

## Knowledge Transfer in Romanian Higher Education

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**Abstract.** *The purpose of this paper is to explore the process of knowledge transfer in Romanian Higher Education Organizations by focusing on aspects of leadership. The current economic and social contexts are under a process of transformation. Educational institutions make no exception, as they must adapt to the changing demands of the market if they want to survive. Concepts such as education massification, competitive advantage of universities, quality assurance, university performance are widely discussed nowadays. All in all, universities are knowledge organizations that are one of the key drivers of innovation, development, leadership and research, as they create and transfer knowledge. An organization's ability to communicate, share and innovate is critical in order to meet the challenges of the knowledge society. Starting from this general background, the present paper explores the characteristics and behaviors necessary for an effective leadership in Higher Education Organizations through a series of interviews with leaders in the academia.*

**Keywords:** knowledge transfer, knowledge economy, higher education system, leadership

### Introduction

For a long time teaching and research – in that exact order - have been the pillars of university development. Nowadays, universities are under a state of transformation, as they need to embrace and introduce a diversified system based on collaboration, innovation and promotion of competencies. Although these worldwide discussed concepts representing the core characteristics of the knowledge society are generally positive they bring into debate the struggle of universities for expansions not only in terms of number of students, or of geographical areas from where those students are drawn, but also in terms of the social prestige of their teaching and research staff, prestige that is

materialized in income and influence. There is a current need for excellence in education in order to meet the challenges posed by the knowledge society. This fact has been evident for the last decade starting with the EU's target set out in 2000 by the European Council in Lisbon, of the need for Europe to become "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" (Mora & Vieira, 2009, p. 79).

In emerging economies, particularly in Romania, this process of change has been more painful and less evident because of obvious historic reasons: for the last half century the system has been somewhat isolated due to both ideological reasons and financial ones. However, at present, the Romanian higher education system is under great pressure as the current reality and the economic context require a reconsideration of its role and structure. This happens alongside the pressures most education systems in the world have to face because of the challenges raised by the knowledge society and globalization, as knowledge transfer becomes a 'third pillar' in addition to teaching and research (Gorzka, 2012). The present paper operates on the assumptions that universities are knowledge organizations that transfer knowledge to society. However, knowledge in itself has no worth. It is the strategic use of knowledge that enables organizations to achieve or even surpass their goals (Phipps & Prieto, 2012). For this reason, it is important to analyze whether Romanian universities develop and encourage strategies or reforms in order to become more competitive in the current knowledge based society. In addition, the paper investigates whether these assumptions are realistic for the Romanian reality and what is the role of leadership when it comes to encouraging knowledge transfer processes.

### **Defining terms and establishing meanings**

For a better understanding of the current society it is useful to analyze the language and clarify the terms that are being used to describe it. Concepts such as *global village*, *post-industrial society*, *information society/age*, *knowledge society* are frequently used in reference with the society we live in. Basically, they describe our diverse and complex reality, which is the state of development of the human society at the beginning of the third millennium. The idea behind those concepts is intended to underline this specific fact, as, presently, we witness a change in mankind's progress. Moreover, nowadays the emphasis is put on intangible assets those that represent the main factors

for any organization's success. Hence, not the tangible assets, but assets such as knowledge, credibility, visibility are recognized to be strategically significant factors for a promising market.

McLuhan's *global village* was used as a comparison for the contraction of the world, due to technology, to the size of a village where everybody knows everybody else and news travels almost instantaneously. It seems that the term *post-industrial society* has become popular after it was conceptualized in Daniel Bell's highly influential book *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* which was published in 1973. Though the term has been used before and the features that Bell assigns to the new type of society have also been analyzed before, it was Bell's approach that placed the term into the mainstream of public discourse in various fields, from sociology to cultural studies, from business and economics to politics among others. "The roots of post-industrial society lie in the inexorable influence of science on productive methods" (Bell, 1976, p. 378) and society itself is based on service rather than manufacturing, the generator of value and therefore wealth being knowledge and information. Bell himself used the term *information society*, but the term became truly widespread in the 90s alongside the development of the World Wide Web and information and communication technologies. Ambrosi, Peugeot and Pimienta (2005, pp. 39-40) underline the strong ideological component of the term *information society* as a political and ideological construct that developed under the direction of neo-liberal *globalization in strong contrast to the concept of post-industrial society which in Bell's view was becoming less and less ideological. Very broadly the term information society may conjure up two major images: the digital divide, with the ever growing gaps between the rich and the poor, and the "friendly" globalization through the World Wide Web, mobile and international telephoning, satellite TV etc. Globalisation is perceived to be offering great opportunities for all organizations, as they have access to a large marketplace for selling goods or even acquiring knowledge. This fact is evident for the educational process as well, and it underlined even at the end of the last century by Peter Drucker (Forbes, 1997) who stated that "Already we are beginning to deliver more lectures and classes off campus via satellite or two-way video at a fraction of the cost. The college won't survive as a residential institution."*

The term *knowledge society* started to be used mainly by academics at the beginning of the 90s when a lot of interest developed in the management of knowledge as well, which started to become a field of study in itself.

That academics became interested in what initially was a management problem of business organizations is both understandable and predictable: knowledge creation, particularly of the theoretical type, is one of the main issues in any university's mission statement. And with the advancement of human society into the post-industrial era the type of knowledge that is a driver of development is mainly theoretical knowledge, based on abstraction and principles, as being more easily codified and turned into processes and frameworks for action (Bell, 1999, pp. 187-199). This trend has been growing not only towards research and development activities in business, but has become increasingly important in social, cultural and political contexts as well (in architecture, medicine, formulation of government policies, etc.).

Furthermore, these concepts (*global village, information age, knowledge society*) are in close connection to the *knowledge transfer* term. The fast development of the internet and related technologies has made available new tools and techniques with the potential for use in knowledge transfer. As such, the rapid and complex changes that have taken place in the last half a century have a huge impact on the role of universities that now face the pressures of massification, of the commercialization of research.

The term knowledge transfer has various meanings depending on the contexts in which it is used. The present paper takes a broad view on the concept of knowledge transfer using it for both new and common knowledge. Echoing Agrawal (2001) we think that new knowledge may be "the free publication of ideas in refereed scientific publications", but also the knowledge transferred by teaching staff through mentoring their students' research, or through giving conference presentations, or patented or licensed knowledge produced in university labs and considered to be the most valuable due to its assumed significant impact on the rate of economic growth, though they represent only a "relatively small channel for the transfer of knowledge out of the university". Common knowledge is contained in textbooks and taught to students by teaching staff in regular classes. Figure 1 illustrates the many channels through which knowledge is transferred from universities and the perception of their relative value for academics. What is worth underlining in the diagram besides the expected weight carried by publication and consultancy work is the perception of conversations and collaborative research as having a value for knowledge creation. In other words the meaningful interaction of faculty, where co-supervision may be added as well, is important in knowledge creation, though difficult to capture and quantify.

### Perception of Relative Importance of Knowledge Channels (n=68)

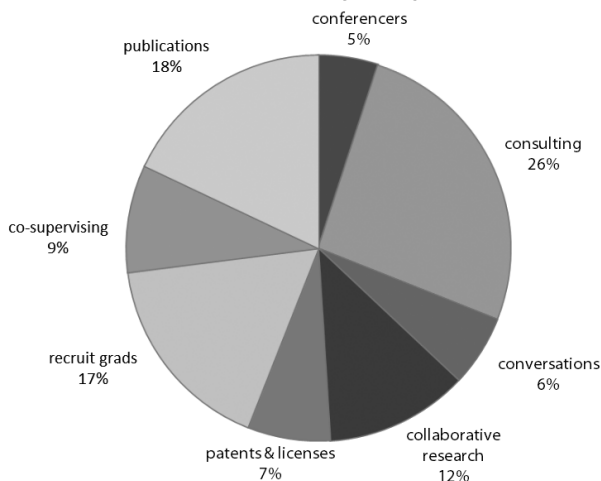


Figure 1. Faculty perceptions of relative importance of knowledge channels (Agrawal, 2001, p. 23)

What is usually referred to as *knowledge transfer* is in the view of Johannesson (2008, p. 2) a complex of “methods and structures to make universities in Sweden more professional, with regard to cooperation with enterprises and other actors in the surrounding society, as well as in valorisation of knowledge and commercialisation of research outcome”. Johannesson (2008, p. 14) considers that there are six categories in which universities operate knowledge transfer and collaboration: *collaborative research*, *commissioned research*, *commissioned education*, *undergraduate education*, *postgraduate education* and *commercialization*.

How effective are universities, as knowledge intensive organizations, to transfer knowledge along those six channels highlighted by Johannesson? To answer this question we will refer to the positions of various international researchers on this issue.

Loh, Tang, Menkhoff and Chay (2003, p. 22) point out that knowledge is no longer the exclusive domain of universities. Public organisations, industry and think tanks contribute through direct production or co-production to knowledge creation. As university research becomes increasingly an outcome of *collaborative dialogues* between researchers and the researcher’s target audience and sponsors, there is a trend towards more participative research

involving many actors and experts who act less according to the patterns of their original fields and more according to the objectives of problem solving. “This may mean that academics may have to be away from the university, working in teams, with experts from a wide range of intellectual backgrounds, in a variety of organisational settings. Researchers must adopt a different set of research practices to participate in cross-industry collaborative knowledge sharing.” The case study presented by Loh et al. (2003) refer to the *Singapore Management University* which increasingly uses knowledge management in the area of research with reportedly encouraging results.

Oosterlinck (2003, p. 3), a former rector of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, considers that a modern university is characterized by the *co-existence* of the following fundamental elements: *knowledge creation*, *knowledge dissemination*, *education* and *academic service to society* meant in the narrower sense of the process of transferring university knowledge to society at large, including the economic world. *Education* is that fundamental value through which the knowledge created by research is spread among university students together with the whole complex of attitude formation, value transfer, skills training etc. From the point of view of *service to society* knowledge transfer means the most efficient contact between university research results and possible applications in the economic life. The link between university research and the business world promises fertile “cross-pollination” with the economy receiving valuable input, which can generate added value and new jobs, and the university getting additional income and valuable feedback, which, in turn, can be used to improve research results, or to start completely new research. Moreover, this is also very beneficial to students who become familiar with the culture of business and industry allowing them to become better equipped to take up jobs after graduation. Oosterlinck (2003) exemplifies this service with the *Leuven Research and Development* unit which is the knowledge and technology transfer office of the university and was set up in 1972 to function as a go-between and a market-place, connecting business with the world of research, and also as an active broker of research results, looking for ways to commercialize them.

### **Universities as knowledge organizations: leadership and knowledge transfer**

Although, universities have always been involved in the creation of knowledge since their inception, never have they faced the challenges they are facing today. Universities no longer live in their long, traditional isolation, as they

have a responsibility to society, which expects something in return for the privileges it has granted them. Therefore, the role of universities seems to be changing, but the whole complexity of the change is still fuzzy and the direction difficult to foresee. Nevertheless, in order to implement change, particularly of a systemic type, it is critical to have a leadership that is not only professional in the sense of having good managerial competences, but also trained in the best practices and most current approaches to leadership worldwide. Leadership is one of the most publicly debated issues in post-communist Romania, however much less researched from an academic point of view.

In addition, today's knowledge society is more and more dependent on universities or higher education institutions for both the individual development of individuals as citizens and for the development of various types of communities, including nations. There are obvious societal changes from a collective world which appreciated critical and independent thinking towards a world in which universities have to meet the values of the market and of the economy. In the old corporate world, individual knowledge meant power. But in the new corporate economy, a person's value is not only given by what he or she knows, but by how easily and successfully he or she shares it. This triggers the need of a different type of education that aims not only at the accumulation of chunks of knowledge, but at acquiring and developing competences.

### **Romanian higher education system: a brief overview**

The Romanian higher education system has suffered many transformations. Most authors agree that there have been four periods of reform: a) between 1990 – 1995 the initial *reparatory reforms* had been meant to clear the curriculum from its heavily political components and to introduce subjects or even study programmes that had been forbidden under the communist regimes (the faculties of sociology, psychology and international business were re-opened in the early nineties); b) between 1995 – 2002 the *first wave of systemic reforms* took place in Romania aiming at developing higher education and research mainly based on programmes financed by the World Bank and by Phare and managing to put in place real autonomy for universities; c) between 2002 – 2009 there have been only fragmented changes triggered by the Bologna process and the period came to be known as the *missing opportunities period*; d) the period starting with 2009 is considered to be the *second wave of systemic reforms* in Romania. The higher education reforms in Romania



can be looked upon from three different but overlapping perspectives: from a broad European perspective set by the Bologna process, from the perspective of one of the member states of the European Union and from the Romanian own national perspective. The EU's stated strategic goal for the next decade is "to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" (European Commission, 2003).

The reforms of the second wave, the ones that are being implemented at present, are financed through the structural funds that the European Union gives to newly accepted members to support them to try and reach the level of development of older members.

The five strategic projects that were financed through the European Social Fund during 2008 – 2011 are: *Quality and Leadership for Romanian Higher Education*, *Doctorate in Centers of Excellence*, *Doctoral Studies in Romania – Organisation of the Doctoral Schools*, *Improving University Management* and *National Student Enrollment Registry Project*. The ongoing projects (2011-2014) are: *Quality and Diversity in Higher Education System*, *Performance for Higher Education System and Higher Education Quality Assurance through Empowering and Auditing*. The main goal for the first project is to meet the demands and needs of the national system of higher education by organizing an international evaluation exercise. The second project is intended to improve the management and to assure the quality of the Romanian higher educational system by consolidating its strategic capacity and empowering the universities. On the long run the project wants to grow the capacity of the Romanian universities in terms of contributing to the country's economic and social development. The third project has as its main purpose to shape and develop both individuals working in management structures and students in terms of understanding the auditing and empowering processes. The project guarantees a qualitative higher education system and sustainable evaluation instruments for teaching staff and research.

The existence of the above projects, the large participation of academics and a large range of stakeholders of the Romanian higher education system as well as the contribution of international consultants offer cautionary optimistic expectations that the implementation of these projects will align higher education to the international standards of quality and will meaningfully prepare it for the increasing competition on the global education markets. Optimistic as the costs of those projects, both financially and particularly in



terms of human investment, are high and therefore offer a good promise for delivering results, but also cautionary as the academic community has been traditionally sceptical to change which is seen rather cosmetic and adaptive, not systemic. The present economic situation has added to the already difficult state of the funding of the Romanian education system in general.

### **Romanian higher education and knowledge transfer – a qualitative approach**

For the research for the present article we have used a qualitative methodology based on two reasons. First, issues related to higher education, mainly to its leadership, tend to be very fuzzy and difficult to capture because the education system in Romania needs both to be reformed, with all the painful issues that reform entails, and also to deliver the excellent results expected by society which in general expects a lot from its higher education with very little concern for the investments into the system and the time necessary for the yielding of results. Second, the convenience of the existence of a body of research consisting of a number of interviews with rectors and deans of Romanian and international universities that was part of the doctoral research of one of the authors and has not been used and interpreted from this perspective.

The main research question was: *What are some attributes or behaviours characteristic of effective leadership in higher education nowadays when financial constraints have become so severe?*

In order to answer this broad question a series of interviews have been conducted using two types of questionnaires – one for the Romanian participants and one for the international ones. Twenty-two respondents participated in the research, out of which fourteen Romanian and eight international, from the United Kingdom (the Open University, London), the Russian Federation (Saint Petersburg State University of Economics and Finance), France (Paris-Dauphine), USA (California State University of San Bernardino) and Australia (University of Melbourne, Monash University, Melbourne). The Romanian respondents were from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, the University of Bucharest, the West University of Timișoara, the Babeș-Bolyai University, the A.I.Cuza University in Iași and the Tomis University in Constanța.

In order to highlight what leaders in higher education today perceive as effective leadership and what the perceived needs for leadership training

in academia are the following specific questions have been used from the framework of the larger interview:

1. Which attributes or behaviours are in your opinion characteristic of effective leadership in higher education today?
2. Do you feel the need for specialized courses to develop leadership competences in higher education?
  - a. If not, why not?
  - b. If you do, what are the three crucial competences that should be covered in the course?
3. What, if anything, is your institution doing to train a new generation of university leaders? If there were such a project in your institution, who would be leading it? Why? What would your contribution to it be?

The answers to question number one were various and complex: from scientific prestige and appreciative intelligence to modesty, patience, communication abilities, mainly persuasion, integrity, creativity and innovation. The main two attributes, however, that have been underlined were the capacity to formulate a vision that the community can appropriate as its own (highlighted by ten out of the twenty-two respondents) and professional competence mainly explained as an understanding of the legal and economic environment of higher education today (seven out of twenty-two respondents), but also as the capacity to attract funding and manage financial matters confidently, but conservatively. It is obvious that if having a vision of the future of a community may be, and very often is, an intuitive process, formulating that vision effectively, in memorable and easily understandable terms, is nowadays the result of sophisticated communication techniques that need both training and, probably more importantly, appropriate budgets.

Professional competence is also best achieved through formal training. Question number three, referring to the need for specialized courses to develop leadership competences in higher education, was answered positively by the overwhelming majority of the respondents: nineteen out of twenty-two respondents, two respondents considering that there is no need for formal training as managerial competences (respondents choice of words) cannot be trained, they are inborn. As to the type of competences to be covered in those training sessions the answers of the Romanian respondents ranged from *subjects / disciplines* to be offered such as human resource management, strategic management and leadership in higher education, educational management, research management, organizational culture, strategic planning to *skills* and *competences* efficiency, adaptability, flexibility, holistic thinking and, under various forms, time management skills.

The answers to question three need a lengthy interpretation which goes beyond the scope of this paper. The main reason for this is the use of language by the interviewees, or in other words - terminology. The words used may be similar, but the realities that those words cover are definitely very different. However, the main conclusion is that in all the international universities that were part of the research leadership training is well established and done either by the human resource departments or by specialized, dedicated departments. For example, the University of Melbourne offers various trainings through its *Staff Development Centre* (<http://www.hr.unimelb.edu.au/pd/performance/pdf/process>) to support their staff to fully develop to achieve personal and professional goals, while the university also has set up a distinct unit, the *LH Martin Institute* (<http://www.lhmartininstitute.edu.au>), to train management and leadership both for the university staff and the larger tertiary education sector in Australia and New Zealand. In Romania novice leaders are trained in a rather diffuse manner, across departments and subjects, at best within training projects such as *Improving University Management* (<http://www.management-universitar.ro>), or are simply left to do their own professional development, which has been mostly the case so far.

## Conclusion

We can conclude that in the knowledge society higher education is one of the key drivers of development. Universities are expected not only to generate, but also to transfer knowledge to society. Their ability, as the ability of all other organizations, to communicate, share and innovate is critical in order to meet the challenges of the knowledge society. There is a need for meaningful change in the governance and leadership of the Romanian universities not only at the level of discourse, but also of practice, if they want to survive the present competitive and fast changing environment.

Universities need to get ready for the current technologic, social and economic challenges. They need to be both perceptive, responsive and responsible for the long term development of today's world. The Romanian higher education system should continue its reform in order to meet the demands of the knowledge society and therefore should reconsider its priorities regarding knowledge transfer through an increased awareness for the need for communication, transparency, innovation, high quality education and research. Part of those issues can only be accomplished through strategic investments in the Romanian higher education institutions.

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