
CHANGES IN AN AGE OF MASS HIGHER EDUCATION¹

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Abstract: *This study offers an overview of the main theoretical discussions about how the increasing phenomenon higher education massification meets the needs of an emerging economy in post-industrial societies. Based on the decomposition of the concept of social change in several frames of analysis, the study synthesizes how individual life is unstandardized in the context of risk society (Beck) and late modernity (Bauman). The study continues to analyze the social changes occurring in the age of mass higher education in relation to the transition of young people, with a special focus on the professional dimension, the shifts on the tertiary education system and its labour market effects. In a broader perspective, the theoretical analysis underlies the debate about the persistence of social inequality through higher education. Placed at the crossroads between sociology of education and social mobility, the paper wants to capture the extent to which higher education universalization manages the social change, which, in turn, accelerates the economic growth and technological development. Considering that the extension of education not only changed the number of those educated, but it created qualitative changes through social groups, in terms of composition and structure, due to increased selectivity in the labour market. The aim is to show how the new route that young people must travel from school to work is designed, under the pressures of a globalized labor market, and under the impact of an increasing educational homogeneity.*

Keywords: *youth, higher education, massification, labour market, social inequality, social change, social capital.*

1. Introduction

Economic growth and technological development have increasingly accelerated competition between economic sectors, as a consequence of globalization. This social reality has created the necessity to use the potential of the entire population, through elevating the level of education and competencies on a large scale, for all social

¹ This paper is made and published under the aegis of the Research Institute for Quality of Life, Romanian Academy as a part of programme co-funded by the European Union within the Operational Sectorial Programme for Human Resources Development through the project for Pluri and interdisciplinary in doctoral and post-doctoral programmes Project Code: POSDRU/159/1.5/S/141086

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segments. At the same time, workplace competition has also grown; hence young people must keep up with all these changes, as education plays an essential part in an individual's professional life. Education represents an important resource for young people, especially from the point of view of developing the necessary skills for the future, but also as a departure point of the transition towards paid employment. During the last decades, transition models have suffered major changes, especially under the impact of time frame extension, but also of profound changes connected with the orientation of transition towards non-linear trajectories. Regardless of their type, transitions are social processes, which mark an individual's evolution towards a new stage in his life. They are products of the life conditions which the individual has access to, as well as products of personal decisions regarding one's own life trajectory, with a strong focus on the work component, under the current pressure of post-industrial society. The educational strategies accessed by young people can shape their transition in different ways, and this is why they become key factors for the study of social mobility and the persistence of social inequalities. Social origin, education, work opportunities, institutional regulations, states' social and welfare policies (Cace, 2008) are determinant factors in the way that young people manage the uncertainty of transition towards adult life, where the development of professional competency represents a key to success.

2. Youth transition and social change

The reasoning of economic evolution and the inherent social change process has always marked the transition from one type of society to another. The reconceptualization of change and its impact on postmodern society led to the apparition of theories such as the one of risk society (Beck, 1992), defined by a weakening of social traditions and institutions, as well as of the standards connected to life's natural course, leading to a reinterpretation of individual identity through an increased inclination towards reflexivity and individualization (Bauman, 2001). Economic and social policy changes have led to the adoption of the new-liberal model, based on meritocracy and the growth of individualization and individual responsibility for managing one's future in an unpredictable society. Individual liberalization, fading tradition, as well as outgrowing old patterns of life and work represent an answer to postmodern abundance, a form of managing uncertainty in the context of new technologies, and a form of adaptation to consumer society. Although the wind of change has entered all areas of life, the results remain almost the same concerning the social inequalities reproduced through education – the problematic areas moved from secondary schooling to university level; polarization has been maintained on social class and gender criteria; and the new post-industrial economy led to increasing income inequalities through labour market segmentation between men and women (McDowell, 2009:58).

Social change has modified all stages of life from the structural point of view, and in this context the young generation, together with adults and seniors, must find a new way for the optimization and management of social life balance. In the context of a risk society (Beck) and the exponential growth of uncertainty (Zamfir, 1990) in all areas of social life, the young generation is required to be accountable for the decisions regarding their own education, formation and employment on a volatile work market,

as well as to become flexible participants in social life. For young people, education-to-work transitions in the post-industrial society represent the link between the future aspects of adulthood. But the functional core of this phase of passage towards maturity depends on the compatibility between education and the future professional career. One of the characteristics of late modernity is that it led to blurring social barriers regarding age and age brackets representations, as well as individual liberalization through increased responsibility and autonomy. In this context, incrementing maturity led to blurring age limits and new adulthood patterns, which can be achieved much faster and easier compared to previous generations.

Structural changes have affected life's general course, especially because of the focus placed on individual autonomy, but a more complete explanation should be sought in the way that labour market and the social policies specific to post-industrial societies restructure youth transitions, as a new adulthood entry phase (Heinz 2009:3). We identified three factors influencing the new professional transition patterns of university graduates:

1. Changes on the level of traditional representations connected to work and employment, caused by the extended access to education and work productivity growth. All these led to modifying practices and content regarding young people's maturity process, bringing important changes to their professional transition.
2. Extending the time frame allocated for studies (formal education and lifelong learning – EU objectives), juxtaposed with intermediary precarious jobs, as attempts to enter the labour market and stabilize one's position; this pattern is dominated by vulnerable recurring positions (e.g. researcher, intern, freelancer). The duration of these jobs represents, in itself, a structural factor shaping youth transition in relation to the labour market.
3. The variety of types of transitions which young people find them in, led to emerging non-linear trajectories (education, work, formation, unemployment, education, etc.), as a consequence of the destandardization of social life. Studies show an unsynchronized relation (Marques, 2015) between basic social life structures: work, education, family and spare time activities. The boundaries between professional emancipation and family life became increasingly unclear, as the new economic context claims continuous of professional flexibility and mobility.

These specific trends of post-modern societies have caused structural changes to work in general, and determined reconsiderations concerning youth transition towards working life.

3. Mass Higher Education and Persistent Inequality

The role of education in contemporary society is that of correcting the persistence of social inequalities, through meritocratic educational reforms and through stimulating individuals' social mobility. The theoretical context of social mobility and stratification was traditionally ensured by the functionalist paradigm (Coleman 1988) specific to industrial and post-industrial societies. The initial principle at the foundation of these

processes is that of linking individuals' potentials with society's needs, and individuals' tendency was to remain close to their original social class. Goldthorpe (2013) believes that this macro-social perspective lost its explicative power, a change of paradigm being necessary especially because the trajectory from the class of origin to that of destination has changed, through education mediation. The association between education and destination has been consolidated thanks to technological changes and economic development. The increased growth of the request for qualified professionals needs the extension of education systems, and the progressive reform requires creating more educational prospects and increasing equal opportunities, so that all available human resources can be most effectively employed. From this point of view, it is necessary to build a new theoretical approach, oriented towards micro-level analysis, starting from the field of economic theory and the labour market, and especially the three theories which stray from the dominating human capital theory: "screening and signaling theory, job competition theory, and incentive-enhancing preference theory". Expectations are connected to the fact that the association between education and the destination class would grow, whilst a certain degree of association between the class of origin and education would be recognized as an unavoidable consequence, but the latter would decrease (Goldthorpe, 2013:5).

"Where and when social mobility occurs?" represents a continuous challenge for sociologists, debates being divided around the social or cultural theory of educational reproduction. These theories, although they acknowledge the fact that mobility is possible, do not succeed in explaining exactly who becomes mobile and in which situation (Roberts, 2009). Throughout the last four decades, education-generated inequality has been systematically studied starting with the works of Coleman, Bowles and Gintis in the USA, Halsey in Great Britain, Boudon, Bourdieu and Passeron in Franța, etc. The main social reproduction mechanism being studied is the relation between the education system and the working system in capitalist societies.

Socio-cultural reproduction was synthesized by Bourdieu by making recourse to an economic concept, that of capital. This theory explains differences and similarities between socio-cultural classes through socio-cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Coleman, 1988). Regardless of social origin, all individuals possess social capital, offering trust to social relations, strengthening them and converting them into material benefits. Cultural capital refers to the non-material resources which individuals possess: education-certified knowledge and taste in music, art, etc. However, there are differences in values between social classes as far as social and cultural capital is concerned: some succeed in converting social and cultural capital into economic capital better than others. Bourdieu claims that when individuals enter education or employment, those with similar cultural capital recognize each other and act in similar ways. He also states that in all societies, the dominating culture in schools is the middle class culture, and education is a social stratification process. Children entering school are already prepared to act with respect towards this norm, the lower class being discredited from the start. Parental support models and the cultural capital of the family of origin represent an important habitat (Bourdieu) for the child's future success and performances.

The growth and persistence of social class based inequalities concerning tertiary education is, on one hand, also explained by the increasing gaps between the incomes of the population (Ilie, 2007). The economic capital based on parents' income generates unequal opportunities regarding access to education (Furlong and Cartmel, 2009:122).

The theory of rational action offers an alternative explanation concerning the role of education in intergenerational mobility (Goldthorpe, 1996a, 1996b, 2013). While the theory of social reproduction focuses on cultural and values differences between classes, the former emphasizes the similarities between them. Regardless of class origin, all families would seek achievement opportunities for their children, the differences consisting of the fact that those belonging to lower classes would settle for modest success targets compared to the middle class. According to the rational action theory, the financial (the effort to maintain a child at university) and cultural investments necessary in order to achieve an upwards mobility make all the difference between social classes in relation to educational achievements and the opportunities to reach a middle class destination.

For most developed countries, the past decades have been marked by the increased participation of the population in higher education, the access to it becoming a mass process instead of an elitist one. Nowadays, university studies are being taken for granted, because they have become the norm for many middle class young people. There are numerous factors contributing to the appearance of differences in access to superior levels of education (Shavit, 2007). One of them is related to family background. As Mare shows (Mare, 1981), "in the Western countries during the 1980s, the educational evolution tended to be the product of successive negotiations between the pupil / student and his family, leading to the option of continuing studies on the academic route (high school – university), or the vocational one (professional school – diploma) or towards the abandonment of studies". In the contemporary context, the apparition of student credits can diminish income-induced inequalities (Voicu and Vasile, 2009). The extended access to higher education, regardless of individuals' social origin, increased the population's general education level, especially favoring increased access for women and for other ethnic groups (Joseph 2012). On the other hand, the ideal of a pure access equality does not keep into account the existing social structure, neither labour market tendencies, and nor does it make any difference between individuals (Shavit, Yaish, and Bar-Haim, 2007; Voicu and Vasile, 2009). Therefore, the principle of applying equality moved the attention from equal access to equal opportunities, focusing on a good quality education. Kucel shows (Kucel, 2014) that the power exerted by social origin in relation to choosing education forms can be an indicator of equal opportunities within a state. It draws attention towards the effects of family background on the probability to reach a certain level of tertiary education, but also the effects on the type of study programme within a certain level (Kucel and Vilalta-Bufi, 2014).

Analyzing the experience of the higher education system of the United States, Trow identified three main development stages of higher education, according to the levels of access and participation: elites', masses' and universal level (Trow 1972, 1974). During the past 20 years, quantitative changes have been registered at the level of the identified stages: hence, if Trow's expectations in the 1970s were directed towards 15% of the

masses of young people being able to make a change from elitist participation to mass participation, and 30% from mass participation to universal participation, after the 1990s thresholds kept on rising, exceeding 25% and respectively 50% (Koucký, Bartušek, and Kovařovic, 2007; Trow, 1999, 2005). But the change was not unexpected, as the expansive tendency of higher education replaced the mass secondary education system, following the same stages. Previously, at the beginning of the 1950s, in order to respond to the needs of industrialized economy, most Western countries underwent transformations within education systems, massifying secondary level access. The only differences between states had to do with placing more emphasis on vocational and technical education, but however, young people's expectations were pretty clear for that period in time: continuing high-school studies, or, in case of school abandonment, entering the labour market. Education was largely oriented towards technical bases, in order to prepare the future workforce, which was divided between manual work, specific to “blue collar” workers, and professional work for the “white collar”, who could afford elitist access to higher education.

The natural extension of higher education from the elitist form to the universal one was directly linked to the diversification (Teichler, 2008) of the educational offer and narrowing study specializations and domains (Klein, 2010; Ortiz and Kucel, 2008; Reimer and Steinmetz, 2009; Vila, Garcia-Aracil and Mora, 2007). Nowadays, we should expect the same trajectory to be followed by the first higher education cycle (bachelor degree level) and Voicu (2009) believes that it would be followed by the upcoming two cycles: master and doctoral degrees (Kehm and Teichler, 2006; Voicu, Tufiş, et al. 2010). The natural tendency to extend the duration of education is motivated by the requirements of technological and scientific progress. Digital technologies and the wide spreading of work flexibility, as well as the increased work market precariousness require adaptation through developing new competencies and continuous learning. The extended schooling period is possible due to increased life expectancy and work productivity. Moreover, “an increased productivity causes a lower workforce request, allowing younger generations to postpone entering the labour market, and creating, on a society level, the necessary financial resources for numerous individuals to embark on higher education (Voicu and Vasile, 2009:4-8). In the same context, for a few decades, Western and Eastern European states have encountered a continuous expansion and massification of higher education (Kivinen and Ahola, 1999; Teichler, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2008; Trow 1999, 2005). In Western Europe, for example, compared to the 1960s, the proportion of those attending university studies within a generation has grown almost six times, and similar tendencies can be found also in former communist European countries (Koucký et al., 2007).

4. Professional Transition and Labour Markets Changes

The last decades have been influenced by the major changes caused by labour market globalization, which had structural effects on education, formation and employment amongst young people. These changes led to increased work market flexibility and precariousness, because of emergent new forms of employment, considered “peculiar”, compared to standard employment models. The typical employment model, inherited after the Second World War, had been adopted as dominant, because it responded to

the needs of industrial economy, and ensured a stable relationship between the individual and the labour market. It was based on a collective, full-time work contract, which consequently was remunerated through an equivalent salary. This employment model is considered traditional because it possesses the standard characteristics of a typical work contract: it is permanent, full-time, is remunerated accordingly and includes social protection benefits. In the postmodern society, the typical salary-based contractual model was replaced by new, flexible employment forms and zig-zag types of career, which present an increased precariousness potential, because of non-linear professional evolutions (formation, employment, unemployment, formation, long-term unemployment, etc.).

The phenomenon of (in) adequate or atypical employment is studied from the perspective of the influence it exerts upon university graduates' employment, and through the degree of correlation between education and the labour market. The analysis starts from a key question regarding the way competencies acquired through education keep their competitive advantage in the context of continuous work market changes. Therefore, tracer and follow-up type of studies such as: Hegesco/Reflex, Cheers, Sociolog pe piața muncii (Sociologist on the labour market), etc. have shown that there are differences in employment, which result from the level of inequalities generated by access to education (Blossfeld and Shavit, 1993; Hatos, 2006; Korka, 2009; Koucký et al., 2007; Păunescu et al., 2011; Shavit, 2007; Thurow, 1976; Voicu, Tufiș, and Voicu, 2010; Voicu and Tufiș, 2011; Voicu and Vasile, 2009) as well as the level of correspondence between the study field, the acquired competencies and those requested by the labour market (Chevalier, 2003; Garcia-Espejo, 2005; Kucel, Vilalta-Bufi, and Róbert, 2010; Kucel, 2010; McGuinness and Sloane, 2011; Ortiz and Kucel, 2008; Reimer, Noelke, and Kucel, 2008). Therefore, in order to compensate atypical employment situations, each young person will adopt different strategies for choosing the best employment option, according to his/her own dominant traits. One of these strategies which high-skilled young people use is over-qualification as an employment strategy. Moreover, it is expected that social sciences and humanities graduate to be found more often in inadequate situations, as a result of adopting the over-qualification strategy. During the latest years, the relationship between over-qualification and the field of study has been drawing the attention of economists, as well as sociologists, causing them to dedicate numerous studies to this subject matter (Battu, Belfield, and Sloane, 1999; Kucel and Byrne, 2008; McGuinness, 2006; Ortiz and Kucel, 2008; Sloane, Battu, and Seaman, 1999; Teichler, 2007b), but the connection between the field of study and its equivalent on the labour market has been less exploited. Moving one step further, the reasons behind over-qualification reside in the fact that “soft” disciplines create broad competencies for the targeted workplaces. For example, the services' market favours an increased access, representing a potentially extended market for these disciplines. In this context, work productivity growth represents an advantage through work offer diversification, as well as a disadvantage through an increased competitiveness within labour force. According to the job competition theory (Throw, 1975), the likelihood to attain top quality jobs belongs to those with the highest education level, but, in the context where the work request exceeds work offer, young people are at a high risk of placing themselves in inadequate situations, even under atypical employment forms. Sattinger's job matching theory (1993) shows that, when an

individual is inadequately employed, meaning that he occupies a position which involves little or no use of the competencies acquired through education, what happens is an “under-use of labour force”, with effects on income and work productivity (Allen and Van Der Velden, 2001). That applies even more in economic crisis situations, when employers would seek to make the best choice (rational action theory) when recruiting the best-prepared candidates, considering the lowest costs (MacDonald 2011). The growth of the under-employment phenomenon amongst young people could occur largely due to the increased number of over-qualified or over-educated people being forced to accept temporary or marginal jobs (Eremia [Naghi] 2014; Naghi 2014). Atypical employment situations among young people could be also interpreted as intermediary stages towards permanent employment, according to the stepping stone theory (Korpi and Levin, 2001). Graduates enter the labour market on positions which are inferior to their educational level, due to lack of experience, but, with time, the level of job correlation grows (Battu et al., 1999; Sloane et al., 1999). However, a new hypothesis can be launched, if at a certain point in time (after approximately three years of experience) this correlation between educational level, the knowledge and competencies required at work does is not being achieved, it could mean there are reasons to doubt the level of adequacy of competencies and specializations.

5. Concluding discussion

The contemporary society is the product of complex processes, determined by social interactions in the economy (as a result of deindustrialization) and by socio-occupational structure, with positive results in relation to work productivity and extended access to education, simultaneously with the existence of less desired effects, such as unemployment and under-employment. Today's young generation has grown with an extended access to information and development of new technologies. Gathering an informational stock, which is difficult to control, as well as the extension of higher education as a means of knowledge management, have led to profound changes in connection with social structure and mobility. However, although social inequalities have diminished as a result of these strategies, they have not disappeared. They continued to exist, although they have changed their form or their place in the social structure. The way class and gender inequalities are being reproduced through education is visible in society's occupational structure (Kucel and Vilalta-Bufi, 2014). Moreover, if in the past the main focus used to be placed on access to high school education, nowadays the key discussion topic represents the population's increasingly wider access to a form of higher education. The massification of higher education puts pressure on education quality and moves the focus towards equal opportunities based on social class and gender criteria. Although social change led to diminishing inequalities between men and woman, qualitative inequalities concerning the type of attended education have remained an issue (Shavit et al., 2007; Shavit, 2007). Following the generalization of higher education, efforts have been made in order to maintain its meritocratic character, at the same time with respecting individuals' educational preferences and aspirations. However, academic performance continued to be conditioned by innate status (Voicu and Vasile, 2009:3), and therefore the transition from inherited merit-based access towards equal opportunities in higher education led

to diminishing inequalities, but not their disappearance (Clancy and Goastellec, 2007; Koucký et al., 2007). The three forms of capital, which families of origin possess to a variable extent, and which influence their children's life and education in a major way is economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu și Passeron, 1977). Their effects influence the formation and functioning of inequalities in society to different degrees. Hence, the effects are given by parents' educational level, by exposure to books, by the level of aspirations, all depending on the family of origin (Bourdieu et al., 1977). The process is continued with the influence of school and the type of accessed social networks (Coleman, 1988), adding the role within the family of origin as first, second or third child (Shavit, 2007). Gender also plays an important part, despite maintaining access inequalities, the extension of higher-education access has increased the participation of previously excluded or marginalized groups, women having had mostly to gain following this extension of higher education access (Furlong and Cartmel, 2009; Shavit, 2007; Voicu and Vasile, 2009).

Sociologists consider education to be the main pillar assuring the economic progress of emerging and developed countries. It makes social mobility and stratification possible, causing the effects on occupational structure. Examining the access to higher education, the attention is drawn towards the real distribution of educational opportunities in society; what are the main causes and the inequalities-generating factors in education supply and participation? Ensuring access to education for representatives of all social classes facilitates the development of skills and potential for an entire emerging generation, and, consequently, ensures the most effective use of knowledge and competencies in order to stimulate economic and social development. At the same time, accessible higher education facilitates change through social mobility between generations of parents and children. Consequently, this prevents social conflicts generated by class-related social differences, which occur when one class is increasingly privileged, and the other tends to be marginalized, towards social exclusion. And, last but not least, equal opportunities represent one of the foundation pillars of democratic societies, as well as individual efforts made by their members. Through meritocratic approaches, equal access to education translates into the individual's possibility to determine his own successes and failures, as these are influenced by his own capacities, not by the social and economic position of the family of origin. Although equal access to education, as an official objective, is guaranteed in all developed countries, there is still a strong influence of economic, cultural and social inequalities, all determined by family background, which largely affect not only school results, but also the motivation to study and educational aspirations. Therefore, the criticism given to meritocracy has shown that basically, by giving priority to individual abilities and achievement, only those who had favourable development conditions, thanks to family-transferred benefits, are being supported and promoted. Reality shows that, this way, the real causes of social inequalities are being dissimulated.

Due to labour market changes, effects on the decreasing number and quality of workplaces, especially for those who abandon school early on. Nowadays a “trendy” strategy, negotiated between young people and their parents, consists of continuing studies in order to compensate the unpredictability of labour market and to secure the future economic position.

To conclude with, the birth of a new economy of services and of a highly technological knowledge society requires new competencies and the highest possible educational levels, in order to accede a privileged status in the professional career. Work prestige implies well-paid workplaces, accessible only to those who can successfully correspond to an increasingly selective labour market. At the same time, workplaces have decreased from the quantitative and qualitative points of view, thanks to work productivity growth in the context of a competitive economy. Consequently, the creation of inadequate employment situations has been reached, young people being highly vulnerable in this respect (Preoteasa, 2011). The effect of diplomas' massification has led to over-qualification forms as an atypical employment strategy, acting as a compensation mechanism towards the dysfunctionalities of the labour market. In turn, its dynamic is influenced by the economic market, which shapes society's occupational structure. Thus, the existing work offer and request determines a higher or lower degree of correlation between existing and requested components. However, inadequate employment forms are present independently of the direction of economic evolution: in times of growth, workplace competition is smaller, and consequently the better-paid ones are more easily accessible, and the educational level adequacy becomes second priority; in times of financial crisis, employers seek to make the most rational choice in order to carry on as an economic actor on the market, inadequacy situations at the time of employment being the sustainable solution in order to resist in a changing economy.

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