

## **Stressor in Public Higher Education of Romania**

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### **Abstract**

The global economy's complex dynamics causes changes in various sectors of activity in all the countries worldwide and furthermore in a country like Romania, where the outstanding change of the political regime has driven to radical changes throughout society in all environments and globalization, regionalization followed the European trend. Higher education differs itself from other types of education because the activities are carried out simultaneously on two levels: teaching and scientific research, which entail a very high level of intellectual consumption for the people involved. The Romanian higher education deeply felt all these changes and sought to adapt. In this process the expression of several internal factors grew enhanced causing the employees to be stressed above a harmless level, which brought poor performance in their activity. This paper analyses to what extent the effects of this stressor are felt by teachers in public education of Romania and proposes their review and the use of the due levers so that to mitigate negative effects.

**Keywords:** work stress, higher education, work performance, teaching and scientific research

### **INTRODUCTION**

One of the reasons for a study of stress to be required is the cost paid by each individual with their health and quality of life in general. People perceive by themselves a continuously increasing stress, which proves how much they are getting aware of the impact it has over their lifestyle.

It is important for every business sector to provide evidence-based policies and interventions in order to improve people's welfare at the workplace. If researchers don't understand these responsibilities, the gap will increase between scientific research and what is relevant for everyday life.

For this purpose, individual perception of the stress-generating situations, historical background and factors helping teaching staff cope with stress, must be analysed. Stress assessment studies and empirical stress management programs visibly show the defects and simplistic line of thinking, the recognized fact that "sick individuals may be a symptom of sick organizations" [1]. Therefore, for both economic and humanistic reasons, a different approach is required. This shall address an increase in the quality of individuals' life at their workplace, dynamic and interpersonal relations of working groups or teams as well as organizational structure and climate that shapes the working environment.

At the European Union's level, the occupational health and safety is one of the main areas in the European social policy. In the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union 21, Article 153 (1 and 2), the European Council is authorized to adopt, by means of EU directives, the

minimum requirements for "improvement of the working environment so that to protect workers' health and safety in particular". The Directive 89/391/EEC explicitly requires the employers' responsibility to "adapt" work to every human individual, especially in terms of "design of workplaces, choice of work equipment and choice of works and production methods" (European Commission, 1989). It was also stated that "employers are legally liable to reduce risks for workers' health and safety", which also means reducing psychosocial risks. In spite of that, psychosocial risks are ignored in many organizations, their leaders fear that additional costs ought to be incurred by them but the evidence suggests that failing to approach these risks may be even more costly for employers, workers and society in general [2], [3].

### **PRELIMINARY QUESTIONNAIRE-BASED RESEARCH DATA ON THE STRESS LEVELS FOR EDUCATIONAL STAFF WITHIN THE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS OF ROMANIA**

The research of stress among teaching staff is a major topic of concern in many countries, but the social, cultural, economic and educational differences prevent the conducted investigations from generalisation from one country to another. Elements adapted to local circumstances were taken into account in conceiving the study herewith.

The completed research aims at the public higher education institutions of Romania and was based on a cross-sectional conducted descriptive type survey combined with statistic data analysis while for the data gathering method the factual and opinion-based questionnaire was used. The descriptive study estimates specific parameters within the analysed population and describes associations that arise therefrom.

An inductive study was achieved by means of the spot check survey. Sampling aimed at being representative from several points of view, such as: geographical allocations of higher educational institutions, profiles of faculties' respondents are employed with, respondents' teaching position, age and sex.

The research was based on information collected in regards to certain aspects and phenomena currently existing in this organizational environment. The main scope of research was the examination of some situations generated by factors associated with the work environment.

The questions asked by this questionnaire considered both quantity aspects - such as number of the extra-hours worked, and quality aspects - e.g. comparison level of costs per regular schedule student, equivalent to the public higher education system of the main countries of Europe so that to allow for an as complex as possible analysis.

Gathering of information was placed to work by design and delivery of a questionnaire dedicated to "evaluate the stress perceived by teaching staff in the public higher education of Romania".

The main elements pursued were: working conditions, excessive increase of workload, tasks, additional roles based on multiple and continuous social changes concurrent with resource reducing. The study intends to identify the sources of dissatisfaction related to qualitative aspects of the institutions' management as well as other organisational factors that emphasize an increase in the work stress level. These factors include low managerial and social support, as well as some aspects that moderate stress at the workplace. There are four categories of factors to be analysed in this paper, i.e. related to: legislation (1), lack of resources (2), time pressure (3) and work relationships (4).

The research instrument was pilot tested on a sample of the target population members, a process that has tracked to which extent the questioned population understands the questions and the instructions and if the questions equally apply to all respondents.

The initial study data consisted in statistical information taken over from official sources, firstly the Report by the National Council for Higher Education Financing on the university year 2014-2015 for the year 2014, mentioning that a number of 22,947 teaching staff are operating in Romania [5].

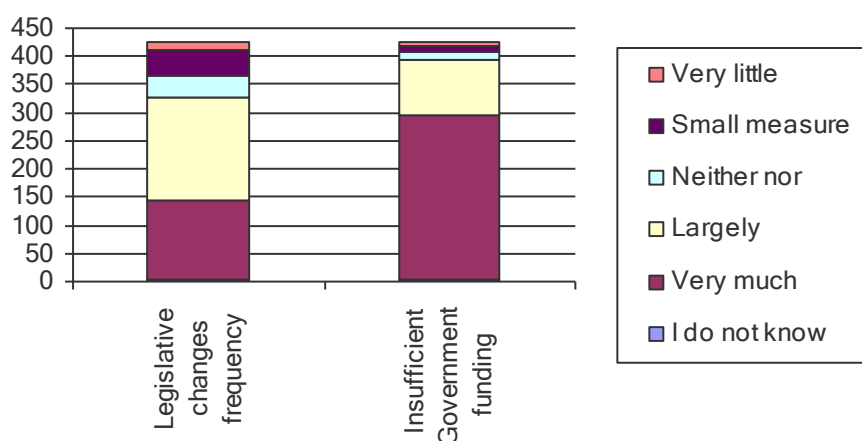
The representative sample at the level of the population subject to analysis consists of 417 respondents, out of which there are 118 to hold leading positions, while the remaining 298 are employees engaging execution positions.

### RESULTS OF RESEARCH ON THE MAIN STRESS-GENERATING FACTORS LIKELY TO ACT IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS OF ROMANIA

Structures, rules and part of the formal relations to be observed within the public education of Romania are established by the legislation in force. Frequent legislative changes in the educational area have generated excessive requirements in the teaching staff's activity, generating difficulties for 75% of the respondents (fig. 1). The material support of research activities excessively affects the teaching staff's private incomes according to approximately 72% of the respondents.

The political and economic changes occurred in Romania after 1989 featured by asynchronous progress, inconsistency and multiple troubles have generated severance and rejection response within organisational structures, economic life and psycho-social context.

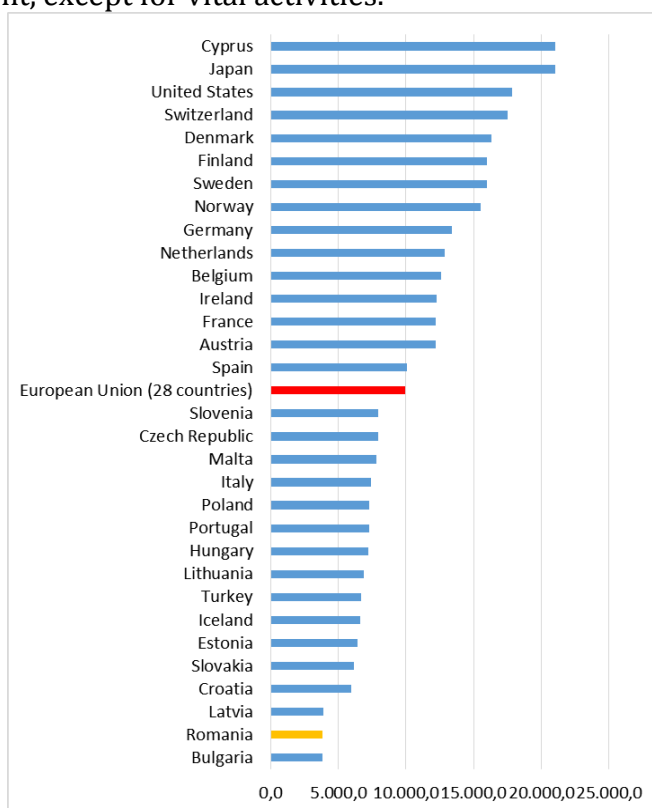
Further to reviewing the questionnaire results, it is noted that the insufficient governmental funding stands for the teaching staff's main dissatisfaction factor (92.08% of the respondents mentioned this aspect) requiring them extra tasks and efforts to pursue their activity.



**Fig. 1 Aspects that Generate / Constitute Excessive Demands on the Faculties**

Insufficient financing is felt in both poor material equipment of the higher education institutions and teaching staff's salary revenues. Consequently both teaching level and research activity are negatively affected. The advanced technical information access and dissemination means are missing, as well as computer technology consumables, laboratories poorly equipped resulting in the impossibility to facilitate students' access to cutting edge technologies.

The teaching staff's salary incomes are insufficient for them to get a decent life standard and have any chance to professional improvement. They are compelled to resort to compromises most of the times by finding private extra hours to teach besides their employed work in order to increase somehow their incomes. These extra teaching activities added to the time allocated to scientific research put even higher pressure on the teaching staff's leisure that tends to become nearly inexistent, except for vital activities.



**Fig. 2 Annual expenditure on public educational institutions per student in PPS, at tertiary level of education (ISCED 56), based on full-time equivalents, 2011 (Source: Eurostat) [4]**

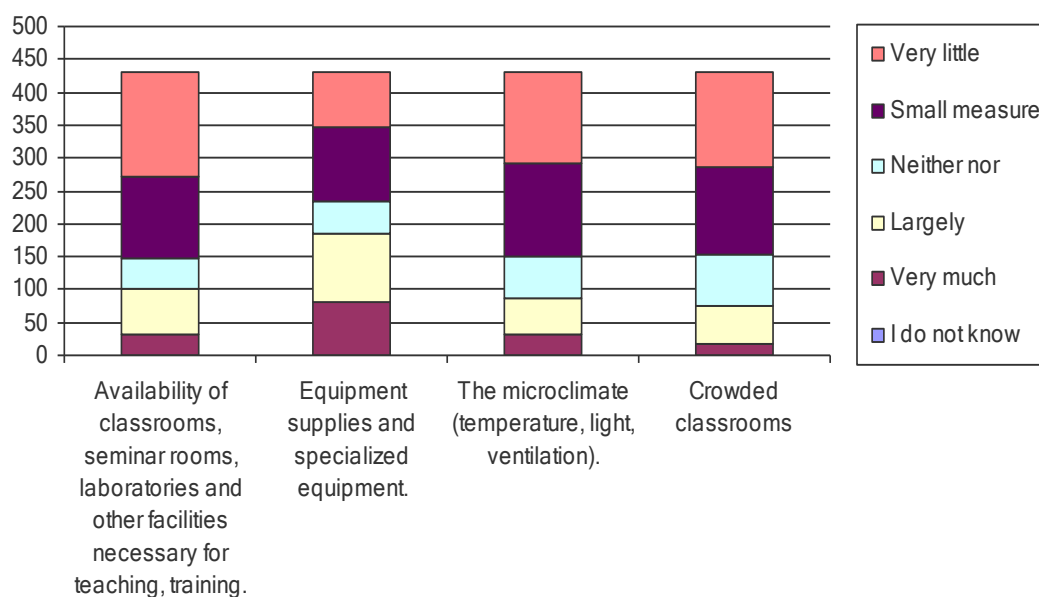
Public structures' financing largely depends on the evolution of the macro-economy, which in Romania was characterized by short periods of stability followed by long periods of getting downwards to the burden of strong economic crisis, thus having created continuous budgetary austerity policies with reverberations in all social fields. On the background of prevalingly downwards economic run, the inadequate managerial training and the lack of the necessary proficiency in acting on a competitive market have led to negative and dangerous phenomena.

Important groups and social segments were involved in the process of structural reforms with great impact on Romania's macroeconomic evolution consisting in phenomena and combinations of actions occurring under the form of social processes in which everything has been changing: behavioural schemes, roles, statutes, values, processes and institutions.

Within such context, the level of costs allocated to public educational system per regular schedule student compared to the equivalent one in the main European countries is shown in Fig.1.

Romania is on the last but one place in this ranking, which supports the results of our analysis in the replies received at the internal survey. It can be noticed that in the absence of international comparative benchmarks, respondents experience a shortage of financial resources, which justifies the difficulties encountered in their professional and private life generated by financial shortages.

From among the work environment aspects in universities, the teaching staff state that the lack of supplied equipment specialized facilities creates the utmost difficulties within the working environment, fact mentioned by 43.16 % of the teaching staff respondents (fig. 3).



**Fig. 3 Aspects of the Work Environment which Create Difficulties for Faculties**

To be also mentioned that it is a consequence of the absence of a stronger bond between business operators and educational institutions.

A major stress source for higher education teaching staff is the quantitative requirements at the workplace, as their working hours exceed in most of the cases the normal 8 hours working day and the 40 hours per week working schedule (fig.4).

The research activities tend to prevail over the deficient teaching activity because, apart from the requirements imposed by the job description, they also stand for the main assessment criterion in all applications for promotion. This phenomenon tends to affect the quality of future generations proper teaching and, by default, their training, too. Thus, the question regarding the average number of working hours per week was answered by teaching staff as follows: 69.5 % of respondents estimate they work more than 40 hours per week, 15 % approximately 40 hours per week, and 15.3 % fewer hours per week.

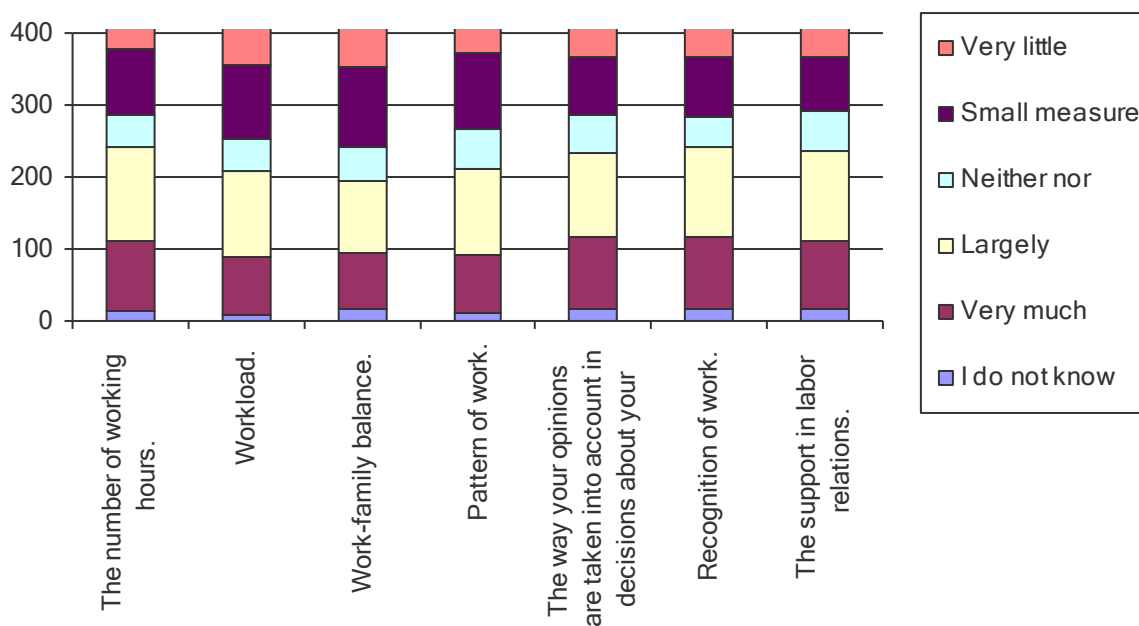
The actual time spent for scientific research, teaching activities and other complementary activities exceeds the regulated working schedule of 40 hours / week (for 75 % of teaching staff), being necessary for them to work also on weekends, days off or on paid leaves (81.5%).

Cutting down the time allocated to solving family issues and to rest determines in time a state of stress fatigue, dissatisfaction for the irretrievable loss of significant private moments, a state of discontent versus the minimal recognition of their results in research. The high amount of scientific research is very often not a result of the teaching staff's private concerns but an activity required by ministry regulations, which is set to output rated, not directly compensated but understood as a duty task. Or, the scientific research is actually so difficult to set according to output rates - due to the high degree of incertitude a researcher has to face in

his activity and on the other hand this is not at all repetitive in procedure, to allow for any similitude between different research assignments for their work amount. Nevertheless there are quantity norms required in results of research that are quantifiable under the form of publications or lectures in which such results are presented.

Another stress factor, also related to research results, refers to the high costs to disseminate results that are most of the time comparable to, or even exceeding, a researcher's salary income, especially if the research is fundamental and not supported from external financing sources.

In regards to the level of satisfaction with the general employment conditions, the teaching staff' grievances are primarily related to the manner in which they can maintain a balance between their professional activity and the time dedicated to their family; they are affected by the work pace and workload, but also by low recognition of their work and poor organizational support.



**Fig. 4 The level of satisfaction in terms and conditions of employment for each item below**

Thus, 43 % of respondents are dissatisfied with the manner to balance their professional activity with their family responsibilities; the workload being recognized as another important source of stress for 41 % of teaching staff (fig.4) and the very alert pace of work being deemed a stressful factor for 37.6 % of the respondents.

The teaching staff's low satisfaction is also determined by the manner how their views are being considered in decisions regarding their work activity, 33 % of them being dissatisfied or partially dissatisfied with this aspect.

At the same time failing to have their work recognised causes dissatisfaction to many teaching staff (34%) and 31% are dissatisfied with the support they receive in labour relationships.

### CONCLUSIONS

The considerable interest in "reforming the public system" enhanced the concerns for system efficiency and for social programs development. The current global financial crisis has

reinstated the issue of the public system's role not only in social development but also in the support and stimulation of the economy. The complex problems of public university education are owed to the fact that it functions as both training environment and trained environment - sometimes secluded.

The reformation of the system should target not only the objectives to be achieved but also the methods of achieving them. The violation of social, managerial, ethical, deontological rules causes tensions that reflect not only on the employees but also on the activity of these institutions, school students, university students and social system as a whole.

In order to achieve the Lisbon Strategy for more and better jobs, the question about flexibility and increased security of jobs arises at both individual and organizational level. In this bunch of problems a new challenge occurred, the one of occupational safety, in addition to the already existing policies referring to workplace safety. All organizations need to support the workforce adaptation to the changes occurred in economic conditions by taking care of their employees' personal skill development, by better responding to their needs, given that by being more productive and adaptable they will be consequently able to ensure greater competitiveness and innovation.

The state has an important economic role in funding education and those capable to provide the necessary policies and interventions must emphasize the social benefits of the public educational system.

Society needs valuable educators having for main mission to provide training services and scientific research, more specifically training and developing the next generation of scientists.

In order to maintain the social training character of the academic environment, proper structures and roles must be created and preserved and this may only be achieved by knowing the due issues and regulating them by policies to improve the quality of professional life in universities.

Between the four categories of factors analysed in this paper, there are interdependence relations.

In Romania, the Legislation on education has been subject to inherent changes to keep the pace with the transition to another economic system. The desire for continuous improvement along with the change of economic and social relations led to excess and determined respondents to sanction this phenomenon. Furthermore, the legislation in force may be considered primarily responsible for the manifestation of the other factors favouring teaching staff's stress beyond the tolerated comfort limits, as shown in the study.

Amid the economic crisis a considerable part of legislation has reached a form of pressure instrument that has lost sight of the humans with their needs and capabilities in a complex and dynamic modern world, primarily supporting the state's and certain groups' interests. The legislation on education along with the ancillary legislation contributed to the shortage of resources in this sector, a workload above the optimal level of job descriptions, and favoured the emergence of tensions in labour relationships. Labour relations reflect, aside from the tensions generated by the other stress factors, the human psychology influence. As a result of

the analysis, the stress factor felt by most respondents was the insufficient government funding, followed by legislative changes and working time increase.

Although the increased frequency in legislative changes was expected to be on the first place, because the law fails to be observed in education funding (6 % of GDP for funding), this latter problem surpassed the legislative dynamic.

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