

# *YOUTH REFORMS IN THE ROMANIAN CONTEXT*

## 1. Introduction

My paper is intended to draw an alarm signal over the problems in the Romanian educational system and labour market, and to propose solutions to overcome them. I consider that today's Romania is a country that confronts with major risks, as our educational system isn't correlated with the minimum requirements of the society and European economy, in which knowledge should be the most valuable asset. Only by implementing the right solutions we can consider to be outside the risk of our democracy to faint!

## 2. Brief overview of the Romanian educational system

In discussing Romanian education, it is quite important to provide an overview of education before the democratic revolution in 1989. The political reforms in 1989 greatly shaped the education system today: <sup>1</sup>

***Education Before 1989:** Education in Romania was a key component of communist society and was centrally controlled. Every student from kindergarten to graduate school was taught in a socialist environment controlled by the state and attendance was compulsory up through secondary school. The Ministry of Education set the curriculum and it was heavily influenced by the communist doctrine.*

***Reform- Education after 1989:** After the 1989 revolution that brought the collapse of communism, the Romanian education system began the process of reform. Education reform was adopted, but implementation of that reform was a slow process. Shortly after the revolution, libraries were emptied of their communist writings and these were burned in the streets. This, of course, left the system with a need for newer, reform oriented books—a process that would take some time. Market reforms allowed several new publishing houses to open up and print books for the new national curriculum.*

Romania has got more than 1380 high-schools and over 90 universities, with more than 740.000 students enrolled to high school and 600.000 to higher studies each year. The number of applicants to universities has markedly increased from 1989: between 1995 and 2003 there was a growth of 77% of students who enrolled to superior studies. Against this background, a host of private Universities also sprang up, some of them boasting reasonable quality of the process but most of them being simply “diploma-factories”, irrespective of their formal status, of accredited or non-accredited Universities. In addition to this, over 63% high school graduates have finished a Bachelor degree in 2003, compared to 37% in 1997. <sup>2</sup>

As part of a wider reform process, schooling has been made compulsory up to the age of sixteen, which means that every youngster must complete 10 years of study. The so-called “capacity exam”

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<sup>1</sup> <http://education.stateuniversity.com>

<sup>2</sup> Dates collected from the Romanian International University Fair website ([www.riuf.ro](http://www.riuf.ro))

has been replaced by national tests at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade, after which 2 alternative routes of schooling develop: one that is so called theoretical (general training), taking place in high-schools and a second one that takes place in the “Arts and trades schools” (specialized vocational training). Both routes lead to the final “baccalaureate” exam, thus providing their students the possibility of continuing their education (i.e.: enrolling in higher education). Although the two routes are presented by officials in the Ministry of Education as being alternative one to the other, truth is that the first actually makes the upper-tier of the system while the second one is its lower-tier.

### 3. Problems encountered in the Romanian educational system

#### 3.1. The demographical decrease of the scholar population

From 1992 to 2005 the population of Romania has decreased with 1,000,000 people and continues to decrease. This tendency is explained by the low fertility rate (1.3 children born/ woman) and by the external migration (approximately 2 million Romanians work legally in foreign countries, but the number of those who work illegal is unknown). Both these occurrences are consequences of the harsh life conditions inherited from the communist regime and of the insecurity that characterised the transition period (from communism to capitalism).

The population of Romania, being on a downward trend at the moment is highly affected by the aging process, phenomenon that affects the majority of the European Union State Members. Starting with 1990, the age group of those less than 14 years old has started to decline, simultaneously with the expansion of the age group of over 65 years. Statistical evidences show that, if the actual demographic trends continue at the same pace, in 2013 Romania will have with 20% less pupils than in 2005, and in 2025 with even 40% fewer<sup>3</sup>. The decrease is dramatic and the consequences on the country’s human resources, so necessary to its development, are easy to be deduced. On a long term basis, these new demographic tendencies will affect the educational system of Romania, by reducing the number of pupils and students.

#### 3.2. Brain Exodus

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<sup>3</sup> Dates extracted from the Report of the Presidential Commission for analyzing and elaborating politics in the domain of education and research, Bucharest, 2006 (<http://edu.presidency.ro/cv/raport.pdf>)

Each year we are proud that we are Romanians when students return from international contests and Olympiads with medals. Each year we use to talk about the great performances of our youngsters in mathematics, chemistry, and physics. In 2007, Romanian youngsters obtained 6 medals at the International Mathematics Olympiad, organized at Hanoi, Vietnam: a gold medal, 4 silver medals and a bronze one, being on the 11<sup>th</sup> place in the world. <sup>4</sup>

Romania needs the young Olympics winners, but it also needs private companies that can offer them good salaries and professional satisfactions. The journalists talk about the migration of our brains to occidental corporations. This is one of the never-ending fears of our society after 1989: the masses of youngsters that migrate from our country being attracted to foreign offers.

The academic potential of the Romanian students can also be measured through observing the great number of accepted applicants to some of the greatest universities in the world. Romania is often on the 1<sup>st</sup> place in Central and Eastern Europe regarding the great number of successful candidates sent to American top universities. In present, there are over 40 Romanian students enrolled at Harvard University, 32 at Columbia, 24 at Stanford and 32 at MIT<sup>5</sup>. These numbers reveal the potential of the Romanians of being top students at universities worldwide. Unfortunately, there are no statistical evidences to reveal how many of these youngsters return after finishing their degree, but the World Bank estimates that only 12% do come back.

However these great results should not invoke the thought that Romania has got a high-performance educational system. The Olympic winners must represent the peaks of a system that has at its foundation a mass of well prepared people. In fact, the good results are not relevant for the system: they only reflect the personal excellence of the few and the teachers that prepared them, and not the state of the system.

### 3.3. From peak performance to mediocrity

Our educational system is highly inefficient, statement sustained by the results at the major international evaluations: PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS. Excepting the results at reading of children in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade (PIRLS 2001), all the rest of our scores are well below the international average.

At the last PISA international test organized by OECD, in 2006, Romania was on the 47<sup>th</sup> place from 57 participating countries. Our country scored 418 points, the average of the participating countries being 500 points. More concerning is the fact that the results of Romanian students at

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<sup>4</sup> As HotNews informed on 31<sup>st</sup> of July, 2007

<sup>5</sup> According to Educativa Group, a group of educational companies and non-governmental organizations

these tests are also weaker than the ones of the neighboring countries, who benefit from the same social-economic conditions as Romania does.

These results do not necessarily reflect the mediocrity of the Romanian students, but most of all the mediocrity of its management. A sub-financed educational system, amateurishly managed, with an aging human resource and a too loaded curriculum, couldn't have given better results. I tend to wonder if, in similar conditions, the Italian or Belgian students would have scored better results.

### 3.4. The lack of performance of Romanian universities

During the years of transition a lot of private universities started to invade the market, being often called nothing else than “diploma factories”, or “factories of mediocrity” because instead of generating young specialists with higher education, their graduates are mere “holders of diploma”, without practical knowledge adapted to the labor market. Each year this plethora of unprepared graduates causes much harm to the labor market.

Moreover, we cannot find any Romanian University amongst the best 500 higher education institutions in the world or amid the best 100 from Europe, according to the classification of the Higher Studies Institute of the University Jiao Tong from Shanghai. The absence of Romanian universities in this top reflects the lack of performance of the higher education concerning scientific research, as well as the low performances of the academic body in Romania.

The University of Bucharest is the only Romanian University included in the Times Higher Education top, with a disreputable position, at the end of the classification, between the 500 and 600 places, together with institutions from 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries: Bangladesh, Indonesia and Sri Lanka.

### 3.5. Corruption – a grave issue

Especially in universities, students must pay important sums of money in order to pass an exam.<sup>6</sup> Students say that in most of the universities in the country, professors receive money to promote students. The greatest demands are at the Faculty of Medicine, where, depending on the university centre, students pay between 200 and 1500 euro for an exam. The costs of passing an exam at Law

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<sup>6</sup> The information comes from the National Romanian Students Union ([www.unsr.ro](http://www.unsr.ro))

School reach 300 euro, and at an Economic faculty somewhere near 200 euro.<sup>7</sup> In addition to this, students complain that they are being asked for money in order to get a place in the university campus and they are also required to buy the books that are written by the course professors.

### 3. Romanian labour market offers few opportunities to young graduates

#### 3.1. Hard time finding a job

- Lack of Experience

One of the student's biggest problems is the possibility of finding a job that corresponds to the study field they have graduated. According to a study conducted by Daedalus Consulting<sup>8</sup>, approximately 39% of the employed young people don't work in the domain they were prepared for. On the other hand, there are many students that have to find a part time or a full time job during their studies in order to increase their income. The same study shows that having a job during the university years is appreciated by 45, 4% of students as having a contribution to their future career.

Although young graduates learn how to prepare themselves for a job interview, what kind of information should write in a resume, how to search for a job on the internet or at the Job Fairs, most of the times they confront with refusals. And this happens because the private companies or even the public institutions usually request a minimum of work experience. The paradox is that, alongside with experience, it is being asked young work force – meaning the exactly same young people who did not accumulate work experience. In order to overcome these odds, youngsters often complete their CV with fictive work places or have to accept low-paying jobs, under their professional qualification.

Without the perspective of a job, young people are forced to search for other ways to obtain an income. Unfortunately, they often head towards criminal activities or black market. Many others abandon the native country in order to benefit from a better education, a well paid job and to launch in a career.

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<sup>7</sup> Realitatea TV, 6<sup>th</sup> of March 2007

<sup>8</sup> The study "Employer of choice" was conducted by Daedalus Consulting in cooperation with Catalyst Recruitment, in October 2007 ([http://www.daedalus.ro/employer/employer\\_rom.pdf](http://www.daedalus.ro/employer/employer_rom.pdf))

- Low loyalty of young employees

Another reason that explains the hard time young people have when trying to find a job is the lack of seriousness and loyalty that they prove towards the company. Thus, according to the same study, one out of two young professionals has changed its work place at least two times in the last 3 years, the average workforce fluctuation reaching hereby 45%. Over 41% of the young people state that their major dissatisfaction is the low salary. As such, career turns into a hopping from one job to another, in an eternal search for a better salary, and finally to “hop across the border”, into a better paid job abroad.

- Skyrocketing unemployment rates

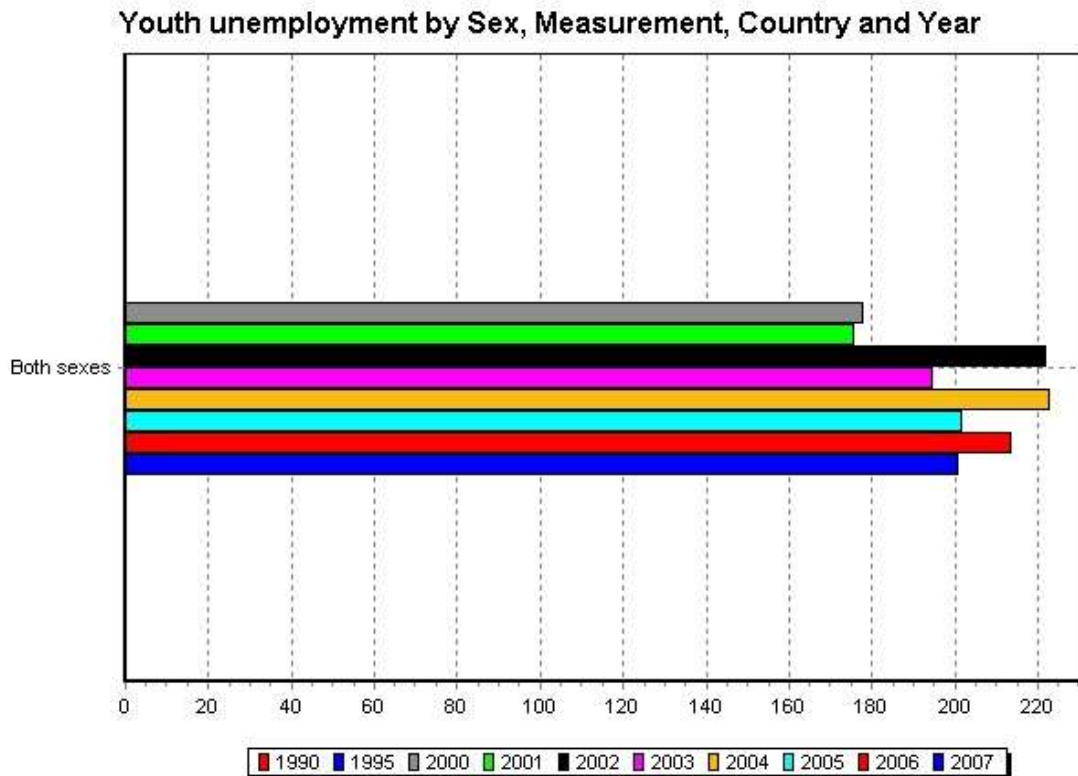
As a consequence of the lack of experience and low loyalty, Romanian youth unemployment is among EU highest, reaching **20,1%**<sup>9</sup>.

The *young unemployed* are all the persons aged 15-24 who, during the reference period, were: without work, currently available for work and seeking work.

The trend of the youth unemployment in Romania in the period 2000-2007 is illustrated in the graphic shown below:

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<sup>9</sup> **Source:** UNECE Statistical Division Database, compiled from national and international (EUROSTAT and ILO) official sources.



The graphic shown above reveals the fact that youngsters under 25 years old have a hard time finding a place to work in Romania, the youth unemployment rate of 20,1% being one of the highest in Europe, despite the fact that unemployment on a national level is close to the European average<sup>10</sup>.

Fortunately for graduates, in Romania, the employers are stimulated to hire fresh graduated students, because if they do it for an undetermined period contract, the employers obtain, during 12 months, subventions in quantum of 1 -1,5 raw base salary on economy<sup>11</sup>. In the same time they have to maintain the work relations for a period of at least 3 years, while the graduates can follow professional training organized by the employer. All the necessary expenses will be supported from the budget of the unemployment insurance – on the request of the employer.

However, the law that is meant to help fresh graduates has also got a downside: employers cannot revoke the work contract earlier than 3 years. Otherwise, the employer will be required to pay the agencies for workforce occupation the sum earned from each graduate, plus the afferent interest

<sup>10</sup> According to the EU Statistics Institute, Eurostat <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/>

<sup>11</sup> Law 76/2002, published in the “Monitorul Oficial”

rates. For this reason and because of excessive bureaucracy as well, companies do not queue to receive these subventions.

### 3.2. Lack of orientation after graduating

Because the quality of schooling in Romania leaves much to be desired, the young graduates are often confused and disoriented regarding which career to pursue. As the system is not so closely related to the realities of the labour market, youngsters find it difficult to adapt and try different jobs before finding out what they really like. This confusion and lack of concentration on establishing long-term objectives can be easily remarked at the job fairs, where fresh graduates come with a pile of CVs in order to apply at each company present at the fair.

### 3.3. Small incomes and informal payment

What makes Romania so attractive to foreign investors is the relatively cheap workforce, especially in the case of young graduates without any work experience. With a supply so ample and in most cases over-qualified, when it comes to youngsters, employers do not bother to offer them reasonably high salaries when there are legions waiting at the doorstep. The young people without any work experience have got average income demands that rise up to 300 euro, and for three years of experience they move up to 500 euro.<sup>12</sup> However, companies usually pay them well below their income demands.

To reduce the costs even more, there are plentiful employers who do not pay the entire salary legally and resort to envelope payments. Approximately 16% of the Romania's population has declared to have worked either illegally, without a labour contract, either with an official salary smaller than the real one, or was confronted with both situations<sup>13</sup>. The results of the same study suggest that the chances to confront with one of these two situations increase if the hired person is at the beginning of the career. The lack of experience in negotiating with employers is doubled by the reticence of the employer in hiring persons without work experience, which gives them courage to be open to "alternative" solutions.

In time, those who work in the underground economy will reach the retirement age and, without being insured for, they will head for the system of social assistance, asking for public money. Also, because the active population will decrease in number, the taxes will consequently highly increase.

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<sup>12</sup> The report "Actual problems of the youth population in Romania", May 2007, conducted by the Ministry of Labour

<sup>13</sup> Source: the study "Attitudes towards work", conducted by the Soros Foundation in Romania, in December 2008

## 3.4. "Working abroad is better!" - the alarming certainty of the youngsters

As a result of the clash between the requirements of the young people and the existing opportunities on the labor market, the remainder solution remains migration for employment abroad. Especially after Romania's EU integration, this has become a worrying issue. Only 21% of the youngsters think they can get better jobs in Romania than in other countries.<sup>14</sup>

My cousin told me an interesting story: walking as a sightseer on the streets of Madrid, Spain he didn't even need to use his broken Spanish in order to ask for directions, because basically at every street corner or bus station he could hear a Romanian whom to pose the question in our native language. Both in Spain and Italy there are large communities of Romanians, generally aged between 18-30 years old, with great work potential. Romanian youngsters are generally preferred abroad for domains such as IT or constructions.

An analysis of the data collected in the researches "Urban Romania" and "Rural Eurobarometer" of the Open Society Foundation, revealed the fact that 40% of the Romanians under 25 years old want to emigrate.<sup>15</sup>

The losses incurred by migration for employment abroad one can say, are as such pretty large for the Romanian economy and for the Romanian labor market. A large number of capable youngsters, sometimes well-qualified, with potential and in their prime working age, leave the country and actually contribute to wealth creation in other economies, usually in the most developed ones, while the domestic economy remains deprived of their potential.

## 4. Proposed solutions for an educational reform in the Romanian Context

Further on, I will point out the solutions I propose for each of the problems aforementioned, encountered both in the educational system and on the Romanian labour market.

- Solutions to stop the demographical decrease of the scholar population should take into consideration reforming the health, education and social insurance systems, so as to encourage birth rates, schooling and placement on the labour market. This would be a major step made by the Government towards creating more work opportunities for the Romanian youngsters.

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<sup>14</sup> The report "Actual problems of the youth population in Romania", May 2007, conducted by the Ministry of Labour

<sup>15</sup> The thesis "Migration of youngsters- an opportunity for them, or a risk for Romania" - Eva Militaru PhD., Bucharest, 12<sup>th</sup> of March, 2007

- Romania's brain export cannot be stopped as long as the work opportunities in our country do not improve significantly. What can the public authorities do whatsoever is setting up a system of clear incentives in order to convince the youngsters to return back home sooner or later. One solution could be offering private scholarships only with the clause of integrating back on the Romanian workforce. Another solution is offering fiscal incentives to the employers that hire youngsters recently returned in the country. The public authorities could also appeal to the emotional side of the youngsters, by emphasising the subjective benefits of returning to the native country.
- In order to decrease the gap between the peaks of the system and the vast majority of mediocre-prepared students, a reform of the national curriculum needs to be put into practice by the Ministry of Education. The curriculum should be adapted to key-competences, because it is not the information that counts on the labour market, but the abilities of the individuals and how they manage to put theory into practice.

The Reference Framework sets out eight key competences:

- 1) Communication in the mother tongue;
- 2) Communication in foreign languages;
- 3) Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology;
- 4) Digital competence;
- 5) Learning to learn;
- 6) Social and civic competences;
- 7) Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, and
- 8) Cultural awareness and expression.

If every discipline will be centered on developing these competences, not on the accumulation of as much information as possible (as the curriculum is too loaded), I am sure that Romanian students will score better results at the international tests (PISA, TIMSS, etc) and as such they will have the necessary skills and abilities to integrate on the labor market easily.

- However painful it may be, the country must get rid of the inefficient private universities that do not contribute to the labour market with well-prepared graduates, but only with diploma holders. This will free important resources and will diminish the unhealthy flow of youngsters towards low-quality university education. In the meantime, the Ministry of Education together with the "Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education" (ARACIS) will have to encourage clustering around the large, efficient universities that can integrate the research component.

Furthermore, in order to increase the performance of the educational system, the Government should assign a higher budget on education, with a better paid human resource (teachers often organize strikes to protest on their low wages). This at its turn would increase motivation among teachers and would finally lead to a rejuvenation of the academic workforce, as young graduates will be encouraged to enter the educational system.

In addition to better salaries, the Government should also invest in the preparation of the teachers, emphasizing the importance of life-long learning. Being better prepared, they would not only benefit the students, but they will be also stimulated to involve into research programs, which will help Romanian universities to be more competitive in the worldwide charts.

- Another problem that needs a solution from the public authorities such as the “*National Anti-corruption Directorate*” (DNA) is the problem of corruption in the educational system. A better transparency of the educational system would certainly help eliminate this problem. Also, anti-corruption campaigns could start from the parents or students, who keep “sponsoring” teachers and who should be informed that by doing this they only help encourage corruption, being a never-ending vicious circle. However, corruption will be mostly diminished only when teachers will have better salaries. Therefore, if corruption from the schooling system is eradicated, exams will be taken by merit and they will represent a clear assessment of the students’ knowledge and abilities, all youngsters being equal in front of the evaluation system, without any one of them being favored in front of the other.
- In order to solve the lack of hands-on experience that most graduates confront with, the deans and rectors should put efforts into establishing long lasting bonds between the industries/employers and their universities. Each university could offer a database with the CVs of all students or alumni seeking work, database which could be offered to potential employers.

Moreover, the Ministry of Education together with the Ministry of Labor could introduce measures in order to facilitate the internship programs, during which participant students would acquire invaluable work experience during their studies. Measures such as subventions may stimulate employers to accept students as trainees/interns in their company and at the end of the internship, perhaps even hire them. As such, at the end of their studies, they will already have had contact with the domain of their study and would integrate more easily on the labor market.

At the present moment, a number of practical hours of training are compulsory for every student, but these hours are basically inexistent. Even though the internship should last 3 weeks, in reality, most employers keep the students only for 3-4 days, giving them a certificate stating that they’ve completed all the compulsory 3 weeks. In addition to this, the work experience of the student is not related to his theoretical background, in most cases doing secretarial work

(sending faxes, photocopying documents, etc), so at the end they don't have any clue about how their future job is supposed to be. For these reasons, a more clear and rigorous system of internship programs needs to be applied in order for students to gain real practical experience and not just false certificates.

- Youth loyalty towards a job will only be increased when they have access to better paid jobs, adequate to their qualification and their domain of study. Besides that, the promise of developing a career inside the company, with an emphasis on the professional improvement may also be an important decision factor for keeping the young workforce.
- Youth unemployment could be reduced by creating more work places (attracting foreign investors mainly). Also, research should be carried in order to correlate the existing need on the labor market with the universities' offer of places. Therefore, the number of graduates would be strictly linked with the requirements of the labor market.

Furthermore, the law regarding the incentive scheme offered by the Government for hiring fresh graduates should be revised by the Parliament, because there are few companies that apply it, due to its strict conditions and great bureaucracy. By simplifying this law, fresh graduates will only need to "remind" the companies of the great benefits they get from hiring them.

- Establishing objectives for the future career is a starting point for every youngster in order to overcome the lack of orientation. Therefore, the Government should introduce compulsory counseling programs for students, to help them realize better what they love doing and are good at.

More care has to be taken by Universities themselves, with respect to career orientation. As such, encouraging students to gain practical experience (through part-time jobs, internships, volunteering) is vital. Also, the curriculum of the universities should involve more practical aspects than pure theory, by organizing different games, projects, work-related simulations and explaining the students what to expect from each job in terms of responsibilities, what qualities should they possess, etc so as to help them discover what they would really enjoy doing.

- The small incomes of the youngsters can be compensated with performance bonuses, offering them feedback and other motivational stimulus that can boost their self-confidence and would make them feel their work is appreciated.

Moreover, the private and public companies could invest on the youngsters' professional development, with much more than simply on-the-job training. Of course, there are already signs of change, but preciously few and most applying only to multinational companies. The Romanian Government with the help of the European Union could offer employers financial support regarding the expenses with the professional training of the young workers.

The Government can also discourage companies to resort to envelope paying regarding youngsters, by applying drastic measures and organizing more controls. Also, the potential employees must be informed by the disadvantages implied by informal payment: their work seniority disappears, they cannot appeal to bank loans, they don't have all the other legal rights (free medical insurance, holidays, pension, etc) and so forth.

- The phenomenon of youth migration should be understood well, as it is very difficult to be stopped. It is crystal-clear that if the domestic labor market doesn't fulfill their needs and expectations, youths will head towards employment across the borders. However, what can be done by the Government is attempting to regulate these flows of migration. For instance, the Ministry of Labor can propose more access to social security schemes back home for workers abroad. The Ministry of Education can think of ways of offering "second chance" educational programs for those returning home after working abroad a number of years. In this way, capable youngsters with work potential may be encouraged to return to their native country.

## 5. Conclusion

All in all, the educational and research system in Romania isn't capable of providing graduates with the necessary skills to succeed on the labour market and to sustain a prosperous and competitive Romania. As the great Dutch humanist Erasmus once said: "*The future of a nation is decided by the way it prepares its youngsters*". If we don't reform our country's educational system soon, the future will not forgive us!