



Corneliu Balan

Romania: Bologna versus entrenched interests

Critique of Bologna in Romania is a pretext for academic complacency and professional self-preservation, writes Corneliu Balan. The problem is not the Bologna system as such but the subordination of education to political interests and the privatization of the universities.

The Romanian technical academic establishment has a largely negative view of the Bologna system. This is particularly true among mediocre university lecturers who think their careers are being disrupted, endangered even, by any form of worldwide evaluation or quality control in which selection will, sooner or later, be based on merit. The system proposed — or should it be "imposed" — by Bologna is obviously structured in such a way as to allow young university graduates to find their optimal place within the dynamics of present and future European society, of which, it is assumed, Romania wishes to be a part.

The Bologna system is built on several common-sense principles:

- keep as many 18- to 20-year-olds as possible within the sphere of higher education (the three-year Bachelor degree cycle);
- select students with high potential efficiently (the two-year Master degree cycle);
- limit the social costs of preparing and training future specialists (the three-year Doctoral degree cycle);
- ensure continuous interaction between higher education and the labour market;
- and, last but not least, generate a shared sense of unity and social solidarity among European countries.

However, for all of the above to gain concrete form, one needs real teachers — honest, generous, professionally competent, not obsessed with stuffy educational regulations, kindly and without overly inflated egos — for whom the individual good is a projection of the common good and morality and justice are the rule. Do you recognize yourselves, dear colleagues?

Assuming that just 51 per cent of lecturers fit this profile, if the following preconditions are met the Bologna system can be implemented, even in Romanian universities:

— Devise truly professional Masters degree cycles. What we have now in Romania has nothing to do with a professional Masters degree; the current M.A. cycle is a mere simulacrum of the real thing transformed into part-time education. It is in this area that the main sore point of Romanian universities is located and, as long as this problem is not adequately addressed, the implementation of the new system remains pointless.

— Drastically limit distance doctoral programmes. The quality of the doctoral students' activities and their international visibility alongside their supervisor should weigh significantly in the balance when awarding the title of university lecturer. How can you possibly become a university lecturer if you are incapable of supervising doctorates? Only in Romania can you obtain the title of lecturer and only afterwards be scrutinized to see if you fulfil the requirements for a doctoral supervisor.

— With the exception of sabbatical leave and time off requested for other activities — such as engaging in politics for instance — university lecturers should work for one university only and should not hold any other positions outside the university except as consultants.

— There has to be a clear retirement age for university lecturers. After this age, they can either become professor emeritus with clearly defined duties, or undertake other permanent activities outside the university.

— The organization and teaching of Masters and Doctoral courses should be taught in separate universities from those teaching the standard B.A. All universities can award the latter but only some of them fulfil the requirements for running M.A. and Doctoral degrees, which should be taught separately.

— The completion of the B.A. degree should under no circumstances be financially constrained, at least not for those students who can prove they have the necessary ability to fulfil the minimum standards required. It is wrong that in European university fees should be charged at the B.A. level regardless of the quality of the applicants.

— Academic curricula should not be subordinated to the lecturers' needs but devised with the better education and adequate training of students in mind.

All these preconditions have been repeatedly discussed in Romania for many years but are not reflected in corresponding legislation and never will be as long as higher education is subordinated to politically motivated group interests. There are six reasons why clear and concrete decisions such as those outlined above are being eternally delayed:

1. Romanian universities do not fulfil the prerequisite for enacting the reform, namely, that 51 per cent of the educators be real teachers. We simply don't have the people.

2. The wilful bundling together of the sort of problems that may be caused by the changes in the educational system is obviously to the advantage of mediocrity. Scathing articles about the failings of the Bologna system are being published — it destroys subject areas and specialisations, it turns us into robots, it forces us to publish ISI articles (The Institute for Scientific Information database contains 16 000 peer reviewed international journals, books and proceedings in the sciences and humanities — ed.) and so on — without mentioning that nobody forces you to devise a course which is bland,

limited, unimaginative and irrelevant, boring and put together only for the sake of observing the new requirements. Who stops you from working directly with your Masters and Doctoral students? From doing research? From finding your place within the European academic community? Too many university lecturers show a complacency and lack of responsibility that is often beyond the pale.

3. Many lecturers wish to preserve their cosy place within the system, irrespective of the repercussions this has for everyone else. How can you lament the fact that there are no valuable young talented teachers when, year on year, you exert pressure on the university to ³extend² your tenure beyond the retirement age? Stating that there is no one to replace you merely shows that you have either been incapable as a teacher or exclusively focused on your personal concerns: you gave nothing. What an example it would be for Romanian society if some eminent professor stepped down at the age of 65 and made himself or herself available to the university!

4. There is a lack of specific and coherent higher education legislation. Not even the Presidential Commission was able to provoke a change in attitude and mobilize parliament.

5. The majority of Romanian society has accepted the concept of a paid-for degree; this has been institutionalized by the political class and its creation and support of institutions that bear the misnomer of ³private universities². We deserve our fate!

6. Obsessively, at their debates about the organisation and running of higher education, television channels almost exclusively present politicians and union representatives who come from the academic world; always the same faces. Thus, the message of civil society will never be powerful enough to make an impression on the legislative system, and politics has gained a dominant position within the mass media that it neither deserves nor justifies by the quality of its actions.

In conclusion, I believe that the Bologna system is structurally incompatible with the reality presented by Romanian universities. Its implementation will, for a long time, remain in the virtual sphere, reform will be enacted in the local style and forced to evolve along lines imposed by political constraints over which local and group interests are superimposed. Let us not forget that universities, such as they are in the Romania of today, are a creation of today's lecturers; it is their mission, duty and responsibility to implement the Bologna system.

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