

UNESCO National Commission Country Report

Under the UNESCO World Higher Education Conference ([WHEC2022](#))
[Section for Higher Education](#) | Division for Education 2030

Higher Education Report: [Romania]

UNESCO National Commission in alliance with higher education institutions and other organisations

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Abstract

Higher education in Romania is recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic by reconsidering its priorities, in particular those related to inclusion and quality.

The “Educated Romania” Project, initiated by a constitutionally neutral actor—the President of Romania— which is a vision document with suitable measures and actions approved by the Government in 2021, aims to increase the quality and attractiveness of higher education by growing university autonomy and accountability and supporting equitable access for all students to quality study programs, correlated with labour market needs.

The Covid 19 pandemic profoundly transformed Romanian university education through digitalization, initiating a resilient system and highlighting the importance of digital training of teachers.

The demographic trends remain an alarming challenge, resulting in a very low enrolment rate. Several programs and projects focus on ensuring the access and participation of students belonging to high-risk groups.

Ensuring the correlation of the higher education system with the requirements of the labour market has been both a priority and a challenge for Romania in recent years. International cooperation, open science and open learning through technology are continuously developing.

Romania needs a digital ecosystem for university education, which should include structures adapted to the specifics of each university dedicated to the development of digital skills. Higher education institutions and the national public policy governance focus their actions to document shared perspectives on the future of HE, in particular to its long term trajectories in support to sustainable development, to the implications of disruptive change for educational research and civic missions. Moreover, the increase of the university autonomy, the support of the partnerships and the openness to the society are constant long-term concerns of the Romanian universities.

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List of abbreviations:

CEEPUS – Central European Exchange Program for University Studies

CNFIS – National Council for Funding Higher Education

ECTS – European Credit Transfer System

EO – Emergency Ordinance

ESF OPHC – The European Social Fund, Operational Programme Human Capital

GD – Government Decision

HE – Higher Education

MoE – Ministry of Education

NIS - National Institute of Statistics

NRRP – National Recovery and Resilience Plan

OECD – Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

SDG – Sustainable Development Goals

STEM – Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics

UEFISCDI – The Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Presentation

The 3rd World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022), which will take place in Barcelona from 18 to 20 May 2022, aims to structure a new roadmap to define the future of higher education, an actualized plan for the coming years taking into account the 2030 Agenda for Development and the challenges that need to be sorted out due to the global COVID-19 crisis.

The report has been elaborated based on the contributions to a dedicated survey to the UNESCO World HE Conference, launched by the ministry of education in February 2022, as well as on the review of higher education analysis related reports. In addition to these, the “Educated Romania” Report, published in July 2021, was used to prepare this report, as well as recent Reports on the State of Higher Education, an analysis coordinated by the MoE, as well as other research studies and reports.

Current situation of higher education

1.1 Historical enrolment and graduation rates (last decade)

Enrolment

Table 1. Evolution of the number of students enrolled in university programs (thousands of)

Academic year	2011/ 2012	2012/ 2013	2013/ 2014	2014/ 2015	2015/ 2016	2016/ 2017	2017/ 2018	2018/ 2019	2019/ 2020	2020/ 2021
Total number of students enrolled in higher education (undergraduate studies, master's degree, postgraduate courses and studies, PhD studies and postdoctoral programs)	871,8	705,3	578,7	541,7	535,2	531,6	538,9	533,7	543,3	560, 2

Source: Data taken from the Statistical Notebooks on Higher Education, NIS, 2011-2021

The decrease in the number of enrolments from one year to the next was determined by a complex of factors: low number of high school graduates who passed the bacalaureate exam; fewer people choosing to pursue more than one university degree at a time (unlike in previous years); the decrease of the population of theoretical schooling age at this level of education (19-23 years); people who lack financial resources to go to university.

The gender-based enrolment analysis indicates a higher female participation than male, in the ratio of 55 to 45. High percentages among girls were recorded in master's and doctoral programs, with postgraduate studies bringing the two categories of students closer together. There is a higher participation in undergraduate university education among the female population of 19-23 years, compared to the male population.

Table 2. Evolution of the gross enrollment rate in undergraduate university education, by gender (%)

	2016/ 2017	2017/ 2018	2018/ 2019	2019/ 2020	2020/ 2021
Total	35,9	36,6	36,7	37,4	38,5
Female	39,8	40,5	40,7	39,7	43,3
Male	32,3	32,8	32,9	35,0	33,9

Source: Data calculated on the basis of the Statistical Notebooks on Higher Education, NIS, 2016-2021

1.2 Quantity and types of higher education institutions

Romania's higher education system is structured quite differently from most European systems, lacking as it is in either hybrids or short-cycle institutions. This means that comparisons with other countries need perhaps to be somewhat more nuanced.

The transition to higher education is conditioned by promoting a unitary baccalaureate which is a condition of access and gives all those who promote it level 4 qualification. Tertiary education is built, in terms of structure, based on the common elements agreed upon by the Bologna Process and elements specific to the states of the European Higher Education Area. Access to any form of undergraduate study is baccalaureate based, with the possibility of organizing additional tests by universities for admission.

In accordance with the development directions of the European Higher Education, there is a non-university tertiary education in the form of short-term programs (120 ECTS credits, the so-called short cycle) or other accredited structures. They offer a qualification of level 5 and allow access to the labour market for certain professions that require a higher level of qualification than secondary education.

University education, on all cycles, takes place in universities authorized or accredited, public and private, which meet a number of requirements quality standards and are re-evaluated on a regular basis. Universities enjoy significant autonomy in accordance with good European practice.

The transfer between institutions and specializations is based on a system examination decided by each university, starting from ECTS system. The transition to master's degree is made after completion undergraduate studies and on the basis of an examination system decided by each university, according to the legal framework.

The master's and doctoral cycles retain an oriented character to scientific research - with the exception of professional and pedagogical masters - and are in line with European recommendations.

The number of faculties decreased constantly in the period 2011-2018, subsequently registering reduced fluctuations.

Table 3. The network of the national higher education system

	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020	2020/2021
Number of higher education institutions, of which:	97	95	92	90	89
- public property	56	56	55	55	54
- private property	41	39	37	35	35
Number of Faculties, of which:	560	554	545	546	541
- public property	405	406	406	407	404
- private property	155	148	139	139	137

Source: Data taken from the Statistical Notebooks on Higher Education, NIS, 2016-2021

Public education represents 60.7% of all higher education institutions and 74.7% of all faculties.

1.3 Legal and institutional framework of higher education

The main legal framework elements for the current academic year 2021-2022 include:

- the National Education Law no. 1/2011;
- the Law no. 200/2004 on the recognition of diplomas and professional qualifications for regulated professions in Romania;
- the EO no. 96/2016 for the amendment and completion of some normative acts in the fields of education, research, vocational training and health, rectified;
- the EO no. 75/2005 on quality assurance of education;
- the EO no. 187/2020 for the amendment of the Government EO no. 144/2020 regarding some measures for the allocation of non-reimbursable external funds necessary for the development in the conditions of prevention of the teaching activities in the context of the risk of SARS-CoV-2;
- the EO no. 192/2020 for the amendment and completion of Law no. 55/2020 on some measures to prevent and combat the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to amend letter a) in art. 7 of Law no. 81/2018 on regulation teleworking activity;
- the EO no. 22/2021 on amending and supplementing the National Education Law no. 1/2011 and the Government EO no. 75/2005 on ensuring the quality of education;
- the EO no. 40/2021 for the establishment of some measures regarding the good functioning of the education system and for the modification of art. 10 para. (2) of Law no. 269/2004 on granting financial aid in order to stimulate the purchase of computers;
- the EO no. 99/2021 regarding the amendment of some normative acts in the field of education, as well as for the amendment and completion of Law no. 55/2020 on some measures to prevent and combat the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The most relevant GD in 2021 are:

- the GD no. 1.086/2021 for the amendment of the GD no. 385/2021 regarding the fields and programs of accredited master's university studies and the maximum number of students that can be enrolled in the academic year 2021-2022;
- the GD no. 403/2021 on the approval of the Nomenclature of fields and specializations / university study programs and the structure of higher education institutions for the academic year 2021-2022,
- the GD no. 780/2021 regarding the amendment of the Methodological Norms for the application of Law no. 269/2004 on granting financial aid to stimulate the purchase of computers, approved by GD no. 1.294/2004.

In order to ensure adequate learning conditions and the least possible disruption caused by the pandemic, a series of notes and ministerial orders were also issued. Subsequently, budgetary allocations have been both adjusted and increased.

1.4. Another relevant subheading

Evolution of higher education staff

In the last ten years, for the first time, the number of teaching staff in higher education falls below the threshold of 26.000 people.

Table 4. Evolution of higher education teaching staff

	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020	2020/2021
Total staff employed	49.732	49.995	50.024	50.603	50.112

Total teaching staff, of which:	26.618	26.266	26.384	26.429	25.991
state property	23.776	23.566	23.822	23.621	23.204
private property	2.842	2.700	2.562	2.808	2.787
% Teaching staff	53,2	52,3	52,5	52,2	51,8

Source: Data taken from the Statistical Notebooks on Higher Education, NIS, 2016-2021

Current challenges in higher education

Challenge 1. - Increasing access, participation and equity

In the last five years, a series of measures and policies have been adopted that aimed to increase the enrolment and participation of Romanian citizens in higher education.

In the academic year 2021-2022, distinct places have been allocated, financed from the state budget, dedicated to:

- high school graduates from rural areas (2000 places);
- priority areas of development (5000 places - bachelor's, 4500 - master's, 300 - doctorate);
- initial training of future teachers through the didactic master's program (400 places);
- young Roma (432 places - bachelor's, 197 - master's, 97 - doctorate).

Romanian and foreign students enrolled in full-time education - bachelor's, master's, doctorate - in accredited higher education institutions in Romania benefit from a 50% discount on domestic rail transport on all categories of trains, class II, throughout the calendar year, regardless of distance or travel routes. Orphaned students benefit from free domestic rail transport on all train categories, class II.

In 2021, the MoE has allocated to the universities a fund for the payment of scholarships (performance, merit, social, occasional) cumulating a total amount of 201 lei per full-time student. The universities granted the scholarships, through their own methodology, having as a benchmark the amount of 560 lei established by CNFIS. Students receive scholarships for the entire school year.

All students who occupy places financed from the state budget and are accommodated in student dormitories benefit from subsidies for the payment of accommodation and meals in the amount of 1420 lei annually. Orphaned students, students coming from orphanages or students whose parents are teachers benefit from a 50% higher value of subsidies.

The Government of Romania has adopted the extension of the Project on secondary education - ROSE, which implements 393 grants awarded to faculties. Among the supported faculties, the retention rate after the first year of studies increased from 79.4% to 81.64%.

Challenge 2. Connecting with the labour market and financing higher education

Ensuring the correlation of the higher education system with the requirements of the labour market has been both a priority and a challenge for Romania in recent years, many solutions being identified by using European funds in sectoral operational programs on education and training for integration into the labour market.

Through the ESF OPHC Call *Integrated measures to increase the participation of vulnerable students in entrepreneurial programs*, projects which increase access and equity in higher education are financed. The ESF OPHC Call - *Measures to optimize the offer of higher education in support of employability* aimed at funding projects dedicated to increasing the attractiveness of educational offers in tertiary and non-university education organized within the higher education accredited

institutions. Another Call named *Student Entrepreneur Scholarship* targeted integrated measures to increase the participation of vulnerable students in entrepreneurial programs.

The ESF OPHC project "ReCONNECT - Adaptation to change - Integrated mechanism for anticipation, monitoring, labour market assessment and education" has, as general objective, the correlation of demand with labour supply, by introducing new tools and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation of public policies and anticipating skills needs.

Challenge 3: International cooperation

The development of the international dimension of higher education in Romania involves the promotion of the educational offer, the obtaining of scholarships abroad by young Romanians, the attraction of foreign students to university studies in Romania, the preservation, development and affirmation of linguistic and cultural identity etc.

The Romanian state annually grants scholarships to support Romanian ethnics from neighbouring countries and Romanian ethnics with permanent residence abroad (3605 – bachelor's; 2000 – master's; 160 - doctorate), as well as scholarships for the education of foreign students (2357 – bachelor's; 760 – master's; 221 – doctorate).

Policy briefs on the internationalization of higher education in Romania were prepared and universities were supported in implementing institutional internationalization strategies, through projects from the Institutional Development Fund. Indicators on the international orientation of universities (student mobility, participation in international programs, attracting foreign students) are mentioned in the Funding Methodology applied in 2021.

The Agency for Credits and Scholarships, based on bilateral collaboration agreements, has awarded scholarships for full university or postgraduate studies, for research, for summer courses, for part-time university studies - lasting from 3 months to one academic year.

Within the CEEPUS program, in the academic year 2020-2021, Romania benefited from 220 scholarship months.

The Erasmus + program had a budget allocated to higher education in Romania for the mobility of students and university teaching staff and for Strategic Partnership Projects amounting to 49.9 million euros in 2020 and 34.34 million euros in 2021.

Higher education institutions in Romania are attended annually by more than half a million students, of which between 5% and 6% are foreign students. In the last 5 academic years, the evolution of the number of foreign students has slightly increased.

Towards 2030 and beyond: recommendations for the future

By 2030, Romanian tertiary education should be a fair and quality one for all students, supporting them to develop as active citizens, able to make the most of their personal potential. Such a system should be open to all secondary school graduates, by creating or continuing bridging programs between pre-university and university systems, focusing on the needs of the student and having sufficient financial resources, allocated in a transparent and efficient way.

Underrepresented groups must also be integrated into higher education. The number of students will increase only when young people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds have relatively equal opportunities in the process of admission to higher education. The educational offer of higher education institutions needs to become more flexible and curricula adapted to the needs of today's society.

Romania has currently important targets for higher education:

- By 2030, 20% of graduates of the first two cycles higher education (bachelor's and master's) will participate in external mobility programs;
- By 2030, at least 40% of 30-34 year olds will be graduates of higher education;
- In 2030, at least 10% of international students study in Romania (out of the total number of students enrolled);
- In 2030, at least 30% of all education courses will be optional, giving students the opportunity to customize and adapt their training to the complexities in to customize and adapt their training to the complexities in a growing labor market.

Recommendation 1. Develop skills and competences and promote innovation for the digital transition

The digital transition provides universities with a key role to play in providing the digital skills and competencies needed by students and researchers in promoting innovation and new technologies. Universities can also ensure the development of innovative educational technology through spin-offs or extensions and capitalize on the potential of the growing education technology (EdTech) industry. They play a key role in promoting a workforce that responds to the challenges of the digital transition in the future. The offer of specialized study programs in digital fields, such as AI, cyber security or cloud computing, as well as microelectronics, are crucial in this regard. The acquisition of skills in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) is the main challenge.

A successful digital transition policy involves first and foremost sustained investment in building the base: providing and financing the necessary digital infrastructure, including systems that allow data collection, hosting, management and analysis, as well as qualified people to manage and maintain the infrastructure, creating policies and standards such as data quality standards and hardware standards and system interoperability requirements.

Secondly, effective digitization involves a commitment to training and supporting staff in the development of teaching, learning, and research processes, as well as ensuring that all actors in the higher education system - students, research consumers, employers - benefit from digitization.

Romania agrees to the *Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation*¹ which invites member states to support the development of high-quality virtual collaborative learning as an integral part of teaching, learning and research, to foster and facilitate inclusive and student-centred transnational cooperation, that complements face-to-face interactions.

Recommendation 2. – Good governance and public accountability

Universities are responsible, not only for executing their teaching and research labour, but also for identifying internal and external stakeholders' needs, for adapting research to solving relevant issues, for sharing useful and important knowledge, not only towards the academic community, but with the society, for shaping responsible citizens concerned with their social, environmental and economic impacts, for showing that ethics should be a relevant tool for corporate and political management, and finally, for presenting the obtained results due to transparent and consistent communication with the different stakeholder groups².

1 Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation, Brussels, 19 ian 2022

² Miotto, G., Blanco González, A., & Del Castillo Feito, C. 2018a. 'Social Responsibility: A Tool for Legitimation in Spanish Universities' Strategic Plans.' http://www.tripodos.com/index.php/Facultat_Comunicacio_Blanquerna/article/viewFile/522/628

Romanian universities must compete with ranked universities around the world, adapting to a shifting educational landscape from in-person to digital or hybrid, and equipping students with critical thinking skills to understand and solve the problems of our world today. To thrive, it is crucial that leadership foster a university culture that embraces change, supports a strong connection between theory and practice, educates active learners, and seeks relationships with external actors.

Promoting effective governance involves not only involving stakeholders in the process of identifying and pursuing strategic objectives and increasing the role and representation of relevant stakeholders, especially external stakeholders, in governance issues, but also recalibrating the level of autonomy in close and balanced connection with the assumption of public responsibility for performance, in relation to well-defined expectations of the socio-economic environment.

Recommendation 3. – The Futures of Higher Education

“Educated Romania” strategic framework shapes the evolution of the higher education system in Romania, in the light of the challenges that the European university system will face until 2030, aligning itself with the following predicted benchmarks:

- the need for greater transparency and greater effectiveness, in the sense that the contribution of higher education to smart, sustainable and inclusive development and growth must become effective and rhythmically related to visible and quantifiable indicators;
- constant challenge to contribute significantly, visibly and transparently to Romania's economic growth agenda and to increase employability and economic productivity; a more pragmatic and effective response to new developments and key implications of qualifications, competences and skills at European / national level and to exploit the added value of academic mobility;
- the new challenge for research and innovation, in the sense that higher education institutions must become pillars of national and European innovation processes, as open and responsible centers for research, innovation and development; the need to promote a new culture of academic governance, responsible and performance and a new model of professionalization of the university manager;
- the global and regional challenge, the internationalization of higher education in Romania, which will become the key to solving the problem of expanding the demand for quality higher education, both for students and teachers;
- the need for strategic and assumed articulation in the medium and long term, with evidence-based policies that respond to the priority needs of the higher education system.

The Romanian plan associated with the Recovery and Resilience Facility (a European Union instrument) drew heavily from “Educated Romania” priorities, as has the National Defence Strategy, voted by Parliament. These developments are important for higher education, as they include a series of revolutionary proposals. In the medium term, the focus is on increasing involvement of universities in society, growing funding for education, intensification of the digital transition and increasing its role in achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), until 2025. In addition, the defense of the fundamental values has become an increasingly visible desideratum within the European Space of Higher education, with an emphasis on respect for academic freedom and defending institutional autonomy. Notably, universities are likely to become central components in the development of vocational centres of excellence, pairing them with campuses, secondary VET schools and businesses in the creation of professional development ecosystems.

The following reforms and investments for HE are financed through the NRRP:

- construction of 5,020 and extension / modernization of 14,500 recreation and reading spaces on university campuses;
- construction of 3,500 and extension / modernization of 3,125 places in canteens on university campuses;

- construction of 4,600 and extension / modernization of 14,530 places in dormitories in university campuses;
- development of 10 regional consortia and development and endowment of 10 integrated professional campuses, equipped for digital workshops, based on a digitization concept adapted to the profile of high schools and technological universities;
- grants to 60 universities to fund integrated measures to improve digital infrastructure and develop the skills of students and university teaching staff.

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