

# **Euro-shape and Local Content: The bottom line of Romanian higher education reform.**

**Alexandra Horobet<sup>1</sup>**

**Bogdan Chiritoiu**

---

<sup>1</sup> Alexandra Horobet, MA, is assistant professor at the Department of International Business and Economics, Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest. Bogdan Chiritoiu, MA, MSc, is assistant professor at the Political and Administrative Science Department, University of Bucharest.

The European Commission, usually pretty unimpressed with Romanian progress towards EU harmonisation, notes in its *Agenda 2000* that the education sector will not create problems in the Romanian accession (Miroiu, 1998). One should also note the optimism of the Romanian Ministry of Education while presenting the year 1999 as a year of reform in education: "1999 will be the year of concrete actions towards visible and comprehensive changes in education, the year when all changes started in 1998 or previously will be completed" (Marga, 1998).

In the paper, we depart from this optimism. In our view, the bottom line of higher education reform is mixed at best. In a country still marred by the 'transition' output fall, higher education is one sector that registered strong growth. This output growth was barely matched by increased resources, what left the sector as starved as before 1989. Moreover, the efforts to improve the content of higher education encountered only mixed success, and today Romanian universities conserve many of the failings of the communist past.

### **Main failings of the system**

A number of recurrent failures are blamed for the lack of competitiveness of the Romanian higher education. They have been targeted by successive governments and the most important are summarised below, according to an official document of the Education Ministry (Marga, 1999):

- ✍ the university system is centred on information, but does not insist sufficiently on production of knowledge or encourage creativity, and, in this context, it aims more at having the student memorise and reproduce information than to use it
- ✍ it is collectivist, meaning that it does not permit sufficient room for individual training choices, does not allow individual achievements to receive complete recognition, and it develops an obsolete conception of personal achievement as simple quantitative expansion
- ✍ it uses local standards, i.e. national standards, of achievement, even though knowledge is now a global matter
- ✍ it emphasises general qualifications, even though educational priorities world-wide have moved on to postgraduate studies

- ✍ it is organised on a centralist basis, in which detailed decisions are only taken by high ranking managers
- ✍ it is a system that is too much inured to the pressures of corruption - grades, competitions, job offers, and examinations, even though the feasibility of partnership is now essential.

### **Reform priorities**

Education reform is inter-linked with the overall reform process (e.g. privatisation, economic reform, administrative reform). Reform of education does not "follow other reforms", but is a condition of their success. Moreover, it can be more rapidly carried out if the other reforms are carried out too and, over the medium run, investments in education are the most beneficial.

The reform strategy of the current education minister is structured around twelve areas, targeting the identified failures. The complete list is presented in Appendix I. We summarise below those most relevant to our topic.

First, the administration intends to improve the infrastructure of education and to promote the development of information technology use. Large investments are granted to universities from the central budget on a competitive basis, including the ability to match funds.

Second, a change in the 'character of education' should take place that should result in a shift from the volume of information to the ability to make use of it to generate knowledge. This includes new curricula, based on inter-disciplinarity and compliance with European standards, and their harmonisation at the national level. A related priority is the development of post-graduate studies (advanced studies, masters, doctoral studies), supported by 'centres of excellence' from high performance universities. Moreover, a reform of examinations to produce reliable nation-wide comparable evaluations is envisaged.

The role of scientific research is re-valued. The aim is to connect research with teaching by re-integrating it into universities and making it the backbone of the post-graduate studies. This will also support an increased status of the teaching profession, another goal of the reforms. However, it is acknowledged that the latter will require a substantial raise in income, correlated with performance payment.

Further on, we shall analyse the achievements the reform process encountered so far on two dimensions: the quantitative expansion of enrolment and proportionate budgetary allocations, on one hand, and the more subtle qualitative changes on the other.

### **Higher education expansion**

#### *Student population*

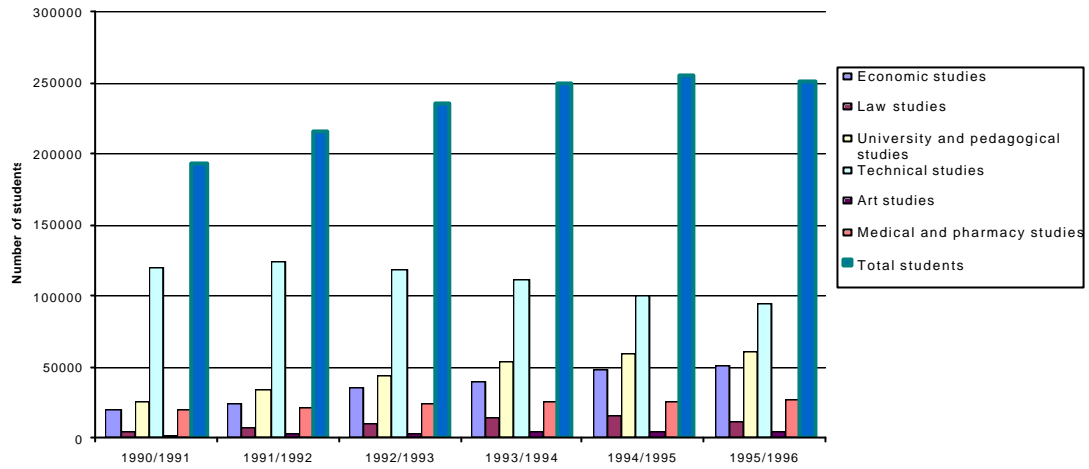
Romania experienced a large increase in the number of students after 1989, partly due to the development of the higher education private sector. While the total number of students doubled over the last eight years, the average annual rate of growth for the private higher education students was 4.4% (1992-1997), this sector enrolling a percentage of 26.4% of the Romanian students in the academic year 1996-1997. (Miroiu, 1998). The rate of higher education attendance<sup>2</sup> increased from 8% in 1989 to 22.2% in 1996 and the number of students per thousand inhabitants from 7.1 in 1989 to 15.7 in 1997. (Miroiu, 1998).

It is also interesting to analyse the dynamics among different specialisations – presented in figures 1 and 2 (based on data from appendix 2). With reference to state higher education, data show a decrease in the number of students enrolled in technical disciplines, in both absolute and relative terms. In contrast, the growth in student population is accounted for by the expansion of social sciences and humanities departments, which quadrupled their capacity.

---

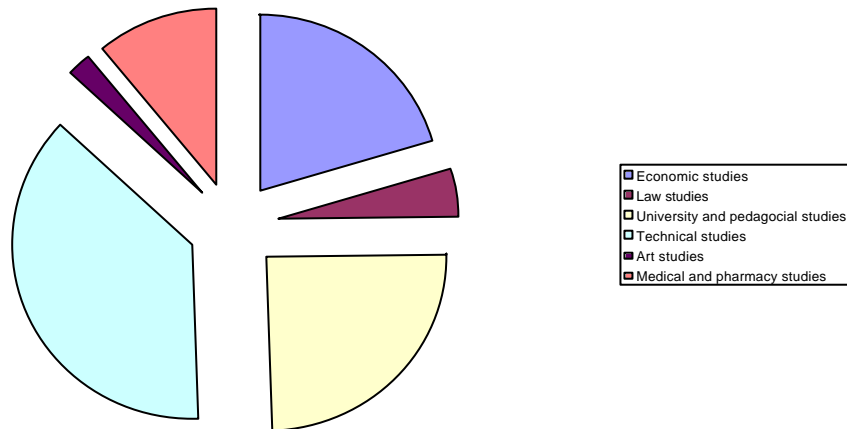
<sup>2</sup> The rate of higher education attendance represents the proportion of students in the total number of high school graduates in a specific year.

**Fig. 1. EVOLUTION OF STUDENT NUMBER BY FIELD OF STUDY STATE UNIVERSITIES**



*Note. Art studies include fine arts, music and theatre studies; university studies include humanist and hard sciences study.*

**Fig.2. STUDENTS ENROLLED IN STATE UNIVERSITIES BY FIELD OF STUDY ACADEMIC YEAR 1995/1996**



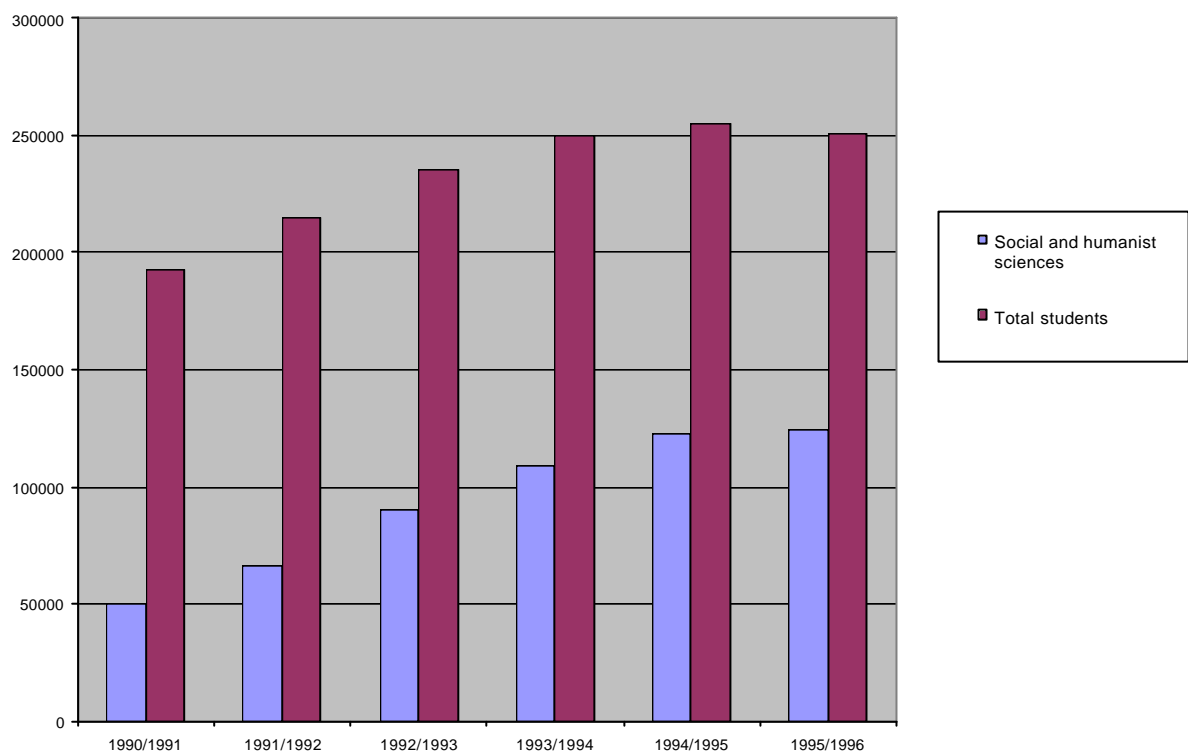
*Note. Art studies include fine arts, music and theatre studies; university studies include humanist and hard sciences study.*

The trend towards social sciences is even more dramatic in private higher education sector. Data presented in Appendix 2, Table 3 shows a percentage of 75.4% of the students enrolled in economic and law studies in the academic year 1995/1996.

The higher education fields have adjusted to the demand of the labour force market by the evolution of the importance dedicated to social science studies, as shown in figure

3. Meanwhile, some sectorial imbalances still persist in specialities like pre-university schoolteachers, public administration, finance and banking, social workers and information technology experts. (Mihalescu, 1996). We expect an expansion of higher education in these particular fields and, on the other hand, a small decrease or a steadiness in the fields confronted with less demand on the labour force market.

**Fig. 3. EVOLUTION OF NUMBER OF STUDENTS IN SOCIAL SCIENCES  
1990-1996**



Highly related to the evolution of student population, it is worth mentioning the evolution in the number of universities and faculties. In a ten-year time, the highest increase in the number of higher education establishments is observable in the private sector, accounting for 44 universities and 161 faculties in 1996-1997, comparable to a number of zero before 1990. The reaction of state higher education to the “attack” of the private sector took also the form of institutional expansion. The number of 44 higher education institutions and 101 faculties in 1989/1990 has grown by 1993/1994 (a record year) to 63 higher education establishments and 261 faculties. (Miroiu, 1998).

### *Financing*

The public spending on education increased in percentage terms after 1989, as illustrated by the tables below. Even so, the proportion falls below the mandated 4% of GDP, as mentioned in the Law of Education, article 169, and is one of the lowest in Europe. Moreover, the increase in percentage terms does not necessarily represent a higher absolute amount (due to the GDP fall over the transition period)- see the second table.

**Fig.4. Evolution of Public Spending (% of total)**

Year	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
Education	6,1	7,6	10,4	9,7	9,8	9,2	10,1	9,6
Health	7,3	7,9	9,5	8,3	8,7	8,6	8,1	7,6
Defence	10,8	7,1	10,4	8,8	6,5	7,1	6,2	5,2
Local government	7,1	4,2	2,9	3,0	3,5	3,8	3,9	3,0
Public Order	9,1	4,3	2,6	2,6	3,4	3,9	3,9	4,0

Source: Miroiu, Adrian et al, 'Invatamintul romanesc azi', Open Society Foundation, Bucharest, 1998

**Fig.5. Education spending as GDP percentage**

Year	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
%	2,2	2,8	3,6	3,6	3,2	3,1	3,4	3,5

Source: Miroiu, Adrian et al, 'Invatamintul romanesc azi', Open Society Foundation, Bucharest, 1998

### *Teaching Staff*

Figures 6 and 7 illustrate the fact that the increased (in relative terms) resources have been directed mainly towards the increase in staff numbers. However, the average wage in the education sector is still the second lowest in the economy, surpassed only by the health sector.

**Fig. 6. The personnel increase in percentages: 1989 – 1996**

Total	Pre-schooling	Primary	Secondary	High school	Higher
+37	+25	+19	+24	+120	+101

Source: Miroiu, Adrian et al, 'Invatamintul romanesc azi', Open Society Foundation, Bucharest, 1998

**Fig. 7. Itemised education expenditure - % of total (1994)**

	Personal	Non-personal	Capital
<b>Romania</b>	76,1	18,7	5,2
<b>OECD</b>	69,2	31,0	12,8

Source: Miroiu, Adrian et al, 'Invatamintul romanesc azi', Open Society Foundation, Bucharest, 1998

The expansion of the student number, the creation of new universities and departments, and the matching increase of teaching staff would lead to the expectation that there would be a higher proportion of young academics. As far as the proportion of junior academic staff can capture this tendency, the hypothesis seems to be refuted. The data for the Bucharest academic institutions presented in Appendix 3 show that the proportion of junior staff has stayed practically constant during the interval at an average of 30%.

## **Higher education restructuring**

### *Legislation*

At present, higher education is regulated by several categories of legislative acts:

- a) The Constitution of Romania, establishing the fundamental principles of the national education system
- b) The Law on Education (1995), regulating the organisation of the higher education system, governance of education, the structure of the higher education institutions, the financing of higher education, university autonomy and student rights
- c) The Status of Academic Staff (1997)
- d) Specific laws regulating aspects of higher education of prominent importance, such as Law No.84/1993 on the accreditation of higher education institutions and recognition of diplomas. A draft of a special law on higher education also exists, but those who argue that such a law might limit the autonomy of higher education institutions contest its opportunity.
- e) Governmental decisions regulating a series of aspects where coherence at the national level needs to be assured: student financial support, home and abroad scholarships; student social protection; the regulation of doctoral programmes; the establishment of the number of students to be financed from the public budget; the



establishment or discontinuation of some higher education units financed from the public budget

f) Orders of the Minister of Education regarding the use of his legal competence (the highest formal rulings of the Minister)

g) Decisions of the national academic councils in specific fields: financing, academic scientific research, quality evaluation, and accreditation, attestation of academic titles

h) Internal regulations of the higher education institutions. The major institutional normative document is the University Charter prepared according to the provisions of the Constitution and the Law on Education. The Charter defines the precise manner in which each institution exerts its university autonomy. The Charter must be prepared by each higher education institution. The universities are also free to prepare additional normative acts, of their own, adapted to specific situations encountered in each university. (based on Mihailescu, 1996).

### *Institutional restructuring*

The post-1989 and current reforms aim to get the Romanian university system closer to the European model. As mentioned in the discussion about reform strategy, master programmes were introduced, and the licence examination and the doctoral programme were modified. The credit system is also being introduced (Miroiu, 1998).

Scientific research was previously institutionally connected to the government bodies or the Romanian Academy. It is now re-coupled with university teaching through the grants offered by the National Council for University Scientific Research to research teams organised inside top university departments. These teams will also supervise master and doctoral programmes (Popa, 1998).

### *Privatisation*

As mentioned above, the private sector is quickly developing, and is responsible for a big deal of the increase in the student population. Public higher education is more rigorous in student selection, while private universities have as a rule copied state universities and fail to offer an alternative. Scientific research in private universities is unsubstantial or non-existent. Private universities do not have their own academic

staff, except for about 5 or 10% (1996), employing mainly the academic staff of public universities or persons who are not qualified to teach. Wide discrepancies exist even among the private universities themselves: some private universities are comparable to the most competent public universities, while others can barely observe the national standards (Mihailescu, 1996).

The interesting feature of the private universities is that they have a lower status than the largely fee-free public universities (even if the quality of their education is increasing) and attract students from lower income status. (Ionita, 1999). This counter-intuitive state of fact is explained by the 'informal' privatisation – the continuous increase of private-tuition (averaging at present around USD 600-700 per year), a main (tax-free) source for supplementing the income of teachers. The decrease in quality of public institutionalised teaching, and the extension of this informal privatisation are curtailing the ability of less prepared students to pass the competitive entrance examinations of public universities (Miroiu, 1998).

### *Reform failures*

In spite of the apparent convergence with the Western education system, the Romanian education, university system included, remain focused on the needs of the provider rather than of the student population and of the society in general. The disciplines, the number and geographic distribution of places and the funding are directed according to the existing labour force, and many changes reflect the need for increased status of the teachers, and not those of the economy. (Miroiu, 1998)

### **Conclusion**

The higher education sector is undergoing a large expansion, answering the strong demand pressure and improving the Romanian statistics in comparison with both Western and neighbouring countries. Where the reform process was less successful is in the qualitative change. Most of the shortcomings inherited from communist regime are still present. The Ministry of Education launches a large number of fancy ideas; it wants to connect the education system to the society / economy needs: to replace the

mechanical reproduction of information with the generation of knowledge through new study programmes and new teaching and testing methods, to re-unite teaching and research and to improve the training of the professors. However, little of this vision has reached the classrooms so far. We identified three factors responsible for this situation. First of all, the material resources are clearly insufficient. Then, the Ministry does not possess any longer the administrative leverage to impose changes upon the universities. From this perspective, the main legal innovation, university autonomy, did not bring the expected improvements. It may well be that autonomy requires more time to deliver the goods. However, with neither hierarchical subordination, nor effective competition for the public resources there is no pressure on universities to change, innovate and adopt best practices. As mentioned in the respective section, the new private sector has not been so far an adequate alternative to the public sector either. Finally, the array of task forces, and committees created have to move beyond institutional building and put more flesh on their proposals to make them really operational.

## **Bibliography**

- ✍ Dinca, Gheorghe, Radu Damian, *Financing of Higher Education in Romania*, Agentia Nationala Socrates, Editura Alternative, Bucharest, 1997
- ✍ Ionita, Sorin, 'A Plea for the Introduction of Tuition Fees', Centre for Institutional Reform, Romanian Academic Society, Bucharest, 1999
- ✍ Marga, Andrei, *Guidelines for the Reform of Education in Romania*, Agentia Nationala Socrates, Editura Alternative, Bucharest, 1999
- ✍ Marga, Andrei, *The Reform of Education in 1999*, Agentia Nationala Socrates, Editura Alternative, Bucharest, 1998
- ✍ Mihailescu, Ion, *The System of Higher education in Romania*, Agentia Nationala Socrates, Editura Alternative, Bucharest 1996
- ✍ Miroiu, Adrian et al, 'Invatamintul romanesc azi', Open Society Foundation, Bucharest, 1998
- ✍ Popa, Gheorghe, *Scientific Research and the University*, Agentia Nationala Socrates, Editura Alternative, Bucharest, 1998
- ✍ \*\*\* *Education in Romania. General Outlook*, Agentia Nationala Socrates, Bucharest, 1998

## **Appendix 1.**

### **MAJOR DIRECTIONS OF EDUCATION REFORM**

*Source: Marga, 1999*

- I. The reform of curricula
- II. The structure of continuing and distance education
- III. The restructuring of the pre-academic and academic network
- IV. Changing the character of education
- V. A refreshed impetus of scientific research in universities.
- VI. Improvement of infrastructure
- VII. Information technology in education
- VIII. The reform of pre-academic and university management
- IX. The school-community partnership
- X. Forms of international co-operation
- XI. Strengthening the social standing of teachers, pupils and students
- XII. An institutional capacity increase of the Ministry of National Education.

## Appendix 2. STUDENTS INVOLVED IN ROMANIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

*Table 1. Student number by field of study*

Fields of study	90/91	91/92	92/93	93/94	94/95	95/96		
						State	Private	State and private
<b>1. Economic studies</b>	20,003	24,801	35,279	39,867	47,712	51,710	32,286	83,996
<b>2. Law studies</b>	3,975	7,543	10,865	14,854	15,424	11,078	32,065	43,143
<b>3. University and pedagogical studies</b>	26,270	34,367	44,298	54,297	59,947	61,318	15,411	76,729
<b>4. Technical studies</b>	120,541	123,736	118,097	111,145	100,837	94,225	64	94,289
<b>5. Art studies</b>	1,893	2,983	3,474	4,186	4,926	5,223	524	5,747
<b>6. Medical and pharmacy studies</b>	20,128	21,796	23,656	25,738	26,316	27,282	4,9553	32,237
<b>Social and humanist sciences</b>	50,248	66,711	90,442	109,018	123,083	124,106	79,762	203,868
<b>Total</b>	192,810	215,226	235,669	250,087	255,162	250,836	85,305	336,141

Source: Mihailescu, 1996

*Table 2. Student number evolution by field of study – state universities. Percentage change year on year*

Fields of study	91/92	92/93	93/94	94/95	95/96	Average change	Change over the interval
<b>1. Economic studies</b>	23.9	42.2	13.0	19.6	8.3	21.4	158.5
<b>2. Law studies</b>	89.7	44.0	36.7	3.8	-28.2	29.2	178.7
<b>3. University and pedagogical studies</b>	30.8	28.8	22.5	10.4	2.3	18.9	133.4
<b>4. Technical studies</b>	2.6	-4.5	-5.8	-9.2	-6.5	-4.7	-21.8
<b>5. Art studies</b>	57.6	16.4	20.5	17.7	6.0	23.6	175.9
<b>6. Medical and pharmacy studies</b>	8.3	8.5	8.8	2.2	3.6	6.3	35.5
<b>Social and humanist sciences</b>	32.7	35.5	20.5	12.9	0.8	20.5	147.0
<b>Total</b>	11.6	9.5	6.1	20.2	-1.7	9.1	30.1

Source: based on data provided by Mihailescu, 1996

*Table 3. Student relative importance by field of study*

Fields of study	90/91	91/92	92/93	93/94	94/95	95/96		
						State	Private	State and private
<b>1. Economic studies</b>	10,4	11,5	15,0	15,9	18,7	20,6	37,8	24,9
<b>2. Law studies</b>	2,1	3,5	4,6	5,9	6,1	4,4	37,6	12,8
<b>3. University and pedagogical studies</b>	13,6	16,0	18,8	21,7	23,5	24,4	18,1	22,8

<b>4. Technical studies</b>	62,5	57,5	50,1	44,4	39,5	37,6	0,1	28,1
<b>5. Art studies</b>	1,0	1,4	1,5	1,7	1,9	2,1	0,6	1,7
<b>6. Medical and pharmacy studies</b>	10,4	10,1	10,0	10,4	10,3	10,9	5,8	9,7
<b>Social and humanist sciences</b>	26,1	31,0	38,4	43,5	48,3	49,4	93,5	60,5
<b>Total</b>	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0

Source: based on data provided by Mihailescu, 1996