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# THE UNINTENDED PERVERTED EFFECTS OF THE RANKING OF UNIVERSITIES WITHIN THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENTS WITHIN COUNTRIES IN TRANSITION. CASE STUDY: ROMANIA

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**Abstract:**

*Ranking has arrived to be compulsory for all countries as a tool to compete in the global world. The ranking's rules are settled by some couples of global rankers. When their practices are implemented into national environments, mainly in countries under transition, some perverted effects might appear. The paper focuses on effects on politic environments and their follow up on academic communities, students and parents, and civil society as an effect of mass media involvement. The theoretical issues are illustrated by the outcomes in Romania particularly as a consequence of the application of the Educational Law since January 2011.*

**Keywords:** academic reform in Romania, universities' ranking, reorganization of universities

Today, mankind prepares itself to pass from 7 to 9 billion people. The lack of resources of which we speak today is relative, as it was during the seventies. It became obvious that one of the adequate means for this transition process is the "knowledge society", which also include a superior accumulation of knowledge based on an increased "sunk capital", but also a minimal level of education which will also transform the individual and the society within the main factor for production, repartition, consumption and stability of living together. Moreover, mankind switched today from the global society to "the interconnected society" (a hypersensitive butterfly effect!).

In this context, universities, in spite of their relative conservatism must transform (adapting themselves is not enough!) or to disappear. The current perception is that the educational system, and within it, the formative system of the system – the academic environment, is the main means of accomplishment ("the knowledge society").

The ranking establishment within universities has become a trend of late. In a world based more and more on competition, the publishing of the first „...the biggest, the best...” has become.....a ritual. Companies, products, even countries, people, etc.

all and all are struggling to show that they are the first. The phenomena is most times pointless, many times the so called „hierarchies” do not have a pragmatic end, being nothing more than a news bulletin meant to colour your life. The true beneficiaries, and most times, also the one who initiated this process, are the mass media means.

The academic world could not resist temptation. The ranking and tables of classification of higher education institutions are current phenomena of globalization. They are used to serve more than one purpose: they answer consumer demand for a faster interpretation of the standards of a higher education institution; it stimulates competition among these institutions; it ensures for a part of the public funds allocation fundament; it helps to create a difference between institutions and programs or disciplines, etc. Moreover, when they are correctly understood and interpreted, they can contribute to the defining of the „quality” of different institutions within a certain country, thus completing the quality evaluation system made by public or private structures within the certification field. This is why the ranking of such institutions tends to become a major component of national quality evaluation systems and the ensuring that the educational and research process in many states tends to become more and more constructed in such a manner. Given this tendency, it is becoming important that those who create hierarchies or classification tables to be evaluated themselves, for the quality of their databases and the methodology they use, as well as result dissemination.

Ranking theory and practice switched from trying to answer the dilemma „of how to add apples with pears, meaning the Nobel prize with the gold at the Olympics or the Pulitzer prize” of evaluating solutions adapted to new societies. And at UNESCO organized conferences, as well as at EU conferences, but mostly within IREG working papers, theoretical researches are concentrated towards practical solutions concerning „interconnected” systems of evaluation and choice for the main actors of the academic field: the university itself, students and employees / financiers. The process is huge given the fact that as we define the university, today, in the world, according to UNESCO, we have anywhere between 17 and 70 thousand academic communities. This is why the publication of the first „50,100,500 etc. universities”, even if was conducted on a study of 1000 or 2000 units, is irrelevant in practice, simply because the „body” of the system is at a medium level, where one consumes and values the majority of the total allocated resources. The vast majority of universities are not included within the global ranking systems, being units of local or regional interest, involved in the formation of a mass of graduates with superior studies and most times are not even concerned with the competition represented by top universities, which have a superior amount of resources, cash, staff, tradition. The ranking system is known to the academic world which uses it as a mirror for their own activity but also to fundament decisions concerning the future.

Unfortunately, among the beneficiaries of the global ranking systems are also the mass media means. To them, a new ranking is first of all, news-worthy, a valuable news through its ability to act on the pride of the readers and to catch the attention of the public, of all categories, because, after all, higher education is of interest to large areas of the communities. Usually, a new ranking keeps the public’s attention alive for days and travels through all the means of mass media communication: newspapers,

magazines, tabloids, radio, news channels, internet, social media. Being an information of general interest, which attracts the majority of the public, in a global world of competition, it drives political leaders to react. Reactions occur either of one's own initiative, being an incredible opportunity for politicians which thus have the chance to come back to the attention of their voters, without any costs for them, either at the request of mass media means, which will increase their news penetration power and will prolong, by politicians intervention, the maximum time-span of the initial news. In a media world of mass consumption one will march on minimal resistance, by appealing to the pride of the receiver, giving birth to reactions of pride, vanity. Especially within developing countries, which are not within the top 50, 100, etc. of the most ... universities, where the need for pride is stronger, and emotional reactions more frequent! In essence, the message – question of the mass media is „how is it possible that our universities are not within the top....who is to blame?“ and this is largely debated through hours and hours of interviews, talk-shows, round tables, etc.

Confronted with such a stimulus, the politician, either in opposition or in power, is compelled to answer and becomes, through the “answer – replica” game, generated by the media, a simple actor to increase mass-media audience. The usual reaction of politicians with power is to blame those who were in power, by presenting the „disastrous legacy” and to those in opposition to criticize measures undertaken by those in power. This is just an image game; basically we will never have a profound analysis of the university educational system. This reaction is also favoured by the relatively short period of a mandate of a minister as compared to the time required to implement and oversee a reform in education. Mass media is not interested in a profound investigation, most times technical enough that it does not interest the general public, nor does it increase rating.

The final effect of its publishing and debate within the national media of global ranking is the introduction within the mass population of a negative feeling, at the border of powerlessness or revolt, but mostly a distrust within the academic system or the political world. This powerful stimulus makes for the fading away and throwing into disarray of information which reveals qualities of the national academic system, measures with benefits undertaken or being implemented at this time, means for removing causes which generate negative effects. Moreover, because in such countries the political class is not consolidated enough that it can avoid being dragged in the easy game of mass-media or to use the opportunity to generate solid and accepted programs, made either by those in power or those in opposition.

A careful analysis however reveals collateral side effects with practical implications, within the national field, of the press moment concerning the publication of a new global ranking. Most of them negative, perverted upon the academic system and on society as a whole. We mention several such examples:

- The loss of faith, by the population, within the national academic system means the departure of candidates towards foreign universities, not necessarily top ranked, exceptions being overseen through the mass media effect as a general rule;
- The usage, by external competition, of such campaigns in order to recruit candidates;

- Adopting measures, by those in power, in their own interest or the interest of their clients;
- Losing funding and contracts by the national academic environment;
- The perpetuation of reforms, whereas a reform becomes a continuous, repeated one, the new power cancelling also the good measures undertaken by the former power;
- The application, within the national academic environment, of methods and techniques used within global hierarchies, without the profundity and adaptation to the national specifics, many times with a political interest.

Some of these effects may have a perverted character in the way that”

1. Directed away from what is right or good; perverted.

2. Obstinate persisting in an error or a fault; wrongly self-willed or stubborn.

3. Marked by a disposition to oppose and contradict” (American Heritage

Dictionary), when political prides overcome the normal and decent level.

These are occasioned by the media campaign concerning the publishing of a new global ranking which does not favour the national academic system and are generated by the political factors through concrete actions, most times through acts of the administration or the Parliament which cancels old rules, good rules, and institutes wrong ones.

The most frequent are those stirred by direct political rivalries and the insufficient analysis and knowledge of the techniques and principles of ranking of a sufficient critical mass for the correct implementation of the criteria and techniques of academic ranking.

An analysis of the effects of global ranking on the Romanian political environment is an eloquent example of such perverted effects. We only state two recent examples, which are easier to reveal, but the situation was, *mutatis mutandis*, the same, in the last 10-15 years.

We state that Romania is still a country in transition towards a society and an economy of a West European type. After 1989 the academic system exploded, trying to recover the lacks and remaining behind and to achieve global parameters. The number of universities nearly tripled, and the number of students jumped from 170 thousands to over 700 thousands that means that rationed to 10000 inhabitants increased 4 times. The number of teachers increased from 56 to 126 thousand and the number of researchers decreased from 40 to 20 thousand. It was inevitable that such an evolution involves many negative aspects, concerning quality. Still, the general image was that the Romanian superior education system was very good, competitive at a global level, except the last years when the results of the global studies concerning the ranking of universities became a media subject. We also underline the particularity that the Romanian public reacts quickly to emotional messages and the behaviour of politicians often has powerful Balkan accents, especially in the country's capital.

During the last years, the publishing of reports concerning various international hierarchies was always followed by real storms in the Romanian media. Neither of the Romanian universities found themselves in top 500 at least. This was explainable, given the force of Romanian universities; a single element can explain the

situation: the number of Romanian Nobel Prize laureates, for example. The Romanian mass media treated the event as one of sensation, marching on the emotional aspects the public. For a few days, it was the ominous subject: newspapers, tabloids, radio, television, internet, blogs, and social media.

As we live during a continuous political experiment, we, Romanians, can be worried about losing the first position in this field. Somewhere in the dominant part of the planet, one invests heavily in experimenting with new political formulas. Before seeing what happens with others in this field of practical experiments, with political consequences in other parts, let us first recapitulate the business at home.

Academia received the campaign with moderation, even with a culpable indifference. In exchange, the political environments were forced to and took advantage by this situation to reach the spotlight. With a temper, with strong reminiscence of journalism and Balkan politics, each maintained their personal points of view and of their respective parties. The power accused the opposition for the „wrong and antinational policy” implemented while it was in power, whilst the opposition accused the power of incompetence and irrational measures concerning the management of national education. All of them stated causes and guilty of their counterparts, obviously underlining their merits and the merits of their party. Publishing a global ranking triggered a strong reaction in Romania, a real storm in which the public lost every time. Spearheads were two former ministers of education, rectors of two prestigious Romanian universities, one from the LP and the other from the SDP and the actual minister of education – DLP, a researcher of international visibility. The perverted effect occurs when discussions bring into effect a large number of politicians, political analysts, journalists, etc. which obviously had no complete or pertinent information neither of the way that global rankings were made, nor of the Romanian academic system as a whole, and which sent, towards the public, a large amount of wrong information, at an amateur level. The theme of their vast majority can be resumed into several ideas: the mediocrity of Romania’s higher education system, its transformation into a factory of diplomas which have no real application on the labour market, a large number of impostors within this domain, promotions onto degrees of professor, made in an abusive way, academia’s despotism, financing granted through other criteria, rather than quality, especially within fields of research and abuses, etc.etc. Negative tags which induced feelings into the public, opinions and appropriate reactions! Even the reaction of the president was an emotional one: „Education never progressed during the last 18 years. The 28 modification of the law of education have seriously undermined the chances of students within the Romanian society and, now, in the European society”, mentioned the head of state, which also reminded that Romania does not have a university within the top 500 universities in the world. Also, Romania does not have a university within the top 100 in Europe. „Hungary has two, Poland has three”, mentioned Traian Basescu. „These things concern us all, whether we are politicians, teachers or students.” (HotNews.ro Saturday, 19 April 2008, 11:07). So here we have an international ranking, which does not include a single Romanian university, and which can scar the public opinion in a country and form a bad image on the Romanian academic system due to the excessive use of a negative comparison with universities with which the comparison

should not be made, because they are not of the same category. It is enough to mention that the financing of the educational system, did not pass 3.5 % of GDP, as compared to financing from states from which the top universities come from.

Moreover, the same mass media launched frequent cries of alarm concerning the lack of medical staff in certain towns and locations across the country, explained by massive emigration of medical staff and faculty graduates from Romania! This does not indicate a more accentuated degradation than the one noticed in countries thought to be developed! A simple analysis of events during the last two years reveals that the number of the educational offer promotion events of foreign universities increased substantially, on the basis of decrease of the selection basins in Western European countries. Surprisingly, media campaigns concerning the classification of the Romanian higher education system within global ranking preceded these events by 2-3 weeks. In two of the cases, with almost a month after the publication of the hierarchies by those who established them!

It is a unanimous appreciation that the Romanian academic system needs a drastic and profound reform. Unfortunately we notice a serious rupture between means and ways of realizing this. In spite of a national pact for education signed by all the political forces, in reality rivalries are great and block any pragmatic initiative, on a medium term, which would survive political changes.

The most powerful and frequent effects are the collateral ones, which spring from taking over superficial technologies and international practices, concerning hierarchies. Although known in Romania, a critical mass at an academic level, a party, mass-media, etc. still has not formed which could manoeuvre their implementation in a professional manner. This leads to disagreements, wrong decisions with high costs and obvious perverted effects.

An obvious example: the Romanian evaluation system took over from international practice the indicator concerning the publication within ISI magazines or indexed databases, used by all global ranking systems. These rules changed constantly, so that we now have an equalization chart between them. Lastly, they allocate a number of points to articles published in magazines only established in a list created by the Education Minister. For economics and business administration by ex., they will take into account only published articles indexed in at least three databases listed as followed: ISI Web of Knowledge, Scopus, EBSCO, EconLit, REPEC, DOAJ, Cabells, JSTOR, Science Direct, SpringerLink, PorQuest. An inventory of Romanian magazines within this field indicates that there are only 3 of them which fulfil the criterium of „at least 3 of...” the majority of them being indexed in two of the list and others in unlisted databases. The object of this paper is not to analyze the political orientation of the editorial boards. But we must reveal as support to our statement the participation fees at national economic conferences: until 2003 the participation fee was 50 lei, the text and the presentation was in Romanian, printed proceedings, un-indexed in databases; since 2005, it has become a custom to use the English language, and taxes reached 150 lei or 50 Euros; since 2007-2008, taxes reached 150 Euros, and the usage of CDs and index of proceedings has started. After the above mentioned regulation issued, the tax increased to 450-550 EURO with proceedings indexed into 3 of the listed databases or ISI! The best placed organizers are the Greek

which collaborate with 2-3 universities in Romania. This is prohibitive for an assistant or Ph.D. student, and expensive for a lecturer! Moreover, the system is blocked until the certification of a larger number of Romanian magazines which can take over demand. So here is how, global ranking systems can cause collateral effects, which are unintended and perverted at the same time, within the educational systems of transition countries.

More and obvious implications for a specialist were lately caused by applying the new Law of National Education. Although the entire Romanian society agrees that the educational system must be reformed, that a new law must be passed, it only passed through Parliament by using an extraordinary procedure – the Government took it upon itself, as a responsibility. In the end, a certain unanimous opinion was reached, through this law, but there are still many persisting disagreements which keep the atmosphere extremely tense. We point out a single one: applying the law requires 50 Government resolutions and 160 Ministry orders. It is less likely that an opposing party once in power would resist the temptation to modify something, even unessential to the law itself, for the benefit of political clients. The means (government resolutions or ministerial orders) are too available! This will create uncertainty in the academic system, the lack of a predictable perspective.

The law took over many of the proceedings and the means used by global ranking systems. It came to pass on February 1st, 2011, with the explicit obligation that until the 15th of February, all rectors must make public their educational offer for the summer / autumn admissions. But the law still regards classification, meaning a pre-ordered ranking of the universities and study programs into three categories:

- (a) Universities centred on education, which can only organize licence studies;
- (b) Universities of education and scientific research, or universities of education and artistic creation; which can organize masters programs;
- (c) Universities of advanced research and education, which can organize doctorate programs.

The programs' classification will be performed into 5 categories: A, B, C, D, E

The differences are essential concerning the access to funding from the national budget. Moreover, 30% of the budget financing for higher education is constituted as a reserve fund at the disposal of the minister to stimulate units with special results. It is obvious that the market will react and the candidates will search mainly the best university and / or program.

The law uses the term „classification” for universities and „ranking” for study programs. By grouping them into three categories, through the methodology used we are actually in the face of an effective ranking, where results are to be published under three classes formed by including the units according to the points gained.

The motivation is eloquently determined by the results of global hierarchies as the National Research Council (CNCS) reveals on its site:

- ” No Romanian University ranks among the top 500 universities in the world (see the ARWU classification at <http://www.arwu.org>). This in turn does not only point to the lack of competitiveness of the Romanian universities in the international arena, but

incurs negative consequences with respect to attracting foreign students and training the local human resources.

- Romania ranks among the last positions in Europe with respect to research performance, if one considers the international publications, patents and innovations.
- The international impact of Romania's R&D output is small to none. Although Romania is present through relatively many published papers, they have a minor impact in the international community, and extremely few Romanian researchers have made it to highly acclaimed journals, such as Nature, Science, etc.
- The echoes of Romanian scientific publications coming from the international academic community are reduced. For that matter, taking into consideration the number of scientific citations per article, Romania is placed on the 15th position from 23 countries in Eastern Europe, according to Scimago source, for 1996-2009
- There is a growing tendency in Romania to publish in journals which, although are present in the Web of Science, do not meet editorial standards of a high quality evaluation."

The example is obvious.

The evaluation with the purpose of classifying university and establishing a ranking of the study programs is realized by the following criteria: teaching and learning, scientific research, the relationship between university and the external environment, institutional capacity.

At the beginning of May, a request was sent to the more than 80 universities in Romania, to upload data, on the ministry's website concerning the institution and, separately, for every field within the university, of the most 60 fields settled by law, grouped into five major groups. To collect data questionnaires were distributed which grouped questions on the four criteria stated above; for each of the criteria a number of countable standards were established, by answering several questions. In the end one reaches a total of points (or another unit of measuring) for each field and institution respectively. According to the score obtained, the universities are distributed in one of the three categories. The loading and verification of data by independent commission was completed within a month and the questionnaires have become public. The estimated term was June 1st (which largely surpassed the term of the law). Unofficial sources within the specialists of the current political coalition which oversees this process appreciate that, for Romania, only 50 universities are enough, of which 5-6 great universities organize doctorate studies, circa 20 organizational units for masters programs and the rest which only organize licence studies. "This process of university classification is stated by law, we are implementing the procedures as we speak, but there is no classification at this time, approved by order of the minister. I expect that this classification be made in useful time for the beginning of the new academic year, so that masters and doctorate places can be granted by a real basis. We cannot finance masters' places in universities which cannot provide this service" (<http://www.edumanager.ro/articol.php?id=9626>) say the Minister of Education mid August.

The finalization of the process, meaning the establishment of the ranking regarding the distribution of the universities within the three categories was published



only August 30, one month before the new academic year should start. The universities have had only September to enrol students for master programs.

But at the practical probe, it was proven that the basic principles concerning ranking were ignored. In order to avoid “adding apples and pears” a sui generis issue was adopted: the universities specialised in military fields and those for art were listed apart. For all others the impossible was applied: comparing all types of universities according to the same indicators! We reached the unworkable situation where classic universities, which organized programs within 40 fields, to be classified in the same manner as specialized universities which organize programs in one or two fields.

12 universities were ranked as universities of advanced research and education, which can organize doctorate programs;

15 universities plus 5 military and 7 art universities were ranked as universities of education and scientific research, or universities of education and artistic creation; which can organize masters programs;

48 universities were ranked as universities centred on education, which can only organize licence studies; all private universities are in this category.

Even if the Minister has several times public stated on mass media that it was not a ranking, not a listing of the place that an university has in the list mass media, politicians, public, student candidates and even academic staff keep saying “our (or this) university is the ..th in the country”. The perverse effect!

The direct and effective effect refers to funding: as per master programs, the second class has received only 70% of the budgeted places comparing to the normal quota, and the universities centred on education only 2380 places only on certain education’s domains. The 12 universities have received the cut places that have led to a large number of unrequested places on less demanded specialities amplified by the very short period of enrolment. A similar situation for doctor studies! The perverse effect: a large loss of public funds for the education system! More, the national baccalaureate promotion rate was only 47% that has deprived many of the private universities of candidates and increases the unoccupied places in public universities and enlarged the budgetary funds and diminish the number of tax paying students in public and private universities. It is for sure that the coming years this system updated in due time will reconfigure the students flow in Romania.

September 3 rd. was published the classification of programs for that of 58 domains where every university organized teaching programs. There will be no impact on the academic market as the enrolments finished. But mass media has a new “warm” subject for a couple of days.

One cannot say that in Romania there is not enough information concerning the ranking of universities or specialists. Politicians are under pressure though, normal in democratic systems, given the lack of a horizon of the duration of their mandate. In a system in transition, active competences are not coagulated via expertise, rather by political belonging. This proves that this attempt is the influence of mass media: additional pressure that it lays on the public. The effects are perverted!

A common sense question is thus asked: why are these situations accepted, at least by the politicians in power, which have the means of action. The answer is obvious in Romania and not only. Under financing! Lack of resources! The Romanian

educational system, based, like other systems, on budget financing, did not surpass 3.5% of GDP during the last 20 years. As a result of IMF accords, Romania must reduce its budget deficit from 7% to roughly 3.5%, this means the halving of all budget resources. In the middle of August, the Romanian government has decided that „the application of the rules of the new law of education which refers to ensuring a financing of the educational system of a minimum 6% of GDP and of at least 1% of GDP for research which was postponed by two years, until 2014”. Until this decision, the accent has fallen on the reformation of the academic system. After that, silence. For now! Except the reform of public funding system for academia!

The situation in Romania is not unique. Collateral effects of ranking might be tricky. We find discussions all over the world; and in all times; all kinds. The perverted effects are present throughout history. As an example:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rLBY4qUqOxg>.

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