The education skills trap in a dependent market economy. Romania's case in the 2000s

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A B S T R A C T

We discuss the political economic development of Romania since 1989, with a focus on the evolution of higher education (HE). First, we place this evolution in the context of demand for HE by prospective students and employers, focusing on the low demand for skills in the MNC-dominated Romanian economy. Second, we provide empirical insight on indicators of quality, enrolment, and funding as key features of the HE system. We argue that Romania has evolved into a dependent market economy entrenched in a low-skills equilibrium, and that the weakness of the HE system is a key element in this process.

1. Introduction

Even if skills acquired in communist higher education were overly specialized and not easily transferable (Boeri, 2000), the system was creating “too many rocket scientists, too few marketing experts” (Campos and Dabusinskas, 2002), and the social sciences, broadly defined, were altogether stymied, one of the advantages Romania, like other post-communist countries, inherited from the communist era was a relatively well-performing higher education sector. The level of instruction in East and Central European universities was considered comparable to that in Western Europe (Graham, 1987), at least in the hard sciences and mathematics (Tomusk, 2000, 2004). Moreover, on human capital indicators such as enrolment or average years of schooling the former communist countries ranked close to the OECD (Barro and Lee, 2001). This arguably meant that Romania, alongside other post-communist countries in Europe, commenced its transition to market economy with a relatively solid skills pool.

Higher education (HE), through the complex skills it provides, is unquestionably vital for economic success in a knowledge-based society, on both individual and aggregate level (Goldin and Katz, 2008; Krueger and Lindahl, 2001; Hanushek and Wössmann, 2010). The level of skills in an economy is inter alia positively correlated with the level of high value-added activities and innovation (McMullen et al., 2000). While the aggregate level of skills depends on more than higher education — it is, for example, also affected by vocational and on-the-job training – formal education remains a cornerstone.

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In the context of transition, it was widely expected that the European post-communist economies would develop towards higher value-added activities. And a superficial glance at Romania might support such an impression. Macroeconomic indicators have continued to improve since 1990, entailing a considerable increase in GDP and living standards for a majority of the population. For example, GDP/capita increased from 1600 USD in 1990 to 9500 USD in 2016 (IMF World Economic Forum, 2017). Successive post-communist governments have aimed to enhance competition on the education market, alongside other sectors (Dobbins, 2011). Enrolment rates in Romanian HE institutions increased from 10 percent in 1989 to 71 percent in 2009, falling back to a still high 53 percent in 2015 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2017). This seems broadly in line with Ansell’s (2010) expectation that democratization and economic openness should lead to increased enrolment in and funding for higher education.

Looked at more closely, three sets of factors combined during transition could lead us to expect a strong performance of the higher education sector in Romania since 1989: (i) The country started marketization with a solid skills pool comparable to many advanced economies, and the number of competing institutions and enrolment only continued to increase thereafter; (ii) the period witnessed substantial and continued economic growth; (iii) the country started a democratization process, which implied increased responsiveness of governments to voters, who demand possibilities for upward mobility through education. However, the expectation of a strong performance in higher education in post-communist Romania has in fact been met only partially. Instead, as we will show below, higher education quality has stagnated and even decreased, especially in technical subjects and in the hard sciences.

In this article, we analyze the role of higher education in Romania post-89 in the context of the country’s broader political-economic development. We argue that Romania has evolved into a dependent market economy (DME) trapped in a low-skills equilibrium, and that the lack of quality in HE is an element of this process. Operationalizing and measuring the quality of HE is a sensitive task. Evaluation procedures have not yet been developed at the European or a broader international level to assess the quality of higher education, as opposed to the well-known OECD PISA test for assessing education up to secondary level. Drawing on the vast literature in education science (Harvey and Williams, 2010), we recognize that assessments of HE quality ideally should be made in a differentiated manner accounting for different stakeholders: students, employers, teaching staff, government, and different funding agencies (Harvey and Diana, 1993: 10). HE quality has been conceptualized as fitness for purpose, as value for money, or as transformative for the students (Harvey and Diana, 1993). However, given the scarcity of reliable and comparable data which could measure stakeholder-sensitive conceptualizations of HE quality in Romania (Freyberg-Inan, 2006), we must here proceed pragmatically: As will be further explained in section 3, we provide information on all possible quality indicators on which systematic data exist, while focusing most strongly on the relatively uncontroversial indicator of the ratio between absolute levels of funding and absolute levels of enrolment.

The lack of clear improvement of higher education in post-communist transition is puzzling, but this puzzle has been largely overlooked in the literature, for at least three reasons. First, the legacy of a relatively high level of instruction took some time to wear off. It was not until the 2000s that stagnation or decline became obvious to even domestic observers (The Economist, August 7th, 2012; Ives et al., 2017; Abbott, 2011, 2012). Second, government and education officials worked hard to project an image of success in Western-type education, both at home and abroad (Tomusk, 2000). Third, observers have often analyzed the capacity of the university system to “Europeanize” rather than its performance per se (Dobbins, 2011).

Our analysis draws on a variety of sources, including access to Romanian-language policy documents, analyses, and polls as well as a series of interviews with higher education officials, politicians, academics, and private sector employees in human resources departments as well as focus groups with students and recent graduates (see references section for list of interviews). Respondents were selected from the range of stakeholders relevant for HE quality: academics in public and in private universities, students and young employees as well as employees in human resources (HR) departments, domestic and multinational employers, as well as representatives of think tanks and employers’ associations.

The focus groups were conducted in the first stage of the data collection process to help generate and further develop hypotheses by means of general discussion. The results of the focus group discussions then subsequently informed the semi-structured interviews. Access to interviewees was facilitated through personal connections and the promise of confidentiality. This translated into an almost 100% initial response rate. Response rates were lower once the snowball technique was used to acquire at university and that university professors do not seem to have any incentives to restructure skills provision at

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1 We eschew the focus on vocational training which is appropriate for other contexts (Martin and Thelen, 2007), as in Romania vocational training has all but disappeared since 1989.

2 The AHELO assessment is a feasibility study developed by the OECD meant to produce an equivalent to PISA for HE. However, results will only become available in 2020, and Romania has not taken part in the feasibility study.
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