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# Cohedissent–Specific Behavior of University Unions to Increase Competitiveness

**ABSTRACT**

The change of the political regime in Romania determined a real revolution in the activity of the trade unions which suddenly had to change their objectives and their working methods. These organisations were in a position to struggle for the status of universities and their professors in a society that considered that 3% of GDP for education is too much. Is possible to understand that trade unions acting instead of universities managers, but immediately after 1989, the rectors and their teams depended by the politicians in a way that they cannot ask more for the needs of universities, and these situations are comparable with ones manifested in other countries, like Peru, Bolivia or Ecuador (Haggard and Kaufmann, 1995). The social and professional involvement of university unions is now much more significant, and their role in the life of higher education institutions is becoming more and more imperative. Not only do

they struggle for financial resources and real autonomy, but they also support the didactic and research activities of their members. They also try to prevent and stop the abuse of university leaders. This work aims to present the activity of the union of *Universitas Timisiensis* (West University of Timisoara), the role it plays to increase the cohesion between its members and the cooperation with other university unions of Romania. We will also present some current and future solutions that can develop the competitiveness of our institution to make it more attractive not only for professors and researchers but also for students.

**Methodology:** In almost two decades we have observed that the role of education is treated differently in political declarations and public budgetary allocation. We tried to understand what the causes of these differences are, and we noticed that the formal voice of different union federations (there are four in the education field in Romania) is quite the same, but also there are some informal arrangements with governmental officials. Even in the higher education area, there are different aspects related to the goals of groups of universities (comprehensive, technical, medical) so the cohesion of different unions can be only apparent. We tried to investigate these aspects using quantitative research based on data supplied by Eurostat and National Institute of Statistics and about 15 interviews with different persons involved in the management of union organisations to see the characteristics of common patterns and also the specific differences.

**Findings:** We discovered that in the field of education there is a paradox of functionality of a system. All political parties sustain the idea of a consistent allocation of resources for education (there is a National Pact for Education signed by all parties in 2008 and assumed by all other parties that appeared after 2008), but in ten years the allocation was around 3% of GDP that represents only half of the agreement. The unions were forced to adopt different strategies in an unfriendly environment: they cooperated in most of the cases but, due to the lack of resources, they had to rally to the positions of the management of universities and that sometimes determined the dissent with other unions.

**Value Added:** It can be assumed that the unions can have an important role in education environment, even if they act in cohesion (most of the cases) and dissent (especially in case of improvement the position of the home university). The cohedissent (we try to underline the combination between the terms cohesion and dissent because it is almost impossible to have only cohesion in educational area) behaviour can represent a key factor to understanding the specificity of the role of university unions in improving the educational environment and insending more suggestive messages to the political parties.

**Recommendations:** The scientific research in universities is an essential aspect of higher education and the specific research within and between university unions can potentiate the activities of teachers and researchers. The cooperation between unions must be improved and the dissent must be used constructively.

**Key words:** universities, governance, trade unions, education, cohesion, dissent

**JEL codes:**H52, I21, J51

## Introduction

Our research aims to demonstrate that, in the current Romanian socio-economic context, university unions could play a more significant role in developing a new approach, a new strategy that will allow universities to benefit greater visibility in society, to be better connected to the realities and demands of the economy of their countries. Thanks to the less formal relations that they develop between their members, the unions are able to know better the people who work in education and their problems.

The endless transition that Romania is still going through has upset not only the country's economy but also social life. Since no one had yet experienced the transition from the planned economy to the market economy, there were many hesitations and mistakes in all areas. Paradoxical or absurd situations exasperated people who were already accustomed to enduring misery (material and moral), extreme poverty, injustice and dictatorship and made them to develop a reaction.

After almost a decade of transition from communism to capitalism, the realities generated a lot of questions and frustration for all categories of population and especially for young generations. A large part of 16-23 years of age population often considered that Romanian government cannot ensure decent conditions for work and taken in consideration to emigrate in foreign countries (Sandu, Stoica & Umbres, 2014).

The financing of education was an important issue of transition concerns, and in this case the approach had to be different for higher education because there appeared a lot of private universities and the treatment must be different related to public universities (Commission Européenne, 2008).

It was hoped, after the events of December 1989, that education and the development of education could change something in the fate of the Romanians, that they would change the mentality of people and improve their lives. But it was forgotten that Eugène Ionesco, the creator of the theatre of the absurd, was born in Romania and that his descendants continued the deconstruction of logic and common sense.

Thus, social dialogue has become more the dialogue of the deaf. Unions and their federations have had paradoxical reactions to the injustices of right-wing or left-wing political regimes, and the country's leaders have taken advantage of this lack of experience and cohesion to give ambiguous laws and ordinances that should have triggered essential but did not provoke any reaction from trade unionists.

Many studies signalled that the direction of education, generated by the government, is not proper for future development and many organisations involved in educational environment started a movement to find better solutions. Step by step, this movement included political parties, specific institutions and NGOs, trade unions that tried to identify the most appropriate instruments to formalise all actions. Surprisingly, they noticed that there are no significant differences between these diverse groups and they needed to identify a common solution (for example Ciutacu, 2011).

Thus, on March 5, 2008, all political parties in Romania signed the **Pact for Education**, a document aimed at setting directions and goals for the future education system strategy and reaching a political agreement that would have allowed a coherent reform of education. Political parties, civil society, NGOs, parents and students deliberated and worked together on the final form of the document. They established an 18-month deadline to sketch a strategy that needed to be backed up by a package of laws.

This pact began with general formulas, with grave and pompous words (conscious, preoccupied, worried, convinced) about the political class. "We, the representatives of the parliamentary political parties, the institutions and the undersigned organizations, solemnly undertake to achieve, through all

our future actions concerning national education, the following objectives: the increasing of competitiveness of Romanian economy; the increasing of financial allocation for education at 6% of GDP and for research at 1% and de-politicization of the subject of education" (own translation).

The second objective of this pact was to talk about a minimum of 6% of GDP for education for the period 2008-2013. Of course, this was an optimistic expectation, but even pessimists thought that 5% of GDP would be attained. And this is what we learn from the final report of research carried out by ETUCE on public budgets for education: between 2008 and 2015 Romania allocated between 2.8% and 4.4% of its GDP for education. The report also shows that after 4.4% in 2008 (the year of the famous pact), the sum fell to 4% in 2009, 3.3% in 2010, and 2.8% in 2013. After that year there was a slight growth up to 3.1% in 2015. For 2018, 3.8% of GDP is expected for education but is improbable to be upper 3.5% despite the real increasing of wages.

The third objective was related to the escaping from the trap of politicization in education. Probably is almost impossible in a country as Romania to attain this objective because there are a lot of advantages for politicians to appear to solve the problems of education, especially in the electoral campaign. Also, some politicians consider that they can obtain additional funds for schools or universities and they expect to have some advantages like nominalisation of some friends in the board of schools or to receive some honorary titles from universities. This kind of behaviour creates a negative impact, and not only can the image of universities be compromised but also the image of the teachers of universities.

**Table 1. Evolution of the percentage of GDP allocated for education**

	Romania	Var.	EU27	Var.	Euro area	Var.
Year						
2008	4.30		4.90		4.60	
2009	3.90	-9.30	5.30	8.16	5.00	8.70

2010	3.30	-15.38	5.30	0.00	4.90	-2.00
2011	4.10	24.24	5.10	-3.77	4.80	-2.04
2012	3.00	-26.83	5.00	-1.96	4.80	0.00
2013	2.80	-6.67	4.90	-2.00	4.80	0.00
2014	3.00	7.14	4.90	0.00	4.70	-2.08
2015	3.10	3.33	4.80	-2.04	4.60	-2.13
2016	3.70	19.35	4.80	0.00	4.60	0.00
2017	3.60	-2.70	4.80	0.00	4.70	2.17
2018*	3.80	5.56	4.90	2.08	4.70	0.00

Source: own calculation based on data available at <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>.

When analysing the allocation of resources for education (% of GDP) it can be noted that the start was good, but the finish of the period means a lower relative allocation, so it is obvious that the second objective of the Pact was not attained. If the decrease in 2009 and 2010 can be explained by the severe recession experienced by the Romanian economy, it is very difficult to explain what happened in 2012, 2013 (with a minimum of 2.8% of GDP), 2014 and 2015, when the objective was cut to around 3% of GDP. These two periods were determined in an aggregate decreasing of 1.26%, that puts us in a different position related to the EU27 average (an aggregate increase of 0.48%) or to Euro area (an aggregate increase of 2.62%).

The efforts of university unions and higher education federation were ineffective. The high pressure did not work out, partly because of dissent within the members of unions or federation, partly because the budgetary constraints were so powerful that it was impossible for the government to allocate the promised resources (Voss, de Micheli, Schöneberg and Rosini, 2017) and one of the leading causes for that was the evolution of total general government revenue as is presented below.

**Table 2. Evolution of total general government revenue (% of GDP)**

Year	Romania	Var.	EU27	Var.	Euro area	Var.
2006	33.10		43.60		44.70	
2007	34.50	4.23	43.80	0.46	44.80	0.22
2008	32.40	-6.09	43.70	-0.23	44.50	-0.67
2009	30.50	-5.86	43.50	-0.46	44.50	0.00
2010	33.00	8.20	43.50	0.00	44.40	-0.22
2011	33.90	2.73	44.00	1.15	45.00	1.35
2012	33.60	-0.88	44.70	1.59	46.10	2.44
2013	33.20	-1.19	45.30	1.34	46.80	1.52
2014	33.60	1.20	45.10	-0.44	46.80	0.00
2015	35.00	4.17	44.70	-0.89	46.30	-1.07
2016	31.60	-9.71	44.70	0.00	46.20	-0.22
2017	30.50	-3.48	44.90	0.45	46.20	0.00
2018*	32.00	4.92	45.00	0.22	46.40	0.43

Source: own calculation based on data available at [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Government\\_expenditure\\_by\\_function\\_-\\_COFOG](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Government_expenditure_by_function_-_COFOG).

Table 2 explains the main problem of the Romanian public policy. As data shows, the difference between total general government revenue in Romania and the average of this indicator in EU27 and Euro area varies from 9.7% (in 2007) to 15.7% (in 2017), and that makes the attainment of the second objective of the Pact impossible. Also, we consider that this is a real problem not only for education and it is necessary to reveal the causes of this involution. The European Union means the harmonisation (not equalisation) of the main indicators, but the budgetary discipline related to the allocation of resources is ineffective without a strong discipline in collecting taxes and other contributions of economic agents.

It is almost impossible to optimise the role of trade unions in improvement processes and competitiveness if the efforts of collecting taxes are inefficient. Romania has lower taxation than other EU countries, and that can

explain a part of the distance. However, there are countries with lower taxation than Romania, and the total relative government revenue is higher, meaning that there are some deep problems related to the underground economy.

## Governance of higher education

Between democratic culture, academic aspirations and market forces, the management of Romanian universities had to respond to the challenges of a new society. This notion is relatively recent and is not characteristic of traditional higher education.

In the communist period, there was an interaction between universities and society because the Ministry of Education managed the number of places allocated to higher education given the demand on the labour market. The tendency to not reserve higher education for elites but to address the mass of the population already existed. Despite the statements of the leaders of the Communist Party, because of the attitude towards the intellectuals, Romanian universities had a smaller and smaller number of places.

After 1990, higher education has grown rapidly, and the number of students and universities has risen sharply. Private education, which had not existed before, developed many universities. Unfortunately, their quality was often doubtful and, as soon as the number of candidates for higher education dropped because of the demographic crisis, they were the first to disappear.

At present, the educational reforms in Romania are both hailed and criticised for their rapidity and radical nature. They are fast because they envision a complete transformation of the system regarding strategy, content, legislation, governance, funding and structures, but they are also radical because change is systemic and encompasses all forms and levels of change, namely: formal, non-formal, informal, pre-primary, primary, secondary, higher and vocational. A great part of the society supports reforms and recognises that they are inevitable. However, there is also vigorous opposition from predominantly conservative groups who refuse any attempt to change that



would “threaten” their way of life. Despite this diverse approach, there is not a single group in the country that openly claims that the previous system was progressive and merit-based. The degradation of academic and professional values was so obvious that it would be unreasonable to deny the facts. Most of the Romanian governments after 1990 started their activity by elaborating a new law of education.

The superficial introduction of innovations without taking into account the specific national problems, rapid decline in the financing of the system, the desire to emulate Western, or especially American universities at all costs have led to anomalies such as the dilution of quality, widespread corruption, elitism, nepotism, the “brain drain”, all leading to a growing distance of Romanian universities from the world of work.

Fortunately, recent years have been marked by changes in prestigious Romanian universities that have realised the need to continuously improve their performance and adapt to the demands of the labour market. As a result, they have tried to diversify their sources of funding and to create closer cooperation with business. Romanian universities are also trying to adapt their research to find solutions to problems of public interest and the needs of the society. Thus, the governance of higher education passed from college to managerial, and there is more talk of university service provider, university-business or corporatist spirit in universities. These transformations have often caused tensions within the institutions, and the emergence of a new type of university is not done “without pain”.

The problem that concerns all actors is to better organise and manage universities so that they become equal partners with other European universities in all fields. Solutions must be found to deal with the political and social reforms that affect the whole of Romania to create a more market-oriented education system characterized by a reduction in state funding and also by a greater autonomy in governance and management, financial and, last but not least, autonomy in the appointment of teachers and in program design.

In this context, the social dialogue between university administrations and the unions of these institutions is a necessity and an obligation to find solutions that can avoid tensions. On the other hand, trade unions must no longer be exclusively critical and demanding. They must also see and propose solutions for better university governance (Varga, 2013).

## Develop and modernise with minimal resources

Our approach envisaged the dialogue and the cooperation between the unions of the universities belonging to the Universitaria Consortium, the five largest and most successful universities of Romania. We initiated discussions with the leaders of these unions and with some of their members because we realised that the unions have operational problems, that there is a tendency to make too much effort to solve problems daily and that management and prospects escape us.

We opted for maintenance as a non-directive research method that created mutual trust, a comfortable exchange of personal experiences told without constraints, without the idea of counting, of an empowering census.

The selected sample (leaders of Romanian university unions and members of these organisations) provided us with valuable information especially on the methods used in the social dialogue and on the specific problems that seem to be the same in all universities.

For more than two decades, the primary goal of the unions of Romanian universities and their Federation Alma Mater (which is affiliated to the Cartel Alpha, one of the largest trade union confederations in Romania) has been to impose respect for the law. They also struggled for implementing its provisions. A lawyer invited to answer questions from members of the *Universitas Timisiensis* Union of the Western University of Timișoara said that in Romania the mere fact of having provided a certain right by law is not enough. There are many situations in which this right must be regained after an endless trial. Because of this situation, we have neglected the challenges

of today's society: the demands of the economy, the working conditions, and the steady decline in the number of students.

We started from the premise that unions must and can contribute to the healing of our society and our universities.

To facilitate the discussions, we organised in November 2016 in Timișoara a symposium dedicated to the Research Day, entitled *The condition of the university professor between research and didactics*. This theme has been chosen because, in recent years, the research had been made almost exclusively to promote in the academic career, without enthusiasm and for no other purpose than the increase of the salary. On this occasion, we realised that for most of our colleagues, it is quite challenging to find solutions to solve the problem of dropping out of school, or to build relationships with the business community. Change, in didactics or research, is difficult and few people want to leave the comfort zone of known and recognised things.

Nevertheless, the conclusions of the debates, at least at the theoretical level, were a little different. Most participants agreed that teachers should become labour market partners and organise courses in collaboration with the best employers, in line with their needs. Thus, university graduates would be truly qualified and able to meet the expectations of their employers. Interest in higher education institutions would be more significant, and adherence to their courses would increase as well. The most eloquent example is that of computer science faculties that have quickly adapted to the needs of the labour market and society.

Unions can support and encourage the connection of universities to the market by developing relationships with the unions of companies that are members of the Alpha Cartel. Their cooperation is possible not only at the level of the Alma Mater Federation but also between the local subsidiaries. Thus, university teachers would have the opportunity to know the needs and requirements of companies and to adapt specialisations and courses.

On the other hand, union money can be used to finance research programs, colloquia or collective volumes, an initiative that has been taking place for several years at the West University of Timisoara.

To encourage the research and creation of its members, the *Universitas Timisiensis* Union has built a house of creation and recreation (in Romanian "creație și recreație") in the village of Igrîș, located about 60 km from Timișoara, in the vicinity from the Mureș River. Here one can find excellent conditions (from tranquillity to the internet) to write an article or a book. The area is also conducive to research for historians (the ruins of an ancient Cistercian monastery), geographers and botanists (flora and fauna of the valley Mureș). The house and the land surrounding it can be used for team building.

The next year, 2017, the Research Day was organised by the union of the University of Bucharest. This time the theme became more specific than ever: *Directorates of Union Research in Romanian Universities*. Taking inspiration from the title of the International Journal of Labour Research published in Geneva by the International Labour Office, we discussed the topics that could be the subject of our future research. Representatives of Universitaria Consortium Unions raised their proposals several themes on themes including *How to reach "noble" objectives under underfunded conditions? The degree of behavioural pathology in the university system; Unions for the healing of society; The relationship between university unions and the labour market; Contribution of trade unions to university cohesion as a factor in the sustainable development of these institutions; The relationship between university unions and student organisations.*

All those who spoke insisted on the idea of depoliticising education in general and universities in particular. The majority of Romanian rectors are involved in political life, and their attitude is often harmful to the activity of the institution. A minimal detachment is necessary for those who decide on the future of Romanian higher education.

We noticed on this occasion that the ideas were not lacking, nor was the enthusiasm, but what was more difficult was to finalise the actions.

The participants decided, for example, to create a union publication to provide a framework and a purpose for their research, but nobody has yet started a coherent action for that. As the observers of these debates, we have found that the problems are the same in all universities and that the solutions exist provided that the unionists are able to present them and find arguments to convince not only the rectors and deans but also their work colleagues.

## Social dialogue - a factor of cohesion

In both situations that we have created and organised, in Timișoara and Bucharest, an idea has been expressed several times: the need to solve problems through dialogue and negotiations between unions and university administrations. Everyone agreed that the dialogue between the union and the administration of the university should be considered on a professional basis and in full agreement with the legal stipulations because otherwise, the results will never be positive. One of the obstacles that may appear is related to the excessive specialisation of attributions as regards the management activity. Sometimes, because in the field of remuneration the law is more than dense and that to use it requires years of practice, it is only the specialist in personnel problems who can offer solutions for employee compensation issues. This can create difficulties because the university specialist interprets the law most often for the benefit of the institution and not for the benefit of the people. Even more: it applies a restriction in the sense that what is not provided for by the law is prohibited, contrary to the principle of law which asserts that what is not prohibited by law is permitted. In these cases, the role of the union is to explain any problems related to the interpretations, and if this is not possible by friendly discussions, then the representatives of the union must bring additional arguments obtained from the similar universities and also the higher organisms (ministries, coordinating institutions at national and European level).

These aspects of union-level social dialogue with representatives of university administrations are but a few of the multitude that manifests themselves in the life of these institutions, but this dialogue must be approached in a constructive manner and in positions of responsibility, equality. It is not a matter of taking action because one is obliged to do it, as is often done in a society in transition, but of a necessary action, made by conviction.

Another type of dialogue that university unions should consider is the dialogue with student organisations. Due to lack of experience, these are sometimes easy to manipulate and use politically. Cooperation with student representatives in faculty councils and Senates has always been beneficial for both parties. Reciprocal support for specific problems is already a tradition. There are times when students are quicker in their reactions, and unions need to consider their opinions and help them.

For a new conception of university education, students should be consulted and encouraged by teachers as the primary beneficiaries of these changes. While we do not agree with those who see universities as exclusively service providers, we believe that "customer satisfaction" should be of concern to us. If young people are not attracted to university courses, our institutions will be affected: in the short and medium term by dropping out of school and in the long run by creating a society without intellectuals and without elites.

At the conference **Education in Europe: Public Investment, Privatization and Reforms - What Role Do Trade Unions Play ?**, organized by **ETUCE** in Brussels (30 May 2017), Susan Flocken, the president of this organization, said that to achieve the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy, especially for the European economy to become more powerful, some measures that require a reaction from trade unions are needed with regard to the recommendation to privatize education. ETUCE believes that we must fight to keep education as a public good because privatisation can make access to educational services more difficult. A consistent and effective social dialogue must exist at the national level so as not to favour the transformation educational services into commercial services. Decent wages

and decent working conditions are essential objectives for trade unions, at a national and European level as well.

Unfortunately, universities in Romania are often compared to corporations, and their leaders want to impose mentality and corporatist behaviour. They forget the specificity of the academic climate and try to accredit rigid rules and punitive measures that kill enthusiasm and creativity. The participation of union leaders in boards of directors and the Senate has often stopped these excesses.

Unions in Romanian universities have had to use all legal means for the administrations of these institutions to apply the provisions of the law concerning wages. And since the law is often ambiguous and allows for several interpretations, it was necessary to create and operate a joint committee in each university to amicably settle disputes over the method of calculating wages. The cooperation between the unions of the Universitaria Consortium has been as beneficial in this situation. In fact, the five leaders proposed the participation of human resources directors and union presidents in meetings where the rectors of the Universitaria Consortium discuss compensation issues. For the time being it is only a project, but we hope that it will become a reality.

## International relationships

Cooperation between university unions in the European Union has become a reality that Romanian university unions have not been able to neglect. The European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) is an organisation set up to solve national and international problems in education, and the representatives of Alma Mater participate in all its work and actions. Current challenges include: lack of social dialogue, poor acceptance of teacher status, reduced salaries in the education sector – those are calling for government action.

The *Universitas Timisiensis* union is also carrying out regional cooperation projects with counterpart organisations in Hungary (the Szeged University

Union) and Serbia (the Novi Sad University Union). These projects contribute to the greater visibility of our university and the permanent exchange of experience.

## Conclusions

Trade union research has become a necessity because Romanian trade unions have diminished their ability to influence educational change with governments and educational agencies. According to opinions and comments from the media, education unions have lost the confidence of Romanians, and changes in the teaching profession require a new approach.

On the other hand, to achieve remarkable results in the current cost of under-funding of education, we must find ingenious solutions, viable solutions, in the long term, and the unions have the material and, above all, human resources to do so. They can convince their members that they must give up their traditional ivory tower to go down to the forum and make the voice of the elites heard.

One of the desired action directions of trade unions is to offer some support to public authorities in order to increase the total government revenue because this is one of the weak points of the general situation in Romania. The mobilisation of efforts through common research of causes of this problem must be a valuable desiderate for all parts, but that means investigation that can create a lot of troubles for some politicians and their friends or relatives.

We, like our colleagues in the *Consortium Universitaria*, believe that dialogue and negotiation are the best methods to solve the problems of Romanian universities. In recent years we have achieved remarkable successes (Law 85, payment of doctorate etc.) through dialogue in joint committees and ministries, thus avoiding lawsuits that would have been detrimental to the image of our universities.



It is essential to convince all actors in university education (teachers, researchers, students, parents, companies, institutions, government) of the importance of dialogue that can resolve conflicts and replace traditional union fighting. We all agree that dissensions are necessary to stimulate creativity and to find better solutions, but finally, the debates must lead to cohesion, the condition of the sustainable development of universities of the future. Unions are able to contribute to changing pedagogical methods, curricula, student admission procedures, recruitment of researchers and evaluation. Unity and solidarity must be manifested at the level of each university and also at the level of the national federation.

The creation of a research department within university unions is an essential contribution to these organisations in adapting their strategies and practices. It can become “a source of internal dynamism while allowing a broadening of its modes and fields of influence” (Payeur, 2016, p. 59). Trade union research has the same rigorous requirements and fulfils a complementary function to university research. It can also play a role of substitution for academic research too often timid in its participation in debates that shake the education community.

Experience shows that the exchange between union research and university research needs to be supported and improved, as these are, in practice, two complementary sectors. Exchange and dialogue are also beneficial in all areas of university activity and can be achieved with respect for each.

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