

The Bureaucratization of the Romanian Education System from a Weberian Perspective

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Abstract

The study aims to identify the causes and effects of the bureaucratization of the Romanian education system, in relation to the Weberian theory of bureaucracy. The principles of bureaucracy, enunciated by Max Weber, are discussed and the way they are taken into account and perceived in the case of education in Romania is followed. The study also aims to compare Romania with other countries (Finland, Spain and the United Kingdom) in terms of the perception of bureaucracy. The main results of the other research show that the countries mentioned follow a pragmatic approach, while the Romanian education system prefers a bureaucratic approach. This difference results from the standards that are lacking in Romanian education, both at management level and in terms of educational activities themselves. In pre-university education in Romania, for example, there is a culture of control, without a clear picture of what a high-performing school means, school inspections become only a bureaucratic action, without really measuring the quality of teachers and education. In higher education, bureaucracy is confirmed by the permanent appointment of rectors or by other legislative decisions that burden universities with tasks that should be carried out by other institutions. The new education laws in Romania increase the bureaucracy already existing in the education system, and all this is the result of misunderstanding and misapplication of the principles of bureaucracy.

Keywords:

Education, Bureaucracy, Weberian Bureaucracy, Education Laws, Romania.

1. Introduction

The issue of bureaucratisation of the Romanian education system is increasingly mentioned in the analysis of the latest education reform actions. In this regard, this study aims to observe what are the

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main elements that lead to this bureaucratization, but also what are the solutions of other education systems to this problem.

The theoretical reference point for the issue of bureaucratisation is Max Weber's approach, in which he elaborates on the one hand a series of principles for the functioning of a bureaucracy, and on the other hand warns of the danger of the "iron cage", i.e. dehumanisation and the removal of intrinsic values through bureaucratic activities (Weber, 1978).

We will also look at national legislation on the education system to analyse policy makers' approach to educational reform, but also at other countries' approaches, such as Finland, the United Kingdom or Spain, for a comparative analysis of educational policies.

The issue of teacher autonomy, teacher trust in policy makers, the issue of politicisation of the education sector or the rationalisation of higher education are the main themes of this study, and the main aim is to analyse how bureaucracy leads to all these.

2. The revision of the speciality literature

Max Weber uses the theory of rationality in presenting his vision of bureaucracy and, in particular, uses formal rationality as a pillar of modernisation through bureaucratisation. Bureaucratization is the social system "most difficult to destroy", according to Max Weber, and represents the shift from "social action" to "rationally organized action" (Weber, 1978, p. 987).

The characteristics of formal rationality identified by Ritzer (2003) in the Weberian text "efficiency, predictability, calculability and technologies that control people" (p. 34) show us the two ways in which bureaucracy can be understood. The first direction, that of technological progress, specific to Western society, and the second, that of moving away from one's own values. On the one hand, this rationalisation of society leads to technical progress, and on the other, to the creation of an "iron cage of humanity" (Weber, 1978).

Max Weber (1947) identifies 5 principles of bureaucracy:

- Division of labour and specialisation

Involves the division of tasks into specialized jobs or departments. Thus work is divided and organised according to the skills and expertise of employees to ensure the highest degree of efficiency.

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- Rules and regulations

Each task must be carried out according to a well-defined system of rules. The rules are clearly formulated and strictly enforced to ensure that the bureaucratic system functions smoothly.

- Hierarchy and authority

In a bureaucracy, positions are organised according to the principle of hierarchy. A layered organisation of authority, where those at the top of the hierarchy have the greatest authority, gradually decreasing to the lowest level, outlines responsibilities and improves communication between members of a bureaucratic system.

- Impersonality

This impersonal attitude applies from the top down, from those in charge to subordinates. Relationships between members of a bureaucracy must be impersonal to ensure that favouritism or prejudice is avoided.

- Promotion based on performance

Employees are hired and promoted based on their job performance.

In other words, in Max Weber's view, bureaucracy is a technical system, where the human factor dispenses with its social side or 'social action', dispenses with emotions and even personal values and moves towards a 'rational' approach to its tasks.

This rationalization can, however, produce "an iron cage" in which the members of the bureaucracy become dehumanized, a fact emphasized by Weber: "the more it is dehumanized, the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation" (Weber, 1978, p. 270).

Lunenburg (2017) referring to the characteristics presented above, identifies a number of dysfunctions of the bureaucratic system: specialisation can generate conflicts between system actors, over-specialisation can lead to routine; strict rules can lead to difficulties in solving spontaneous situations where those rules may not apply; hierarchy generates a top-down communication that can inhibit the initiatives of actors on lower hierarchical rungs; impersonality may be considered the most serious of the shortcomings, as the modern approach to leadership requires leaders to be directly involved in

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working towards objectives, not just supervising subordinates; career promotion often tends to be based on seniority rather than competence.

These principles of bureaucratisation will help us to understand the causes that lead to the main problems in Romania's education system. Seeing how they are applied in our case, but also understanding the dysfunctions of the bureaucratic system, will allow us to analyse the specificities of our education system.

3. Research methodology

In the following section, a qualitative content analysis of the main documents (reports on the state of education and education legislation) and situations (from educational practice) referring to the bureaucratisation of education in general and the bureaucratisation of education in Romania in particular will follow. Documents from Romania will be analysed as well as documents referring to other education systems such as the United Kingdom, Finland or Spain.

The main objectives of the analysis are: to identify the bureaucratic processes in the Romanian education system, to compare the approach to bureaucracy in Romania with the approach in the above mentioned countries, to identify the landmarks of the Weberian theory in the bureaucratization of the Romanian education system and to identify the main causes leading to the bureaucratization process.

The aim of the research is to identify how the Romanian education system relates to bureaucracy, how it understands bureaucracy and applies it. For this purpose, in the analysis of the research results we will take into account the principles of bureaucracy, developed by Max Weber.

4. Analysis and interpretation of the research data

4.1. Bureaucratization of the pre-university education system

The Weberian view of bureaucracy, but also the implications of rationality, shows us that a bureaucratic system can work in technical fields, but in the case of education, impersonality and the danger of the "iron cage" can subordinate the real values of this field, can lead to an excessive standardization of the educational process,

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can lead to the professional inhibition of teachers both in teaching and in communication relations at work.

The problem of the bureaucratization of education in general manifests itself both at the level of the education system as a whole, but also at the level of each factor involved in this system: students, teachers, principals, etc. If education aims to create cultured, free-spirited individuals with critical thinking skills, bureaucracy subjugates all these elements of individual freedom and turns humanizing education into a standardized process, through which precise and often artificial results are pursued (Skipper, 2018).

4.2. Human capital, more important than bureaucratic processes

Mehta (2013) is of the opinion that the main problem with modern education systems is their organisation: 'around a central system that functions more like a bureaucracy than a profession' (p. 463) and argues that the education system should focus more on professionalisation and limit the power of administrative hierarchies.

For example, the Law on Pre-University Education establishes more than 20 institutions and commissions with various roles: school inspections, quality assurance, monitoring and control, teacher training, etc. Some examples would be: County Directorates of Pre-University Education, Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance and Inspection in Pre-University Education, Integrated School Management System, Body of Educational Managers, etc. (Pre-University Education Law no. 198/2023).

These institutions clearly lead to excessive bureaucratisation of the education system, which is already suffocated by the current bureaucratic processes. For example, until the recent legislative changes, school evaluations were carried out in parallel by the County School Inspectorates and ARACIP - Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education. These evaluations created confusion and did not give a clear picture of what we want from a high-performing school. The same report also shows that school inspectorates have a monitoring role, but no powers to advise schools and teachers (OECD, 2023).

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In the case of teachers, the problem of bureaucratisation and the administrative hierarchisation that takes place within it often manifests itself in a lack of trust in decision-makers (Mehta, 2013), but also in the activities in which they are engaged, which often mimic training and professional development. Two examples of such activities would be: school inspections that often do not measure the real level of professional development of teachers and the lack of autonomy of teachers in terms of the subject taught.

Turning to the subject of school inspections, we take the example of another country and find that Finland, which has one of the best performing education systems in the world, has done away with school inspections since 1990, with the evaluation of the quality of education taking place at the level of the whole system, not at the level of the individual (Webb, Vulliamy, Häkkinen & Hämäläinen, 1998). This practice eliminates the bureaucratic processes to which teachers and schools are subject and, at the same time, gives teachers more autonomy in their profession by encouraging them to self-evaluate their own work.

In Romania, school inspections attract bureaucratic processes in which teachers are involved: drawing up lesson plans, making calendar plans, in the case of some inspections (those for teaching grades) a dossier has to be submitted (which has also been submitted in the mobility stages). School inspectors are also drawn into the bureaucratic process, completing evaluation sheets and reports in a very short time of 50 minutes - the duration of one hour of teaching in pre-university education.

In addition to the issue of the bureaucracy of inspections, there is also the issue of their effectiveness, the extent to which they measure what they set out to measure. More often than not, school inspections become nothing more than bureaucratic processes, and teacher evaluation is carried out superficially.

Another factor of bureaucracy and administrative hierarchy is also present in school inspections: the authority that inspectors exercise over teachers. Weber (1978) highlights the concept of legislative-rational authority, characterised by the power of the law in a democratic society and the recognition of actors elected by citizens. An important element here is that this type of authority will only be

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accepted if its validity is recognised (Weber, 1978). In other words, we return to what Mehta (2013) emphasised: trust in decision-makers or in the particular case of school inspections, the trust of teachers in those who are hierarchically above them.

In Romania, in many cases, school inspectors are not specialists in education, sometimes they are even on the same level of professional training as the teachers they evaluate - they have the same teaching grade, in the case of grade I. These elements can affect the authority of school inspectors. Moreover, with the politicisation of the education sector and the hiring of inspectors without the necessary skills on political grounds, teachers' confidence in them is diminishing.

In the end, this culture of school inspection in Romania shows that we focus more on hierarchical control than on validating the actual quality of teaching staff. What we should be concerned with is the proper training of teachers and only then the culture of control. Returning to examples of good practice: in Finland, teachers attend weekly training courses, two hours per week, and have autonomy in organising teaching activities and selecting teaching methods (Attali, 2024).

In this sense, John Dewey (2001) considers that the curriculum model imposed from the top down on teachers is automatically replicated on pupils. "Adaptation to external purposes becomes confused if intrinsic meaning is not recognized" (p. 114). In other words, teachers' lack of autonomy prevents them from applying the curriculum taking into account the motivations of the learners. Teacher autonomy is particularly important in several respects: the curriculum should be designed taking into account the views of teachers, not imposed by the authorities; the curriculum should be more flexible to allow teachers to create learning approaches based on the real experiences of learners; teachers should become facilitators of learning, not (only) transmitters of knowledge.

4.3. School management and standards for principals

Several OECD reports (2020) show that school principals in Romania are too involved in administrative activities and do not receive quality initial and in-service training in school evaluation

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activities (OECD, 2023). Romania also needs to set clear standards for school leadership, as is the case, for example, in the United Kingdom.

In Ireland for example, standards for school leadership are divided into (Education Scotland, 2015, pp. 19-29):

- Self-evaluation and self-improvement;
- Learning leadership;
- Leadership of change;
- Leadership and staff management;
- Resource management that promotes quality.

The UK National Standards are also divided into four areas of importance to the work of headteachers (Department of Education, 2015):

- Quality and knowledge;
- Pupils and staff;
- System and process;
- Self-improvement of the school system.

We see from these examples that the work of principals is not just about day-to-day bureaucracy and administrative activities, but emphasises their role in the development of the school in all aspects: the teaching process, the teaching staff, decisions about the changes the school needs. It is about a pragmatic approach to the work of headteachers, about active involvement in school management, about competences measured by clear standards. However, in Romania, without a set of clearly structured criteria, the quality of principals' work is difficult to measure and, at the same time, it is hard for them to understand their role in the development of the school.

4.4. Higher education and bureaucracy

In the case of higher education, bureaucracy exists at two levels: the external - represented by the rules coming from the state and the internal - represented by the actions taken by each university to implement these rules (Terjesen, 2022). Thus, as Schneijderberg (2017) opines, the expansion of bureaucracy in academia can also be identified in: the student admissions process, the organisation and administration of study programmes or the accreditation of universities.

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We will see in the next section that these elements, while important, are only the tip of the iceberg. In Romania, the main problem in higher education is the laws and their application. The politicisation of higher education, the uneven division of tasks or the exaggerated culture of control are, in fact, problems that should concern us and are the subject of the following analysis.

4.5. Supremacy of rectors

Legislative changes in university governance in the post-December period increased the culture of hierarchical control and ensured the supremacy of rectors.

For example, the 1995 Education Law mentioned only two consecutive 4-year terms for rectors; in 2011 the new law also mentioned two consecutive 4-year terms, but there the following was added: "A person cannot be rector of the same higher education institution for more than 8 years, regardless of the period in which the terms have run and their interruptions" (Education Law no. 1/2011) - this clarification was very important, as some rectors were suspending their last term of office, which was not considered finished and they could run again. The above mention has been removed from Law 1, and rectors can still stand for re-election through the same practice of suspending their last term.

The new Higher Education Act changes the term of office to 5 years, with a maximum of two terms. However, the law is not retroactive, i.e. it does not prohibit rectors who have had two terms of office before its entry into force from standing for two more (Law on higher education no. 199/2023).

The supremacy of rectors is therefore ensured by law in Romania. However, the bureaucratic system that universities represent is not governed by a clear education law, but rather by political reasons and legislative artifice. Thus, two of the most important principles of Max Weber's bureaucracy are subjugated: functioning on the basis of clear rules and promotion on the basis of performance.

4.6. New laws and bureaucratic proposals

The new law on higher education introduces elements that feed the already existing bureaucracy and amplify it. Former education

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minister Andrei Marga notes, for example, that the new law places new bureaucratic activities on the shoulders of universities. For example: "university ethics and deontology policies" - which were the object of the ministry and "university ethics and deontology code" - which was the object of the CNATDCU - National Council for the Accreditation of University Degrees, Diplomas and Certificates (Marga, 2022). Although Minister Andrei Marga noticed these elements already in the drafting phase of the law and pointed them out in the public space, no changes were made in the text of the law published later.

Another example of excessive bureaucracy is a legislative proposal which first required a monthly verification of the conditions for granting the doctoral bonus (O.U.G. 115/2023, art. XVIII), then an annual verification, and finally a definitive abolition of the verification, and the bonus to be granted on the basis of the previous criterion: work in the doctoral field. These examples indicate changes of form, not of substance. Changes that do not really solve anything.

4.7. University rationalisation and the labour market

The rationalization of universities means mainly that they must be closely related to the economic environment and its needs, thus, the idealized form of the university in the 21st century appears: the socially embedded university, where curricular changes are in line with the needs and requirements of the labor market (Ramirez, 2006). The rationalization of universities, as Weber (1949) observes, lies in the social role they play in preparing graduates for the labor market.

In order to adapt the objectives of universities to the requirements of the labour market, the Ministry of Education introduces in 2022 the dual university education - which involves collaboration between universities and economic operators in the training of students (O.U.G 128/2022).

Another measure included in the new law on higher education is the introduction of the MBA (Master of Business Administration) - which provides managerial skills, demanded by the labour market (Law on higher education no. 199/2023).

It is very important that these measures are actually implemented, not just on paper, as is the case in many cases in

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Romania. We must leave aside internships where students go only for attendance. It is important that the protocols between universities and economic operators lead to the employment of students and to the formation of skills and the accumulation of knowledge necessary for the labour market.

4.8. A comparison with the Spanish experts' proposals

The group of experts appointed by the Spanish Ministry of Education to deal with university reform submitted a report of the main proposals to the minister in 2013. We will be looking at this report for a comparative analysis between what they proposed and what our experts proposed. University reform in Spain is still ongoing.

The establishment of the National Observatory for the Employment of University Graduates is a proposal that leads to valuable analyses of the quality of university programmes (Comision de Expertos para la Reforma del Sistema Universitario Espanol, 2013). On the one hand, universities receive real feedback directly from the labour market for the training and education process of students, and on the other hand, companies and employers form a clear vision of the quality of higher education. These analyses can count greatly in future institutional collaborations between universities and companies.

Spain emphasises the streamlining of higher education by constantly adapting to the labour market. In addition, the mechanism of observing the employment of graduates in the labour market can lead to clear results on the link between the field of study and the subsequent job - a very important feature for improving study programmes.

The recommendations in relation to doctorates lead to more effective doctoral studies and are oriented towards excellence and the practical side - especially the proposal to carry out doctoral studies in collaboration with some companies. (Comision de Expertos para la Reforma del Sistema Universitario Espanol, 2013) Encouraging master's students to do a

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PhD by offering scholarships is also a good idea, which can ensure the continuity of studies until the last level.

We note that Spain seeks the pragmatic side of doctoral studies, while the Romanian legislation seeks the bureaucratic side. In the first case it is about the purpose of the doctorate in relation to social and labour market requirements, and in the second case it is about checking activity reports without clear criteria.

The restructuring of university councils, proposed by the Spanish experts, has an essential component: the introduction of members of civil society. They represent 25% of the university council. Their presence is important because they represent the link with the world beyond the university gates, with the needs of students, with the needs of the economic environment and with the needs of society as a whole. If universities limit themselves to composing such councils only from members from within, deficiencies may arise in communicating with the outside world and in establishing the real objectives of education in relation to society (Comision de Expertos para la Reforma del Sistema Universitario Espanol, 2013).

This ensures transparency of decisions in the university environment, but also civil society control over them. On the other hand, we have seen that in Romania the supremacy of rectors is ensured by law, which in many cases makes it impossible for some decisions to be transparent.

There are therefore big differences in approach between Spain and Romania. Mainly, in the case of Spain, we see an approach focused on the rationalisation of universities and clear standards for evaluating the quality of higher education, whereas in the case of Romania we have an approach focused on documents and hierarchical control.

5. Results

All these examples, both at pre-university and university level, show that we have not understood bureaucracy as Max Weber saw it. Or rather that we have only understood and applied its negative side and that the system has ended up in the "iron cage", lacking benchmarks, lacking clear objectives, lacking values.

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Why did we end up here? Because we have violated the principles of efficient bureaucracy:

- Division of labour in the pre-university system, in the case of school inspections, for example, has not been clearly demarcated between the various institutions and hence the lack of benchmarks for a high-performing school. Principals have no clear objectives and standards to guide their work.

- Rules and regulations in Romanian education often contradict each other or identify inappropriate solutions, ignoring real problems. We see this for example in higher education, where universities are given new tasks that would normally fall to us, or where there is a lack of clear benchmarks for the evaluation of PhD professors.

- Hierarchisation is understood in terms of a culture of control rather than a culture of support and communication between members of a hierarchy. An example would be school inspectors controlling but not really advising schools and teachers. Another example is the permanency of rectors.

- Impersonality can also be linked to the above examples. And it shows that it too has been misunderstood. Impersonality in Weber's view implies avoidance of favouritism and objectivity, but in our case it implies hierarchies justified by the culture of control.

- Advancement based on performance, as the OECD report (2023) shows, is limited, especially in the pre-university system. Teachers wait too long to move from one teaching grade to another. Promotion is based on seniority rather than performance.

6. Conclusions

Romania's education system is highly bureaucratic, both at pre-university and university level. This is underpinned by education laws and regulations, which should focus more on the pragmatic side of education than on the administrative side.

The education reforms and laws of the post-December period have led to increased bureaucracy, without leading to the establishment of clear standards to ensure the quality of education. This is evidenced, for example, by the politicisation of higher education, the permanency of rectors or the poor evaluation of the quality of pre-university education.

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Compared to countries such as the UK, Finland or Spain, Romania prefers a cause-driven approach and a culture of control rather than identifying genuine solutions. Thus, the "iron cage" of which Max Weber spoke is present in Romanian education, which through new laws intensifies bureaucratic practices and moves education away from its social goals.

At pre-university level, school inspectorates largely fulfil only a bureaucratic role, whereas they should be focused on counselling and the training role of teachers. Teachers need more autonomy in the pre-university system, and this can only be achieved after quality initial and in-service training.

The relationship between universities and the labour market could be improved through more transparent communication and clear collaboration mechanisms. There is also a need for more in-depth analysis of graduate student employment so that there is a match between fields of study and the labour market.

Romania's education system is stifled by a bureaucracy whose principles it does not understand. After all, it is not the bureaucracy that is to blame for the mediocre functioning of the system, but the way it is practised.

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