

Higher Education and Long-Term Manpower Planning in Socialist Romania (1950-1975). An Empirical Study

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Abstract: This article sets to analyze the manpower planning approach in respect of the Romanian higher education system during communism. The arguments used intend to demonstrate that long-term planning, although commonly used in the context of demand economy, was not a reliable instrument in education. Archival research has outlined the connections and the variations between long-term ‘cadre’ plans and higher education outcomes, in an attempt to better assess the feasibility of manpower planning in a socialist economy. The empirical analysis confirms the theoretical approach used by Jan Sadlak in the 1980s, but also provides an additional outlook on the practical and conceptual limitations of centralized normative planning.

Keywords: *manpower planning, socialist system, higher education, professionals, prognosis.*

Introduction

Post-war Romania was the subject of political and structural change that followed the Stalinist model, and confirmed the influence of the Soviet Union in East-Central Europe. Command economy and revolutionary imperatives demanded the mobilization of the entire society towards the goal of overcoming economic backwardness through high growth rates of industrialization. This process involved the maximization of

the workforce mainly by employing any labor surplus available (housewives, post-collectivization peasants, the ‘declassed’) (Kornai, 1992:204-205), and by extending the education system.

The transformations of the profile and mechanisms of Romanian economy called for an intense growth of specialized workforce, especially secondary and higher education graduates. Direct bureaucratic control of employment and wages made it possible to plan the workforce along with the entire economy. The state

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was undoubtedly involved in orienting citizens towards certain fields of study, and ultimately towards certain jobs that the state could benefit from. In order to increase the number of highly specialized professionals so much needed in the economy, the Romanian socialist state used the instrument of manpower planning, which consisted in forecasting the needs for professionals usually for five-ten years in advance, and turning the estimates into higher education graduation – and, consequently, enrolment – targets (Sadlak, 1985:402; Sadlak, 1988). Since we have discovered archival records, as well as statistical data concerning manpower planning, we are now able to analyze the relation between manpower needs, and economic and higher education planning until 1975 from a quantitative perspective. Thus, we try to identify whether long-term manpower planning was a useful or an irrelevant instrument for the communist regime.

The so called ‘plans for cadre training’ were designed based on the latest Party directives and economic plan (usually a five-year plan). The State Planning Committee was the first institutional body to put forward targets, after consultation with the branch ministries. The Committee represented an institutional link between economic and educational plans, but also the main prospector and policy maker of future economic development. The Ministry of Education had to ensure that demand could be satisfied, had to look for solutions for proper schooling, and finally design – in close collaboration with the State Planning Committee and the Ministry of Finance – long-term and annual higher education

plans. It is worth mentioning that the State Planning Committee acted as a trustworthy unbiased operator, upon which the Party leadership relied the most. The ministries and applicants tended to maximize demands, whereas the leaders in the higher education system tried to limit targets so as to comply with the system’s capacity, when solutions for enlargement wouldn’t come out (see Cazan and Paşca, 2012).

The first long-term plan regarding both enrolment and graduates for the next five years was drafted in 1950-1951 by the State Planning Committee (Arhivele Naționale Istorice Centrale, Președinția Consiliului de Miniștri, 224/1951). The peculiarity of this plan was that it regulated the number of graduates for a higher education system that had been going through fundamental changes since 1948 – instability being one of the consequences –, and one could have thought of poorly estimated figures. Stalinist mass mobilization dictated a number of revolutionary goals. Therefore, given the lack of a data control methodology and the problems related to post-war enrolment (1946-1949), combined with the situation of students expelled on grounds of social discrimination, there were significant gaps between expectations and realities (see Figure 1).

Expectations also grew in regard to enrolment, from a minimum of 19 thousand to a maximum of 25 thousand in 1955, the attempt being to keep an ascending trend of graduates in the late 1950s. Because of revolutionary ‘democratization’ and the institutional expansion of both secondary and higher education,

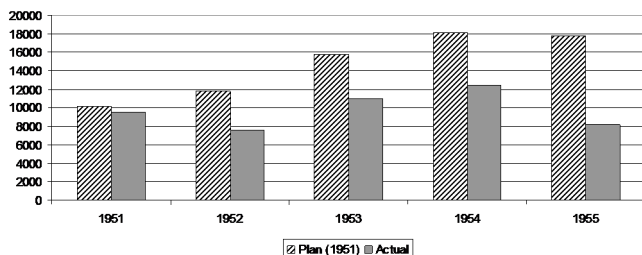


Figure 1. Numbers of higher education graduates (1951-1955)

Sources: ANIC, PCM, 224/1951, 5; DCS, 1966: 290-291.

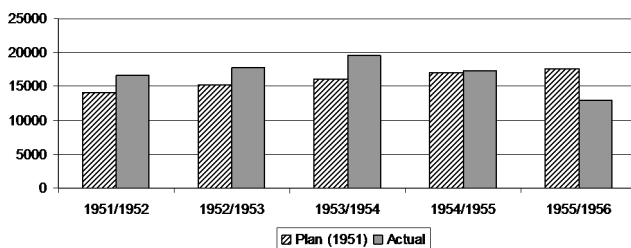


Figure 2. Enrolment, 1st year, daytime attendance (1951-1955)

Sources: ANIC, PCM, 224/1951, 5; ANIC, PCM, 424/1954, 66; ANIC, CC-PCR-Propagandă și Agitație, 40/1966, 51.

along with the industrialization rally, actual enrolment was 13 per cent (18 per cent in the daytime attendance sector) higher than as planned during the Stalinist regime (see Figure two). After 1953 enrolment dropped, mainly because the aims of the Party moved away from industrialization towards the consolidation of power and more cautious policies. Planners considered that the lower level of higher education enrolment could be complemented by the expansion of secondary level technical training that could provide technicians better qualified for industrial activities (Arhivele Ministerului Educatiei, Cercetarii, Tineretului și Sportului, 99/1957).

In addition, it seems that the over-fulfillment of enrolment plans during the first five-year economic plan caused an inflation of professionals in the middle 1950s. A program drafted by the Ministry of Education in 1958 proposed that the number of 8,000

students (daytime attendees) per year be maintained for another three years, until the expiry of the saturation period, and that, during the following decade, the ‘normal’ quota should be of 10,000 students (daytime attendees) per year. The document states that the drafted plan was devised by the Education Division of the State Planning Committee, and that it followed ‘the development forecast of national economy for the next years’. Although it was meant to be a guideline, the program made it clear that figures were only hypothetical, and that changes (i.e. increases) could occur anytime, particularly given that the number of students within the total Romanian population placed this country last among the states from the socialist bloc. The complementary solution to the maintenance of relatively low levels of daytime attendee enrolment was envisaged with the expansion of evening classes, and the setup of

short-term technical institutes (which were actually founded only after the 1968 reform) (AMED, 231/1958). The enrolment program of 1958 (ranging to 1975) was the outcome of the prevailing modest situation (not particularly favorable to forced economic and institutional transformation – first year enrolment was planned to increase by only 30 per cent in 12 years) and applied a conservative principle (planning ‘without leaps’), which made it unsuitable for a dynamic economy as Romania’s during the following years, and thus it became shortly outdated.

The same year, following the strengthening of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej’s position as head of the Romanian Workers’ Party (RWP), the plenary of the Central Committee of the RWP announced in November 1958 the return to the industrialization policies, and, approximately two years later, the directives of the third Party Congress reinforced further industrial development (Tănase, 1998:163-171).

As a consequence, the Party leadership criticized the ‘midge and stationary’ numbers of graduates proposed by the State Planning Committee and the Ministry of Education in the previous years, as well as the lack of long-range strategies. Future institutional transformations and investments, as well as academic conversion meant to provide fast the much needed technical graduates were presented. For instance, about one fifth of the students in physics and mathematics had to be transferred to technical specializations, and graduates without a degree could take part in a special ‘state exam’ session (see Table 1).

There was also a provisional

solution of employing best secondary-school graduates (‘technical operators’) for engineering activities (AMED, 99/1957). The directives of the RWP Congress demanded an increased number of 31,000 engineers in six years (in contrast to an estimated planned amount of 12,000), which was only 85 per cent fulfilled (Directia Centrala de Statistica, 1966:290-291).

After Nicolae Ceaușescu came to power in 1965, it became very clear that economic growth remained a top priority. Therefore, planning was an essential instrument; measures were taken to ensure the necessary numbers of employees (i.e. higher education graduates) for the next ten years. Beside the fact that economic planning focused on five year terms only, affecting the longer-term planning of higher education, the criteria involved were the following: compliance with the directives of the ninth Congress of the Romanian Communist Party (1965); the extrapolation of the current five-year plan using the same development progression for the early 1970s; increase of labor productivity; the reassessment of study requirements for each job (CC-PCR-Cancelarie, 101/1966, 17-31). The gap between socio-economic demands and graduation prospects expanded from several thousands at the beginning to over 15,000 for engineers and over 20,000 for economists at the end of the covered period (1975) (Arhivele Nationale Istorice Centrale, CC-PCR-Cancelarie, 101/1966, 34-35). Either the educational network had to develop further in terms of capacity, or the political and economic system had to undergo significant transformations. The evolution of actual graduate

Table 1. Number of higher education graduates, showing the impact of the Third RWP Congress (1960)

Field		1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965
Technical (including agricultural)	Plan pre-1960	2670	2390	1640	1900	1800	n.a.
	Actual	4523	4114	4043	3314	4008	6461
Agricultural	Plan pre-1960	1530	1170	910	730	850	n.a.
	Actual	1621	1263	1735	771	1260	1449
Economic	Plan pre-1960	230	370	430	350	630	n.a.
	Actual	616	967	1014	755	767	1020

Sources: AMED, 99/1957; DCS, 1966: 290-291.

numbers reveals that the higher education system seems to have overcome the late 1960s crisis, and recovered a large part of the remaining planned graduates in the early 1970s (see Figure three). Meanwhile, the setup of sub-engineer institutes shortly after the 1968 education reform helped the education system provide annually 2,000 more professionals besides the 5,000 already existing (1972-1975) (see Figure four).

Archival documents show that economic ministries could hardly accomplish the task of conducting a satisfactory calculation of their own professional needs for long periods of time, either because they were late and insufficiently dedicated to the assignment, or because they submitted figures higher than the State Planning Committee's estimates (ANIC, CC-PCR-Cancelarie, 101/1966). Ministerial increases were considered 'exaggerated' by the Party apparatus, but on the other hand this phenomenon was typical for a classical socialist system as Romania's (Kornai, 1992:217) (see Figure five). Since industry automation failed to materialize, and labor productivity was increasing at a slow pace, the extensive

growth of specialized workforce seemed to be the best solution for the timely fulfilment of economic plans. The inflation of applicants trend was somehow determined by the fact that designers and allocators – the Party leaders, the State Planning Committee, and the Ministry of Finance – were inclined towards cutting expenses and enrolment to an absolute minimum, which could prolong the situation of professional shortages. In 1966, one of the reformist leaders of the Romanian Communist Party, Alexandru Bârlădeanu, spoke in defense of the ministries' requests, stating that the 'cadres' plan did not necessarily have to comply with the five-year economic plan (ANIC, CC-PCR-Cancelarie, 102/1966, 3). But his voice was singular and failed to make any positive impression.

Disparities also occurred in the sectorial composition of higher education, especially in the 1950s, when Romania's plan for future development was unclear even to policy makers. For instance, in 1952, enrolment in engineering studies was planned as 29 per cent, but the actual share was nearly 34 per cent, to the detriment of universities. In the following year, the

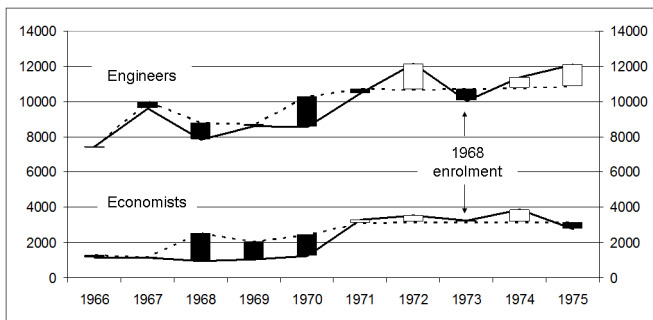


Figure 3. Deviations of higher education actual results (continuous line) from the long-term plan (dotted line) (graduates, 1966-1975). There were no middle-school graduates in 1968 (due to extension of study years)

Sources: ANIC, CC-PCR-Cancelarie, 101/1966, 34-35; DCS, 1966-1975.

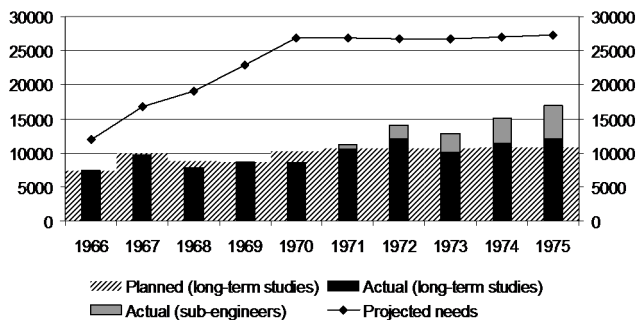


Figure 4. Manpower needs, plan and actual results – Engineering graduates (1966-1975)

Sources: ANIC, CC-PCR-Cancelarie, 101/1966, 34-35; DCS, 1966-1975.

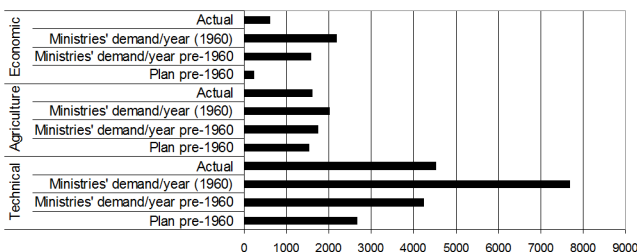


Figure 5. Ministerial requests, plans targets and actual numbers of higher education graduates (1960)

Sources: AMED, 99/1957; AMED, 231/1958; DCS, 1966: 290-291.

engineering enrolment plan grew to 39.5 per cent, that in reality was only 37.5 per cent, which showed the real absorption capacity of technical higher education. It should be specified that Soviet counselors had an important role in raising the planned share of technical studies after the Stalinist model, thus diminishing the necessary levels of agricultural engineering

which Romanian economy needed the most (ANIC, PCM, 424/1954, 36-37 and 66; ANIC, PCM, 659/1953, 49). The 1957 share of engineering studies was 30 per cent, compared to a planned figure of 26.5 per cent, which continued to drop to 17-21 per cent during the next two years. The 1958 long-term plan emphasized the need to increase the number of bureaucrats

and intelligentsia for the next decades; therefore, it recommended the increase of academic and pedagogical studies up to 50 per cent, leaving behind technical (including agronomy) enrolment quotas at an average 32 per cent (AMED, 231/1958). However, on the long run, the situation proved to be precisely the other way around. In 1966-1975, the share of long tenure technical studies alone (without sub-engineers) in the total enrolment ranged between 37 and 47 per cent, while the share of university and pedagogical studies ranged between 27 and 35 per cent (calculations from annual plans and DCS, 1966-1975 – daytime attendance).

The lack of plan fulfillment accuracy throughout the period is attributable to a certain time-dependency, as Jan Sadlak put it (Sادلک, 1985:403). In other words, long-term plans were difficult to work out as long as economic development both in quantitative and qualitative terms, as well as personnel needs and technical improvement, were forecasted in a rudimentary manner – yet deemed scientifically –, specifically by purely quasi-mathematical estimates and the extrapolation of historical trends (Fulton et al, 1982:57-58; Sadlak, 1985:403). Additionally, the historical experience of the Romanian state and archival records show that expectations could be altered not only by worldwide economic developments (Sادلک, 1985:403), but also from the inside. Arbitrary political and institutional involvement, as well as step by step decision making could make any potential professional plan revisable at any moment. The domino effect ensued shortly after. Economic policy changes affected manpower

needs, which in turn affected the long-term ‘cadre’ plan and higher education plans. Conversely, variations in graduates’ numbers compared to the plan affected the manpower plans. This continuous interaction made any long-term prospect unreliable, and improvised methods such as constant monitoring and the circulation of professionals on the labor ‘market’ had to be applied instead.

Along with the misuse of statistical information and suitable forecast models, there was some sort of planning inertia, since long-term plans were tributary to the current aspirations for the future (the best example was the 1958 plan, which ultimately could not be implemented). Graduate number expectations were also modified by the higher education potential (which usually diminished the expected numbers due to the insufficient infrastructure, number of teaching staff and investment funds, or the relatively small numbers of secondary schools graduates) and by the involvement of various interest groups in the planning process (Sادلک, 1985: 403; Pașca, 2013). The general effect was the maintenance of a ‘structural labor shortage’ (Kornai, 1992: 211-216). Only in the mid-1950s there was an overflow of specialists whom the lagging economy was not ready to absorb.

It is worth remembering that the Romanian Communist Party elite was profoundly reluctant to any reform, and that plans were compulsory (normative); consequently, ministers and their subordinates had to figure out solutions and manage lack of productivity before the Party leaders became annoyed at the failure to achieve

targets. In other words, the methods were subject to criticism, whereas the approach (belief in the predictability of economic and social development) was not, and its prevalence was fueled by the adaptability and mobilization of higher education and enterprise organizers within the system.

There was room for improvement and, indeed, the methodology of manpower and higher education planning was upgraded to some extent after 1975 (see Fulton et al, 1982: 65-72). Nevertheless, the arbitrariness

of daily political and economic life in socialist Romania, as well as the ideological urge of doing things whimsically continued their rampant spread throughout society, including the educational milieu.

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