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# The institutional conditions of adapting to future challenges in the Romanian education system

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

The “**Future Challenges to Education Systems in Central Eastern European Context**” (EDUC, <https://cps.ceu.edu/research/educ>) is a two year comparative research project aiming at assessing the ability of the education systems of five Central-Eastern European countries to adapt to various ongoing changes, such as technological changes and their impact on labor markets, demographic changes, populist politics and autocratic governance, old and new inequalities, changing gender roles, globalization, etc. The research focuses on the adaptability of education systems determined by the interplay between governance and the institutional operation of schools in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Serbia and Romania. The project is supported by a grant from the Open Society Foundations.

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**THE INSTITUTIONAL CONDITIONS OF  
ADAPTING TO FUTURE CHALLENGES  
IN THE ROMANIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM**

Lucian Ciolan, Simona Iftimescu  
and Mihaela Stingu

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper is a country study on education in Romania, developed as a contribution to the “Future Challenges to Education in Central-Eastern European Context” project of the Central European University – Center for Policy Studies.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the study is to contribute to the comparative analysis of the adaptability of education systems that is created by the interplay of the capacity of schools to change and of educational governance to incite and support school-level change. It also provides input to the contextualization of the impact of various future challenges on education systems. This study is based on the concept paper of the project, elaborated by Peter Radó (Radó, 2020).

The first chapter brings into discussion the strategic priorities in education over the last (five) years, analysing, in parallel, the landscape of governance from the perspective of its maturity as a democratic and transparent mechanism for strategic steering and quality policy making.

In the second chapter, we have mapped out the capacity, at system level, to respond and adapt to key challenges faced by education in current times and in the future, with a special focus on digitalization (including some reflections on recent developments due to the pandemic), demographic evolution, and political instability.

Chapters three and four mirror the analysis at the school level, looking both to the capacity of schools to adapt to external pressures and challenges, but also to some key aspects of school-level governance.

The whole paper tries to make a contribution to better understanding the evolution and development of the education system and especially its governance in Romania, more than 30 years after the collapse of communism, and 13 years after entering the European Union. The critical analysis of the education governance approaches and behaviours aims to underline the need for a more self-reflexive approach and ongoing analysis of the governance process itself in order to improve its functionality and effectiveness, especially when it comes to the capacity to respond to future challenges. The capacity of central and school governance to look beyond everyday life events, pressures, and needs and to take a more strategic, future-oriented approach, based on a shared vision and participation of stakeholders, is a sign of maturity and intelligence. Nevertheless, we are aware that the governance of education is part of the broader mechanism of political action and policy making at the central government level, but at the same time, a reflection of its own evolution. Moreover, broader regional and international evolution, including the new type of authoritarianism emerging in Central and Eastern Europe and beyond, is definitely influencing national affairs, but, at the same time, is providing a very appropriate context for cross-regional comparative analysis, as is the case with the current project.

1 <https://cps.ceu.edu/research/educ>

To better understand the context of the analysis, we can look at some of the literature and transition models at a systemic, organizational, or individual level (Adams et al., 1976; Hopson, 1982; Bîrzea, 1992, 1994, 1996; Nicholson & West, 1987; McLeish & Phillips, 1998; Rado, 2001; Wawrzak, 2006). Thus, we can identify several stages in the process of education reforms and major systemic changes since 1990, correlated with election cycles.

The first stage (1990-1996) could be seen as one of **macro-transition**, of creating roadmaps, laws, and legislation – as well as breaking with the past. The main aspects to consider were decentralization and ensuring the independence of educational management and administration, as well as replacing the pre-1989 curriculum. The second stage (1996-2004) could be seen as the stage of **micro-transition** (McLeish & Phillips, 1998) at structural, curricular, and evaluation levels – a stage laying the foundation for the future. The First National Core Curriculum for pre-university education, grades 1-9 (primary and lower secondary) was implemented, as well as a school-based curriculum. There was also a change in structure – namely, regarding the number of years of compulsory education (Law no. 268/2003). One of the areas that experienced most changes was evaluation – first, national exams were introduced – these included the *Capacity* exam (eighth grade, later renamed ‘National Evaluation’) and the baccalaureate (twelfth grade). A third stage we can identify in these past 30 years is one of **Europeanization** (2004 - 2011) – and of moving from so-called quick fixes towards a more coherent strategy. This time frame was dominated by reform priorities required by the European integration process, by a Post-Integration Strategy (2007-2013), and by the creation of the Romanian Agency for Quality Insurance in Pre-university Education (Emergency Ordinance no. 75/2005), soon followed by the Law on the Quality of Education (no. 87/2006). In 2008, a National Pact for Education was signed by all political parties and the Presidency, which eventually had some echoes in the 2011 National Education Law. Legislative measures in higher education were further driven by Romania joining the Bologna Process, and new legislation passed in accordance with the Bologna Declaration (2004-2006). Starting in 2011 and lasting until 2016, the fourth stage could be seen as the **coming of age** of the Romanian educational system, while change remained one of the main constants. One of the most significant changes during this time frame was National Education Law no.1/2011, which defined the framework for the following decade. Several other initiatives aimed at creating a vision, a strategy, and a roadmap in the education reform process were also put forward by several relevant institutions (the Romanian Academy, the Presidential Administration, and the Ministry of Education). The fifth and most recent stage (2016-2020) could be seen as one of **crisis meeting opportunity**. Following regional and global trends, Romania has also experienced social and political unrest, with particular focus on corruption and justice reform – the two main topics on the public agenda for the past five years. Given this political instability, education fell off the radar, this period of time being mainly dominated by the curricular reform process and responding to the challenges at hand.

## 1. GOVERNANCE OF EDUCATION: BETWEEN IMPROVISATION AND STRATEGIC APPROACH

### 1.1. The educational policy agenda: what is urgent, what is important?

Recent policies in Romania aim to address some of the challenges around persistent inequality and low levels of acquisition of basic competencies.

When it comes to the construction of the educational agenda, some recurrent issues come to our attention, basically derived from two sources:

- Everyday crises and challenges, taken and accentuated by the media, impacting political behaviour and made ‘policy priorities’: bullying, violence in schools, and, more recently, online teaching and learning as result of the pandemic. The disruptive and unpredictable evolution of SARS COV 2 has raised many concerns about the capacity of central governance, but also of schools themselves in relation to getting ready for the new school year.

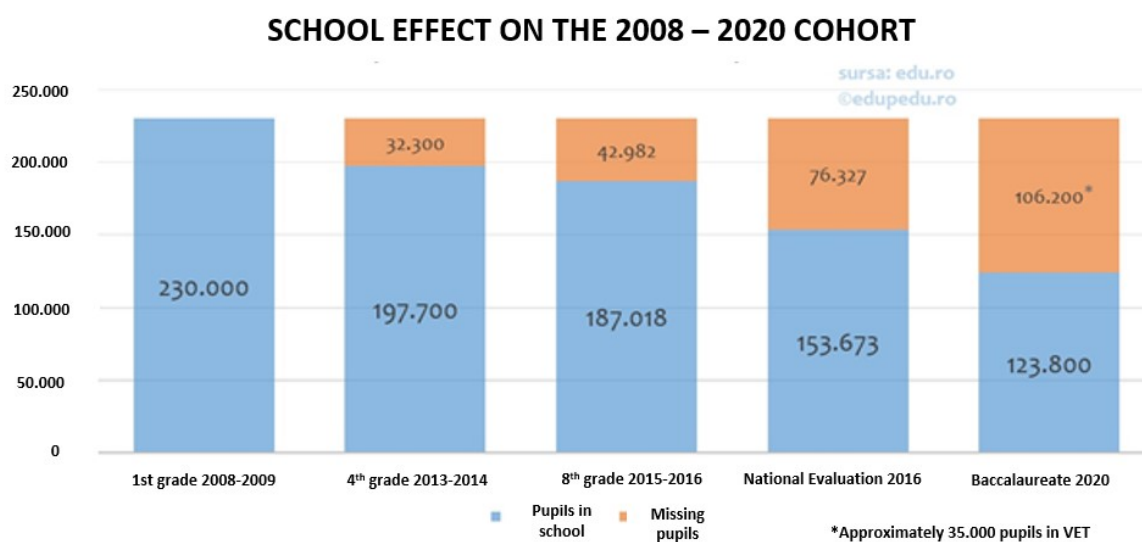
Currently, the agenda is clearly dominated by discussions about the way to deal with face-to-face versus online education, and this seems to be a never-ending process. What has happened until now is that the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health have agreed on some basic rules, but asked every school and local community to analyse local conditions, consult with parents and other stakeholders, and propose an adapted, customized scenario. Empowering local levels and giving an opportunity for consultation and ownership seem to be good ideas, but this has created a certain level of unrest, as the approach somehow contradicts the regular behaviour of central governance, which is highly restrictive and centralized. In many cases, the capacity and readiness of schools and local authorities to really take into their hands the responsibility to decide about the evolution of school life is limited, both by fear (of making mistakes, and then being held responsible) and by habit (waiting for upper levels to make decisions).

- Low-level achievement with regard to international and national testing: after failing to ‘blame’ international evaluations for the national failure of educational achievements, we have realized that national testing is also concerning: for example, the success rate for the national baccalaureate exam (end of high school) has remained low in recent years, with only about 65-70% of graduates succeeding. The issue here is that we have no clear idea what happens with the other 30% of each generation...

For example, in relation to the last point, cohort analysis reveals a worrying situation: the high-school graduates that took the baccalaureate exam this year (2020) started school in September 2008. They started compulsory education in a year with the highest economic growth, and graduated

during a pandemic crisis, which generated economic losses. As also shown in media reports,<sup>2</sup> after 18 years of schooling, from the 2020 generation, one in every three students (more than 74,000 in total) who entered first grade failed to obtain a baccalaureate exam (not including those who chose a vocational school).

**Figure 1. Effects of school on 2020 generation, from first grade to baccalaureate (twelfth grade).**



Source: edu.ro (adaptation from edupedu.ro)

The permanent subject of attention for policy intervention somehow remained at the level of the ‘tip of the iceberg’, with a clear obsession about the curriculum. The ‘most wanted’ tri-dimensional resources in education – allocating time (per discipline and working day), content, and learning objectives – was always at the centre of restructuring. A kind of obsession has been created over time and is deeply rooted in the conception of teachers and also policy makers: by changing some visible parts of the curriculum, it is thought that you influence the quality of learning. We face an overestimation of the impact of changing the number of hours for a discipline, or the list of content to be addressed in classrooms. There is limited capacity and interest in going deeper into this subject, asking the difficult questions, and trying to ground policy initiatives on solid research data.

While the central governance of education has failed, in recent years, to come up with a clear and long-term strategy that is known and accepted by stakeholders, the Presidency institution launched its own project, called *Educated Romania*. Launched in 2016, the project involved a large number of consultations, and tried to create a social and political consensus about the future directions for the development of the education system.

A document about creating a consistent vision was launched for public debate, and, in the last stage of the project (2018-2020), assisted by the OECD through the EU Technical Support Instrument, four policy briefs were launched to complement the initial document, with examples of good practice from the international environment, but also a specification of concrete action to be taken in order to achieve the established objectives for 2030. The four areas are:

2 <https://www.edupedu.ro/generatia-2008-2020-elevii-care-in-12-ani-de-scoala-au-avut-18-ministri-ai-educatiei-pest-74-000-de-copii-care-au-intrat-in-clasa-i-in-2008-nu-au-mai-ajuns-la-bacalaureat/>



- Teaching career;
- Educational management;
- Equity;
- Early childhood education.

These areas were somehow adopted by the central government as strategic priorities, and – related to teacher education and educational management – two large-scale pilot projects were launched.

- a) In July 2020, the Ministry of Education decided to start piloting a new model of curriculum and governance in high schools, activating a provision of the Law of Education which allows for selecting schools for this kind of experiment. The role of the schools selected as application / experimental institutions is to apply and evaluate educational research projects, new curriculum models, and teaching career paths, for creating an evidence base for future educational policy at the national / system level. Although somewhat expected and widely promoted in the media, the methodology and design of this experiment were still unclear at the time of writing, with less than two months before starting the new school year.
- b) In October 2020, eight universities selected by the ministry started piloting a didactic master's degree, involving a new model of initial teacher training and certification. A ministerial order was issued in May 2020,<sup>3</sup> thereby setting up a very tight calendar for selected pilots to design and accredit the new programs, and also prepare an admission in early autumn.

Although this was also a good decision per se, was recommended by the presidential project, by the OECD, and also provisioned for in the Law of Education 1/2011, the rush and pressure to 'do it now' just to satisfy the political agenda and tick boxes might seriously jeopardize the quality of the whole process.

## **1.2. The educational governance landscape in Romania: the “missing links”**

Strategic steering and quality policy making in education in Romania has involved, for a number of years, some missing links, especially related to ensuring key conditions for good quality governance.

The quality of a governance system for education relies on a number of key pillars:

1. A clear and shared vision of the main directions for educational development and educational transformation, giving coherence and predictability to stakeholders;
2. A reasonable quality of staff involved in the central governance of educational and a balanced distribution of responsibilities across levels, making the system capable of addressing challenges and the needs of all beneficiaries;
3. Adherence to the principles of equity and integrity, as well as the presence of functional accountability mechanisms;

3 Order for establishing and organization of didactic master degree programs no. 4524/12.06.2020

4. Capacity for self-reflecting and adapting the structure and functioning of the governance system, making it more capable of strategically steering resources and processes to achieve its goals; commitment to a democratic and professional approach to the process of policymaking in education – namely, a transparent and well-staged process and the continuing use of evidence to inform decision-making.
5. A robust design and delivery of educational support services for students, teachers, and managers to assist them with adequate mechanisms for achieving good results.

We will try here to make a synthetic evaluation of the extent to which the central governance of education in Romania is founding its action on these pillars.

1. The strategic direction of the development and transformation of education, based on a shared and widely agreed vision, was always an issue in past years, as the Ministry of Education, in different political configurations, basically failed to advance and promote a comprehensive strategy at the system level. Priorities were mainly defined by sectoral strategies, some of which came into action as a result of EU constraints / requirements (*ex-ante conditionalities* for using EU funds), as is the case with the following ones, initiated in 2015 / 2016 for the current programming cycle that ends this year:

- Strategy for reduction of early school leaving
- National strategy for Lifelong Learning
- National strategy for tertiary education
- Strategy for vocational education and training in Romania

The first three were developed with technical assistance from the World Bank within a very short time frame, and they were basically not subject to serious public debate and scrutiny, not even with the key stakeholders. The aims and directions of these sectoral strategies are based on previous studies, data, and analysis, and, in broad terms, they identify the critical problems of the sector and the main directions for action. The main issue here was, and still is (at the end of the five-year cycle), poor operationalization in terms of budgets, key actions / interventions, as well as monitoring, evaluation, and impact assessment. This year (2020) is the last one in this strategic cycle, and there have been no consistent assessments of interventions that have been made and their contribution to the improvement of the respective sectors.

In addition to these four, another one focusing on infrastructure was added, having a time frame of 2017-2023: *Strategy for modernization of educational infrastructure*, also based on EU conditionalities and realized with the technical assistance of the World Bank.

The key targets for these strategies are derived from the priorities and indicators set at the EU level, the most important of which are presented in the table below.

**Table 1. Key targets for sectoral strategies**

Indicators	EU target	RO target	Value 2019 (RO)
Employment rate of recent graduates by educational attainment (age 20-34 who left education 1-3 years before reference year)	75%	70%	76,1%
Early leavers from education and training (age 18-24)	10%	11,3%	15,3%
Tertiary educational attainment (age 30-34)	40%	26,7%	25,8%
Adult participation in learning (age 25-64)	15%	10%	1,3%

Source: Education and Training Monitor (2020) apud Eurostat; OECD (PISA)

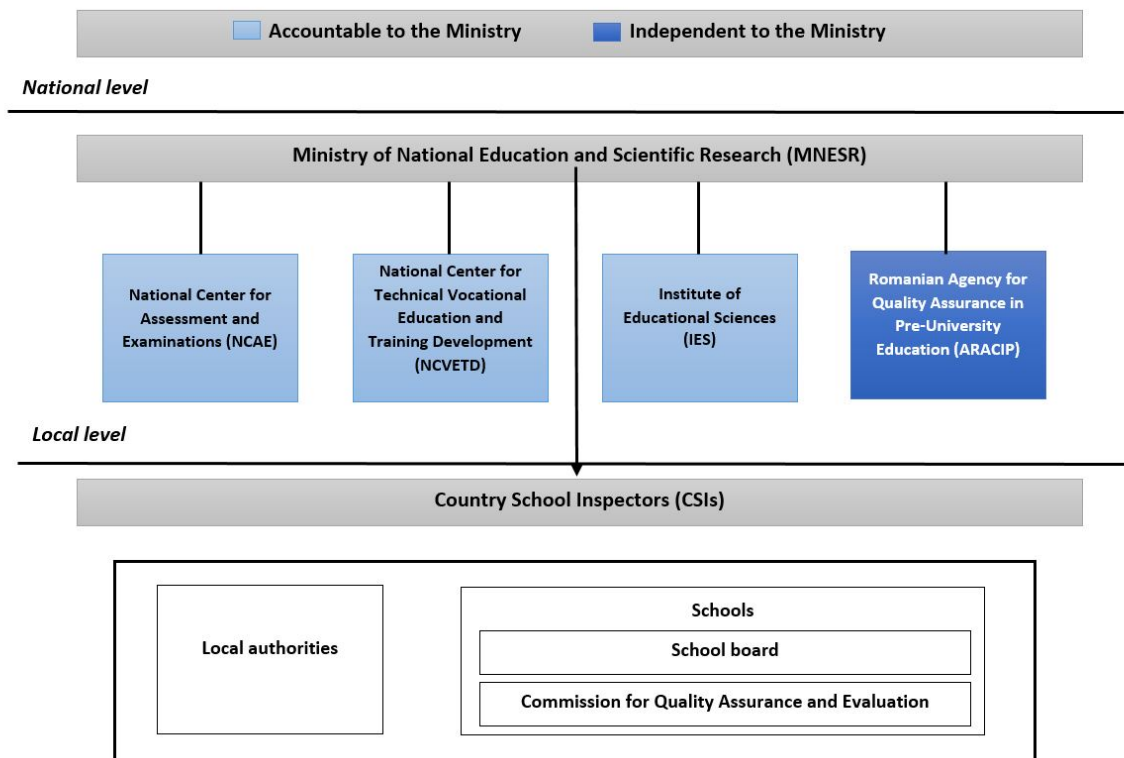
Although these five strategies are well-developed and to a certain extent provide a legitimate strategic framework for the development of the education system, their impact is limited and, to a large extent, they remain ‘off-the-shelf’ documents used to fulfil conditionalities and to access different projects, but fail to generate a comprehensive, coherent, and intensive effort at improving the quality of education. The main reasons for this are:

- The model for generating the strategies as a result of external requirements and conditionalities, which is associated with little consideration of the bottom-up process based on the needs, consultation, and participation of stakeholders;
- The strategies were not embedded into the budgetary planning cycles in an explicit and operationalized way;
- Limited provisions for monitoring, evaluation, and impact assessment;
- Continuing alteration of the educational agenda through political interventions and / or political instability.

In conclusion, in spite of a significant number of isolated legitimate interventions based on pressing needs or political priorities, the central governance of education has failed in the last five years to consolidate a shared vision and a comprehensive strategic approach to improving the quality of education in Romania. Caught in the middle between external demands, everyday pressures, political interventions, media-driven tension, and its own limited capacity to have an impact that goes beyond the day-to-day administration of a heavily centralized huge system, the Ministry of Education is still in search of a stable framework of priorities associated with strong implementation and budgetary support.

2. One of the challenges faced by the central governance of education in recent years has also been its own capacity for strategic steering and quality policy making. Traditionally, if we look at the institutional model and at the functioning of central governance in Romania, a key role has been played by central education agencies – mainly professional bodies focused on specific areas of expertise, and expected to be the main contributors to policy analysis and development. Until a couple of months ago, the essential components of the governance system were organized as shown in Fig. 2 below:

**Figure 2. Levels of educational governance**



In spite of a series of attempts to bring decisions closer to their direct beneficiaries and stakeholders, the educational system in Romania remains highly centralized. Although there are three main layers of management decisions – namely, central governance, county school inspectorates, and schools, plus an additional one at the level of local councils / town halls – the distribution of power and resources is clearly unbalanced.

A recent (unexpected) decision of the government was to merge the NCAE (assessment and evaluation agency) with IES (a research agency also having the responsibility for curriculum development). IES was the oldest and probably the most stable agency working under the coordination of the Ministry of Education, and the only professional body at the national level focused on educational research, with a special focus on substantiating policy interventions. This decision was not based on any analysis or coherent restructuring of governance, but was simply backed as a measure for increasing the policy capacity of the Ministry. The existing mix of professional, governance, and administrative functions collected under the umbrella of the new institution is way too diverse, and also contradictory, and, for the moment, research capacity has been seriously undermined.

This measure came as the last one in a series over the last few years to weaken, in general, the capacity of all relevant agencies working at the central level of education. After closing down the agency for the training of teachers and managers in pre-university education (and re-organizing it as a department in the Ministry), there was also a tentative move to close down the VET agency, and then the merger mentioned above went ahead. In this way, the professional capacity of central governance was seriously weakened, and the many (young) professionals working in these agencies decided to leave, as their independence and professional activity had been seriously jeopardized.

Excessive politicization of leadership in the Ministry and related agencies (except for the Quality Assurance Agency, which enjoys more independence) has limited professional behaviour and the capacity for policymaking. Moreover, although the Law on Education 1/2011 provided a framework for providing more autonomy to schools and for decentralizing some governance functions, the distribution of power and resources remained highly centralized in the Ministry.

3. A serious concern at the decision-making level, well reflected in policy initiatives and projects, was addressing the vulnerable categories of students: namely, early school leavers; the capacity of vocational education students to attend tertiary education; and the Roma minority and other ethnic minorities, etc. In some areas, significant progress was made, but other categories are still at high risk, and are either neglected at the level of the policy agenda or approached in ineffective ways. The critical groups that should be addressed are the following:

- Students with special needs – very limited and low-quality support services are available in schools to assist their integration. Many years after the political decision to integrate them into mainstream education, the investment and capacity required to offer them professional support services is extremely limited, and this raises serious ethical concerns;
- Students in rural areas, where, according to the last PISA analyses, average student performance is more than a year behind that of urban students, raising serious concerns about the capacity of the former schools and students to escape the vicious circle of low achievement.

Both situations require national frameworks, but also local adaptations and school-level solid implementation, as the disparities and specificities in our system are tremendous.

When it comes to the accountability mechanisms of central governance, they were also seriously weakened, especially under socialist governments, as the process of policy making was shortened / simplified and transformed mainly through administrative and political decisions. One of the key accountability issues for the central governance of education is the weak commitment to evaluation and impact assessment. Although methodologies for ex-ante impact assessment were developed and adopted more than ten years ago, and some provisions in the strategies are leading to monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, this function of governance remains very weak, and this area is somehow maintained this way by being ignored. The external impact assessment of educational policies is a very rare event, not to mention the making of public reports about this. Starting in 2004/2005, a very well-structured report on the performance of the education system was designed and published on a yearly basis, this being a legal requirement. In recent years, these reports were mainly published by teams in IES, thus responsibility was not officially assumed by the Ministry. Nevertheless, these reports are a very good instrument both in terms of accountability and for policy analysis and development, as they are structured around key indicators and bring to attention their evolution over time and comparisons with situations in other countries or EU averages. Evaluation and impact assessment are clearly the ‘weakest link’ in the policy cycle, limiting accountability and providing poor data for further agenda setting and prioritization.

4. When it comes to the reflexive capacity of the central governance in relation to restructuring and adapting to the new challenges, we can clearly detect the prevalence of political logic: this appears in changes in the organigram / structural composition of the Ministry and related bodies, with no functional analysis to support this. In recent years ministers of education have changed very often,

but the last 10 years have brought 14 different ministers, doubling the rate of change compared with previous decades according to World Vision report ‘Cursa celor 30 de ani de educație în România’.<sup>4</sup> Lacking a shared vision and strategy, every minister came with their own perspective about the role and functioning of the central governance of education, and the related adaptations and changes do not reflect the challenges in education and policy priorities.

For example, professional policy capacity and ability with information systems and digitalization are ‘lost’ in small departments that have very limited capacity and influence. Moreover, as mentioned before, the professional capacity of national agencies has been undermined, making the gap between central governance and local levels even greater, but also affecting the credibility and professionalism of central governance.

Basically, in recent years, the Ministry of Education was not in the position to launch any form of public policy designed and developed ‘by the book’, preferring a more authoritative and direct approach of directly intervening, but with limited impact. The general and dominant perception of external stakeholders when it comes to capacity of the central governance and their agility to adapt and respond to challenges is a lack of coherence, limited capacity, improvisation, and a disruptive agenda, led by media or political interests.

The capacity of central governance for self-adaptation is therefore limited; consequently, its capacity to empower lower / decentralized levels to react to challenges is also minimal.

5. Educational support services include a wide variety of professional services provided to schools, teachers, and pupils, such as in-service training, counselling, project development and implementation support, assistance for SEN / at risk children, etc.

In-service training is regulated as a formal obligation of teachers, according to which they should acquire 90 professional credit points from engaging in ongoing training every five years. The system, although quite modern and flexible, lacks a strategic orientation and is associated with serious funding issues and limited access for some potential beneficiaries.

Counselling and guidance, assistance for special needs, remedial teaching, and other additional services for students are dramatically under-delivered, with serious (but not yet formally assessed) consequences for school attendance, continuation of education, career choice, and inclusion. This is actually one of the critical points for intervention in the future. The limited approach of focusing almost exclusively on teaching and learning in the frame of formal schedules is hard to overcome.

When it comes to schools / school management, the availability of support services is even poorer. School managers are teachers who would really need support mechanisms to perform better. However, they are under constant pressure to deliver, they have to fight a high level of bureaucracy, and they enjoy very limited autonomy and support.

In conclusion, one of the main issues of the last five years or so is that the governance of education has remained attached to simplistic forms of behaviour, typically neglecting the logic of a strategic approach and taking the ‘easy option’ of administrative fixes: i.e. small fixes as they go (typically responding / reacting to current crises), instead of looking forward and preparing for future challenges. Mainly due to political instability, but also to the tempting pattern of behaviour of politicians as they obtain power, education governance in Romanian has somehow failed to come up with a strong

4 The 30 years Race of education in Romania. World Vision Romania, [https://worldvision.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/WV\\_EDU30\\_15June2020\\_GMP.pdf](https://worldvision.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/WV_EDU30_15June2020_GMP.pdf)

message to society as a whole that involves a clear vision of nurturing trust in education and in the capacity of the system, schools, and students to flourish and develop through learning.

Facing the dramatic challenge of a continuing fall in quality of education, for most of the indicators<sup>5</sup> central governance interventions lack a comprehensive strategic perspective and are based dominantly on legislative tools that overlap with legislation on policy making and which fail a) to address substantive problems, beyond the ‘tip of the iceberg’ (curricula, standards, assessment, duration of schooling, etc.) and, b) to ensure the appropriate conditions for strategic steering and quality policy making at a central level, as well as to give more power and autonomy to schools and local levels.

## 2. CURRENT CHALLENGES: PREPAREDNESS, LEARNING PATHWAYS, AND STUDENTS' ATTITUDES

### 2.1. School system preparedness

First, it should be noted that the OECD Reviews of Evaluation and Assessment in Education for Romania (OECD, 2017) identified as one of the main policy issues the improvement of the use of results and evidence-based decision-making, with one particular mention of establishing a standard procedure for the use of evidence. This recommendation was made as there is no unified framework for progress monitoring in education, little data is available (or rather it is scattered and non-integrated) about the different components of the educational system, and the data that do exist are not always used in the decisional process. Even though there is a standard procedure for drafting public policies (including incorporating evidence that supports policy alternatives), it is not always used as intended. Educational research in Romania is mainly carried out by universities and national or international NGOs/private entities, with some contributions from institutions subordinated to the Ministry of Education and Research. At a centralized level, even in situations where the infrastructure allows for the collection of data (for example, through the online Integrated Information System for Education in Romania [SIIR]), there is still room for improvement as regards the type of data that is collected and its accuracy, completeness, frequency, and usage.

The lack of research and assessment data became even more obvious in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, indicating the overall low level of preparedness of the education system to respond to major challenges. As educational institutions abruptly ended face-to-face interaction on 11 March 2020, the transition to online teaching underlined the weak points of the system: a lack of financing, lack of communication, teacher training (particularly in using IT&C) and difficulties adapting the content and the teaching/assessment methods to the online environment, a lack of data regarding the number of pupils and students with little or no access to technology, and a lack of data on student background or school context, etc.

The current crisis also puts under the spotlight some of the most pressing issues and challenges for the educational system and for society as a whole. Amongst these, we will focus primarily on digitalization, demography, political instability, and socio-economic inequalities.

5 See Education and Training Monitor 2019. Romania. (European Commission, [https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/et-monitor-report-2019-romania\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/document-library-docs/et-monitor-report-2019-romania_en.pdf))

### ***2.1.1. Digitalization***

In the current context generated by the Covid-19 pandemic, several surveys and research studies have tried to capture the transition to online learning, either from the teachers'/students' perspective, or from a processual perspective. One such study was carried out by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (IRES, 2020), one main finding of which reflected that more than 900,000 pupils (32%) have limited or no access to a laptop/desktop/tablet. As a complementary measure, the majority of pupils in the eighth (52%) and twelfth (72%) grades who were preparing for the national examinations followed the so-called Tele-school (an educational initiative coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Research, broadcast on national television) (IRES,2020). Even though there was little to no preparation for online/distance learning, the majority of those responding to the survey stayed in touch with their/their children's teachers for online teaching sessions (64%), for homework (61%), and for informal discussions (55%) (IRES, 2020).

However, the Education and Training Monitor (2019), indicates that only 52% of young people (aged 16-19) assess their digital skills as 'basic or above basic' according to the 2019 PISA results – below the EU average, and significantly lower than in 2017 (83%). Also, there are 'substantially fewer highly digitally equipped and connected schools in Romania than the EU average' (European Commission, 2019, p.9). Of course, the irony is not lost as Romania reports to having one of the fastest broadband internet connections – fourth in the world and twice as fast as the global average, while the penetration rate for fixed internet in 2019 was 62% at the national level (ANCOM, 2019).

If the sudden school closures in early March due to the current pandemic took the world by surprise, the Romanian education system included, six months later it seems to be in no better position to handle the start of the 2020/2021 academic year (starting 14 September 2020 for the pre-university level and 1 October for higher education). These six months may be characterized by delays, conflicting views, errors, and a lack of transparency in communication, and, above all, increased concern and many unanswered questions particularly for pupils, parents, and teachers.

An inter-ministerial committee was created at the government level (including all stakeholders, with input from the Ministry of Health and the National Institute for Public Health) to coordinate school reopening. This will be done according to three scenarios:

- Green: 1 case/1000 residents/14 consecutive days – schools open as normal (face-to-face instruction);
- Yellow: 1-3 cases/1000 residents/14 consecutive days – a hybrid system will be implemented (partly face-to-face instruction, partly online);
- Red: 3 cases and above/1000 residents/14 consecutive days (schools remain closed – only online instruction).

As expected, given the difference in the number of cases from county to county, the decision (and responsibility) for reopening was transferred to the local level (school principals, mayors, parents, and local communities). However, this is also unexpected, given that it is one of the first real systemic measures to support the process of decentralisation, officially implemented since 1997. Therefore, besides adapting the entire education system to an unusual context generated by the pandemic, there are also two other issues that could (once again) leave the educational process on the backburner: the lack of 'practice' with exercising autonomy and responsibility at the local level, as well as the impending



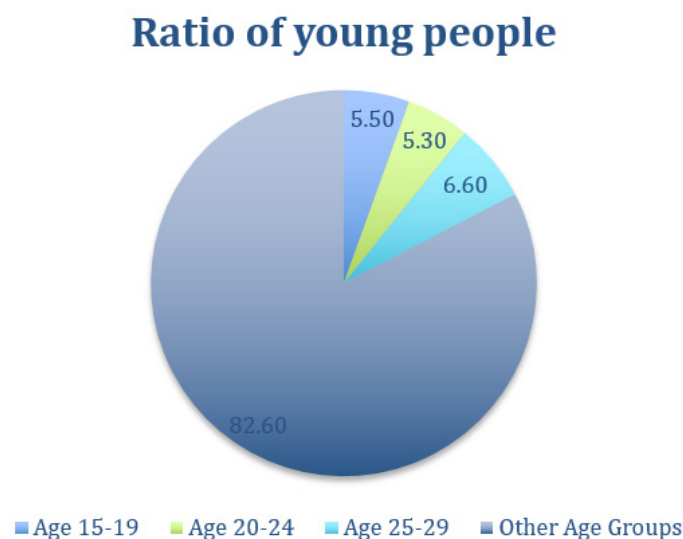
general local elections on the 27 September, which could have a great influence, particularly as the majority of mayors, members of the local council, etc. are representatives of the social-democratic party that is currently in opposition following a rather tumultuous mandate (2016 – 2019).

Focusing on the first issue, local capacity is somewhat limited. One reason is the lack of financial resources, as most communities have diverted funds towards the health system during the pandemic, or, as happens more often than not, have not considered local funding for schools to be a priority – not to mention that the actual number of schools has decreased in recent years (for example, 727 fewer schools in 2018 than 2017), which sometimes led to overcrowding or pupils learning in three shifts (morning, noon, and afternoon). Second, as the Romanian educational system could be seen as a ‘highly centralized decentralized system’, there will be an increase in pressure on schools, amplified by an underlying fear of consequences (for school principals, teachers, mayors, local representatives, etc.), which could lead to little or no action. Third, there appears to be little support from the Ministry, as most guidelines appear to pass the buck – no daily temperature checks of pupils at schools, and parents in charge of ‘triage’, no group (pool) testing, a lack of clarity concerning masks/no-masks in schools, delays in the acquisition of tablets/computers for pupils/schools, etc. Also, the lack of infrastructure and resources – few available classrooms, with a large number of students (sometimes as many as 35 students/class), and a lack of, or deficient sanitation, as well as a lack of tablets/computers for children living in disadvantaged communities – just to name a few issues – will make respecting the guidelines more than challenging.

### 2.1.2. Demographic challenges

For more than a decade, Romania’s population has been constantly decreasing, partly because of the negative balance between births vs. deaths, and partly because of an increase in the rate of emigration. Thus, demographic challenges partly stem from an overall 12% decrease in the total population, from 22,458,022 (1999) to 19,703,494 (2016) – a figure which takes into account the number of Romanian citizens, either resident or not. For the resident population, these numbers have decreased significantly because of high levels of emigration – over three million Romanian citizens are currently living abroad (European Commission, 2020). In the past 30 years, ‘Romania lost 23.3 % of its working-age population due to emigration’ (World Bank, 2018).

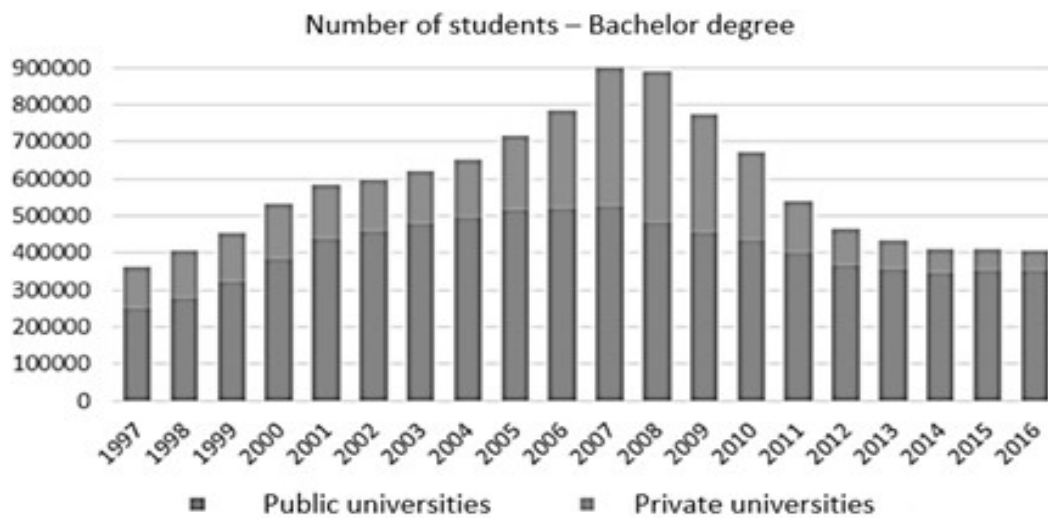
**Figure 3. Proportion of young people in the total population - January 1, 2020**



Source: Youth Wiki - Romania (EACEA, 2020)

A similar decrease has also been registered amongst the 0-24-year-old population, marking a decrease in this age group as a proportion of the population from 40.3% (1992) to only 26.5% (2016) according to the National Institute of Statistics (apud. ARACIS, 2018). Automatically, this leads to a decrease in the overall student population per cohort – for example, a decrease of 25% in those registered for high school from 2010/2011 to 2016/2017 has also led to a proportional decrease in the number of students enrolled for bachelor degrees. In higher education, the decrease in the student population reached 48% over the period from 2008 to 2018, the largest drop among countries implementing the Bologna Process (Education and Training Monitor, 2018). The increase in the total number of students in 2005-2008 is more significant, as 2005 marked the enrolment of the so-called ‘first Bologna generation’, who overlapped with the student population of the 2004-2008 cohort.

**Figure 4. Evolution of number of students (Bachelor degree).**



Source: National Institute of Statistics (2017); CNSPIS (2018)

### ***2.1.3. Political instability and socio-economic inequalities***

One of the main impacts of political instability on the education system in Romania can be seen in the frequent changes at the level of the Ministry of Education and Research – with no less than 29 education ministers in 30 years (some interim, and others serving non-consecutive mandates). One of the main problems remains the fact that a change at the ministerial level triggers changes throughout the system – from the Ministry to the local administrative units, which leads to a lack of predictability and unitary vision, to incoherence, and to a somewhat high level of resistance to change within the system.

Evidence from the most recent PISA study (2018) points to the fact that **socio-economic status** is a factor contributing to school performance, as ‘socio-economically advantaged students outperformed disadvantaged students in reading by 109 points and the performance gap related to socio-economic status was 86 score points’ (OECD, 2019).

**Early school leaving** in Romania, defined as the percentage of 18-24 year olds who have completed at most lower secondary education (equivalent to grade eight), and are no longer in education/training, is still higher than the goal set for 2020 (11.3%). In the past ten years, the proportion has varied from 19.3% (2010), 17.3% (2013) and 19.1% (2015), reaching 15.3% (2019) compared to the EU average of 10.3% (Eurostat, 2019). According to the Education and Training Monitor (2019), youth in poorer

areas are more likely to leave school: ‘in rural areas, one in four people aged 18-24 has left school too early. By contrast, the rate is 15% in towns and only 4.2% in cities’ (European Commission, 2019, p.9). This aspect needs to be addressed as there is even more evidence related to the fact that students with a similar background are usually clustered, with direct impact on the quality of education provided to disadvantaged children and minorities, particularly Roma, leading to one of the recommendations that Romania should ‘improve the quality and inclusiveness of education, in particular for Roma and other disadvantaged groups’ (Council of the European Union, 2019).

One particular problem Romania is facing – namely, the large number of **NEETs (not in education, employment or training)** – seems to be slightly improving, from proportions of 18.1% in 2015 and 17.4% in 2016 to 15.2% in 2017 for youth aged 15-24 (still one of the highest shares in the EU), even though the effects are now more visible in terms of the increase in those aged 20-34, with 20.6% falling into the NEETs category in 2019 compared to 16.5% in 2018 and 14.3% in 2017 (Eurostat, 2019). On top of leading to a 4.1% overall unemployment rate in the first trimester of 2019, according to the National Institute for Statistics, this rate was the highest among 15-25 year-olds at 15.6% (INS, 2019). The structure of the NEET group is also reflective of the issues faced by disadvantaged groups, mainly based on gender, ethnicity, disability, and socio-economic background. Of particular note, according to a study developed in 2019 by the Romanian Centre for European Policies (CRPE), is the fact that, on average, 64% of young Roma are in the NEET category (CRPE, 2019).

## 2.2. Progression in education and diversification of learning pathways

Currently, the structure of the Romanian educational system is comprised of:

- **Early education** for children between 0-6 years old. This consists of crèche (0-3 years old), which falls mostly within the category of social services rather than educational services, and kindergarten (3-6 years old), organized in groups/levels: lower, middle, and upper. Early education is non-compulsory (with the exception of the upper level in kindergarten, compulsory starting 2020/2021 – a provision to be gradually extended to all levels by 2023).
- **Primary education** starts with a preparatory class, or so-called ‘grade 0’, compulsory since 2012, aimed at facilitating the transition from kindergarten to the first grade, and consists of grades 0-4 (compulsory). Children can be enrolled in the first grade when they turn 6 or 7 years old.
- **Secondary education** comprises lower secondary education/gymnasium (grades 5-8) and upper secondary education/high school (grades 9-12/13).

According to the Ministry of Education and Research, high school education comprises the following fields and profiles:

- Theoretical education, with humanities and science clusters;
- Technological education, with the following clusters: technical, services, natural resources and environmental protection;
- Vocational education, with the following clusters: military, theology, sport, art, and education.

**The transition** from lower secondary to upper secondary consists of passing a national examination in mathematics, and in Romanian language and literature. Based on the results of the national examination, the average grade obtained during the lower secondary cycle and on personal preference, pupils are allocated to the upper secondary cycle in one of three branches: theoretical, technological, or vocational (arts, sports etc.). At the end of the upper secondary cycle, pupils need to pass the baccalaureate exam in order to advance to higher education. Graduates of the technological and vocational branches also have to pass a qualifying exam.

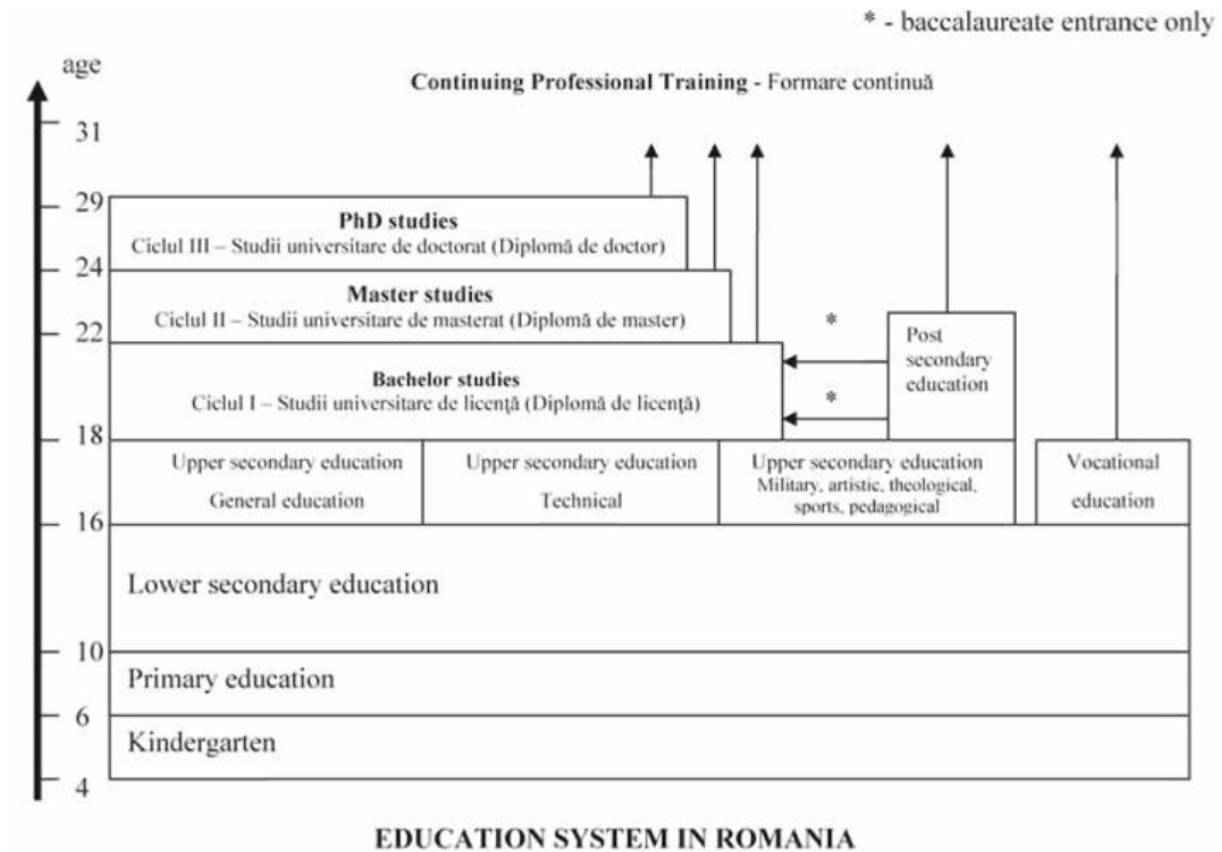
**Alternative routes** are also available, particularly through ‘professional education’ in technical and vocational high schools, at the end of which pupils obtain a qualification certificate. There is also a possibility for those graduating from a professional school to continue their studies in upper secondary cycle once they have completed the eleventh grade, but only by repeating the eleventh grade in high school. According to a World Bank report (2017) that analysed SABER ratings (Systems Approach for Better Education Results) in relation to TVET, Romania recorded a score of three for Policy Goal six, which refers to diversifying pathways for skills acquisition, corresponding to an established level of development (World Bank, 2017). The report also identifies several measures taken by the government to support diverse pathways, including career and counselling services, and recognition of prior learning and training – noting, however, the limited reach of these measures. Moreover, there are still methodological issues regarding what concerns the recognition of prior learning and the validation of non-formal and informal learning. During recent years, active measures have also been taken to increase the appeal of Vocational Education and Training (VET), but these options are still largely ‘perceived as unattractive’ (World Bank, 2017, p.40) [3], even though participation in VET is above the EU average (CEDEFOP, 2019) [4]. For those who do not obtain a baccalaureate diploma, or for those who do, but do not want to pursue higher education, there is an option to enrol in **post-high-school non-university education** (1-3 years), which trains students specifically for the job market. For holders of a baccalaureate diploma, the credits can be recognized as transferable study credits towards a bachelor degree.

**Higher education** is structured in three cycles, according to the Bologna Process: bachelor, master, and doctorate. Entry to the first cycle depends on obtaining the baccalaureate diploma and on fulfilling any other conditions defined by the university (either high-school average, entry exam, portfolio etc.).

According to Education Law no.1/2011, compulsory education extends from the preparatory grade to the tenth grade (primary education, lower secondary education, and grades 9 and 10 in high school), or until the pupil turns 18 years old. If a pupils turn 18 years old and has not completed the compulsory education cycle, there are alternative routes for them to complete their education (for example, the ‘Second Chance’ program).

Following a recent Law (2019) which modifies Education Law no.1/2011, **compulsory education** will be extended from 11 years (grades 0 – 10) to 16 years by 2030. By 2023, compulsory education will include the middle level in kindergarten, and by 2030 compulsory education will include kindergarten and high school.

**Figure 5. The Romanian educational system**



Source: Ministry of National Education

**Learning pathways** in the Romanian educational system diversify at the high-school level, after nine years of education, even though there are also options at an earlier point (usually lower secondary level), particularly for pupils attending vocational schools (arts, sports, etc.).

As mentioned before, the transition between different educational cycles is either automatic (between kindergarten and primary level, as well as between primary and lower secondary), or based on a national examination (between lower secondary and upper secondary and between upper secondary and higher education). However, there are also some exceptions – particularly in the transition from the primary cycle to lower secondary, as some educational institutions set an admission exam for pupils entering the fifth grade (particularly in the case of high schools that also include the lower secondary cycle, with a focus on intensive language, mathematics, or computer science classes).

Also, given the fact that the first two grades of high school (ninth and tenth grades) are part of the compulsory educational system, the national examination at the end of eighth grade allows enrolment in the upper secondary cycle even for those pupils who do not pass the exam. This national examination is seen as controversial and discriminatory by some, particularly because the transition from lower to upper secondary cycle appears to be one important cause of high drop-out rates (most schools in rural areas only offer lower secondary education, meaning that pupils need to travel to a high school in the nearest city or even move to a city). Also, there are currently debates around the fact that at the end of the tenth grade (currently the end of compulsory education) there is no national assessment, nor a leaving qualification, as ‘Romania is yet to develop [...] a strong, coherent reform agenda for addressing the negative effects of a highly selective and unequal secondary school system’ (Kitchen, 2017, p.99).

Compulsory education is mostly provided by the State (public education), but there are also private and denominational educational institutions authorized or accredited by the State. Moreover, besides the traditional educational system, there are also educational alternatives, such as Step by Step, Waldorf, Montessori etc.

### 2.3. Learning cultures

The **national curriculum** comprises seven curricular areas, built on a core curriculum and an optional curriculum (school-based decision), the latter allowing individual schools to include one or two electives per grade in accordance with options decided upon together with the school community (pupils, parents). Moreover, National Education Law no.1/2011 introduced individualised learning plans and student portfolios, which ‘are positive tools to encourage more student-led, differentiated learning’ (Kitchen, 2017, p.108). However, given the high teacher-to-student ratio in many of the schools (particularly in urban areas), and the total number of classes per teacher, individualised learning could be difficult to implement.

Even though new national assessment initiatives have been implemented at both primary and lower secondary levels (second, fourth and sixth grades) starting in 2014/2015 with the main purpose of supporting more individualized learning, ‘there is no national policy or guidance available on the development of the individualized learning plans’ (Kitchen, 2017).

### 2.4. Learning outcomes

Following a 20-year hiatus, the Romanian educational system is currently undergoing curricular reform, which started in 2008 with the early childhood education curriculum. The most important aspect of this reform is the shift towards a *competency-based* approach to learning (Kitchen, 2017). This became a key principle and the curriculum was built on eight main categories of competencies, in line with the key competencies for lifelong learning set out in the EU Reference Framework: 1) communication in the mother tongue; 2) communication in foreign languages; 3) mathematical competence and basic competencies in science and technology; 4) digital competence; 5) learning to learn; 6) social and civic competencies; 7) sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; and 8) cultural awareness and expression (OJEU, 2006). The new curriculum is rolled-out in stages for different grades, following the student cohort, with the eighth grade implementing it beginning in 2020/2021. Several teacher training programs have been developed in order to support teaching staff in the process of adapting to the new curriculum.

However, results of the programme for international student assessment (PISA) in past years have drawn more attention to these learning outcomes in connection to their practical applicability. In higher education, qualifications are driven by the European credit transfer system (ECTS), following a competence-based model.

According to the 2018 PISA results, students in Romania scored lower than the OECD average in reading, mathematics, and science. More specifically, 59% of students attained at least Level 2 proficiency in reading (OECD average: 77%), 53% attained Level 2 or higher in mathematics (OECD average: 76%), and 56% attained Level 2 or higher in science (OECD average: 78%). The only slight improvement compared to 2006 appears to be in mean reading performance. However, results in mathematics were significantly lower than 2015, while results in science were similar to those in 2006 or 2009. Also, gaps in performance have increased (OECD, 2019).

## 2.5. Attitudes of students and young people

In order to better understand the role of formal education in shaping the attitudes of students and young people in relation to social and political issues, it should be noted that civic and citizenship education is a formal part of the national curriculum from primary school (initially ‘Civic education’) to the end of lower secondary level (initially ‘Civic Culture’). Starting 2016/2017, a new curricular area was introduced (roughly translated as ‘Man and Society’) with classes covering different topics under ‘Social Education’ (Critical thinking and children’s rights, Intercultural education, Education for democratic citizenship, Economic and financial education).

According to a piece of research by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) in 2018/2019 [5], regarding young people in Romania (15-29 year olds), there are several aspects which can be highlighted with regard to social trust, religion, and spirituality, democracy and socio-political attitudes. The context of this research also takes into account the ‘demographic recession’ (Bădescu et.al, 2018, p.3) happening in the region, as well as the ‘strong authoritarian counter-movement’ (Diamond, 2014; Mudde, 2013 in Bădescu et. al, 2018, p.3), with Romania also being one of the 27 EU member states with the highest level of inequality.

Following the communist measures aimed at promoting (or rather forcing) a high birth rate, as well as a post-1990 increase in migration and decrease in population, the youth of Romania are underrepresented, particularly when compared to those between 40-50 years old, leading to their weaker political representation and participation (Bădescu et.al, 2019, p.4).

Some of the main results of the FES study indicate that Romanian youth tend to be confident about their personal futures, while showing a lack of confidence in the future of the country itself. There is a lack of encouragement for youth to participate in politics or civil society (influenced by and influencing in turn a lack of attachment to the community, also manifested by the 30% of respondents willing to leave the country for at least six months). Moreover, young people in Romania tend to be fearful, particularly in relation to corruption, poverty, and social injustice. There is also a lack of trust in social relations with people outside their family – Romanian youth manifesting one of the lowest levels of social trust of countries in the region. Compared to other countries in the region, Romanian youth support for minorities is lower overall, with the majority supporting the existing level of rights and access for minorities, and only one third supporting an expansion.

An Open Society Foundations 2019 study indicates that young women are more open to diversity and more engaged in civic initiatives. In Romania, 42% of ‘Generation Z’ (born in 1993-1995) consider that the LGBT community should be offered more support, similarly to the 50% who support supplementary assistance for ethnic communities. Emigration represents a relevant topic, with 67% of respondents being concerned that people are leaving the country. Only 10% of young Romanians consider that people can live the life they want, no matter their background, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

Despite a low level of trust in the media and in political parties, civil society appears to be more involved, particularly when it comes to respondents from Generation Y and Generation Z. However, most civic participation is undertaken through petitions (43%), distributing articles or opinions on social media (35%), or donating to an organization/charity (23%). According to the same study, both Generation Z (55%) and Generation Y (54%) respondents perceive high insecurity and a sense of threat with regard to democracy in Romania (Bui-Wrzosińska, 2019).

### 3. SCHOOL-LEVEL ADAPTATION

Romania's educational system is centralized, even though initiatives towards decentralization have been developed since 1997. The key responsibilities for education strategy, policy and delivery are concentrated within the Ministry of Education. Several specialized bodies provide input to the ministry, but there is no fully independent evaluation body. Locally elected authorities play very little role in the design and delivery of education policies. The Ministry of Education directly steers and monitors the implementation of national policies at the local level through the County School Inspectorates (CSIs). The county school inspectorates have mainly the following attributes: They...

- apply the policies and strategies of the Ministry of Education
- control the application of the legislation and monitor the quality of teaching-learning activities and compliance with national standards / performance indicators through school inspection;
- control, monitor and evaluate the quality of the management of educational units and institutions;
- ensure, together with the local public administration authorities, the schooling of students and monitor participation in courses during compulsory education;
- coordinate high-school admission, national assessments, and school competitions at the level of educational institutions;
- monitor the implementation of national programs initiated by the Ministry of Education;
- mediate conflict and litigation that occur between the local public administration authority and the educational units;
- present annual reports on the state of education on the territory of the county
- provide advice and assistance to educational units and institutions in the management of human resources and positions of teachers
- monitor the activities of setting up and vacating teaching positions / departments in educational units
- manage the database on qualified teachers employed in educational institutions, as well as the entire education database.

Government actions initiated and carried out in the period 1997-2004 with a view to the modernization of pre-university education and its compatibility with European education systems have materialized, among others, in the adoption and application of a set of normative acts that have ensured, in part, the transfer from the central level to that of the educational units and councils, responsibilities, and attributions regarding the content and structure of the process of education, school networks,



the financing and administration of educational institutions, and human resources policies. Decisions about decentralization were not coherent and consistent during that period. In 2005, a Strategy for Decentralization of pre-university education was developed. According to this strategy three main pillars were considered:

- Redistribution of responsibilities, decision-making authority, and public responsibility for specific educational functions, from the central level to the local level.
- Participation of non-administrative factors, of civil society representatives, in the process of decision-making (parents, NGOs, business, professional associations, social partners, etc.).
- Transfer of decision-making powers from central to local levels and / or organizational ones, to bring decisions closer to the beneficiaries of the public education service.

In this section, the following key problems will be addressed: school autonomy, self-evaluation and school development, and organizational learning.

### **3.1. The scope of the professional and organizational autonomy of schools**

Despite recent reforms designed to increase their autonomy, schools' decision-making authority continues to be limited. The 2011 Education Law reinforced school boards, which previously had a limited decision-making role (Ministry of Education, 2011).

According to 2011 Education Law, school boards (composed of school principals and their deputies; teaching and administrative staff; and representatives of the mayor, local council, and parents) acquired responsibilities previously held by CSIs, such as the recruitment of the school principal and deputy principal, and disciplinary sanctions of teaching staff. However, the changes have not been implemented in practice. Amendments to the 2011 Education Law subsequently transferred responsibility for human resource decisions back to the CSIs. This could reflect school boards' limited capacity to assume these responsibilities, taking into consideration that half of their members have no expertise or experience in education and they receive limited training about their roles. It could also reflect resistance from teachers' unions, since it would mean that some human-resource decisions could no longer be negotiated nationally, thereby reducing unions' influence (World Bank, 2011).

At local and school levels, many managerial roles have historically been politicized. It was reported to the OECD review team during interviews that inspectors and school principals are often appointed mainly based on their political affiliation or connections with local officials (Kitchen, 2017). This raises concerns about schools' independence and integrity, and the quality of leadership, while increasing instability, as key school actors may change with the government. In 2011, the Ministry of Education introduced merit-based open contests to appoint school leaders and school inspectors, but this was not implemented until 2016. Candidates for the principal position need to fulfil certain prerequisites, including being a permanent teacher with five years of seniority, having positive annual appraisal results, and didactic grade qualifications signifying teaching excellence. The new process of becoming a principal includes three stages: a written exam based on multiple choice questions which aims to assess both cognitive and school management skills; analysis of the candidate's curriculum vitae; and an interview.

Legally, schools in Romania have some autonomy over the curriculum and can choose up to one-third of the curriculum that is taught, called “optional subjects” (Ministry of Education, 2011), but in practice, this flexibility is apparently rarely used (Kitchen, 2017). Data from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey in 2015, which assessed the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students and collected information on key factors influencing student outcomes, showed that principals and teachers in Romania have among the lowest levels of responsibility for the distribution of school resources and determining school assessment policies of all countries and economies participating in PISA (OECD, 2016).

### 3.2. Mandatory tasks deployed to schools in connection with self-evaluation and school development (quality management)

Quality assurance and quality management are a systematic effort in Romania that is institutionally controlled. Therefore, institutional capacity building has been considered as equally important as the empowerment of the multiple actors who are involved, and their active participation and support. In the school education sub-system (from pre-primary education to upper secondary education inclusively), the quality-improvement-driven model is based on a support system that is based on the coordinated and coherent actions undertaken at national, regional, and local levels. Regarding the national level of the education system, the quality assurance strategy is implemented by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education.<sup>6</sup> In Romania there are two types of school evaluations: internal and external.

### 3.3. External evaluation

The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education is responsible for the external evaluation of the quality of education offered by schools. The purpose of external evaluations is mainly (i) to certify the capacity of the schools to meet quality standards, (ii) to play a role in the development of a culture of quality in school education institutions, and (iii) to recommend policies and strategies to the Ministry of National Education in order to improve the quality of education.

In Romania, external evaluation is undertaken by teachers who have gone through a procedure of recruitment, selection, and specific training and who do not carry out their current activity in the county where the evaluated school is located.

In Romania, the following types of external evaluation are legislated:

- For the establishment of new educational units, and for the development of new levels / specializations / professional qualifications, external evaluation is performed in order to authorize *provisional functioning*;
- After the end of a schooling cycle, within a maximum of two years from the graduation of the first promotion of an authorized school / authorized level / authorized specialization / authorized professional qualification, external evaluation for *accreditation* is undertaken;
- Every five years, for any accredited education provider, a *periodic external evaluation* is undertaken.

6 [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/quality-assurance-56\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/quality-assurance-56_en)

The external evaluation process is carried out in three stages:

- Collecting and analysing data about each school;
- School visits for observing educational practices and the ethos of the organization, analysis of facilities and various documents, consulting teachers and managers, and in some cases other relevant stakeholders (parents, students, local council representatives);
- Drawing up the evaluation report, validating it, and deciding on the consequences of the evaluation.

The external evaluation carried out by ARACIP does not end with recommendations for schools, this institution having only a role of appraisal; the planning and implementation of ameliorating or corrective measures is the responsibility of the educational unit, the school inspectorate, the local authorities, and the relevant ministry.

### 3.4. Internal evaluation (self-evaluation)

Internal evaluation can cover any aspect of school life in order to assess the quality of education provided by the institution itself, being a process initiated and conducted by schools with the help of its members, in some cases in collaboration with other stakeholders (students, parents, or members of the local community). In Romania, the internal evaluation covers exactly the same aspects as the external evaluation.

Since 2016, a new set of standards and performance indicators have been implemented through which both external evaluation and self-evaluation (internal evaluation) are carried out. As can be seen in the table below, a few changes have been made, which we discuss later.

**Table 2. Performance indicators for external and internal evaluation**

Categories of primary indicators (before 2016)	Categories of primary indicators (after 2016)
<b>Institutional capacity</b>	
F01. Institutional, administrative and managerial structures	F01. Institutional, administrative and managerial structures
F02. Material basis	F02. Material basis
F03. Human resources	F03. Human resources and institutional capacity to attract human resources outside of the institution and country, according to the law
<b>Educational effectiveness</b>	
F04. Content of study programs	F04. Content of study programs
F05. Learning outcomes	F05. Learning outcomes
F06. Scientific or methodological research activity	F06. Employability
F07. Financial activity at the level of the educational unit	F07. Financial activity at the level of the educational unit

Quality management	
F08. Quality assurance strategies and procedures	F08. Quality assurance strategies and procedures
F09. Procedures for initiating, monitoring and periodically reviewing programs and activities carried out	F09. Procedures for initiating, monitoring and periodically reviewing programs and activities carried out
F10. Objective and transparent evaluation procedures	F10. Objective and transparent evaluation procedures of learning outcomes, including evaluations made by students
F11. Procedures for periodic evaluation of the quality of the teaching staff	F11. Procedures for periodic evaluation of the quality of the teaching staff
F12. Accessibility of adequate learning resources	F12. Accessibility of adequate learning resources
F13. Systematically updated database on internal quality assurance	F13. Systematically updated database on internal quality assurance
F14. Transparency of information of public interest regarding study programs and, where appropriate, certificates, diplomas and qualifications offered	F14. Transparency of information of public interest regarding study programs and, where appropriate, certificates, diplomas and qualifications offered
F15. The functionality of the quality assurance structures of education, according to the law	F15. The functionality of the quality assurance structures of education, according to the law
	F16. Accuracy of reporting required, according to the law

The main changes between the two sets of standards are that the new standards:

- Focus more on employability than scientific or methodological research activity
- Include students in the evaluation procedures in order to make them more objective and transparent
- Also focus on internationalization by attracting human resources from other countries
- Focus on children's wellbeing

In Romania, internal evaluation is mandatory, being established by national legislation, starting in the school year 2006 - 2007. Schools must undertake such evaluation on an annual basis according to specific responsibilities in relation to the Commission for Evaluation and Quality Assurance – CEQA (at the school level), and the results must be made public and substantiate improvement decisions made by school management. The CEQA of each school must be composed of representatives of teachers, parents, students (starting with the lower secondary level), local government, ethnic minorities, as well as other stakeholders considered important for the school. The Commission shall design the quality improvement strategy and plan, supervise the internal evaluation activities, and produce the annual internal evaluation report. Among others, the Commission for Evaluation and Quality Assurance – CEQA has the following main tasks: It...

- Coordinates the application of institutional self-assessment (internal evaluation) procedures and activities regarding the quality of education, approved by the school management, according to the fields and criteria provided by the legislation in force;

- Prepares an annual internal evaluation report on the quality of school education. The report is made known to the beneficiaries by display / publication and is made available to the external evaluator;
- Formulates proposals for improving the quality of education, which they present to the management school.
- Cooperates with other competent agencies and bodies or similar institutions in the country and from abroad, according to the law.

Schools are free to choose the tools or documents they consider most appropriate for internal evaluation processes, having at their disposal a wide variety of virtual (platforms, online forums, and databases) and non-virtual tools (textbooks, guides, analysis, questionnaires, and interviews) for analysing and comparing own data with those of other schools. In Romania, schools can also choose the tools they consider appropriate for self-assessment processes, and they have at their disposal a special manual dedicated to internal assessment and an online application (<https://calitate.aracip.eu>) that supports this process. The approach to supporting schools made by ARACIP also includes a portfolio of materials disseminated throughout the pre-university system and training programs dedicated to teachers.

In Romania, starting with the 2014/2015 school year, schools must upload their annual internal evaluation reports on a centralized electronic platform. Previously, there was only the obligation to publish reports on the school website or in any other form (for example, by posting within the school).

### **3.5. Summary of research and evaluation results about the quality of schools (strengths, weaknesses, problems)**

Schools use the results of the evaluation in order to improve the quality of the services that are provided. How the results of the internal evaluation are used at the school level is, to a large extent, left to the decision of the school. In general, education authorities have issued guidelines on the use of internal evaluation results to improve the quality of schools. In Romania, the legislation stipulates the obligation of schools to improve the areas that in the external evaluation were assessed as unsatisfactory, and to choose, for development, other areas in which the school considers that improvements are needed.

In Romania, the results of internal evaluations are used primarily by schools to improve the quality of educational services provided, but are also exploited as a source of information and for the external evaluation of particular schools.

Even though in the last decade Romania has created the architecture of a modern school evaluation system, with an independent external evaluator and school self-evaluation, in practice evaluation is still focused on compliance, and provides little support for improvement (Kitchen, 2017).

### **3.6. The efficiency of self-evaluation-based school development procedures**

It has been observed that internal evaluations (EI) result in overestimations in relation to the current external evaluations, with the levels of indicators evaluated at the school level (i.e. self-evaluation) being higher than those obtained in the external evaluations for 37 of the 43 indicators (for four indicators the levels are very close – less than one percentage point difference, and for four the levels of indicators evaluated in EC are above the levels obtained in EI).

The introduction by the 2011 Education Law of national student assessments in Grades two, four, and six, and the roll-out of the online Integrated Information System for Education System in Romania (SIIIR) from 2013 was aimed at supporting accountability by improving the quality of data collected by schools (World Bank, 2011). However, schools currently make limited use of the data from the national assessments for diagnostic purposes, reflecting limitations in national support and local capacity. Despite improved data collection at the school level, gaps in contextual data on student background and school context limit analysis of what is influencing student learning across different groups.

In order to support schools to use the results from internal evaluation, experts from the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education elaborated a guidebook on how to plan, implement, and use the results of internal evaluation (Iosifescu, 2012). The results of the evaluation are used to fulfil the main functions of the evaluation (Iosifescu, 2012):

- **Improvement of the current activity** - the respective decisions must be appropriate, to prevent the occurrence of major dysfunctions and, at the same time, to show very clearly what went wrong and what did not in former activities;
- **Providing feedback for significant interest groups** - the results of actions must be made known to students, parents, teachers, managers, community as a whole, so that all these interest groups can judge whether the ‘investment’ that was made (not only the financial one) led to the expected impact, and whether it is worth continuing to make changes;
- **Reviewing and optimizing educational policies and strategies** at the school unit level so that they better serve the designated mission.

To better understand the process, in the latter handbook (Iosifescu, 2012) several examples are included, of which we present some.

**Example:** evaluation of beneficiaries ‘satisfaction with teachers’ activity

- **Improving the current activity:** we find with some teachers the use of a language inaccessible to most students; we thus decided to increase the number of attendances during these hours of teachers (from school management and heads of department) and to provide feedback, counselling, and (if necessary) training in the field of teacher communication.
- **Providing feedback to significant interest groups:** in the same situation (some teachers using language inaccessible to most students), we confirm the existence of the problem to parents and inform them of the measures taken.
- **Reviewing and optimizing educational policies and strategies:** the lack is found to involve the objectivity of evaluation; this finding, in conjunction with the evidence resulting from evaluations of other aspects of school life (for example, teachers’ inability to accomplish the matrix of specifications for the summative evaluation tests), can lead school management to make teacher empowerment a priority in evaluating school results. In this situation, the Teaching Staff House is informed in relation to the need to organize and accredit training programs on this topic.

## 4. POWER, RESOURCES AND QUALITY ASSURANCE: DISTRIBUTION OF ROLES AND INTER-CONNECTIONS

### 4.1. School governance and financing: structures, responsibilities, limits

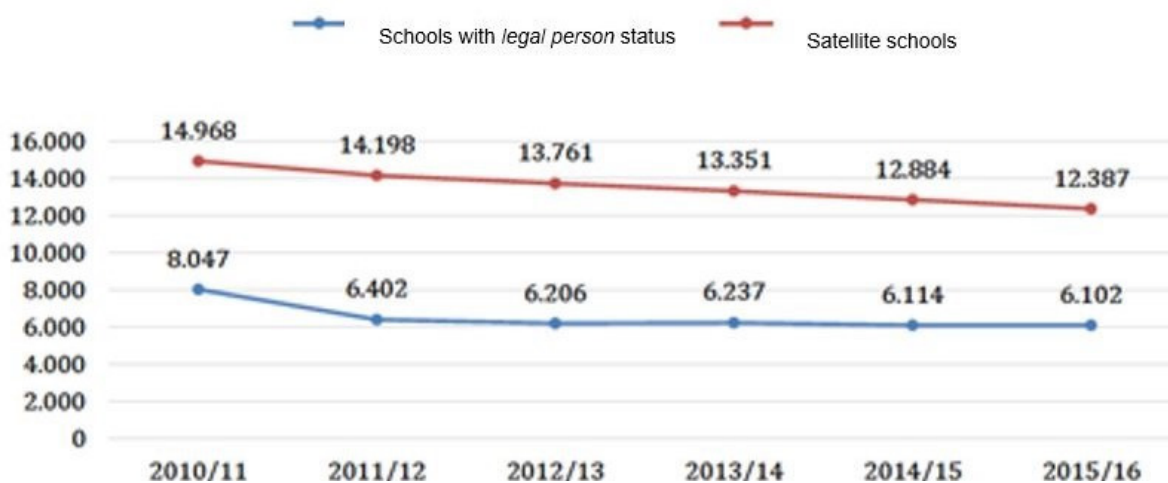
#### 4.1.1. School governance

The reality of the educational system should not be limited to the results of national or international exams. There are also other issues, more difficult to control and manage, that stay in the shadows. For instance, the accelerated decrease in the number of schools and school population.

If the reduction in the number of schools also has to do with administrative decisions to ‘fuse’ or unite schools in neighbourhoods to reach a specific number of students in order to sustain a juridical personality, the reduction of the school population is a demographic fact that should impact any future reflections on educational policy.

For instance, the number of educational units / schools decreased linearly from 2010 to 2016: a 24% decrease in number of schools with juridical personality, and a 17% decrease in the number of ‘satellite’ schools. Mainly, this process was a result of the 2010 school system optimization, but the impact on quality of education remains uncertain.

**Figure 6. Effects of school network optimization on number of school units 2010-2016**



Source: National Institute for Statistics.

Note: the above figures refer to preschool institutions and all lower secondary, upper secondary, and tertiary non-university schools, but do not include special schools (for students with special needs)

The governance of schools in Romania is basically regulated by the 2011 Education Law, which made schools publicly responsible for their performance, as embodied in the form of the school board and the principal.

Basically, school boards are responsible for the current management of schools, but also for strategic planning and development, with all its aspects: staffing, management selection, and procedures, financing, schooling etc. The board is composed of teaching staff, including principal and deputy principal(s), but is also representative of the local council and mayor. Parents also have their representatives on school boards.

School boards validate the school's self-evaluation report (the Yearly Report on Internal Evaluation), promote improvement measures, and approve the school's strategic planning documents, budget plans, and curricula.

The principal (and their deputies) ensure the executive management and administration of schools, represent schools, and manage budgets. They also develop the organisational, operational and budgetary plans for their schools, and are responsible for assessing, training, and motivating staff.

At the level of each school, we find the Methodical Commissions, which include all teachers of a particular curriculum subject who are in charge of a range of teaching and learning matters.

When it comes to the effectiveness of school governance, beyond its sizeable and sometimes complicated structure, several aspects have a great impact:

- Highly centralized and hierarchical decision-making systems remain very powerful in spite of different attempts and measures at decentralization. The power of the centre comes mainly from control over resources and management positions in schools.
- The composition of school boards, on which other stakeholders besides teachers are rather marginal, means that participants have a limited impact on decisions; sometimes it is very difficult for local authorities to participate if they have a larger number of schools in their jurisdiction.
- One of the key negative influences on school management is also underlined by the recent OECD report, which shows that '[t]he politicisation of local and school leadership roles has limited their professional development. At local and school levels, many roles have been historically politicised. It was reported to the OECD Review Team during interviews that inspectors and school principals are often appointed mainly based on their political affiliation or connections to local officials. This raises concerns about schools' independence and integrity and the quality of leadership while increasing instability, as key school actors may change with the government' (Kitchen, 2017, p.41).

The professionalization of school management will remain a target to be reached as long as there is no fair and open competition for principal positions, and the management of key resources (money and staff) is seriously hampered by the restrictions, regulations, and the influence of top levels.

*'School principals in Romania focus primarily on administration rather than pedagogical leadership and school improvement. The lack of objective criteria to guide selection, principal appraisal and conditions for dismissal to date have created instability in the role and have not ensured that principals have the skills and capacity that school leadership requires' (Kitchen, 2017, p51).*



#### **4.1.2. Financing**

Starting in 2009, Romania started to officially use standard costs in financing, leaving behind an old and conservative system based on historical costs. In this way the budgets of schools in Romania are basically built up based on multiplying standard costs per student / pre-schooler, decided every year at national level by a government decision. The standard cost is calculated for every level of education, profile, and specialization, and adjusted by a number of correction coefficients. Money is distributed at the level of every locality in line with the general directions of public finance, with technical assistance from county school inspectorates.

The main issues with this financing mechanism are the following:

- Budgetary allocations are not really based on projections from schools, and have a limited orientation regarding performance and results. This situation seriously diminishes the advantages of formula-based financing.
- The autonomy of schools to really manage their budgets is very limited due to heavy bureaucracy and regulations, as well as by a lack of flexibility in resource allocation.
- The most worrying situation concerns the situation of poor communities, regarding which no money or very limited additional amounts are invested into education. For instance, where there are schools with a large number of families at risk (socio-economically disadvantaged ones), the principles of equity are not fully respected, decreasing chances for access to good education and the continuation of studies for respective students. The most vulnerable schools in terms of financing are those with a low number of students (below 300) that are located in economically disadvantaged areas.

Schools basically function, on average, on survival budgets, which hardly cover daily needs. Investments in teacher education, for instance, are very limited, leaving aside one of the key chances to increase quality of learning and educational achievement.

As shown also in a UNICEF report (Fartușnic et. al., 2014), as long as decision makers, both at central and local levels, continue to distribute financial resources based almost exclusively on inputs, with insufficient correction mechanisms and flexibility, and with very limited direct decision-making input of schools regarding the use of their own budgets, the real needs of schools and their local environment will not be reflected in resource management.

The flexibility and autonomy available at the institutional level to operate, for instance, with a system of incentives and disincentives, is rather limited. Not being fully able to make decisions about people and money, the position of school directors is actually questionable in terms of their real management capacity. They are affected by many restrictions and control mechanisms, and have very limited autonomy and capacity to prove their managerial skills.

#### **4.2. Curricula and standards (content regulation)**

According to the 2011 Education Law, schools in Romania have some autonomy over the curriculum and can choose up to one-third of the curriculum that is taught – called ‘optional subjects’ (MNESR, 2011). However, in practice, this flexibility is apparently rarely used. Data from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey in 2015, which assessed the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students and collected information about the key factors that influence student outcomes,

showed that principals and teachers in Romania have among the lowest levels of responsibility for the distribution of school resources and determining school assessment policies of all countries and economies participating in PISA (OECD, 2016).

At this very moment, the National Core Curriculum is overloaded with many subjects at all levels, and the learning time of students has been extended towards the maximum limit. A recent piece of legislation, adopted in the ‘classical format’ of ‘fast forward’, with no supporting evidence, has raised huge challenges for the Ministry of Education: this involves reducing students’ school time / number of hours per week according to a fixed algorithm: four hours per week in primary education, five hours in lower secondary, and six hours in upper secondary (on average). This situation has led to a new example of administrative fixation, since there was no time to do policy evaluation, research, and analysis regarding where to cut the time, and how to distribute it, etc. Accordingly, in June 2020 the Ministry of Education came out with some ‘options’ for framework curricula to be used starting from next autumn, which are just different administrative allocations with no substantive evidence-based scenarios.

In general, school-based curricula and the autonomy of schools and students in relation to designing adapted / personalized learning pathways is very limited – even more limited than according to the provisions of the first National Curriculum Framework (1998). External pressures on curricula have basically been converted into less autonomy and self-determination.

Although for many years now curricula have been based on competences and learning outcomes, and include to a large extent European recommendations about key competences, practice is still dominated by a focus on content and information transmission, thus leads to overloading and maintaining students’ learning in non-productive and ineffective areas, as proved both by national and international assessments.

### **4.3. External school evaluation**

#### ***4.3.1. Quality Assurance***

Recent reforms aimed at increasing school autonomy have been matched by strengthening schools’ accountability to central governments and their local communities. Following the 2011 Education Law, school boards and principals are now publicly responsible for school quality. Accountability to local constituencies has been reinforced by creating a Commission for Quality Assurance and Evaluation in each school, and to the ministry and broader public by establishing an independent evaluator, ARACIP (see Chapter 4).

The system of quality assurance in pre-university education is a mixed concept, which tries to merge the two theoretical models: the self-assessment and self-reflection model, and the external evaluation model. Basically, schools are asked, through the QA commissions, to produce a self-assessment report, present it to the national agency, and then be inspected externally based on that report. As the capacity for external evaluation and school inspection is rather limited, schools enjoy quite significant autonomy to decide about what areas or standards to focus their own development on as a result of the analysis. The main issue here is that development priorities are rarely correlated with their budgetary allocations or external validations of progress made.

### ***4.3.2. Student assessment***

The introduction by the 2011 Education Law of national student assessments in Grades two, four, and six, and the roll-out of the online Integrated Information System for Education in Romania (SIIR) from 2013 was aimed at supporting accountability by improving the quality of data collected by schools (World Bank, 2011).

As also shown in the OECD Review (2017), two high-stakes examinations in Grades eight and twelve strongly influence teaching and learning, encouraging ‘teaching to the test’ across a limited range of domains and competencies. The influential role of external examinations also limits the space available for teachers to exercise and develop confidence in their own professional judgement, which is central to developing their ability to reliably assess student learning and to practise formative assessment to help students to progress.

Unfortunately, given the exaggerated importance of these exams for the future of student careers, they become a source of continuing pressure and encourage parallel tutoring systems to overcome the insufficient quality of school learning, but also to increase the competitiveness of students on these tests. This is one of the major ethical issues with the system, especially for the end of lower secondary education, where results at the national examination basically decide the quality of high school / vocational school students can enter. One of the aspects of concern related to the situation created by these tests is students’ well-being – and even teachers’ well-being – as they can hardly find ways to reasonably deal with this dominant logic.

In any case, the current design and administration of assessment is not consistent with this purpose, and its ability to provide reliable data for system monitoring is hindered by the lack of standardised marking (see also Chapter 2).

Selection in secondary education through high-stakes examinations reflects the ingrained culture of academic competition in Romania. High-stakes examinations put pressure on teachers to ‘teach to the test’, which limits students’ learning opportunities and narrows the curriculum (OECD, 2013). It also encourages teachers to focus on the top-performing students, with little incentive to address the needs of those who might be struggling to progress. The success of teachers and schools in Romania is also determined, to a large extent, by the achievements of high performers, while the preparation of students for academic competitions (‘Olympiads’), and examination results are part of the criteria used in the teacher appraisal process (Kitchen et al., 2017, p.47). Also, according to Kitchen et al. (2017, p.168), in Romania:

- There is a lack of a shared definition of school quality for guiding evaluation and improvement efforts;
- The responsibility for external evaluation is fragmented, which means that schools in Romania are subject to multiple evaluations;
- There is a lack of feedback, particularly for struggling schools, which may not receive the feedback they need to improve;
- School self-evaluation has not taken root as a meaningful developmental process, in part because of limited capacity and understanding, but also because of schools’ weak autonomy in a system that remains highly centralised and focused on control.

#### 4.4. Information systems

When it comes to information and data management in education, the vicious circle of supply and demand still affects the related processes: ‘we don’t produce data as nobody wants it / uses it’; ‘we don’t use data as there is not enough good quality and relevant data available to us’. Leaving the metaphor behind, although it expresses the general situation quite well, some significant initiatives have started to change and are still changing this volatile environment: for example, the SIIR (Integrated Information System for Education in Romania).

SIIR provides complete management services for the activities of the pre-university education system from an operational, technical, administrative, and strategic point of view. SIIR addresses both the needs of users at the central level (especially related to decision making based on the analysis of performance indicators, but also to ensuring the transparency of investment processes, the management of human resources, their composition and operation) and the needs identified at local level (management of activities, processes, and flows at the level of the educational unit).

SIIR is a platform oriented towards the provision of services, thus allowing communication with existing applications, but also the provision of specific extensions designed to cover the shortcomings identified in existing systems. The system is composed of different modules that respond to various needs of the users mentioned before:

- **Material Resources module:** This module for managing the material resources in educational units is an important component of the system, having a major impact on reporting activity. The module allows for the collection and management of complete and relevant data related to the material resources and facilities of educational institutions.
- **Kindergarten Registration Module:** This module allows for the collection of data necessary for the enrolment process in preschool education (provided through enrolment applications), as well as the evaluation of applications submitted and re-enrolment.
- **Management of educational institutions Module:** This model is used to manage the structure and organizational details of educational units and allows for the collection and administration of all details and attributes of school units, but also of the characteristics that define the exact context of their operation (management of study formations, management of extracurricular activities, and management of partners and consortia).
- **Human Resources Module:** This module allows for the collection of complete and relevant data about teaching staff, teaching assistants, and non-teaching staff in schools.
- **‘Statistical data’ module:** The module manages statistical data at the level of educational units, at the level of the County School Inspectorates (ISJ), and at the national level (ministry). Statistical data are collected at the level of educational units, while the County School Inspectorates (ISJ) can view and modify the data collected by the units. The latter can also view the outputs of all the statistical data in the county of residence of representatives.
- **Student management module:** This module is a key component because students are the main addressees of the educational offers provided by the educational units. In this module the complete identification data of students can be collected and managed, as well as the management of their schooling from enrolment in the unit, registration in a study group, extracurricular activity, and transition from one educational cycle to the next.

- **Curriculum module:** This module manages information regarding the offer of the educational units, as well as their approval and management process at the national level. The draft schooling plan includes information about the structure that each school can manage: levels, profiles, areas, specializations, and classes. In order to be able to draw up the schooling plan, it is mandatory that the school network be completed for the next school year. This is completed at the level of the educational unit (during the period communicated by the County School Inspectorate, and the School Inspectorate of the Municipality of Bucharest) and can be accessed at county and national level through the application interface.
- **School network module:** This module manages the school network of educational units and deals with the collection of characteristics that allow the identification of each unit. The totality of the educational units and the hierarchical relations that are established between them constitute the national school network. Information regarding the educational units is collected at the level of the County School Inspectorates (ISJ) and the School Inspectorate of the Municipality of Bucharest (ISMB). The importance of the School Network module is significant, and justified by the fact that any activity in the system must be assigned to the educational unit in which it occurred, but also due to the fact that the possession of SIIIR data by network units dictates the rules of visibility for each of the users (a school will have access to its own data, an ISJ user will have access to all the data at a rounded unit level, etc.).

Although at the initial stage information in SIIIR started to be used for policy analyses and reports, it also started being made compatible with databases in higher education and for migrating the data of students across levels, with a significant impact on reducing bureaucracy and facilitating transparency.

#### **4.5. Accountability system: teachers, school managers and county inspectors**

A dedicated methodology is in place and regulates the evaluation of the work of teachers and staff from school units, determining the rules for performance appraisal and individual application of evaluation criteria and assessment tools.

Evaluating the activity of teaching staff is organized in the following stages:

- a) Self-evaluation work undertaken by each employee, based on self-assessment forms and a report justifying the self-assessment score.
- b) Evaluation of teachers is completed at the methodical commission along with an objective evaluation of the functional compartment – a score given by all the committee members to each person who is assessed.
- c) The final evaluation of the work of teachers is done by the board of directors of the unit / educational institution.

The system as it is quite clearly formalized and organized, but it does not deliver or serve its purpose. The approach of managing human resource performance in schools remains formally egalitarian, with very limited space for incentives / disincentives. The results of the evaluation are always very positive, as there are no clear key performance indicators and associated consequences for high / low performance.

The institutional accountability of schools and school management is seriously hampered by excessive politicization, which often affects the lowest level of decision making. In parallel, as there

are limited support mechanisms for school improvement, but many external pressures for high performance (from communities, but also from school inspectorates, who are in competition among counties for their place in national rankings), schools are somehow left alone to find their way within a dense network of pressures, requirements, and obligations, while suffering from limited capacity and poor external support. In an overregulated and highly centralized system, schools and teachers mainly passively fulfil requirements, but there is a very high level of frustration due to this situation.

In a somehow paradoxical way, given the fact that the over-regulated system has poor mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation, quite a significant number of schools have managed to find their way around the system, proving their high capacity to adapt to challenges, to build a solid reputation in their communities, and to create friendly environments for teaching and learning. This however, is mainly a result of local circumstances, and especially local dedicated teams of professionals.

Giving more autonomy to schools, developing in parallel a transparent and effective accountability system, professionalizing school management, and empowering the participation of stakeholders could lead to better school management and adapted school improvement plans – and there are, as mentioned, many examples of success at this. Nevertheless, external support for institutional development needs serious consolidation, especially when it comes to the role of the school inspectorates and local public authorities.

Being bombed with requirements and expectations from the top (ministry) to the bottom (schools, via county inspectorates) has created a vicious climate based on reciprocal blaming and a lack of trust. The main responsibility here rests with the school inspectorates, which are almost completely politicized, with poor competence and capacity: they represent a continuing source of instability, abuse of power, and disregard for the culturally sound roles of providing support, improvement, counselling, and guidance to schools and teachers. As deconcentrated units of the Ministry of Education, they are more concerned about sustaining a good reputation in front of their superiors than professionally assisting their school networks to improve and develop. In particular, school inspectorates, although they enjoy lots of power and influence, are subject to very limited, almost non-existent accountability mechanisms, especially in relation to their own beneficiaries.

## CONCLUSIONS

1. When it comes to the governance of education in Romania from the perspective of capacity to adapt to external (future) challenges, all challenges have their relevance, but specific weight should clearly be placed on the certain discrepancy between social changes over recent years, and the agility of educational institutions to keep pace with these changes – especially their capacity to learn, be self-reflective, and adopt a proactive orientation towards future evolution instead of managing current crises and reacting to different types of pressure. There are at least two dimensions of the external environment that particularly burden the situation of the education system: the low level of achievement of students in most areas (see the international and national assessments of all kinds) and large disparities and inequalities inside the system (especially urban – rural, but also all others related to social / economic status, residence, access to resources, etc.). Although years-old challenges, these two structural challenges

remain poorly addressed, part of the cause being the very limited analysis and research that has been done to deepen the understanding of causes, routes, effects, and solutions. The low level of achievement of students and large disparities among schools and students make the system very diverse and difficult to effectively govern, especially when key decisions are still centralized, and the approach is more or less ‘one size fits all’.

2. Limited autonomy leads to poor adaptability and no consistent commitment to accountability mechanisms. Although successive regulations have in theory given more power and responsibility to schools, the fragmented and inconsistent approach has left room for keeping up ‘old practices’ in an apparently new system. School management is not professionalized, school boards are rather formal and ‘decorative’ in terms of making decisions, and the empowerment of school as an autonomous and learning organization is still a target to be reached.

3. Although democratic values and a democratic climate are still supported by central governance and their regulatory initiatives, day-to-day practice in schools and in school inspectorates has been seriously damaged by excessive politicization – a ‘chronic disease’ that has resulted mainly from political instability and tension, but which has successively been raised to an unacceptable level. This situation has diminished trust in educational institutions and limited the interest and participation of stakeholders. While the system may look good from outside, when you analyse the institutional framework and the formal arrangements, the culture and climate of schools and schooling tell a different story. Living in two worlds at the same time allows for a significant difference between ‘what we say, and how we design it’ and ‘what we do, and how we transfer it into practice’.

4. The quality of the governance process itself, mainly at central and intermediate levels (school inspectorates), has not really manage to improve over recent years. The process of policy making, quite well established during the period of pre-accession and early accession to the EU (2004-2008), has gradually been transformed into an administrative and regulatory ‘industry’ that over-burdens the system with a huge bureaucratic network of procedures and laws that are modified all the time. The central governance of education has weakened professional agencies and remains somehow suspended from the real life of schools, since the inspectorates are there merely as a missing link, not as a meeting point. The lack of balance between power and expertise has seriously affected the quality of governance and its capacity to propose a comprehensive vision-based project for educational transformation for the future.

Education in Romania thus remains in a permanent stage of transition, sometimes making significant progress and sometimes qualitative leaps, but at the same time failing to systematically build an effective governance mechanism that would ensure the stability and agility of a system exposed to so many external challenges and internal problems and pressures. Thirty years after the collapse of communism, and looking ahead to evolution in demography, technology, climate, international relations, internationalizations, cultural transformations and, more recently, worldwide crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, we may say that Romanian education is still ‘caught in the middle’ between solid reforms and modernization initiatives and the recurrence of conservative practices, a lack of vision, and coherency and structural problems that are superficially addressed or even neglected. One of the requirements for the future is serious analysis and reflection on the governance model itself: processes, layers, responsibilities, power relations, and professional approaches. This could be a starting point for reconsidering current and future challenges, and being more aware of the profound transformations of functions, not only structures.

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