

CRITICAL ASPECTS REGARDING THE ACCESS OF STUDENTS COMING FROM RURAL AREAS TO UNIVERSITY QUALIFICATION IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

Loredana-Marcela Trancă, PhD.,

Faculty of Sociology and Psychology, West University of Timișoara
loredana.tranca@e-uvt.ro

Abstract: The objectives of the present study aim at knowing the factors that contribute to the decision to continue studying in university education for students; identifying critical aspects of rural students' access to qualification and identifying measures to improve access for students from rural areas to universities. The study is a qualitative-exploratory one, based on the focus group method. Seven focus groups were organized at the West University of Timisoara, Romania, with personnel involved in the development of university education programs: teachers, rural students and social services employers. The research tool was the moderation guide, having as main topics the students' motivation to continue their studies, the process of admission to the university, the admission process, proposals for improving the access of rural students to the university. The results of this study have an essential instrumental value in terms of developing measures to improve the access of rural students to qualification in university education programs.

Keywords: rural students, university qualification, social sciences, admission.

1. Introduction

Access to education is a fundamental right provided in European and national education policies, with a significant role in addressing socio-economic, demographic, technological, informational or environmental challenges. Access to higher education is a topic widely discussed in the literature, not only in Europe, but also in other countries of the world. (Huges, 2018; Maila & Ross, 2018; Luceș, Sava, Crașova & Malița, 2016; Friesen & Purc-Stephenson, 2016; Hobden & Hobden, 2015; Irvin et al., 2012; James, 2001) The educational policy of the last period, without giving up the objective of quality, has reintroduced equity and equality of education chances among its priorities. The rural environment is a priority for development programs, both for infrastructure investments, support for social services and for education. The access of rural students to higher education is a topic debated on the agendas of universities in Romania, as well as a way of supporting the social inclusion of vulnerable groups. Traditionally, young people in rural Romania have had little participation in education compared to those in the urban environment. In the 1990s, 31% of age-specific cohorts of access to higher education born in the urban area took part in university studies, while the share of those in rural areas was only 5%. (Voicu & Vasile, 2010) After 2001, with the elaboration of the Rural Education Re-launching Strategy, increasing the participation rate of rural youths in higher education in Romania increased to 22%, compared to 38% for the urban environment. (Voicu & Vasile, 2010) In the context of the European Union's strategy to have a knowledge-based economy, meaning a workforce with a high level of education able to compete in a common market, graduating from university is a necessary condition. According to the *Europe 2020*, at least 40% of people aged 30-34 should be graduated in tertiary studies in 2020. With the advancement of young people in the education system, the level of under-representation of those in rural areas is increasing, with the highest value in higher education (National Institute of Statistics, 2019).

In the academic year 2015 - 2016, the rate of students from Romanian universities from disadvantaged environments (using as criteria: the rural environment, localities under 10.000 inhabitants, persons with disabilities and Roma persons) was 26.81%, the share of

students coming from the rural area being 77.2%, and those from the localities with a population under 10.000 inhabitants was 21%. (Popescu *et al.*, 2017)

The motivation of Romanian pupils in rural areas to continue their studies at tertiary level is lower than in urban areas. Only 54.9% of rural students want to attend a college, while in urban areas the intention to continue to university studies is 75.6%. (Pricopie *et al.*, 2011) Among the factors that negatively influence the decision to continue university studies, Voicu & Vasile (2010) states: the social norm (of non-continuing education at university level) distance from the university, the demand on the labor market, the quality of pre-university education, especially at the primary level and gymnasium.

Several studies have highlighted the factors contributing to the disparity in urban / rural proportions in terms of participation in tertiary education in Romania: lower graduation rates for young people studying at high school in rural areas (37% compared with 68% graduation rate of high school students in the urban area); high living costs to continue their studies in urban areas, where universities are located (Sandi & Moarcas, 2007; Novak, & Iosifescu, 2017); low income for young people in rural areas (Novak & Iosifescu, 2017; National Tertiary Education Strategy, 2015-2020); continuing studies is not a rooted model to be followed in life; (National Strategy for Tertiary Education, 2015-2020).

The strategies developed in recent years facilitate the existence of a framework for the development of measures and the implementation of educational programs aimed at increasing the chances of access to education for disadvantaged groups, including young people from rural areas. Romanian authorities are funding support measures for first year students, especially for those at risk from under-represented groups, such as young people in rural areas. For the first time in the academic year 2018 - 2019 nationally funded tuition figures (2000 places) were allocated for high school graduates located in rural areas, thus applying some form of preferential treatment or positive discrimination. (H.G.131, 2018). The idea underlying such an approach is that, in order to achieve equal access to higher education for different social groups, existing inequalities in resources and opportunities must be combated by favoring disadvantaged groups (Trancă, 2016). Another measure designed to support equal access and participation in university education was the provision of rail and metro railway facilities, implemented from 1 February 2017 (HG 42, 2017). Thus, the students enrolled in full time education curriculum - bachelor, master, doctorate - in the accredited higher education institutions in Romania benefit from free of charge internal railway transport in all train categories, second class, throughout the calendar year, regardless of distance or travel routes. One of the directions of the Education and Training Strategy in Romania for the period 2016 - 2020 (2016) is to facilitate access to vocational training programs in the youth education system, focusing on those from vulnerable groups, ie young people from rural areas, the Roma population and people with disabilities, with specific actions providing financial support for the accommodation and living needs of young people. Students residing in the countryside benefit from scholarships from the state budget, which are awarded according to Order 6200/2008 and H.G. 769/2005. This type of scholarship is cumulative with all other types of scholarship and the beneficiaries of this scholarship are obliged to practice in rural education for the specializations for which they have been trained for at least the duration of the studies.

In the context presented above, we propose through the present study to identify the critical aspects that contribute to the access of students coming from rural areas to university studies.

2. Research Methodology

The goal of this research is to identify academic ability of ensuring access to higher education to students from rural areas.

The objectives of this research aim at knowing the factors that contribute to the decision of pursuing further studies in higher education; at identifying some critical aspects regarding students from rural areas accessing qualification; at identifying some measures to improve students from rural areas accessing higher education.

The study was carried out at the West University of Timișoara, the largest university in Western Romania with 11 faculties of social sciences, humanistic sciences and sciences. International ranking placed it 4th among other Romanian universities, hence its status of elite university. Timișoara is the largest academic city in Western Romania, with a rather high living standard.

Research method: To reach our objectives, we initiated a fundamental qualitative-exploratory study based on the focus group method because students can supply new perspectives on the topic that have not been taken into account initially, and because it can ensure the control of the line of question, which impact positively the accuracy of the answers. At the West University of Timișoara, we organised seven focus groups on this topic to which participated people involved in the development of academic programmes: teachers, students from rural areas and employers in social services. Experts in the field moderated the focus groups. Participants were free to state their opinions based on their own experience. Each focus group had three stages. In the first stage, experts explained the study objectives, provided information on the rules regarding the course of talks, provided information regarding the recording and the use of it, and obtained participants' agreements. In the second stage, experts moderated the talks based on the interview guide, and in the third stage they consolidated the information by summarising them, asked for completions, and asked for feedback and provided feedback. The interviews were audio recorded. The approximate duration of a focus group was 60 to 80 minutes. Participation did not incur physical, social, or legal prejudice. Experts did not use names, addresses or people's identities since they were bound to observe the right to privacy and personal life.

The research instrument was an interview guide containing the following topics: the factors determining the participants to the study to pursue their studies in higher education; the motivation for professional choice and the West University of Timișoara; the information and resources necessary to document upon access to higher education; participation in events dedicated to academic careers; observations regarding the admission process and criteria; difficulties before and after becoming a student; future plans in relation to area of origin; suggestions for the improvement of admission to higher education of applicants from the rural area.

There were maximum 20 students per focus group. They were students from the 1st year majoring in social work, pedagogy, sociology and education science; representatives of employers and people involved in the development of academic studies; teachers in the same academic fields.

The methodological approach of this study covered the design of research methodology, data collection through focus groups, analysis of results, and editing the report.

3. Research Results

Our research approach favours the visibility of perceptions and of participants' points of view on motivational factors for pursuing studies, information regarding access to higher education, relevance of admission criteria, difficulties in admission to higher education, and recommendations regarding the improvement of rural area students' access to higher education.

3.1. Motivational Factors for Pursuing Studies

Participants' debates scanned two categories of most representative reasons to pursue higher education: professional and personal.

Personal reasons for pursuing higher education are intrinsic: aptitude, personal interests, solving one's own problems or the problem of relatives or friends, personal development, knowing social realities in the studied field, a profession of choice, desire to self-assess abilities in the field of choice, desire to live in the urban area, desire to change the marital pattern (marriage at an early age specific to rural area), and choosing a career.

Professional factors are: competition specific to contemporary society asking for choosing society-related jobs and careers, specialising at higher education levels, meeting the need for professionals on the labour market, developing professionally (by getting employed or by developing one's own organisations after improving the knowledge in the field), finding opportunities to get employed in fields for which they believe are gifted, progressing at social level, validating knowledge and abilities acquired informally, certifying professional competencies acquired during volunteer activities in the field before going to university, getting a diploma ensuring the preservation of one's current job (constraint by either the employer or by the legislation in action), getting a diploma allowing promotion within the organisation, wish to reconvert professionally after graduation wish to gain financial independence after graduation, completing one's studies after graduating abroad to comply with Romanian regulations, norms, and standards.

The conclusion is that the motivation for pursuing higher education is essential: it valorises participants' aspiration related to themselves and to their own career.

3.2. Information regarding admission to higher education

In order to be admitted to higher education, the participants got information regarding the admission to higher education through recommendations from their colleagues, from graduates, from acquaintances or from relatives who either worked in the field, acted as volunteers or had pertinent information from within the system; through one or several internships as volunteers in the field, particularly in organisations cooperating with the university; through specialists working in organisations whose beneficiaries they were; through the university guides received upon high school graduation and through information from the faculties and departments they were interested in; through university fairs, the Open Doors Day during the "Week Otherwise" (a national event for non-formal education activities in schools) or through presentations made by teachers promoting their universities, faculties, and departments in high schools; through fliers promoting the educational offer of the university supplied within promotion activities in high schools or from acquaintances; from a related field in which they were already active. All these information from different source were completed with online sources (the sites of the university, the Facebook pages of the departments, the sites of the different organisations with which the university cooperates, etc.).

3.3. Relevance of admission criteria

During the documenting period on the admission process to higher education, there were two categories of information of great interest for the participant: administrative information, on one hand, and academic information, on the other hand.

The most relevant administrative information in the choice of a major were: admission conditions and degree of difficulty of these conditions; admission period (admission opportunity in a second admission period); contents of admission file (documents necessary to apply for admission); number of budgeted places (including knowing admission means of the last years and graduation percentage of admission examination); level of the tuition fees

(and the possibility of reductions or of instalment payment); duration of courses and the possibility of prolonging this period; schedule flexibility (number of classes per day and per week; morning or afternoon courses; weekend classes; minimum number of course and seminar attendance classes); availability of distance courses; facilities for disabled people, for people from placement centres, or for Roma people; accommodation in the university campus (prerequisites for a place in the dormitories; accommodation fees; accommodation conditions and number of beds per room).

Academic information of interest in the decision of pursuing higher education in a certain field were: the subjects to study; majoring opportunities; academic prestige, credibility and tradition in the field; international recognition of the graduation diploma (which partly justifies the wish of the participant to emigrate, at least temporarily); opportunity of identifying a job in the field at local, regional or international level after graduation; possibility of acknowledging credits from another major in a similar field; possibility of training stages abroad or of volunteer stages acknowledged by the university; type of practice stages (during summer or during the semester); attitude of the teachers towards the students (type of interaction, degree of availability, etc.).

3.4. Difficulty of getting admitted to higher education for people from the rural area

General talks and focused evaluations about the difficulties students from the rural area face when accessing higher education show the following: information and recruitment of future students is rather poor in the rural area: the only people really informed about almost everything are those who attend high school in towns and cities; poor quality of education and training during secondary school because of the substitute teachers that have no proper training, hence the low rate of graduation and the impossibility of pursuing higher education; access to information regarding academic offers provided directly in the rural area, hence the need for supplementary information and the difficulty of obtaining such information (the income of their parent prevent them from paying the subscription for cable Internet); the long distance between home and university, hence supplementary time for commuting (commuting is less costly for them compared to rent because accommodation in the dormitories is not available for all students due to compelling criteria and renting in an academic town is rather costly; means of transportation difficult to access because of the route map and of the schedule, which hinders academic schedule; difficult access to local transportation because of the snowfalls in winter and of floods in spring and autumn; high costs of transportation; lack of parental support for the pursuit of higher education because of the low income level of the students' parents.

3.5. Recommendations for the improvement of admission to higher education for people from the rural area

After analysing the debates with the participants to the focus groups, we can suggest a few solutions for the improvement of the access of students from the rural area to higher education:

- promotion activities in the high schools of neighbouring counties ever since the beginning of the school year (grades 11 and 12) to present our educational offer and future job opportunities, together with teachers, students, and graduates that are already working in the field;
- school children's access to activities within the university to better know the academic environment (courses, seminars, laboratories, practice, library, etc.);
- improving the information on the university, faculty, or department sites regarding the admission process or the education process, testimonials or videos of graduates, video materials depicting activities and events organised by the different departments;

- taking into account the gap between information in urban and rural areas, we suggest posting our educational offer and job descriptions in the most visible and accessed places in the rural areas: town halls, cultural centres, shops, etc.;
- publishing information on a constant basis in town hall publications (such as Monitorul) that are distributed free of charge to all inhabitants;
- promoting within NGOs active in the field;
- organising volunteer stages in the field of choice before applying for admission;
- supplying teaching aids in both printed and electronic formats (for the students from the rural area) and sharing them via an online platform allowing access and downloading, as well as communication with the teachers;
- organising Massive Open Online Courses accessible from local public institutions especially for educational activities for community members;
- organising admission selection online or in a town (county seat) close to rural areas;
- establishing, administering and developing within local public administration level of information services for the youth to motivate people from the community to pursue higher education;
- development of information and awareness raising programmes for the parents of future students;
- developing support services to approach barriers in the process of enrolling in higher education and, later, in student life in an academic town;
- granting scholarships to students from the rural area;
- involving students from the rural area in paid practice stages;
- support from students from higher years.

4. Conclusions

Students from rural areas face difficulties in their pursuit of higher education; this study identifies a few critical aspects regarding the training of these students. Rural students' access to academic training in Romania is difficult because of the costs of higher education, including accommodation and food costs, motivation, access to information and communication, lack of parental support, and other factors. This topic is of real interest nowadays, which made us advance recommendations for the improvement of higher education. Since access to education is a human right, we need to develop equitable conditions for all students, no matter their environment. Compared to students from urban areas, students from rural areas need more time and financial resources to pursue higher education. Enrollment of more students from rural areas in higher education contributes to creating an educated workforce for rural communities. Also, obtaining a university degree helps a person to have a broad set of less tangible opportunities for those without higher education, more employment options, higher income potential, and improved quality of life at a general level. The specializations chosen for this study provide jobs that are needed in rural areas, such as social workers, pedagogues, psychologists and sociologists, but which are not sufficiently available at national level.

This study could be a basis for the extension of learning opportunities and it could contribute to the development of measures for the improvement of rural students' access to higher education training. This study provides clues regarding the opinions of social science students; however, the study should be extended to the other domains of study in the university. Our study provides a first perspective on the challenges for students from rural areas majoring in social sciences at the West University of Timisoara, but this perspective should be followed by an implementation of their suggestion correlated with their future progress.

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