

ACCESS TO BASIC AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

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I. Approach

From Plato’s Academy and Aristotle’s Lyceum to the school and university campuses of today, the secondary and tertiary education of successive generations has traversed a complex process whose essential vector indicates a trend of quantitative accumulation: getting as many subjects as possible to further their education by committing to universities and other forms of post-secondary education. High schools and universities alike, each in its own way, have become common areas for the accumulation and development of knowledge and cultural awareness by means of social integration, this environment invariably facilitating the development of students’ individual personality.

Free access to any form and level of education is a right which has become, especially in today’s information society, inalienable for anyone. It is a right exercised without limitation, but positively so; it is based on the quintessentially public nature of educational interest, national states playing an active role in the capitalization thereof. Active as it may be, this role has been interpreted differently by different countries. In many states, including Romania, secondary and tertiary education has become accessible to whoever wishes to pursue it. This is not just important but also significant for cohabitation in the information society. This degree of access is positive, its initial intention being to solve a major issue weighing heavy on communities and societies alike: a lack of training and knowledge expressed by a low potential for civilization and a low capacity for social integration. However, this issue has reached the limits of the “*reductio ad absurdum*” demonstration, due to the inconsistency of the initial hypothesis: *If* access to secondary and tertiary education is allowed to all those who want it, *then* the level of education expands in terms of magnitude and develops qualitatively in terms of intensity.

The hypothesis at the basis of the “new” outlook on education, extracted from a wider view included in the “new education” trend (and which has fully proven, over the course of more than one century, not just its benefits, but also its nefarious consequences on education) - is based on overbidding (in a mechanistic manner) the causation above, in which the invariable is given the rank of certitude, the random (conditional) is ignored, and hidden evidence is completely omitted¹. So that the vision built on an inconsistent hypothesis (in spite of the fact that it was based on a normative judgment which claimed a desirable education) became, in its turn, incomplete, as it failed to consider realities such as:

- the limited nature of resources and the absence of political willingness to redistribute resources based on prioritization criteria;

¹ See Adrian Gorun, Horațiu Tiberiu Gorun, *Despre Lebăda neagră a lui Nassim Taleb și eroarea confirmării*, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, Bucharest, 2018.

- the absence of the legislative framework regarding the applicability of the principle of subsidiarity in certain states;
- major differences in potential among individuals (cognitive, attitude, psychomotor, moral etc.);
- scant and improper institutional potential;
- scarce teaching staff and, in many cases, qualitatively depreciated;
- uncertain job market; low absorption rates on a medium term;
- inadequate educational offer;
- degree inflation and the devaluation thereof;
- decrease (all the way to the cancellation) of the competition between candidates to secondary and tertiary education, which translates into an involutory shock to quality.

II. *Unanticipated effects: the principle of marginal utility and its effects in education*

Education is a public service, the access to it requiring a series of social and individual costs, which are not only monetary in nature: they include less visible costs (which are oftentimes excluded from calculations) such as time invested, sustained effort (mental and physical energy), postponement of other objectives, abandonment of various social and cultural alternatives, integration into the rigors of a pre-established program, and so on.

Since it is a public service, education - just like any other public service - is part of the value circuit; access to education therefore has as a result *education consumption*. As the last phase of the value circuit, education consumption is subjected to *the laws of demand and supply*, which means that there can be case in which:

1. demand is higher than supply, which means that a series of basic criteria in terms of education consumption remain unfulfilled (the access to education is limited);
2. demand is lower than supply, which means that the interest for the consumption of education is low,
 - a) either due to a disparity between the supply and the aspirations and requirements of education consumers (inadequate study programs, outdated content, educational strategies that are lacking etc.);
 - b) or due to oversaturation (marginal utility), a result of long, monotonous and inadequate (“useless”) consumption of education;
 - c) disinterest of individuals or groups (exponents or carriers of peripheral subcultures) for education; the lack of motivation (intrinsic or extrinsic) for education.
3. demand is equal to supply - ideal situation, manifested as a trend, in which the *quality* vector is distributed at the level of both terms of the equation; it entails the optimal educational environment which gives rise to demand stimulation strategies by introducing motivational factors which relax the specific threshold of marginal utility, as well as supply diversification strategies, by continuous reference to what is new.

Here we must say that not all goods become depleted due to consumption; there are goods which, although used and consumed, do not lose value. A work of art, for instance, does not lose its value by entering the value circuit to which art “consumers” have unlimited access. However, many visitors an exhibition has (painting, sculpture, books, museum etc.), the exhibited goods do not lose their intrinsic value. At the same time, it must be stated that no matter how much drawn

we are to a work of art, at a given time - by repeated contact with its aesthetic features - comes saturation, as well as a gradual decrease in curiosity (motivation, interest) for its qualities. Regardless how attracted we are to the narrative of a novel, by reading it over and over again our interest for it reaches the point of marginal utility. If I am attracted to a vehicle of a certain brand or make, after I purchase it I am no longer interested in buying another similar one (at least temporarily). If I watch a movie fifty times, the fifty-first time my interest in seeing it is almost zero.

So how does this translate with regard to the consumption of the public asset and service - education?

As in the case of art, the consumption of education - understood as individual training, by cultural awareness and social integration¹ - is, normally, unlimited, especially with regard to permanent education or life-long learning. This means that regardless how many people take part in education (by receiving training as well as by self-learning), they do not deplete its values, scientific references, goals and objectives. In other words, education preserves its “substance” and perpetuates from one generation to the next by means of its universal invariables.

That is why the principle of marginal utility in the consumption of education makes its way by connection to the level of interest (individual, group) for education, which is supported by intrinsic motivation, correlated to the subject’s goals and desires. Therefore, if the subject believes that their interest for education is supported by their desire *to know, know how to do and know how to be*, then their motivation for education has the coordinate of permanence. If, on the contrary, the subject believes that their interest for education is supported only by the acquisition of a certificate or a diploma (regardless of the conditions) that would improve their resume, then their motivation for education disappears after that goal has been reached, the holder of that diploma reducing education to the utility of a document granting them various rights. If the subject attending a form of education becomes convinced during the course of their studies that the diploma that they would receive at the end is useless, they abandon their studies. Finally, when the content of the education is seen as useless and irrelevant, the subject’s lack of interest takes the form of marginal utility as far as they are concerned. This does not mean an education surplus or excess but, from an objective point of view, it indicates an educational *deficit*. The feeling of “too much” is the result of subjective perception; it is this perception that pushes the subject to abandon their education and justify their actions.

The educational demand versus supply relationship in a community or society is not conditioned one-dimensionally; a series of factors influence it one way or the other. Thus, an oversized demand can be generated and conditioned not only by an increase in the interest for education, but also by the insufficiency of resources to sustain a supply that is quantitatively and qualitatively close to the demand. The regulation is carried out by an exogenous mediation which consists in the introduction of a series of selection criteria which generate and support competition in access to the various forms and levels of education. This type of regulation introduces limitations to the access to education.

In its turn, an oversized supply can be generated and conditioned simultaneously by an interest on the part of education providers in attracting additional resources for themselves, but also by a decrease in the interest in education, for any of the reasons presented above (Point 2 a,

¹ See Adrian Gorun, *Contribuții la reconstrucția identității educației naționale. Sinteze*, Editura Academica Brâncuși. Târgu-Jiu, 2015

b, c). In this case, the competition between those who accede to a form of education is replaced by the competition between education suppliers, who fight to attract, access and keep as many students and thus increase their resources. The balance can be reinstated by intervening over the quality of the educational supply, which will decrease its scope but at the same time increase interest in learning. Lastly, the balance between demand and supply can be achieved (on a medium term, at most) in two ways:

- By means of the two types of regulation indicated above, limiting access to education by imposing various conditions;
- By qualitative diversification of the education supply, whose effect is the stimulation of the demand and thus access to education becoming unlimited.

The fact that the effects of marginal utility were not anticipated when the principle of unlimited access to education was consecrated is proven by the involutory shock of quality.

III. Conclusions

1. The access to education is an established right for any and everybody in late modernity. The state and the community have the obligation to provide the normal framework required to an unlimited access to education for every human being, intervening by means of stimulating measures. The right to primary education is connected to two categories of obligations:
 - students’ obligation to attend school;
 - the state’s obligation to guarantee free primary education.
2. The access to vocational, secondary and tertiary education is a right which the citizen exercises according to their own options and interests. This access can become limited in situations such as:
 - intersection of exogenous factors (poverty, migration, absence of resources etc.) with endogenous factors (a decrease in the motivation to study, poor quality of the educational environment, reaching the point of marginal utility by concluding on an individual level that the contents of the learning is useless etc.);
 - the demand for secondary and tertiary education cannot be satisfied by the actual supply;
 - the end result of the education does not correspond to the aspirations of the youth enrolled in the secondary and tertiary education;
 - the choice of specialization is done at random, the students not being counseled prior (the specialization is not selected according to the student’s options and potential, talents and abilities).
3. Remedial measures - especially affirmative action programs, such as those for supporting underprivileged students or anti-poverty measures - failed to bring the desired results, the motivation for learning among the targeted communities remaining limited. Moreover, although these programs aimed at widening access to education, school dropout rates did not decrease;
4. Family, community and entourage are factors which can stimulate the motivation for learning, but, at the same time, they can increase the effects of marginal utility. These are the effects that school in general seems to be less and less capable of counteracting.