Higher education from the perspective of demographical evolution: obstacles and solutions

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Abstract

It is obvious nowadays that population are decreasing in number, but increasing in longevity. There are new lifestyles and new patterns of migration and all this affects higher education systems all over Europe. In this new context, higher education institutions may be deeply challenged by the existing and future demographic shifts in terms of the organization of their academic work, their organizational cultures and institutional identities, as well as concerning newly emerging types of student flows. Starting from such aspects, our paper aims to emphasize the connection existing between education and demography in Romania, as those two concepts influences one another. To assess the impact of demography on education in Romania, qualitative and quantitative methods will be used. Considering the obtained results, this paper is intended to have a relevant impact on the academic level and perhaps on the national policy regarding demography.

Keywords: Education, demography, economy, quality of life;

1. Introduction

In the last centuries, people from the south-eastern Europe are trying to find their place in the civilized Western world, through some mass renewal policies promoting a strong education in general, and a development of higher education in particular. In Romania, in the last two decades, higher education has undergone some substantial changes, but insignificant ones, if we are speaking about their quality, because nothing has changed the external perception. Although Romanians made efforts in order to assimilate Bologna and Lisbon standards, the conservative inertia have further proliferated rigidity, bureaucracy, instability, stress etc. and an unexplained lack of correlation between education and labour market.

Nowadays, education is becoming a major center of concern for researchers in any field of knowledge, an "intellectual fashion", but without having a real model. Beyond the natural interest for the sensitive complexity defining education, in the study of education there are sometimes not only hidden strong obstacles difficult to overcome, but there are also unspoken interests.

Emigration, early school leaving, the problems regarding the "hygiene" of the baccalaureate exams, the continuing natural decrease of population are only some of the negative aspects concerning the education area. In the present, one could easily observe that public and private universities are struggling to attract as much as possible of a small number of candidates. A few years ago the universities were struggling to assert its identity on the
international market and to prove their scientific prestige. Now their greatest concern is related to financial and human resources. Where from to take the money? Where from to find the teachers? Where to find an adequate number of students?

Indeed, the first obstacle is the financial one, but education has different rules than those of money; education takes time, and time is money. The choice between education and less money means early school leavers, meaning a systematic decrease in the enrolment quotas, which is going to the restricting of all levels of education activities. The frequent changes in the education curricula and in the assessment methods, under the pretext of increasing school performance, create mistrust in the educational system, in general, and in Romanian schools, in particular. Unfortunately, these are only a part of the problems of the higher educational system in our country. A very important issue to be solved in the years to come is related to the demographical trends, as we are going to see in the next pages.

2. The demographic challenge in our century

The EU member states are facing and are going to face in the coming decades a series of challenges associated with an ageing society. Demographic trends have featured on the policy agenda of many European countries as most of them are confronted with what is usually described as the “second demographic transition”: population decline and a modification of the age distribution. It is obvious now that the population is increasing in longevity and that there are new lifestyles and new patterns of migration and all this affects not only the higher education systems all over Europe, but the society in all its aspects. Specialists emphasize three main factors that explain the ageing population trend: persistently low fertility rates, increasing life expectancy, and a baby-boom generation that will soon start to reach retirement age. Although ageing is relatively easy to forecast, the topic did not receive much attention from researchers and policy-makers until the 1990s. Nowadays it is a very important issue not only in the academic world.

According to EUROSTAT yearbook 2010, Europe’s ageing society and its relatively static number of inhabitants may be contrasted against a rapid expansion in the world’s population, driven largely by population growth in developing countries. United Nations’ population projections show that the situation on our continent is by no means unique, and that most developed, and indeed some emerging economies, will undergo changes in their demographic composition in the next half century, with shrinking working age populations, a higher proportion of elderly persons, and increasing dependency rates. The reports show that one of the main reasons behind Europe’s ageing population is the decline experienced in the average number of births per year, which fell from a high of 11.9 million during the period 1960 to 1965 to 7.4 million for the period 2000 to 2005 (Europe in figures — Eurostat yearbook 2010). In contrast, the overall number of births in every other continent continued to rise, except in North America.

Among the reasons, there are also mentioned: the reduction in the number of marriages; the increase in the average age at which people marry; and an increase in the number of divorces.

The Demography Report 2010 presented by the European Commission indicate that by 2014 the working age population (20-64) will start to shrink, as the large baby-boom generations born immediately after World War II are now entering their sixties and retiring. The same report shows that the number of people aged 60 and above in the EU is now rising by more than two million every year. In the same time, every year about 5 million children are born in the EU-27 and over 2 million people immigrate from third countries. Births outnumber deaths by several hundred thousand persons each year, whereas net migrations well over a million (European Commission, 2011). Moreover, it is told that EU-27 Member States are host to some 20 million non-EU-nationals. A further 10 million EU nationals are living in another Member State, and about 5 million non-nationals have acquired EU citizenship since 2001. Statistics show that by 2060, persons of all nationalities with at least one foreign-born parent are expected to account for close to a third of the EU-27 population.

Ageing population has a profound impact on all generations and on most of the areas of economic, social and politic activities: employment, social protection, education, culture, and politics. Demographic changes challenge the institutions and political strategies, which were put into operation at a time when demographic trends were
different. They influence the daily lives of citizens and the strategies adopted by EU Member States, which are confronted with a number of problems: the cost of pensions, the changing of strategies related to education and training, housing, transport, healthcare, public infrastructure, tax reforms, structural reforms, public expenditure etc. Moreover, this ageing trend may adversely influence the medium and long term economic performance through its effect on productivity and innovation. It is expected that older people adapt slowly to changes and to involve with some difficulty in training activities; thus, the process of innovation and adaptation to new technologies may be affected (Barth et al., 1993).

In this context, many countries also fear that demographic changes in their population are leading to a substantial contraction of their higher education systems, with implications for their human resources and international competitiveness.

3. The higher education system and the demography in Romania

3.1. Demography in Romania

The total population of Romania (21.462.186 persons in 2010 according to the National Institute of Statistics) is expected to follow the European trend and to decline by almost 16 % until 2050 as a result of low birth rates and a high level of net emigration. As one can observe in the figures below, the number of deceased persons is bigger than the one of live births. The old-age dependency ratio is expected to remain below the EU-27 average for a couple decades, then increase to well above the EU-27 average by 2060, when, as a result, public expenditure on pensions is projected to be above 15 % of GDP (European Commission, 2011).

The fertility rate is also not very encouraging. In this context, it is expected to see a reduction in the total future number of Romanian students. The decrease of the population has affected directly the education by continuous fall of the school population, and this fact generated major dysfunctions on a local plan (the reorganization of the teaching posts, the closing of the school units etc.). In the last two years, we note a significant decrease in the number of enrolled students in higher education. Considering the year of 2007/2008 as baseline, we observe that the number of enrolled students in 2009/2010 dropped by 14.55%. In fact, 2007 was the year with the highest number of students enrolled (907.353 students), and it was the year when the first signs of the economic and financial crisis hit Romania (Șerban-Oprescu and Badea, 2011). It is estimated that the number of students is going to decrease in the future, as it is positively correlated with the number of births.

Beside the low birth rate, like Lithuania, Bulgaria and Latvia, Romania has experienced a decade of large population losses also due to the emigration of young adults (Șerban-Oprescu and Badea, 2011). It is also to be seen the phenomenon of brain drain, which brings another issue into discussion: the costs generated by the education of the young people who leave the country are supported by the Romanian state, but the benefits are going to be taken by other states.
3.2. The impact of demography on higher education system

Higher education institutions may be deeply challenged by the existing and coming demographic shifts in terms of the organization of their academic work, their organizational cultures and institutional identities, as well as concerning newly emerging types of student flows. Are higher education institutions prepared to adequately react to unprecedented demographic shifts?

The decrease of the population has affected directly the education sector. In addition, one must take into account the fact that in Romania the public expenditure in the educational sector, in general, is below the EU27 average. With student cohorts expected to decline, maintaining or expanding current enrolments will involve tapping into a pool of students who will have fewer financial resources available (Șerban-Oprescu and Badea, 2011). This would require a review of the financial support system.

In the same time, universities need to refocus teaching and learning from disciplines to problems and to diversify their educational offer. The ageing process will increase the need of long life learning. Regarding this aspect, Romania also has some obstacles to pass, as the overall results for the European Lifelong Learning Index show that Romania is situated in the lowest performing group of countries with Hungary, Greece and Bulgaria, while the Nordic countries Denmark, Sweden and Finland and, in addition, the Netherlands rank highest (ELLI, 2010).

It is obvious the fact that in order to succeed to conduct to the growth of a country’s prosperity, an educational system must not only train future workers for today's environment but also arm them with the tools and resources to continually upgrade their skills. Education is not a one-time event. Life-long learning is a necessity in today's rapidly changing world. That means providing students with both the desire and the tools to continue their education. We must work to provide graduates with the education needed to meet the realities of today's and tomorrow's marketplace (Plosser, 2008).

Thus, universities need to raise their attractiveness in order to balance the decreasing number of students and to be able to face the increasing competition generated by some foreign universities. Attractiveness of the universities can be reached by ensuring and improving the quality of educational services, by growing the flexibility, by developing an international network of cooperation with various partners, by developing partnerships with the business representatives etc.

The demographic trend leads the academic staff to invest more time in research, as the number of students is decreasing and it generates more time for other activities to some professors. It also influences them to bring some students in the research area as they need to attract future researchers in the system in order to continue their work at some point. The research area also is important in creating partnerships between the academic and the business environment.

The need to readjust the higher educational system generated by the demographical trend is also related to the ITC revolution. It is obvious the fact that the hegemony of traditional universities has been definitively challenged: “… Many universities may die or may change beyond recognition as a result of the ITC revolution. When asked what his light bulb would mean for the candle industry, Thomas Edison reportedly replied: <<We will make electricity so cheap that only the rich will burn candles>>. We are entering an era in which most colleges and universities must decide whether to change a little (and thus remain in the academic candle industry) or a lot (and launch themselves into the academic electrical business)" (Langenberg, 1996). Thus, the Romanian higher educational system is facing a “perfect e-storm”, which is linking pedagogy, technology and learner needs. The growing demand for online learning leads to opportunities for innovation in the educational system. In Romania the first steps were taken through implementing e-Learning projects and defining the barriers that stand in the way of an information society for everyone. In the Romanian educational system – rather conservative – changes occur gradually and it takes a long time until the innovations are assimilated.

4. Conclusions

In Romania, the higher education system faces a lot of issues, which beside the demographic trend must be solved as they can harm the whole mechanism. It is well known that many universities operate with overcrowded
and deteriorating physical facilities, limited and obsolete library resources, insufficient equipment and instructional materials, outdated curricula, unqualified teaching staff, poorly prepared secondary students, and an absence of academic rigor and systematic evaluation of performance. Similar conditions can be found in many of the new private universities and other tertiary institutions. Moreover, drastic reductions in public funding are further jeopardizing the quality and sustainability of existing programs and even the survival of entire institutions (Holm-Nielsen, 2001).

The austerity policy adopted by the Romanian government induced by the prolonged crisis slowed the process of "revival" the teaching staff and accentuated the deficit of teachers. In the same time in our country it is easily to see that even in normal conditions the education sector is no longer an area of interest for the young graduates because of the unattractive and small salaries.

EUROSTAT data shows that almost three quarters of the Romanian population is poor, and almost the same number of individuals is equally ignorant. The statistics are even bleaker when you look to the future: a decreasing and ageing population with an alarming degree of poverty! For a long period of time the civilized world lived with the slogan "A country is rich, if it has rich people", but the subtext of the slogan always remembers that "a country is rich, if it has educated people". Moreover the access to civilization and welfare seems paved with "the tiles of education" and thus, emerging countries are being right to say that "redeeming through education" is a sure way towards prosperity. But, saving a nation through education requires, first of all, saving the education sector.

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