

Silvia Florea

**INTERSECTIONS OF TIME AND VALUE
IN EDUCATION AND CULTURAL NARRATIVES**

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in Education and Cultural
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Intersections of Time and Value in Education and Cultural Narratives

The book draws upon a collection of essays I have written and published over the past decade on education and culture through the many and diverse lenses provided mostly by my American scholarship experience. The volume is defined by three main thematic architects. The first, *Raising Awareness: Education and the Sustainable University* emphasises the role that education can play in both raising awareness among young people about sustainable development and giving them the skills to put sustainable development into practice. It places priority on the development of sustainability literacy as a ‘core competence’ among graduates performing in an academic culture. Issues such as “Accessibility and Affordability” are intertwined with widening access concepts, employment and employability issues in public and private, marginal or mainstream Higher Education contemporary constructs. *With Tradition vs Dynamism: Academic Culture in Times of Change*, the focus shifts to lifelong learning and transnational education and policies, to more diverse (and better) forms of learning environments that can determine, sustain and characterize the academic culture. Coming full circle, the larger theme of *Cultural Heritage and Inter-cultural Communication* is intended to offer several insights into the role of culture in communication processes. The idea is that culturally attributed social interaction processes are themselves the result of socially constructed processes and against this background cultural heritage, capital and liminality become critical vantage points for the mapping of cross- and inter-cultural communication.

The book remains an invitation to reflect more critically on the contemporary values and issues facing our higher education and culture and it ultimately seeks to create openings in the walls that separate both persons from one another (across professions, disciplines, race, gender, class, age) and members of the academy from the larger society.

Silvia Florea

1. Raising Awareness: Education and the Sustainable University

On Accessibility and Affordability of English Studies in Romania

Abstract

This article considers English Studies from the viewpoint of student enrolment and participation, trying to shed new light on the causes and effects of over- and under-enrolment. I argue that in the absence of coherent educational policies in the last two decades, several factors – declining academic status, radical demographic shifts, and progressively massive reductions in governmental financial support among them – have impinged on access and affected rates of participation, leading in time to both shortages in and burdens on universities. Under the circumstances, English Studies institutions have been staggering under the double pressure of ensuring academic program quality and accommodating mass access. English Studies departments have been seeking to re-negotiate their social function while simultaneously being ‘streamlined’ under the two (related) pressures of economic and academic restructuring devolving from the Bologna Process. My article also discusses over- and under-enrolment from the viewpoint of the access and equity challenges they pose and argues that, paradoxically, despite the massification of Higher Education, English-language study programs show a propensity for elite student access, that is, they increase class divides and reduce lower-income student access to Higher Education.

Keywords: English Studies, Higher Education, over- and under-enrolment, massification, access, widening participation, barriers, demographic shifts

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The significance of the year 1989 for the Romanian tertiary education system resides not only in the overthrow of the Ceaușescu regime but also in initiating the country's transition to a market-based economy and providing the impetus for many important educational reforms. The main sites of social inequity before 1989 were the rural areas, the minorities (the Roma minority in particular) and low income families (Reisz 77). Non-participation in education and dropout rates, particularly in early school stages, were high. The general under-funding of education, more dramatic in rural regions, had led to degradation of schools and equipment. These were but a few of the problems that post-communist education was confronted with on the brink of change. Romania was the only Eastern European country that in 1989 experienced a violent change of regime and the ensuing economic and societal transition was slower and more problem-ridden than in most countries in the post-communist period. The Romanian economy suffered a massive recession throughout the decade, with the gross domestic product falling by 40 percent, industrial production by 45 percent and inflation increasing a thousand-fold (Sălăgean 8). The HE system was, as in other Balkan countries, functional and, more importantly, the most similar to Western systems (Daxner qtd. in Reisz 78). However, the shifting political-economic imperatives in governance, globalization, and market forces called for quite a few educational reforms which were to involve restructuring, decentralization and consequent institutional autonomy, as well as privatization, all of which affected traditional universities and colleges. For instance, the fact that in the academic year 1989-90 the Romanian HE system included 164,307 students while the teaching staff of 11,696 was smaller than in 1970 (Reisz 82) had to be taken into account. Such factors, exacerbated by the lack of openness and competitiveness in tertiary education, indicated that attempts at

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institutional reforms would be difficult and unlikely to close the gap between Romanian and European education systems in the short term. The post-communist transition in Romanian HE was then superseded by the Bologna Process which was to expose the system to a double pressure: making up for almost 40 years of communism and building a foundation on which future reforms could be based. In brief, the reforms had to respond to broader reforms in HE in the West and adhere to EU imperatives with a view to accession, particularly to the Bologna Process (Reisz 73).

Post-Communist Enrolment Increase

The dramatic increase in enrolment in post-1989 Romania was coupled with declining or stagnant government resources and a decrease in performance incentives. This explosion in HE enrolment in Central and Eastern Europe may be compared to the similar expansion in Western Europe and the USA in the post-war period. Then the US experienced an enrolment explosion due to the GI Bill program adopted by Congress in 1944 supporting enrolment of returning military into HE. In five years, enrolment rates more than tripled. By comparison, in Germany it took almost 20 years to reach a similar increase in enrolment (from the late 1950s to the late 1970s) (Berde and Vanyolos online source). In Hungary, HE enrolment more than quadrupled between 1989 and 2005 (Ministry of Education 2006b), whereas in Romania, total enrolments increased more than fivefold between 1989 and 2007, that is, from 192,810 students in 1990/1991 to 785,506 in 2006/2007 (INS 2008, Table 8.13, online source). In very specific figure terms, student enrolments in private HE increased from zero in the 1989/1990 academic year to 143,904 students enrolled in the 2004/2005 academic year and 265,243 in 2006/2007, almost tripling from

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1992 to 2007 (INS 2008, Table 8.16). Likewise, the number of students per 10,000 inhabitants also increased four times between 1989 and 2002 from 71 in 1989 to 286 students in 2004 (Korka and Nicolescu 349). There was also a tremendous increase in the number of higher education institutions in that their total number almost tripled during the period 1989-2004 (Korka and Nicolescu 347). While the number of public higher education institutions increased by 25 percent, private higher education institutions increased from zero in 1989 to 67 in 2004. The share of the private sector in the total number of higher education institutions also reportedly increased from 37.8 percent in 1995 to 55 percent in 2004 (Mihăilescu 1996).

This remarkable expansion in the number of institutions and in enrolment levels aimed to accommodate the excess demand created by the overly limited student admission numbers under the communist regime (Nicolescu and Korka 351). This growth was initially spurred by the existing public universities, which responded to the pressure by expanding their programs in the high-demand fields as soon as restrictions on student intake were relaxed. Very soon this growth began to be stimulated by the emergence of new, private providers in HE, mostly in an environment lacking clear accreditation regulations. Therefore, the existence of high demand at the beginning of the 1990s and the inability of public universities to fully meet this demand stimulated increased enrolment rates and constituted growth factors in our transitional educational reforms.

In Romania, there has been no focused research on the ways in which student over-enrolment has affected the HE system, particularly in relation to ES programs. I argue that since the 1990s, access to HE in general, and to English Studies in particular, has been affected by a noticeable rise and then decline in the academic status of philological subjects, by demographic

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shifts and reductions in state financial support. In terms of demographic fluctuations, educational policies were initially intended to increase intake of students in response to demand in the immediate post-communist period. However, these policies were not adjusted according to demographic shifts in the next few years. The high demand at the beginning of the 1990s was to a large extent the outcome of the 1966 anti-abortion law, which was meant to increase the population, transforming women into childbearing machines (Berelson 219). According to this law, the foetus was the property of the whole socialist society and giving birth, a patriotic duty, and therefore the state could interfere in order to ensure that the process of reproducing and expanding the Romanian population went according to plan. Initially, the abortion was restricted to only a few categories of women, with work advantages and money rewards as stimulating compensations, but starting with the 70s, the dramatic punishments exceeded the general frame of 'setting an example.' The Party pronatalist policies, along the lines of "the politics of duplicity," to use Kligman's term, were further enhanced and 'perfected' by such measures as: more regulations which made divorce difficult to obtain (especially for couples with children under 16), increase and liberalization of family allowances, reduction of the income tax for families with 3 or more children, introduction of the "childless tax" for women over 26, whether married or single, the ban on contraceptive products and sexual education in schools and, last but not least, introduction of a 7 year prison sentence for women who performed illegal abortions on themselves or others. All these measures were thought to work out for the 5-year plan, which envisaged that Romania's population would exceed 30 million inhabitants by the year 2000. This state of affairs following the 1966 law had a series of repercussions on post-communist access policies, directly

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reflected in the link between investment in human capital and the distribution of individual private benefits, the so called MMI – Maximally Maintained Inequality – (Raftery and Hout 53) and uniform democratisation, which arises when such large proportions of an age group enter Higher Education. Degrees become positional goods and do not warrant social mobility, they engender diploma races between students and social groups and result in overproduction of specialists and over-capacity of universities.

In point of educational achievement and classroom success, recent research (Pop-Elecheş 2005, 2006, 2007) has found evidence that children born after the ban on abortions was lifted (the cohorts born in 1990-1991) had better educational achievements, in that they scored higher on the national entrance exam, were more likely to be placed in a school with higher scoring peers and less likely to be placed in a vocational school, and therefore were more likely to be admitted to the highly desirable academic high school track. On the other hand, in point of net educational effects, the children born after the 1966 decree (also known as “*decreșei*,” or “children of the decree”) affected the reforming educational policies for an entire decade, up until 2000. With large numbers of students entering HE beginning with the 1990s, universities soon started to struggle financially, even as they were expanding. Nonetheless, a fully fledged, observable education crisis began in Romania only in the late 2000s, as the number of students progressively began to spread thin. Two types of factors contributed to this: 1) the student body was made up of “one child per family” post-revolutionary generations, as a consequence of the post-1989 social, economic changes and demographic imbalance, caused by the withdrawal of the 1966 law on the one hand and the deterioration of living conditions for the population, on the other; 2) the marked increase in the