

Examining the Strategic Framework of Romania's Educational Infrastructure from the Perspective of European Integration

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Abstract: The process of European integration, through its dynamics and complexity, proves to be a great challenge for Romania on the whole, and the education system is the central point in reconfiguring the socio-economic and political evolution of the Romanian state. For almost three decades, the education system in Romania has undergone numerous transformations and redefines, but nowadays, more than a decade after joining the European Union, we find that these reforms in education have not had a positive impact, and on the contrary, we are on the last places in different rankings regarding the competences of the graduates in different fields (PISA studies), and on the top places, if we look at the educational system from the perspective of statistical indicators such as: the early leaving rate of the education and training system; employment rate; etc.. This paper follows the strategies underlying the evolution of the education system in Romania in connection with the development strategies and policies in the field agreed and assumed at EU level. This research-paper addresses mainly policy decision makers in the education system, but also other stakeholders relevant to the education system.

Keywords: Europe 2020; Knowledge-Based Economy; Quality of Training; Brain Drain; HEIs; Human Capital.

JEL Classification: I21; I23; I25; I28; O30; R10

1 Introduction

There is an important difference between «*joining EU*» and «*EU integration*» and this difference can be easily noticed if we look at the annually country reports elaborated by the European Commission which monitor the assessment of progress on structural reforms, prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances, and results of in-depth reviews under Regulation (EU) No 1176/2011.

In accordance with the latest country report (European Commission, 2018), the particular challenges for Romania's economy, are the following:

- labour and skills supply are not keeping up with the fast-changing needs of the economy;
- poverty increased and income inequality remains high;

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- no tangible results were achieved on public administration reforms, and the business environment shows weaknesses;
- ***the weak performance of the education system limits growth prospects in the long run;***
- the health status of the population has improved, but remains below EU standards;
- performance in the area of research and innovation remains modest;
- high public spending is not reflected in the country's infrastructure;
- the irreversibility of the progress in the fight against corruption was recently put at risk.

But, at the same time, this Country Report for Romania reveals that “over the last years, the Romanian authorities have taken some measures to address poor education outcomes and skill shortages by adopting **relevant strategies**”.

Throughout this paper, we try to identify the relevant strategies that govern the educational system in Romania and their compliance with the EU strategic trend in the field. In this regard, this research-paper intends to be a national case study, focused on the analysis of the strategic framework of Romania's educational infrastructure from the perspective of European integration.

2 A Short Diagnosis of Romania's Educational System

2.1 Key Features of Romania's Educational System

The general legal framework for the organization, administration and functioning of the education in Romania is established by: the Constitution (ch.2, ch.32); the Law of National Education – which is an organic law; and by ordinary laws and Government ordinances.

The education system in Romania is administered at *national level* by the Ministry of National Education (MEN)¹, at *central level*, in cooperation with other ministries (e.g. Ministry of Public Finance for financing schools) and institutional structures subordinated to the Government, and at *local level* by the county school inspectorates, as subordinated local institutions. The specific procedures and

¹ Ministry of National Education organizes and leads the national education system, education, scientific research, technological development and innovation in partnership with both subordinate institutions and institutions under the coordination. The Ministry of National Education ensures the relationship with the Parliament, Economic and Social Council and the representatives of the civil society in matters specific to its field of activity.

regulations are established by Government Decisions and orders of the Ministry of National Education.

The general mandatory education has **11 grades** and includes the *primary education*, the *lower secondary education* and the first 2 years of the *upper secondary education*. The forms of organization of the pre-university education are: *frequency education* and *reduced frequency education*. **The mandatory education is frequency education. The public school education is free.**

Table 8. Stages of Romanian Education System

Early education (0-6 years)	the before preschool level (0-3 years)	takes place in nurseries, kindergartens and day-care centres, whether state-owned or private, according to the same educational content and the same national standards.	
	the preschool education (3-6 years) includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↕ the small group ↕ the middle group ↕ the big group 	takes place in kindergartens or schools (state or private), which have pre-school groups as a section, following the same curriculum and respecting the same national standards.	
Primary education	ISCED 1	the preparatory grade	
		<i>grades 1-4</i>	
Secondary education	ISCED 2	secondary lower education or gymnasium ¹ <i>grades 5-8</i>	
	ISCED 3	secondary superior education	high school education , which includes the high school <i>grades 9-12/13</i> , with the following pathways: <i>theoretical, aptitude-based (vocational)</i> and <i>technological</i>
			a minimum 3-year professional education ²
Tertiary non-university education	ISCED 4	post secondary education	The professional and technical education is composed of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • professional education • technical education

¹ The access to the higher level is achieved by a national evaluation examination and distribution in upper secondary education units.

² The graduates of the professional education promoting the certification examination of the professional qualification may attend the high school education courses.

			• post secondary education.
Higher education ¹	ISCED 5-8	↳ Bachelor studies ↳ master studies ↳ PhD studies	
Adult education	includes training programmes at all qualification levels, organized in the public or private sector		
	At public level, the Institute of Education Sciences provides training courses by which it promotes education reforms ² .		

Schematically, the information presented in the previous table can be rendered as follows:



Figure 1 Structure of the National Education System in Romania

Source: Eurydice 2017-2018 (https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/romania_en)

2.2 The Current Stage of Romanian Educational System Development

A statistical overview of the main education and training indicators is offered by the Directorate General for Education and Culture through country analysis “Education and Training Monitor 2017 - Romania”.

In accordance with this report (Comisia Europeană, 2017):

¹ The higher education is organized in universities, study academies, institutes, higher studies schools, referred to as higher education institutions or universities, temporarily authorized or certified. The high school graduates with high school diploma can enrol in the higher education. The admission conditions are different from one institution to another.

² The Teaching-Staff Resource Centre offers professional development courses with regard to the system of professional and transversal skills necessary to the teacher and to the national and European policies and strategies in the education field.

- Romania is implementing a competence-based curriculum in school education. Plans are underway to train teachers to teach the modernised curriculum.
- Underachievement in basic skills remains one of the highest in the EU. This is due to *educational factors* and *equity challenges*. Access to quality mainstream education is particularly a challenge for students in rural areas and for Roma.
- **Funding for education is very low.** Early school leaving risks remaining high, with consequences for the labour market and for economic growth.
- The labour market relevance of higher education is improving, but tertiary educational attainment is *the lowest in the EU*.
- Efforts to introduce dual vocational education and training are underway. Adult participation in learning remains *low despite the need* for up-skilling.

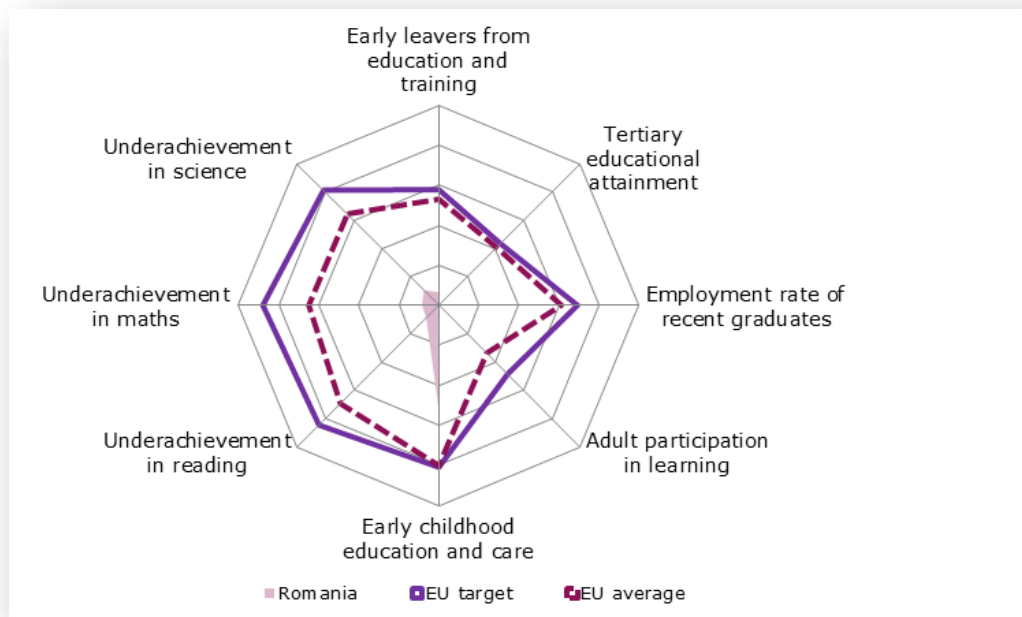


Figure 2 Position in relation to strongest (outer ring) and weakest performers (centre)

Source: (Comisia Europeană, 2017) http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/et-monitor_ro

Summarising, Romanian educational system is confronted with a set of problems, which over-time will significant increase if policy decision makers and also other stakeholders relevant to the education system, do not cooperate in order to re-orientate the entire system to nowadays society needs.

It's time to learn that the Romania Educational System should **focus on quality** in:

- preparing students for employment in accordance with their job-qualification achieved in the field of study;

It is important to offer the basic specialized knowledge for all students but, in the view of Europe 2020, there is an increased need to develop a high level of necessary skills and abilities for knowledge based society.

- promoting community values and training the students as active European citizens;

The fundamental values like: intolerance, discrimination and respect for diversity, should be promoted at different level of education, and moreover, it is essential to promote 'active citizenship' among students by fostering democratic involvement of young people in solving the various problems of local community life.

- creating a broad base of advanced knowledge enabling the development of innovative spirit;

There is a need to re-orientate the entire educational process toward *learning outcomes*, instead of *learning outputs*. This switch implies to implement innovative teaching and learning methods focused on using new technologies and digital content; to create inclusive learning-friendly environments, together with increasing the flexibility of learning methods through recognition and validation of different forms of learning. On the long term, this will contribute to students' personal development, and also will attract students to research activities.

3 The Strategic Framework of Romania's Educational Infrastructure

Currently, the educational system in Romania, is based on a set of *strategic planning documents* that describes the main directions of development for different types and/or levels of education:

- Education and Training Strategy in Romania 2016-2020;
- National Strategy for Lifelong Learning 2015 -2020;
- National Strategy for Tertiary Education 2015 – 2020;
- Strategy to reduce early school leaving in Romania.

Moreover, for vocational education and training (VET) and for technical education, there are specific strategic planning documents, such as:

- Regional Action Plan for Vocational and Technical Education (for each NUTS II region);
- Local Action Plan for Vocational and Technical Education (for each county);
- The Action Plan of the School.

As it may be observed, in Romania there is a big amount of documents which are shaping the development directions for educational sector.

But, the *outcome* of this strategic framework of Romania's educational infrastructure, unveil that (Comisia Europeană, 2017):

- in accordance with the 2015 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey, **more than half of 15-year-olds do not possess the minimum level of skills** in science (56.1%), reading (57.5%) and mathematics (59%). Besides, *students' performance is linked to their socioeconomic background*, underachievement among disadvantaged students being almost three times higher, the highest gap in the EU (36.9 pp. in science, compared to 26.2 pp. in the EU);
- *high early school leaving (ESL) is the third highest in the EU* (18.5% in 2016) and is *concentrated in rural areas and among Roma*. The difference between ESL in rural (26.6%) and urban areas (6.2% in cities, 17.4% in towns and suburbs) is high;
- *rural-urban disparities and inequality in education often overlap*, because the **quality of mainstream education** is a particular challenge in rural areas, rural schools scoring below urban schools on all performance indicators. Furthermore, these inequalities are so significant, due to the fact that students from urban schools are using on large scale private tutoring, particularly to prepare for national examinations;
- *the integration of Roma in education hinder their social inclusion and ability to find employment*;
- **Romania's general government expenditure on education** as a proportion of GDP remains **the lowest in the EU** (3.1% in 2015 compared to the EU average of 4.9%), with a strong negative impact on *educational outcomes, intellectual capital and economic growth*. In addition, the mechanisms to channel funds to disadvantaged schools are insufficient;
- evidence from PISA shows that **the proportion of top performing students** (those capable of solving complex problems) is **the lowest in the EU** (2% in reading, 3.3% in mathematics and 0.7% in science), suggesting that the

educational factors such as *teaching* and *curricula* are having an important impact on *educational outcomes*;

- even if the Education Law (from 2011) requires teachers to follow a two-year master's programme in education, **this legal requirement was not implemented** and the effect consists in a *low-quality teachers*, particularly in disadvantaged schools;
- **the tertiary educational attainment rate is the lowest in the EU**, mainly due to: *high dropout rates in pre-university education*, *low pass rates for the baccalaureate exam* and also *low participation of disadvantaged groups* in higher education;
- *fostering excellence in higher education and research remains a challenge* mainly because **the Education Law is not respected**, and doctoral schools in Romania are allowed to function with a temporary accreditation, without the five-year re-evaluation required by law; also, recent *plagiarism cases* raise questions over the quality of academic ethics and of doctoral schools. In addition, a controversial decision by the Ministry of Research and Innovation limits the participation of foreign peers in the evaluation of national research projects, measure that raise question over the **openness** of Romania's public research and higher education system;
- *adult participation in learning remains very low despite the widespread need for up-skilling* (1.2% in 2016, well below the EU average of 10.8 %); due to a **limited culture of participation in lifelong learning**, particularly among the large population living in rural areas and working in subsistence and semi-subsistence agriculture, where there is poor educational infrastructure and limited access to learning opportunities.

In brief, even if Romania's educational system is highly covered by strategic planning documents, the access to *quality* and *inclusive education* is faced with continuous challenges, with a huge negative impact on socio-economic development. **Skills shortages** are starting to emerge in a number of economic sectors such as: *ICT*, *health* and *education*, and **continued emigration** adds to the challenge. (CEDEFOP, 2015)

Even if Romania has adopted a **2015-2020 strategy for higher education** with the aim of raising quality, labour-market relevance and participation of disadvantaged groups, **the slow pace of implementation**, limits its expected results.

The **adult learning system** in Romania remains *fragmented*, and its different components have *developed in disparate ways*. **Implementation** of the **national strategy for lifelong learning** adopted in 2015 **has been delayed** and the **adoption** of the **new national registry of qualifications** was **again postponed**.

Nevertheless, some **progress** has been made in *vocational education and training*, *lifelong learning* and *higher education* but the **quality** of these services and their

labour market relevance remain **largely insufficient**. After the adoption of the “Strategy for Early School Leaving” in 2015 and the progress observed the following year, **efforts to continue implementation were modest in 2017**. This is reflected in *high early school leaving rates, unequal access to quality education* including for the Roma and *large gaps in terms of student performance* all pointing to persistent hurdles. (European Commission, 2018)

Concluding, *high rates of underachievement in basic skills, coupled with early school leaving and low tertiary attainment* **do not meet** the *increasing needs for skilled labour supply*, and coupled with the *emigration of highly skilled workers*, creates **skills shortages in knowledge-intensive sectors** and ultimately **limits economic growth**.

All of these raise concerns over the *governance, efficiency and effectiveness* of Romania’s education system.

4. Final Thoughts

The **entire strategic framework of Romania’s educational infrastructure** should be **redesigned**, in order to ensure the *connectivity of information, the reliability and completeness of strategic planning documents* and also the *consistency and comparability of information*.

In the context of harmonization with Europe 2020, there is an increased need for an **integrative strategic thinking**, so a *high level of harmonization* of these documents is required. It is very important to **integrate the information** from different strategic planning documents, so a *timetable should be strictly respected* in designing such documents.

Substantial change is needed in order to create an **integrated strategic framework** for Romania’s educational infrastructure, and the *involvement of all relevant stakeholders* (internal and external, as well) in the decision making process is a precondition to move forward, from a «**document-driven**» to a «**message-driven**» approach.

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