

# Access to Higher Education. A Review of the Literature, with a Focus on Central and Eastern Europe<sup>1</sup>

**Adrian Hatos**

*University of Oradea*

**Abstract:** *The article is reviewing the mainstream literature on the issue of expansion of higher education and the evolution of inequalities of access in tertiary cycle, with a special concern for the case of Central and Eastern Europe, and for two cases which are rarely considered together in the literature, those of Romania and Hungary. Cross cohort investigation of access to higher education, with a focus on class differentials, have highlighted the persistence and even increase of inequalities in access between youth of privileged and underprivileged classes. While communist regimes were not successful in leveling differences between classes in access to higher education, the inequalities have been aggravated during the last two decades of expansion in higher education, which have been peculiarly dramatic in both Romania and Hungary. In order to explain the enduring inequalities, the review highlights, besides the usual factors and mechanisms, the impact of qualitative differentiation, which can be understood in the frame of the theory of effectively maintained inequality. Considering prospects for future research, one should be beware not only of the probabilities of entering or not entering (or graduating), but also of the differentiated likelihoods of specific status groups and class categories to enter and graduate the various types of higher educational institutions and fields of study available. Contextual variables describing local and national policies and measures, as well as special institutional features should also be taken into consideration.*

**Keywords:** higher education; inequalities; effectively maintained inequality; Hungary; Romania.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** învățământ superior; inegalități; inegalitatea menținută eficient; Ungaria; România.

## **Introduction. Expansion in tertiary education in Central and Eastern Europe**

Participation in higher education has exploded globally in the decades of massification of post-secondary education. Globally, participation in the tertiary education has increased from 19% of the corresponding age cohort, in 2000, to 26%

in 2007 (Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley, 2009). This increase has been the strongest during the past decade until 2009 (Usher, 2009) in the countries of the former Soviet Union, with 89% increase in enrollment figures, and Central and Eastern Europe – including Hungary and Romania –, where the increase has been of 51%. According to the available data on the evolution of Gross Enrollment Rate (which will be abbreviated, from now on, as GER) in the

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\* University of Oradea, Faculty of Social Humanistic Sciences, University Street no. 1, 410087, Oradea, Romania. E-mail: [adrian@hatos.ro](mailto:adrian@hatos.ro).

Central and Eastern European region, Hungary and Romania were among the countries with fast increases in the enrollment figures, the figures of Hungary being a little bit higher nevertheless, at the beginning, and concerning the dynamics of enrollment as well. By 1999, almost all the

countries in the region have had already massified systems of higher education<sup>2</sup>. Hungary has passed the 50% threshold in 2003, and Romania waited for the same figures until 2006, when its GER reached 52%.

**Table 1:** *GER of several countries in the Central and Eastern European Region*

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	1999/2006 change
Hungary	33	37	40	45	52	60	65	69	35
Lithuania	44	50	57	62	68	73	76	76	33
Russian Federation	40	45	52	59	65	69	71	72	33
Romania	22	24	28	32	36	40	45	52	30
Slovenia	53	56	61	67	69	72	79	83	30
Ukraine	47	49	52	57	61	65	69	73	26
Czech Republic	26	29	31	35	37	43	48	50	23
Latvia	50	56	63	67	71	75	75	74	23
Poland	45	50	55	58	60	62	64	66	21

Source: Usher, 2009.

The dramatic increase in enrollment figures of Central and Eastern European tertiary education institutions have raised the question of their impact on the distribution of opportunities of access across social classes, reflecting the similar experiences from the Western countries. The article will develop starting from international scholarly experience which shows that tertiary educational expansion rarely has produced a decline in class differentials concerning access to higher education. The trends in European communist and post-communist countries, with a focus on Romania and Hungary, will be then presented. The last and largest section of the article will deal with the most important theories that had been proposed to explain the lack of educational mobility and the persistence of class inequalities in access to higher education, in Romania and Hungary. As such, the article will be useful

in building hypotheses and orientating further comparative research of inequalities in access to higher education in Central and Eastern Europe, and especially in Romania and Hungary.

### **Despite the expansion, inequalities in access persist**

The gains of enlarged access are not distributed, though, evenly across countries, and, within the same country, across social categories. As the evaluations of the impact of educational expansion in Western countries show, real equality of access means eliminating the barriers to participation in higher education that affect the enrollment levels of some deprived social categories and groupings. Individual, familial and institutional factors interplay and combine to produce very different

'opportunity structures' across social classes (Reay et al., 2001).

From the very beginning it has to be highlighted that the issue of access is far more complex than that of simple administrative or financial barriers. First, open admissions policy and elimination of tuition fees may not equalize at all the participation rates, as Raftery and Hout (1993) concluded for the case of access in Irish secondary education. Moreover, even if chances of enrollment are leveled, the completion rates can remain unequal among social categories, reflecting the uneven distribution of resources needed for a successful career in tertiary education. Beyond that, if entrance and exits from the tertiary are controlled, inequalities may persist regarding the types of institutions which are differentiated horizontally, confirming, thus, the hypothesis of effectively maintained inequalities (Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley, 2009).

Due to different institutional arrangements, the access patterns can be very different from one country to another (Usher, 2009). Such specificities have to be taken into account when one considers comparing participation and access in higher education in Romania and Hungary. Usher (2009) underlines that massification and, later, universalization in Central and Eastern Europe have been realized with other means than in the rest of the world, the most important peculiarity of the regional dynamics in higher education enrollment being the significant role played by private universities. There are important differences between Romania and Hungary in this respect. Thus, the Romanian trends of the late decades are consistent with Usher's generalizations, almost half of the Romanian tertiary students being enrolled in private universities, and Romanian secondary education graduates being beneficiaries of a broad and liberalized system of tuition fees. In Hungary though, although there have been set up a large

number of private tertiary educational institutions, their enrollment figures are rather small, and thus students in private universities and colleges make up only 13% of all the Hungarian student bodies (Hansson and Charbonnier, 2010). Another peculiarity of Romania and Hungary is their relative recent history of communist control of access to higher education within experiments of declassification of a scale never met before. I will present, therefore, first, the trends in access to higher education communist regimes and the evolutions that followed the collapse of the totalitarian regime, with a focus on Romania and Hungary.

### **Access to higher education in communist and post-communist countries**

Participation in higher education was at very low levels in all Central and Eastern European region at the middle of the previous century, although some differences reflecting development differentials were clearly visible. Countries in the Balkans had among the lowest enrollment ratios, while Czechoslovakia had figures comparable to those of the Western countries. However, in the entire region, tertiary education was reserved for an elite that descended from the upper classes.

One of the reforms that the communist regimes implemented immediately after they come to power, around 1948, was to reshape the entire educational system, following the Soviet model. In the tertiary education, the main focus of these reforms was on equalizing the access probabilities (or reducing the class differentials) through an unprecedented mix of means: all education provided for free and strictly by the state, including higher education; blocking the access to tertiary education of

persons from the hostile classes (the former *bourgeoisie*, clerics, high functionaries of the previous regime), and favoring working class youth at the admission in the higher education through affirmative action policies (Simonová and Antonowicz, 2006).

The communist regimes have invested heavily in the expansion of the vocational and technical education, which explains, partially, the persistence of inequalities in access to higher education. While upper secondary vocational schools were justified by the needs of communist industrialization, they were also avenues for rapid social mobility and quick entrance into the labor market for working class youth, including youth from families with an agrarian background. Parents and youth from the educated classes usually chose, though, to enroll into the longer, and more costly tracks of higher education to which any alternative route represented a menace to status preservation. Despite the evident effort of the Romanian communist regime towards orientating youth to technical or vocational education routes, the evolution of enrollment figures in Romania during the communist regime (Florescu, 2010) provides clear evidence of the preference of parents and their offspring for the academic tracks of the upper secondary level, which would allow admission to the much restricted places in the Romanian universities and polytechnic schools of the era.

In all the countries of the communist block, the expansion of higher education was put under control (Reiszand and Stock, 2006), thus the enrollment figures experienced only slight variations, in any case lower than in the Western counterpart. Considering the post-war demographic boom, the expansion and the saturation of the upper secondary track by the middle of the communist period, it is clear that the competition for entrance in university in these countries became, at the end of the communist regimes, fierce.

Research results, obtained usually applying the model of educational transitions to large survey data sets split into demographically or politically relevant cohorts allow us to highlight the most important trends concerning access to higher education during the communist and post-communist period, in the countries of the former Soviet block:

- Most of the reviews and research articles (see Kreidl, 2005 or Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2010 for the case of Hungary alone) agree that social inequalities declined in the period of extreme communism, which covers mainly the '50s of the previous century, with some countries preserving levels of inequality achieved in this period even after 1970. However, for most of the countries of the block, inequalities start to mount in the '60s and the '70s.
- In determination of transition to higher education, the impact of parents' occupation (class effect) decreases, whereas that of parents' education increases (Heyns and Bialecki, 1993; Mach and Peschar, 1990; Matijù, 1993; Nieuwbeerta, 1996; Treiman, Ganzeboom and Rijken, 2003) during the years of communist regime. This dynamic is reversed in the post-communist period when the education effect stays usually unchanged, while the effect of class (occupation) displays dramatic increase (Matijù, Reháková and Simonová, 2003).
- All documents admit that, in the region, the access likelihoods became equal for men and women by the '70s. In some places, like Romania, the probability for making the transition to higher education became even larger for women than for men (Vlăsceanu, 2007), while in Hungary there are no significant differences in educational attainment between men and women,

for the same period (Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2010).

The evolution of probabilities of access to higher education in communist regimes, which was, among other things, a huge failed experiment in declassification, stimulated the emergence of middle range theories aimed at comprehending the maintenance of social inequalities in these apparently adverse situations. Of these sort are the theory of the 'new class' (Hanley and McKeever, 1997; Széleányi and Aschaffenburg, 1993), which argues that the new communist elite that came to forefront in the period of extreme communism assured the reproduction of social status for their descendants, by renouncing to many of the declassification policies of the '50s. Another special theory is that of status reproduction (Boguszak, Matijù and Peschar, 1990; De Graaf, 1986; Gerber and Hout, 1995; Simkus and Andorka, 1982) which maintains that descendants of the pre-communist upper classes reproduced their status positions via educational attainment, by investing their cultural and social resources in a competition for access in which material endowment were no longer so valuable. Other long range theories aimed to explain the persistence of social inequalities in education can also be invoked.

Despite the fact that the simple figures provide evidence of the expansion of education and of the increase in chances for youth from the working classes to obtain a higher education certificate analyses in Romania, employing the logistic response model developed by Mare (1980) to account for the transition rates to specific education levels, show that Romania is no exception, compared to the other communist countries (Hatos, 2012). Thus, social inequalities in access to higher education have increased in each cohort, including that of those that entered university after 1990. Moreover, in a trend that is similar to those recorded in other

communist countries, class effects tend to decrease while educational reproduction became stronger with every cohort. Moreover, the increase in class differentials that is witnessed by the post-communist cohort, which also encountered an explosive expansion in university level education confirms the theories of maximally and/or effectively maintained inequalities.

### **Persistence of inequalities of access**

The questions regarding the evolution of access inequalities can be raised relative to the different cohorts, on the one hand, and relative to the life-cycle of a person. During the person's life-cycle, studies have consistently documented the lowering of access inequalities, a phenomenon which is explained by the social selectivity of early educational transitions. The same logic makes the expansion of access to higher education, for example, guilty of increasing the class and educational reproduction effects.

One of the persistent conclusions of international comparative effort devoted to investigate the evolutions of probabilities of access in higher education is that of the unchanged inequalities relative to social class across cohorts (Egerton and Halsey, 1993; Reay et al., 2001). A study of 15 developed nations (Shavit et al., 2007) has found that indeed massification in higher education allowed greater proportion of lower social categories to participate in tertiary education, but did not have the consequence of altering the relative advantages in transition rates to tertiary education of those from the privileged classes. On the other hand, along with the general increase in the rate of participation in higher education, the class-differential in age-participation have increased (Reay et al., 2001).

This persistence of access inequalities across cohorts, and especially the immunity of these socially reproductive effects to almost any sort of policy measures, has been compellingly explained within the frames of general theories designed to help understand the evolution of educational opportunities, in most various context and across all levels of education. The two most important recent theoretical developments of this sort are the theories of Maximally Maintained Inequality and of Effectively Maintained Inequality.

### ***Maximally maintained inequality (MMI)***

An important contribution to understanding of the persistence of educational inequalities is provided by the theory of maximally maintained inequality, formulated by Raftery and Hout (1993), in order to explain the persistence of social reproduction effects regarding access to secondary education in Ireland, even after tuition fees for accessing this title have been eliminated. The main assumptions of this theory, inspired by rational choice models (Boudon, 1973; Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997; Goldthorpe, 1996), are: 1) Students, but mainly parents, in the case of secondary level, make decisions contingent on the anticipated costs and benefits of school continuation decisions. Even if the access probabilities are rising for lower classes, the relative costs stay high, likewise the costs of failure, which all lead to career decisions which are correlated with the economic and cultural resources of the student's family. 2) One has to make the distinction, initially introduced by Boudon (1973), between primary effects (ability and educational achievements) and secondary effects (which appear mainly in certain moments of educational career) in explaining educational achievements. Educational

expansion entails a decline in the strength of primary effects, because the schools become less selective, which lead, paradoxically, to the increase of importance of secondary effects (like social, economic and cultural background resources). In other words, the higher the probability of acceding to higher levels is greater (because of the increase in educational opportunities) the more important becomes the social origin for the accomplishment of the future educational transitions (because the cohorts of eligible students are more heterogeneous concerning the motivations and abilities). Therefore, educational expansion has the counterintuitive consequence of increasing social reproduction effects until the point in which the demand for certificates of certain level is saturated, in the case of those endowed with the best resources. In the moment in which finishing a certain level – say, post-secondary – becomes universal for the members of the upper class – that is, the demand from the members of that class becomes saturated – the effects of social background variables upon that transition decreases, but only if the educational expansion cannot be maintained using other ways (Lucas, 2001). In addition, the decline of social reproduction effects which happens following the saturation of demand from one of the social classes is reversible. Thus, a lowering of public support for education can lead to an increase in social background effects.

Starting from the above mentioned assumptions, Hanley and McKeever (1997) explain the virtual absence of a decrease in the socio-economic inequalities regarding the access to higher education, in the communist period:

- 1) The very slow increase of access opportunities in the tertiary level did not allow the saturation of demand for higher education certificates within the groups which possess, traditionally, high educational expectations. Thus, the

higher education has stayed very selective, especially when candidates from the lower classes are involved.

- 2) Despite of some initial efforts intended to prove the advantages of the socialist system (sustained by initial affirmative action measures – i.e., positive discrimination, favoring students from the lower social strata), the new socialist elite managed to consolidate some advantages for their offspring concerning access to the higher education. This variant of social reproduction in the case of communist societies is called the model of the new class.

### ***Effectively maintained inequality (EMI)***

The fundamental assumptions of EMI is that actors from socio-economically well-off strata assure (to them and to their children) a certain advantage any time such an advantage is possible, either quantitative (indicated by access probabilities and likelihood of achieving a certain transition) or qualitative (indicated by larger probabilities of accessing in schools and specialties considered, better'). The model proposed by Lucas (2001) shows that the saturation of demand for a certain level of education, within the higher classes, does not lead, necessarily, to an increase of the demand for higher level certificates as a mechanism of status preservation, which would be an inflationary mechanism predicted already by promoters of maximally maintained inequality, but can be liberated through the orientation of the demand to certain certificates from the respective level which become, thus, instruments of social reproduction.

The model highlights the fact that, at the formally same level of education there can be more or less formally differentiated tracks, and that the differentiation among routes is contingent upon the respective certificates' capacity to contribute to the candidates' status attainment. From this

perspective, apparently homogenous education levels have to be approached from the hypothetical standpoint of their qualitative differentiation, as it is the case of the various formal alternative tracks from the upper secondary level (high schools and vocational schools in the case of upper secondary cycle, or the brand new hierarchization of universities in Romania, or, even amongst the most elite higher education institutions, the distinction between universities and polytechnic schools). It is quite evident that non-formalized qualitative differentiations, recognized through hierarchies of prestige of *lyceums* (high schools) and universities, in the Romanian case, which are reflected by quantitative differences, measurable through indices like admission selectivity or aggregate school performances, are functioning in an analogous way with the students' aspirations and status attainment, although, in what concerns the Romanian university system, the formal structures are homogenous (Andreescu et al., 2012).

Generally speaking, the most valid explanations for the persistence of educational inequalities in communist countries are relying on the above mentioned theoretical models. Here, the difference between culturalist and rational choice explanations become immediately visible, in the manner of conceptualizing education choices. Thus, the often expressed preference of working class students for technical or vocational education can be the manifestation of a specific status culture, to be identified in the glorifying of labor (meant as physical work), or in the anecdotic oppositions between those which deliver physical work and those who are specialized in intellectual labor. The same choice can be understood as the result of a calculus which takes into account the risks of embarking on an adventure in the higher education in a context in which the high social selectivity of the tertiary education is clearly evident.

On the other hand, maintaining a high selectivity of post-secondary institutions, which should reflect itself in the persistence of social reproduction effects in explaining access probabilities was associated with a continuous differentiation in the upper secondary cycle (high schools level) between a preparatory track, aimed at the entrance in higher education, on the one hand, and a professional track with a direct exit in the field of labor.

## **Other sources of educational inequality**

### ***Geography***

Distance from higher education institutions adds costs for enrollment and participation, first, through travel costs, which are substantial in case of commuters, accommodation expense, but also due to the indirect (hidden) costs of travelling and moving. People who are on the move a lot cannot easily find employment, and also have problems in allotting sufficient time for study. The effects of breaking from important social networks are also not negligible in the case of those moving, also.

### ***Rural-urban gaps***

One of possible sources of inequality in access to higher education comes from the association of poorer life chances with rural settings. This could be the case in Central and Eastern Europe where large rural-urban differences persist, especially in Romania. In a recent article, Voicu and Vasile made such an argument considering the rates of access to higher education in Romania across cohorts (Voicu and Vasile, 2010). A test of the same relationship using the methodology of logistic response model by Hatos in a forthcoming research paper

(Hatos, 2012) provided different results, though. It appears that the lower chances of rural youth to enter universities in Romania have been a result of poorer endowment with the social, economic and educational capitals that educational transitions require.

### ***The financing of higher education students***

There is no doubt that being post-secondary student comes with a high price tag that can constitute a barrier towards participation in correlation with the economic potential of the student and of his/her family. Due to this fact, one should expect higher rates of participation in higher socio-economic strata.

These economic barriers do not act mechanically, but rather affect the rate of participation in the underprivileged categories, through mechanisms of self-selection justified by cost-benefit considerations. Besides the immediate impact of access to liquidity that can inhibit aspirations to higher education, Usher (2006) identified two other rationales that influence the enrollment decisions of secondary education graduates coming from different socio-economic backgrounds: the ratio of perceived benefits from graduating university, compared to the perceived costs, on the one hand, and the aversion from indebtedness. In both cases, students from deprived strata find less motivation to go further into higher education, seeing their future gains from graduating a university as less compelling, and the prospect of returning credit as negative.

Direct and indirect costs of post-secondary education are usually covered with measures implemented at the level of governments, universities and students themselves, of course. Governments or/and universities provide a series of financial transfers in the form of grants (in the form of direct financial transfer or of tuition-free

admission, which can cover all or merely a part of all the tuition) or scholarships, which can also be based on merit or on means. Merit based distribution of scholarship further raises equity questions, as academic performance is already significantly influenced by the economic resources of the students. Students themselves can ease their access to universities by accessing students loans (which are, in most of the cases, subsidized by the governments), by internal loans (i.e., money borrowed from parents) and by getting a job to earn the money needed to cover the costs of education. However, this latter opportunity is expected to have a negative effect on academic performance (since the resources devoted to learning are decreased), on academic integration (because students in this situation have less time to spend with colleagues) and increased risk of dropout, and, consequently, lowered gains from the time spent in University, in the labor market as well as in terms of social capital (Metcalf, 2003). Access to internal loans is the main condition behind the differential access to higher education which is addressed by the above mentioned policies that claim to have, usually, as target that of reducing inequalities of access.

### *Competitive systems of admissions*

Public systems of post-secondary education are of two general types, considering the admissions procedures: open-admissions, in which all eligible graduates of the appropriate secondary track are enrolled in the university institution, on the one hand, and systems with competitive admissions, in which candidates for enrollment in specific institutions are examined, usually for skills and competencies.

In terms of equity considerations, one could assume that open-admission policy provides more equal opportunities of

access. In fact, there are evidences that such a system reproduces social inequalities through at least three selection mechanisms: by further transmitting the reproductive mechanisms at work at lower levels of education, via socially differentiated completion rates and through social differentiated post-secondary educational tracks. These two latter mechanisms correspond to the hypothesis of effectively maintained inequality.

Competitive admissions, which occur usually in the case of elite universities in differentiated systems, give a clear advantage for those with higher social standing, through simple mechanisms of social reproduction so often underlined in sociology of education. One further advantage for the offspring of well-offs in this case is the outcome of the shadow education, like in the case of Far-Eastern countries (Bray, 2011).

The differentiation of institutions and tracks into selective ones and others' non-selective reflect the tendency of class-specific allocation of benefits of higher education. Usually, the more selective an academic track, the more intense are the social reproduction effects. Analysis of longitudinal data from US proved socio-economic status to be positively correlated with access to selective US colleges and into fields with high economic returns, within these colleges (Davies and Guppy, 1997). In the Israeli case, the conclusion is that people with lower SES benefit from educational expansion only concerning access to fields of study that carry little social advantage (Ayalon and Yogev, 2005).

### **Horizontal differentiation of higher education institutions. Impact on inequality**

Differentiation of educational credentials can replace quantitative inequa-

lities with qualitative ones (Lucas, 2001). For example, in Israel, there are two types of secondary promotion accreditation, a plain one and one that allows the beholder to enter university. Policy measures to increase eligibility for this accreditation (matriculation) increased the access to the plain diploma, while decreased it for the access to the one driving to university enrollment (Ayalon and Shavit, 2004).

Increased diversification of higher education institution is regarded, from a functionalist perspective, as functional, in the context of growth of the system. Faced with conflicting values, norms, pressures for both equality of access and excellence and competitiveness, differentiation of the systems comes as a natural outcome (Bastedo and Gumpert, 2003), a process which was felt most strongly in the United States (see for example Usher, 2009). In the same time, uniformisation pressures have increased in areas like Europe though the so-called 'Bologna process', or due to the increasing student mobility which produced a standardization of degree lengths and structures all across the 'European area of higher education' (Usher, 2009).

Differentiation has also many effects that lead to the reproduction of social inequalities:

- Best performing students at the secondary level are enrolled in research universities, where teaching is not among the top priorities;
- Low performing students are directed to higher education institutions where the resources for teaching and learning are scarce;
- Students enrolled in institutions lower in the hierarchies of universities or field are becoming more and more aware that they have been subjects of a process of exclusion that have had started much earlier, even from the elementary school.

There have been numerous policy initiatives recently conducive to increased differentiation of the higher education programs. In the US, this tendency means targeting more resources to well performing academic programs and penalizing weaker programs (Bastedo and Gumpert, 2003). Similar proposals have been made in Romania, in the context of the ongoing reform of the university system.

Many researchers have observed that as higher education have grown generalized or massive, turning from an elite-based to a majoritarian system, it also became more stratified (Reay et al., 2001).

In some instances, differentiation has been the consequence of policies with a social justice program in target. Such is the example of British polytechnics, established by Labor governments in the '60s of the previous century, in order to increase the chances of youth from working class environments to access post-secondary education (Furlong and Cartmel, 2009). While the rates of transition to higher education of working class youth have increased, the class differentials in probabilities of realizing this transition have remained basically unchanged, and the traditional British universities have preserved and even strengthened their elite status (and social composition, as well). Two years colleges and community colleges in the US have played the same role of contributing to the augmentation of chances for access to post-secondary education for the underprivileged, which they did without reducing the overall inequalities of access (Ayalon et al., 2001).

Generally, it can be stated that attempts at reducing inequality by leveling selectivity at one of the gates of the tracks has the consequence of moving the pressure to other points of entrance, the overall inequality remaining unchanged. Easing the access to secondary level certificate needed to enter universities, in

order to allow more minority and working class youth to enter higher education, in Israel was answered by universities with increased selectivity at entrance (Ayalon and Shavit, 2004).

Horizontally differentiated university level institutions have vertical consequences as to the length and level of tertiary careers. Most so called elite schools allow for post-graduate studies, at the top of all hierarchies being the so-called research universities which provide doctoral and post-doctoral programs. Horizontal differentiation is visible, first at upmost at institutional level, and secondly, at the level of fields of study. An evident separation between these two realms comes from the fact that institutional differentiation is formally carved in mission statements and rules, some of them regulating bluntly the criteria of admission, while fields of study (nonetheless institutionally differentiated universities as well) are different operationally in terms of so-called 'selectivity', a term that signifies the relative appeal of specific institution or department to eligible secondary graduates.

Distribution of social inequality depends on these institutional configurations bearing in mind the principle of inequality preservation. In conditions of similar probabilities of access into tertiary education, the lower is the institutionalization of vertical differentiation of higher education establishment, the stronger are the social reproduction effects that manifest at the admission of specific fields of study within the same universities. This is the result, for example, of a comparison between Germany and France (Duru-Bellat, Kieffer and Reimer, 2008): the less differentiated systems of Germany leads to a more polarization of fields of study in terms of selectivity and, consequently, to larger class differentials between the student intakes of specific fields of study.

Well known is the organization of French tertiary education, divided between elite institutions (most of the *grandes écoles*) and regular universities. Although general participation in higher education has expanded, graduates of the elite institutions have a higher probability of being males with father holding university degrees (Givord and Goux, 2007). A similar pattern of multi-tiered organization of post-secondary institutions emerged in UK during successive waves of university establishment, the last significant being the founding of more vocationally oriented polytechnics (Furlong and Cartmel, 2009) during the '60s), post-secondary institutions which are generally regarded as of poorer quality than the more ancient 'old universities'.

## **Conclusion and questions for further research**

Cross cohort investigation of access to higher education, with a focus on class differentials, have highlighted the persistence, and even increase in inequalities in access between youth of privileged and underprivileged classes. While communist regime were not successful in leveling differences between classes in access to higher education, the inequalities have been aggravated during the last two decades of expansion in higher education which have been peculiarly dramatic in both Romania and Hungary. Research evidence highlights that an educational meritocracy had not been achieved by the communist regime in neither countries, while in the decades following 1990 class and education differentials, or the so called secondary effects in educational achievement, became stronger.

Since access to higher education has become universal but non-meritocratic, and effect persist or are even aggravated,

explaining them, given the context of increasing access opportunity, is of utmost interest. Moreover, another crucial focus of any research in the area of social correlates of expansion of higher education in Romania and Hungary should be the investigation of correlation of tertiary educational institutions' differentiation and social inequalities in access to higher education following the thread of the theory of effectively maintained inequality. Therefore, one should be beware not only of probabilities of entering or not entering (or graduating), but also of the differentiated likelihoods of specific status groups and class categories to enter and graduate the various types of higher educational institutions and fields of study available.

Contextual variables describing local and national policies and measures, as well as special institutional features should also be taken into consideration. Some such important features that differentiate Hungary and Romania and need to be investigated are: 1) the importance of private sector supply of higher education in Romania which are delivering tertiary education to various niches, even selected

on ethnic or religious basis, which rely on the larger social diversity that one finds in Romania; 2) the much larger rural-urban gap in Romania than in Hungary and 3) the stronger financial pressures faced by Romanian students, not only due to the lower incomes in the more Eastern countries but also because of the larger share of the tuition paying student sector, even in the public higher education. Entering in the details of the effects of economic variables on access inequality several research questions can be raised concerning the costs and the access to financial support for the students in the cross-border area: 1) What is the relation of socio-economic background with the expected gains and costs of obtaining a higher education certificate? 2) What is the distribution of access to financial support of the students in the cross-border area? How is this access affected by country, type of institution, or SES? 3) What is the effect of employment on university participation? 4) How equitable is, in terms of SES breakdown, the distribution of merit-based scholarships or other ways of supporting educational participation?

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> According to the classification delivered by Trow (1974), systems of higher education with Gross Enrollment Ratios below 15% are labeled as elite systems, those with GER

between 15 and 50, as mass systems, while those with GER above 50% are universal systems of higher education. Gross Enrollment Rate in higher education: the total number of students is divided by the sum of citizens in the five year cohort following the normal end of the secondary school (18-22 years). The figure counts all kinds of tertiary students, traditional and non-traditional as well.

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