Academic Education, as Seen by Students

Abstract

The main issues considered by the research are referring to the general context of the academic education and the Romanian higher education system, aiming to identify deficiencies of the system, criteria for selecting the University that provides most adequate knowledge and competence for graduates and understanding of the directions for a career-oriented educational system, at the present as well as for the next future, identifying needs for a better career-oriented instructional system. The paper also aims to identify whether the educational system and particularly university studies meet the needs of students of economical sciences faculty for professional insertion. The study searched for opinions expressed by students and by their professors in order to formulate solutions that might improve teaching processes at this level.

Keywords: instructional needs, knowledge, competence, professional insertion.

INTRODUCTION

Romanian economy is facing a serious challenge – the need for entrepreneurial abilities, competiveness and creativity in the economical area of development involves not only continuous training for existent specialists but mostly a different approach of the educational system that will provide the skilled workforce of the future. The expected evolution of the economic educational system has to follow the goals of the Europe 2020 Strategy and the directions within the Bologna Process.

The research also considered a survey coordinated by the author and conducted by two students of Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, focusing on the educational system and its legal regulatory needs.

The research considered a wide range of interest and concerns in regard to issues as follows: the students' needs for the accomplishment of their professional targets; competences requested by the professional route intended and how these competences might be obtained or developed; establishing whether the reputation of a certain University is the main determinant of choice; establishing the importance of admission exams for acceptance in Universities; performance of the Romanian higher education, compared to European higher education; eventual deficiencies of the Romanian higher education system; general opinion of interviewed subjects on whether professional success depends on University studies performance; determining the purpose of studies in University, referring to the knowledge and competence needed in order to successfully enter the professional market targeted by students, but also referring to personal development; identifying of the instructional needs of students that are not successfully satisfied at the present time.

The study approached the themes not only from one-side perspective, being not concerned only by the students' opinions, but also from an inside perspective, drawn by professors and specialist within the University. Finally, the study concluded on the possible solutions for adjusting instructional environment to provide more adequate professional insertion of economical studies graduates.

I. UNIVERSITY EDUCATION NEEDS

Actually, reforms are taking place all over Europe, so Romanian educational system has to face the requests of reform and new development directions. As crisis is still affecting Europe – and Romania – the relationships between funding, equity and efficiency of higher education have been gaining increasing attention. The main effect of this Europeanization is the increasing "*marketization*" of higher education. As greater

emphasis is put on the economic aspects of higher education, there is a higher pressure on the universities to perform more efficiently and connect closer to the business community, not only in terms of content and funding, but also in changing the traditional public service conception of higher education towards a more pragmatic one (Garben, 2012).

The Romanian educational system seems to fail to understand that the EU promotes not just increasingly public expenditure on education, but targeted investment, aimed at increasing levels of employability through the increase of job-specific skills. The Council and the Commission encourage the involvement of employers and labor market institutions in the design and delivery of educational programs, thus intending to provide more practical experience in courses and the adaptation of funding mechanisms to reward success in equipping students for the labor market.

Until 1997 Romania had insufficient students, related to the need for specialists of the national economy. When universities were allowed (in 1997) to autonomously determine and establish their own numbers of future graduates, an increasing number of specialists entered the workforce. Still, in 2008 Romania had only about 10% of university graduates out of the total active population, compared to an average aiming to 50% of university graduates in the active population in Europe (Marga, 2009).

Education should thus be massively extended and strongly innovation-oriented. Universities have to satisfy the hunger for education of the young generation, while encouraging innovation. This might be achieved by universities (focusing on research) sustained by governmental institutions (being fully aware that education helps society). Reference [2] shows that innovative thinking is still not enough important in the educational system, as "it is amazing how little attention education shows for the ability to think. There is an absurd conviction that information and intelligence are enough…school wastes two thirds of social talent, while universities sterilize the remaining third" (de Bono, 2007).

II. STUDENTS' EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

A. *General considerations*

Students being the main active participants in their own tuition, educational system should aim to consider not only financial and regulatory constraints but also the real

needs of students for a better professional insertion after graduation.

As professional insertion means more today than profound knowledge and adequate specific skills and competences, students are growing aware of the importance of the prestige of the graduated university in their further professional destiny. This is why students pay attention to academic rankings - whether or not employers do it - as academic prestige is promising better jobs. They are also very carefully assessing research profile of the university and organizational culture that completes academic competence offered. Academic tuition is expected to be not only efficient, but also motivating.

A research conducted at Memorial University of Newfoundland presented a study on students' perception of effective teaching in higher education, aiming to identify the characteristics of effective on-campus and distance learning as perceived by students at this university (Delaney, 2010). The study invited students to select the most relevant characteristics of effective teaching from a larger list of characteristics. The final data indicated that students perceived nine characteristics as significant in establishing an effective teaching practice. Such instructional needs referred to the characteristics as follows (in alphabetic order):

- Approachable
- Communicative
- Engaging
- Humorous
- Knowledgeable
- Organized
- Professional
- Respectful
- Responsive

B. University Studies in Romania

During the last years, the Romanian academic educational system experienced considerable academic reform consisting in political, structural and financial changing.

Higher education reform has included academic evaluation, accreditation, and new financing systems. Thus, the academic reform intends to produce changes in administration and management from bottom-up to top-down, and involves reduced basic financial provision for academic staff and universities and unfortunately focuses on extensive research activities to teaching detriment and visible reinforcement of external evaluation (Moraru, 2012).

In the beginning of the '90 decade, the first private universities appeared in Romania. A research conducted in 2010 shows that in a relatively short period of 20 years, more than 50 private educational institutions have been established with 202,786 students, and a total of only 4662 professors (Andrei et al., 2010). The authors also show that during a relatively short period of time there has been a tremendous increase in the number of students, from 165,000 in the 1989-1990 academic year, to more than 890,000 students in 2008-2009, and the ratio between the number of pupils and students decreased significantly from 21.4 at the beginning of the transition period, to 4.2 in 2010. Only considering data presented by this study a first idea is obvious: universities have to increase their efforts in order to attract the best students, as an important condition for achieving higher standards.

C. Case Study: Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Economical Studies Faculty

In order to provide research material, two sociological enquiries were conducted: for drawing an image on the university educational system the first investigation group consisted of 70 adult persons, (50 students or graduates and 20 teachers of Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu). A second group of investigation consisted of students in the Faculty of Economical Sciences, Engineering Faculty (same University) and Economical College Sibiu (50 students) as well as 20 university teachers, intending to find out whether career orientation education is relevant for better professional insertion and which are the directions to be taken by career education process.

The choice of the students and teachers can be explained by the dynamics of the number of students in public education, as statistics have shown [1] (Table 1):

Our research was a fundamental qualitative research, we have chosen the opinion questionnaire but did not limit answer choices, intending to provide not only an accurate image on the chosen topics but also possible

TABLE I
THE AVERAGE RATE OF CHANGE IN THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN PUBLIC EDUCATION (%).

Years	Technical studies	Economical studies	Total number of students
1990-2008	0.1	16.6	9.5
1990-1992	3.3	-0.9	5.9
1993-1996	-5.8	65.4	23.3
1997-2000	5.5	-8.9	2.7
2001-2004	6.4	12.6	7.9
2005-2007	-2.2	53.4	29.4

Vertical lines are optional in tables. Statements that serve as captions for the entire table do not need footnote letters.

[a]Gaussian units are the same as cg emu for magnetostatics; Mx = maxwell, G = gauss, Oe = oersted; Wb = weber, V = volt, s = second, T = tesla, m = meter, A = ampere, J = joule, kg = kilogram, H = henry.

directions to be studied in the future. Objectives have been stated either based on previous assumptions, or on the need to obtain personal opinions from the subjects involved in the process on different positions (students as well as teachers).

The research focused on a wider range of interest. The present paper will refer to the relevant objectives for this paper theme, as follows:

1)Identifying the professional profile of students involved in the survey: intended future career, competence requested by the desired career, means of

obtaining and developing of these competences

*2)*Determining the main purpose for studying in University – whether universities provide knowledge and competence requested for successful career opportunities, personal development and valuable knowledge (assuming that these are the most important determinants for the students).

*3)*Which are the factors determining the quality of the chosen university (assuming such factors might be academic competence of teaching staff, partnerships with other universities, curricula, competitiveness of scientific research, financial power, or any other)?

*4)*Which seem to be the major problems of the Romanian higher education system (expecting for own personal opinions to be expressed)

*5)*Determining whether private universities are considered better than state universities (assuming that less than 10% of the answers might favour state universities)

*6)*Determining of the directions of development expected for higher economical education and of the major inconvenient of the system at the time being, as subjects on both sides of the process have identified

*7)*Identifying needs and expectations for the economical and business education adequate for the economical environment of the present

D. Results

Referring to the career-orientation of the group studied for this range of interest, 48% of the interviewed students see their future career developing in own business, 18% intend to search for a highly motivating job, 10% consider the option of a stable job, even if not very well-paid, while 18% will accept a well-paid job even if not very stable. It is interesting to note that none of them consider the eventuality of being jobless after graduation, even if a considerable 18% amount of them do not know yet what career they might embrace.

As far as competence needed for the intended career is concerned, the range of interest of the interviewed students covers a wide domain: communication skills need to be improved for 56% of them, foreign languages are important for 46% of them, technical skills are to be improved for 34% of the students, 32% of the students seem to need improvement of their personal marketing, while computer skills need to be improved only for 22% of them and scientific competences seem to be needed only by 4% of the investigated group. A little surprising, 12% of the students are willing to improve their artistic abilities. The students' expectation for achieving development of these required skills and abilities focus on courses (56%), workshops (26%), in school (18%) or other educational programs (5%).

The most important achievement during university studies seems to be (for students as well as for teachers) development of competences, personal development and gain of knowledge. Out of the maximum score of 5 points for each achievement, professional competence scored 4.65 points according to students and 4.54 points according to their teachers, while personal development scored 4.8 points according to the students and 4.34 points according to the teachers. Knowledge is a very important asset, while the diploma is not at all the most important achievement for students who consider competence the most important.

The high standards of the chosen university are given by quality of the important factors such as academic competence of the teaching staff, curricula and the high standards of the research provided by the university. Subjects were asked to range the most relevant of these factors, by attributing scores (1-10) for the importance of these determinants for the standard of the universities. Out of the total opinions expressed, 56% considered the maximum importance for the academic background of teaching staff. Involvement of the university in eventual partnerships is rather irrelevant in the students' option, but curriculum seems to be highly relevant: 33% of the subject scored the maximum 10 points for this issue, while another 33% scored this issue for 9 points. Similar results were provided for competiveness of scientific research provided by the university: the same 33% scored the maximum 10 points for this issue, while 38% scored 9 points. High scores were also attributed to the financial power of the university.

Major deficiencies of the university studies system identified by subjects of the survey are not referring only to a less practical approach of the curricula (34% decided that there is not enough practice in universities, while 17% considered there is too much theory), but also to financial status leading to inadequate endowment (15%) and even to corruption (20%); some of the students (14%) are discontent of the superficial approach. Still, state universities remain the first choice of future students: 46% of the subjects consider private universities to be inferior to state universities, while only 14% consider the two systems rather comparable. There is a favorable opinion of 20% of the subjects considering private universities superior to state universities, with a narrow 8% admitting that private universities might be a rather good choice.

III. CONCLUSIONS AND INTENTIONS

It is obvious that major problems of the society dramatically affect educational systems, higher education included. Students seem to be fully aware of their educational and professional needs and thus universities have to rapidly adapt their educational offer to the requests of a dynamic socio-economical environment. Universities need a permanent and efficient feed-back not only on students' needs, but also on economical environment and its evolution. A more practical approach is needed in educating future specialists, and a continuous adjustment of the knowledge offered in teaching processes.

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