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IDENTIFICATION AND ASSESSMENT OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CHOICE OF VARIOUS HIGHER EDUCATION TRAJECTORIES AND THE PATTERNS OF INTERGENERATIONAL PRESERVATION/IMPROVEMENT OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

A b s t r a c t

Higher education is an important factor in shaping social mobility in contemporary societies. As it has been argued by several inquiries undertaken in developed societies, education is a tool used by individuals (supported by their families) to move from one social position to another in stratified societies; yet, although education can be a way for upward social mobility, the same inquiries have proven that chances for educational attainment are unequal, being influenced by the unequal access to resources at the starting point, and thus education often helps to preserve the existing socio-economic hierarchies and stratification.

The role of higher education in shaping social mobility depends to a large extent on the percentage of graduates in relationship to the overall active population. This percentage has increased during the post-communist period, from less than 10% in the 1980s to almost 25% in the last decade (22.5% in 2023, according to Monitorul educației și formării 2024). While the increase is significant, Romania is still lagging behind the developed countries (EU27 average was 43.1% in 2023, and some developed countries have percentages above 60%).

In contemporary Romania, where the number of graduates is about a quarter of a generation (and less for older cohorts), a higher education diploma still makes per-se a significant difference on the labor market, and thus in securing access to better-paid occupations and providing thus the basis for a higher socio-economic status. Nevertheless, there are also qualitative differences between types of higher education studies, both in terms of study fields, study cycles and, to some extent, the higher education institution graduates. It is to be expected that in the future when the share of graduates will increase and there will be an increasing abundance of higher education diplomas, the significance of qualitative differences between higher education credentials will also increase.

The attempt to preserve and, if possible, improve the socio-economic status from one generation to the next is legitimate and widespread. This means families undertake various strategies to ensure that their offspring can complete higher education and thus have access to well-paid jobs and can improve (or preserve) the status attained by the parent generation. One of the main components of these strategies is to invest economic capital in private lessons (meditations) to enhance the educational performance of their offspring. While until the 1990s most of these private lessons were targeted for the admission competitions, in the last decades only a part of the fields of study have competitive admissions, which demand intensive and expensive preparations. Nevertheless, as the part of pupils who do not finish high school or don't succeed at the baccalaureate exam has become significant, a large part of the investment in private lessons has shifted towards earlier phases of secondary education.

Private lessons are just one part of the economic investment in educational performance. Many affluent people have less and less confidence in the public schools or in the Romanian higher education institutions. Therefore, some of them decide to enroll their offspring in private and/or international schools and support them to study abroad, if possible, at prestigious European and/or American universities. The rationale behind this option is that the youngsters will thus get a better education, and better skills and more prestigious academic credentials will make a difference in the labour market. While this is true for graduates who seek to work for multinationals, it is less evident for graduates who attempt to return to Romania; the latter find out that success in getting jobs in the public service and even in many private companies depends more on the social capital of their families than on the fact that employers recognize their skills and their capacity to be a valuable input for the hiring institutions.