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European projects and national developments. The case of initial history teacher training in Romania

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Abstract

The paper presents the Romanian contribution to a series of three European projects aimed at the initial History teacher training, co-ordinated by the Vienna University. The paper presents the way in which a specific topic is developing over a decade in the framework of three consecutive projects, with an increase in project partners, the negotiating of findings and the search for a common ground, and the educational structures in Europe change. They give a long-term perspective over changes that occur at the level of initial teacher training, and its relation to broader changes in educational policies and systems of schooling.

Keywords: initial teacher training; History education; long-term perspective of educational change change; comparative analysis; assessment.

1. Introduction

The recent decades have introduced a new factor in the design of research, of any research – time. As perceived research needs increase at a faster rate than available resources, the increase for accountability puts new stress on the researcher and institutions alike. One of the critical resources is time. It is critical in two...
respects: first, it is a measure of the relation between resources and the output; but more important, it is critical because of the disparities between the public agendas (usually framed in cycles of 4 years) and the pace of research, especially in the area of Humanities and Social Sciences.

The time factor is significant also from another viewpoint. Long-term perspectives favor decision-making strategies that diminishes mechanisms of false involvement of interested actors (such as tokenism). [1]

One way to circumvent this issue might be the scaffolding of research, designing from the onset such an approach, or better still to identify means of expanding research. Such a possible example is a series of projects that can be regarded as a single effort aimed at a specific research topic. One good example is a project in the field of initial teacher training, coordinated by the University of Vienna. It started in 1998 and focused on History as a subject matter. The project began with 13 countries and now it draws data from related teaching subjects (Political/Civic Education, Social/Cultural Studies and History) and from educational systems in 27 countries.

In this most recent phase, its title is “Assessment, tutorial structures and initial teacher education of trainee students in the subjects Political/Civic Education, Social/Cultural Studies and History in Europe – A comparative study on Structures and Standards of Initial Training for History Teachers in Europe”.

Its main focus on History teaching is because it is a field of inquiry that is surely not more important than others, but probably more controversial. A series of documents developed by the Council of Europe and the European Comission state that History is crucial for the development of democratic citizenship, for fostering skills and competences that have a direct influence on the democratic societies. The teaching of such a subject is, then, of importance since the society at large has a clear stake in it. Therefore, the training of future History teachers is of significance for the social development of European countries. The history of this project on History teaching is also interesting in terms of educational research.

During an entire decade, in an increasing complex context, the project diversified its methodology in order to increase the degree of participation of its members, and the reliability of the collected data. In terms of products, several materials were developed:
• a number of publications (comparative studies and national reports, printed and electronic editions);
• a network of persons in charge of educational management as well as teacher trainers who are involved in establishing relevant standards in initial training for history teachers (at national or local level);
• web portals.

For the entire duration of the project, the overall co-ordination was ensured by Prof. Alois Ecker and its Vienna based team.

2. Phases of the research

The first project started in 1998, and had its published results in 2001, under the title “Initial training for history teachers Structures and standards in 13 member states of the Council of Europe. A comparative study”, as part of a larger project of the Council of Europe (“Learning and teaching the history of Europe in the 20th century”) [2]. The initial research focused on 13 countries and on some key issues: the influence of the recent developments in European societies (from multiculturality to the issues related to the economic development), the structures and standards of ITT for History teachers, the institutional links between ITT institutions and schools, the training of teacher trainers, the factors that influence ITT, possible recommendations. In 2004, a second volume published by the same team (led by Prof. Alois Ecker from the Vienna University), included several other countries from SE Europe in the study [3]. Although the volumes have the same outline, the second volume has a more pronounced focus on statistics, and on the comparative aspects of the research. However, the results of that first study encouraged the research team to take into consideration a long-term approach, since the initial training of History teachers was undergoing significant changes throughout the countries of Europe, and – as it became obvious – with different aims, directions, and paces. That is, educational change, while inspired by common
goals and objectives, still remains a (national) multifaceted process in which local traditions and structures react rather different to European-level stimuli.

The second project, called “The Structures and Standards of Initial Training for History Teachers in Europe. A Comparative Study” (2003-2006), included from the beginning an increased number of countries (17), to which independent experts were added. The new project focused on developing a questionnaire for quantitative data, as well as national reports (drawn on the same basis as the overall questionnaire) for in-depth and localized analysis. The new report was mainly comparative in its scope, and used extensively charts and maps to convey the main trends at European level. During the project, several issues became obvious. First, the significant differences in the terminology employed throughout Europe. This issue was partly solved by the use of the ISCED levels, and the Eurydice databases in what concerns the general structures of the national educational systems. However, the differences in the academic curricula, and the standards related to the qualifications for the teaching profession were too different to give an accurate European-wide picture. Finally, the gap between History curricula and History teaching was considered. The latter demonstrated the need for a more comparative approach, both in terms of breadth and in terms of depth.

The third project, started in 2010, took into consideration the whole area of Social Sciences, because it was closer to the actual teaching in Secondary education. Its title, “Assessment, tutorial structures and initial teacher education of trainee students in the subjects Political/Civic Education, Social/Cultural Studies and History in Europe – A comparative study on Structures and Standards of Initial Training for History Teachers in Europe”, is the result of previous experiences. The changes are significant. First, it included History teaching among the broader spectrum of school subjects related to the Social Sciences, thus enabling a more significant comparison (in various countries of Europe, several institutions train teachers for the whole area). Second, it focused much more on the curriculum structures of ITT, both in terms of academic and didactic content (e.g., types of activities, types of courses – concept based, process-based, scope of courses – regional, national, European, global). Third, it established a common conceptual framework by using the APA glossary. Finally, since quantitative data are not enough, thematic workgroups were established (such as educational policies, media education, conflict resolution), that produced synthetic reports. While the final report of this project is still under construction, it seems that now general trends are more visible (such as the increase in integrating subject matters, the development of links between theoretical approaches to ITT and practical activities, the shift towards consecutive models of ITT).

3. The results: data and significant trends

The three projects managed to develop a broad picture of the initial teacher training for History and other Social Sciences school subjects. The investigation took into consideration the administrative structures, teaching methods and standards, as well as the theoretical, methodological and conceptual background of the assessment of initial teacher training, and of mentoring and/or tutoring structures.

Data were collected systematically in each country by the respective contributors with the help of questionnaires and by using the databases of the national ministries of education, the curricula of institutions of higher education, as well as personal experiences in the field under scrutiny. They were then forwarded to and compiled by the Vienna research group, which also compared the collected data with data from the European education database Eurydice, the UNESCO “World database on education” and the OECD studies in the series “Education at a glance”. The second approach was based upon in-depth expert discussions on qualitative aspects of the subject. Several group networks worked on relevant problems of the field. By the end of each project, the recommendations that were one of the outcomes of the activities went to international organizations in the field of education, to ministries of education and to teacher training institutions.

When looking at these projects as a whole program of research, there are obvious developments:
• The aim of the research, the initial teacher training of History teachers in Europe, was maintained, but as the requirements evolved during the decade, so did the project adapt itself to the new situations (especially the Bologna process, and the shift towards competence-based curriculum development and teaching);
• The methodological approach was fine-tuned through the team input in order to increase the potential comparative scope of the data: from a combination of quantitative with qualitative methods, but with a domination of the former, to the balance between the two approaches with thematic workgroups producing their own agenda and reports;
• The thematic approach shifted from an intradisciplinary to a transdisciplinary focus; that is, from a focus only on History as a school subject and a field of initial teacher training, towards the multiple mechanisms and combinations in which History teachers are trained;
• The geographical coverage: from separated reports to (added) European-wide comparisons; while national data can provide in-depth analysis of local (and regional) evolutions, the continental comparison can provide informations concerning the relation between European-level desiderata and national responses to these trends.

This effort to identify elements that can outline an European training framework is not singular. The European Primary Teacher Education (EPTE) aims at developing a curriculum framework focused on developing several European-wide elements, but with an enhanced mobility capability for participating students and institutions in the European Higher Education Area. Some of the publications produced have a strong comparative potential [4]. At the same time, the TUNING project is intended to develop a methodology for ensuring the compatibility of training programs, the comparability of data gathered and for ensuring quality standards at European level, thus creating a common ground for the universities that have accepted the Bologna Process [5].

The comparative analysis of the data gathered in the projects on the initial History teacher training shows some interesting trends. For example, at the level of teaching techniques presented in the courses for History Didactics, from the 10 methods included in the questionnaire, the most frequent are the planning and organizing of lessons, process-oriented teaching and learning, and the implementation of historic research skills in history lessons. The rather traditional approach that seems to be dominant is confirmed by the fact that in the majority of institutions that participated in the project, instruments for collaborative teaching and web.2 are not a priority [6].

4. Relevant findings for Romania

Initial teacher training is considered to be a significant variable in the increase of the quality of educational systems. Therefore, the majority of changes in the legal framework of education took into consideration also the initial teacher training. Taking part in the three phases, enabled the Romanian team to see where is the national initial teacher training system placed in relation to systems in neighboring countries, and with educational systems that are based on different educational traditions.

We have selected a few of the possible topics, on the basis of their significance for the ongoing nation-wide debate concerning the teacher training in Romania.

4.1. The debate over the model of initial teacher training

The concurrent model has a long tradition in Romania and in SE Europe, also because of the influence of the political system in place in the region up to 1989. In Romania, the model was maintained after 1989, with changes and adjustments at the level of curriculum, and of the teaching methods. The Law of Education (1/2011), however, brings a paradigmatic change, the shift from the concurrent to the consecutive model of teacher training. The Law states that the initial teacher training will be at the MA level, organised by each faculty in the universities. Nevertheless, this change was introduced without consulting the universities, and disregarding the implications of such a change – the limits of the managerial potential of faculties to organise such a MA
programme (with an added stress on already limited financial and curricular resources, and the fact that the
funding is at university level), the problems related to the relation between the faculties and the local school
authorities for the practical activities of teacher trainees. The result was that by following legal decisions, the
consecutive model was (for the time being, at least) abandoned.

4.2. Content of the professional profile

The issue of the professional profile for teachers remains open, for both the higher education and Secondary
Schools. This topic was among the most difficult in the questionnaire, also because there is not national
consensus over a definition for the professional profile for the teaching profession, and the rather scarce sources
of information. There are, however, some steps taken in the direction of developing a national framework of
qualifications. Looking at various sources (including the requirements for attaining various statuses within the
teaching profession), an inventory of specific competences that teachers should be able to demonstrate could
include the following:

• knowledge and understanding of historical and didactical terminology, information sources that are specific to
  history and to the educational sciences and the methods and instruments of evaluation;
• ability to identify ways in which issues of the contemporary world can be addressed through the curriculum,
  ability to analyze didactic interactions in the classroom and the role of the teacher in facilitating
  communication;
• ability to use a diversity of historical sources and teaching strategies that contribute to the
  development of research and communication competencies;
• awareness of the need for diversified/individual approaches in the classroom.

4.3. The relation between academic courses, courses in general didactics, subject didactics and practical
courses/activities during the initial teacher training

The data collected demonstrate that in Romania, as in other countries, the training of History teachers, and
especially the initial training, is organized exclusively at national level. That is, there is always a common
curricular framework for the training of History teachers at the level of academic knowledge. As a result, there is
a significant influence of national tradition of historical interpretation and analysis. On the other hand, it seems
there is no common/core curriculum for all institutions of initial training for History teachers in Romania at the
level of didactic training. Within each institution of higher education there is, however, at least a declared
tendency of co-ordination of the training, by means of a course synopsis that includes the elements of the
competencies formulated in the university curriculum and taken into consideration by that specific course. Only
recently, projects in universities are focused on facilitating the subject-specific didactic training of academics.

Bodo von Borries, in a paper presented in a meeting of the project participants, states that the initial teacher
training should provide two elements: a balance between theory and practice, and an approach to history that is
supported by multiperspectivity, controversy, and the plurality of orientations [7].

4.4. The structures of tutoring/mentoring

There is also little knowledge on a comparative European level about the structures of tutoring/mentoring and
their impact on the retention of student teachers as well as their impact on the development of social skills and
teamwork of the trainee teachers. From the data in the questionnaire one can identify an interesting inventory of
current practices in the field (http://che.itt-history.eu), that could be of interest for the future development of such
schemes in Romania: comprehensive teacher portfolio, records in a career entry and development profile
statement, monitoring systems, collaborative learning groups with self-organization, mentoring teachers during
the practical training in schools, teacher mentor during course at the university, mentor during practical training
in schools, the involvement of the teacher mentor during the practical training in university, supervision during subject courses, portfolio supervised by a lecturer/course tutor.

4.5. Theoretical concepts for the training of subject didactics

The identification of the theoretical concepts related to the initial teacher training is based on the analysis of the curricula from the universities in Bucharest, Cluj, and Iasi. There seems to be common elements for the courses in general pedagogy and a greater diversity of approaches in the field of subject didactics.

The General pedagogy course is organised in modules: fundamentals of pedagogy, curriculum theory and methodology, theory and method of learning, theory and method of evaluation.

The main concepts are related to pupil-centred learning; process-oriented forms of learning and teaching, project work, educational management, learning environment, teaching models/paradigms, learning metaphor, knowledge society, reflexive practices, curriculum theory and practices, key competencies, authentic evaluation.

The curricular documents developed at the level of initial teacher training departments include usually, in the course synopsis, the following elements: the capacity to apply theoretical knowledge in practice, fundamental knowledge related to the teaching profession, the ability to work in an interdisciplinary team, professional ethics. At a more specific level, that of subject didactics, these documents take into consideration skills such as evaluating learning results and student performance, awareness of the different contexts in which learning takes place, counselling of students and parents, critical thinking, practical reflective skills, metacognitive skills, the design and use of innovative teaching and learning strategies, designing educational processes, efficient communication.

At the same time, teachers that teach subjects such as History or Social Studies have increased responsibilities in what concerns the training of democratic attitudes and values, the intercultural dialogue, tolerance and the understanding of cultural diversity.

4.6. Reputation of history teaching

History teaching is considered by history teachers to be important for their professional development; there is an increased interest, especially among younger trainee teachers and teachers, in new teaching approaches. As a field of academic training, however, many academics feel that “you are either a good teacher or not”, meaning they know their subject or not, probably as a result of their own limited knowledge of modern teaching approaches.

The reputation of History teachers (and of the teaching profession as a whole) seems to be influenced by several factors: the level of income is the most significant, followed by the social status and the presence of history as an examination subject (optional) in the national examinations. There has been no change in the last couple of years.

On the other hand, history graduates have ample opportunities to work not only in research, but also in politics, civil society and the civil service; they are better equipped to enter postgraduate training in various fields (politics, media, foreign affairs, etc.). Historians are perceived as persons able to contribute significantly to the development of a democratic society.

5. Conclusions

From a broader perspective, the projects co-ordinated by the University of Vienna seem to confirm that “it is often stressed that compatible qualification structures as well as quality assurance standards and procedures in higher education should enhance the employability of graduates and increase innovation and productivity. It has
been stressed in discussions that broader changes to education systems – not only at the tertiary level – are needed as well as ‘changing the mindset’ [8]

The relation between the academic field and the school subject is another interesting point that will need further scrutiny. The training of future History teachers should take into consideration how to help them to put to good use the academic knowledge so that students will be able to use it significantly, both in terms of content and skills. Therefore, academic knowledge should be adapted also – by means of negotiation and fine-tuning – to the training of future teachers.

Bibliography

[6] Presentation delivered by Prof. Alois Ecker at the final meeting of the project, Vienna, May 2012