The Educational Innovator

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The purpose of the hereby paper is to describe who bears or should bear the role of an educational innovator within the environment of higher education, as well as to emphasize the primary factors of motivation necessary to assume this role, by trying to compare and contrast the motivational scheme of the business innovator with that of the academic innovator. The research focuses on a combination of the individual dimension (individual motivators to be an innovator) and organizational dimension (creation of conditions to perform this role).

The paper is an essay that approaches both a theoretical and empirical view, thus trying to define the major groups or organizations currently involved in education restructuring as well as their impact. Moreover, it addresses new groups that should take part of this process and the potential outcomes of their involvement.

The main findings of the paper are a clear definition of the educational innovator, which can be used for any of the primary, secondary or post-secondary systems, as well as the current status of the higher education system in Romania and its barriers for innovation.

It is true that the process of innovation in the educational environment has become increasingly important within the last two decades. However, the innovative university is still a new field of research, especially taking into account that traditional universities have had no real competition until the burst of technology. Therefore, this paper comes to supplement this field of innovation within the educational environment.

Key words: educational innovator, business innovator, university, factors of motivation

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1. Why innovate the higher education system?

1.1 Reality of universities today

Motto: In tomorrow's world a nation's wealth will derive from its capacity to educate, attract, and retain citizens who are able to work smarter and learn faster—making educational achievement ever more important both for individuals and for society writ large. Margaret Spelling (2006)

It is true that not every individual can or should pursue a university. However, the economic security of every individual and its financial stability major relies on graduating one, or at least a post high-school educational institution.

However, not everyone has access to this tertiary system, either it is because of lack of information, lack of financial aid or pure lack of interest. But the beneficiaries of the system are not alone in this problem. The fact is that universities are now trying to cope with the future, by relying on what they did in the past. And since the future of the 21st century is very much different from the future they were used with, it is obvious that universities are not doing a great job.

However, as technology has evolved, it created on the market real competition for the universities, offering convenient courses at affordable prices and flexible timing. Historically, higher education has avoided such competitive disruption. There are several reasons for this past immunity. One is the power of prestige in the higher education marketplace, where the quality of the product is hard to measure. In the absence of comparable measures of what universities produce for their students, the well respected institutions have a natural advantage; because they have been admired in the past, they are presumed to be the best choice for the future(C. M. Christensen, H.J. Eyring, 2011:17).

The concept of Christensen, regarding innovative universities is also connected to the Third Generation University concept (Wissema, 2005) which specifies that "external and the internal landscapes of universities as well as their ambitions are changing in a fundamental way. Universities are used to accommodate new developments by adding, say, a new faculty for a scientific subject on the rise."

A global survey performed by United Nations this year shows the number one priority worldwide is to provide a good education. This is true also for Romania, where the voters chose this as a problem they

perceive for their reality.

1.2 University system in Romania

According to the European Commission, "Romania faces a major challenge in raising the quality of its education and training system. Early school is a significant challenge. Romania should implement its reforms whilst building up its administrative capacity. Tertiary education should be aligned with the needs of the labor market and improve access for disadvantaged people."- Europe 2020. We can observe below a statistic regarding the number of people that attain tertiary education, within age 30-34.
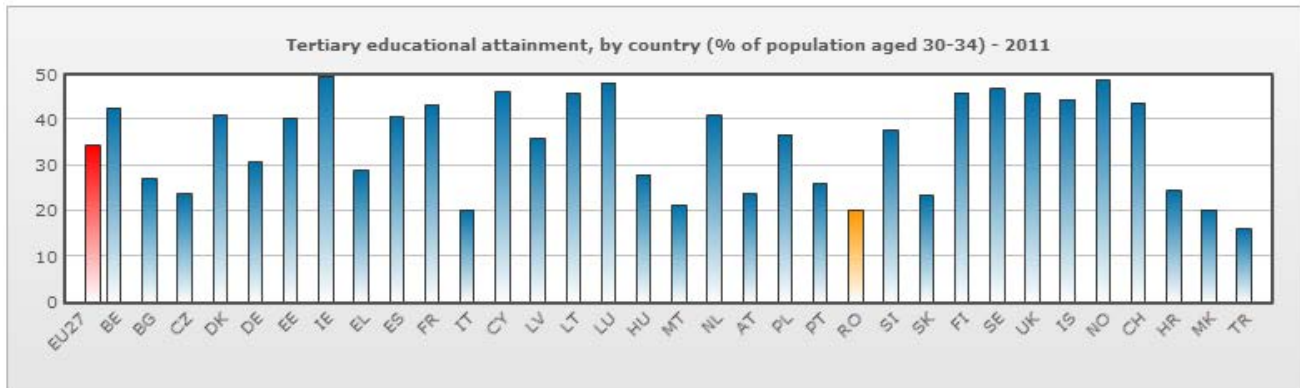

Table 1. Tertiary education by country
Source:http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/europe-2020-in-your-country/romania/progress-towards-2020-targets/index_en.htm

It is highly interesting that as a country, we reach a percentage that is less than half of those in Finland, Sweden or UK, countries that rank high regarding the standard of life quality. So can we find any link between them?

I believe we can. Just as stated previously, the tertiary system offers financial security. A reason for this is the fact that in a country where the private sector is increasingly growing and foreign investment funds look for educated labor force, only the universities can provide a solution for them.

Moreover, even if we refer to the most performing sectors of our country, industry and agriculture, people need to be specialized in order to cope with the new demands, have the necessary training and attract the available European funds.

Therefore, we can perceive the need for universities that understand the requests of the market, educate the future employees and behave as they should, as an engine for the economy.

1.3 Ranking

The quality of education, although hard to measure, is constantly monitored and evaluated worldwide. No matter that different variables are taken into account for each measurement, many groups of interest rely on these evaluations in order to make decisions, either we refer to government, parents, students or private companies.

Therefore, based on evaluations, the government empowers the universities that rank good, parents and students select them and private companies finance them. All these action finally translate in the power of those universities to open and finance new programs, create innovation incubators, support new start-ups and qualitative research.

The importance of the results and measurements are important not only for the power the universities to foster innovation but also to the social value that universities create. Either this social value relies in better educated people who have access to better employment, or high quality research that enhances the economic environment, the social benefits can be quantifiable and reliable.

THE (Times Higher Education), one of the most renowned magazines that evaluates the quality of education worldwide based on variables like teaching, research, citation or industry income (innovation), creates an annual ranking of the universities.

In 2013 report Romania doesn't have any university ranking in the top 400 worldwide.

Moreover, according to European Universities Association report under the Institutional Evaluation Program , only 12 of the universities in our country can be categorized as research intensive institutions, which are the best valued according to our government assessment.

Coming to support the educational system and enhance transparency, ARACIS, the Romanian Agency of Quality within the Higher Education System, performs annual assessments of the study programs as well as of the institutions and their functioning. However, coming to supplement the above statements, in 2012 report, from 11 universities that were analyzed, only 2 universities ranked as high level of confidence from the Agency, while the other 9 reached a medium or low level of confidence.

Therefore, it can be acknowledged without doubt that the higher education system needs a change, in order to become sustainable and adapted to today's market and environment.

According to a study performed by MECTS together with UE FISCDI (2011), the current situation of the higher education system(and not only) can be summarized as follows:
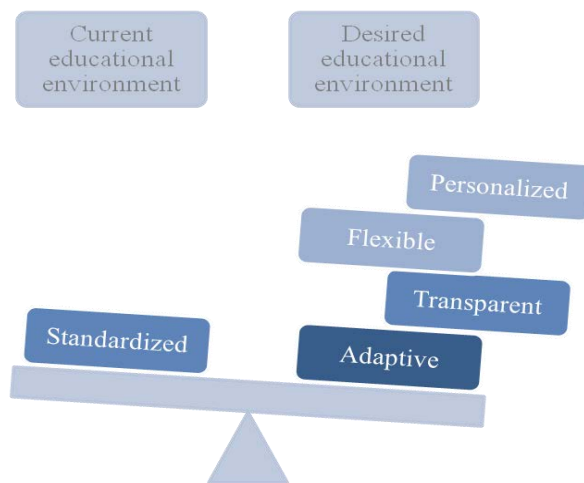

Figure 1. Status of Higher Education Environment
Source: MECTS, UE FISCDI (2011)-adapted

2. The educational innovator

2.1 Definition

Motto: Leaders of companies that go from good to great start not with "where" but with "who" - *James C. Collins (2001)*

Even though the research is not scarce in the field of innovation and education, little is said about who should actually assume this role to innovate the system, upgrade or improve it in order to better cope with the realities of today. Better said, who is the educational innovator?

I believe that this concept is best described as any individual (member of the educational institution, researcher or stakeholder) or group that contributes to the development, growth, change, reshape or rebirth of the education institution or system through innovative practices, thus creating value.

Hence, it assumes the role of pioneer and introduces new methods, ideas or structures for the educational system, like new teaching methods, effective and efficient ways of performing regular activities, reshaped curricula or universities with changed structure.

Combined from literature, the concept of the business innovator can be described as an individual/group/company that bring new ideas, concepts or techniques on the market, which are an adequate solution for the current economic and social situation and thus bring value to society and create wealth.

As it can be observed, a real contrast between the two does not really exist. It seems that aside of the objective of innovation, they are very much the same. Furthermore, there are characteristics identified in by scholars, who can describe any type of innovator, as for example creativity, assertiveness, commitment or willingness to take risks.

2.2 Factors of motivation

When it comes to motivation however, things may lie differently as scholars argue between a social value that the innovator of the educational system pursues to create, social value that is not necessarily an objective in business innovation.

A long-time observer of the business innovator, Professor Clayton M. Christensen identifies in the article The Innovator's DNA (2009), the abilities that define the business innovator as the following:

- Associate
- Question
- Observe
- Experiment
- Network

According to Christensen, the above abilities or capabilities can transform any individual or group in an innovator, no matter the field of innovation. Therefore, one can easily translate this attributes in the educational sector.

However, aside the DNA, one of the most important external drivers and motivators of innovation in the business environment is and will be competition. Therefore it is of an utmost importance to create and acknowledge competition in the educational environment.

"Historically, higher education has avoided such competitive disruption. There are several reasons for this past immunity. One is the power of prestige in the higher education marketplace, where the quality of the product is hard to measure. In the absence of comparable measures of what universities produce for their students, the well respected institutions have a natural advantage; because they have been admired in the past, they are presumed to be the best choice for the future" (Christensen, Eyring - 2011:17). Moreover "For the first time since the introduction of the printed textbook, there is new, much less expensive technology for educating students: online learning". (Christensen, Eyring – 2011: xxiii)

It is then only natural that after experiencing such a long period of self satisfaction and indulgence, that the higher education institutions need to find new ways of adapting to present.

2.3 Actors

Because there is this obvious need now for a change in education, it is of an utmost importance to acknowledge the groups that bear the responsibility of producing this change. Is the government the only answer? Is civil society the sole answer? Nelles and Vorley (2011:347) state that "university, administrators, board members, department heads, and the directors and staff within structures that support the third stream are important sources of initiative, all of which contribute to developing knowledge exchange strategies, processes, systems and a supportive (or depending on the orientation of these leaders potentially unsupportive) organizational culture ."

There it is not a single answer to this question. As mentioned in the above definition of the educational innovator, any stakeholder of the educational system can and should become a driver of change, a starter of innovation. The main groups identified are:

- Civil society
- Policy makers
- Private environment
- Academic institutions
- Teachers/Professors
- Parents
- Students

These groups are present worldwide and impact differently the educational structure.

Whether they currently impact or not the system is not however, as relevant as the fact that they have the power to do it and must be aware of this. "Whereas government institutions are poorly organized to tackle with complex problems, the power and responsibility goes to the civil society that currently lacks capital, skills and resources to take the ideas to a promising scale" (Murray, Caulier-Grice, Mulgan 2010: 4).

This is not necessarily true when it comes to Romania. While developed countries can rely on civil society as an important group of power, in our countries it represents still an unknown variable, because of its poor influence and incipient stage of development.

Moreover, private companies and the educational environment experience a rather poor relationship, even though they share the students, in different stages of their development as workforce. This is mostly true for our country, where private funding and research are rarely mixed, where the capacity of the universities to create new knowledge applicable in the private economic environments is rarely appreciated or transformed into a resource and where the private environment starts educating the people they hire within their inner training centers adapted to their needs.

Parents are as well, a minor influence group, as their involvement within the higher educational system is either poor or completely missing.

Therefore, after a brief analysis, one can acknowledge that the groups who do currently impact the higher education system are made of the government, the educational institutions and their members, as well as the students.

A relevant question appears in such a case - Why can't anyone that has an interest in this system become part of its process of change?

3. Barriers

The answer is that there are barriers imbedded in the system, that prevent other groups to get involved in it, even though such an involvement could have a positive impact.

The barriers are different, starting with institutional ones like power distribution, the separation of groups of stakeholder, closed system, lack of transparency, to more individual ones that are connected to social values, like sense of citizenship, common vision, create a critical mass etc.

The result is that the groups that need a change but do not feel they have the power to do it, create alternative structure (e.g. non-formal education, training centers, alternative universities) and other just stay aside.

But when those groups do not share a common vision and when the government institutions limit the power of the education institutions to create innovative structures within their formal ones, it goes without saying that the educational innovators are hard to find.

4. Conclusion

Motto: Changing direction requires…leadership that views universities idealistically, as something more than a business and something better than a slave to the logic of economic competition. - Harry Lewis (2007)

This paper is not meant to criticize the current structures but rather to point out the fact that the higher education system needs innovation in order to keep its importance on the map of an individual life long development.

Moreover, it wants to emphasize the importance of every stakeholder in the development and change of higher education and the fact that each and every one should assume the role of educational innovator. Whether the means to do it are discovered or not, it is our duty, as parents, students, teachers or policy makers to make use of this status and find ways to cope with the realities of today.

There are many alternative structures and technology breakthroughs that change constantly the shape of learning, in such speed that traditional system becomes obsolete. It is for sure that we have to reinvent the system and imbed the innovative process into the core system of all universities.

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