

The Knowledge Society and the Reform of Creative Writing

How the Reforms Promoted by the Romanian Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation Affect the Writing in Higher Education

Cristina-Emanuela DASCĂLU, *Ph. D.*
PostDoc Scholar/ Postdoctoral Grant Recipient,
Romanian Academy, Iași Branch
cristinaemanueladascalu@hotmail.com

Abstract

This article deals with how major top-down reforms in the Romanian higher education system have affected and will continue to affect student writing and have forever challenged and changed teachers' and students' traditional roles. The reform of student writing in Romania is initially due to the implementation in the Romanian education system of the Bologna Declaration of 2002 and continues ever stronger due to the extraordinary new Education Law passed by the Romanian Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation in 2011. One of the initial outcomes of the adherence of the Romanian education system to Bologna Declaration was that, while previously to this change Romanian universities demanded very little undergraduate writing especially the original, research-oriented one and, thus, grades relied heavily on the results of the traditional sit-down final examinations, most courses now in the Romanian higher education system include student essay writing and other types of writing and systematic teacher feedback. Creative writing has started to appear here and there, too in the university curriculum especially at private universities. As a result of Romania's adherence to Bologna Declaration of 2002, Portfolio Assessment, which demands extended writing, has been also introduced in Romania, both at state universities and private ones. As a result of the new 2011 Education Law, even more emphasis will be placed on writing, research, competences and abilities, included practical ones, and creativity at all levels of education, higher education included therefore. The article presents some results from an evaluation of the educational reforms in Romania, mostly of the initial reforms following Romania's adherence to Bologna Declaration of 2002, but the study considers some of the reforms that follow from the newly passed Romanian Education Law. Mainly the following questions are addressed in this research study (1) Why did the initial reforms change writing practices and how even more we expect writing practices to change as a result of the implementations of the newly passed Education Law?; (2) What other factors have contributed and will further contribute to the change; (3) In what ways have the changes in writing practice, including creative writing practices, affected students and teachers and how further on these writing practices will

change as a result of the implementation of new Education Law; and (4) What are unintended results and critical factors in the future development of writing in the aftermath of the new reforms of the Romanian education system?

Keywords: *Education, Romanian Socialist Education/Pre- 1989 Education, Romanian Post- 1989 Education, Reforms, Bologna Declaration, Education Law, Writing, Creative Writing.*

Introduction: Brief Facts about the Romanian Education System Pre- and Post- 1989

Romanian Education after the Second World War and before 1989: After the Second World War, Romania became a socialist state. Education in socialist Romania, like in any other socialist regime, was a key component of the socialist society and was centrally controlled. Every student from nursery to kindergarten, from primary and secondary school to high school and all the way to graduate school was taught in a socialist environment closely monitored and controlled by the state. The education system was strong, rigorous, tough, selective and based on many exams and tests during the trimesters, at the end of each trimester, at the end of the school or academic year. Written exams at main academic disciplines, each exam being based on everything studied till that point, examination time per subject lasting three hours, were also required in order for a pupil or student to pass/graduate from one level to the other, with very difficult final and entrance exams when finishing the 8th grade in order to pass in the 9th grade, then again when graduating the first two years of high school, when finishing 10th grade and entering the last two years of high school, and then again there were the compulsory baccalaureate degree exams, oral and written ones, at all main subjects taught and the entrance exams to the faculty and university of each person's choice, different exams for each specialization. Competition was extremely high, a lot of emphasis was on theoretical knowledge, attendance was compulsory up through secondary school,¹ yet even at university level attendance was mostly required. The centralized education system provided one notable success – literacy rates were estimated at 98 percent during communist rule,² students took studying very seriously, and the academic staff, teachers, professors were appreciated.

¹ S. Rabitte, "Education: Overview," retrieved from <http://www.russia.cz>. 2001, on November 8, 2011.

² United States Department of State, "Background Notes: Romania," July 2000, retrieved from <http://www.state.gov>, on November 8, 2011.

There was both a scale of values where each person knew his or her place and a clear social system, with obvious social classes – as contradictory as it may seem in the light of socialism and communism as systems eradicating social differences among people, system based on equality among all members of a society. Thus, during the socialist education system, students from all levels were studying very hard since there were only few places at university level and only the very best ones could succeed, and also in order for one to pass from one level to another in school or high school, if they desired to be in the best classes, students had to have the very best grades at all subjects of examination. If on one side competition proved efficient, students used to study hard and be serious about school, parents cared about school, too, on the other hand, teaching methods focused mostly on memorization of material for state exams. Very little emphasis was placed on critical thinking. Creativity was and is still not too encouraged in the Romanian education system. Students were not taught that it is desirable to think out of the box, when the contrary they were punished if they had too much initiative. Same goes for the Romanian education system nowadays, even after the *Bologna* reforms. Perhaps, however, that the 2011 *Education Law* will bring some good changes in this respect. The desire to toughen again a system that now lacks rigour (and that showed in the low-passing rate at baccalaureate degree this year). If teachers were to be paid what they deserve, if there were to be more enforced discipline and less corruption in the school system, further generations will be more like those of the socialist time with yet another advantage too: the one they could also think for themselves, have initiative, think creatively and be different in a good way.

In the socialist system, the Ministry of Education set the curriculum and the curriculum and the textbooks were heavily influenced by the communist doctrine – Religious and private schooling was nonexistent in communist Romania. The Ministry also planned the number of students who would be accepted at institutions. Students were generally free to apply to the school that they chose, but acceptance was regulated by the state. The number of pupils to be accepted at schools of each level was planned during the summer by The Ministry of Education for the school year beginning in September.³ The Ministry of Education and the state declared that all schools had the same quality of education, but it was clear that technical schools were the emphasis of the state. Agricultural and rural schools had fewer resources and were not sought after like technical schools, which included the sciences and engineering. Regarding Arts, foreign languages

³ S. Rabitte, *op. cit.*

included there, the competition was even harder, and each year only one of the three state universities would have open seats for the students passing the entrance exams. Thus, one year students who would want to study English had to go to Bucharest to attend courses at the University of Bucharest, the next year there will be seats available for exams in Iasi at *Al I. Cuza* University while the third year students desiring to major in English will have to go to Cluj to that State University. Usually 10 to 15 places in the whole country were assigned yearly for those who would like to major in English, meaning that for each place there would have been over 300 well prepared students competing. Education reforms in the 1970s provided a heavy emphasis on technical schools at a ratio of two-thirds technical schools to one-third or even less humanity schools. This was, in part, due to Ceausescu's belief that study of the humanities was a waste of state resources and that intellectuals were not productive members of society like those trained in the industry. The emphasis on technical education is exemplified by the different tracks of curricula available to students entering high school. Technical schools, at the high school level, were divided into different types and students were selected for these on the basis of entrance exam scores. The best students were placed into physics and math curricula, middle grade students were placed into electronics and mechanics, while the rest will specialize in textile industry, wood industry, etc. Each high school student was also compelled to complete a one-month internship or apprenticeship per trimester and also each student had to spend time doing agricultural work during fall, when all Romanian population will be involved in harvesting.

Despite the technical emphasis of education, Rabitte⁴ notes that the socialist curriculum was well balanced – even by Western standards. Students balanced their technical training with courses in Romanian literature and language, two additional foreign languages, even if students had only one or two hours a week of foreign languages, history, sports, geography, biology, and drawing. Physical education was obligatory and even during breaks, students were gathered in the yard of their kindergarten, school or high school to perform a few stretches and different types of physical exercises. Gaining both general knowledge and technical one – student having to go each semester for practical training in the factories depending on their curricular emphasis, was important. However, emphasis was placed on Math, Physics, and Chemistry, students taking two hours of math a day, one of physics and one of chemistry a day if they specialized in math-physics. It is not surprising that international estimates of literacy rates were

⁴ S. Rabitte, *op. cit.*

reported so high. Schools taught the English, French, German, Spanish, and Italian languages. However, Russian was not heavily taught in schools because of Ceaușescu's severance of ties with the Soviet Union during the late 1960s. Each year, student will be rated – same happens nowadays but with more tolerance and flexibility, and they will be given first, second, third place and a few mentions. Grades in both the socialist and actual education system are 1 to 10, with 1 being the lowest and 10 the highest. One had to receive 5 at each discipline, at each subject each semester in order to pass. Same goes for each exam necessary for passing from one level to another, with 6 being the average of all exams taken. At university level, there were only a few students who graduated *Summa cum Laudae*, with 10, and they were Honor students, Meritry national scholars. Another think worth mentioning here was that gifted children, adolescents and young people did not have enough opportunities to develop their talents. Also, very bright students could not finish school faster than their peers, could not do two years in one for instance, thus they were stuck in the same level with slower students. If on one side teachers used to concentrate on teaching the very best students in the school, the mediocre ones and weak ones being let at the mercy of private tutoring, etc., on the other side, gifted children too could not truly benefit from their skills, talents and abilities. Also, even if in one of the above paragraphs I was writing about the role of physical education in socialist Romania, on the other hand the lack of adequate state support showed even in this area since not too many students knew how to swim or skate due to the lack of swimming pools and skateboards.

Education in Romania after 1989: After 1989, the Romanian education system began the process of reforms, but without continuity, each new person in charge bringing his or her personal agenda into reforming education. Education reforms were adopted, yet chaotically, and implementation of reforms was and continuous to be a slow process. Market reforms allowed several new publishing houses to open up and print books for the new national curriculum, however the standards are not as high as needed, and due to corruption not always the best textbooks are selected. Even the current Romanian Minister of Education, Dr. Daniel P. Funeriu was referring to current Romanian textbooks as to “books that put one to sleep”. Also, due to slow changes or even no changes in mentality, communist/socialist ideas remain even nowadays among the teachers and the academic staff. Thus, Romanian managers (school principals and university presidents included here too) tend to favour long briefings and meetings where there is much talk and little work and teachers and professors still favour courses

they read while students take notes. It is interesting to notice that immediately after the 1989 Revolution; one controversial reform allowed students the opportunity to dismiss teachers and professors that were not changing with society, but that was a very temporary movement. In addition, some teachers who were active members of the communist party were forced to retire from teaching,⁵ but that again was just immediately after the 1989. There always have been and still are many contradictory things in the Romanian education system. On one hand, the Romanian government placed emphasis on following a certain retirement age; however, both state and private universities are full of teachers that should have retired a very long time ago. Also, we borrowed ideas and procedures from other education systems, yet we do not follow through as needed. To give an example, student evaluations do not have the same value they hold in the American system, for instance and many times it is not even the students who fill in the forms but teachers themselves just before some ARACIS or ARACIP committee will show up. There is too much bureaucracy, not enough honesty, and too much corruption in s a system that needs to be drastically reformed. Tougher rules that are being implemented regarding the promotion of professors came a little too late punishing those that are good while for too many years after 1989 assistants were very fast and with almost no writing or research promoted to full professors. Also there is something similar to mafia – the so-called “nepotism” in the university system, where family clans rule. One of the immediate reforms of education after 1989 was to rid the country of socialist ideology classes. Religious education and other private schools began to emerge from socialism. Included in this was a growth of private universities of different caliber. Many of these schools were, especially initially, quite expensive for locals and the curricula was and is still not always very good. It does not mean that state curricula are any better. Since universities became autonomous, the curricula did not become mostly better than before but unfortunately mostly worse, courses and seminars being placed in the curricula not based on students’ needs according to their chosen specialty, their major, but according to human resources, meaning according to professors’ training and specialties. Even over 20 years after 1989, some of the private universities do not have the resources of well-established state universities, not that state universities are also very competitive when there is much corruption and little real competition and when at many universities some families rule the place. No wonder, that Romanian higher education system places very low and we have no elite schools, no first tier universities, and none of the Romanian universities ranks in the very

⁵ S. Rabitte, *op. cit.*

first 500 ones in the world. Regardless of criteria taken into consideration for making the “top 500 most important universities in the world”, not a single such Romanian institution has managed to make the list, even though our Hungarian, Polish or Czech neighbors have at least one institution in this list. Every year, four such lists are published: “The Academic Ranking of World Universities”, conducted since 2003 by the Shanghai University “Jiao Tong”, “QS World University Rankings”, made by the Times magazine, “HEEACT”, made by the Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan and “Webometrics” made by a Spanish state institution.

Of all these, *The Academic Ranking of World Universities* seems to be the most reliable, as the list is made according to the number of graduates who have won the Nobel prize, the Fields Medal prize (the most important prize given to a mathematician) and the number of published studies in the most relevant science magazines. Every year, more than 1,000 universities are analyzed and the first 500 names are made public. As expected, the list is dominated by American education institutions. 17 of the first 19 best universities in the world are American. Top three is made of Harvard, Stanford and University of California, Berkeley, while UK’s Cambridge comes fourth. North America has 184 universities in the top 500, Europe has 208, the Asian/Pacific area has 106, and Africa has 3. Of course, higher education units in Romania do not count, but countries in our area are quite well placed – Hungary and Poland each have two universities in the top 400, the Czechs have one university in the top 300 and Slovenia has one in the top 500. By continents, 212 of the first 500 universities are North American, 9 are Latin American, 222 are European, 15 are Australian, 38 are Asian, 3 are Arabian and one university is from Africa.

Also, with too many students graduating and with too little emphasis on actual real life training, many students who graduated especially after 1995 found that their degrees were not valuable in the market. As reform continued, there were and continue to be improvements in the private universities and many became nationally accredited, even if even the accreditation process was not always very clear or fair. Rabitte⁶ suggests that private institutions institutions, Romanian private universities have improved greatly and have sunk much of their profits into internal, capital improvements. State run universities and their curricula also came under reform. Reisz⁷ argues that the initial reform of universities in the 1990s was

⁶ S. Rabitte, *op. cit.*

⁷ R. D. Reisz, “Curricular Patterns Before and After the Romanian Revolution,” *European Journal of Education*, 29(3), 1994, pp. 281-290.

an expansion of academic freedom. These included a development of new disciplines by academics along with the fall of barriers to international information (e.g., by the Internet). However, even nowadays most Romanian universities do not have the needed resources for real research since they lack subscription to online research databases or to printed specialized journals and most universities do not have enough computers or printers for their students, professors and staff. The 1989-1995 reform toward a more open society included a new emphasis on business, and the arts and humanities in education. However, the new government in 1991 continued to promote the industrialization of Romania and technical education remained important. This meant deemphasizing fields such as health and education to fund industrial priorities. These implementation problems are of particular concern to rural areas that are underfunded and without good facilities and textbooks. Raisz⁸ argues that the early reform experiment of “absolute freedom” in curricular affairs was considered to be unsuccessful. Therefore, he suggests that academics in Romania have been held back by the Ministry of National Education and that this signals a return to more central control over education in Romania. The Romanian curriculum also changed from an emphasis on memorization to a more emphasis on critical thinking. International experts aided Romania with this transition mostly in urban areas, however measures implemented were somewhat artificial and they did not consider the actual cultural background becoming forms with no real content. The transition was even slower in the rural areas where teachers still follow the old teaching techniques, where students and their parents do not always have the material resources needed for good education. Despite reform efforts since the 1989 revolution, many problems persist including what has been termed as “chaotic growth”⁹. Student enrollments increased from 164,505 in 1988-1989 to 256,690 in 1992-1993; the number of faculties tripled; and private universities grew to 73 by 1995. Along with this growth came a serious shortage of teachers. The number of teaching positions grew from 14,485 to 31,249 from 1989 to 1993. However, although the positions grew by 116 percent, the number of positions filled only grew by 64 percent (according to different internet sources). Most newer, after 1989 state and private universities have been founded in the 1990s, and, of course, due to the rapid increase in both the number of universities and the number of available specialties and places at each university, there is an inflation of badly prepared professors and

⁸ R. D. Reisz, *op. cit.*

⁹ K. Smith, “A Romanian Renaissance,” *The London Times. Higher Education Supplement* 1178, June 2, 1995, p. 10.

students — please see findings.

In 1990, Romania put forth objectives for educational reform. Wilson Barrett¹⁰ discusses the reform mission put forth in 1990 by Romania as a series of reforms that were in line with other national reforms (constitutional, political, economic, and social). The following objectives had priority: One was decentralization of educational administration by delegating responsibilities to inspectors and school principals; by increasing university autonomy and the accountability of education through a system of public responsibility for efficiency; and by creating boards to facilitate the participation of local officials, parents, trade, and industry. The other very important priorities included: modernization of education finance, reorganization of teacher training, restructuring of vocational and secondary technical schools, modification of curricula including books, and the abolition of the state monopoly over textbooks. Along with granting more autonomy, Romania also prioritized higher education reform to include academic evaluation, accreditation, and new financing systems. Finally, new government institutions were set up to implement education reform. These included the Department of Reform, Management, and Human Resources (under the Ministry of Education); the establishment of teacher centers in each county; regional managers of reform at the local level; a network of pilot schools organized by the Institute for Educational Services; the National Council for Educational Reform; and the National Council for Evaluation and Accreditation. Given the discontinuity in the system, it is still laudable that the Romanian educational system is still competitive not as before of course, and that Romanian students stand out in both high school and college. Romanian high school students hold a record number of medals and distinctions in international math, physics and computer science competitions, Romanian computer scientists, engineers, and medical doctors are considered among the best in Europe, and Romanians students who receive grants overseas are the best teaching assistants and research graduate assistants at the institution that offered them financial support. In fact, compared to all Central and east European countries, Romania sends most students to top American universities yearly. Given the performances these students show abroad, one can see the intellectual capacity of the Romanian academic body and the potential of Romanian students to top students in universities around the world. However, due to universities desperate desire to have more money, weaker and weaker students are enrolled each year at both state and private universities and

¹⁰ W. Barrett, "Romania," *European Education: A Journal of Translations* 27, Winter 1995/1996, pp. 70-71.

there is much pressure on the faculty to make sure the students, regardless their capacity and work, to pass and be graduated if possible even with good grades, meaning there is serious grade inflation in the Romanian education system all the way from first grade to doctorate degrees.

Another comment to make about post 1989 Romanian education is that a staggering 41% of 15-year-old Bulgarian students have difficulties with reading, which ranks Bulgaria first in Europe while Romania is second in the negative ranking with 40% while the average EU percentage is just 20%. The data comes from a new study titled “Teaching Reading in Europe: Contexts, Policies and Practices,” which was published by the European Commission.

A Few Words about the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sport and a Few More Words about Romanian Higher Education System as It Stands in 2011: The Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sport is one of the nineteen ministries of the Government of Romania. Over the years the Ministry changed its title. Initially it was called Ministry of Religion and Public Instruction, then Ministry of Public Instruction, and then it changed to Ministry of Teaching, Ministry of Teaching and Science, than changed back to Ministry of Teaching. When Andrei Marga became Minister, it introduced the largest reform measures, starting with the name of the institution: Ministry of National Education (Romanian: Ministerul Educației Naționale). In 2000 the name was changed to Ministry of Education and Research (Romanian: Ministerul Educației și Cercetării). This title was kept until April 2007, when it changed to Ministry of Education, Research and Youth (Romanian: Ministerul Educației, Cercetării și Tineretului). Since December 2008 the title is Ministry of Education, Research and Innovation (Romanian: Ministerul Educației, Cercetării și Inovării). From October 1, 2009 to December 23, 2009, Prime Minister Emil Boc served as ad interim Minister, member of the PD-L, and as of December 23, 2009, Daniel Funeriu of the of the PD-L holds the post of Minister of Education. The European University Association will be working with the Romanian Ministry of Education and the Romanian universities to support the implementation of a major new higher education reform bill that came into force this year.

A Few Words about Romanian Higher Education System as It Stands in 2011: Romania has a large higher education sector with 54 public universities and approximately 40 accredited private universities. The new law, which foresees a reform of the entire HE sector, seeks to diversify the system by grouping all

The Knowledge Society and the Reform of Creative Writing

universities (public and private) into three major categories of institutions: research intensive, teaching and research oriented and mainly teaching institutions. The launch of the evaluation process has been announced on 25th of March 2011 at an event involving EUA and Daniel P. Funeriu, Romanian Minister of Education, Research, Youth and Sport as well as the Rectors of the country's main universities. The law requires these reforms and particularly the classification exercise to be supported by an external body. On the request of the Romanian Minister of Education, EUA has agreed to act as this external body. As a first step, EUA has established a high level international expert group to support the reform process. The task of the expert group will be to provide expert advice and follow-up on the methodology for this differentiation exercise, on the development of relevant indicators, and on the evaluation of the documentation received from universities. In this initial phase universities will be asked to evaluate, themselves, to which of the three categories – mentioned in the law – they belong, and to provide or confirm the relevant data, much of which has already been collected by the Romanian Quality Agency (ARACIS), and the Romanian Funding and Research Councils. EUA has agreed to take part in the first phase of this project provided that it is able to support and work with universities in the crucial follow-up phase focused on improving quality and institutional performance. This process will be carried out by the EUA's Institutional Evaluation Program over the next three years.

The Knowledge Society and the Reforms(s) Of Writing

A Few Words about Writing and Its Place in Higher Education: Writing is a central activity in higher education across disciplines. Research results are published in journals and books, and students are required to document their acquired knowledge primarily through written text. Although writing is often referred to as a “skill” or a “competence”, most academics would agree that it involves much more than being able to communicate what you already know. Writing is also an important tool for thinking, learning and knowledge creation. Writing as the “discourse of transparency”, whereby language is treated as ideally transparent and autonomous is a common way to look at writing.¹¹

Current academic practices need to be located within a broader historical and epistemological framework both in order to reach a deeper understanding about what's involved in student writing and in order to inform meaningful pedagogies.

¹¹ T. Lillis and J. Turner, “Student Writing in Higher Education: Contemporary Confusion, Traditional Concerns,” *Teaching in Higher Education*, 6(1), 2001, pp. 57-68.

To learn a discipline involves learning how to think and talk and write in the discipline. This is the basic theoretical assumption and rationale behind investigating the change in academic writing in Romanian higher education over the last few years. Although the centre of interest in this article is writing, it is acknowledged that writing practices are closely interconnected with assessment and structure. Therefore, all of these issues are important topic strands in the article. Thereby the article deals both with writing in general and creative writing as well.

Student Writing at Romanian Universities before the Bologna Reforms: Romania is located in Eastern Europe, at the crossroads of Central and Southeastern Europe, on the Lower Danube, within and outside the Carpathian arch bordering Hungary, Ukraine, Serbia, Moldova and the Black Sea. It is a member of NATO and has joined European Union on January 1st, 2007. At 238,391 square kilometers (92,043 sq mi), Romania is the ninth largest country of the European Union by area, and has the seventh largest population of the European Union with 21.5 million people. Its capital and largest city is Bucharest, the sixth largest city in the EU with about two million people. Romania is the largest country in Balkans and has one of the most developed educational systems in the region. Romania has a long-standing record of national and international academic achievement. The country is home to more than 1,380 high schools, more than 90 universities with over 740,000 students enrolled in high school and 600,000 in college each year.

Student writing at Romanian universities before the 2011 Reform can briefly be characterized as making low demands at both undergraduate level and at master's level—with the exception of the master's thesis. "A major reason for this can be found in the traditional Romanian university model, which has been called the «exam giving university» in contrast to the Anglo-American «instruction giving university»."¹² In such a system students' grades only depend on the final examination and external examiners are important in order to secure a fair evaluation. Romanian students have not been expected to write as much and as regularly as in the United Kingdom and the United States. Even though handing in written papers was always advocated as a good way of preparing for the examination, the system was based on students' free choice. Generally speaking,

¹² O. Overland, *Can Universities Improve?*, UNIKOM, Universitete i Tromsi, Tomso, 1989; O. Overland, "Writing at the «Instruction Giving» and «Exam Giving» University," in O. Dysthe (ed.), *Writing at University*, UNIKOM, Universitete i Tromsi, Tomso, 1994.

undergraduate students did little or no compulsory writing, except for the final examination at the end of one year of study, which in most cases was a sit-down examination of 3 hours. The picture was, however, somewhat more diversified in the humanities and social sciences, where some courses had introduced ‘term papers’ too, especially in the last couple of years. In mathematics and science departments, laboratory reports and site observation reports constituted the bulk of writing. In some subjects like physics, laboratory reports often require very little writing, as the students fill in a standard form. Training in sustained writing was lacking, and this became a problem for many graduate students, combined with a lack of knowledge of the demands of the academic genres expected of them. The Romanian master’s degree before the Bologna Reform was a two-year graduate degree based on a substantial dissertation or thesis with a time frame of 3–4 semesters, which often took longer. One overarching question in this article is how the *Bologna Reforms* affected student writing at undergraduate level and how the *Education Law* of 2011 will even further affect it. Subsidiary questions are how students and teachers react towards the changes and the wider implications for student learning and teachers’ work practices. In the final section, I will discuss how structural changes combined with changes in assessment interacted, and thus created both intended and unintended effects on writing.

Characteristic Features of the Romanian Higher Education and the Bologna Reforms: When 16 European education ministers met in Bologna in 1999 to discuss a common European education policy for the future, few had foreseen the consequences. The *Writing in higher education* 239 Bologna Declaration¹³ is not a treaty that is ratified by parliaments or signed by the governments that were involved in formulating it. Nevertheless, it has already exerted considerable influence on educational policies in many European countries. Its clear goal is the creation of a European Higher Education Area by 2010, in order to ensure mobility within Europe and to make Europe more competitive on the international arena. The objectives of the Bologna Declaration are specific: A common frame of reference for comparing diplomas from all the European countries; An alignment of programs at undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate level: 3-year bachelor’s and 2-year master’s, followed by 3-year Ph.D.; Implementation of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS); Quality assurance systems; Better student and teacher mobility.

¹³ *Bologna Declaration* in particular, retrieved from http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/educ/bologna/bologna_en.html, on November 8, 2011.

The recent reforms of Romanian higher education were strongly influenced by the internationalization in the higher education sector in general, and the *Bologna Declaration* in particular.¹⁴ The *Education Law* of 2011 will further reform the Romanian education system. As a result of the *Bologna Declaration*, the bachelor/master's study structure (3 + 2 years) was implemented at all levels in Romanian universities. The Bologna Reform represents a radical break with many of the traditions in Romanian higher education. It affects the structure and length of undergraduate and graduate studies, the assessment system, teaching, supervision and student learning. Romanian students now get their bachelor's degree in three instead of four years, many courses are modularized and the use of external examiners in undergraduate courses has been reduced. New types of courses have been created, although many of the new programs build upon the old ones. The pedagogical expectations of the reform were clearly formulated in official documents and can briefly be summarized as follows: (1) More use of student-active teaching methods; (2) Closer follow-up of each student and regular feedback on their papers; (3) Closer connection between teaching and assessment; (4) More emphasis on formative assessment and alternatives to traditional examinations, for instance, Portfolio Assessment; and (5) Increased use of information and communication technology. As a result of the new *Education Law*, educational institutions will also have to make agreements or contracts with students concerning courses, clearly outlining the rights and responsibilities of the institution and the student in relation to each other. These measures are clearly in line with international trends in higher education. A more rigorous school system at all levels, the difference between teaching and research institutions, an emphasis on life-long learning, the heavy use of Portfolio Assessment, more student writing and more regular feedback to students are all new directions in education.

In order to see how both the *Bologna Reforms* and the new *Education Law* change the way student and teachers think about writing, I have conducted a national survey and four institutional case studies. The survey was carried out with the aim of collecting quantitative measures of the consequences of the *Bologna Reform* as experienced by the teachers. The survey consisted of 82 questions, and was sent out to a randomized sample of professors, associate professors and lecturers in all the higher education Romanian institutions, both state and private. The survey was administered from April 2011 till June 2011. There were 70 respondents. Statistical analysis shows that there are only small deviations on the variables age, sex, institution and position. It is therefore safe to use statistical

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*

inference tests on the data. The data is, however, not quite representative of the entire population of academic employees as such. A more comprehensive survey sent to more respondents and a survey conducted with students are the next step of this part of the research. As to the case studies, I had to choose a sample of institutions to visit. Given the time and financial constraints, I chose only universities based in the city of Iași. It was particularly important to include state and private universities, big and small altogether. Thus two state universities and two private ones were selected as case studies. Thus, I have selected the *Alexandru Ioan Cuza* University and the Gheorghe Asachi Polytechnic Institute as the two big state universities and *Apollonia* University of Iași and *Gheorghe Zane* University as the two small private universities. Of course, the study needs to be further conducted, including more geographically diverse institutions and both small and big both state and private universities. At *Apollonia* University of Iași, I have already started the student-based survey, too. Here are some of the findings that relate to student writing. In the interviews the teachers and students were not asked specifically about *writing*, but they were asked to talk about the changes after the *Bologna Reform* as they had experienced it. One question was, for instance, “What were the major pedagogical changes after the *Bologna Reform* in your department?” The findings that I report are thus based on what the informants chose to talk about and comment on, as well as the follow-up questions that brought more specific information.

I do not have data to document the exact increase in student writing after the *Bologna Reform*, but the survey data combined with the interviews give a fairly clear picture of increased compulsory student writing. Some 59% of all the respondents in the survey report great or considerable changes in assessment. There is no significant difference between state universities and private universities in this respect (see findings below). A greater number of smaller written assignments are reported by 32% of these. Portfolio Assessment is reported by 37% as the biggest change. This means that, of the 59% who have changed assessment practices (i.e. small assignment combined with tests or portfolios or projects combined with or instead of final examinations), a total of 81% have instigated changes involving more compulsory student writing. The data from the case studies corroborate that there has been a quite substantial change in all the departments included in the study in the direction of compulsory student papers. Here are some question presented in the initial surveys and the statistical data:

Have the Bologna Reforms led to changes in assessment?

Yes, great changes 33; Yes, medium changes 26%; Yes, some changes 13%;

No, just small changes 22%; No changes 6% Total 100%.

As a result of the *Bologna Reforms*, students engaged actively in the content of the subject instead of just listening to teachers and fellow students and as a result of the new *Education Law* this will happen even more. Thus, writing will contribute more and more to “student activity” and thus their writing skills will improve. There seems to be a consensus between teachers and students across institutions that the *Bologna Reforms* have resulted in closer follow-up of students. Of those in the survey who reported changes in their teaching, approximately 70% answered that they give more feedback to the students than before the *Bologna Reform*, and 60% provide more supervision. Although not explicitly stated, it is implicit that feedback means feedback on students’ written texts. Teachers commented on student papers before the *Bologna Reform*, but since writing assignments at undergraduate level were then voluntary in most disciplines, the amount of time the teachers spent on giving feedback had been very limited. In university colleges there has been a tradition of giving more feedback to students, partly because the teaching component is higher for the teachers there than at universities.

Portfolio Assessment

In the survey 29% answered that *Portfolio Assessment* was one of the most notable changes of assessment, while 14% identified project assignments. In the interviews at HSF a frequently voiced opinion was that new assessment practices and better follow-up of students, in the form of feedback to written assignments, were the most noticeable and positive result of the *Bologna Reforms*. A major finding was thus an increase in the total amount of assessment in the institution, a finding that was confirmed by teachers and students alike. The initial positive attitudes towards portfolios seemed to wane when students felt they did not get enough credit for the amount of work they put in. On the other hand, when portfolios replace examinations they tend to have a lower failure rate than examinations. Critics of the reform therefore contend that this contributes to a “light version” of a university degree. Others argue that the higher grades are due to students learning more when they have to write continuously. A closer investigation of portfolio use at the four institutions has revealed a wide variety of definitions of portfolios and has thus corroborated our impression from the interviews. But a common denominator of portfolios of all types is that they require students to write and hand in written texts and that these count towards their grade. Since *Portfolio Assessment* had not even been in the vocabulary of

most higher education teachers in Romania before 2000, it is not surprising to find a great variety of interpretations of what portfolios are. In some cases “portfolio” is used to designate continuous assessment of very traditional assignments, while in other cases teachers used this opportunity to introduce more authentic assignments, with the purpose of tying the course content closer to the world of work. Whatever type of portfolio, undergraduate students were asked to write on a regular basis and hand in their written work for feedback and grading.

Few Discussion Points and Further Explanations:

My theoretical point of departure for this discussion is a view of language and learning as closely integrated.¹⁵ From such a perspective writing supports the learning process by making students engage with the content at a deeper level. A crucial aspect will then be the assignment, whether set by the teacher or by the students themselves. As a result of the 2011 *Education Law*,¹⁶ even more emphasis will be placed on assessment and types of assessments. Another important aspect is feedback that will help students discover misconceptions and encounter different perspectives. Again, as a result of the 2011 *Education Law*, even more emphasis will be placed feedback. Writing in the disciplines also means learning the relevant genres and mastering the demands of academic texts, being always aware of the specific audience’s needs. Qualitative improvement of such writing is dependent on a number of factors, not just a quantitative increase in the amount of student writing. My study focuses mainly on four issues. Thus, first, I will discuss why writing practices were changed by the top-down Bologna reforms, in the face of evidence from decades of school reforms that they have little effect on grass-root practices. My argument is based on a view of assessment as one of the strongest forces for change or retaining the status quo, but I will also discuss other factors. Secondly, I will discuss students’ and teachers’ views on whether the changes had positive effects on student learning. This leads to the third issue, namely, the unintended consequences that are potentially counterproductive to the goal of improved quality of student writing. Fourthly, I will briefly indicate, based on the previous discussion, some critical factors for the future development of writing at

¹⁵ L. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, A. Kozulin (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987; J. Britton, *Language and Learning*, Penguin, London, 1988; O. Dysthe, *Writing and Talking to Learn. A Theory-Based, Interpretive Study of Three Classrooms in Norway and the USA. Report No. 1*, University of Tromsø, Tromsø, APPU, 1993.

¹⁶ *Legea Educației Naționale* (Education Law), retrieved from <http://www.ccdis.ro/userfiles/files/Legislatie/Legea-educatiei-nationale.pdf>, on December 6, 2011.

Romanian institutions of higher education. Necessary at that point was the interviews I conducted which inquired *Why did the reform change writing practices?* In the interviews, I got the clear impression that many teachers interpreted “more student-active teaching and learning” as an invitation to give students more written assignments and they argued that this would engage students in the course contents. This is a “safe” interpretation of active participation, compared to initiating new interactive teaching methods, which would have meant more radical change for many teachers. The general conception was also that writing would increase the quality of students’ learning. The strongest driving force in changing or conserving teaching and learning practice, however, has always been assessment. This has been called the “backwash effect” of assessment in international literature.¹⁷ Assessment is then seen as “the dog that wags the tail”, implying that it has a strong, even determining effect on teaching and learning. Another important raised question was *What other factors contributed to the change in writing practices?* Even though assessment changes are important, it is very unlikely that a top-down reform would have resulted in such widespread changes unless “the soil was ready” for it. We need to take into account that critics of the Romanian university system for decades have deplored the lack of undergraduate writing. Another factor influencing the change in the direction of more student writing is an increased awareness of the demand for communication skills in the students we “produce”. In international discussions of quality improvement, “academic competencies” get a lot of attention and writing is regarded as one of the most crucial of these. The impact of new technology should also be considered. It has been claimed that the widespread use of computers has made our culture more text-oriented . More specifically, the introduction of virtual learning environments (VLEs) in higher education institutions has made it much easier to administer increasing amounts of student papers. The data indicate great variations among departments and within departments regarding the extent and type of use of information and communication technologies. Paper-based portfolios, for instance, are still common in subjects with small numbers of students. It is also likely that the new budget model where a substantial part of the finances depend on student throughput is an incentive to introduce more written

¹⁷ C. Gibbs, *Beyond Testing. Towards A Theory of Educational Assessment*, London, Falmer Press, 1994; L. A. Shepard, “The Role of Classroom Assessment in Teaching and Learning,” in V. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Research on Teaching* (4th ed), Washington, DC, American Educational Research Association, 2001; S. Murphy, “That Was Then, This Is Now: The Impact of Changing Assessment Policies on Teachers and Teaching of Writing in California,” *Journal of Writing Assessment*, 1(1), 2003, pp. 23-45.

assignments. Since grades are predominantly based on written work, writing gains in importance. It is also commonplace that written assignments help students to work more regularly throughout the semester and distribute their work better. Compulsory writing was, therefore, an important element in maintaining quality, in the face of the reduction of the bachelor's degree from four to three years. I also asked *What were students' and teachers' views of the changes and the effects?* The main tendency in the interviews is that both students and teachers are positive towards the changes in writing and feedback practices, but find the increased workload problematic. There was considerable agreement among the teachers interviewed across disciplines that frequent student writing combined with feedback had improved student learning, but it was not clear whether they thought this was due to regular written assignments spreading the workload of students and making them work more, or to a belief in writing as a tool for learning. Nevertheless, our data indicates a broad acceptance of compulsory writing as a quality improvement measure. This was somewhat surprising, since there had been considerable resistance to compulsory writing requirements earlier, sometimes based on the argument that "academic freedom" should also include students' right to decide how they would learn the subject matter. Compulsory assignments and constant feedback would, according to this view, remove a basic difference between universities and schools and counteract students' autonomy and critical thinking. There also seemed to be general agreement among students that writing papers proved to be a good way of learning the subject matter, and also that increased writing had improved their writing skills. A typical statement was: "Writing papers is very time consuming, but we learn a lot". Students were also unanimously positive that the reform had resulted in more regular feedback, even though some complained that it still was not good enough or specific enough. At the *Apollonia University* of Iași, all the interviewed teachers and/or leaders mentioned more compulsory student writing as one of the consequences of the reform, but the effect was rarely discussed. At the Law Faculty from *Alexandru Ioan Cuza* University, however, students specifically talked about the positive consequences of more writing: "We have become much better at writing. The training in writing has been very effective and we have already got positive feedback on this from the workplaces that employ lawyers." When asked about change in work habits, a student leader at the same faculty answered: "We clearly have to work more and the knowledge level is probably higher than before." Another student agreed that this was so in the modules where writing assignments was compulsory, but he also pointed out that avoidance strategies were still

possible: “But there are ways of avoiding regular work. With just one final exam that counts, it is possible to continue as before.” This last point will be discussed later. A major concern for both students and teachers was time. Students generally felt that their workload had increased compared to before the *Bologna Reforms*. This was not in itself the major source of complaint, but they problematized first and foremost that they did not get enough credits for the time and effort they put into writing. The teachers’ ambivalence was also connected with the time factor, but from a different perspective. Many of them felt that they spent too much of their time giving feedback to students’ written texts, and that this took time away from research. This emerged as one of the teachers’ major concerns. Even though many university teachers had earlier advocated increased use of compulsory writing and better follow-up, skepticism was now based on a fear that the extra resources were insufficient to pay for labour intensive pedagogical changes, and that they would be the losers. I then asked for Unintended *effects*? In order to get behind the surface level of the complexities involved when changes of this kind are made, I will first discuss students’ dissatisfaction with not getting enough credit for their writing. It can be argued that this is a result of the difficulty of making real instead of cosmetic changes in an established assessment system. Students voiced a positive attitude towards Portfolio Assessment, but complained that their final examinations had not been reduced in numbers and often not even in size. At both *Alexandru Ioan Cuza* University and *Gheorghe Zane* University, students were positive about more compulsory writing tasks during the semester, as long these counted towards the final grade. At the *Apollonia University* and *Gh. Asachi* Polytechnic Institute, the students said that the continuous writing made them work more regularly, but the assignments were of little consequence for the final examination. Very often the final examination counted for 80%, and a variety of written assignments in the portfolio added up to just 20% of the final grade. Students therefore reported that they experienced ‘the same old stress’ before the examination because the finals demanded new knowledge that had not been covered through the regular written work. The students’ explanation for this was the inherent conservatism in university assessment practices and the teachers’ lack of knowledge about alternative forms of assessment. It is a very common phenomenon both in curriculum and assessment that it is easier to add something than to cut something. If Portfolio Assessment is just added on to existing assessment, without thinking through how it is going to be combined with or replace end-of-term examinations, the change is just cosmetic. If this continues beyond the first reform phase, students will act accordingly and gradually invest

minimally in their writing assignments. Alternatively, it can be solved through negotiations and a reasonable balance found. This has already happened in many of the courses. There are, however, in our interview material signs of more dysfunctional aspects related to the structural changes of the reform that affect students' attitudes towards their writing, and ultimately also endanger the development of quality in writing. In disciplines/courses where the end-of-term examinations were replaced by graded written assignments, or where passing writing assignments was a necessary prerequisite for taking the examination, students prioritized working on their assignments instead of going to lectures, seminars and groups. This is a clear instance of the backwash effect of an assessment system on students' strategic behaviour, but the connection is more complex than it may seem. It is tied up to the modularization, which means that students need to take two or three modules each semester, and if all the modules introduce regular writing assignments, whether in the form of portfolios, continuous assessment or requirements for examinations, the result may be overloading the students and avoidance strategies are to be expected. At some of the institutions there was also concern among the teachers that the great number of compulsory writing tasks given to students had the unintended effect of students reading less and attending fewer teaching sessions unless they were compulsory. This was corroborated in communication students. Students interviewed said that a lot of students tend to drop both lectures and group sessions and that they tend to read selectively, which means that unfortunately they do not get the big overview. It is not surprising, however, that it takes some time to adjust study behaviours to new demands. I then focused on *What are critical factors in the development of writing after the Bologna reforms, in the light of the newly passed 2011 Education law?* Given my theoretical perspective on writing, it is no surprise that I think the quality of Romanian undergraduate education has improved as a result of the changes in writing and feedback practices. Improving writing in higher education, however, is not just a question of quantity or of whether or not it is compulsory. The combination of structural changes (modularization) and changes in the assessment system have influenced student learning processes in complex ways, some of which may be counterproductive to learning, and these need to be dealt with at a national level. I want briefly to highlight three factors that need to be solved at faculty and departmental level. First, a balance must be found between the needs of the students for regular writing and feedback on their work, and the demands on teachers' time. This may mean a general increase in teaching resources and increased use of teaching assistants, but it may also mean new ways

of structuring teachers' work in order to safeguard specific periods of time for research. A balance has to be found between coursework, portfolios and examinations. Students need to feel that the work they put into the writing assignments is given credit and counts towards their grade. There already exist a variety of models of how to combine portfolios and examinations. Many more of these are used in the university colleges, but they would also be improvements at the universities. Then, there is a need for holistic planning of writing development in the various disciplines from the first semester to the PhDs. Key issues are the formulation of explicit learning objectives, a plan for training students and teachers, a plan for progression throughout the entire trajectory and the placement of responsibilities for the writing program.

Conclusions and Further Directions

In this article, I have started to show how the Higher Education *Bologna Reform* in Romania has changed the conditions for undergraduate student writing by advocating more student active teaching and learning, and, more importantly, by giving up the centralized regulation of assessment systems and opening up much more varied assessment formats. This has resulted in extensive use of coursework, Portfolio Assessment and some project assessment. In spite of widespread agreement that Romanian students ought to write more, and considerable development work and advocacy for more undergraduate student writing over many years, it was of little consequence until the assessment system was changed. There are, however, still structural issues that need to be resolved in order to reap the full learning benefits of the increased attention to writing. The fact that Romanian undergraduate students now are required to write more regularly is not enough to make students proficient in writing. There is a need for more holistic planning of writing programs in order to ensure a sensible progression throughout student's educational trajectory. These findings are relevant to higher education in other countries as well, even those where undergraduate essay writing has been an integral part of the system, for instance in the United Kingdom or United States of America. Regular writing is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for improvement in writing, and the necessity of teaching academic writing is increasingly being recognized in most European countries and in North America. The European, particularly the continental, Scandinavian, and eastern European university tradition has been to view writing as a skill students were expected to possess when they entered higher education, or acquire through practice without being taught. The American tradition, however,

dating as far back as the nineteenth century, has been to offer separate courses in writing. More emphasis needs to be placed on writing and creative writing which may lead European universities, Romania universities included to move in the direction of the Anglo-American model of teaching writing, but probably with a particular focus on teaching disciplinary writing instead of general writing courses. This would be in concert with recent writing research that has shown the inadequacy of an academic skills approach to teaching writing and the close connection of writing to disciplinary knowledge cultures.¹⁸ The *Bologna process*, with its early emphasis on structural changes, did not directly involve the content of study programs. The study reported here, however, has shown that, although the change from a 4 + 2 to a 3 + 2 model in Romania had no specific pedagogic or content provisions, it led to more compulsory student writing and increased teacher feedback, partly as a means to maintain quality in the face of reduced time. A similar focus on student writing as an important quality measure may be expected in other European countries as well, but whether the drive to standardize course descriptions and requirements across countries will result in a call for definitions of what, for instance, “writing-intensive courses” means, in terms of students’ written production, remains to be seen.

As further directions, more universities, both state and private need to be surveyed, with equal emphasis being placed on interviewed professors and students. Also, the new surveys need to focus on creativity, cognitive knowledge and creativity, creative writing, artistic assignments across curriculum.

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¹⁸ P. Prior, *Writing/Disciplinarity. A Sociohistoric Account of Literate Activity in The Academy*, Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum, 1998; M. Lea, M. and B. Stierer, *Student Writing in Higher Education—New Contexts*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 2000.

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