

Research Article

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Hidden in plain sight: student fund-raising in Romanian universities

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Abstract: This study provides a glimpse into student fundraising activities in Romanian public universities and of the university governance policies and practices linked to student organizations and student activities. The findings paint an institutional landscape whereby students were relatively active in fund-raising although the fund-raising culture was largely missing in their institutions. It shows that student fund-raising was mostly event-driven and with short term impact and that many fund-raising activities were aimed at addressing the shortcomings of an obsolete and rigid curriculum by providing optional activities. The universities exercised limited oversight over students' fund-raising which led to a large degree of discretionary power over donor relations including donor cultivation and gift stewardship.

Keywords: university fund-raising, student fund-raising, Romanian higher education

1. The context

The research into Romanian higher education in the aftermath of communism though relatively extensive has focused mostly on the system level due to the multiple policy changes that took place in the last decades and the adoption of the Bologna process. Evidence about the *meso* (institutional) and *micro* (individual stakeholders including students and faculty) levels has rarely been brought forward. Policy creation and implementation at institutional level and areas of university life not linked directly to the implementation of Bologna process reforms including management policies and practices,

student services and student life activities have been little documented.

The present study aims to fill this gap by casting a light on university governance policies and practices linked to student organizations and student activities. The term *fund-raising* is used rather than *development* or *advancement* not only because it is employed on the ground and also because it seems more suitable for universities that are just starting to organize their income diversification activities. To build on Perez-Esparrells and Torre's definition (2012) *fund-raising* in this study refers to the efforts made by students to seek individuals or organizations willing to share the goals and results of their organization (regardless of its name –students association and leagues, both formally constituted and not) through financial or other type of contributions.

The topic is important because it illustrates:

- Activities important to students but not funded by the university;
- Students' limited influence and room for negotiation with regard to funding from university budget;
- The funding priorities and mechanisms of student organizations at university and department levels;
- The informal peer learning processes in place between students and alumni with regard to fund-raising and
- University leadership and administrative staff's attitudes towards students.

To set the topic in the appropriate context I will briefly describe the Romanian higher education landscape, the status allocated to students and the role of students' organizations. Next I will provide an overview of existing fundraising carried out in Romanian institutions by faculty and students and explain how fundraising done by various constituencies link to the institutional goals and priorities. While fund-raising by student organizations is usually treated separately from university fund-raising I have chosen to treat them together for the following reasons: first, students fundraised to a large degree for activities that provide skills the university failed to provide in the curriculum. Second, students' affiliation

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with the university was essential in fund-raising: they relied on the university brand and at times even competed with units and departments for the same resources. Third, this study includes students' organizations that were not legally constituted, hence they did not fall within the NGO category. Fourth and last, the data gathered shows that the students organizations that were legally constituted got very limited funding from bodies (state institutions, foundations, associations) funding the NGO sector and rather from those funding specifically students or youth projects.

1.a. University funding and fundraising

In the aftermath of communism Romanian higher education suffered massive changes. Among them were: the reintroduction and re-conceptualisation of social sciences (to correspond to the Western university tradition rather the Soviet-imposed approach), the *system massification* (Trow 1971) of higher education and the establishment of private universities (Reisz 2003, Reisz and Stock 2012). By mid-2000 the private universities enrolled approximately half of the student population but from 2010 onwards they struggled to maintain enrollment numbers due to a decline in incoming student numbers. Standardized practices of accreditation and assessment and the funding mechanisms led to a high degree of institutional homogeneity (Andreescu et al. 2014).

State universities were allowed to offer tuition-free and tuition-paying places at prices that were very competitive to the private universities. However the operating costs of state universities were usually higher than those of their private counterparts because they offered not only social sciences and humanities but also more costly disciplines such as biology and physics as well as costly students' facilities (dormitories, canteens, sports venues). Unlike private universities many state universities benefitted from the prestige privilege and struggled less to maintain their student numbers. Nevertheless their operating costs were barely met by fees and per student capita funding from the government. In this context of *institutional massification* (Mohamedbhai 2014 building on Trow's 1971 theory of system massification) whereby the number of students increased dramatically, financial resources were concentrated on essential functions such as teaching and less on non-teaching related activities. Consequently, funding for extra-curricular activities for students was very limited and student support services became severely understaffed while still tributary to the 'one size fits all' approach despite the increasingly different backgrounds of their students (Bateson and Taylor 2004).

To make up for funding shortages universities included fund-raising as an institutional priority in the strategic plans starting from the early 2000. Nevertheless state universities in Romania were not 'natural entrepreneurs' (Clark 1998) and they operated in a legal, economic and national context that was largely unfavorable to fund-raising (Nastase 2015). First, the tradition of fund-raising for universities was missing not only in Romania but in Europe in general (Pérez-Esparrells and Torre 2012 provide a comprehensive argumentation). Unlike their US counterparts most of the public European universities (with the exception of UK) still rely heavily on state support as shown by the *EC Report on university fund-raising from philanthropic sources* (2007). Students' participation in institutional fund-raising in Europe has been shown to be far from the US model where students and student services units cooperate closely with the fund-raising offices to help raise funding for both core and extracurricular activities (Hillman 2002, Hendrix-Kral 1995, Crowe 2011).

In Romania, as shown by Nastase (2015) there was limited evidence of large scale university fund-raising in universities both state and private. Higher education institutions faced multiple challenges with regard to fund-raising. Externally, universities functioned in an environment of *curtailed entrepreneurialism* (Barnett 2005) with limited financial autonomy¹. The legal environment set by the 2004 Sponsorship Law offered limited incentives for corporate fund-raising, unlike the US context where tax incentives are a major motivation for corporate philanthropy (Muller and Sepheri 1988)². Another challenge was the unavailability of governmental matching funds schemes (such as the Matched Funding Scheme for Voluntary Giving in the U.K.)³ that would have rewarded the fund-raising efforts. Internally, challenges included university fragmentation and the difficulties of policy implementation at department level, the lack of specialized staff and of financial tools to incentivize faculty and the so called 'grey entrepreneurialism' whereby faculty members were able to attract funding but they were not paying any overhead to the university. Additionally, academics were reluctant to engage in fund-raising- which was perceived as incompatible social status

¹ as shown by the 2011 EUA Autonomy Scorecard

² The Sponsorship Law 32/1994 provides for corporations the possibility of sponsoring cultural or sports activities with an amount up to 20% from the taxable profit but no more than 3/1000 from annual turnover. These percentages were deemed too insignificant to constitute real incentives for philanthropic giving (Nastase 2015).

³ <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2012/cl142012/> consulted on December 18, 2017

of the academics not only in Romania but throughout Eastern Europe⁴.

1.b. Student organizations: funding and place in university hierarchy

Students had secured since the early 1990s by law their places in governing bodies (Senates and department's councils) and student organizations existed in every university as well as at national level. The multiple student organizations founded after 1990⁵ were funded from several sources: internal (membership fees) and external sources including institutional grants provided by the state authorities, grant giving organizations, project based grants, donations and sponsorships from the business sector and in-kind donations (Proteasa et al. 2009).

However, formal student representation did not necessarily result in increased student participation nor in a bigger impact of students on decision making processes (Bateson and Taylor 2004). The strong symbolic capital students had at the beginning of the 1990s when student organizations were mostly preoccupied with political issues⁶ had weakened due to the "domestication of the student voice" (Brooks et al. 2015) and to a change of focus towards academic and welfare issues of students. This limited symbolic capital is illustrated by the following policies and practices. First, students had limited real access to university leaders: proposals and grievances got through senior leaders through ad-hoc and unsystematic channels and therefore had limited longer term impact (Bateson 2008). Second, students' facilities (particularly dormitories) have been throughout the last two decades mostly unfit for purpose in most state universities⁷ despite students' strikes. Third, student services units in Romanian universities were inadequate for their mission and had low overall importance in the

university hierarchy. Bateson (2008) describes these units as without a voice (such as a senior leader) or a presence (with offices often scattered throughout the university and located in low-status places). These policies and practices point to a limited importance of students in the university hierarchy. On the polity spectrum suggested by Luescher-Mamashela and Klemencic (2017) (from students viewed as minors to students as important stakeholders) students seemed to have moved away from the place of important stakeholders hold at the beginning of the 1990s to a spot with less visibility and holding less influence.

To conclude, universities were facing severe funding shortages, operated in regulatory environments where additional funding was difficult to raise and lacked fund-raising know-how. Students had limited influence in university budgeting despite being represented in Senates and other bodies. Their universities offered very limited funding and could not provide fund-raising support needed to pay for the extracurricular initiatives desired by the students.

2. Methodology

The research was conducted in two of the best known and largest public non-technical universities chosen specifically for their size and "institutional privilege" (understood as a long history and prestige) because prior research suggested that in national contexts where diversification of funding streams is at the beginning fund-raising activities are unlikely to be found in smaller and less well known institutions⁸. The reason for choosing institutions located both in the capital (referred to as UC) and the province (referred to as UP) was to see whether location in the capital and arguably with access to more opportunities (wealthy individuals, corporations and foundations) had any impact on student fund-raising as Clark (1998) indicated previously that it might impact the degree of entrepreneurialism shown in certain institutions.

Data was gathered between 2008 and 2012 thorough a combination of:

- Focus groups with students, conducted on campus and off-campus at student conferences, including interviews with students' representatives in the Students' Leagues (*Liga Studentilor*) and other student organizations at department and faculty/school levels;

⁴ In an example from Hungary, Richard Quandt recounts the reaction of disbelief of a Rector when told the universities should not rely on the state for funding and his comments that fund-raising is similar to panhandling (Quandt 2002).

⁵ Either legally established under law 26/2000 regarding the foundations and associations or without legal standing.

⁶ Examples are the political situation in Bessarabia and the so called Timisoara Declaration demanding that former Communist party members are removed from positions of power.

⁷ See for instance <https://www.campuscluj.ro/stiri/1198-chirie-sau-camin-preturi-si-conditii-acum-la-inceput-de-an-universitar.html>, accessed 1 October 2017 and http://adevarul.ro/educatie/universitar/situatiacaminelor-studentesti-capitala-locuri-putine-conditii-mize-rabile-1_597f4e4a5ab6550cb8a53517/index.html, accessed August 20, 2017

⁸ EC (2008) Giving in evidence: Fundraising from philanthropy in European universities

- Follow up interviews with students and alumni to clarify data, discuss intermediary findings and get updates;
- Interviews with faculty and university leaders, including vice-rectors (two at each of the institutions), head of departments (2 per institution) and faculty (6 per institution);
- Document analysis of strategic plans and internal guidelines and regulations.

3. Findings

Evidence collected during field trips points to a multitude of fund-raising initiatives and important funds raised almost single handedly by students. These included:

- Student-led calls for support of student events such as Freshman and Graduates Balls (*Balurile Bobocilor si Absolventilor*), student conferences (such as the National Conference of Psychology Students), workshops and trainings of trainers.
- Student projects including international exchanges, media development (for example the student newspaper) and projects of local interest (such as the student led initiative to mark hiking mountain routes). State agencies including the Agency for Student Support (Agentia pentru Sprijinirea Studentilor -ASS) organized calls for project proposals and offered non-repayable grants to student organizations with individual legal standing.
- Social causes including hardships funds for colleagues that were experiencing severe medical or family problems but also for social responsibility type of projects whereby students volunteered to help out disadvantaged society members (in one case a drive was initiated to fund the expenses of students volunteering in schools with a high number of poor children).
- University-led events such as job fairs, University Open Days and sports events.

The data also points to: first, limited contributions made by foundations, possibly because very few students' organizations had individual legal status separated from the university. Second, no evidence of major gifts being raised by students, possibly because "obtaining a major gift is a process, not an event (Shay 1993.p. 19) whereby donors are courted over a longer period of time. The transient nature of student organizations did not allow for engaging in long term donor cultivation. Third, there were neither major corporate gifts nor pledges of longer

term support possibly because of the unfavorable tax framework and the lack of institutional interest for such initiatives.

3.a. Students' rationale for fund-raising

The reasons students quoted for fund-raising were largely clustered in three categories.

First, the desire to offer additional or more up-to-date courses for students as described by one UP student: *At our faculty the curriculum does not include any course on human resource management although now many psychology graduates go into HR jobs. So, the students' association from my faculty looked around for money to organize an intensive week-end workshop with a young professor from Timisoara who is specialized in HR and who teaches a course on the topic. It was the same with people who were interested in certain therapies -they organized for somebody to come from Bucharest and they got the money from a pharmaceutical company (I think).* The students also expressed a certain frustration with their limited ability to impact the curriculum: *Our courses are not very much in line with what is going on in the world right now. We are bored with the old course offerings because they have not changed much in the past years. The education plan [curriculum] cannot be changed because students want to do more visual studies for instance.* (UC student representative). Additionally, students quoted the need to add skills that were not covered in degree courses: *Every year we hear about how wonderful opportunities these AIESEC guys have, how they travel and how many trainings they attend so this year we decided that we will try to offer at our faculty workshops in project management, media and PR, and in public speaking. Of course there was no point to ask the Dean for money because he does not have so we managed to convince speakers to come for a very low fee and the National Agency for Students gave us a grant to cover travel and accommodation* (UC student). A UP student also mentioned that the international experience was important in getting involved in fund-raising: *When I was an Erasmus student in Italy the university was offering many skills workshops for all students and students paid very little, almost symbolically. I attended a public speaking one and it was very good. When I told them that in Romania we have nothing like that, they asked me: ok, but why don't students get organized to do it?*

Second, certain student related activities they were interested in were not funded by the university and those students interested in the topic had to seek funding: *The university has always had some sort of student newspaper but the quality and number of issues per year has always*

been unreliable because this is not a priority for the university and when it is it also depends on how good a manager is the person in charge with finances. This year we got money from the cultural office of the Mayor's office to do a very good issue which also links with the anniversary of the city. So in this issue many journalism students got their chance to publish and it was a great applied project (UP student).

Third, students sought funding to attend students' event abroad: *Every year there are countless very interesting and useful events abroad where we apply but we cannot get to because they rarely pay for the travel and the university ... well, not only do not have the money but they don't think it's important for students to attend such things. They only care about the courses they teach and that is it (UC student).*

3.b. Institutional support for student fund-raising

While the existence of student fund-raising is not necessarily surprising, it is interesting to note the limited support from universities and oversight of student activities. Both universities seemed to have a culture of openness to students' initiatives with one student noticing: *"we can do pretty much what we want, as long as we ask no money from the institution. Of course we cannot do anything illegal but as long as we don't have problems with the law the professors seem not to care what the student organization does".* The university leaders acknowledged that students have a high degree of discretion in fund-raising but framed it in somewhat different terms: *of course we don't interfere in student fund-raising, first it is their projects and second they need to learn by doing. If their ideas have value than they can convince somebody to fund it. If they need help with something important my door is always open but we will not micro-manage student activities, this is not why we are here and they do not want it either (UC Provost).*

In this context the student organizations encouraged the personal entrepreneurship of their members in identifying both worthy causes for support and in attracting funding: *"when I had the idea to approach the company where my flat mate's sister works; the student union told me that if I can bring in funding I can of course decide what project it should go to. So, I knew who to write to and how, -and raised the necessary funds to fund the travel and accommodation to this workshop in Iasi for 6 of my colleagues, which I got to choose".*

The universities had very limited oversight over students' activities and did not monitor the donors to student activities and the type of contributions. This lead

occasionally to potentially embarrassing situations when both students and faculty approached the same donor: *We went to ask one of our alumni who was the director of a company (...) for funding for a department event and were surprised to find out that the company was a regular contributor to the university. It was surprising that nobody in the university knew about their contribution, neither the Rectorate nor colleagues from other departments. We realized that they had been contributing to the student organization when we saw their logo on the poster of student activities. So in their mind they were giving to the university.*

Aside from allowing students a high degree of discretion with regard to activities and fund-raising, the universities supported student activities by usually allowing them the free use of facilities.

Students voiced a certain frustration with the university management for not paying more attention to opportunities available for students: *We have to phone the ANS (National Agency for Students) every week to find out when the call is coming out, what papers we need to prepare for the proposal and so on. Wouldn't it be easier if the university was in contact with the Agency and they would get a fax when the call is out and put it up there on the Board (the Avizier) for all interested students to see?* (Student representative, UP). A student from the UC also mentioned that : *'when we have a student project the accounting department treats us as beggars, we have to go numerous times to their office for a simple paper or for them to tell us whether the money arrived or not. Not to mention that their working hours are often when we are supposed to be in class!'*

Informally, several faculty members were involved as advisors but these were mostly faculty who had previously themselves taken part in students' organizations during their studies: *I try to help out students in their extracurricular activities whenever I can. In fact I just recently convinced a major photo equipment company to sponsor one of the student's photography contests. I do it because I can but also because I remember that not long ago I was also part of the student organization hustling for funding (UP faculty).*

3.c. Management of fund-raising activities

Record-keeping, donor cultivation and stewardship are essential steps in fundraising according to the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) the

professional association of advancement professionals⁹. These were one of the weakest points in student fund-raising because: first, the leaders of students' organizations were changing every year or every few years and second because many contacts were personal and not institutional. The situation has been summarized by one student representative who noticed that: *students with fundraising experience are preferred in leadership positions but for those who don't have experience the older colleagues usually know what happened 2-3 years before and can tell us which company has given before*. An additional challenge for record keeping at institutional level was the large number and the fragmentation of student organization. For instance when asked whether the students from their faculty have ever fund-raised for private scholarships, one student representative told me: *from my department (of Psychology) I don't think so but I heard that those from Social Work did*, which indicates that even student organizations might not be aware of the fund-raising activities of students from the same Faculty.

Donor identification and solicitation seemed to be among the strongest points, with student organizations having discretionary power in choosing the companies and institutions to be approached. Sponsors were identified almost ad-hoc, always based on personal contacts and were usually companies where graduates, students or their friends and parents worked. While it is difficult to estimate the success rate of the cases for support, most of those interviewed indicated that usually the companies and (more rarely) the individuals they had approached in the past have contributed either in kind or in cash. In this context the student organizations encouraged their members to identify both worthy causes for support and to attract funding.

Nevertheless, the minimal oversight of students' fund-raising raises a series of ethical issues linked to the profile of donors approached and the way the call for support could have been formulated (Rosen 2005). As previous research pointed out, university donors need to be carefully screened to avoid association with people and organizations with the potential to negatively impact universities. The scandals related to sponsorships coming

from tobacco industry and the recent London School of Economics case (Turner 2011) serve as examples that the laissez-faire approach to donor identification could have had unexpected outcomes.

3.d. Fund-raising know-how acquisition

Incoming student representatives often received fund-raising training which was offered usually ad-hoc by former students who stayed in touch after graduation. While the content and timing of these trainings were rather ad-hoc they seemed to have been quite effective and more than what the university leadership was offering to its staff with regard to fund-raising know-how: *We wanted to write a letter to a company that supported the Sports Day the previous years and we did not know who to approach at that company and how to write it. We wrote to one of the graduates who had dealt with this last year and she came in and spent 5 hours with us and told us how to write letters, who needs to sign it in the university, how to follow up to the letter and how to follow the money once it comes in* (UC student).

4. Discussion and conclusions

The findings paint an institutional landscape whereby students were relatively active in fund-raising for what Bateson and Taylor's (2004) called "the bulging periphery of student projects". When compared to the fund-raising activities conducted at institutional level (Nastase 2015) students come across more entrepreneurial, which is not contradictory since previous research showed that *different stages of entrepreneurialism* can be displayed inside the same institution by different departments and units (Marginson and Considine 2000, De Zilwa (2005). Students' organizations relied on personal relations and the university brand to fund projects benefitting a small number of students and chosen arbitrarily based on the personal interest of the students involved. The study highlights the *grassroots leadership* of students whereby students without leadership positions strive to create and manage change (Mars 2009). These students brought about positive initiatives such as the introduction of skills trainings, participation in student conferences and workshops.

Nevertheless most of students' fundraising seemed to be events driven rather than geared towards projects with long-term impact. The diversity and fragmentation of calls for support reflected the diversity and fragmentation of student organizations and although overall many donors

⁹ CASE lists the following steps to be taken by institutions trying to secure additional funding: *Identification of donor* (Who will you ask and what will you ask for?), *Cultivation* (Building relationships, engaging the prospect and preparing to make the ask), *Solicitation*. (Making the ask) and *Stewardship* (Recognition and continuing to engage donors). http://www.case.org/Publications_and_Products/Fundraising_Fundamentals_Intro/Fundraising_Fundamentals_section_7/Fundraising_Fundamentals_section_71.html consulted on December 10, 2017

were recruited to give to the university, their contribution had limited impact both in time and scope. By contrast universities fund-raise for a wider range of projects out of which a significant percentage are long term ones such as new buildings, dormitories and auditoriums, endowed chairs and programs. Student fund-raising bares similarities to the individual faculty and with departmental fund-raising in Romanian universities (Nastase 2015): events driven, building on a combination of university reputation and personal contacts and taking place somewhat in the shadow. These similarities could point to the common need to make up for a shortage in funding, to bypass the institutional bureaucracy and the drive to benefit directly from personal entrepreneurship and contacts as a compensation for the work put in.

The institutions seemed to be overall open to students' initiatives although the political will of university leaders (Rectors, Pro-Rectors, Deans) to support students did not always filter down to the administrative staff which come across as rather unhelpful if not hostile. Nevertheless the students were efficient in using the institutional capital as a lever to fund-raise (Mars 2009) by obtaining institutional support and acknowledgement letters. Students did receive in-kind support by accessing university facilities almost without restrictions and with limited bureaucratic procedures.

In terms of their standing in the university's hierarchy students' formal representation in governance was not accompanied by significant student influence on curriculum development and financial allocation. In those stages students found it easier to organize their own events and trainings than to convince the university to add optional courses or trainings to the standard curricula. The data points to a certain disconnect between students and university and particularly between students and student services units. In other contexts, most notably in the US, student services act as interfaces between students and leadership particularly with regard to student life. By contrast, in the Romanian context they appear to have a very limited mandate and equally limited interest in working with students to organize student-led activities.

Additionally, the drive to organize and fundraise for activities not included in the curriculum could be an effect of early internationalization. International student organisations such as AIESEC and ELSA had started to offer trainings and mobility opportunities for Economics and Law students which were desired by those enrolled in other faculties. Moreover, due to the Erasmus programs some students had gotten the opportunity to see how other student organizations operate and tried to introduce these models at home.

The data collected does not allow for an analysis of fund-raising patterns among the 17 student organizations from UP and 15 from UC. Nevertheless few observations could be made about the fund-raising practices of university level Students' Leagues and the many smaller, department level organizations. The university level Students' League (*Liga Studentilor*) both at UC and UP had a less spontaneous approach to projects and fund-raising and tended to fund-raise for regular, yearly events such as the University Sports Festival, Student Cultural Festival (a UP) and Student Film Evenings at UP and Environmental Protection Day (at UP) and Spring Cleaning Days (at UC). These events usually got limited funding from the university and the students approached every year more or less the same companies for additional funding. The data collected does not point to the Students' Leagues representatives lobbying the university leaders to put forward important students' welfare issues as cases for support. In other words, students appear not to have requested that new dormitories, new canteens and facilities be fund-raised for in campaigns bringing together students and university leaders. Possible explanations are the limited time students spent as representatives, lack of vision from both students and university leadership, limited institutional knowledge on launching and managing fund-raising campaigns and the impact of the unfavorable legal and economic context in Romania at the time. This may also show a major limitation of students' fund-raising abilities: their organizations did not have the necessary numbers needed to influence issues requiring both the university and the ministry to work together.

To sum up, in the two institutions where this study was conducted students were involved in fund-raising and significantly more active than the central administration in attracting outside funding. Fund-raising activities were almost entirely events-driven, with short rather than long-term impact. They had mostly an ad-hoc character with little record-keeping and stewardship of donors conducted by students mostly because of the transient nature of student life but also because the institution was little involved in their activities. This situation also made it very difficult to have a clearer picture of the percentage of successful calls for support which is one shortcoming of this research.

The limited oversight granted to student activities and fund-raising allowed students a great degree of personal entrepreneurship which led to numerous donations and sponsorships from corporations. Most donors seems to have been corporations identified rather as small and medium corporations in UP and larger corporations in the UC. However, it is not possible to generalize given the

small number of interviewees when compared to the total student populations and the number of students involved in students' organizations. Nevertheless the university leaders and many of the faculty involved seemed unaware of students' fundraising initiatives and successes with many of them being sure that students are not involved at all in fund-raising. This relative unawareness of students' entrepreneurship could lead to the conclusion that in fact the institutions failed to capture it and inscribe it in a university wide strategy, just as they failed to capture the individual entrepreneurship of faculty members (Năstase 2015).

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