

# **Romanian Higher Education after 1990. Developments and Challenges**

## **Summary**

### **Introduction**

This section discusses the phenomenon of massification in higher education, starting from its roots and moving on to how it has been understood and interpreted in Romanian literature. Initially, I will consider several aspects regarding the definition of massification, the history of this phenomenon, and how it has spread over the past century. Although I will develop this concept in the chapter dedicated to the evolution and expansion of higher education in Romania, defining certain terms is necessary for the clarity of the upcoming discussions. In this thesis, I discuss the concept of "massification" as representing the increase in enrollments in a higher education system so that access becomes a right for as many people as possible (Trow 2007a). Thus, the idea of massification initially originated in American society at the beginning of the 20th century, during a period when student flows gradually increased and almost doubled every twenty years. More precisely, in the early years after 1900, only 4% of the total age group eligible for college admission (18-21 years) was enrolled in tertiary education, and this percentage increased to 16% by the 1960s when approximately three million students were enrolled in the United States (Trow 1972a).

Since we cannot discuss democracy in Romania until the fall of the communist regime at the end of 1989, this turning point marks the beginning of the transition to a mass higher education system. As I will show in the thesis, access to higher education was very limited until the Eastern European revolutions, and the phenomenon of massification penetrated much more slowly in former communist countries, including Romania. The transition to a democratic system and the simultaneous increase in access to higher education represented a beneficial change for Romania, but one with institutional challenges. I will discuss how the first steps were taken in Romania concerning massification and the institutional circumstances around which the expansion of the higher education system occurred. To provide more clarity, I will consider the system of institutions (laws, rules, norms, customs) on which the tertiary education system began to be built after 1990, considering the legislative and normative gaps specific to the post-communist transition

period. Since, during the communist period, higher education was a privilege accessible to a very small percentage of people (due to the very limited number of university admissions), the liberalization of the university market after 1990 represented both an opportunity for the future labor market and a challenge from the perspective of managing new areas of activity.

## **Objectives**

Next, I will discuss the objectives I aim to achieve in this thesis and, implicitly, the goals of this study regarding the massification of higher education in post-communist Romania. I intend to divide the objectives into three main categories – namely, theoretical, methodological, and empirical objectives, which I will briefly discuss before detailing each one individually. Thus, in the first phase, the theoretical objectives are related to identifying the optimal theoretical framework for conducting such a study and determining the relevance of using these theoretical perspectives in the proposed context. I will primarily focus on the contribution of the new institutionalism in explaining and aim to determine the role of institutions in analyzing the expansion of the higher education system. Secondly, the methodological objectives aim to briefly discuss the reasons for using a specific research design over another, considering the type of information necessary to conduct a study that seeks to explain the conditions in which the massification of the higher education system occurred. Finally, by delimiting some empirical objectives, I aim to clearly state what I intend to achieve in the thesis in terms of research results and, more specifically, what the priority aspects are concerning the lines of empirical research.

For the first of the three categories of objectives mentioned above, the theoretical objectives, the goal is to explore how the expansion of the Romanian higher education system can be explained by invoking the notion of "institution" and the role institutions play in educational policies in the years after the Romanian Revolution. Thus, I intend for this chapter, dedicated to the analytical framework specific to the new institutionalism, to include clear and necessary explanations regarding what exactly an institution is, how institutions are managed by formal organizations, and, more importantly, the effects these institutions have on individual and organizational behavior. I bring up the idea of "behavior" here because another objective is to delimit the type of institutionalism I will use in the thesis, namely the rational choice institutionalism and the concepts proposed by it. To provide more clarity, the reason I intend to narrow down the discussion about

institutionalism is to introduce and use concepts such as the rational actor and "rules of the game," which aim to explain institutional behaviors from the perspective of the incentives economic actors face. Therefore, the specific objective here is to highlight the role that institutional analysis plays in explaining the issues that have arisen around the process of massification in Romanian higher education.

From a methodological perspective, the discussion revolves around the research instrument chosen and, implicitly, how the data will be collected and analyzed in the final section of the thesis, which is dedicated to empirical research and represents the core of this study. Thus, the methodological objective is to use the interview as a research tool specific to qualitative research to collect relevant data regarding the "on the ground" situation of the post-communist period concerning the massification of higher education in Romania. More specifically, the aim of this study is to collect and analyze information from relevant people in the field of higher education and the Romanian academic environment so that, in the end, I can create an overview of how the process of tertiary education expansion took place. I opted for a qualitative research approach rather than a quantitative or mixed one mainly for two reasons. The first is more related to the depth of information necessary for such a study, a depth that could not have been achieved in a quantitative research context where the instrument used would have been a questionnaire, and where the topics proposed could not have been explored with the same intensity. The second reason is more related to a limitation of the research, namely the resources available for launching such an initiative, but it could be the subject of future research. More specifically, using both a qualitative and a quantitative instrument would have represented a volume of data that would not have been manageable within the parameters defined for this research in the research project.

The last of the three proposed categories of objectives represents the empirical objectives and targets the goals and expected outcomes concerning the qualitative research I proposed in this doctoral study. More specifically, the objectives this time represent the targets I aim to achieve in the interviews and, implicitly, the coverage, as much as possible, of all areas of interest related to the subject of the expansion of higher education in Romania. I discuss here the main dimensions that will receive increased attention in the interviews I will conduct with respondents, namely aspects such as administrative and institutional incapacity immediately after the revolution, the effervescence and uncertainty in the post-communist academic environment, student enrolment

flows, the internationalization of higher education, as well as the funding and quality assurance in the Romanian academic environment. Therefore, the objective here is to cover as much as possible all these dimensions through discussions with respondents and, implicitly, to outline a complete picture of the situation on the ground during that period, with the goal of collecting perspectives from experts, university staff, and policymakers from as diverse areas of interest and research as possible. Once these data are collected, the objective is to analyze them and discover the frequency with which certain references and perspectives appear, so that I can determine which were the most pressing and difficult-to-manage situations faced by the Romanian academic environment in the context of massification.

### **Research Questions and Arguments**

Up to this point, I have discussed the general directions the thesis follows through the proposed objectives. Therefore, I will now talk about the research questions I aim to answer in this research. I will begin by formulating the main research question – "How did the massification of higher education occur in Romania and what were the institutional incentives that accompanied the emergence of this process?" Since I aim in this research to closely follow the institutional developments and changes in the post-communist period, this research question encompasses the main objective, namely explaining massification in Romania and, implicitly, explaining the system of institutions around student flows. The secondary research questions I will try to answer reference the empirical objectives I discussed in the previous paragraph and relate to the main aspects that accompany the expansion of higher education. These secondary questions are: "What was the state of the Romanian academic environment in the early years after the revolution, and how did student flows evolve?" "What incentives supported the process of massification of higher education in Romania?" and "What are the effects of the funding formula on academic performance in Romania?" Therefore, the next section is dedicated to discussing the arguments that will be formulated to provide answers to these questions.

### **Methodology**

First, like other Central and Eastern European states, Romania's transition to a democratic system and, implicitly, economic and political liberalization represented the triggering factors for the

development of higher education. Thus, chronologically speaking, the first discussion that arises in the economy of this research's methodology is precisely this transition from communism to democracy, a change that represented a "starting line" for all Central and Eastern European countries that shared the common past of an authoritarian system. From this perspective, one aspect addressed from the early years of the transition was formal access to higher education and determining the conditions for becoming a higher education provider. Since, in the early years of the transition, numerous entities self-declared as higher education providers, there was a pressing lack of regulation and criteria or standards to address who and how higher education could be provided (Vîiu & Miroiu 2015). Since the case of the Romanian Revolution was not as peaceful as, for example, the "Velvet Revolution" in Czechoslovakia (Kurtz 2008), the early steps after '90 were accompanied by sudden, accelerated transformations and lacked a clear trajectory toward what would be the best long-term outcome.

The second aspect I consider in discussing the case study of higher education in Romania is student flows and, implicitly, the increase in the number of registered students. For this section, I use data provided by the National Institute of Statistics through the online TEMPO platform, from which I extracted information on the total number of students and trainees enrolled in higher education in Romania after 1990. Since these data were not centralized, or at least not available to citizens, I cannot make a comparison between the number of students before and after the revolution. However, the figures from the last 34 years are available, and at first glance, they reflect, in some places, abrupt and substantial increases that, when placed alongside information about the state of higher education during those periods, can help better explain the phenomena that occurred in the post-communist years. I thus mention moments such as the period of 1994-1995 when the increase in the number of students was 80,979 students from one year to

The second aspect I consider in the discussion about the case study of higher education in Romania is student flows and, implicitly, the increases in the number of enrolled students. For this section, I use data provided by the National Institute of Statistics through the TEMPO online platform, from which I extracted information on the total number of students and learners enrolled in higher education in Romania since 1990. Since this data was not centralized or, at least, was not and is not available to citizens, I cannot make a comparison between the number of students before and after the revolution. However, the figures from the last 34 years are available and, at first glance,

reflect sharp and substantial increases that, when compared with information about the state of higher education during those periods, can help explain the phenomena that occurred in the post-December years. For example, during the period 1994-1995, the increase in the number of students was 80,979 from one year to the next. In other words, while between 1990 and 1994, the number of students increased slowly and gradually from 192,810 in 1990 to 255,162 in 1994, the poorly regulated emergence of private higher education providers led to 336,141 students being enrolled in 1995 (INSSE, 2024), a growth that was marked as "artificial" by the experts with whom I discussed this aspect.

The final element for which I find it useful to study the case of the expansion of higher education in Romania is the human resources that the state had with the new democratic system and which could further prepare experts and specialists in various fields. The discussion here revolves around the fields that emerged or re-emerged with the 1990 moment, whose existence had been interrupted or banned by the communist regime. I am referring to areas of study in the socio-human sciences (including sociology, psychology, anthropology, political science), social work, as well as educational sciences whose purpose is to train educators for future generations. Since freedom of expression or inclusive studies could not be discussed under the communist system, the liberalization of the higher education market in Romania represented, on the one hand, a prolific moment for the emergence of new tertiary education providers, but on the other hand, it meant a wave of specializations that the Romanian state was not prepared to manage. More specifically, I refer here to one of the references made by Respondent 20 during the interview, regarding the problem of the lack of human resources in preparing students in newly emerged fields or those whose form changed with the fall of communism. They note that, while social work was completely banned under the communist regime, social sciences as a whole were "severely stifled" and a field such as sociology had professors who were "qualified on the job" and had no prior specialized training (Respondent 20).

**Conclusions** Since literature on the massification of education is quite limited in Romania, I aimed for this thesis to represent both a theoretical contribution to massification, expansion, and quality, as well as a starting point regarding possible future directions that public and political decision-makers might consider, so that the issues identified in this study can receive a response or even a resolution. I refer here to various impediments and difficulties reported by respondents in the

discussions held, which led to identifying a series of aspects that make higher education in Romania a system of institutional actors whose rational behaviors can lead to a decrease in the quality of tertiary education. Thus, since all respondents are, in addition to other titles or positions, university faculty members, they have been able to clearly and precisely highlight the problems in the academic system and the link between these problems and the institutional changes that have occurred over the past three decades. Therefore, regarding these issues, I have tried through this work to contribute with some policy proposals formulated following the analysis of aggregated solutions obtained from interview participants. These proposals were discussed in the chapter dedicated to results and discussions, but I will reiterate them here: the proposal for universities to gradually abandon admissions solely based on documentation, adopting a cohort-based funding formula rather than equivalent student numbers, and, last but not least, recalculating the indices in the additional funding formula that address quality in higher education.

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