

PERSPECTIVES OF INTEGRATING HIGH-SCHOOL GRADUATES LIVING IN RURAL AREAS INTO AGRICULTURAL HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: *The paper discusses a particularly acute problem of the higher education in Romania, concerning the relatively low percentage of young people from rural areas who, after finishing secondary school, choose to continue their studies at an academic level. A study by the World Bank and The Ministry of Education and Research in 2008 revealed worrying results: only 3.7 % of the young people between 25 and 29 years of age who lived in rural areas had graduated from university; by comparison, the percentage of university graduates from urban areas was 27.2%. This disquieting reality draws attention on the necessity of implementing psychopedagogical and social programs for facilitating access to higher education for young people from disadvantaged areas. In this context, the aim of the present study is, firstly, to make an inventory of the factors that lead to the low insertion of high school graduates from rural areas into higher education. Secondly, starting from this analysis, we want to highlight some courses of action for improving the access to higher education for young people from disadvantaged social environments. It is our belief that a democratic society based on equity in integration must implement public policies meant to alleviate the discrepancies among the opportunities that young people coming from different social environments have, in what access to education is concerned.*

Key words: *integration, access, equity, rural area, higher education*

INTRODUCTION

Romania is home for approximately 6 million young people aged between 15 and 34. Although the percentage of young people in Romania is above the E.U. average which was 25.1% in 2012, the rate of decrease in numbers is more dramatic in our country. The percentage has been going down steadily, from 32.1% in 2003, to 28.6% in 2012 (Eurostat, 2015).

The European Union strategy in the field of education and training for years 2010-2020 aims at having at least 40% of the people between 30 and 34 years old graduate tertiary education. The focus is to be placed on ensuring equity and social cohesion, by offering equal opportunities and fighting any kind of discrimination.

At a national level, the studies made in the last decade by the World Bank and The Ministry of Education and Scientific Research reveal that only a fifth of university graduates come from rural areas.

DIRECTIONS OF FORMAL AND NONFORMAL EDUCATION

The national strategy in the field of policies regarding the young, for the period 2015-2020, published on 14.01.2015, presents the objectives undertaken within strategy Europe 2020 for education (<http://gov.ro/>). Some of these are as follows:

- reducing the dropout rate by 10%;
- increasing to over 40% the percentage of university graduates between 30 and 34 years old;

- maintaining the total number of student places for BA, MA and doctorate studies at a level that matches the objectives assumed by Romania and assures intelligent development of Romanian economy;
- developing study programs that are required by the labor market and approximating the National Framework of Qualifications with The European Framework of Qualifications, by developing the National Registry of Qualifications for all training levels;
- creating an attractive system of scholarships that will ensure equal and non-discriminating access to tertiary education for all young people;
- increasing the number of places on university campuses, in order to ease the access to tertiary education for young people from rural areas;
- creating an informatics structure in all educational spaces and living areas on university campuses;
- financing the courses necessary for obtaining IT skills to all university students, irrespective of their study programs;
- developing Life Long Learning at tertiary level: this is seen as a chance to ensure easier insertion on the labor market, in view of regional development of the eight areas of development in Romania;
- providing minimal living standards for unhindered access to tertiary education of young people, irrespective of their origin, nationality, gender, social status, religion, etc.;
- providing mechanisms for financing tertiary education for young people coming from disadvantaged rural areas and young people coming from low income families;
- providing adequate infrastructure to give young people conditions for living, practicing sports and relaxing within university centres; sports clubs, leisure clubs, etc.;
- accessing start-up and spread-off programs for young students in view of easier access on the labor market and developing the students' professional skills;
- creating a communication framework between youngsters and graduates, through ALUMNI organizations;
- creating solidarity among generations.

According to the Report of the Presidential Commission for Social and Demographic Risk Analysis (2009), the proportion of Romanian people living in rural areas is quite high. In 2011, this percentage was 44.9% (INS, 2011).

Romania has been facing significant discrepancies in what graduating from university is concerned: in 2011, 23% of people in urban areas had a university degree, as compared to only 3% of the people in rural areas (ibid.).

In the BUASVM „King Michael I of Romania” from Timișoara, at Bachelor's Study Programs, are 1135 students from rural areas of the total 3052 students matriculated in the year 2015/2016, as follows: 235 to Faculty of Animal Science and Biotechnology, 137 to Faculty of Food Processing Technology, 214 to Faculty of Agriculture, 152 to Faculty of Agricultural Management, 183 to Faculty of Horticulture and Silviculture, 214 to Faculty of Veterinary Medicine.

At Masters, are 214 students from rural areas of the total 898 students matriculated in the year 2015/2016.

Thus, at the moment, only about 1/3 of the students enrolled at BUASVM „King Michael I of Romania” from Timișoara come from rural areas, although the study programs of the six faculties train specialists for multiple jobs in rural areas. One of the causes of these discrepancies is the insufficient vocational counseling performed in these areas.

DISCUSSIONS

From 2008 to 2012, the percentage of young people in Romania who were not enrolled in any type of school or training and did not have a job either ("Not in Education, Employment or Training" - NEET) was higher than the European average. Most NEET youngsters were identified in 2011: 17.4% of all people aged between 15 and 24. In 2012, the percentage dropped to 16.8%, while the same study showed that the percentage in the EU was 13.2% EU-27 (<http://www.unicef.ro/wp-content/uploads>, 2015).

The results obtained at PISA standard tests place Romania among the countries with poor performance in the three areas of analysis (reading, Mathematics, sciences); EU Youth Report highlighted the same situation (Romania occupies one of places 47- 49, out of 65 countries, depending on the skill). In the Global Information Technology Report - World Economic Forum's Centre for Global Competitiveness and Performance (2012) Romania ranks 90th of 142 states, with a score of 3.3 on a scale from 1 to 7 regarding the quality of the educational system.

According to a national study ("Access and equity in academic education in Romania. Dialog with pupils and students", 2011), most highschool students in rural areas (80%) consider that in order to be successful in life one has to have education, intelligence, will, ambition, and family support, all of these being actually prerequisites for success. In addition, a large percentage of students (80%) state that it is "important" and "very important" for a person to have academic education in order to achieve professional success. They believe in the positive results of reaching the goals set for themselves. As for the lower degree of satisfaction regarding the chances of finding a job in their field (47.3%), it can be explained, on the one hand, by the poor correlation between the theoretical and the practical knowledge, and on the other hand by the slight chances of finding a job after finishing highschool.

The empirical studies made nationally and internationally (Johnstone Bruce, 2010; Pricopie Remus, 2010, European Council, 2009; Ivan Loredana, 2008) reveal that the main factors that lead to the poor insertion of rural-area highschool graduates into academic education are the following:

- in its traditional form, school brings boredom among students, thus losing ground to the alternatives given by the informational society (media, internet);
- the theoretic dimension of the teaching/learning activities;
- the insufficiency of practical applications;
- the lack of utility of the things learned in school;
- the poor preparation of pupils for school;
- difficulties to integrate in the school community;
- the poor information regarding the educational offer of faculties;
- low incomes in their families;
- families in which one of the parents works abroad;
- poor support from parents;
- the parents' level of education;
- the lack of appreciation young people have for education;
- slim chances of finding a job;
- school dropout rate;
- entourage;
- the size of the town where the school is located;
- the residence of the school;

- scholarships;
- places in hostels;
- transport facilities;
- the wish to get married after finishing higschool;
- the wish to go abroad for work;
- material values;
- health issues;
- ethnicity.

On the whole, if our goal is to improve the insertion of young people from the rural areas into the academic education system, we should focus our educational activities on the following directions: vocational counseling of students; improving the quality of teacher training; counseling the parents; correlating the university study programs with the requirements of the labor market, and especially of the labor market in rural areas; implementing social programs for giving financial aid to highschool graduates coming from disadvantaged areas.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study highlights the necessity of implementing social and psycho-pedagogical programs in order to facilitate access to higher education to youngsters in rural areas.

In this context, we believe that, in a democratic country based on equity in integration, it is necessary to implement public policies which will alleviate the discrepancies in the access to education of young people coming from different social environments.

Some courses of action for improving the access to higher education of young people from disadvantaged areas could be (www.edu.ro, uefiscdi.gov.ro, www.politici-edu.ro, <http://gov.ro> – The National strategy on youth policies, 2015-2020):

- developing counseling and opportunities for non-formal learning oriented towards groups with high risk of dropout;
- good social integration of young people and their behaving actively and responsibly: education for being good citizens, knowledge of their rights and obligations as teenagers, education for work, education for a healthy lifestyle, etc;
- expanding school counseling and professional orientation both by increasing the number of counselors and through a diversified system of counseling (in schools, youth centers, community centers for lifelong learning);
- including in the counseling system also the young people who do not attend school anylonger but face professional and social difficulties;
- implementing prevention and intervention measures for reducing the dropout rate, including alternative types of education, such as adult education and training, with special importance given to rural areas;
- encouraging young people in rural areas and in disadvantaged groups to increase their participation in tertiary education;
- supplying the minimal materials at society level for making sure that young people have access to education;
- increasing the relevance of university curricula, in relation to the requirements on the labor market; strengthening partnerships among schools, businesses and the research sector.

In recent years studies have shown that, irrespective of the method used for estimating poverty, the young people have constantly been the most vulnerable age group. More than a quarter of the young people aged 18 to 24 live in relative poverty (28.1% in 2011 – Ministry of Labor, Family and Social Protection), which means that our country is ranked among the three countries with the worst situation in EU-27. Approximately one in ten young people declare that they had to drop out of school as a result of the economic crisis.

There is another special risk: contrary to the global tendency, a university degree does not improve the chances of success on the Romanian labor market. The entrance of university graduates on the labor market is hindered by the fact that employers prefer experienced staff. EU Youth Report 2012 reveals that the most severe cases are to be found in Romania, Bulgaria, Ireland, Greece, Spain and Italy, and that the percentage of young people who are neither in school nor in a job is higher among university graduates in only 7 seven countries.

According to *National strategy on youth policies, 2015-2020 for the period 2015-2020* (www.infolegal.ro), Romania has set to reach the following levels of education by 2020: 11.3% for the dropout rate and 26.7% for the percentage of university graduates among the people aged 30 to 34..

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