

## CHANGE AND INNOVATION IN ROMANIAN TERTIARY EDUCATION: THE CASE OF ELT

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*Abstract: Despite numerous reforms the least flexible and the most resistant to change sector of the Romanian education is tertiary education. And what is more, the most renowned and traditional universities are the most affected by resistance to change and seek to preserve their status quo. To illustrate this claim, we will discuss some findings obtained via ethnographic direct observation and document analysis as well as interviews conducted among emeritus professors of the Faculty of Letters, History and Theology, the West University of Timișoara.*

*Keywords: ethnography, legacy, reform, tertiary education.*

In this case study we put forth an ethnographic analysis of the current situation of tertiary education in Romania. We take the following view on ethnography:

Ethnographic research allows researchers to explore how people create, sustain, change, and pass on their shared values, beliefs, and behavior – in essence, their culture. (Heigham and Sakui 2009: 93)

More than that, our case study is doubly ethnographic in nature since its authors are also insiders to the system under scrutiny (and not just the respondents). In other words, the researchers are experienced members of the academic staff of the faculty which hosts the case study, while the interviewees whose opinions are included in the study used to teach in the faculty hosting the case study, both during the communist regime and in the post-communist era. First we will deal the authors' perspective and then we will summarise the findings produced by the analysis of the respondent interviews.

### **Some general observations**

Tertiary education in Romania is relatively young, especially when compared to those of other European countries and its becoming was shaped by several important factors: the emergence of Romania as a unitary state in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, World War II, the Iron Curtain, the fall of the Berlin wall followed by the December 1989 Romanian uprising. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century after the national state of Romania was born, following the Union between Moldavia and Țara Românească, in 1859, and one of the most important reform, educationwise, was that of the orthographic system in 1862 which allowed for the birth of a unitary education system throughout the newly born state. The father of the Romanian modern education system is Spiru Haret, the minister of education who, in the 1880s created and implemented an ambitious reform for the modernization of education. The first two universities in Romanian were founded: *Universitatea din Iași* in 1860 and *Universitatea din București* in 1864. Most Romanian scholars believe that the modern education system developed into its modern, Europeanized form within a century from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this line of thought, Toma, 2008 observes:

Romania is a country in which the educational system was consolidated between 1862 and World War I on the basis of a well formulated legislation. It is, though, the period between the two world wars that marked the creation of a modern system of education, mostly inspired by those of France and Italy. It was well balanced and democratic and it opened a way to many young people of humble origin and enabled them to become outstanding representatives of the Romanian culture and social life. (<http://www.romanalibera.ro/cultura/aldine/60-de-ani-de-la-reforma-invatamanului-134099.html>, original Romanian, personal translation)

In a similar line of thought, Dragnea, 2011

(<http://www.istoria-romanilor.com/modernizarea-invatamanului-romanesc-sec-al-xix-lea/2011/09/15>) notes:

...the 1912 Law of Superior (tertiary) Education stipulated an increased autonomy of Romanian universities, the rights of university leadership, the organization of diplomas awarding, as well the organization of the students' university life. (Original Romanian, personal translation.)

The post War World II, mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century period was subject to many changes and these can be roughly divided into three smaller periods each accompanied by its own reform. The first reform was that of 1948/1949 which laid the foundation of an educational system which was a copycat of the Soviet, USSR's one. It was an unfortunate period because it meant the expulsion of many students who have started their studies before the Soviet invasion of Romania. According to Soviet policies and philosophies only those of 'sound' origins (i.e. working class or peasants, without any 'fortune' be it land, houses or private businesses) deserved and were worthy of superior education. The rest were deemed as bourgeoisie and responsible for the creation and sustaining of an unjust discriminatory state. The empowerment of half illiterate and illiterate working class representatives lead to hard-to-imagine aberrations. Along with the expulsion of innocent and most often than not hard working, intellectually endowed students, on grounds of their origins, many renowned, highly respected academics were also expelled from universities, some being sent directly to prison. Besides this unjust decapitation of the Romanian elite, the 1949 reform brought about the complete change of the curriculum which had to be approved by Soviet officials. The long term consequences of this 'reform' can still be traced today. For example, Toma (2008, <http://www.romanalibera.ro/cultura/aldine/60-de-ani-de-la-reforma-invatamanului-134099.html>) argues that the 1948 was:

... just the beginning of the putting into practice of communist ideologies in education a basic initial intention which has not changed along the way and which visibly marked the way of thinking of the subsequent generations. (Original Romanian, personal translation.)

The second, 1958, educational reform took place subsequent to the demise of Iosif Vissarionovici Stalin, (the absolutist ruthless leader of USSR) and the 1956 student revolt. This reform brought forth a certain liberalization of education. Thus many previously forbidden canonical scientists and writers of Romanian and non Romanian origins were re-introduced for study in the school and university curricula. The Romanian leader, Nicolae

Ceaușescu, was highly appreciated among Western leaders for moving away from the tentacles of the Soviet Union and the education system started to enjoy a breath of fresh democratic air. Unfortunately, this breathing space too soon expired, following Ceaușescu's visit to China and North Korea. The ample, sumptuous, well directed and highly disciplined shows displayed during his visits deeply marked the Romanian leader and sparked a change in his personality. He became a personality cult addict and having no one around to help him get a grip with reality gradually turned into a monstrous figure who managed to alienate and impoverish his people in order to achieve his sometimes lunatic goals, such as Romania's complete adulation and financial independence. In other words he dreamed of creating an isolated, closed, self sustainable society which he could rule as he pleased. The reform that followed this philosophy took place in 1972. This reform put a stop to the liberalization process initiated by the 1953 reform, bringing about new restrictions. Thus, for the following decades and more prominently in the 1980s the system of education

was shaped by philosophies common to the totalitarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe: it was highly centralised, totally subordinated to the ideology of the Communist Party, aimed at creating 'a new person' (completely devoted to the Party ideology: ready to renounce family, property, freedom of thought and expression for the country and Party). (Goșa, 2009: 15)

In other words, the teachers were supposed to find a way of introducing ideological elements in their classes, to brainwash their students and work towards the creation of the “new person”, an obedient, standardized robot whose main three roles were to work, reproduce and praise the providential ruler accordingly. (For a vivid illustration of such a person, see footages of North Korean public rallies.)

The tertiary, university system could make no exception to this rule, even though in a less evident way. Apparently, the university life was more autonomous, and less prone to the party propaganda. Nonetheless, university education was as infected by the totalitarian communist regime as any other domain of social life, in a more subdued way but as efficient as anywhere else. A few examples might be worth mentioning to support this claim. For becoming members of the teaching staff university professors not only had to be communist party members but they also needed the approval of the party bureau and the *Securitate* representative in the University. Clean records were at least as important criteria for selection as professional merits, doubled, most often than not, by the right political connection. Just having a relative who chose to flee Romania and live abroad in the “corrupt western” world meant a “stained” record and the impossibility to access a position within the academia.

In a similar way, student life and career prospects were subject to political and ideological pressures. Thus, students with unstained records and good academic results were invited to become communist party members and sometimes were pursued by the *Securitate* to become their informants. Refusal to accept such proposals would automatically trigger the marginalization of the student, to say the least. Moreover, the students who became activists received credits added to their academic marks and these credits were crucial to secure a better job after graduation. But it was more than that, the students who dared to voice their dissatisfactions in any way were immediately tracked down by the *Securitate* and drastic

repercussions followed. A telling case of what the totalitarian regime could do to students is that of the Aktionsgruppe Banat, founded by Swabian students in the 1970s as literary society which fought for the freedom of speech. All the members of this society suffered from various forms of persecution from the *Securitate* (one member, for example, was sentenced to prison for two years). Nobel Prize winner, Herta Müller, who had strong connections with members of this group, speaks extensively about this dark period of communism in Romania and the disreputable role of the *Securitate* in the students' life.

Romania was the only country in the region where the totalitarian communist regime fell as a consequence of a bloody uprising. Despite the fact that more than twenty years have passed since then, post-communist Romania is still marred by the residues and flawed values of the totalitarian era. The transition from one of the most oppressive, closed, totalitarian regimes in the region to an ideological and economic opposite, namely democratic pluralism and market economy was more dramatic and controversial than in any other behind-the-Iron-Curtain country. Due to the loss of many lives in defense of liberty, people expected immediate changes with immediate positive and visible results. The slow pace of changes in all the domains of social life: politics, economy, education or health care have generated a never ending and not very successful a struggle to replace totalitarian engendered values and practices with democratic ones. These continuous unprofessional and often futile attempts caused, (what many politicians, analysts, civil society members, journalists believe) its constant lagging behind, in spite of Romania's official joining the EU in 2007, It is, in other words, the reason why Romania is still seen by many as a marginal country, a second-rated, poor and annoying relative of the richer, more developed EU member countries.

This never ending story of transition was bound to influence the system of education. Even though some of the most evident and detested effects of the communist regime: indoctrination, ideology and excessive manifestations of power and control over persons and institutions were, at least at face value, dropped. Many of Romania's officials spoke of the much needed reforms and innovations and even attempted to implement them. However, the general feeling, often expressed in the media, is that these so-called reforms were and still are implemented in a rather haphazardous manner without much preparation or planning. As Fullan (1995: 4) argues:

Neglect of the phenomenology of change - that is, how people actually experience change as distinct from how it might have been intended - is at the heart of the spectacular lack of success of most social reforms.

As a consequence, resistance to change was inevitable and the Romanian educational system still suffers from its totalitarian legacy. A book frequently quoted in Romanian studies, editorials or essays is entitled *Romanian Education Today: A Diagnostic Study* and it was edited by Miroiu (1998). One of the reasons why this book is so much quoted is that, to this date, it represents one of the very few pertinent, diagnostic studies of the status of Romanian education. This book paints a grim picture of the system of education in Romania in the late 90's, insisting on the need for change and reform. The following three major characteristics inherited from the communist regime were identified: authoritarianism, hyper-centralisation and conservatism. Unfortunately, a decade later, we still talk about the never

ending reform of the Romanian educational system and the aforementioned characteristics still continue to pose serious obstacles to reform. On the other hand, one needs to acknowledge that large scale national projects, such the school-leaving examination (the *Bacalureat*) reform were indeed implemented with some success.

However, when it comes to tertiary education, due to the more autonomous nature of universities, such large scale projects were hard to put through. If in the pre-1989 totalitarian regime all universities were strictly controlled, highly centralized state universities, in the next period the existing state universities expanded both in the number of students they could take in and in the number of new programmes accredited. Added to that, in the 1990s, a substantial number of private universities were founded to accommodate an increasing demand for higher education (Romania being one of the European states with an incredible low percentage of young people who attended and graduated from universities). Accordingly, much of the university academic personnel got promoted almost overnight, while a number of secondary school teachers became academics. The quality assurance control was difficult under the circumstances and many complained of the poor quality of the teaching staff and of the inappropriacy of the programmes. Older, traditional and renowned universities reacted to this state of affairs and formed a *Consortium* and, to this date, this *Consortium* continues to exist and there still are some diplomas and certificates that are recognized only if they are issued by universities part of this consortium. In later years, due to the demographic decrease, on the one hand, and on their having problems in upholding the law, some of these private universities had to close their gates or, while in some cases the gates were closed on them by the Romanian officials on the grounds that they did not observe the rules.

One big change, a leap forward to the reformists, and a drawback to the traditionalist and euro skeptics, was Romania's signing and becoming part of the Bologna Agreement in 1999. The four-year undergraduate Romanian university system turned into the (in)famous 3 + 2 + 3 (bachelor, master and doctoral programmes). The most beneficial effects brought about by the Bologna Agreement doubled by Romania's joining the EU, was, as far as I am concerned, the Erasmus programme. The teaching staff and student exchanges lead to development. Through this programme, for example, many students got to study in various universities around Europe and thus became acquainted with different practices and types of courses, hence a major shift in their students' expectations when they returned. Consequently a feeling of dissatisfaction seems to sweep the student population in Romania and eventually this is bound to trigger a much needed change, since, in an apparently strange way, the most renowned and traditional universities are the most affected by resistance to change and seek to preserve their status quo. Some of the newly founded universities proved to be more flexible, especially when it comes to reforming to their curricula and to adapting them to the market needs. This might be one of the reasons why they managed to survive the demographic plummet. The aforementioned resistance manifests at several levels: staff policies, research, and academic programmes. We try to explain as follows.

The hierarchical system of the academia and some well ingrained practices make the promotion of an academic quite difficult in state universities. Very often such promotions are not based on meritocracy but are age related, of the type, the oldest in the system gets promoted while the young have to wait for their turn. Consequently, in general, though there have been exceptions, promotion comes with age. Professors tend to be quite "mature", and

what is more, an example of legacy from the previous regimes, before the 2011 Law of Education, one had to become a professor before being granted the right to supervise doctoral theses. Also before the 2011 Law of Education, there was no age limit for those who supervised PhD theses. It is no surprise then, that one of the PhD students' favourite anecdote relates to the many prayers for the good health and long life of their supervisors, at least for the period in which they have to complete and defend their PhDs. The 2011 law stipulates that the maximum retirement age is 65, when it comes to regular teaching and research when, if they choose, professors can become associates and supervise PhDs by the age of 70. When political changes took place in 2013, there was political pressure from senior, more empowered academics and the law was "slightly amended". It now stipulates that the University Senate can decide whether professors remain active longer than the regular retirement age. Also, the 2011 law stipulates that in order for an academic to be granted the right to supervise PhDs, s/he has to go through the process of *habilitation* (like those existing in France, Germany and other European countries). Thus no matter the age or university title, in principle, anyone who has gone through this process can become a PhD supervisor. Unfortunately, gaining this right is not an easy process and young academics are still not sure how this habilitation will function, especially for lower academic titles. Therefore are reluctant to begin procedures, especially since a lot of money is also involved.

The Romanian tertiary education is also plagued by research related problems. The latest plagiarism scandals which affected the Romanian academia, and not only (see the case of a former Minister of Education and the Prime Minister himself), are but the tip of the iceberg. Many of the PhD supervisors themselves have difficulties when it comes to conducting research. The few existing exceptions, most of them connected to natural sciences, especially mathematics, informatics or physics, are the exceptions which, unfortunately, seem to confirm the rule. The worst case can be found in humanities, some of the professors not making the difference between essay writing and research report. What is even more mindboggling is that some professors do not (or at least did not, before the cat was out of the bag) sanction plagiarism, thus encouraging and replicating unethical practices. Only in recent years this situation started to change, especially due to young academics many of whom have studied abroad. Regrettably, those who return to their homeland after finishing their studies are not very many. What is even sadder is that the most brilliant high school students choose to do their university studies elsewhere, particularly because they do not trust the university system of Romania. Brain drain is at its peak these days, whether we talk about high school students and young graduates or professionals (such as doctors). And I truly believe that when it comes to the university choices made by high school student graduates, at least part of the blame lies on the Romanian tertiary education system itself, both when it comes to its study programmes and to the reputation of the professionalism and practices put forward by the teaching staff.

Many of the academic programmes have not changed for a very long time, nor have they been updated to suit the ever more fluid labour market. The studies in the Romanian academia, most often than not, are knowledge based and what the exams test is a students' memorizing capacities. In other words, academics spoon feed their students and they expect them to faithfully regurgitate the contents of the spoons. Added to that, some academics teach the same course all their academic lives, (which in some cases is more than thirty years). Such

courses do not aim to teach what the students need to know in order to help them in their profession, but they aim to teach what the academic knows best. As for the lack of flexibility when it comes to the courses taught, though academics have complete freedom to propose any course they might see fit, they can do so only every five years due to the Romanian bureaucratic system of accreditation. Each study programme's accreditation expires after five years and the national accreditation board is invited to send a commission to re-accredit the programme. This is the only opportunity, one in five years to change the philosophy, name, structure, and basic content of a course. Undoubtedly if an academic really wanted to change something, s/he could do it but to a small extent and by keeping the name of the accredited course. And this is the course name that goes into the diploma supplement, according to the Bologna agreement.

The students that we talked to in our careers, whether informally as tutors or formally, for example in various research focus groups, said that they found many of the courses imposed on them useless and boring. Some mentioned professors who, during lectures, read from their own books, while the students were expected to keep quiet and take notes. But “the icing on the cake” as one of the students put it, was the fact that the students were also supposed to buy the book the teacher was reading from. One of the students went further and stated that not only did he feel that he did not develop in any way, but he felt that he had known more when he started his university studies. He also felt that he was being turned into some kind of a “drilling machine” incapable of thinking autonomously, or of creating something.

One might rightly argue that we take too negative a view and attitude towards our colleagues, and we do want to highlight that we consider that the system is mainly responsible for inertia and teacher centeredness and not individuals. Many of the academics have not been exposed to new pedagogies and teaching methodologies and they simply replicate what they have been subjected to during their studies. Concepts like student oriented teaching or needs analysis have but recently reached some of the academics and, what is more, such concepts are seen as inappropriate for tertiary education. After all, “academics do know what's best for their students, don't they”, and “students are opinionated and disrespectful enough as it is, why encourage them to be more so” are two of the lines we fairly frequently hear uttered by some of our fellow academics. Such opinions might originate in academic self-consciousness (some might simply call it “vanity”) on the one hand, and in the lack of training in pedagogy on the other. Unfortunately no institutionalised teacher trainer or refresher courses are available for tertiary education in the Romania.

In brief, we consider that communist legacy is still present in the tertiary education in Romania while reform is evident only at the level of form, in a rather superficial way. The outcome of university studies is, most often than not, a production of frustrated graduates who have difficulty in finding well paid, suitable jobs. The analysis now moves on to presenting the institution (university and faculty) in which the case study was conducted and then to summarizing the views put forward by the interviews with a number of its emeritus professors.

### The case study

The tertiary education institution in which the present study was carried out is currently called *Universitatea de Vest* was founded by the Royal Decree no. 660/December, 30, 1944. This university located in Timișoara was thus authorized to offer study programmes in the fields of law, letters, philosophy, human medicine, veterinary medicine, pharmacy and theology. However, the changes in the regime put an obstacle in the way of making these real. In 1948, when the Education Reform enforced the basic principles of organizing tertiary education in Romania, by Decision no 263327/October, 25, a Pedagogic Institute was founded in Timișoara, destined to function in parallel with the other higher education centers already existing in this town (the Polytechnic Institute, the Medical Institute and the Agronomic Institute). At the time a single faculty was founded within this Pedagogic Institute, Mathematics and Physics, with a three-year duration of study. The purpose of this institute was to train teachers for the western part of the country. In 1953 the duration of studies was extended to four years and in 1956, when the Faculty of Philology was founded, the duration of studies was further extended to five years. Starting with the following year, the director of the institute became *rector*. In 1962 (via the Decision of the Council of Ministers no 999/September, 25) it was stipulated that the status of the institute should be changed to that of a university, that the sections should become distinct faculties, and that the graduating students were to elaborate a diploma paper). Thus the former Institute officially became the University of Timișoara. In the same year 1962, the construction of the new university building commenced. It is interesting, in an anecdotic sort of way, that the decision to attribute to this newly found university a piece of land on the banks of the Bega river, close to the center but still a cornfield, managed to raise a few amused and malicious brows and has been, since then, part of the urban legend of the becoming of the ‘cornfield, rednecks’ Sorbonne’ (as it used to be called) and which is, in fact, the becoming of the first comprehensive university in the western part of Romania. Between 1962 and 1989 the activity of the university was shaped by the numerous ministerial orders and decisions, which stipulated the forms of education, the founding or closing down of faculties, sections and specializations, departments, and disciplines. In 1967 the Faculty of Economics was founded, while in 1968 the request for the foundation of the Faculties of Music, Arts, History – Geography, Sports and Physical Education was granted by the Ministry. These were, nevertheless, closed down after 1976. The university entered the post-communist era having only three faculties: Philology (Letters), Natural Sciences and Economics.

The post 1989 period brought about immediate and substantial changes in the structure of the university through the (re)founding of several faculties: Arts and Design, Physical Education and Sports, Chemistry, Biology and Geography and, later on, Psychology and Sociology, Law, Music and Drama. In 2004 the youngest faculty is founded: the Faculty of Political Sciences, Journalism and Communication Sciences.

The respondents of our study all came from, what is now called, the Faculty of Letters, History and Theology, one of the oldest faculties in the university. Before 1989 it was known as the Faculty of Philology. Once the domains of study diversified in the 1990s, the faculty changed its name according to the domains of study developed under its umbrella. Thus at various points in time, *Letters* was the only constant in various combinations with Philosophy, History, Journalism and Theology. However, some felt that their place of was not with

humanities but with social sciences and decided to join other faculties. The way it is shaped today, our faculty offers BA programmes in:

- Languages and literatures in a double combination of the following: Romanian, English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Serbian and Croat and Latin
- Applied Modern Languages in a double combination of: English, French, German and Spanish
- History
- Pastoral and Didactic Orthodox Theology

BA studies can be continued with MA programmes in: Translation studies (English and French), American studies, Romanian literature, Romanian Language, conceptual history, archeological studies and orthodox theology. The doctoral school of our faculty is considered quite strong and one of the most representative in the university. Applicants can do their PhD studies in Romanian language, literature and cultural studies, English and American Literatures, German literature, Serbian and Croat languages and history.

As far as the interviews-based findings of our study are concerned, they are the result of a project financed by the Soros Foundation Romania, within the program East-East: Partnership Beyond Borders, project entitled *Teaching values by role model examples – A university outreach project for community involvement*. To this end, our faculty has conducted a series of interviews with academics in order to highlight the involvement of the university, via its people, in the every-day life of the local community. The corpus consisted of nine semi-structured interviews of representative members of the cultural and academic community of cities in the regions envisaged by the project (Timisoara, Romania, Szeged, Hungary, and Chişinău, the Republic of Moldova). All the respondents had both an academic and an administrative relevance (as members of the university leadership at a certain point, including a rector, a vice-rector, two deans and several heads of departments). Within the process of analysing these interviews we came across a serendipity pattern: the constant references to pre and post 1989 periods. We decided to re-analyse the interviews produced by the four respondents who came for our faculty, with a different focus in view: their opinions on the becoming of tertiary education across time.

The categories that were identified were: the pre-1989 context (the communist period), the transition period (the 1990s) and the contemporary context (the 2000s). Each of these categories were further divided in subcategories: career, professional relations, and values (referred to as such or reflected in behaviour and practices). The analysis has revealed clear similarities across all respondents.

The pre-1989 context, in the respondents' views was characterized by closure at all levels. Despite the fact that the respondents had an elite education and the chance to study next to elite role models, the closed system in which they were educated, communicated, made friends and professional contacts was claustrophobic. All mentioned the formalism of their entire professional life, especially when it came to communicating with colleagues and students. As a consequence, their relationship with the students was exclusivistic, strictly professional and elitist, generated by the restricted freedom of speech. All respondents referred to the aim of trespassing the ideological and geographical barriers: travelling abroad,

obtaining a scholarship in a foreign university, making efforts to send students or younger colleagues to teach and study in another country. None of the respondents however made any reference to the role of the *Securitate* in their professional life. One major paradox of the communist educational system was also revealed – the fact that, although tertiary education was self-fashioned as a „mass” process, it was far more elitist than other systems, an elitism highly esteemed by all the respondents.

In the 1990s, values and criteria changed, a reality which was usually perceived negatively, whether it referred to the shift from quality to quantity or to the political engagement of education. The first drawback identified by the respondents accuses the bureaucratic approach to excellence, where promotion depended on the number of publications and the sums of money received through grants, criteria which, as one of the respondents put it, would have kept Einstein away from the university and professorship. None of the respondents though made any reference to the criteria according to which an academic’s excellence should have been measured. The second aspect is perceived as a sad paradox: while the pre-1989 period was characterized by a formal character and isolation, the post-1989 eagerness to embrace politics threatens to destroy the teaching mission and deteriorate peer and teacher-student relationships. What both hypostases have in common is the inevitable renunciation to quality. Some respondents tried to explain both the vulnerability of the academic system to international pressures and quantitative criteria, and the inability to achieve recognition by means of the dissipation of the previous academic tradition which was seen as having been more appropriate and meaningful. The comparison with prestigious European institutions brought to the surface feelings of dissatisfaction of belonging to relatively small and obscure institutions (in terms of their presence and position in various international rankings). All in all the changes brought about by the new, post-communist era were not seen as a benefice to the tertiary education.

The characterization of the years 2000s may seem surprising as it goes against the general trend of the universities outside the post-communist paradigm, despite the fact that the above-mentioned East European institutions have appropriated Western standards (the Bologna convention, the European Credit Transfer System, memberships in international associations and boards, participation in high profile international events, etc.). This may come as a reaction against the inadequacies these professors might have experienced in the later years of their careers. As most respondents were selected, according to definite age criteria (in order to be able to share a working life long experience), many of them referred to rejection and exclusion, rather than inclusion and opening, references justified by the biographical context: because of the reform in education, the changing laws and the precarious financial circumstances, many of them had to retire. Many respondents looked at this event in negative, punitive terms, referring to their retirement as to the measures of an abusive system (some call the group of people who were invited to retire „the lot”, as if they were convicts). They invariably deplore the gesture as the repression of elites. The discourse the respondents employ, therefore, acquires a cyclical quality: the reference to elites was present in the pre-1989 context while disappearing in the 2000s, therefore the representational role of the institution in the community would disappear along with the disappearance of this “elite” and the values it represented.

The summary of the analysis of the interviews presented above confirms the findings based on observation and document analysis put forward in the first part of this paper, namely that inertia and resistance to change is all-pervading in the Romanian tertiary education. Moreover it appears to be entrenched in the conservative and elitist culture of the academia. The predominant values still replicated in post-1989 Romania are those of elitism and professor-centeredness, while students and young academics are being discouraged to initiate a change to the system. All these lead to the idea that, in spite of the many changes and reforms, it has been subjected to the Romanian tertiary system is more legacy than reform oriented.

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