

The impact of educational policies regarding the social dimension of Higher Education in Romania

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Abstract

This present study has as a starting point the dual responsibility that universities have nowadays and this refers to the university as a promoter for economic growth, but also as propeller for fostering social cohesion. In this sense, we can bring into discussion the steps that have been made at a legislative level by mentioning the Bologna process and all papers derived such as the Prague communiqué 2001, which emphasizes the need to start working towards the development of a more inclusive higher education system. In order to understand how the inclusion vision was implemented across Romanian universities, this paper focuses on data collected through a qualitative methodological approach, that relies on a semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with professionals from academia. The interview guide seeks to evaluate what was the impact of educational policies regarding the higher education social dimension in Romania and how do Romanian universities respond to the need to develop of more equitable and inclusive higher education system, with a focus on the support mechanisms developed by universities in order to grant students' access, retention and employability and on the opportunity of developing an Inclusion Index for higher education. Results show that progress in this view is constantly, but still the impact of educational policies is quite low and this is due to the absence of expertise in implementing the established indicators and to the absence of procedures related to the process of policy monitoring.

Keywords: social dimension; higher education; Romania.

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1. Introduction

Moving from a Humboldtian higher education system (HEs), the today`s university has to start engaging more in fostering social cohesion. Steps have been made, and in this sense it is mentioned the Bologna process that specifically mention the importance of the social dimension in the higher education systems, starting with the Prague communiqué in 2001, which emphasizes the need to start working towards the development of a more inclusive higher education system. The work hasn`t stopped here and the following declaration and communiqués (Berlin, 2003; Bergen, 2005; London, 2007; Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, 2009; Budapest-Vienna, 2010; Bucharest, 2012; Yerevan, 2015) have continued to push forward the importance of the social dimension in constructing and consolidating the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Another initiative worth mentioning is the European Council conclusions on the social dimension of higher education that underlines the main actions that can be implemented by member States. So, in order to increase access, participation and completion rates in higher education it is recommended to embark on mapping studies that present the relevance of policies on access and drop-out and completion rates in higher education with a view to analyzing the effectiveness of the national and institutional initiatives and actions that tackle how structural, institutional, personal, socio-cultural and socioeconomic factors influence drop-out and completion`. (Council of the European Union, 2017, p.4)

Moreover, in a recent UNESCO report it is presented the idea that inclusion and equity in educational policy should focus on a central message, the one that every learner matters and matters equally. The report agrees that, however, when trying to put this idea into practice a lot of issues will arise and they are related to difficulty on changing mentalities. This is the only way to trigger change in practice. (UNESCO, 2017)

2. The social dimension of Higher Education Systems

Even though the concept is not new, the literature mentions different definitions of the social dimension in higher education. Trying to understand the concept of social dimension, among the existing literature, a pattern was identified and it consists on following key words: the wellbeing of students (OECD, 2012; Margrove, 2015); authentic learning

experiences (Kearney, 2013; Iucu & Marin, 2014); highly prepared teaching and administrative staff (Sharma et. al., 2008; Marin, 2014, 2017); ergonomics of the classroom (Hanafin, et.al.,2007); developing a strong collaborations between specialists in order to create learning materials as for example braille textbooks, audiobook, etc. (Jones, 2013) and providing financial support for students (OECD, 2006; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2014, Roger, 2017). The main aspect all literature have in common is the fact that changes in the field should be focus on evidence based policy-making. This idea was developed during the European Network of Education Councils Conference held in Bucharest in May 2017 and expresses the fact that research needs to be conducted on how to implement inclusive education in order to guarantee maximum benefits, not only for students with disabilities or pupils at risk, but for all children, also those in situations of transitory needs. (EUNEC, 2017)

Another aspect identified in the literature is the fact that we should look closer at existing data that in, this case, shows us that many European countries have a significantly higher number of students that are enrolled in tertiary education compared to the previous generations. According to an OECD study, today, nearly twice as many young adults with an age of 25 to 34 are tertiaryeducated compared to their parents' generation 30 years ago (that are now aged 55-64). (OECD, 2014) This data shows us that the policy initiative implemented so far are relevant and have a positive impact.

Overall, the main goal of this article is to contribute to the literature in this field, following the recommendation of the Council of the European Union, that states that these of results and the outcomes of the studies and other work being carried out should be seen as a basis for further debate and policy consideration in examining issues of access, participation, completion and the impact of different funding models in relation to higher education. (Council of the European Union, 2017)

3. Methods

A qualitative methodological approach was used in order to better respond to this article objectives. Therefore, a semi-structured in-depth interview with professionals in academiawas conducted. The interview guide is structured so as to evaluate what is the impact of educational policies regarding the HE social dimension in Romanian universities,

more specifically on describing the changes that the existing policies have produced. Another center point is identifying existing support mechanisms developed by universities in order to grant students' access, retention and employability and on the opportunity of developing an Inclusion Index for higher education. The transcriptions resulted from this research are coded using line-by-line coding guidelines (Charmaz's, 2006) and these codes are developed based on the theoretical framework. The codes used refer to: educational policies, students' access, retention and employability, support mechanisms, and the inclusion index for higher education. When beginning the analysis, a series of significant fragments were identified as relevant and afterwards a code was allocated to each of these fragments. The identified fragments were listed and then compared in order to facilitate the process of identification of patterns and similarities between fragment/quotations. To respond to the qualitative data management system, the Maxqda 11 software was used in order to facilitate coding, as well as elements that are related to the management and transparency of data collected. The length of the interviews is situated between 40 to 60 minutes. The research is being carried out at the Center for Development and Training in Higher Education, University of Bucharest, and it is presently ongoing, but we can present some of the preliminary results.

3.1 Participants

Due to the fact that the research is ongoing the data presented hereby is generated after conducting a semi structured interviews with 4 university professors from the University of Bucharest. This research seeks to better understanding of the concept of social dimension across Romanian Higher Education Institutions (HEs).

3.2 Results

Taking into consideration that The Europe 2020 strategy targets the incensement of the proportion of 30 to 34 year old people to complete tertiary or equivalent education to at least 40%, it is considered necessary to engage in a better understanding of what and how do the Romanian universities are doing in order to sustain the development of more equitable and inclusive HE system. The results are structured on three main topics of interest that aim at presenting the impact of educational policies at national level, at analyzing the support mechanisms developed by universities in order to grant students access, retention and employability and nonetheless present academics perception

towards the development of an Inclusion Index for higher education. These results will contribute to a better understanding of what has to be done in order to reduce national disparities in terms of access to university, active participation during their studies, and completion of a tertiary education.

The impact of educational policies at national level

The main documents brought into discussion when it comes to policies that aim the development of a more inclusive education system are The Romanian Law of Education, the National Reform Programme and the Methodology on allocating budget funds for basic and additional funding of higher education institutions in Romania for 2016 (OMEN No 3530/2016). The three documents have in common the concern for further development of an inclusive HEs focusing of identifying mechanisms and policy instruments meant to stimulate the access and participation. Other concern is related to the need of a clearer definition of the underrepresented groups that these policies aim to. According to the Law of National Education (Law no. 1/2011), the law that represents the legal framework that regulates the structure, positions, organization and operation of the higher education in Romania there are several underrepresented groups, such as: students with physical disabilities; students coming from low income families; orphan students or those coming from foster care; ethnic Romanians coming from abroad; students coming from environments with high socioeconomic risk or socially marginalized; Roma Students; and students from rural environment. Moreover the Law also states the existence of a set of instruments, such as: regulation for a loan system; procedures for scholarship allocation; procedures for funding of student dorms and canteens; public transport subsidies; and the possibility to distribute study grants on social criteria. When it comes to the National Reform Programme (2017) the main pillars that need development are related to: providing support for students from rural areas, as well as for students from disadvantaged groups and from those students that are considered to be non-traditional students so that they could participate in tertiary education; providing a more well developed education and research IT system; engaging more in increasing the number of international collaborations; creating a stronger collaboration with the labor market; and sustaining the development of an open lifelong learning framework. Another document

brought into discussion during the interviews is the Methodology on allocating budget funds for basic and additional funding of higher education institutions in Romania for 2016 (OMEN No 3530/2016). The present methodology includes a quality indicators on social equity with an emphasis on the needs to allocate funds for institutional development, more specifically it refers to the development of a financing line that targets the increase of the social equity, social inclusion and access to higher education.

Starting from these recent policy paper on the HEs that aim at the creation of a more favorable, a more open and flexible education systems, the respondents concluded that these documents are a first start that boost the development of the social dimension of the HEs, stating that:

'looking from a top – down decision making system, these documents are absolutely necessary because they gather at on place all the pillars of development that we must focus on...it provides a general overview of how our future actions must look like and also it creates the premises for initiating actions mechanisms that can put in practice the recommendations stated'. (I4)

Also, these documents ensure that there has been made a previous evaluation of our current education system, evaluation that brought into our attention the need to focus more on inclusiveness. One interviewer agrees that: *'if we look into the European context we shall see that the problem that we are facing is not unique at all...other countries have the same problems, but that doesn't mean we have to copy their problems and their solution...and I think that is why it is important to have our own reform programmes'. (I2)*

At the same time interviews brought into discussion some aspects related faults in writing these policy papers. One of the aspects is related to the fact that a more rigorous policy monitoring process and an evaluation plan must be developed in order to ensure that the policy will have the expected results:

'the problems identified and the recommendations presented are very relevant in our national context, but I am afraid that if we do not have a monitoring and an evaluation plan included in the strategy everything will be in vain'. (I1).

Other critical aspects underlined are the lack of comparative longitudinal studies that will allow a deeper understanding of the development, implementation and impact of a policy paper or recommendation that has been implemented. In the absence of such a

studies, one interview's opinion is that: *'we will never manage to close the circle and have a clear view of the accomplishments, to understand the effects of this policy on the HEs and to understand how can we further approach other aspects that appear'*. (I2)

Support mechanisms developed by universities in order to grant students' access, retention and employability

In order to better understand what initiative universities have already developed, a collection of different initiatives is seen as a most relevant action to do. Therefore, the focus was on presenting different actions developed within their universities that aim at supporting students before, along and after their study period. The actions mentioned address the need to create a department that is in responsible with understanding and meeting students' needs and expectations. Another action targets the development of a subdivision within a pre-existing departments or others have developed counselling centers that are responsible for fostering the dialogue between the university and their students so that they could play the role of mediators. Some of the initiatives are internal funded, but some are funded by external funds such as the SOCIUS project - Career Guidance, Counseling and Guidance Services in Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities. The example of actions or *'in-house strategies'* (I3) have as a starting point the policy document recommendations, but the most important aspect is that these are personalized activities and this due to the fact that: *'the university is autonomous and can implement its own actions to support the transformation towards a more inclusive HEs'*. (I3)

Developing of an Inclusion Index for higher education – between opportunities and threats

Starting from the proposal of Booth and Ainscow (2002) of the Index for inclusion in schools, we thought it is relevant to see professionals' opinion towards the development of such an index for the higher education system. The proposal was debated from two main perspectives: opportunities brought by the implementation of this instrument and threats that may occur. Regarding the opportunities of the development and implementation of such an instrument within universities, professionals consider that it could be a good opportunity that will help mapping all the social dimensions of the HE and it also offers a real opportunity for universities to track their progress, assessing at the same time the level of satisfaction of the practices and support mechanisms already implemented that target students with special needs. In this regard, respondent agrees that:

'having such an instrument can help us to have a better understanding about two main aspects: if the support mechanism that we are already implementing are relevant for the students and therefore can help us assess the impact that this mechanisms; and also it can be used to predict future actions according to our students needs'. (I1)

Another opportunity that arose is related to the development of the literature within the field of social dimension in higher education. Doing so we will continue to draw the attention to the university responsibility towards sustaining the society development by providing access and retention to tertiary education for a wider population.

When talking about threats, respondents brought into the attention the difficulty in developing such an instrument and this concerns are related to the target group, mainly the fact that there is such a wide definition of the target group called 'vulnerable groups'. The recommendation was that before starting developing such an instrument it should be clarified the concept of vulnerable groups: *'setting a common language and what I mean is to clearly define the target group, understanding their needs in order to provide personalized assistance and support'. (I3)*

Moreover, among respondents there was a central aspect regarding threats and this is strictly related to their reluctance towards the way this instrument will be seen by other colleagues within universities. Mostly, they agree on the fact that this instrument is going to be seen as another standardized evaluation instrument used to formally assess the universities practices in terms of inclusiveness. Therefore, respondents brought into attention on the fact that this instrument won't trigger real and valuable changes and it will be seen as just another paper that has to be filled:

'if not understood properly by those who have to answer to the questions in this index, I am afraid that is going to be just a waste of time[...] first, the answers will not be relevant and the whole institutional evaluation process is going to be a failure; secondly, if the results, even though are relevant results, will not be seen as an important outcome and it will not be used in order to improve the support mechanism, everything will be in vain'. (I2)

Conclusion

Starting from the assumption that the social dimension as it is stipulated in the Bologna Process is generally associated to the need to ensure equal access to, progress in and

completion of higher education of all students (Clancy & Goastellec 2007, Kooij, 2015) we tried to better understand the impact of the policies in the field of social dimension across Romanian universities.

Even though the policy papers are considered absolutely relevant and needed, respondents consider that the lack of a more specific guidelines regarding the monitoring and evaluation process of the policy recommendation it brings great disadvantages, in term of not having a clear overview of what has been done, and what were the main accomplishments and limitations.

Still, data shows that a lot of progress has been made, but we still are far from reaching our objective. For example, the latest Education and Training Monitor, shows that the tertiary educational completion rate in Romania is one of the lowest in Europe. There isn't only one reason, but multiples ones that are related to high level of students that dropout before they could reach university, the significant low rate of students that pass the baccalaureate exam and also a low level of participation of students from disadvantaged groups. (EC, 2017)

In conclusion, process is still slow regarding the social dimension in higher education at national level, but actions are implemented and this is a good indicator that shows the interest of higher education institutions towards the social dimension by enabling all students, regarding their personal, social or economic backgrounds, to reach a set of key competences that are needed in their personal and professional life, supporting them to become active citizens. (Council conclusions, 2009)

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