

# Governance through transparency tools: The case of Romanian higher education reforms

- ABSTRACT -

In 2007 the Romanian government started an ambitious higher education reform. The reform was largely inspired by European policy narratives that emphasized the importance of higher education in a future knowledge economy and more precisely the significance of higher education diversification as means to achieve better overall performance quality. Consequently, Romania became one of the few Eastern European countries to introduce a diversification policy based primarily on the classification of universities and ranking of study programmes. Rather than merely providing comparable information about the performance of each individual institution and study programme the policy sought to utilize these transparency tools as instruments of governance and link them to the allocation of publicly funded study places and other financial incentives. In this respect, the Romanian reform represents a unique case since it was one of the first attempts in Europe to actually use a classification and ranking exercise for such broad purposes. While policy implementation has eased following a change in the national government in 2012 the distinctive endeavour by Romanian policy makers to use transparency tools for steering higher education proves to be a noteworthy case to study.

As it will be argued in this paper, the reforms initiated in Romania sought to go beyond providing comparable information to relevant stakeholders about the performance of universities and represented an effort to change the existing governance of higher education. This argument is supported with qualitative data gathered from October 2013 to May 2014 by interviewing eleven policy makers in Romania and reviewing related policy documents. The obtained qualitative data served as the basis for analysing changes regarding the authority and autonomy of actors to steer higher education processes, in order to discover the direction of governance change. Thus, the analysis was conducted by contrasting the obtained evidence against the theoretical assumptions of the four models of governance in higher education put forward by Olsen (1988).

The analysis of the evidence supports the assumption that the policy sought to instrumentalise universities for national political agendas and related to research and education mainly as factors of production. Instead of having predefined 'production targets' set by the government, performance was to be assessed in a comparative manner according to the classification and ranking criteria. Hence, each institution was regarded as a direct competitor to the other. Looking at this model as a purely market driven one would be an overstatement. The power of the government is restored by its ability to define and set the dimensions in which competition is expected to take place, reducing the freedom of institutions to excel in other areas or in alternative forms. It is also more rigid towards the traditional market since institutions are locked into a national grid for performance indicators. Instead, the evolving argument suggests that the new forms of governance leaned towards a sovereign state model, where the introduction of transparency tools enabled the Romanian government to reassert its role as a governing body.