

# THE PARADIGM SHIFT OF EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION UNDER THE BOLOGNA PROCESS. MASSIFICATION OF ACADEMIC EDUCATION – A SOLUTION FOR THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY?

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## **Abstract**

*The Bologna reform causes a paradigm shift of European higher education by the changes in the philosophy, structure and purpose of the educational process. The mission of higher education is the training of qualified and competitive human resources for the labour market. This mission must be integrated in the Lisbon Agenda framework which aims to make the EU the most powerful and competitive economy in the world. A way to achieve this goal is the creation of the Knowledge based Society and Economy. Academic education and scientific research, the advanced knowledge are the ways to achieve these objectives. Higher education expands its addressability to a diversified public, to non-traditional groups of students. The third millennium university is the inclusive and responsive university, directly related to the social realities and developments, the needs and aspirations of society, an extremely diverse and dynamic environment. In this context, the Bologna reform generates the higher education massification process. From an elite institution, as consecrated by the European academic tradition, the university becomes an inclusive and responsive institution, with large social addressability, an instrument of massification and globalization. Thus a paradigm shift of higher education takes place, from the model of elite to the model of massification. Such a metamorphosis is a challenge for the university as a space of higher education, quality, excellence and performance in education and scientific research. There could appear the risk that the new paradigm generate the massification-mediocrization association in higher education. Inside this metamorphosis, the University must maintain its status of an institution of quality academic education, advanced scientific research, creativity and innovation, excellence, performance and competitiveness. The viable solution concerning higher education can only be the social massification of the higher education public, i.e. the extension of its addressability, and not the massification of quality. The key institution of the third millennium higher education is the elite university, with a crucial role in building the Knowledge Society in the world of globalization.*

**Key words:** paradigm shift, elite, massification, extension of addressability, quality, excellence, academic education, scientific research, creativity, innovation, elite university, knowledge society, globalization

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **THE REFORM OF HIGHER EDUCATION - AN OBJECTIVE NECESSITY**

The European higher education is passing now through a transformation process regarding fundamental aspects of it: *philosophy and vision, mission, structure, content, the relationship with the labor market*. The programmatic reform of higher education, as philosophy and system, begins with the Bologna Declaration (1999) that triggers what is called the Bologna Process. It is a major change in the fundamental coordinates of higher education, driven by the major social and political changes on the scene of Europe, by the enlargement of the European Union, by the development in geometric progression of knowledge in the same time with the spectacular advances in information technology and communications field, by the worldwide fierce competition among the strongest economies and by the globalization process. The economic argument plays a leading role in these processes and developments at national, European and global levels. By the economic development of the member states, the European Union aspires to become, accordingly to the Lisbon Agenda, the strongest global economy, in direct competition with the U.S. The economic development is based on *knowledge*. Therefore, within the level of the European Union, there were launched key concepts as *Knowledge-based Society* and *Knowledge-based Economy*. Regarded in its essence, this process of change is facing *two major challenges: the reform of quality and efficiency*, and also a fundamental change concerning the university's mission: *the linking of the academic education and the scientific research to the economic environment*.

The edification of the Knowledge-based Society in order to achieve a competitive European economy, globally competitive, demands educated and skilled *human resources* by the highest standards of quality and efficiency, competent in their fields of expertise. Given the size of the changes at national and European level,

the today's European society and economy are facing the need for a *growing number of qualified and competent individuals* in the labor market. The education, the training of future employees in order to acquire skills in various specialties represents the responsibility of higher education. In these terms, a *third challenge* to higher education is the *expansion of its addressability* to the social diversified groups, as gender and age, the broadening of the recruitment social basis of the students. Under this issue, another necessity of higher education and university is *the expansion and diversification of the educational offer, of the study programs and of the education forms*. In this complex process of reforming and adaptation of higher education to meet the challenges of the Knowledge Society, it takes place a cardinal metamorphosis, *a fundamental change of paradigm, vision and finality: the massification of higher education*.

## 1. THE UNIVERSITY, THE AREA OF ELITES AND ELITE KNOWLEDGE

The University has been conceived as an elite area of education and research, study and creativity, being dedicated, by vocation, to the social elites. Since its inception, the university was an environment of the chosen ones, privileged by the material condition, by the social rank and also by their spiritual condition. The social elites were those supported by a solid material status, they were forming the upper classes of the society, in general belonging to the aristocracy and to the various nobility ranks, aristocratic families from western and central European countries. The first universities of the European Middle Age, beginning with the University of Bologna, were created on the model of the elite and the elitism, being exclusive institutions of knowledge. The access to these institutions was depending on the social and material condition of the young aspirant to higher education. The teachers and students were, in their turn, well defined social and professional categories in terms of identity and their mission, with a privileged status in the society. The most brilliant minds of society, in the beginning being the prelates, formed the academic body. The university was gathering the greatest scholars, scientists, academics, great minds summoned to spread the light of knowledge to the world of disciples, those also having sharp minds, which were meant to continue and develop, through their career and work, the knowledge process. By its universities, the Europe's academic education was, from its crystallization as a system, an exclusive territory, an environment of the elites and elite knowledge, in which the teachers and their followers were proud that they represent, by privilege of the highest knowledge, a higher social and professional class, a sort of aristocracy of spirit. Such a pride of knowledge was motivating a Pico della Mirandola, the most brilliant and comprehensive mind of the Renaissance, educated at the Universities of Bologna, Ferrara, Padua, Paris, Florence, to say full of pride, challenging: "I know everything and something more!" The space of the elites and of knowledge elite statute of the University has perpetuated throughout history in the academic Europe. In virtue of this tradition, the higher education remained an accessible experience only to the leading groups from the society, with financial strength and a respectable social status, belonging to the upper layers, to the sphere of the aristocracy, or, later, of the bourgeoisie.

As a system and accessibility, the European higher education, built on prestigious universities such as from Bologna, Padua, or as the Sorbonne, Oxford, Cambridge, Uppsala, Salamanca, Prague etc., and developed over the time, was an open area of knowledge. The applicants to the elite experience of knowledge could choose to study in famous universities of Europe, and later from U.S. Also, the European university education, by the way it was designed by its universities, was allowing the students and teachers' mobility from one university to another, to follow the studies that they wanted, in order to specialize in certain areas. The higher education institutions were recognizing the university internships and the experiences developed in other universities in the same country or from abroad and they were assimilating them to the course of the university studies.

Initially, in the University there were studied, with teachers from the elite of every field, fundamental branches of knowledge from the area of sciences, law, humanities, theology, arts. As open space of knowledge since the beginning, the University has grown the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches, by virtue of the fact that it understood the knowledge universe in a holistic vision and representation, in interdependence, harmony and synergy of different fields of study. The ideal of the classic University was to form *homo universalis*. Over time, with the advancement of knowledge, the area of the educational offer has expanded and diversified. It is a process of intercausality, meaning that, on the one hand, the university as a source of knowledge has contributed to the advancement of society and, on the other hand, this progress has led the university to continuously develop the studies offer.

Higher education remained an elite one even when it began the expansion process of it, of the number of students, of its addressability to diversified social groups. In essence, the demanding criteria selection systems were a way to maintain the traditional status of the university. It should be noted that the status of the university as the area of the elites and of the elite education, of elitist and exclusive environment, ensured and perpetuated its *scientific and social prestige* and of the higher education as a system during ages.

## 2. MASSIFICATION - THE NEW PARADIGM OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The concept of *massification* of higher education is a complex one and difficult to grasp in a single definition. If, however, it would be to propose a general definition, we could understand **massification as the enlargement process of the university education in three directions: social-human, temporal, educational**.

At European level, massification develops as a coherent process, built on a new philosophy and vision, towards well defined goals, within the ample reform of the European higher education, initiated by the Bologna Process. But before the massification analysis within the context of the Bologna reform, it is necessary a brief historical overview of the massification process.

### **2.1. Massification - a historic overview**

The massification process of higher education began in the second half of the 20th century, generated by the changes in the social area and by the economic developments. In the western area, in Europe and in the U.S., due to the increased need for education, skilled and competent personnel in various fields of economy, on the labor market, the universities began to open up more to the society. Postwar, the massification of higher education is governed by the *principle of access and of social equity*.

After 1990, the Romanian higher education is entering in a new phase of its development. New public and private institutions of higher education appear, a fact that leads to an *unprecedented expansion* of the education system in Romania. It should be noted that *the phenomenon of private higher education* has an *exceptional dynamics*, by the emergence of many private universities. In this context, the Romanian higher education *massification process* meets an *impetuous progression* by the increasing of the institutional offer, even beyond the limits of the social need. The massification of the higher education has two coordinates: *the social addressability* of education and *the studies programs diversification*. It takes place a *great opening of the social access*, but a *decrease in the quality of the educational offer*, within the conditions of the increase in geometric progression of the number of universities. *The university inflation, the fierce competition* among higher education institutions, while some of them abandon the quality standards and any academic requirement, represent a *blow to the principle of elitism and to the elitist status of the university*, by virtue of its European tradition.

### **2.2. Massification of higher education within the Bologna Process**

The Bologna reform aims to the reforming of higher education and scientific research in the idea of their efficiency by increasing quality, performance, competitiveness, the ability to train skills, to encourage innovation and creativity. From the perspective of this process, higher education is seen as *a support of the Knowledge-based Economy and Society*, within the global competition. Within this reforming framework, *massification* represents an extensive process that opens the access of broader social categories to higher education, thereby increasing its addressability, extends the educational process from the duration point of view during the active existence and substantially diversifies the offer and the forms of education. The paradigm shift brought by the Bologna Process is the transformation of higher education in a *framework of developing skills and competences in order to qualify* the future graduates for the labor market. The national economic systems and the economy of the United Europe need competent and qualified people, having a work capacity formed to the most demanding standards of exigency and efficiency.

From the Bologna Reform perspective, the idea and the massification process are associated with a number of concepts, spread at the level of the field policies under EUA (European University Association): inclusive and responsive universities, access and equity, the social dimension of education, positive discrimination, gender equality, access of women, of minorities and immigrants, lifelong learning, academic mobility, credit transfer (ECTS), the Diploma Supplement, the internationalization of the studies, efficiency and pragmatism in education. The major themes of the European debate regarding the policy reform, within the EUA conferences, comprise explicitly or implicitly the *idea of massification: Europe's universities beyond 2010 – diversity with a common purpose; The Governance of European Universities post 2010 – Mission Diversity, Autonomy and Accountability; The Governance of European Universities post 2010 – Enhancing Institutional Mission and Profiles; Inclusive and responsive universities – ensuring Europe's competitiveness; Facing Global Challenges: European strategies for Europe's universities; Internationalisation beyond Europe's frontiers: enhancing attractiveness through global Partnership and Cooperation; Investing Today in Talent for Tomorrow*. The UNESCO Regional Forum for higher education from Bucharest (2009) *Access, Value, Quality and Competitiveness* and the World Conference of UNESCO from Paris (2009) *New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research for societal change and development* considered the *higher education massification* among the priority topics.

#### **2.2.1. Massification on the social-human coordinate**

An essential coordinate of the higher education massification is the social-human coordinate. Within this context, higher education opens to society, towards ever broader and diversified social categories. The process aims to the broadening of the social access to the higher education experience, the increase of the social addressability of higher education.

Massification based on the social-human coordinate is substantiated on a philosophy and vision that place the university in the heart of society, as its core institution, area of training, knowledge and qualification. The university, the emblematic institution of higher education, has the mission to educate, train and qualify competent and professionalized personnel for the Knowledge-based Society and Economy. The developments from the European Union scene and worldwide, the fierce global economic competition have created a new

dynamic of the development of EU member states economies. The advance of technology, especially of ITC, has accelerated unprecedentedly the pace of economic and social change. Under these conditions, the strong and competitive economies base on the competent and qualified workforce. The training of human resources is the responsibility of higher education that thereby has to keep the pace with the labor market, economic and social environment demands. The stake of the higher education reform is represented by the transformation of HEIs in academic areas of quality, excellence, performance, competitiveness, innovation and creativity in education and research, with vocation towards the labor market.

The Knowledge-based Economy needs not only quality human resources, but also extensive ones from numerical point of view, to cover the requirements and needs of various branches of activity. By the Bologna Process, higher education has entered in a new phase of its addressability extension towards the society. In concrete terms, this horizontal extension is achieved by applying some humanist principles: equal access, social equity, gender equality, women's access, positive discrimination. By this philosophy, higher education has also opened to social categories that, traditionally, had no access to the university studies, towards the disadvantaged groups, the vulnerable communities, including from the rural areas, to minorities, immigrants, etc. In order to diversify and numerically increase the target audience, HEIs within the Bologna Process are undergoing a significant metamorphosis: they become **inclusive and responsive universities**. Such a transformation concerns the very mission of the universities which thereby are opening to the society and become more receptive, on the one hand, to the needs of the economic environments and, on the other hand, to the needs to train, qualify and professionalize of the society. The massification based on the social-human coordinate aims therefore to the increasing of the social access to higher education by the creation of an increased social basis from numerical point of view, qualified, competent and professionalized, to support the Knowledge-based Economy.

### **2.2.2. Massification on the temporal coordinate**

The process of higher education massification is performed also by the extension of its addressability beyond certain traditional temporal borders. Until this change of vision and mission, the university studies experience was regarding a certain age of the formation, after which the integration of graduates in their careers was following. The Bologna reform overcomes the temporal barriers of higher education, by the expansion and diversification of the educational offer of HEIs for all the age categories of the active population. A crucial concept of this philosophy is *lifelong learning*, which substantiates and develops, at the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) level, a first order necessity of the individual, of the society and economy: *the need for lifelong learning*. This need is manifested in the context of the economic and social evolutions, of the technological and economic progress, the continuing need for skilled human resources. Unprecedented social and economic dynamics requires the qualification and retraining necessity, the job change, the reorientation, the professional retraining, the reprofessionalization, the specialization and super-specialization etc. In this process, higher education has a pivotal role, as an area of continuing education, qualification and professionalization of the human resources. Therefore, HEIs must meet the requirements of the economy and society by a studies offer that can open the possibility of continuous training for all the active age groups on the labor market. This institutional feedback is achieved by the diversification of the studies programs, the adaptation of the training offer to the needs of a target-audience more numerous and more diversified.

*European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning*, a fundamental document of the reform policies within the Bologna Process, published under the auspices of EUA in 2008, identifies a series of action strategies for universities (*embedding concepts of widening access and lifelong learning in their institutional strategies; providing education and learning to a diversified student population; adapting study programmes to ensure that they are designed to widen participation and attract returning adult learners etc.*). All these action directions form the development framework of the new vision of higher education, which, by the *lifelong learning* concept and process, promotes *learning as a continuous process* during the entire life. The expanding of education and training within HEIs based on the temporal coordinate, along the active existence of the target audience, an extended and diversified audience, is representing an essential element of higher education massification process.

### **2.2.3. Massification on the educational coordinate**

Higher education massification involves significant changes at the level of *the content of the study programs and of the development forms of the educational process*. Regarding *the study programs*, the Bologna Process has generated major changes of the university training period by the reorganization of it in the three cycles: Bachelor's Degree, Masters's Degree and PhD Degree. The meaning of this reorganization is to make the education process efficient, by a logical and coherent execution of the study cycles, by assuming some different missions for each of them, to transform it into a pragmatic experience, related to reality and the labor market, advanced and competitive. Bologna studies structure is a pyramidal one: the base is formed by the Bachelor cycle, followed by the specialization by Master and the elite experience of the doctoral studies, a form of super-specialization and excellence research. The massification process acts mainly at Bachelor level and, to a degree, at the Master level. In this spirit, HEIs have diversified the programs of study, by approaching new specializations required by the economy and the labor market. The European Qualifications Framework and the National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education in Romania provides a suggestive picture of the specializations diversification and, by those, of the fields of study. The coverage of knowledge through the study

programs has expanded, tending to be a *comprehensive* one, so as Bachelor and Master cycle to become a major area of training, of acquisition of skills and competencies in order to qualify the graduates and to introduce them into the labor market. One can speak thus, at this level, about the **curriculum massification** of higher education, as its reaction mode to the challenges and the necessities of the Knowledge-based Economy. Also to the curriculum massification are subsumed the inter and transdisciplinary approaches within the process of teaching / learning, and Bologna tools such as: the academic mobility, the transferable credits, the Diploma Supplement and also the internationalization of studies. It must be also underlined that in the area of curriculum and educational massification enter also **the studies, training, qualification or new specialization, postgraduate programs, that can be assimilated to the lifelong learning process**, new programs, *atypical*, if they are reported to the university offer tradition, but still held under the auspices of the university.

Massification also concerns the development forms of the education process. In the same time with the conceptual and system openings achieved by the Bologna Process and with the substantial contribution of the technological progress, HEIs have diversified the education forms, the teaching-learning modes within the educational process. Thus, as an alternative to day learning, the *distance learning* has developed, being a form of education by which higher education expands its addressability towards new social, professional and age categories, facilitating their access to the academic training experience. As a support for distance learning, there have been created the *e-learning platforms* that are facilitating the access of the students to the training process, thereby being an exceptionally utility tool within massification. Another development modality of the educational process is represented by the *online education*, which also plays a leading role in increasing access to higher education.

### 2.3. An institution of massification: the inclusive and responsive university

Within the process of higher education massification, the university is undergoing a metamorphosis regarding its mission and objectives: from an elite institution, it becomes one of the extended access, that opens its doors to broader and more diversified categories of students. The university, as we have seen, opens both its *real doors* and *virtual doors*, descending from its elitist sphere to the reality, towards all the social categories, towards nontraditional publics, including the disadvantaged, vulnerable, minority groups, etc. Therefore, in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) it is increasingly used the concept of **Open University**, that takes benefit of all the ITC gains, of e-learning and online support to address the public. In the same spirit, at the level of the EUA policies, within the Bologna Process, there has emerged a new institutional profile of the university, a *new university*, with a changed mission, adapted to the today's requirements of the Knowledge Society: **the inclusive and responsive university**, which integrates in the *massification paradigm* of higher education. It is the university that includes in its space increasingly large and diversified categories of students, meaning **the university of the extended and open access**, and, in the same time, **the university directly connected to the reality**, that receives the social, economic, technological challenges, the challenges of the education, research, science and knowledge evolution and responds to those by adapting and adjusting the educational offer, the studies, training, qualification programs, etc.

Within the context of this institutional change, it can be taken into account a wider metamorphosis, at conceptual and even nominal level, that has in the center the pivotal institution of the higher education: the translation from **university** to **university**, that expresses the change of paradigm and mission of HEIs. In other terms, the university becomes, following the process of massification of higher education, an area of academic diversity from many points of view: social, educational, cultural, mental, studies programs, specializations, skills, qualifications, research programs, professional courses, etc. This transformation takes place taking into account the idea that a larger and different population must have access to the university studies, a national and international target audience, in order that the academic offer to extend nationally and across borders, in the context of the internationalization of studies, based on a tough competition on all levels.

By the vision promoted by the Bologna reform, higher education affirms its *support role of the Knowledge-based Economy and Society, as an engine of the sustainable development* that offers a new definition to the mission of the universities in the third millennium.

## 3. MASSIFICATION: OPENINGS, BENEFITS, RISKS

In the context of the metamorphosis that higher education is passing through the Bologna reform, *the passage from the elite's model to the massification's paradigm*, it is important to analyze which are **the openings and the benefits** it brings to the academic education and to the scientific research, on the one hand, but also the **risks** involved by such a change, on the other hand. It must also be seen, in the broader picture of this transformation, if and to what extent the massification *affects* the meaning and the mission of the university, the way they were established in the higher education tradition, that has in the center **the university as an elite institution and a place for elites**.

### 3.1. Massification - from university "literacy" to specialization

The massification process, by its three major instances discussed above, presents a number of *openings and benefits* for higher education and its target audience. The benefits generated by the massification can be classified into three main categories: *social, educational, economic*.

**The social benefits** are generated by the fact that the massification process broadens the access to higher education towards more diversified groups of the society, including here also those non-traditional, the communities and the disadvantaged, vulnerable, minority groups etc. This way it occurs a **democratization of the access** to the experience of the academic studies, including by the positive discrimination, a transformation that involves a series of values and moral principles, in the spirit of **the new humanism** that defines or should define the today's age of globalizing Europe and world. The fact that, based on a new education philosophy, the universities are opening their doors, using also the support of technology, represents, in terms of these values, an act of social justice that has historical dimension. In this spirit, each individual has access to academic education and opportunities to qualify and professionalize for a future career, to develop his or her potential. Massification creates the setting for comprehensive *university "literacy"* and for *specialization* by the developing of skills and competences required for the qualification in the labor market.

Regarding the **educational benefits** by massification, in the vision and shape promoted by the Bologna Process, the university education records a series of innovations and openings as a process and system. Under the conditions of the increase of addressability and of the broadening of the social access, higher education is developing at the level of the structure and of the content. It can be taken into account a *diversification and expansion of the curriculum*, developed on the structures of the Bologna studies, along the three cycles, but also in the setting of the *lifelong learning* process, that includes a variety of educational shapes and offers. The logic of this development in relation to the increasing of the social access is a simple one: to meet the needs of a diversity of students, the university, as a place of education and research, as a pole of knowledge, must continuously expand, diversify and adapt its studies programs and the educational offer, in a permanent feedback process to the requirements of a rapidly changing society. This **curriculum development and diversification** is a beneficial phenomenon for the training process and, in general, for the act of knowledge. Also within the reform, built on the paradigm of massification, by the restructuring of the studies, by the curriculum expansion and diversification, by the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches, the higher education is opening more to knowledge, in a new, comprehensive approach.

Massification of higher education also generates a number of **economic benefits**, under the philosophy that supports the Bologna reform. According to it, academic education has as a fundamental purpose the training of the skills and the competencies of the students, for the qualification and the professional introduction of the graduates into the labor market. Higher education is, in this view, a source of competent and qualified personnel for the economic environment. By massification, by the social implications of this process, the expansion and the diversification of the university audience lead to a numerical increase of the qualified personnel for the labor market, to the broadening of the recruitment base of the human resources and of the talents for various fields and specializations. Higher education, through the inclusive and responsive universities, becomes thereby the support of the Knowledge-based Economy and Society, the engine of the sustainable development. Massification makes higher education more flexible and receptive to social and economic needs, brings it closer to reality, develops the vital relationship between the university and the labor market, places the university in the heart of society, as an institution with the doors open to all, a space of education, of scientific research, but also of training, qualification, specialization for the professions from the labor market. It is obvious that a personnel qualified according to the higher education standards will conduct a quality professional activity, obtain the results and the performances desired by the employer, increase business efficiency and competitiveness in the field, in an economic area defined by competition, governed by a desire for domination and supremacy of the competitors. The massified higher education, in this philosophy terms, thereby brings major benefits to the economy that is being built by help of knowledge, provides a durable, sustainable and dynamic development.

### **3.2. The risks of massification**

Massification of higher education also carries a series of risks. This refers to important risks that threaten to impair the essence and the mission of the university education. The transition from the **elite's paradigm** to the education **massification's paradigm** generates risks in the field of the **quality and efficiency of the studies**.

#### **3.2.1. Massification of quality and the risk of mediocrization**

By definition, if we go back to the origins and to its history of almost a millennium, the university is a privileged domain, *belonging to the elites*, and not to the many. The concept itself of **higher education** expresses the idea of a **superior level** of approaching knowledge, associated to quality and excellence in education and research. By massification, as we have seen, the education expands its addressability and access towards various categories from social, material, mental, cultural, spiritual, ethnical point of view etc. The university opens its doors, it becomes the **inclusive and responsive university**, the **open university** of the Knowledge's Society and Economy. In the original and traditional design of the elitist conception, represented in a pyramidal structure, higher education, seen as the space of elite, is occupying the upper part of it. In the massification model the ratio is reversed, the focus descending from the top to the base of the pyramid.

This revolutionary **paradigm shift** is launching a series of **important challenges** to the quality of university education. First, the widening of access to universities associates with the flexibilization of the selection processes for admission, their formalization or even cancellation. The university audience is no longer the result of a rigorous selection, often harsh, but the result of the *open access*. Therefore, it is a heterogeneous audience,

from different backgrounds, having different levels of education and knowledge. The diversity may have implications on the level of approach of the teaching-learning process, on the criteria used in evaluation. This way, there is the risk of lowering the standards and criteria within the tendency to adapt the education and training act to the diversity of the audience, a tendency, ultimately, of *homogenization of knowledge*. There is also the danger that the university adapts itself, accordingly to its new target audience, adjust its curricula according to the students' knowledge level, instead of imposing high standards of approach for the academic education. Massification of higher education brings the idea of *compromise* with regard to the approaches level from the instructive-educational process and the quality of the studies. The *risk of lowering the higher education towards an average level* is one that should be taken into account. From the condition of *average higher education*, which reflects a contradiction in terms, but at the same time a real danger, to the *mediocre education*, there is only one step. It is a risk - the **risk of mediocrization through massification** - and a compromise in the tendency of higher education and of the university to address to more and more diverse and extended social categories. In this context, massification of higher education may involve such a severe phenomenon as **massification of quality**. Another risk associated with it, and even causally linked to massification of quality, is represented by **the massification of the didactic staff**. This latter risk appears on the background of the higher education massification, in all the forms and coordinates discussed above, of the expansion and diversification of the target audience, when also the need for academics increases. **The massification at the teaching staff level** can appear under the conditions of relaxation and relativization of the access standards in the academic career, and particularly threatens the new appeared HEIs, especially in the private education. Massification of quality represents a major threat, the most important in the order of severity, that threatens higher education within the massification process.

### 3.2.2. The institutional inflation, massification and the quality crisis in Romanian higher education

All the risks generated by massification at European level are also available for Romanian higher education, noting that they act in a context defined by aggravating circumstances.

Given the conditions of its development, the dynamics of the system after 1990 has led to the proliferation of the number of public and private universities and to an unprecedented diversity of them. The proliferation of HEIs, both state and private, of the programs and study offers generated a *hard competition, not always positive*, at the system level, in the rush of the universities for students. The strong arguments, that some of them brought before the audience, were the resigning to any principle and mechanism of selection for the admission, small fees and low standards within the instructive-educational process, waiving the exigency. The liberalization of access, the abandoning of exigency, the decrease of quality gained momentum also on the background of *the diversification of the forms of university education*, namely by *the developing of the distance learning and of the territorial centers*. The lowering of the standards by some HEIs also forced the other universities to open themselves to such *compromises*, to liberalize the admission examination or even abandon it, to provide tuition fee education, generating a sort of chain reaction. It is a **compromise with the quality of higher education**, with the university's mission and status. In the space of Romanian higher education, **the tax** has become **an instrument of massification**. In other words, the universities have widely opened their doors to the public, towards all the social categories, the only condition for access being, in some cases, the tax payment. Massification understood as such leads to the *mediocrization of higher education*, to its transformation into **mass education**. In these circumstances, the university becomes a formal space, having the purpose and mission changed.

Under the conditions of a defining phenomenon for the Romanian university system, associated to massification, **the institutional inflation**, higher education is facing several risks: *the lowering of the instructive-educational process, the massification of quality, the massification of the didactic staff, the superficial and inefficient training*. **Massification as mediocrization** represents a threat hanging over higher education in Romania. These risks do not apply to *the entire Romanian university system* and to all the HEIs. There are prestigious universities in Romania, consecrated by time and tradition, as well as newer ones, public and private, developing quality, performance and excellence in education and research.

## 4. THE MODEL OF ELITE IN THE MASSIFICATION CONTEXT: A CHALLENGE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

The opening to the society through massification of higher education represents a beneficial process from social point of view. But, beyond the social and economic advantages of this opening, the university should not be **open to compromises** regarding the quality of the studies. But there is a *risk of the open access*, a risk that the universities should consider and avoid. **The open access**, based on humanistic principles and values - belonging to the new contemporary humanism - should not mean **unlimited access, uncontrolled and uncensored access** by any criterion. There cannot be made quality, efficient and competitive education without some *exigency criteria* within the educational process. The institutional quality depends directly on the quality and performances of the educational process. The university must not fall into mediocrity. At the same time, *massification of higher education* must not determine its transformation into **mass education**. The very notion of higher education reflects a value judgment, an axiological ranking, by definition, in a pyramidal structure, in the elite area.

#### 4.1. Quality, efficiency and performance - the sustainable model of the higher education development in the era of massification and globalization

The university bears the institutional memory of its academic tradition: *memory of elite*. Today, in Europe and in the world, the universities are classified into several categories. In the Romanian university education area, the National Education Law provides the classification of universities into three categories: education, research and education, advanced research and education. It is a classification governed by axiological criteria, but also pragmatic, in the name of efficiency and competitiveness, that takes into account the capacity of the institutions to produce quality and performance in education, to develop excellence in the scientific research. Such a ranking regarding the HEIs favors the returning of the university to the idea of elite space and elite knowledge, of the *higher education* framework in the genuine meaning of the word, of the cutting-edge research, an environment of great ideas, of creativity and innovation, as there were the major universities in history.

How can be prevented *the risk of mediocrization through massification*? By open access, but through a *continuous selection process*, throughout the studies, by rigorous evaluation and selection criteria. The ranking of the universities is a useful and necessary process that rearranges the universities in an axiological order, gives massification a constructive purpose, or tries to eliminate the risk of mediocrization. By ranking, the open access to education is provided by the education universities, which form the broadest support of massification. The access to the higher stages involves a selection process of the students, according to their knowledge level and capacity.

The ranking should be regarded from two perspectives: the one of the HEIs and the one of the audience composed of students. Fundamentally, the classification of universities into three categories represents a certification and a consecration of the vocation and of their institutional capacity to produce quality and performance in education and research. On the other hand, the ranking of the universities determines a selection, a restructuring in the diversified audience through massification of higher education. It takes place a process of harmonization, restructuring and reordering of higher education from the double perspective of HEIs and of the students. It can be the solution by which massification can develop itself, until a certain level, without compromising the quality, mission, status and image of higher education. At the same time, through ranking, higher education maintains and develops its role of academic education and elite research space.

The Bologna reform proposes the paradigm shift in higher education through *the reform of quality*. The quality of education represents the foundation of this change, the support of a metamorphosis essential for the efficiency of higher education in the Knowledge Society and in the global competition among the world economies. In this process, **the European and national agencies for quality assurance in Higher Education – in Romania, ARACIS** – have a **key mission**, of paramount importance. In the context of massification, the chance of higher education is represented by *quality in education, performance in scientific research, creativity and innovation* at the level of both areas of education. *Quality* is the model by which the university can maintain, adapt and develop its *elite status of space of elites and elite knowledge*, achieve the objectives of its new mission, of first order in the edification of the Knowledge Society and Economy. Massification of higher education must be developed around the *quality model* as a *conceptual core of the new paradigm*. In this way, HEIs do not betray their vocation and the original meaning of their existence, they maintain their status of *higher education, higher* also in axiological sense, i.e. belonging to the elite education, training, research, and create all the prerequisites to achieve their mission objectives in the spirit of efficiency, performance and competitiveness.

#### 4.2. The future of higher education from the European perspective: The Declaration of Aarhus

The EUA Conference in Aarhus (Denmark, April 2011), *Investing Today in Talent for Tomorrow*, ended with *The Declaration of Aarhus*, a document that identifies the priorities and coordinates of the European higher education reform in the following period until 2020. All these directions are conceived within the Bologna reform and the massification process. The first direction is *Widening access and increasing capacity to respond to the needs of more diverse student populations*, a priority that synthesizes, from the access and institutional perspectives, the massification philosophy and process. This indicates that the **massification process** remains **one of the Bologna reform priorities**, with its fundamental elements: the broadening of the social access to a more diversified audience, the transformation of HEIs in inclusive and responsive universities to meet the continuous needs and challenges of the society and economy in the age of Knowledge.

## CONCLUSIONS

### From the Medieval University to the Global University

If the *medieval university*, beginning with Bologna, is one of the elite in the double meaning: the one of the social elite and the one of the elite knowledge, *the postmodern university* or *the global university* is a massified one. The massification process, seen in all its social, human, educational complexity, is a *necessary* and *unavoidable* one in the age of Knowledge-based Economy. Its **necessity** consists in the fact that the today's world needs more than ever, in all areas of activity, skilled human resources at the highest standards of competence and in a larger number. The development of economy, the competition on European and global level

need increasingly larger, competent, specialized and efficient human forces. In the context of the Knowledge-based Society and of globalization, massification of higher education is, at the same time, an **inevitable process**. Academic education and scientific research, under a close connection with the labor market and the Knowledge Economy, can no longer be limited as addressability to an elite audience. The today's developments require the entire society to have access to education in all its forms, developed through the process of massification.

The necessary and inevitable character of massification of higher education must not diminish the essential role of quality and excellence in education and research. On the contrary, though, conceptually, **the elite education** and **the massified education** seem notions in complete contradiction, the two terms must act synergistically in the edification of the new paradigm of education from today and tomorrow. In other words, the elite and the massification do not exclude each other, but require, as complementary terms, as two instances of a big complexity phenomenon, with outstanding stake: higher education. It is true that the knowledge-based Economy needs *a base as expanded as possible of qualified human resources*, a mission that today goes to the massification process. But equally true is that in order to be qualified, competent and competitive, the human resources need quality education. The institution that must ensure this training is the university. Within these data, the university must remain an institution of quality, excellence, performance and competitiveness of the academic education and scientific research, *an elite institution* in terms of knowledge. The **viable model** of the university's existence in the XXI century, in the knowledge society and in the world of globalization, is **the one of the elite**. The university of the Knowledge Society is an **Elite University**, *within a massified higher education*. The difference is that the meaning of the elite concept transfers from the social area in the knowledge area. Despite the paradoxical combination of terms, this way we can speak about **the elite University, inclusive and responsive**, as **a pillar of the massified higher education**, open to all human areas and categories of the society. The only chance of existence of the University in the era of globalization, under the conditions of an unprecedented competition, often by all means, the only chance of edification of the Knowledge-based Economy and Society is represented by **the quality education and training**, using all the scientific results of the cutting-edge research, a process possible only in an **elite knowledge space**.

Within these data, the metamorphosis of higher education in the Knowledge Society and in the age of globalization is not a paradoxical and contradictory one, as it might seem. It affirms a *new model, possible and necessary: the massified higher education, following high quality and exigency standards, developed in a reformed society, adapted to the challenges and needs of today's society and economy, globally competitive*. It is the only chance for the higher education to maintain its status and prestige; it is also the university's only chance to carry on its mission and vocation, at the highest standards, in continuing its great elitist and academic tradition. It is a tough challenge, but not an impossible one, pleading for a **new model of university**, in a new setting, to support the knowledge-based development of the globalized world.

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