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AN ASSESSMENT OF THE TRANSPARENCY LEVEL IN ROMANIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

Case
Study

Keywords

Transparency,
Public sector,
Universities

JEL Classification

I23, M40, M41

Abstract

Transparency in the public sector is of paramount importance for the general feeling of trust in the system itself, as public servants are publicly accountable for the use and effects on public resources. In this respect, ensuring an increase in transparency would allow these public servants to discharge accountability accordingly and would provide the necessary frame for assessment of public resource use from stakeholders. This paper aims to determine whether transparency levels are adequate in the case of Romanian public universities, using a refined assessment tool which consists of multiple criteria based on principles and required elements for the reduction of information asymmetry. Our findings show that overall, in the case of Romanian public universities, the transparency level is high and there is a prerequisite to ensure the fair judgement from stakeholders.

INTRODUCTION

The proper functioning of public sector entities and the adequate use of public resources have constantly been in the spotlight. To this extent, we can state that public scrutiny is the ultimate assessor for the adequacy of resource use by the public servants, who are (and can be held) accountable for this process. Moreover, it is a widespread opinion that this discharge of accountability is possible through a transparency enhancement process. After all, for a stakeholder to have a true and fair judgement of the resource allocation, the information asymmetry level should be minimized.

The level of transparency shown by an organization is prone to assessment using specific tools. Through this paper, we intend to refine a tool for enabling this analysis and to measure the level of transparency for a list of selected Romanian public universities. We select the higher education system as a primary focus for our analysis as the public universities encompass a broad range of resources and stakeholders in their activity model, enhancing the public accountability trait and providing a prerequisite (at least assumedly) for a good level of transparency.

Otherwise said, our research objective is to test whether this initial assumption regarding the level of transparency in the case of Romanian public universities is indeed accurate. To accomplish this, we draft and refine an index for transparency level measurement – using the elements from the literature, as well as the reporting guidelines and regulations – and we determine the overall level of transparency for each selected public university. Moreover, we can pinpoint analytically the elements of interest (which are encompassed in the structure of the index) that enable a good level of transparency and, by contrast, the elements where there is still a high level of information asymmetry.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Transparency is defined as the strategy that an entity follows to disclose accurate, appropriate and complete information, using the best available channel, enabling the recipients to make decisions (Baraibar Diez & Luna Sotorrío, 2012). Specially in education, transparency is seen as the extent to which stakeholders can understand the basis on which the financial, material and educational human resources are allocated to the individuals and how they are used (Hallak & Poisson, 2007).

Together with performance, transparency seems to be an essential principle of the public accountability (Monfardini, 2010). A greater

transparency can ease detecting the corruption and fraud and recover the losses (Barata & Cain, 2001).

The literature identifies some of the aspects that might influence transparency in the public organizations positively. Thus, accrual accounting may contribute to achieving the fiscal and financial transparency and, implicitly, the fiscal sustainability (Robinson, 1998; Ștefănescu & Țurlea, 2011). On the other hand, looking through a different lens, Robinson (2001) states that the improvement of fiscal transparency through accrual accounting has failed, because many of the significant users, such as ministers and parliamentarians appeared to be confused by the new accrual-based budget papers. According to Christiaens et al. (2010), the need for efficiency and transparency explains the trend toward accrual accounting.

Also, Diamond (2002) emphasizes that the adoption of accrual accounting would lead to the enhancement of transparency on total costs of governments activities resources, but, at the same time, the fiscal transparency. Marti (2006) also supports the idea that the implementation of the accrual basis will improve transparency and accountability of the financial reports issued by the governments, and Benito et al. (2007) state that the full accrual basis improves accountability, reliability, and transparency of the financial statements. Moreover, according to Pina et al. (2009), the accrual basis enhances transparency by making the information available to the public, even though reading the accounting information requires some training.

The institutions of higher education have a series of stakeholders, and they have an obligation to respond with a proper transparency, accountability and reliable information (Honoré et al., 2007). The demand for accountability has raised some significant organizational issues. More specific, in universities, there are concerns regarding the research, teaching, and the management. Through this demand, the academia is under the pressure to demonstrate the financial responsibility. The literature suggests that transparency within universities does not provide an open window of the organizational activity and make some internal aspects of the organizational activity publicly available. Also, the reviews of transparency do not enhance the notions of organizational responsibility (Neyland, 2007).

The literature also identifies the most effective methods and strategies for improving the governance, accountability and transparency in education which are based on the same principles in poor and rich countries alike. It is vital to improve the regulatory systems, to strengthen managerial abilities, and to build a strong social

control over the use of resources (Hallak & Poisson, 2007).

The increasing demands from the stakeholders and from the government authorities of financing for the universities to justify their needs and prove transparency. However, the universities are under the indirect pressure of some institutions such as the media or OECD (Bayenet et al., 2000). Taking into consideration the fact that universities receive a significant amount of public funds and undertake a significant process of resources allocation, they should improve the information disclosure, for enhancing transparency (Gallego-Alvarez et al., 2011).

The culture of public accountability and transparency still generate new challenges for the universities. On the other hand, the greater transparency and accountability on aspects regarding sustainability, such as energy consumption, is a part of the social responsibility of universities and will contribute to the enhancement of organization performance (Albrecht et al., 2007). Regarding sustainability, Lozano (2006) sustains that the potential for transparency is one of the three most important approaches for analyzing and assessing the sustainability.

Examining transparency in the Italian non-profit organizations, Gazzona & Ratti (2014) find that transparency is increasing, and the better information available on the Internet achieves more confidence in the sector.

Paloma Sanchez & Elena (2006) investigate transparency in the European public universities through the intellectual capital. The findings of the study show the intellectual capital is essential to improve governance and benchmarking analyses.

The call for the public accountability requires the disclosure of the economic and social outcomes of the universities (Leitner, 2002). Thus, Gallego-Alvarez et al. (2011) investigate the impact of several variables, including the profitability, the type of university and internationality, the age or tradition or the growth-reduction of student numbers on transparency of Spanish universities. The results of the study reveal the fact that the sizes of the university and also the internationality level have a positive influence on transparency, measured by the Disclosure Index. On the other hand, variables such as the type of university (more technically-focused) or the private status do not influence the volume of disclosed information.

Jabnoun (2015) investigates the impact of transparency, democracy, and wealth on the number of universities ranked among the top 300 and 500. The results of the study indicate the fact that the countries with top-ranked universities have a higher gross domestic product per capita, democracy and transparency levels than the countries with no top-ranked universities. Also, the results reveal that the countries with the less

corruption tend to have the top universities. On the other hand, Baraibar Diez & Luna Sotorrió (2012) analyze the influence of transparency on university social responsibility, based on 73 Spanish universities. The results of the study find that transparency has a positive impact on the university reputation. Likewise, the results of the study reveal that some variables such as the ownership (public or private university) and the size of the university (the number of the students) have a strong influence on the reputation.

The Internet has some advantages in the dissemination of information, significantly increasing transparency in the public life (Serrano-Cinca et al., 2009). Also, the enormous impact that the Internet has in the public organizations, is investigated by McIvor et al. (2002). The results indicate that the public entities do not embrace the opportunities given by the technological progress will always have serious problems in achieving efficiency and providing the value demanded by the citizens, particularly regarding the public budgets.

Ancarani (2005) emphasizes the idea that the development of technology has generated substantial modifications in information management. Thus, the increasing request for the efficiency, effectiveness and transparency is an important issue in public sector management. On the other hand, the internet is a vital tool that helps public-service managers to increase efficiency, reduce the costs and build healthy relationships. The study considers a correlation between the e-service quality and the efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency through organizational re-engineering.

Another study that focuses on the e-procurement implementation belongs to Croom & Brandon-Jones (2007). The authors examine the results and experiences of the e-procurement systems implementation, involving nine different public sector organizations. The results of the analysis show that the implementation of e-procurement systems has an impact on the organizational process and performance of the entity. There is a connection between the performance and transparency, given that „performance measurement brings transparency” (De Bruijn, 2002).

The literature approaches the issue of improving transparency in the public sector through the International Public Sector Accounting Standards (IPSAS). One of the primary goals of the IPSAS is to improve transparency of the financial reporting in the public sector (Tiron-Tudor, 2010; Hamisi, 2012).

Thus, Perez & Lopez-Hernandez (2009) investigate the financial transparency in the MERCOSUR countries, using IPSAS 1 and IPSAS 2 as a benchmark. The main results of the study suggest

that none of the MERCOSUR countries entirely follows the principles and recommendations of the two standards.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current paper addresses the topic of transparency through two aspects. First of all, the theoretical approach consists of a brief literature review, based on the state of the art. The views of some authors are useful for choosing the criteria that we consider relevant for the case study.

The practical approach is based on the analysis of the information published on the websites of 15 Romanian public universities, the entire study being based on the information publicly available on the Internet. The 15 universities are selected based on the geographic coverage criterion, so that we may collect evidence from the practice attributed to all the major university centres in Romania (for a comprehensive list, see *Table 1*).

The following step in the analysis is to identify the considered criteria on the websites of the universities (see *Table 2*). These criteria are established based on the literature and regulations and are related to the actual publication and structure of the financial statements (balance sheet, the statement of financial performance, cash flow statement, the statement of changes in net assets, notes to the financial statements, and budgetary execution account). Moreover, we approach the issue of information update and the accessibility of information.

Also, there are some additional criteria related to transparency and considered within the study such as the visibility of information (mainly to disclose public interest activities), information regarding the teaching staff (background, wealth statements, responsibilities), the ways of contesting the public institution decisions, the regulatory and delineating documents, and the access to information by foreign users, by translating the information into other languages, besides Romanian. Last but not least, we check whether or not the public universities publish information regarding research and intellectual outputs (as this pillar is of paramount importance for their existence and activities).

We give a different weight to each of the criteria considered within the study, because we believe that some of them are more critical in ensuring the public transparency of the university. To calculate the weight of each criterion, we establish links with an existing methodology for the measurement of the transparency level in public sector entities, developed by Ștefănescu et al (2016), which is based on a structure emulating the six-tier capital model from the Integrated Reporting Framework, using specific guidelines and metrics (see *Table 3*). The weights of our criteria are calculated by

dividing the number of occurrences in *Table 3* (in the “links” column) by the total number of occurrences.

As it can be seen in *Table 1*, the weights given to the regulatory and delineating documents the comprehension of the financial statements are the highest (which reflects a focus on the formalization of disclosure). By comprehension of the financial statements, we refer to the number of elements included in the financial statements.

The next step in assessing transparency of universities is calculating the weighted average for each university. The weighted average is the extent to which the criteria listed in the table above contribute to the insurance of the global transparency. The encoding for each criterion is binary (“1” if the criterion is validated and “0” if the conditions of the criterion are not met). All the data are calculated for each criterion and also globally.

RESULTS

In order to assess transparency of each university, we evaluate the contribution of each criterion. Analyzing the ten criteria, the results revealed by our scoring system are presented in *Table 4*.

By calculating the weighted average for each university, the result is a ranking that illustrates the extent to which the universities are transparent through the information presented on their websites.

The results show that five out of fifteen analyzed public universities have the highest value of transparency index. In their case, the website of this university includes all the financial reports requested by the Romanian regulations. The website of these universities is in Romanian and English. In this group, we can find: „Aurel Vlaicu” University; „Babeș-Bolyai” University; „Ovidius” University; „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University, and „Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy.

On the other hand, the minimum value of the transparency index is associated to the North University of Baia Mare. The university does not present any information on the website, except some regulatory documents. Also, another lower value of transparency index (0,67) is associated with „Dunărea de Jos” University and „Henri Coandă” Air Force Academy.

Overall, the average level of the public universities from the sample is centred around the value of 0,77. This reflects a good level of transparency in the case of most universities, validating the criteria from our index structure.

Conversely, when we switch the analysis on a criterion-basis, we can see in *Table 4* that although C2 is seen as important (in terms of weighting), only 33% of the universities from the sample (out of the 40% validating C1) publish the set of

financial information in its entirety (with all the constituting elements). The difference of 7% between the two criteria consists of public universities that partially publish the set of financial statements. This finding is interesting as the use of financial resources is considered of paramount importance and the financial statements reflect the financial position and are able to be used as a justification for accountability discharge. This could be regulated by making the publication of financial statements mandatory on the public universities' website.

In the case of „Aurel Vlaicu” University of Arad we could easily find on the website all the six financial reports requested by the Romanian regulations: balance sheet, the statement of financial performance, cash flow statement, the statement of changes in net assets, notes to the financial statements, and budgetary execution account. In the case of the rest of the universities which received the “1” marker for C2, the identification required extensive searching.

Regarding C3, the update of presented information, the majority of the universities of the sample (93%) present the data available for 2015.

Looking at C4, the accessibility of information, we take into consideration the readiness of information published on the websites of universities. In this case, 14 of 15 universities have been marked with “1”, because the information was quickly identified.

The fifth criterion (C5 – the visibility) refers to the insurance of the aspects related to scientific events, conferences, scientific papers, and journals, published books or other social events. The results reveal that 14 of 15 universities publish information about the elements mentioned before. The only university that does not publish information related to scientific and social aspects is North University of Baia Mare.

In the matter of the sixth criterion considered for our study (C6 – information regarding the teaching staff), the issuance of such statements proposes to ensure transparency towards taxpayers. Publishing the wealth statements of teaching staff may reduce cases of corruption and breakdowns of law. The results of the study find that 14 universities (93% of the sample) receive the “1” marker for this criterion.

As regards the ways of contesting the public institution decisions – C7 – they differ dependent on the university in question. 80% of the universities from the sample publish the ways of contesting the decision of public institutions fully. Some of them publish them partially (and received marking), and one university (North University of Baia Mare) does not release this information.

According to the Romanian regulations, the universities are under the obligation to publish the regulatory documents under they operate.

Regarding C8 – publication of regulatory and delineating documents – 14 out of 15 universities of the sample release fully or partly these regulatory documents.

The last two criteria that we take into consideration for our study are C9 – the website in foreign languages – and C10 – information regarding research and intellectual outputs. All the universities from the sample validate these two criteria. Most of the analyzed universities publish the information on their website in at least two languages. Also, all the universities have online one specific section (easily identifiable) which discloses the research process and outputs.

Overall, we can appreciate a good level of transparency for Romanian public universities. On average, they comply with at least three quarters of the elements required (as a benchmark) for an ideal and transparent communication system to the recipients of public services and other stakeholders. We notice that most of the universities structure their reporting system in accordance with the principles and elements emphasized by our transparency index, despite the widespread opinion that the Romanian public sector presents a high level of information asymmetry. However, our analysis is restricted to the higher education system – which engages a broad range of stakeholders and is prone to managerial interests to attract students and research funding.

CONCLUSION

Ensuring a transparent public sector is considered a priority when we address the adequacy of public resource use. The enhancement of transparency levels is a mean to discharge the accountability of public servants. This principle is emphasized on all layers of the public sector; however, the broader the range of stakeholders, the more significant the impact of a high transparency level is.

Our study focuses on assessing the transparency level for 15 public universities in Romania, using a transparency index which consists of ten criteria (encompassing all the elements and principles required to reduce information asymmetry). Our findings show that the overall level of transparency is high for our sample. Most of the universities validate at least three quarters of the criteria, and five universities have the maximum level of transparency benchmarked by our assessment system. The lowest level of transparency is found in the case of North University from Baia Mare.

Also, an interesting finding is that, even though the transparency levels are high, only a third of the universities from the sample have the entire set of financial statements published online.

Overall, we consider that the transparency level is adequate for Romanian public universities, but the assessment system could be further improved and

refined (by adding new criteria in the assessment). Also, another limitation of the study is the number of public universities in the sample (which can be overcome by refining our selection criterion and adding new ones). As a research perspective, the potentially improved assessment system could be tested on other areas in the public sector (such as public hospitals or public administration institutions).

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TABLES

Table 1.
The list of Romanian public universities included in the study

Number	Website	City	University
1	www.uab.ro	Alba-Iulia	„1 Decembrie 1918” University
2	www.uav.ro	Arad	„Aurel Vlaicu” University
3	www.ub.ro	Bacău	„Vasile Alecsandri” University
4	www.ubm.ro	Baia Mare	North University
5	www.afahc.ro	Braşov	„Henri Coandă” Air Force Academy
6	www.ase.ro	Bucureşti	Bucharest University of Economic Studies
7	www.ubbcluj.ro	Cluj-Napoca	„Babeş-Bolyai” University
8	www.uniovidius.ro	Constanţa	„Ovidius” University
9	www.ugal.ro	Galaţi	„Dunărea de Jos” University
10	www.uaic.ro	Iaşi	„Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University
11	www.uoradea.ro	Oradea	Oradea University
12	www.armyacademy.ro	Sibiu	„Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy
13	www.usv.ro	Suceava	„Ştefan cel Mare” University
14	www.umftgm.ro	Târgu-Mureş	University of Medicine and Pharmacy
15	www.upt.ro	Timişoara	Polytechnic University

Source: author’s projection

Table 2.
Transparency index structure – criteria for assessment

Number	Criteria	Weighting
C1	Publication of financial statements	10%
C2	Comprehension of the financial reporting system (inclusion of all required elements)	20%
C3	Updated (dynamic) information	7%
C4	Accessibility of information	3%
C5	Overall visibility of information	3%
C6	Information regarding the teaching staff (background, wealth statements, responsibilities)	10%
C7	Ways of contesting the public institution decisions	3%
C8	Publication of regulatory and delineating documents	27%
C9	Website in foreign languages	3%
C10	Information regarding research and intellectual outputs	14%
	TOTAL	100%

Source: author’s projection

Table 3.
Checklist for transparency level assessment

Type of capital	Disclosure proxy items	Links with the transparency index	Recommended guideline reference for metrics
Financial	Economic performance	C1, C2	GRI
	Financial costs incurred by externalities	C1, C2	
	Financial accountability	C1, C2	
Manufactured	Inputs and deliverables	C2, C3	GRI
	Tangible resources and infrastructure	C2, C8	GRI & <IR> Framework
Human	Work conditions	C6, C8	GRI
	Labor practices	C6, C8	
	Human rights	C6, C8	
Intellectual	Innovation	C10	Grimaldi et al (2013)
	Intangible infrastructural assets	C10	
	Information technology	C10	
	Intellectual property	C10	

Type of capital	Disclosure proxy items	Links with the transparency index	Recommended guideline reference for metrics
	Organizational structures	C7	<IR> Framework
Social and relationship	Product or service responsibility	C8	GRI
	Program and policies effectiveness	C8	
	Connections with society	C3, C4, C5, C9	
Natural	Environmental relationships	C8	GRI
	Environmental impact and use of resources	C2, C8	

Source: Refined projection based on a methodology developed by Ștefănescu et al (2016)

*Note: GRI is an abbreviation for Global Reporting Initiative. <IR> is an abbreviation for Integrated Reporting.

Table 4.
Transparency index calculation sheet

University	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9	C10	Index value
„1 Decembrie 1918” University	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0,70
„Aurel Vlaicu” University	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1,00
„Vasile Alecsandri” University	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0,80
North University	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0,17
„Henri Coandă” Air Force Academy	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0,67
Bucharest University of Economic Studies	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0,70
„Babeș-Bolyai” University	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1,00
„Ovidius” University	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1,00
„Dunărea de Jos” University	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	0,67
„Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1,00
Oradea University	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0,70
„Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1,00
„Ștefan cel Mare” University	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0,70
University of Medicine and Pharmacy	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0,70
Polytechnic University	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0,70
Percentage of universities validating the criterion	40%	33%	93%	93%	93%	93%	80%	93%	100%	100%	0,77

Source: author’s projection