

The Romanian Education System – Between Mediocrity and Competitiveness

A Review of Petre T. Frangopol, *Mediocritate și excelență - o radiografie a științei și învățământului din România*. [Mediocrity and Excellence: A Radiography of Science and Education in Romania] Vol. 1. Bucharest: Editura Albatros, 2002, 338 pp. Vol. 2, Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2005, 288 pp. Lei 14.50. ISBN 973-686-763-3. Vol. 3. Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2008, 367 pp. Lei 15.80. ISBN 973-133-342-7. Vol. 4. Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2011, 250 pp. Lei 20.00. ISBN 978-973-133-959-7.

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Mediocrity in education may feed on routine and disincentives, but it certainly stems from a nation's history. Professor Petre T. Frangopol, a dedicated academic and a valuable researcher, former Counsellor at the National Council for Scientific Research in Romanian Higher Education and a member of the Presidential Commission for policy analysis and development in the field of education and research, shares his views on the topic in the multivolume work under review, voicing criticism with regard to the way in which Romania's Ministry of Education has been groping towards setting impartial and transparent criteria that will accurately assess academic research.

Replete with information and projections on the prospects of quality in that research, the four volumes, entitled *Mediocrity and Excellence - an X-ray of Romanian Science and Education*, gather the author's articles published in *Aldine*, the weekly supplement of *România liberă*¹, between 1999 and 2011. Having witnessed the development of Romanian scientific research since 1956, Frangopol confesses in the very "Introduction" of his first volume (2002) that he feels it is his moral duty to warn academics, politicians, and all decision makers about the steady involution of the education system in Romania and its gradual decline towards mediocrity. He sets out to highlight several uplifting moments in the history of the Romanian education system, praising some of its leading reformers, such as Spiru Haret in 1883, or Constantin Angelescu in 1918, who managed to impose strict quality standards at all levels, since, having graduated from leading universities in France, they were familiar with European standards, expectations and benchmarks in those times (see Frangopol, 2002, 9-10).² He

¹ "România liberă" is a newspaper of historic resonance which has been subjected to various transformations since 1877. After the Romanian revolution against the Communist regime in 1989, the newspaper was relaunched as a democratic newspaper by Petre Mihai Băcanu, former journalist and dissident, imprisoned in 1988 and released on 22 December 1989.

² All subsequent quotations from Frangopol's book will appear in parenthetical notes, within the main text, specifying the year of publication and the page number.

traces mediocrity back to the Communist reform in 1948, whose main goal was to develop the self-sufficient, multilaterally developed man, “Homo Sovieticus” (see Frangopol, 2002, 9), a process which entailed “a systematic assault on the human mind and annihilation of critical intelligence”.³ Later (and recent) reforms conjure the ghost of communism by entailing scrapping de facto criteria of academic excellence in order to revert to former impressionistic methods of evaluation in research and promoting egalitarian education. Unfortunately, the mistaken view equating universal *access* to education and *accessible education* has in Frangopol’s view engendered the unwavering decline of all spheres of activity. Moreover, Frangopol contends that the massive introduction of the humanities and social sciences after the Revolution in 1989, driven by the wish to replace and forget about scientific socialism, Marxism-Leninism and dialectical materialism, represents an integral part of the process which has aggravated the decline (see Frangopol, 2002, 11).

The author remembers the times, back in 1956, when the Communist Party used to select and appoint as its leaders and as Ministers of education, industry, or economy individuals from among non-qualified workers who had been forced to go to college and universities and offered inducements and advantageous conditions, thereby becoming obedient underlings (see Frangopol, 2002, 19). This habit has perpetuated itself for decades, with feudal relationships between professors and their disciples still evident, with academic hierarchies still politically overdetermined, and with fresh graduates (professionally innocent in-laws usually) propelled to leadership positions where they are easily manipulable, while young researchers and able doctoral students, who shake the status quo with their scientific and researching output published in scholarly journals become *personae non grata* in their own country (see Frangopol, 2005, 20-21). At a time of high unemployment, when Singapore and Hong Kong welcome foreign alumni, aware that their scientific capital is beneficial to national development⁴, Romania denies even a low-paying job to its own students, who are specialized abroad and willing to come back home but who find their way blocked on the grounds that their studies do not accord with Romanian guidelines on equivalence, or because they are overqualified and cannot be offered a position commensurate with their command of their discipline (see Frangopol, 2002, 105-109). This pervasive immorality in policies governing recruitment and appointments favours the incremental brain-drain in all fields, precludes any reform, and deters gifted researchers from moving to a post in a Romanian university.

Drawing on his international experience, Frangopol cannot help expressing his concern that without radical reform, Romanian universities will never reach a higher position in international league tables of excellence in higher education, such as the Shanghai Ranking. Therefore, inspired by the education systems in Japan, South Korea, Finland, France, or the United States, he suggests possible solutions that could stem the crisis in Romanian education, if applied rigorously at all levels. Thus, for instance, in the attempt to promote ground-breaking research performed by young Romanian academics and doctoral students around the world, an on-line project entitled AD-

³ Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons. A Political History of Romanian Communism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 209.

⁴ Michael Barber et al., *An Avalanche Is Coming. Higher Education and the Revolution Ahead* (London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 2013), 11.

ASTRA⁵ was initiated in 2002: a non-governmental initiative and organization whose members have succeeded in securing international recognition and are committed to actively engaging in infusing rigour in the system.

Irrefutable evidence, statistically supported, enhances the author's pleading: the low scores in PISA testing,⁶ the increased brain drain, especially in the field of mathematics, few publications in internationally recognized journals with a high impact factor according to the Science Citation Index, low budgets for academic research, projects suffocated by increasing bureaucracy, questionable awarding of degrees, rampant financing of non-competitive institutions, disregard of the scientific elite, and the paradoxical yet uninterrupted encouragement of young people's departure abroad to pursue further studies and find an appropriate job there and a well-deserved salary. All these are symptoms of a contemporary disease that appears to have spread beyond Romanian borders as well. While Romanian researchers aspire to international visibility and to the quality of their research being acknowledged, it seems that some leading academics have misgivings about this transparency, measurement, and commodification of science, in particular about the impact of scientometrics on research.

Thomas Docherty, professor at the University of Warwick, expresses similar concerns regarding the gap between what we preach and what we teach in higher education nowadays. While Docherty pleads against "homogenizing measurement" or standardization of different domains of study, such as literary deconstruction and molecular endocrinology⁷, Frangopol upholds the opposing view that all fields should be assessed on more or less relatable criteria (and budgeted accordingly). He even calls the Humanities to account for their low visibility in peer-reviewed scholarly journals, as internationally monitored by the Institute for Scientific Information (ISI). Elsewhere Frangopol acknowledges that the high qualifications and standards achieved in one field or another represents "an obstacle which divides the scientific world from the world of humanities" (see Frangopol, 2005, 119-121). Nevertheless, despite the pride we take in the great representatives of our field (from Mihai Eminescu, George Enescu and Constantin Brâncuși to Mircea Eliade, Eugen Ionesco, and Emil Cioran, to mention but a few), we have to admit that the world of knowledge is changing at an intimidatingly fast pace, not least through the latest discoveries in fields like information technology and biotechnology, for instance, and the rate of improvement of Romanian higher education has been far from commensurate. Recent surveys on higher education⁸ focusing on American and British universities, for instance, point to other contexts' increasing demand for specialists in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) that would provide the best solutions to the world's economic crisis, doing so just when unemployment among university graduates has not stopped growing incrementally mainly due to their inappropriate training that no longer meets the demand of the market.⁹ Ever since 2002, when his first volume was published, Frangopol has been criticizing the inadequacies in the type of education provided by Romanian institutions, in relation to imperatives in, for instance, the economy, ecology,

⁵ "Ad Astra-Proiect online pentru comunitatea științifică românească" [Ad Astra – Online Project for the Romanian Scientific Community], Asociația Ad Astra, accessed April 26, 2013, www.ad-astra.ro.

⁶ PISA is an international study launched by the OECD in 1997 which assesses 15-year-olds' competences in three key subjects, namely: reading, mathematics and science.

⁷ Thomas Docherty, "The Unseen Academy," *Times Higher Education*, November 10, 2011, 40.

⁸ Barber et al., *Avalanche*.

⁹ Barber et al., *Avalanche*, 12-13.

and the food industry, and with a clear focus on the danger of slipping down “the slope of the Humanities”¹⁰ (Frangopol, 2002, 12) which do not fuel innovation and economic growth.

My own contention, in reaction, is that things have significantly changed in the field of the Humanities. Academics in the Humanities have become much more aware of international standards and expectations, where non-fulfillment can engender drastic diminution in university budgets and a poor result in the institutional rankings initiated by the former Minister of Education, Daniel Funeriu. The assessment process and subsequent hierarchy of universities, journals, and publishing houses initiated by Funeriu in 2011 succeeded, on the one hand, in diminishing the publication fever that all too often led to plagiarizing and mediocre output and, on the other, in increasing public awareness of the international benchmarks attained only by small enclaves of Romanian researchers. In addition, it impelled valuable researchers to break with routine, transcend the barriers of provincialism, and seize the opportunity to display their work by publishing it in some of the leading journals and publishing houses¹¹ approved by the National Council for Scientific Research in Romanian Higher Education. No sooner had the academics been exhorted to action than all assessment criteria were changed by the newly appointed Minister(s) (four ministers of education in just a few months!), for whom quantity prevails over quality, just like in the 1990s.

British universities, in an intriguing contrast, appear to be beset by a similar crisis *after* having reached some of the highest positions in all international rankings. Docherty exposes this state of affairs when stating that “the proper activity of the university is increasingly carried out in a rather less visible, even surrogate fashion”.¹² In short, Docherty’s dichotomy between the “Official University” and the “Clandestine University” that concurrently run within the same institution, the former aiming to conform with “society’s governing norms”, whereas the latter gathers “scholars and students who hold on to the idea of what a university is for”¹³, does not look like the right destination we should head for. If, however, that is the case, why lament the actual content of teaching and the consequent quality of our students’ learning?

Frangopol’s attempt to provide a non-biased outlook on the Romanian system of education is sometimes undermined by contradictory statements. It is admirable to say that Romanian academics should aim at attaining international recognition, but how can this be achieved if the research budget is 0.2% of GDP as compared to 2.15 in France, or 2.3 in Germany (see Frangopol, 2005, 63-64)? It is argued that teachers should become more involved, and yet their “decent remuneration” is still an issue “to be solved” (see Frangopol, 2011, 113). Moreover, how can academics share their research outcomes with their students if some of the students are not even able to take notes in Romanian, while most of them do not have the basic knowledge in algebra, physics, foreign languages, or the building blocks of whatever specialization they have opted for (see Frangopol, 2011, 110)?

Education will be immeasurably improved if governments stop making inconsistent decisions and start developing a coherent plan based on impartial and

¹⁰ All translations from Romanian are mine.

¹¹ “Edituri cu prestigiu internațional” [Internationally Recognized Publishing Houses], National Council for Scientific Research in Romanian Higher Education. Accessed April 26, 2013, <http://www.cnscs-nrc.ro/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Edituri-prestigiu-international-stiinte-umaniste.pdf>

¹² Docherty, “The Unseen Academy,” 38.

¹³ Docherty, “The Unseen Academy,” 38.

politically unbiased ideas in order to reform all levels of education, from kindergarten to university. The study initiated by Barber *et al.* provides revealing insights into the future of universities and it comes as an up-to-date record that sets forth similar conclusions to those drawn by Frangopol, attesting to the trenchancy of much of his study. The educational mission of a university is not to scale the national and international rankings, but to widen students' horizons and enable them to pursue excellence. The primacy of research must drive the selection process and the appointment and promotion of academics, but it should not become detrimental to the quality of the teaching and learning experiences. Universities need devoted academics that seek to keep up with the latest research in their field, to surpass the borders of the "local, parochial elite" (see Frangopol, 2008, 78), to remain relevant within changing market conditions, and to assume responsibility both for themselves and for the world around them. In addition, older universities cast on the classical model need improved management and the ability and readiness to cater for the various intellectual needs of students and to compete with emerging models of university education.¹⁴

Frangopol's four-volume study accurately depicts the deficiencies of the Romanian system in the midst of its piecemeal efforts to align its standards with international ones. His thorough engagement with the topic and acute and incisive observations will hopefully sound a note of caution on the reforms to come, as fighting entrenched sets of values and beliefs becomes a prerequisite for radical change.

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¹⁴ Barber et al., *Avalanche*, 18-21.