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The educational system in Romania, the European Union and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Comparative analysis

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Abstract. This paper aims to be a comprehensive overview of how quality is considered an important indicator in measuring educational systems in European countries. The primary research question in our study is the following: "Is the educational system in Romania a qualitative one compared to those belonging to other EU states?" and tries to analyze, in a comparative manner, how a number of significant factors negatively influence the quality of education in Romania. Also, the findings are important for improving the development of the educational system in Romania, aiming to carry out a SWOT analysis, and highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of the system. The research has revealed, as in a statement, that understanding the weaknesses of the Romanian educational system will contribute to the development of ways in which this system can be improved with the responsible involvement of those who decide, respectively of the political factors. Finally, the results of the study indicated a number of strong points of the educational system in Romania which are of major importance in order that our educational system become a competitive and qualitative one, compared to those belonging to other European states.

Keywords. Romanian educational system, quality, European countries, SWOT analysis, development.

1. Introduction

Quality, equity and efficiency are the three pillars of the educational reforms of the last decades in Europe and the world, which must be taken into account when building national management and quality assurance systems, including the one in Romania. In Europe, quality is valued differently from one country to another, which prevents the circulation of products in the European space, an aspect that also manifests itself in education (Comşa et al., 2007). Two important events shaped the image of European quality in education: Bologna Process (1999) and Lisbon Treaty (2007).



The Bologna Process (1999) outlined the European Area of Higher Education. In the conferences that followed it, the signatory countries undertook to achieve, by 2010: the adoption of a system based on two cycles; implementation of the credit system, recognition of diplomas; ensuring the social dimension and lifelong learning.

The Lisbon Treaty (2007) established rapid economic growth as the main objective until 2010. As this objective can only be achieved with people, changes were also necessary in the field of education. For this, in Stockholm, in 2001, the European Council, at the proposal of the European Commission, adopted three strategic objectives in the field of education: improving the quality and effectiveness of the education and professional training systems in the EU; facilitating universal access to education; the opening of education and professional training systems to the extra-European space.

From the analysis of the documents of the 32nd Session of UNESCO General Conference (29 September to 17 October 2003) it follows that the new concept of the quality of education is characterized by: (1) Optimizing the concept of quality in education in a society of knowledge and in the context of an increasingly pronounced globalization; (2) The new concept of quality must take into account common human values; (3) Emphasizing the values of democratic citizenship and solidarity; education for human rights and sustainable development becomes essential; (4) Ensuring through education the development of individuals, but also of social groups; (5) Centering strategies on educators and their professional development; (6) Development of systems of quality indicators and standards; (7) Encouraging accreditation and quality assurance procedures; (8) Encouraging the exchange of information, good practices, pupils and students, programs and expertise between the countries of the world (UNESCO, 2004).

2. The main characteristics of educational systems

2.1. The educational system in Romania

The education system in Romania is administered: at the national level by the Ministry of Education; at the central level, in cooperation with other ministries (eg the Ministry of Public Finance for the financing of school institutions) and institutional structures subordinate to the Government; at the local level, by the county school inspectorates, as subordinate local institutions.

The Ministry of Education organizes and manages the national system of education, training, scientific research, technological development, and innovation, having as partners both the subordinate institutions and the institutions under coordination.

The general legal framework for the organization, administration, and functioning of education in Romania is established by: the Constitution (2003) (chap. 2, art. 32), the National Education Law (Law no. 1/2011 with subsequent amendments and additions), and ordinary laws and government ordinances.

The national education system has an open character, allowing the mobility of students, by transferring from one school unit to another, from one class to another, from one profile to another and from one stream to another, as well as a pluralistic character (public or private schools, in the educational alternative system) and provide ways of schooling in the official language of the state (Romanian), in the mother tongues of students belonging to national minorities or in languages of international circulation.



In Romania, education is a national priority. Education in Romania is compulsory until the end of the 12th grade (or until the age of 18). The education system in Romania is based on an egalitarian and free schooling system. The national educational system includes state, private and confessional, authorized, or accredited educational units (Eurydice, n.d.).

The national education system is structured on the following levels:

- Early education (0-6 years), consisting of the preschool level (0-3 years) and preschool education (3-6 years), which includes the small group, the middle group, and the large group. In state institutions, early education is free.
- Primary education, which includes: preparatory class and grades I-IV;
- Lower secondary education or gymnasium, which includes grades V-VIII;
- Access to the higher level is achieved through a national assessment exam and assignment to higher secondary education units.
- Higher secondary education can be:
 - high school education, which includes high school classes IX-XII/XIII, with the following branches: theoretical, vocational and technological;
 - professional education with a minimum duration of 3 years. Professional education graduates who pass the professional qualification certification exam can attend high school education courses;
 - non-university tertiary education includes post-secondary education;
 - vocational and technical education consists of: vocational education, technical education and post-secondary education.
- Higher education is organized in universities, study academies, institutes, schools of higher studies, called higher education institutions or universities, provisionally authorized or accredited. High school graduates with a baccalaureate diploma can enroll in higher education. Admission requirements differ from one institution to another. The structure of higher education reflects the principles of the Bologna process: bachelor's studies, master's studies, doctoral studies and continuous learning (postgraduate studies, continuous training).

Romania – 2022/2023

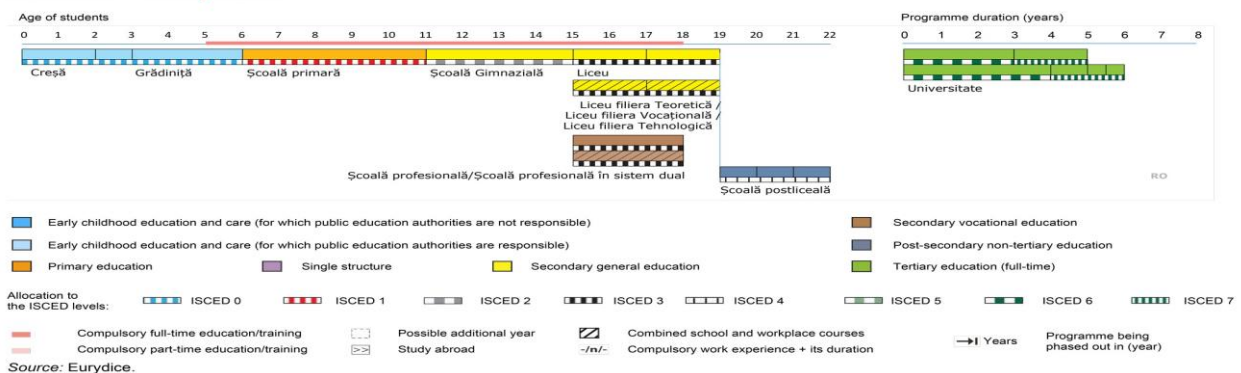


Fig. 1. Structure of the National Education System
Figure 1 source of data: Eurydice, n.d.



2.2. The educational system in France

The French education system is characterized by a strong central presence of the state in the organization and financing of education. The French education system is regulated by the Department of National Education, Higher Education and Research. The official language for education is French. Public education is secular and free.

The French education system is centralized, organized and branched. It is divided into three stages: primary education (enseignement primaire), secondary education (enseignement secondaire) and higher education (enseignement supérieur). Regarding higher education, the following degrees are recognized by the Bologna Process (European recognition, therefore identical to those in Romania): Bachelor (Licence and Licence Professionnelle), Master (Master recherche and Master professionnel) and Doctorate.

The organization and numbering of classes in France is different from Romania.

Primary education includes two optional years of kindergarten (école maternelle) and five years of general school.

Secondary education includes four years of secondary school (collège) and three years of high school (lycée).

The baccalaureate takes place in two stages: first the French language exam, at the end of class XI-a première, and then the other subjects, at the end of class XIIa (terminals).

Grades in France are awarded from zero to 20, with 20 being the best grade. However, it is generally theoretical, given that teachers do not usually award it, starting with grade 16 the student has the maximum mention of très bien, meaning very good. The minimum passing grade is grade 10 (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, n.d.).

2.3. The educational system in Finland

An essential characteristic of the culture of education is to ensure equal opportunities for all. In Finland, education from pre-school to higher education is free. School meals and learning are provided free of charge, and access to remote and sparsely populated areas is provided by free school transport.

The National Core Curriculum leaves room for local variation and therefore individual schools and teachers have a lot of freedom to design their own curricula and training.

Also, the higher education institutions enjoy extensive autonomy, being independent in terms of finance and administration. At the same time, they are also autonomous in terms of teaching and research.

There are very few external controls such as school or manual inspections. The first national exam takes place at the end of general secondary education.

A special emphasis is placed on lifelong learning, which is ensured by giving students the opportunity to study at any stage of their lives. Adult education is provided at all levels of education. Informal and non-formal education is also recognized. In vocational education, for example, competency-based qualifications provide a way to demonstrate prior learning.

The stages of the education system in Finland are as follows:

- education and care of preschool children (varhaiskasvatus) - participation in preschool education and care is a universal right for all children under school age, i.e. aged 0-6.



- preschool education (esiopetus) – compulsory the preschool education begins one year before basic education, at the age of six. Municipalities are obliged to provide preschool education of at least 700 hours per year. Preschool education is entirely free for families.
- basic education (perusopetus) - compulsory schooling starts at age 7 and lasts 9 years. This is provided in a single system structure called basic education and includes grades 1-9. Education is free for pupils, including teaching materials, daily school meals, health and social care services and transport from home to school if the journey to school is long or dangerous.
- higher secondary education (toisen asteen koulutus) structured in: general higher secondary education (lukiokoulutus) and vocational higher secondary education (ammattillinen koulutus); higher secondary education is provided by general and professional institutions of higher secondary education. The general age for attending upper secondary education is 16 to 19 years.
- higher education (korkeakoulutus) represented by university (yliopisto) and university of applied sciences (ammattikorkeakoulu). ISCED level 8 qualifications, such as doctorates, can only be awarded by universities (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, n.d.).

2.4. The education system in Germany

The German education system is significantly different from other education systems, but it engages students in a performative scheme so that upon graduation they have a very high academic level. Curriculum differences exist between the German states, due to the control function that the federal states have over the education sector.

The German education system is structured as follows:

- Grundschule (elementary school) comprises grades 1-4, during which undifferentiated subjects are taught. After that, students will be directed to other types of schools, depending on their and their parents' academic ability and aspirations. There are three types of schools that students can choose between:
- Hauptschule is suitable for children between the ages of 10 and 15 (grades 5 - 9). Here, students study common subjects with students from other types of schools, only at a less competitive level and combined with a series of vocationally oriented courses. Upon completion, students obtain a certificate that allows them to continue their studies in a vocational school, which they will complete at the age of 18.
- Realschule provides education to children between the ages of 10 and 16 (grades 5-10, depending on the states). It combines the academic side with the practical side, and at the end of the period a certificate is obtained that allows the continuation of studies in a school vocational, but students with a high academic level can transfer to a Gymnasium for graduation.
- Gymnasium, depending on the land, is offered up to the 12th or 13th grade (from 10 to 19 years old). After taking the final exams (Abitur) which allows students to continue their studies at a university or other higher education institution. The curriculum differs from one school to another, but generally includes: German, mathematics, physics, geography, biology, chemistry, computer science, arts, music, history, philosophy, civics, but also a number of foreign languages. The education offered in the Gymnasium is of a classical type. Students can choose between 6 fields of study: humanities and social sciences, mathematics and sciences, foreign languages and music. Each high school offers one or two of these programs, children can choose at least 2 subjects studied at an advanced level and 7-10 standard subjects.



Exams and grading. In the last year of high school, students take written exams only for the subjects in the chosen profile, one for each of the two intensively studied subjects and one for two standard subjects. The general average is formed on the basis of the grades from the exams and the grades obtained from the last 2 - 3 years of study. After successfully passing the final exams, the Abiturzeugnis diploma is obtained, which is the high school diploma in Germany. This document is necessary, but not always sufficient, for continuing studies at a university or other higher education institution. Depending on the university destination and the chosen field of study, it will be necessary to take entrance exams and various other conditions may be imposed (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, n.d.).

2.5. The education system in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

Education is compulsory for all children between the ages of 5 (4 in Northern Ireland) and 16 years. Date of birth is very important, with children turning 5 (4 in Northern Ireland) before the start of their first year of study on 1 September.

In principle, in Great Britain there are two education systems, compatible with each other but with different emphases:

- England, Wales and Northern Ireland – traditionally, here the focus is on a more in-depth approach to the subjects studied, with students taking a smaller number of exams at a more advanced level;
- Scotland – here the educational system is distinguished by a broader, more horizontally developed approach, with students taking a greater number of exams at a less advanced level.

Until the age of 16, the subjects that pupils study in the UK are specified in the curriculum and many of these, such as English and maths, are compulsory.

In England, compulsory education takes place during 11 years of schooling (Y1 ÷ Y11), years which are grouped into 4 key stages (Key Stages: KS1 ÷ KS4).

- Primary education in England is for children between the ages of 4 or 5 and 11 or 13. At this stage, pupils study a wide range of subjects, with the main aim of primary school being to teach them to write, read and master basic mathematics. But it is still primary school that lays the necessary foundations for the study of natural sciences, geography, history and social sciences. Depending on the school they are enrolled in, at the age of 11 or 13 students make the transition to secondary education.
- Secondary education in England is for children between the ages of 11 or 13 and 16. During secondary education, students study a varied range of subjects, but in the last two years (Y10 and Y11), they prepare for GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) exams. From the age of 14, the arts (comprising art and design, dance, theater and media), design and technology, humanities (comprising history and geography) and modern languages are no longer compulsory subjects, but students have the right to study a subject from these four fields.

In Y10 and Y11 (KS4) pupils choose some of their 9÷11 subjects to study in depth and can opt out of the other subjects. English, maths and science are compulsory subjects, the others can be chosen according to personal abilities and preferences. For two years, students study their chosen subjects and prepare for GCSE exams. At the end of the two years of study, Y10 and Y11, students sit subject-specific exams and obtain GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education)



certificates. At the end of Y11 pupils sit exams in each subject studied and obtain their IGCSE certificates.

After taking GCSE/IGCSE exams students have the following options: continuing studies with an academic program (A-Level, IB, etc.); further studies with a vocational program (BTEC; etc.); apprenticeship, practical training instead of traditional academic training.

Grading system. For GCSE examinations, the grading system ranges, in descending order, from A* to G, and U is not a pass grade. As of 2017, GCSE English and Maths exams are graded in descending order from 9 to 1. From summer 2019 all GCSE exams are graded from 9 to 1. For A-Level exams, the grading system ranges, in descending order, from A* to E, and U is not a pass grade (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, n.d.).

3. Similarities and significant differences in educational systems

Analyzing, the educational system in **Romania** is similar to the **French** one in terms of structure, in addition, in the case of Romania we also have a pre-primary cycle, the kindergarten. In terms of school subjects, emphasis is placed on French and mathematics, special attention is paid to teamwork, and students receive homework.

In **France** things are similar; children between the ages of 2 and 6 attend the kindergarten, called *École Maternelle*. Then, the duration of primary school is 5 years (between 6 and 11 years). The five primary school classes include: CP (*Cours préparatoire/Preparatory Class*), CE1, CE2 (*Cours élémentaire/Cours élémentaire*), CM1 and CM2 (*Middle Class/Cours moyen*). The general school comprises 4 years of study (between 11 and 15 years). Then comes high school, which is only 3 years old (between 16 and 18). Students can opt for traditional high school (*Lycée Classique*) or technical high school (*Lycée Technique*). In terms of school subjects, emphasis is placed on French and mathematics, special attention is paid to teamwork, and students receive homework.

In **Germany**, the educational system includes primary school, called *Grundschule*, grades I - IV. At the end of the 4 years, students can move to other types of schools, depending on their academic abilities and aspirations. From this point of view, there are three types of schools that students can choose between *Hauptschule*, suitable for children between the ages of 10 and 15 (grades V – IX), *Realschule*, for children between the ages of 10 and 16 (grades V - X) or *Gymnasium*, depending on the land, being offered up to the 12th or 13th grade (from 10 to 19 years old). In German schools, emphasis is placed on the *independence of students and their harmonious development*. Learning is done in modules: mathematics, German, English, natural sciences, anatomy, music, sports, religion, and so on.

If we look at the case of **Finland**, one of the best-performing education systems in the world, things are even more different. The Finnish education system is based on a compulsory 9-year comprehensive primary school, which students join at the age of 7. After leaving this school at the age of 16, those who wish to continue their education have a choice between upper secondary school (*lukio*) and vocational school (*ammattilinen upailaitos, yrkesinstitut*). Secondary education is not compulsory, but an overwhelming majority of students attend it. Primary and secondary education is funded by the community, and upper secondary school prepares students for university. Vocational school, in turn, develops professional skills.

Analyzing the education system in the **United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland**, there are actually two educational systems. It is the one in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, which focuses on a more in-depth approach to the subjects studied, and students take exams in fewer subjects, but at a more advanced level. The second is the one practiced in Scotland, which



offers a broader approach, with students taking exams in a larger number of subjects, at a less advanced level. Also, students have very little homework. Traditionally, *English higher education is one of the best in the world*, world-renowned are the names of the largest elite universities: *Oxford and Cambridge*.

A significant difference is a **scoring system**. In *Romania*, the grading system is a classic one, including grades from 1 to 10. The new laws, however, bring an important change. As an exception to the rule of awarding grades from 1 to 10, in subjects that are part of the arts (music, drawing and so on) or in physical education and sports, students receive "*admitted*" and "*rejected*" grades.

France's scoring system is the only one that hasn't been changed in more than 170 years. The meanings of the grades would be as follows: 10 - 11.99: passing grade ("*passable*"), 12 - 13.99: passing grade with a positive character ("*mention assez bien*"), 14 - 15.99: equivalent to the qualification "good" ("*mention bien*"), 16 or more: equivalent to the qualification "very good" ("*mention très bien*").

In *Germany*, there are two different grading systems. A system includes grades from one (1 = very good) to six (6 = insufficient), this system being the most widespread. It is implemented both in schools, from first grade to tenth grade, and in vocational schools. The second grading system comprises a scale from 1 to 15 points and is used mostly in high schools and in technical and higher vocational schools.

The scoring system in *Finland* contains 10 points. Until the third grade, however, students are not graded. From the 3rd grade up to the 7th grade, grades are given from "*can be better*" to "*perfect*". Grades and ratings are *confidential, not used to create hierarchies or to be reasons for reprimanding*, but solely to motivate students to improve their skills and knowledge.

Thus, as we can see, there are substantial differences between the educational systems in European states. In the case of *Romania*, the structure of the education system is similar to that of *France*, *but differs from the point of view of grading*.

Important differences can be observed between the education system of Romania and the United Kingdom. In Great Britain, an interactive and effective teaching method is applied, which encourages students to express themselves freely and participate in classes, a method that is not applied in *Romania*. In summary, most of the similarities and differences between the education system in *Romania* and the *United Kingdom* are related to compulsory education, grading system, qualification, structure of the school year, cost of studying, corruption and courses in higher education. However, many *Romanians* claim that the *Romanian* educational system is better than those in other countries, because students learn more things at a higher level.

Although responsibility for education and training systems rests with member states, the EU plays a key role in supporting their efforts to improve and modernize education systems.

In a globalized and knowledge-based economy, Europe needs a highly skilled workforce to remain competitive in terms of productivity and innovation. This is especially important in times of rapid technological and societal change.

4. Is the education system in Romania a qualitative one, compared to those belonging to other EU states?

This is one of the questions that raises a series of debates and can be a topic of reflection confronting those of us interested in education.



Mariya Gabriel, European Commissioner for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth, in the "Foreword" of the "Education and Training Monitor 2022. Comparative report" (European Commission, 2022) explained the challenges that the educational systems in Europe had to face in the last two and a half years. She revealed that "*The past two and a half years have been dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Disruptions to activities in schools, universities, and training centers have had severe consequences, not least on teachers' and young people's well-being. The impact of the ongoing Russian war of aggression against Ukraine is also reverberating throughout Europe's schools, teachers, and the education community at large.*"

Romania ranks 3rd in Europe in terms of the time our children spend at school, i.e. 11 years. However, *we are among the last places* in terms of PISA - Program for International Student Assessment results, with 42% of our students in the country being functionally illiterate. Concretely, the school dropout rate in Romania is still among the highest in the European Union, ranking third in the EU, respectively an average of 18.5% (Echazarra & Radinger, 2019).

Education specialists show that the relatively large number of years spent at school by children, in a mandatory way, somehow forced, imposed, and not optional, as a result of their own decision, only underlines the inefficiency of the Romanian educational system, which is based on quantity rather than quality (we accumulate years, grades, exams, qualifications, diplomas).

In 2009, approximately 205.000 people graduated from the baccalaureate, and in 2017, less than half, i.e. 102.000 people, according to the National Higher Education Forecasting and Statistics Council. That's a major reduction in a relatively short historical period. The fundamental causes of this involution are *demographic elements* and *population migration*. The promotion of the baccalaureate exam is a factor that has fluctuated significantly in recent years, stabilizing recently at a percentage of 70%, something that raises questions about the functioning of the education system in our country.

We can talk about improving the quality of education in Romanian education, but the starting factor is in the family and in kindergarten, only after that can we talk about the propagation to the other educational levels.

At the school level, the quality in education is not a product of its functioning under normal conditions. Starting from this benchmark, considered essential in ensuring an optimal educational process, quality can be defined by carrying out the negotiation between the school and the community and then assumed in partnership, not imposed hierarchically.

Learning is an active and constructive process, it is much more effective when students are actively involved when they participate in building their own knowledge, learning with pleasure, and much more thoroughly.

By using these interactive learning strategies, a variety of situations are created in which knowledge is transferable to other contexts, applicable in other situations than those in which they were acquired in the classroom, in the teaching process. Students' interests, their curiosity are stimulated especially if real-life situations are used for real life.

Analyzing, there are a number of *significant factors that negatively influence the quality of education in Romania*, compared to education systems in other states belonging to the European Union, such as:

- *Early school leaving continues to be a major problem in Romania.*

In 2021, the rate of 18-24 years olds not having completed upper-secondary education and not in education or training (ELET - early leaving from education and training) improved slightly,



reaching again the 2019 level of 15.3%. However, this remains significantly higher than the EU average of 9.7%. In the last decade, Romania managed to reduce the early school leaving rate by only 2.5 percentage points (17.8% in 2012 compared to 15.3% in 2021), as mentioned in the “Education and Training Monitor – Romania” (European Commission, 2022).

Table 1. Early leavers from education and training, years 2012, 2019 and 2021 (%).

Country	Years				Country	Years			
	2012	2019	2021	EU Target		2012	2019	2021	EU target
1. HR	5,1	3,0	2,4	9	15. FI	8,9	7,3	8,2	9
2. SI	4,4	4,6	3,1	9	16. SE	7,5	6,5	8,4	9
3. EL	11,3	4,1	3,2	9	17. LU	8,1	7,2	9,3	9
4. IE	9,9	5,1	3,3	9	18. UE	12,6	10,2	9,7	9
5. LT	6,5	4,0	5,3	9	19. DK	9,6	9,9	9,8	9
6. NL	8,9	7,5	5,3	9	20. EE	10,3	11,2	9,8	9
7. PL	5,7	5,2	5,9	9	21. CY	11,4	9,2	10,2	9
8. PT	20,5	10,6	5,9	9	22. MT	18,1	13,9	10,7	9
9. CZ	5,5	6,7	6,4	9	23. DE	10,5	10,3	11,8	9
10. BE	12,0	8,4	6,7	9	24. HU	11,8	11,8	12,0	9
11. LV	10,6	8,7	7,3	9	25. BG	12,5	13,9	12,2	9
12. FR	11,8	8,2	7,8	9	26. IT	17,3	13,5	12,7	9
13. SK	5,3	8,3	7,8	9	27. ES	24,7	17,3	13,3	9
14. AT	7,8	7,8	8,0	9	28. RO	17,8	15,3	15,3	9

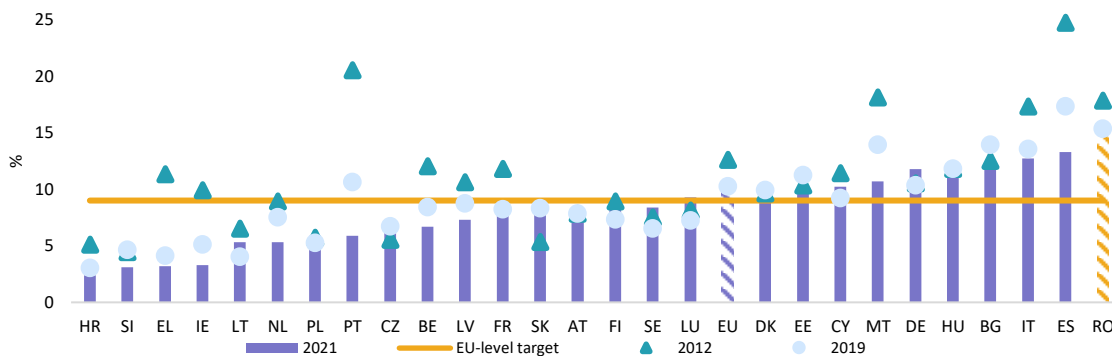


Fig. 2. Chart of early school leavers in the European Union, years 2012, 2019 and 2021 (%) Table 1 and Figure 2 source of data: Eurostat (LFS), EDAT_LFSE_14, 2022.

The disparities in the rate of early leaving education and training systems between urban (4.5%) and rural areas (23.2%) are substantial. A recent study conducted by *World Vision Romania* shows that *1 in 10 children* of compulsory schooling age in rural areas do not currently attend any educational institution. This study also showed that *1 in 3 teenagers* (37%) are absent from school



temporarily or permanently because they work in the household (World Vision Romania, 2022). The rate also differs from one region to another: from 7.9% in Bucharest to almost 23% in the southeast region. Students at risk of dropping out tend to be concentrated in disadvantaged schools in rural areas, which lack resources and experienced teachers (OECD, 2022). Many young Romanians leave the school system without acquiring the necessary skills to enter the labor market, with its rapidly changing needs. This makes their transition from school to paid employment difficult (OECD, 2022).

Reducing the early school leaving rate is one of the priorities of the "*Educated Romania*" Report (2021), which represents the national strategic framework for education in the perspective of 2030. This effort to reduce the early school leaving rate will also be largely supported under the *National Resilience and Recovery Plan* (Ministry of European Investments and Projects, 2021).

- *Early childhood education and care (ECEC) continues to face problems of low participation and inadequate infrastructure*

In 2020, the ECEC participation rate of Romanian children between the ages of 3 and the age of starting compulsory education was one of the lowest in the E.U. (78.2% compared to the EU average of 93%). Despite the financial incentives offered to low-income families to enroll their children aged 3-5 in ECEC, the participation rate in each age group (3, 4 and 5+) is falling.

National tests show poor school results in Romanian schools, confirming the poor results observed in the tests set by the OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018. The most recent PISA test results were announced in 2019, and the next PISA test results will be published in 2023.

The results of Romania's national report on the literacy level of Romanian students, published in May 2022, show that only 11% of students in Romania can read fluently, and 42% of students are reported as "non-functional", a category close to illiteracy. Many students in Romania do not have the skills to interpret and analyze information and facts, form their own ideas, or draw conclusions. These low rates risk deteriorating even further given the school closures and limited access to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (Iliescu & Airinei, 2022).

- *Access to quality education is unequal.*

The discrepancies between national exam results indicate a structural inequality in the education system. There is a significant difference in underachievement rates between students from high socioeconomic backgrounds (10.8% underachievement) and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (49.8% underachievement).

- *Teacher recruitment and retention policies face significant challenges.*

In recent years, Romania's teacher policy has focused on improving the recruitment and selection process of future teachers, especially for schools located in rural and economically disadvantaged areas. Reforms and policies were aimed at increasing financial incentives and other measures to make the profession more attractive. Progress on these policies is limited due to a large number of schools in rural areas which remain unattractive for highly qualified teachers. In addition, *neither initial nor continuous teacher training is sufficiently well aligned with classroom needs* (European Commission, 2022).

Romania's *PROF* project for the professionalization of the teaching career takes place between 2021 and 2023, its objective being to ensure professional mentoring throughout the career of a teacher by ensuring the training and development of teaching skills for 28.000 teachers (Ministry of Education, 2021).



Another program, "*Motivated Teachers in Disadvantaged Schools*", provides training courses for teachers, support staff and school principals who need to develop their skills and knowledge to work in disadvantaged schools or to use teaching methods atypical (Ministry of European Funds, 2016).

In order to improve the quality of the education system, in 2022 the government reorganized the *Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education*. Currently, education stakeholders should be better represented, including students, parents, trade unions and the private sector.

A major impact on the Romanian education system is the fact that significant changes have entered into force in the organization of the school year and in the assessment of students, in the school year 2022 – 2023 (Edupedu, 2022). As part of the new structure, five learning periods of 6 - 8 weeks have replaced traditional semesters, which were considered too long for children. A similar approach is applied in *Belgium and France*, where students benefit from shorter learning periods while the total number of school days remains the same. In addition, a "*green week*" was introduced to raise children's awareness of climate change and the environment.

Together with the new structure of the school year, Romania decided to implement a *new evaluation system*, which will be better aligned with the learning modules. The objective is to end the current practice of requiring students to submit a written paper each semester ("semester theses") and to replace this requirement with standardized school-wide assessments at the beginning and end of the school year.

- *Romania continues its long-term policy reforms to improve digital learning and strengthen digital skills.*

In 2021, only 50% of teenagers between the ages of 16 and 19 in Romania had basic or above basic digital skills. This meant that Romania ranked last among EU countries in terms of digital skills. The EU average was 69% in this age group having basic or above-basic digital skills, and Romania's performance was below the EU's 'Digital Decade' target for 2030 of 80%. Computer science and digital education are an important part of both of the "Educated Romania" program, as well as National Resilience and Recovery Plan of Romania. Despite these developments, significant gaps remain, including in the availability of computing devices and internet connections (European Commission, 2022).

- *The disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic continue to affect the vocational education and training (VET) system.*

The shift to remote learning and the temporary closure of many businesses limited students' exposure to work-based learning during the pandemic. This effect, combined with continued uncertainty in the labor market and the wider economy, has led to a significant drop in the employment rate of recent VET graduates (from 68.7% in 2020 to 61.4% in 2021). Some ongoing projects, such as *Re-Connect*, a skills forecasting mechanism funded by the *European Social Fund*, should contribute to a better match between labor market demand and the supply of skilled workers. The ongoing reform plans, which aim to transform VET schools into institutions more focused on dual education should also make these schools more attractive (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2022).

Romania has made recent improvements in increasing participation in adult learning, but still lags behind other EU member states. The participation rate of adults in learning in the last 4 weeks was 4.9% in 2021, much higher than in previous years, but still lower than in most other



Member States (EU average: 10.8%). The low level of participation in learning among adults has led to persistent skills shortages, which hinders economic growth and makes it difficult for Romania to adapt to a rapidly changing labor market in the digital age.

- *The graduation rate of tertiary education in Romania remains the lowest of all EU countries.*

Over the past decade, this rate has not improved significantly and a long-term stagnating trend can be observed. In 2021, this rate was 23.3%, which is almost half of the EU average (41.2%). Among other causes, low levels of higher education completion are caused by high early school leaving rates, low baccalaureate pass rates and low levels of participation in higher education by students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This leads to a shortage of highly qualified professionals.

The shares of information and communication technology (ICT) and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) graduates in Romania are among the highest in the EU, but skills shortages remain.

As regards the digitization of higher education, progress is being made. The National Resilience and Recovery Plan (2021) provides funding for the digitization of universities, including digital infrastructure and the development of digital skills of students and university teachers. The National Centre for Recognition and Equivalence of Diplomas launched a platform, which provides information on higher-education institutions and accredited study programs in over 80 countries. This platform is supported by the Erasmus+ program and coordinated by the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), with the aim of expanding the scope of involvement of quality-assurance agencies in higher education in the European Higher Education Area and improving connections between these agencies (EQAR, n.d.).

- *Romania's spending on education remains among the lowest in the EU.*

According to the latest available data, in 2018, general public expenditure on education had increased in real terms by 6.4%, equivalent to 3.2% of GDP (*gross domestic product*). This level of spending is significantly lower than the EU average of 4.6%, and is one of the lowest in the EU. Underinvestment is still felt particularly in pre-university education, and funding mechanisms to support equity are still thin (European Commission, 2022).

5. Own conceptions about the subject

Quality education needs teaching staff to engage in research and learning, it needs teamwork and a common purpose that accepts both individualism and collectivism as essential to organized learning, and it needs management dynamically connected to the environment in which it takes place, which is in permanent change.

This work is not easy because educational partnerships and participatory management involve many individuals and groups who each come with different experiences, opinions, visions of the world and educational issues.

In the education systems of other EU countries, everything is designed in such a way as to avoid stressful situations for students, teachers or the school director, and a positive approach to any aspect is considered the effective strategy.

The Romanian education system presents both advantages and disadvantages.

Our compulsory education system is free and provides the necessary materials for classes, but the teaching methods are inadequate, being based on theoretical information presented only by



the teacher, compared to other countries, where the emphasis is on the development of practical thinking and the formation of a spirit teamwork.

The dynamics of education in a society based on knowledge, determines a permanent need to "upgrade" the knowledge and skills of the teacher. Along with the initial training of teaching staff, continuous training is the key element of professionalism, efficiency and educational performance, because European studies demonstrate that student success is directly correlated with the expertise of the human resource that delivered the education.

The aims of education are necessary to the extent that a particular point is to be reached. In general, the absence of a goal can be understood as the inability to reach a proposed target. Likewise in education, we must know what we want, to know where we must go. Education is the main resource of individual development, but also a major premise in preserving national identity. It is meant to help children grow into successful adults. With this goal in mind, education must provide each child with the knowledge and skills necessary to function well in modern society. Children are eager for opportunities to explore the environment and for new experiences that will shape their lifelong enjoyment and curiosity for learning. Children like, and even need, to realize how much they have to learn and discover, without being intimidated by the idea of accumulating new knowledge.

Education has the role of teaching them to aspire to the truth, to develop their moral responsibility, the ability to discern right from wrong. Where students feel that teachers are not just teaching, where teaching is not only about delivering instructional content but also engaging in the relationship with young people, the results will be better.

The essential change in education is not about attracting material resources or time spent in school institutions, but about the quality of experiences. In the 21st century, there is a need to understand why students need to learn differently. There is no need to teach more in the same way as before, but to educate different skills. Change needs high-caliber teachers who not only convey the generally accepted thinking of the moment, but encourage young people to question it.

A quality education system means making significant efforts to attract very good people to practice the teaching profession, but the even greater challenge is not to attract new people, but to improve the performance of those already working in this field.

6. Conclusions and future work

In conclusion, among *the strong points of the Romanian education system* are mentioned:

- the presence in the education system of an elite body of highly qualified teachers concerned both with the quality of the educational act and with the elaboration of scientific works, specialized publications, new methodologies and manuals;
- qualified teaching staff who fill their positions through a national tenure competition;
- constant identification of peaks from each school generation, children with special talents or special intellectual capacities;
- the presence and development of educational alternatives and private educational institutions at all levels of schooling;
- administration of schools by local authorities that can lead to the identification of the needs of education, of the community and the offers of the labor market, taking into account the specifics of the area;



- the increasingly meaningful involvement of the family in the educational process of the children, which can lead to greater flexibility of school institutions;
- the existence of school dropout prevention and illiteracy prevention programs organized by state institutions.

Among *the weaknesses of the Romanian education system* are the following:

- political influence that can be manifested at all levels of educational management (ministry, inspectorate, school unit);
- the fluctuations of teaching staff and the presence of unqualified staff or who work in other positions than those for which they are specialized, an extremely present phenomenon especially in poor or rural areas;
- curriculum not adapted to the requirements of different ages and interests of the students, contents based on memorization, large volume of notions, concepts, reduced capacities to adapt to the outside world;
- the presence in some schools of an institutional culture marked by confrontation and unfair competition that induces demobilization and lack of concern for children's educational needs;
- the lack of specific performance indicators and clear criteria for evaluating the activity of teaching staff that would lead to a real differentiation realized including in different salary classes;
- constantly changing legislation and the lack of coherent policies regarding the education system.

At first glance, the solution is not a complicated one: we try to solve the identified problems and take advantage of the opportunities that arise. It's just that, practically, the change must be made at all levels of the system, which is difficult to achieve in a system that does not put the benefits of students first, but political interests.

So, without a responsible involvement of those who decide, we will sink more and more seriously into the darkness of functional illiteracy, which will bring with it an increasingly sharp decline in the standard of living, evident not only in disadvantaged areas, but and at the national level. ***It is the responsibility of a generation that is the case to stop being eternally sacrificial.***

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