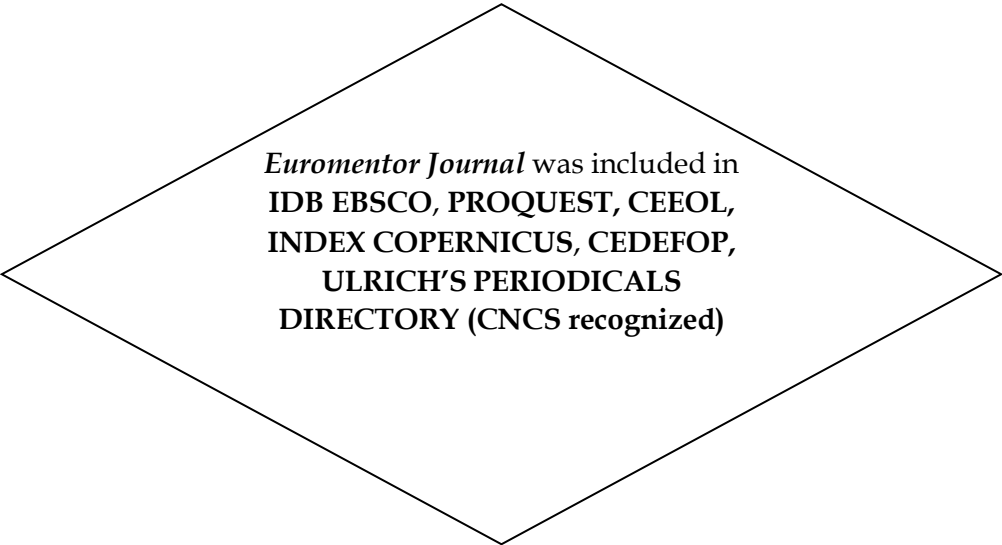


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LAUDATIO

On the occasion of the 35th anniversary of “Dimitrie Cantemir” Christian University

At the beginning of the new academic year 2025-2026, our academic community is experiencing a moment of special celebration: the 35th anniversary of the existence of “Dimitrie Cantemir” Christian University. Three and a half decades of work, perseverance, and faith in the ideal of education represent not only a moment of jubilation, but also proof of a robust construction that has grown alongside post-December Romania and the transformations of European society. “Dimitrie Cantemir” Christian University has proven over time to be an exceptional paideutic project, created by two brilliant minds, endowed with much courage and practical wisdom. Thus, the late Professor Dr. MOMCILO LUBURICI founded this institution in 1990, being the first rector and president, together with Professor Dr. Adriana Corina Dumitrescu, the current president of the University. We owe them the vision to establish a private university during a time of great turmoil, in a context where the idea of a private university seemed almost impossible. The founders had the strength to open new paths during a time of uncertainty and social reconstruction. They set in motion the legal process of establishment but also the deep moral and intellectual foundations of the university. Through dedication and vision, they created a framework in which teachers and students could build together a sustainable academic community. Without their enthusiasm, spirit of sacrifice, and faith in the power of education, this project would not have taken shape. This is not an apologetic exercise, but rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's: recognizing the merits of those who laid the foundations of this institution, which has now become a landmark of Romanian education. Without the much-regretted Professor Dr. MOMCILO LUBURICI and without Professor Dr. CORINA DUMITRESCU, “Dimitrie Cantemir” Christian University would not have been possible. Founded with the generous vision of combining Romanian cultural tradition with European and universal values, DCCU has established itself over the years as one of the first private universities in the country. It has managed to provide a solid and credible alternative in higher education, placing not only the transmission of knowledge at its core, but also the building of character. Through its faculties - Law and Administrative

Sciences, Foreign Languages and Literatures, Business Faculty, Faculty of Educational Sciences - and through the work of hundreds of dedicated professors, the university has created a true academic community, with graduates integrated into the professional, cultural, and civic life of the country. Their merit is complemented by professors convinced that authentic education is not limited to the transmission of information, but is built on values, such as **integrity, responsibility, freedom, and faith.**

Today we celebrate not only a jubilee, but also the life of an academic community, the spirit that has shaped and given meaning to generations of students. "Dimitrie Cantemir" Christian University has grown like a cathedral of the spirit, built from faith, science, and love of truth. What has been built in 35 years is measured not just in diplomas, but especially in characters, destinies, and communities. During this time, DCCU has shown that modernity and tradition do not exclude each other, but can fertilize one another. Faithful to classical academic values - respect for culture, for science, for the holistic education of the young - the university has simultaneously cultivated openness to innovation and continuous adaptation to the demands of society. Quality teaching, diversified programs, and emphasis on interdisciplinarity have made the university a space for the training and affirmation of new generations. One of the strong pillars of the institution's development has been and remains internationalization. Institutional partnerships with prestigious universities from Europe, as well as from the USA and Asia, have opened the doors to academic exchanges and Erasmus mobilities. At the same time, the awarding of Doctor Honoris Causa titles to top personalities and involvement in international projects have strengthened the visibility and credibility of DCCU. International scientific research has itself become the rationale for recognition and visibility through two academic journals - COGITO and EUROMENTOR - genuine platforms for international scientific dialogue, bringing together professors, and researchers, from around the world, as well as Romania, on their pages. These publications not only convey ideas but also amplify the university's image in the global academic environment, confirming its vocation as a center of excellence. In recent years, DCCU has embarked on the path of becoming a SMART UNIVERSITY, exploring the possibilities offered by digitization, new educational technologies, and the integration of artificial intelligence into teaching, research, and academic administration processes. This innovation-oriented approach places the university among institutions that insightfully confront the challenges of the present and transform them into opportunities for

the future. On the occasion of its 35th anniversary, “Dimitrie Cantemir” Christian University reaffirms its place in the Romanian and European academic landscape as a modern institution, founded on solid values and open to innovation. The anniversary is not only an opportunity to recall the tradition and express gratitude towards its founders, but also a moment for reflection on the future. The challenges of the digital age, the transformations brought by artificial intelligence and globalization call upon the university to continue its adaptation process and to strengthen its role as a Smart University, capable of combining humanistic tradition with emerging technologies, for the benefit of students, professors, and the community. Through these achievements, DCCU asserts itself as an academic space where the founding tradition organically intertwines with openness to universality and integration into the circuit of European and global values. Today, “Dimitrie Cantemir” Christian University is not only a landmark of private education in Romania, but also a credible partner in the international dialogue of knowledge. Surely, the coming years will confirm its vocation to form not only competent specialists but also moral personalities, driven by critical spirit and civic responsibility. The legacy of the founders is alive and fruitful, and the future of the university is marked by a two-fold fidelity: to tradition and to the mission of innovating in education and research.

At 35 years old, DCCU shows us that the true strength of a university does not lie in its age but in its ability to reinvent itself. In the name of tradition and innovation, of faith and science, we express today a single word: gratitude. And a single wish: MANY HAPPY RETURNS OF THE DAY, CANTEMIRIAN ALMA MATER!

Professor Ph.D. habil Gabriela Pohoată
Editor-in-chief COGITO & EUROMENTOR

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A SERVANT ON A MISSION¹

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Abstract: *We are celebrating today a crossroad of several important events, whether we speak about Christian University Dimitrie Cantemir, with 35th anniversary of its foundation or the Orthodox Romanian Church's anniversary of 140th from the autocephaly, 100th of Patriarchy and consecration of National Cathedral and even the year of the memoir of the spiritual fathers of the XXs century. The lights shed on the personality of His All Holiness, Bartholomew, the Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch, the spiritual leader of 300 million Orthodox Christians worldwide. The lack of outcomes at interreligious dialogue in the past is now fulfilled by his approach, which builds a communication tower among people based not on a common religion or an ecumenical dialogue, but on the existential and daily realities of every person. Not a Babel Tower which emphasized the anthropocentrism but an opposite one, from the common to particular, from the theory to practice, from the man and environment to God. It is valuable to bring into dialogue what gathers us together, rather than what separates and differentiates us.*

Keywords: *Orthodox Christianity, Dimitrie Cantemir, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, dialogue, spirituality, continuity, Christian University Dimitrie Cantemir, commemoration.*

Foreword

Researching history is always a challenging endeavor, given the available sources, the ways in which we interpret them, and the constant temptation to impose our own preconceptions on the past. It is equally difficult to portray a personality, whether one seeks to highlight a prominent figure in history, culture, and civilization – such as king Dimitrie Cantemir, the Moldavian ruler who became an emblematic figure

¹ The quotation belongs to Saint Barsanuphius of Gaza (6th century). It reflects the humility and character of the pastoral-missionary, cultural-educational and social-philanthropic work of His All Holiness, Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew, according to His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Encountering the Mystery. Understanding Orthodox Christianity Today*, New York: The Doubleday Broadway Publishing Group, 2008, p. 24.

* Missionary priest at the chapel *Sfântul Dimitrie cel Nou din Basarabi, Dimitrie Cantemir Christian University* (since Dec. 2021).

of European culture and promoter of Enlightenment values, and who is also the patron of this university – or to offer, in words that seem insufficient, a tribute to the personality and work of His All Holiness Bartholomew, Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch. This year, however, as we celebrate the 35th anniversary of the founding of this distinguished university, together with the 140th anniversary of the autocephaly of the Romanian Orthodox Church and the centenary of the Patriarchate – an occasion also marked by the consecration of the **National Cathedral**, a millennial dream of our nation – it becomes even more difficult to find adequate words. And this difficulty does not stem from incapacity, for we thank God that we are able to witness such memorable events, but rather from the limits of language when faced with action, as Saint Cleopas, in his exhortations full of faith and love, reminds us: *Be silent, let your deeds speak for you!*²

Nevertheless, on this occasion of awarding the title of *Doctor Honoris Causa* of Dimitrie Cantemir Christian University to His All Holiness, Bartholomew, Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch, I feel compelled to speak. This award is not merely a formal gesture; it represents the long-cherished dream of the founding president, Professor PhD. **Corina Adriana Dumitrescu**, who, together with the late founding president, Professor PhD. **Momcilo Luburici**, has faithfully upheld the Christian values of this university – not only in words, but in practice. Indeed, even the very name of our university reflects its Christian heritage. To embrace this heritage is to follow the path of the Holy Fathers of the Church, who, through unity and service, call us to bear witness to Orthodoxy. Among the many distinguished personalities who have previously received this honor from our institution, I wish to recall Patriarch **Teoctist** Arăpașu and His Beatitude **Daniel**³, *Archbishop of*

² Saints such as Cleopas and Paisios of Sihla are among the sixteen saints of the Romanian Orthodox Church who were officially canonized in 2025, the year marking the 100th anniversary of the Patriarchate and dedicated as a commemorative year of the Romanian spiritual fathers and confessors of the 20th century. Moreover, Saint Cleopas of Sihăstria was the spiritual father of His Beatitude, Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, just as Father Asterios was the spiritual father of His All Holiness Bartholomew, Ecumenical Patriarch.

³ The pastoral-missionary, cultural-educational and social-philanthropic activity of His Beatitude Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, is so vast and rich that it is practically impossible to describe in full. This is because his work began in his youth and continued during his ministry as Metropolitan of Moldavia, with initiatives such as TV and Radio Trinitas, the newspaper Lumina and many other projects. Since

Bucharest, Metropolitan of Wallachia and Dobrogea, Locum tenens of the Throne of Caesarea in Cappadocia and Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church. It is only natural, therefore, that today, in the spirit of brotherhood and unity among our Churches, His All Holiness, **Bartholomew**, *Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome and Ecumenical Patriarch*, should be recognized with this award in acknowledgment of his monumental work.

While I was a student at the Orthodox Faculty of Theology, in Bucharest, during the 1990s, I remember vividly the teaching of the famous professor Emilian Popescu and his course on *The History and Spirituality of Byzance*. One episode moved me deeply. When he lectured on the fall of Constantinople, on the 29th of May 1453, the eyes of our professor were tear-stained. At that time, perhaps we did not fully grasp the significance of his emotion. Yet he never despair – and neither should we – for, as the great academician and historian Nicolae Iorga explained in his work, *Byzance after Byzance*⁴, this apparent catastrophe gave, for nations, rise to a renewed affirmation of roots and Byzantine identity, a kind of spiritual awakening and solidarity in common faith. In spite of this painful territorial loss, we can affirm, together with Iorga, that:

*In this great city, with its many rival factions that could easily have turned against one another, without the guiding hand of the peace-keeping monarch – such as the emperors of true Rome – there has remained a district that has preserved one of the strongest authorities ever to shape the human spirit throughout history: the Ecumenical Patriarchy of the Orthodox Church*⁵. Across the centuries, it has stood as the highest ecclesial authority, safeguarding the faith with rigor and fidelity, while maintaining a delicate diplomacy in its relations with Muslim rulers.

Dimitrie Cantemir – Bridge between East and West

The entire life of the scholar-king Dimitrie Cantemir reflects the instability and fragile relations between the Ottoman Empire and foreign

becoming the sixth Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, this work has expanded and developed to such an extent that today we are witness to the fulfillment of a national dream: the construction of the National Cathedral. During his patriarchate, cooperation between the Romanian Orthodox Church and various social institutions – such as hospitals, universities, schools, the army, and prisons – has grown significantly. Through his initiatives, the Church today enjoys both material and spiritual prosperity. Moreover, His Beatitude's efforts extend beyond national borders, encompassing dialogue with other Orthodox Churches as well as broader inter-Christian relations.

⁴ Translation from Nicolae Iorga, Bucharest: Encyclopedical Publishing House, 1972.

⁵ Cited work, p. 8.

princes. Sent by his father, the king Constantin Cantemir, to Constantinople as a hostage at the Sultan's court between 1688 and 1691, he studied at the Orthodox Patriarchal University, where he learned Greek, Latin and Slavonic, as well as Turkish under the guidance of Isaad Efendi. He also studied Persian and Arabic, together with mathematics, topography, and geography⁶. Through this broad education and his later writings, Cantemir created a true symbiosis between East and West. His foremost priority remained the love of his people and their faith. Having been introduced to the courtly protocol of those years learned at school of that protocol at the High Court, Cantemir examined the maps of Europe and Asia and sensed that the great empire had already begun its decline, having lost important strategic positions. Amid the shifting geopolitical realities of the early 18th century – when Europe's spiritual unity was struggling to survive after repeated confrontations between Christianity and Islam – Cantemir vividly illustrated a genesis of a national conscience, laying the foundation for the modern Romanian nation. As some scholars have observed, Dimitrie Cantemir may have lost with the sword, but he triumphed with the pen⁷.

Cantemir's unique destiny, marked by the drama of exile far from his homeland – a true *Babylonian captivity* – became the crucible in which his personality was forged, producing intellectual lights and reverberations that shone across the European cultural horizon.

Highly esteemed by his contemporaries, Dimitrie Cantemir was the first Romanian to become a member of a major scholarly academy in Western Europe. Over time, historians, writers, and literary critics alike have studied his life and works, recognizing him as both king and scholar. His singular destiny – shaped by exile and enriched by his international experience – remains unparalleled. Perhaps the most evocative portrait of this Moldavian ruler was drawn by George Călinescu, who, in his monumental "History of Romanian Literature", described Cantemir as a European scholar, Moldavian voivode, Berlin academician, Moscow prince and our Lorenzo de Medici⁸.

⁶ Translation from Pr. Prof. univ. dr. Vasile Nechita și Arhid. Lect. univ. dr. Vasile M. Demciuc, *Dimitrie Cantemir – Moldavian king and Prince of Romanian Science*, Suceava: Crimca Publishing House, 2023, p.6.

⁷ Ibidem, pp. 6-7.

⁸ Translation from Prof. Dr. Dorin Stănescu, *The exile of a scholar, Dimitrie Cantemir (1711-1723)*, published in Lumina the newspaper of Romanian Orthodox Patriarchy,

<https://ziarullumina.ro/actualitate-religioasa/an-omagial/exilul-unui-carturar-dimitrie-cantemir-1711-1723-162753.html>.

The Ecumenical Patriarch – from the dialogue of the Orthodox Churches to the dialogue between God, the man and the environment

Some 217 years after the death of Prince Dimitrie Cantemir, another Dimitrie was born on the island Imbros, (present – day Gökçeada, Turkey), at the crossroads of the winds. This child would one day become Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. Dimitrios Archandonis grew up in the village of Saints Theodores, today known as Eleonas, *Village of the Olive Trees*. Although elected on the October 22, 1991, as the 270th Ecumenical Patriarch, he never forgot his birthplace. He restored the chapel of Eleonas, where today the local priest – son of Asterios, the very priest who nurtured and guided him in the love of Christ and His Church – serves the community. *To this day, an icon of the saint (Saint Marina n.n.) in his bedroom reminds Patriarch Bartholomew of his childhood years; he also preserves some soil taken from that chapel, which his family would tend*⁹.

In order to complete *his elementary studies in his native village of Saints Theodores, Demetrios traveled to the city of Constantinople (today, Istanbul), where he attended the junior high school of the Zographeion Lyceum. He returned to Imvros for the first years of his secondary education, daily walking five kilometers each way to the closest town of Panagia...His senior secondary education and seminary formation took place at the prestigious Patriarchal Theological School of Halki*¹⁰.

The Turkish authorities closed this prestigious school in 1971. Since then, *it is Bartholomew's dream and desire to reopen the Patriarchal Theological School. He persistently underlines the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne and Turkey's obligation both to recognize the legal status of the Patriarchate as being ecumenical in scope and nature and to respect its right to educate its clergy and leaders*¹¹.

Between 1961 and 1969, Demetrios pursued his studies in Western Europe, following in the footsteps of Cantemir before him. He enrolled at the Pontifical Oriental Institute of the Gregorian University in Rome, where he studied in Italian, Latin, and French, and became acquainted with the thought of the great Catholic theologians of the 20th century, such as Jean Danielou (1905-1974), Henri de Lubac (1896-1991), Yves Congar (1904-1995), Karl Rahner (1904-1984) and Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope

⁹ His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, *Encountering the Mystery. Understanding Orthodox Christianity Today*, New York: The Doubleday Broadway Publishing Group, 2008, p. 25.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 26.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 27.

Benedict XVI). During those years in Rome, he participated – for the first time in the history of Orthodox – Catholic relations – in the sessions of the Second Vatican Council, known as the Vatican II (1962-1965). Also, in Rome, Bartholomew completed his doctoral dissertation, *“The Codification of the Holy Canons and the Canonical Constitution of the Orthodox Church”*, subsequently published in 1970 by the Patriarchal Institute for Patristic Studies in Thessaloniki, Greece¹². In addition, he studied psychology and philosophy at the University of Athens, and he fulfilled his compulsory military service as an officer in the Turkish Army. As a Turkish citizen, this aspect of his background would later prove to be an advantage in fostering dialogue between the Orthodox Church and Islam.

After completing his studies, Bartholomew returned to Constantinople, where, he served as assistant dean at the Kalki Theological School from 1968 to 1972. That year he was appointed personal secretary to Ecumenical Patriarch Dimitrios I (1914-1991), a role in which he remained faithfully at his side¹³. In 1973, Bartholomew was elected Metropolitan of Philadelphia, later becoming head of the Patriarchal Chancellery, a position he held until in 1990, when he was elected Metropolitan of Chalcedon.

Upon the death of his predecessor in 1991, Bartholomew was unanimously elected Ecumenical Patriarch at the age of fifty-one, being solemnly enthroned on November 2, 1991. Since then, His All Holiness continued and expanded the work and initiatives begun by his predecessors.

His tenure has been characterized by inter-Orthodox cooperation, by inter-Christian and interreligious dialogue, as well as by formal trips to other Orthodox countries¹⁴, seldom previously visited. He has exchanged official visits and

¹² Ibid., p. 28.

¹³ Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁴ His All Holiness, Bartholomew has been a distinguished and constant guest of our country. His first visit took place between **August 12-18, 1993**. The second visit occurred between **October 12 and November 1, 1995**, on the occasion of the celebrations marking the 110 years of autocephaly of our Church and the 70th anniversary of Patriarchate. The third visit was held between **September 20-28, 1997**, on the occasion of the International Symposium, *Black Sea in the Crisis*. The fourth visit took place between **October 11-16, 1997**, in Moldavia, when he received the title of Doctor Honoris Causa from the University of Iași. The fifth visit was between **October 26-28, 1999**, on the occasion of the International Ecological Symposium *The Danube – The River if Life*. On this occasion, the Ecumenical Patriarch also participated in the celebration of the Saint Demetrios the New of Basarabi, the patron of Bucharest. In three speeches delivered at that time, His All

accepted numerous invitations with ecclesiastical and state dignitaries. In his home city of Constantinople, Patriarch Bartholomew has restored all of the existing churches, monasteries, pilgrim sites, and charitable centers, which had formerly been either abandoned or dilapidated.

Patriarch Bartholomew is as comfortable preaching about the spiritual legacy of the Orthodox Church as he is promoting sociopolitical issues of his immediate cultural environment and praying for respect toward Islam or for global peace. He has traveled more widely than any other Orthodox Patriarch in history; he has also conducted liturgical services in historically significant places in Asia Minor, such as Cappadocia and Pergamon, where acts of worship would have been unthinkable even twenty-five years ago. He has also received sympathetic, albeit sometimes

Holiness emphasized three key aspects: the involvement of youth in the life of the Church, the role of the Orthodox Church in Europe, and the place and importance of theology in academic scholarship. During this visit, the Patriarch received the title of *Doctor Honoris Causa* from the University of Bucharest, and the President of Romania awarded him the National Order *Steaua României* (*The Romanian Cross*). Between **October 10-14, 2000**, His All Holiness visited Romania once more, on the occasion of the Feast of Saint Parascheva in Iași, where he was named Honorary Citizen of the city and received receiving the title of *Doctor Honoris Causa* from both the Romanian Academy and University of Galați. The seventh visit occurred between **October 15-21, 2004**, during the commemoration of 500 years since the passing to God of Saint Stephen the Great. On this occasion, His All Holiness was elected an Honorary Member of the Romanian Academy and received the title of *Doctor Honoris Causa* from Babeș Bolyai University of Cluj and from Ovidius University of Constanța. Between **March 4-7, 2005**, the Ecumenical Patriarch participated in the commemoration of 120 years since the granting of autocephaly and 80 years since the establishment of the Patriarchate. On **August 3, 2007** His All Holiness presided over the funeral service of the late Patriarch Teoctist of Romania. Subsequently, between **August 26-29, 2010**, His All Holiness, together with His Beatitude, Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, took part in the solemn session of the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church, as a reciprocal response to Patriarch Daniel's visit to Constantinople (**May 27 - June 2, 2009**). The most significant visit occurred in Bucharest in the autumn of **2018**, when His All Holiness, Bartholomew, Ecumenical Patriarch, together with His Beatitude, Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, officiated the blessing and consecration of the new National Cathedral. For further details, see: Gheorghe Anghel, *The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew celebrates 30 years since his enthronement*, published by the **Basilica** Press Center of the Romanian Patriarchate, <https://basilica.ro/patriarhul-ecumenic-bartolomeu-aniverseaza-30-de-ani-de-la-intronizare/>; Pr. Cornel Enache, *Visits of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to Romania*, published in the daily newspaper **Lumina** of the Romanian Patriarchy; <https://ziarullumina.ro/actualitate-religioasa/stiri/vizitele-patriarhului-ecumenic-bartolomeu-in-romania-139381.html>; pentru detalii a se consulta site-ul oficial al Patriarhiei Române, <https://arhiva.patriarhia.ro/un-patriarh-misionar-semnificativ-vizitelor-patriarhului-ecumenic-bartolomeu-in-romania-7562.html>).

*controversial, attention in the Turkish media and been invited to offer public lectures in Turkish on Christian-Muslim relations*¹⁵. His ecumenical mission and vocation, as Patriarch of all Orthodoxy are embodied not only in the resumption and advancement of dialogues among Christian Churches – particularly within the framework of Ecumenical Council of the Churches – but also in his practical commitment to preserve the environment¹⁶.

*He has worked to advance reconciliation among Catholic, Muslim, and Orthodox communities, such as in the former Yugoslavia, and is supportive of peace-building measures to defuse global conflict in the Balkans and ecclesiastical politics in Ukraine. He has also presided over the restoration of the Autocephalous Church of Albania and the Autonomous Church of Estonia, proving a constant source of spiritual and moral support to those traditionally Orthodox countries emerging from decades of wide-scale religious persecution behind the Iron Curtain*¹⁷.

Grounded in His All Holiness's view of the human person as a mystery endowed with freedom, relationality and integrity, his ministry has centered on promoting peace on earth, combating racism and all forms of discrimination, and resisting fundamentalism. These commitments are closely linked with his efforts to protect and preserve the natural environment¹⁸.

Yet perhaps the most significant role of the Ecumenical Patriarch is that of *bridge builder*¹⁹. Beyond the many conferences, symposia, addresses, and visits carried out in the ecumenical spirit, His All Holiness does not limit himself to theory. Beginning with the communion of the Orthodox Churches, he actively promotes continued dialogue with other Christian denominations and, importantly, with those outside Christianity as well. His efforts also extend to political and social authorities worldwide, addressing issues such as faith, human rights, and environmental protection²⁰.

The first of these bridges is one that reaches out to the various Orthodox churches...The second bridge is one which reaches out to Europe, a bridge which has been created from the Patriarch's vigorous pleas for the extension of the European Union to the East and the Southeast of Europe. In the midst of current

¹⁵ His All Holiness, cited work, p. 31.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 31-32.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.18.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 33.

²⁰ His All Holiness Bartholomew is often referred to as the *Green Patriarch*, due to his numerous initiatives and consistent commitment to preserving and transforming the environment (cf. cited work, p. 4).

*hesitation concerning the future of the Union, his unremitting plea for a complete Union and his concern for the protection of the environment are guiding lights for both East and West. The third bridge is one that will facilitate the dialogue between all the Christian churches*²¹.

To better illustrate the personality and work of His All Holiness, we may turn to his address at the International Congress *Religions for Peace*, held in Istanbul on 29 July 2025. The event brought together more than sixty religious leaders from across the world²². In his speech, the Patriarch underscored the urgent need for a paradigm shift.

*This is not an attempt to create a new, syncretistic religion, nor a substitution for the unique worldviews that characterize each religious tradition. Its purpose is, on the contrary, the highlighting of a field of consensus, the mapping of those points where the different experiences of the Sacred converge, creating a common front against the domination of materialistic reductionism*²³.

Moving away from an idealistic and one-sided ecumenical approach, His All Holiness Bartholomew calls for a return to the innermost depths of the human person and to life in communion. In other words, this is a movement from theory to praxis²⁴. In this context, he identifies two major global challenges: first, the crushing weight of global debt, which undermines the human spirit; and second, the rise of artificial intelligence, as an expression of the desire for autonomous knowledge divorced from God.

His All Holiness, Bartholomew affirms that *we meet in essence not when our theologies coincide, but when our communities share the bread with the hungry, care for the sick, and defend the wronged. Unity is forged in the common resistance to the forces that attempt to efface the human face. In this struggle, the diversity of our spiritual weapons is not a weakness, but a wealth*²⁵.

In conclusion, His All Holiness stands as a living example and tireless laborer in the field of Christian ecumenism and interreligious dialogue. His

²¹ Ibid., pp. 33-34.

²² <https://ec-patr.org/keynote-address-by-his-all-holiness-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew-at-the-meeting-of-the-world-council-of-religions-for-peace-istanbul-july-29-2025/>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ By implicitly acknowledging the shortcomings of the Ecumenical movement – without referring to them directly – His All Holiness suggests a focus on everyday issues, recognizing that true dogmatic unity can only be achieved through the conversion of all to Orthodoxy. Nevertheless, such a goal does not appear attainable in the near future, as humanity remains preoccupied with material possessions and distorted forms of knowledge (cf. cited article).

²⁵ Ibid.

approach does not falter in the face of doctrinal or religious differences; rather he proposes a practical affirmation of the human person, even in its existential primordial *emptiness*, as one who stands before God.

Communication and communion today

Conclusions

Through his high mission of serving God and humankind, His All Holiness is honored today by the president of our university, who, in awarding this distinction, not only recognizes the Patriarch's work but also seeks to strengthen and further develop close collaboration with the Orthodox Church. The title of *Christian* extends beyond formality, for the president of *Dimitrie Cantemir* Christian University, Professor PhD. **Corina Adriana Dumitrescu** – an eminent figure in Romanian education and a devout Orthodox believer – has faithfully continued the path traced by deceased Professor PhD. **Momcilo Luburici**. She has worked tirelessly to ensure that the collaboration between the university and the Church is not merely formal but deeply lived: personally, overseeing the divine services in the chapel, providing everything necessary for the worship, supporting the priest's ministry, and maintaining the sacred space. Significantly, the chapel itself is dedicated to Saint New Dimitrie of Basarabi, the patron saint of Bucharest.

This collaboration has also been evident in the life of *Dimitrie Cantemir* Christian University during both moments of sorrow and moments of joy. In times of grief - such as the passing of the founding president, Professor Momcilo Luburich PhD. – the university was accompanied by the Church, when Professor Buchiu Ștefan, PhD., priest, honorary vicar of Bucharest Archbishopric and delegate of His Beatitude, Daniel, our patriarch, took part in the funeral service. At the same time, joyful occasions have also marked this partnership, including the carol concerts performed by *Symbol*, the Choir of Romanian Patriarchate, as well as conferences, symposia, and not least, the divine services celebrated in the university chapel.

Today we offer these achievements as a bouquet of our souls to the celebration of 35th anniversary of the founding of *Dimitrie Cantemir* Christian University in 1990, by Professor PhD. Momcilo Luburici, and Professor PhD. Corina Adriana Dumitrescu, to whom we express our deepest gratitude.

This commemoration also recalls the sacrifices of our ancestors, who, through their devotion, built both a free nation and a living faith. As Scripture tells us: *I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones*

would immediately cry out (Luke chap. 19 verse 40)²⁶, we must also recall the example of His Beatitude, **Daniel**, *Archbishop of Bucharest, Metropolitan of Wallachia and Dobrogea, Locum tenens of the Throne of Caesarea in Cappadocia and Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church*. At this moment of celebration, once again, we are called to follow his example. Through his zeal and tireless efforts, a long-cherished national dream has come true. As a testament to the sacrifices of the entire people²⁷ and the dawn of better times, we now gaze upon the Cathedral of the Salvation of the Nation. Rising majestically toward the heaven, it stands as a sign of God's descent to earth and of our ascent to Him.

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²⁶ *The Holy Bible*, King James Version (1976), New York: Regency Publishing House, Giant Print Reference Edition, p. 1532.

²⁷ At the foot of Holy Table inside the National Cathedral, there is a list with the names of approximately 350.000 of Romanian heroes, known in history, in order to symbolically mark that the Cathedral represents a historical sacrifice of all nation, for its faith, national independence and freedom through God (according to <https://catedrala-nationala.ro/patriarhul-ecumenic-si-patriarhul-romaniei-vor-sfinti-catedrala-nationala-in-luna-octombrie/>).

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THE AI-DRIVEN UNIVERSITY: HIGHER EDUCATION IN 2030

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Abstract: By 2030, artificial intelligence (AI) has become a central force reshaping the landscape of higher education across Europe. The AI-driven university is no longer a futuristic concept - it is an operational reality influencing pedagogy, research, administration, and student experience. This article explores how AI technologies are transforming higher education institutions (HEIs), with a focus on emerging practices and policies across some leading, different from each other European universities. AI is enabling unprecedented levels of personalization in teaching and learning. Intelligent tutoring systems, adaptive learning platforms, and real-time feedback mechanisms are supporting students in more individualized and responsive ways. Simultaneously, the role of educators is shifting - from delivering content to designing learning ecosystems, curating resources, and mentoring students in AI-enhanced environments. This transformation, while promising, raises important questions about academic integrity, educational equity, and the preservation of the human element in learning. Beyond the classroom, AI is driving institutional change in areas such as admissions, academic advising, and operational logistics through automation and predictive analytics. These systems offer increased efficiency and insight, but also surface concerns about transparency, data ethics, and algorithmic bias. In research, AI is augmenting academic work through data analysis, simulation, and content generation - redefining the contours of scholarly contribution and collaboration.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Higher Education, AI-driven University, Personalization, Academic Integrity, Digital Governance, European Universities

1. Introduction: Enter the AI-Driven University

In the past decade, artificial intelligence (AI) has rapidly transitioned from a speculative frontier to an embedded feature of everyday digital infrastructure. Nowhere is this shift more evident - or more consequential - than in higher education. From adaptive learning platforms to predictive student analytics, AI has begun to reconfigure the architecture of the university itself. As we enter the 2030s, the concept of the "AI-driven university" has moved from theoretical discourse to practical

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implementation, challenging institutions to redefine how knowledge is taught, created, and managed.

1.1. The Rise of AI in Education: Trends from the 2020s to 2030

The 2020s witnessed a surge in AI applications in educational settings, spurred in part by the global disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Emergency remote teaching catalysed investments in digital infrastructure and accelerated the adoption of AI-based tools. By the mid-2020s, AI was increasingly used to support personalized learning, automate administrative tasks, and enhance research capabilities¹. Generative AI, in particular, gained significant attention following the public release of models such as ChatGPT, raising both excitement and ethical concerns across academic communities.

By 2030, AI has matured into a multi-layered presence in higher education. According to recent estimates, over 70% of European universities have adopted AI systems for at least one core academic or administrative function². These include intelligent tutoring systems, virtual assistants, automated grading tools, and AI-supported research environments. Crucially, AI is no longer viewed as a peripheral technology but as a strategic asset, integral to institutional competitiveness and pedagogical innovation.

1.2. The Strategic Role of AI in Shaping University Models

As AI technologies evolve, universities are reimagining their core functions - teaching, research, service, and governance - through a digital lens. Some institutions have begun to embed AI into their mission statements and strategic plans, framing it as both a tool and a driver of educational transformation³. The shift is not merely technological but structural: AI is influencing hiring practices, curricular design, assessment strategies, and student support systems. Moreover, AI has become a key factor in global higher education competition. Universities that effectively integrate AI are positioned to attract students, secure research funding, and develop interdisciplinary programs aligned with future labour markets. At the same time, this strategic emphasis raises new challenges around ethics, equity, and autonomy - prompting questions about the

¹ Luckin et al., 2016, pp. 1-72; Holmes et al., 2021, pp. 1-168

² European Commission, 2025

³ Jisc, 2025

risks of algorithmic governance, data surveillance, and dependence on commercial AI providers⁴.

1.3. Scope and Aims of the Article

This article examines the state of the AI-driven university in 2030, with a particular focus on developments across European higher education. It investigates how AI is being applied in four key areas: (1) teaching and learning; (2) administration and student services; (3) faculty research and academic labour; and (4) institutional strategy and ethics. Through selected different case studies - including the University of Helsinki, Finland⁵, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium⁶, TUM Technical University of Munich, Germany⁷, University of Edinburgh, Great Britain⁸ and Centria University of Applied Sciences, Finland⁹ - the article illustrates both the promises and tensions embedded in AI integration. The aim is not to offer a singular vision of what the AI university "should" be, but rather to map the diverse ways in which AI is reshaping academic life - highlighting the innovations, risks, and governance dilemmas that define this emerging landscape. Ultimately, the article calls for a human-centered approach to AI in higher education, one that prioritizes transparency, inclusivity, and academic integrity in an era of rapid technological change.

2. AI in Teaching and Learning: Personalization Meets Automation

Artificial Intelligence is rapidly transforming how teaching and learning are designed, delivered, and experienced in higher education. By 2030, the traditional lecture-centric model has been largely supplemented - if not replaced - by AI-powered systems that offer adaptive, data-driven, and highly personalized learning experiences. This transformation is not limited to elite institutions; a growing number of European universities and applied sciences institutions have adopted AI to enhance teaching effectiveness, address student diversity, and manage large-scale instruction more efficiently.

⁴ Williamson & Eynon, 2020, pp. 223-235

⁵ www.helsinki.fi

⁶ www.kuleuven.be

⁷ www.tum.de

⁸ www.ed.ac.uk

⁹ www.centria.fi

2.1. Intelligent Tutoring Systems and Adaptive Learning

One of the most significant advancements has been the implementation of intelligent tutoring systems (ITS) and adaptive learning platforms. These systems use real-time data to assess a student's progress, identify learning gaps, and deliver customized content and feedback. By 2030, such platforms are common across undergraduate curricula in STEM, business, and even humanities disciplines.

Platforms like *Century Tech* and *Knewton*, originally piloted in the UK and Germany during the 2020s, have evolved into fully integrated learning environments that support personalized pacing, automated formative assessment, and interactive simulations¹⁰. AI-driven systems have become capable of adjusting not only what students learn, but how they learn - suggesting optimal study times, recommending supplementary materials, and even offering emotional support cues via sentiment analysis¹¹.

While these technologies have increased student engagement and retention rates in some contexts, they also raise concerns about over-reliance on data-driven instruction and the reduction of learning to algorithmic pathways. Critics argue that adaptive systems may narrow critical thinking opportunities if not paired with reflective and human-led pedagogies¹².

2.2. Automated Assessment and Feedback

Another major area of AI application is automated assessment. Natural Language Processing (NLP) tools are now capable of grading essays, short responses, and even creative assignments with a level of consistency and speed that far exceeds manual grading. These systems not only free up faculty time but also provide students with immediate feedback - often including suggestions for improvement, citation checks, and clarity scores. Although automated assessment is most effective in large introductory courses, it is increasingly being used in formative assessments at advanced levels, especially when paired with human oversight. However, studies continue to highlight risks of bias, particularly in language-heavy disciplines where cultural nuance and subjective interpretation are critical¹³.

¹⁰ Holmes et al., 2021, pp. 1-168

¹¹ Luckin et al., 2016, pp. 1-72

¹² Williamson & Eynon, 2020, pp. 223-235

¹³ Borenstein et al., 2024, pp. 1-312

2.3. The Evolving Role of Educators

As AI systems take on more instructional tasks, the role of the educator is shifting from content delivery to learning design and facilitation. Instructors are increasingly expected to act as mentors, moderators, and ethical guides within AI-enhanced environments. They curate digital resources, design AI-compatible assessments, and intervene in cases where algorithms fall short - especially when dealing with students who require human attention and empathy.

This shift has required a parallel evolution in faculty training. Universities such as **KU Leuven** and **Centria University of Applied Sciences** have invested heavily in upskilling their academic staff to become fluent in AI tools and data interpretation. In these institutions, instructional design is no longer a secondary task - it is central to the teaching profession¹⁴.

2.4. Academic Integrity in the Age of Generative AI

The widespread availability of generative AI tools such as GPT-5, Claude, and open-source language models has significantly complicated traditional academic integrity norms. By 2030, universities are no longer focused on detecting AI-assisted writing, but on integrating AI literacy into the curriculum itself. Students are taught how to responsibly use AI for ideation, drafting, and citation, while assessment models increasingly emphasize process over product. European institutions such as the **University of Helsinki** have led the way by embedding AI ethics and digital literacy modules across disciplines, ensuring that students understand both the capabilities and limitations of AI in academic work. These initiatives reflect a growing consensus that resisting AI is no longer viable; instead, the focus must shift to using AI responsibly and transparently in learning environments¹⁵.

3. Smart Administration: Efficiency Behind the Scenes

While much of the discourse around AI in higher education focuses on teaching and learning, some of the most transformative - and less visible - impacts of AI are occurring in university administration. By 2030, artificial intelligence has become a core component of institutional management, from admissions and academic advising to resource

¹⁴ European Commission, 2025

¹⁵ Jisc, 2025

planning and campus logistics. These "smart back-office" systems are enabling universities to operate with greater efficiency, agility, and data-informed decision-making. However, they also raise complex questions around transparency, accountability, and institutional control.

3.1. AI in Admissions and Student Success

Admissions processes, once reliant on labour-intensive manual review, have become significantly more automated. AI systems now handle initial application screening by evaluating transcripts, test scores, and even written statements using natural language processing. More advanced systems incorporate predictive analytics to assess not only who is likely to succeed academically, but also who is at risk of dropping out, requiring support, or thriving in certain fields¹⁶. At **KU Leuven**, for example, predictive models are used to analyse historical data on student performance and course completion rates. This helps tailor outreach and support for incoming students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds. Importantly, the university has implemented a human-in-the-loop model to ensure that final admissions decisions are not left solely to algorithms¹⁷.

Once enrolled, students benefit from AI-powered academic advising systems that offer personalized study plans, course recommendations, and alerts for academic risk. These systems draw from real-time data - grades, attendance, engagement patterns - to proactively suggest interventions or connect students with human advisors. This "precision advising" model has improved retention rates at several European universities, particularly in high-dropout disciplines such as engineering and economics.

3.2. Administrative Automation and Campus Operations

Routine administrative tasks such as scheduling, facility management, and communications have been streamlined through AI automation. Intelligent scheduling systems allocate classroom space based on enrolment data, course requirements, and even real-time building occupancy. Virtual assistants now handle thousands of student inquiries daily, ranging from enrolment status to financial aid questions - dramatically reducing staff workload and improving response times. The **University of Edinburgh**, for instance, has integrated conversational AI systems into student services,

¹⁶ Holmes et al., 2021, pp. 1-168

¹⁷ European Commission, 2025

enabling 24/7 access to support and reducing administrative bottlenecks during peak times. Meanwhile, AI-driven maintenance systems monitor building infrastructure and energy use, contributing to sustainability goals and budget optimization. These technologies not only reduce administrative costs but also free up staff to focus on more complex or student-centered tasks. However, their implementation has led to concerns about job displacement, loss of institutional memory, and over-reliance on commercial software providers¹⁸.

3.3. Challenges: Transparency, Bias, and Data Ethics

As universities increasingly rely on algorithmic systems to make decisions that affect student access, success, and support, the need for transparency becomes critical. Black-box AI models - where decision-making logic is inaccessible - pose risks to both students and institutions. Concerns around algorithmic bias, particularly in admissions and financial aid, have prompted several European universities to adopt "explainable AI" protocols and establish internal AI ethics boards¹⁹. Data privacy is another key issue. The use of personal student data to train AI models necessitates strict governance frameworks. In the European context, compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has added a legal layer to ethical concerns, forcing institutions to be more deliberate in their data practices.

Centria University of Applied Sciences offers a compelling example of responsible implementation. Through its collaboration with regional industries, Centria uses AI tools for managing student work placements and skill mapping. All data usage is governed by transparent consent protocols and regular audits to ensure GDPR compliance and ethical standards in partnership-led educational models.

4. Faculty & Research in the Age of AI

Artificial Intelligence is not only transforming how students learn and institutions operate - it is also reshaping the role of faculty and the nature of academic research. By 2030, AI has become an essential tool for academic productivity, collaboration, and innovation, while also prompting critical reflection on what it means to conduct scholarly work in an era of algorithmic assistance. From literature reviews to lab

¹⁸ Jisc, 2025

¹⁹ Williamson & Eynon, 2020, pp. 223-235

simulations, AI is augmenting nearly every phase of the research cycle. At the same time, faculty roles are shifting in response to new expectations around digital fluency, interdisciplinary thinking, and ethical stewardship of emerging technologies.

4.1. AI as a Research Partner

AI is increasingly seen not as a research subject, but as a research partner. Machine learning tools are used to analyse large datasets, identify patterns, generate hypotheses, and even co-author papers. In the natural sciences, AI-powered simulations accelerate experimental design and reduce the cost and time of discovery. In the social sciences and humanities, generative AI models support text mining, sentiment analysis, and discourse mapping - making it easier to analyse large corpora of documents or media sources²⁰.

By 2030, universities across Europe have integrated AI labs and digital research hubs into their infrastructure. At TUM **Technical University of Munich**, AI is used extensively in interdisciplinary research programs combining computer science, bioengineering, and environmental sustainability. TUM's faculty teams employ AI-driven design tools to develop climate modelling software and bioinformatics simulations, demonstrating how AI expands the methodological toolkit available to researchers. However, concerns about accuracy, reproducibility, and academic integrity remain. Researchers must grapple with new forms of plagiarism and data manipulation, particularly when using generative AI tools to produce text or images. As a result, most institutions have implemented clear AI usage guidelines for research publications, as well as disclosure requirements similar to conflict-of-interest statements²¹.

4.2. Transforming Academic Labor and Faculty Roles

The integration of AI is also redefining academic labour. Routine tasks such as grading, plagiarism checking, and even peer review are increasingly automated, allowing faculty to focus more on mentoring, research design, and interdisciplinary collaboration. However, this shift has introduced both opportunities and tensions. On one hand, automation has alleviated workload pressures, particularly in large teaching institutions. On the other hand, it has blurred the boundaries of academic

²⁰ Borenstein et al., 2024, 1-312

²¹ European Commission, 2025

responsibility and raised questions about job security - especially for early-career researchers and adjunct faculty. Universities must now balance efficiency gains with the need to preserve meaningful, intellectually engaged roles for academics.

AI has also changed the metrics by which faculty performance is evaluated. Research impact, teaching quality, and service contributions are increasingly tracked through data dashboards that integrate AI analytics. While this allows for more granular performance assessment, it risks reducing complex academic work to simplistic key performance indicators unless interpreted in context²².

4.3. AI in Academic Publishing and Peer Review

One of the more controversial uses of AI in academia has been its growing role in scholarly publishing. AI tools now support literature review, reference formatting, journal matching, and even first-draft writing. Some platforms offer auto-generated summaries and citations, which are particularly helpful for non-native English speakers and early-career researchers. At institutions such as **KU Leuven**, faculty are trained to use AI writing tools as assistants - not authors - ensuring that research originality and integrity are preserved.

Peer review processes are also being automated to some extent, with AI systems used to flag methodological issues, plagiarism, and even detect the likelihood of fabricated data. While these tools improve efficiency and consistency, they also introduce risks of bias and overreliance on automated judgment. Therefore, most European academic publishers now require human reviewers to validate AI-assisted feedback.

5. Case Studies: AI Innovation in European Universities

To understand the practical realities of AI integration in higher education, this section presents selected case studies from five European higher education institutions: **University of Helsinki** (Finland), **KU Leuven** (Belgium), **TUM Technical University of Munich** (Germany), **University of Edinburgh** (Great Britain), and **Centria University of Applied Sciences** (Finland). These examples illustrate diverse strategies for leveraging AI in teaching, administration, and research, while also highlighting regional priorities, ethical practices, and implementation challenges in the following table.

²² Williamson & Eynon, 2020, pp. 223-235.

Table 1: AI Innovations in five European Universities

Institution	AI Focus Area	Key Technologies	Outcomes
University of Helsinki (FI) www.helsinki.fi	AI literacy & ethics in curriculum	AI literacy modules, ethics training	Nationwide AI competence strategy
KU Leuven (BE) www.kuleuven.be	Predictive analytics for student retention	Learning analytics, predictive risk modelling	Improved retention in high-risk programs
TUM – Technical University of Munich (DE) www.tum.de	AI in research and STEM education	AI simulation labs, automated lab workflows	Interdisciplinary innovation in sustainability
University of Edinburgh (UK) www.ed.ac.uk	Administrative AI for student support	Chatbots, process automation, virtual advising	Faster service delivery, reduced admin load
Centria University of Applied Sciences (FI) www.centria.fi	Applied AI for industry collaboration	AI skill mapping, placement management	Regional workforce alignment & GDPR-compliant AI

5.1. University of Helsinki: National Leader in AI Literacy and Ethics

The University of Helsinki has emerged as a European leader in promoting AI literacy and ethical awareness. Building on its early 2020s initiative *Elements of AI* - a free online course developed with Reaktor - the university expanded its AI education strategy to include discipline-specific AI modules across faculties.

By 2030, all undergraduate students complete at least one course on AI ethics, data privacy, or algorithmic bias. These modules are co-developed with faculty from computer science, philosophy, and education, ensuring both technical depth and humanistic perspective. The university also supports interdisciplinary AI research through its **Helsinki Centre for Data Science (HiDATA)**. This AI literacy framework has been adopted nationally as part of Finland’s Digital Education Strategy, making Helsinki a model for ethical and inclusive AI integration²³.

5.2. KU Leuven: Predictive Analytics for Student Success

KU Leuven uses AI-based learning analytics to identify students at risk of academic failure and intervene early. The university’s **Learning**

²³ University of Helsinki, 2025

Analytics Lab developed models that process attendance data, Learning Management System (LMS) usage, grades, and demographic factors to generate real-time risk profiles. The system sends alerts to academic advisors and instructors, prompting support interventions such as tutoring or course adjustments. Importantly, the university ensures that students are informed when AI systems are used, maintaining transparency and data governance compliance under the GDPR. The retention rates in engineering and economics programs improved by over 15%, especially for first-generation and international students²⁴.

5.3. TUM Technical University of Munich: AI-Enhanced Research and STEM Education

TUM has positioned itself as a hub for AI-enhanced research in fields like environmental engineering, robotics, and biotechnology. The university's **AI Lab for Sustainable Futures** uses machine learning models for energy system simulations, climate forecasting, and materials science. At the undergraduate level, TUM integrates AI training into STEM curricula, emphasizing practical lab applications and interdisciplinary problem-solving. Students engage with real-world data, work in AI-augmented lab environments, and collaborate across fields. TUM also partners with regional startups and research institutes, bridging the gap between academic innovation and industrial application²⁵.

5.4. University of Edinburgh: Administrative Automation at Scale

The University of Edinburgh has focused on administrative AI to improve service delivery and operational efficiency. Since 2025, the university is deploying a suite of conversational AI tools and process automation systems, including: **Virtual assistants** for student FAQs and **Automated scheduling systems and AI-powered helpdesk triage**. These tools now handle over 60% of student queries and significantly reduce administrative burden on staff. Feedback loops are built into the systems to ensure continuous improvement, and all AI tools will be evaluated annually for fairness, accessibility, and user satisfaction. Edinburgh's **AI for Good Office** also evaluates ethical risks and compliance, reinforcing its reputation for responsible innovation²⁶.

²⁴ KU Leuven, 2025

²⁵ TUM Technical University of Munich, 2025

²⁶ Jisc, 2025.

5.5. Centria University of Applied Sciences: Applied AI and Regional Workforce Alignment

Centria University of Applied Sciences, located in western industrial Finland, presents a different model of AI integration - focused on applied education, industry collaboration, and regional development. As part of its mission to support local businesses and workforce development, Centria has implemented AI in two major areas: **AI-based skill mapping and career profiling** for students entering regional industries (manufacturing, chemistry, energy, logistics) and **AI-assisted work placement matching**, using natural language processing to align student competencies with job descriptions and project-based learning opportunities. All data handling complies with GDPR standards, and consent-driven design is built into system architecture. Centria also runs **micro-credential programs** in AI fundamentals for adult learners and vocational educators. This case shows how smaller institutions can lead in innovation when their AI strategy is closely tied to regional needs and practical outcomes²⁷.

6. Challenges and Ethical Tensions

Despite the promising benefits of AI integration across teaching, administration, and research, universities face a complex landscape of challenges and ethical concerns. As AI becomes more deeply embedded in higher education, it demands not only technical solutions but also institutional vigilance, policy innovation, and cultural change. This chapter examines the principal issues surrounding AI implementation in universities by 2030, highlighting ongoing debates about equity, transparency, privacy, and academic integrity.

6.1. Equity and Access

One of the most persistent challenges is ensuring that AI-driven education does not exacerbate existing inequalities. While AI-powered personalization can support diverse learners, it also risks reinforcing biases embedded in data or algorithms. Students from underrepresented backgrounds may experience unintended discrimination through predictive analytics that inaccurately flag them as “at risk,” limiting access to opportunities²⁸. Moreover, unequal access to AI-enhanced resources -

²⁷ Centria University of Applied Sciences, 2025.

²⁸ Borenstein et al., 2024

such as high-speed internet, smart devices, or specialized software - remains a barrier, particularly in rural or socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. European universities like the University of Helsinki and KU Leuven have sought to mitigate this through digital inclusion initiatives and by designing AI systems with fairness criteria embedded from the outset.

6.2. Transparency and Accountability

The “black box” nature of many AI algorithms complicates transparency. When AI systems influence decisions about admissions, grading, or academic support, stakeholders demand clear explanations of how those decisions are made. Without transparency, students and faculty may distrust AI tools, eroding institutional legitimacy²⁹. To address this, European higher education institutions increasingly employ **explainable AI** frameworks and establish ethics committees or AI oversight boards. These bodies review AI applications, audit algorithms for bias, and ensure compliance with regulations such as the EU’s **Artificial Intelligence Act**³⁰.

6.3. Data Privacy and Security

Universities handle vast amounts of sensitive student and staff data, raising concerns about privacy and cybersecurity. The GDPR provides a strong regulatory foundation in Europe, but evolving AI capabilities require continuous vigilance to protect data from misuse, breaches, or unauthorized profiling. Centria University of Applied Sciences’ consent-driven AI systems exemplify best practices: students explicitly opt-in for data use, and data retention policies prioritize minimization and anonymization. Nevertheless, the rapid pace of AI innovation requires constant updates to governance frameworks and staff training.

6.4. Academic Integrity and the Role of Human Judgment

The proliferation of generative AI tools has disrupted traditional concepts of academic integrity. While AI can support research and creativity, it also facilitates plagiarism, contract cheating, and misinformation. Universities have moved away from solely policing AI misuse towards educating students on responsible AI use and integrating

²⁹ Williamson & Eynon, 2020

³⁰ European Commission, 2025

AI literacy into curricula³¹. Furthermore, the increasing automation of grading and peer review raises questions about the appropriate balance between machine efficiency and human judgment. Faculty members remain essential for interpreting nuanced contexts, mentoring, and fostering critical thinking, roles that AI cannot replicate.

6.5. Institutional Capacity and Cultural Change

Finally, implementing AI at scale requires significant institutional capacity - infrastructure, expertise, funding, and leadership commitment. Resistance to change and fear of job displacement among faculty and staff can slow adoption. Successful universities have emphasized transparent communication, collaborative development processes, and ongoing professional development to build a culture that embraces AI as an augmenting tool rather than a threat.

7. Conclusion: Embracing the AI-Driven University - A Call to Action

As to approach 2030, the AI-driven university stands at a critical crossroads - one that will define not just the future of education, but the very fabric of our society. Artificial intelligence is no longer a tool of the future; it is a powerful force reshaping knowledge creation, learning experiences, and institutional life today. The potential is breathtaking: AI can democratize access, personalize learning to unprecedented degrees, accelerate scientific breakthroughs, and transform administrative efficiency. Yet, this tremendous promise carries profound risks - risks that demand our immediate and unwavering attention.

This is a moment of reckoning. The choices universities make now will reverberate for generations. Will AI deepen existing inequalities, entrench bias, and reduce students to data points? Or will it become a beacon of inclusion, innovation, and ethical stewardship? Will faculty roles be diminished to mere overseers of automated systems, or will educators reclaim their place as vital mentors and creators in a human-centered digital age? Will institutions succumb to the allure of efficiency at the cost of transparency and trust? Or will they forge a new social contract where technology serves humanity's highest values? We must recognize that AI is not neutral - it embodies the values, priorities, and blind spots of those who design and deploy it. The stakes are existential. A failure to govern AI responsibly risks eroding academic freedom, degrading

³¹ Jisc, 2025.

privacy, and hollowing out the very essence of critical thinking and creativity. But the rewards of success are equally monumental: universities that nurture empowered, ethically aware learners equipped to navigate - and shape - the complexities of a rapidly changing world.

The AI-driven university of 2030 is a call to courage. It demands visionary leadership ready to confront ethical dilemmas head-on; it calls for inclusive dialogues that engage all stakeholders-students, faculty, policymakers, and society at large; it requires bold investment not just in technology, but in human capacity and digital literacy. This is not a future to fear - it is a future to seize. The AI-driven university can become the greatest engine of human potential ever created - if and only if we commit to guiding AI with wisdom, humanity, and relentless purpose. The time to act is now. Our collective future depends on it.

The AI-driven university of 2030 represents a profound transformation in higher education, reshaping how knowledge is created, shared, and applied. Across Europe, pioneering institutions like the University of Helsinki, KU Leuven, TUM Technical University of Munchen, Edinburgh University, and Centria University of Applied Sciences illustrate diverse approaches to integrating AI-ranging from ethical AI literacy and predictive analytics to research augmentation and administrative automation. These innovations promise to enhance personalization, inclusivity, and efficiency.

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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE VERSUS FUNCTIONAL ILLITERACY: OPPORTUNITY OR MAJOR DANGER IN TODAY'S EDUCATION

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Abstract: *The year 2020, the year of the Coronavirus pandemic, was the t0 moment of the accelerated transition of the entire human society towards an unpredictable technological era, with an overaccelerated dynamics of changes that predictions for a future, even near, become uncertain, unclear, and shrouded in a thick fog...! Educational systems cannot be protected from these tensions, being perhaps the parts most exposed to the mentioned technological challenges. In our paper, we try to highlight and draw attention to two extreme "phenomena" that strain, especially after 2020, the educational environment: AI - Artificial Intelligence and AF - Functional illiteracy! It is worth noting that the two phenomena are growing rapidly and interdependent, so that one is an extremely efficient "fuel" for the other! Between the pressures exerted by the two phenomena, AI and AF, to what extent can we still talk about the quality of education?*

Keywords: *quality, management, artificial intelligence, functional illiteracy*

I. Artificial intelligence in education. Concepts, effects, issues

1.1. Artificial Intelligence. Aspects

There are already many definitions (but also confusions!) regarding the concept of *Artificial Intelligence* (AI). In the EU, we have a consensus definition:

"AI is the ability of a machine to mimic human functions such as reasoning, learning, planning, and creativity."¹

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¹ European Parliament (topics). 2023. *What is artificial intelligence and how is it used?* Source: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/ro/article/20200827STO85804/ce-este-inteligenta-artificiala-si-cum-este-utilizata>

With the following caveat: "*AI systems are capable of adapting their behavior to some extent by analyzing the effects of previous actions and operating autonomously.*"

The concept of AI is not new. It emerged a long time ago, and AI-specific technologies have been around for over half a century. Two factors have accelerated today's AI explosion: the *enormous growth in computing power* and *the huge streams of data* flowing at extraordinarily high speeds in today's society.

We appreciate that two other factors have further accelerated the speed of implementation of AI in everyday life: the transition of human society towards *Industry 4.0* (the fourth industrial revolution), especially after 2018 (approximately), and after the *Coronavirus pandemic* (2020).

How does AI manifest itself in everyday life? Through various digital functions/tools: *internet search engines* (in fractions of a second, the search engine displays hundreds of thousands, millions of results related to the searched topic. E.g.: 5,050,000 results for the question "what is artificial intelligence?" on the search engine Edge (Microsoft)), *online shopping* and advertising, *personal digital assistants*, *machine translation*, pc PC-specific functions implemented in car operation (adaptive lights, rain sensors, automatic braking, lane keeping), *cyber security*, *combating disinformation*, etc. An EU-wide survey (Eurobarometer, 2017) reveals that 61% of Europeans have a favorable opinion of AI and robots, but 81% support very careful management of AI.

Since the 1950's considerable efforts have been made by scientists to implement AI (Warren McCulloch, Walter Pitts, 1943 - the first elements of neural networks, A. Turing, 1950 - the "Turing test"). „*The Turing test (Can a machine think?)*“) has been a very important benchmark in the evaluation of artificial intelligence. Although it was shown in the 1970s that it was impossible for AI to pass the Turing test, over time, specialists have recognized that the Turing test has been passed in several stages of AI evolution. Currently, the bar of *the Turing test* has been increasingly raised for AI.

Since the Turing test and ultra-specialized aspects of AI are outside the scope of this paper, we will not go into details on the evolution of AI over time!

I2. Artificial Intelligence in the education system

AI is particularly "present" at the level of the educational system, in the systemic mega-processes that use huge databases for their functioning

and for keeping the educational entities in a coherent functioning. We appreciate that more important are the aspects of AI penetration at the level of *(basic) educational processes*. As a rule, by basic educational processes (or fundamental educational processes) we mean those educational processes in which educational products and implicitly, what we call education, are realized!

Thus, the core educational processes (China, 2015)² are considered as: *lesson/classroom hour, laboratory hour, extracurricular (dedicated) activities, etc.* Why are they "core processes"? Because these processes are based on *direct teacher-pupil/student interactions*! During these processes, the essential element of educational processes is realized: ***the educational product that the child/pupil/student further uses in his/her own intellectual construction, finally obtaining what we call education!***

For these reasons, the use of AI in basic educational processes is an extremely important endeavor, since it contributes directly to the realization of the educational product mentioned above.

Using (or implementing) artificial intelligence in educational processes can be done in two ways:

- Systematic/scientific/coordinated through the process manager - the teacher;
- Informal - through student access to AI via smart devices (PC, Android phones, etc.).

Some aspects of the (positive) influence of using AI in educational processes are mentioned below (M. Lynch, 2017 in):³

1. **Personalization.** Teachers know that the most difficult task is to respond effectively to the specific learning needs of each pupil/student, because the differences in personality and learning ability are obvious! It is almost impossible for a teacher to be able to respond to the two aspects that are strictly characteristic of each pupil/student in the class/group he/she has. Help is coming from AI in the form of dedicated learning support programs that are adaptable to the needs of each student and can provide effective feedback during the learning process. These are also called intelligent tutoring systems (ITS).

2. **Grading.** The AI can take over the grading process to a considerable extent, going from grading on grid tests to student essays.

² R. Chină, *Quality management in pre-university education*. University Publishing House, Bucharest, pp: 320 - 322. (2015). DOI: 10.5682/9786062801830.

³ M. Lynch, *The Benefits of Artificial Intelligence in Education*, (2017) Source: <https://www.theedadvocate.org/benfits-artificial-intelligence-education>

3. *Course quality feedback.* A significant percentage of students' negative responses may indicate serious gaps in the course content, related to missing or underdeveloped concepts or information.

4. *Lesson planning, communication between teachers and parents, professional development, etc.*

Last but not least: plagiarism detection, statistical analysis of student performance, etc.

Challenges of AI in education. The implementation of AI in the education system and in educational processes is an issue that requires special attention because such an approach cascades new challenges for the education system:

- High implementation costs;
- Required skills in using specific AI programs,
- Technology addiction - can affect communication skills;
- Limiting perspective. Using AI routinely can limit perspectives for both students and teachers, as it greatly decreases the time allotted for studying what is new in the subject/program area.

- Ethical accountability. Already, there are many suspicions about the accountability and transparency of AI-based decisions.

A detailed study on the impact of AI on university education (Borbalan, 2025)⁴ highlights some negligible aspects of the impact of AI on the education system in the segment studied in the article:

"When talking about the impact of AI on education and higher education in particular, assumptions focus mainly on the promises rather than the threats or ambiguities of its dramatic development, even if the difficulties are by no means ignored. Many authors or reports begin with the view that AI is already bringing major changes and will increasingly do so (Kumar et al., 2024)."

The implementation of AI in higher education is a particularly important endeavor that, in addition to the obvious benefits, must also take into account the inherent risks. These risks are first mentioned under two aspects: *"skewed data and potential fraud in both the learning assessment process and in research processes and data: plagiarism or misuse of AI and AI-generated content."*⁵

⁴ J.C.R. Borbalan, *The transformative impact of artificial intelligence on higher education: A critical reflection on current trends and futures directions*. International Journal of Chinese Education (IJCE) p. 2-3. (2025).

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2212585X251319364>

⁵ Ibid, p. 2

The use of AI in higher education is now indispensable, and this will be measured in terms of a meteoric rise in the sector's turnover to over 32 billion dollars by 2030!⁶

Given its particular impact on educational processes, the academic community worldwide is striving to establish, by consensus, common views on the use or non-use of AI. According to recent studies, the use of AI can be particularly useful in various support or processes useful to students⁷:

***"Personalized support for students:* tutoring, translation, academic/career advising, facilitating administrative processes, brainstorming, editing, accessibility tools, and assistive technology;**

***Teaching assistant:* course design, grading, providing feedback to students, providing feedback to faculty, and improving accessibility of course materials.**

***Research assistant:* finding and summarizing literature, sorting and analyzing data, predictive modeling, creating data visualizations;**

***Administrative assistant:* automating tasks, drafting/reviewing communications (e.g., e-mail), audio transcription;**

***Learning analytics:* analyze and visualize student success data, providing insights for student recruitment and retention;**

***Digital education:* preparing students to be part of the digital workforce and society."**

From our point of view, Research Assistantship and digital literacy are fundamental applications for the work of students when doing in-depth research work, and a second time, for students preparing to enter an increasingly digitized job market!

Issues leading to "inappropriate uses" of AI include:⁸

***"Simulating human judgment* (e.g., grading students' papers, peer reviewing academic articles, writing letters of recommendation);**

***Representing AI-generated work as your own* (e.g., using AI to write papers, take exams);**

Not citing AI as a resource for generated content;

***Making high-stakes decisions* (e.g., student admissions) without human oversight;**

Conducting invasive data collection or surveillance;

Developing work using AI tools instead of human thought and creativity;

⁶ Ibid, p.3

⁷ J. Robert, *Educause AI Landscape Study*. (2025). Source:

<https://www.educause.edu/ecar/research-publications/2024/2024-educause-ai-landscape-study/the-future-of-ai-in-higher-education>

⁸ Ibid

Providing tools for unauthorized access to sensitive data (e.g., data relating to or affecting intellectual property).

Several risks are identified in this context:⁹

"Ethics: plagiarism, copyright and intellectual property violations, marginalizing individuality, reinforcing abnormality and bias, widening the digital divide, increasing disinformation;

Privacy and security: insufficient data protection, intrusive data collection or surveillance, use of data without consent, breach of privacy and security laws and policies, loss of trust among stakeholders (especially students), outsourced and automated hacking;

AI Literacy: lack of leadership and professional development, failure to evaluate AI-generated content, missed opportunities to teach students about AI, and falsely accusing students of unapproved use of AI.

Creativity and critical thinking: loss of fundamental skills that require independent thinking, diminishing personal relationships in learning environments, less personalized work and learning outcomes, proliferation of 'surface-level' work and learning."

Studies show that, to a majority, two opposing trends in the assessment of the evolution and, especially, the impact of AI in higher education:

- *Moderate skepticism* about the positive impact of AI on higher education. This is mainly expressed by teachers, especially in view of the risk elements mentioned above!

- *Major optimism* about the evolution of AI and its impact on higher education, especially among students!

Note that training teachers in the use of AI, regardless of the educational segment, is a much slower process than the development of AI, which considerably tempers the actual process of implementing AI in the educational environment!

II. Functional Illiteracy and Artificial Intelligence. Landmarks, concepts, and interferences

II.1 Functional illiteracy in education

"Functional illiteracy (FI) in education" - because all studies on this phenomenon converge on the idea that FI begins with the child's first interactions with the educational system or is closely linked to educational processes!

It is universally recognized that studies on functional illiteracy are insufficient or at least at an early stage, although there is increasing media

⁹ Ibid

coverage of the phenomenon. It can be said that technological advances are increasingly highlighting the phenomenon itself, with a growing number of people vulnerable to the use of new or even existing technologies that can be used in everyday life...!

Experts in the field are increasingly asking the pertinent question: at what level of education can AF be considered to exist? An example in this respect is the following situation (Coldea, Dresler et al, 2016)¹⁰: "..... IT experts and car mechanics have to operate machines (e.g., washing machines), have to read their bank statements, have to take medicines (and read leaflets), have to compare prices in the supermarket, etc. Therefore, we assume that there should be some basic functional literacy skills." So the level of literacy is correlated with the level of training of the person, whereas a car mechanic or an IT expert (functional at the basic skills level of the profession) is in the position of *functional illiterates* when they can't handle banking software?

According to UNESCO studies (UNESCO, 2015)¹¹ Literacy is defined as: ".... ability to understand, evaluate, use and engage with written texts in order to participate in society, achieve their goals and develop their knowledge and potential (OECD, 2013, p. 59). It is clear that "literacy and basic knowledge cannot be separated" (Coldea, Dresler et al, 2016).¹²

Even more difficult is to differentiate between concepts that are close in meaning. If between literacy and illiteracy the distinctions are clear: *literacy* - the definition given above, and *illiteracy* - "A person is illiterate who cannot, with understanding, read and write a simple short statement about everyday life"¹³ between functional illiteracy and literacy, the difference lies only in the meaning of the word "functionality"¹⁴. In the following sense: a person who is considered functionally illiterate, is at the stage of literacy but is unable to use what he has acquired in the process of literacy,

¹⁰ R. Vágvölgyi, A. Coldea, T. Thomas Dresler. et al. *A Review about Functional Illiteracy: Definition, Cognitive, Linguistic, and Numerical Aspects*. (2016). Source: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5102880/>, DOI:10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01617, p.3

¹¹ UNESCO. ADULT AND YOUTH LITERACY Paris: UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2015). Source: https://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/fs32-adult-and-youth-literacy-2015-en_0.pdf

¹² R. Vágvölgyi, A. Coldea, T. Thomas Dresler. et al. *A Review about Functional Illiteracy: Definition, Cognitive, Linguistic, and Numerical Aspects*. (2016). Source: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5102880/>, DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01617, p. 1

¹³ Ibid, p. 3

¹⁴ Ibid

because "he cannot engage in all those activities in which literacy is necessary for the effective functioning of his group and community and also to enable him to continue to use reading, writing and arithmetic for his own and the community's development (UNESCO, 1978, p.183)."¹⁵!

Measuring FI is not an easy task, and so far, the assessment of this phenomenon is not clear, which requires specific tools to identify the number of functional illiterates in an educational system.

A good indicator in this respect may be the PISA tests, which include three domains relevant to measuring student performance at age 15: math, science, and reading (reading/understanding a text). An obvious problem is the need to use specific texts to identify the phenomenon among adults!

If we analyse the situation of FI in the Romanian education system from the perspective of the results obtained in different editions of the PISA tests, we can see that, for example, in 2015, on the overall PISA "Science" scale, Romania scored an average of 435 points, ranking 48th out of 70 countries. It should be noted that Romania's performance in the field of "science," according to the PISA report¹⁶, has improved considerably, along with 10 other countries whose performance has increased. According to PISA analyses, in the hierarchy of established competence levels, Level 2 "Level 2 is considered the basic level of competence in science necessary to engage in science-related issues as a critical and informed citizen. All students should be expected to reach this level by the end of their schooling."¹⁷ It follows that students who do not reach this level are functionally illiterate! On the overall Reading scale, Romania scored an average of 434 points, an increase compared to 2009, with an improvement in average performance achieved by increasing the proportion of top-performing students at levels 5 and 6, without a simultaneous reduction/decrease in the proportion of low-performing students. Below level 2 were the results of students tested in Mathematics - 39.9%; Science - 38.5% and Reading - 38.7%¹⁸.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ PISA 2015 *Results Excellence and Equity in Education*, Volume I, Source: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2015-results-volume-i_9789264266490-en.html, p. 37

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 34

¹⁸ *The Education and Training Monitor 2018 Romania*, DOI: 10.2766/234512, Source: https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/et-monitor-report-2018-romania_ro.pdf

The 2018 test results, according to PISA reports, showed significant differences compared to the 2015 test: in Science, there was a decrease of 6.5 percentage points; in Reading, a decrease of 2.1 percentage points; and in Mathematics, a decrease of 6.6 percentage points.¹⁹

In 2022, the differences stagnated or even deepened: 44% of students tested in Science, 42% of those tested in Reading, and 49% of those tested in Mathematics were below level 2²⁰.

But what causes this phenomenon?

A specialized view is expressed by (Vágvölgyi, Coldea, Thomas Dresler et al. 2016)²¹: "*Functional illiteracy is assumed to stem from cognitive or linguistic impairment and/or to be associated with sociocultural disadvantage (Eme, 2011; Boltzmann and Rüsseler, 2013).*"

And yet the causes may be many more, in our view. Most of them are even unrelated to the socio-economic background of the person studied from the perspective of this phenomenon.

"Socio-economic and sociodemographic factors as well as individual factors (cognitive, emotional, and motivational) have been identified in the literature (see e.g. Vágvölgyi et al. 2016, for review) to affect - in isolation or in combination - childhood literacy acquisition (e.g. Hemmereichs et al. 2016) as well as adult literacy competence". (Vágvölgyi, R. et al, 2021)²²

"Disadvantages in the home environment"²³, related to issues such as economic security, disinterest, domestic violence, or negative school experiences (punishment for failure, bullying, early onset medical problems, "uncorrected vision and hearing impairment"²⁴ Dyslexia has been associated with causes of early literacy and the transition to functional illiteracy in adulthood!

¹⁹ National Report PISA 2018, Source: https://www.ise.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/PISA-2018_raport-national.pdf

²⁰ National Report PISA 2022, Source: <https://www.ise.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/PISA-Raport-2022.pdf>, p. 7

²¹ R. Vágvölgyi, A. Coldea, T. Thomas Dresler. et al. *A Review about Functional Illiteracy: Definition, Cognitive, Linguistic, and Numerical Aspects.* (2016). Source: <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5102880/>, p. 3

²² R. Vágvölgyi, K. Bergström, A. Bulajić, A. et al. *Functional illiteracy and developmental dyslexia: looking for common roots. A systematic review.* (2016). Source: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41809-021-00074-9>

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid

Could one of the causes be *Artificial Intelligence* (AI)? This is exactly the aim of this paper. To determine how which AI may influence FI.

II.2 Influence of AI on FI

In the first part of our paper, we presented some issues related to AI and its impact on the educational system. Since, at European level, there is an (alarming) increase in the phenomenon of FI, but also an accelerated increase in the use of AI (at the same time as its over-accelerated development), it is necessary, in our opinion, to identify the interdependencies between the two phenomena, which are little known at this stage but are developing at an ultra-fast pace! Moreover, it is absolutely essential to consider a well-defined process of *AI literacy*, since the ability to use the digital tools associated with AI does not come instantly, especially for people who demonstrate a high degree of maladaptation to the use of this type of technology. From the studies conducted during the pandemic and immediately after, it emerged that an alarming percentage of teachers (approx. 50%) were demonstrating inabilities in the use of educational technologies.²⁵ These inabilities were correlated with a high rate of rejection of online educational processes²⁶ by teachers themselves!

On the other hand, *AI Literacy* requires, according to studies, "*systematic thinking skills..., essential for equipping individuals with the ability to analyze, predict and solve complex problems in diverse contexts*"²⁷. It is important to note that AI Literacy contributes to the simultaneous development of both systematic thinking skills and intuitive thinking skills!²⁸ Acquiring both systematic thinking and *intuitive thinking* skills leads to the formation of another type of (higher-level) skills.²⁹, i.e., the formation of *complex problem-solving skills*!

According to experts in the field, "*Complex problem-solving skills (CPS) are defined as the ability to effectively respond to and manage problems*

²⁵ S.A. Luca, B. Gheorghită, *Attitudes towards online teaching activity in pre-university education in Romania, in a pandemic context*. Journal of Pedagogy, (1), 129 – 150. (2022) Source: <https://doi.org/10.26755/RevPed/2022.1/129>

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ W. Promma, N. Imjai et al. *The influence of AI literacy on complex problem-solving skills through systematic thinking skills and intuition thinking skills: An empirical study in Thai gen Z accounting students*. (2025) Source: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2025.100382>, p. 2

²⁸ Ibid, p. 2

²⁹ Ibid, p. 2

*characterized by their complexity, involving multiple interdependent variables and by constantly evolving situations (Dörner & Funke, 2017).... CPS is crucial in several domains, including crisis management in organizations, long-term strategic planning in business, and public policy development (Mumford et al., 2000)."*³⁰

Therefore, some aspects relevant to our topic emerge:

- AI can be a particularly useful tool in terms of partially solving/diminishing functional illiteracy by:

- Easier access to specialized information;

- Increased autonomy in learning. E.g. (Goga, 2024)³¹ *"ChatGPT can help functionally illiterate people in several ways, including through its ability to orally summarize text that a computer can read aloud, or through its ability to receive input of typed or ungrammatical dictated text that can then be corrected."*

- AI can become an extremely damaging factor through the excessive use of digital tools, while at the same time dramatically decreasing the capacity for research, analysis, and, above all, resistance to prolonged intellectual efforts. In this case, the use of AI in educational processes can be reversed in a negative sense, becoming a generator of functional illiteracy!

III. Conclusions

The two phenomena addressed, AI and FI, represent extremely serious challenges for education systems. The less the education system is prepared to adapt to the new challenges, the stronger the negative effects will be, systemically affecting the whole educational environment.

The Romanian education system operates with two large sub-systems: one in urban and one in rural areas, of approximately equal size. Between the two subsystems, the differences in terms of endowments, quality of human resources, and school performance are clearly in favor of the urban subsystem. It follows that, in reality, the Romanian educational system is representative, from the perspective of educational performance (quality in education), through the urban educational subsystem!

Functional illiteracy is present in both subsystems, especially in rural areas! Including for the reasons mentioned in this paper: difficult access to school (the school bus is a compromise solution!), socio-economic

³⁰ Ibid, p. 3.

³¹ G. Goga, *Can Generative AI Help Solve Functional Illiteracy?*(2024). Source: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1007&context=ideas-that-matter-24-25>.

background of the family, school dropout (including the "unseen" one - internal school dropout), etc.

The efficient and effective use of AI in educational processes requires considerable efforts in terms of digital facilities and access to specific AI programs. Last but not least, these efforts require, first and foremost, the AI literacy of teachers. The shock provoked by the Coronavirus pandemic (which generated the *Global Pedagogical Blackout*³²) was of great intensity, and the Romanian education system was unprepared to mitigate the effects of this shock. Research is still extremely necessary and useful in the field of the effects of this shock on the long-term preparation of the generations of children/students caught in the shock wave of this phenomenon.

The question then arises:

How fast should we move to real digitization reform in specific generative AI technologies??!!!!

Otherwise, Generation Z's informal access to AI tools will further accelerate the process of increasing functional illiteracy!

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Functional literacy/*Definition*/ UNESCO, Source:

³² L. Molina-Bonilla, L., *The new phase of the global pedagogical blackout (2022-2030 and beyond)*, (2021). Source: <https://luisbonillamolina.com/2021/12/06/the-new-phase-of-the-global-pedagogical-blackout-2022-2030-and-beyond/>

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EMBRACING THE FUTURE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN THE CLASSROOM: TRANSFORMING EDUCATION THROUGH INTELLIGENT TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract: *The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) in educational environments represents one of the most significant paradigms shifts in modern pedagogy. This article examines the current state and future potential of AI implementation in classrooms, analyzing its transformative impact on teaching methodologies, student learning outcomes, and educational accessibility. This paper presents a comprehensive framework for understanding how AI can enhance educational experiences while addressing the challenges and ethical considerations inherent in this technological revolution. The findings suggest that strategic AI implementation can personalize learning, improve educational efficiency, and prepare students for an increasingly digital future, while requiring careful consideration of privacy, equity, and pedagogical integrity.*

Keywords: *artificial intelligence, education technology, personalized learning, classroom innovation, digital pedagogy.*

Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed an unprecedented acceleration in technological advancement, with artificial intelligence emerging as a transformative force across multiple sectors. Education, as a fundamental pillar of societal development, stands at the threshold of a revolutionary transformation driven by AI technologies.

The traditional classroom model, largely unchanged for centuries, is now being reimaged through intelligent systems capable of adapting to individual learning needs, automating administrative tasks, and providing insights into student performance that were previously impossible to obtain.

The integration of AI in educational settings is not merely a technological upgrade but represents a fundamental shift in how we conceptualize teaching and learning. This transformation encompasses

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various dimensions, from personalized learning pathways and intelligent tutoring systems to automated assessment tools and predictive analytics for student success. As educational institutions worldwide grapple with diverse challenges including varying learning styles, resource constraints, and the need for scalable quality education, AI presents both unprecedented opportunities¹ and complex challenges.

Through this exploration, we seek to establish a framework for understanding how educational stakeholders can effectively embrace AI while maintaining the human elements that remain central to quality education.

The journey toward AI integration in education builds upon decades of educational technology evolution. From the introduction of computers in classrooms in the 1980s to the widespread adoption of learning management systems in the early 2000s, educational technology has consistently aimed to enhance learning experiences and improve educational outcomes. The emergence of AI represents the latest and most sophisticated iteration of this technological evolution.

Research by Clark and Mayer (2016) established foundational principles for multimedia learning that continue to inform AI-powered educational tools. Their work demonstrated that technology's effectiveness in education depends not on the technology itself but on how it is designed and implemented to support cognitive processes². This principle remains crucial as we consider AI integration strategies.

Contemporary research identifies several key areas where AI is currently making significant impacts in educational settings. Intelligent tutoring systems (ITS) have shown remarkable success in providing personalized instruction adapted to individual student needs. Studies by VanLehn (2011) and Ma (2014) demonstrate that well-designed ITS can be as effective as human tutors in certain contexts, particularly for procedural knowledge and skill-based learning.

Adaptive learning platforms represent another significant application area. These systems use machine learning algorithms to adjust content difficulty, pacing, and presentation style based on student performance and engagement patterns. Research by Oxman (2014) indicates that

¹ W. Xu, *Integrating AI technologies in education: Virtual reality and intelligent tutoring systems for enhanced academic performance*. Educational Technology Research and Development, 72(2), 234-251. (2024).

² R.C. Clark, R.E. Mayer, *E-learning and the science of instruction: Proven guidelines for consumers and designers of multimedia learning (4th ed)*. Wiley. (2016).

adaptive learning systems can improve learning outcomes by 40-60% compared to traditional instruction methods³.

Natural language processing (NLP) applications are revolutionizing how students interact with educational content. Automated essay scoring systems, chatbots for student support, and language learning applications demonstrate AI's capacity to provide immediate feedback and support across various educational domains.

Several theoretical frameworks inform our understanding of AI's potential in educational contexts. Constructivist learning theory, as articulated by Piaget and Vygotsky, emphasizes the importance of active knowledge construction and social interaction in learning processes. AI systems that support collaborative learning and provide scaffolded support align well with constructivist principles.

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) concept is particularly relevant to AI applications. AI systems can potentially identify each student's ZPD more precisely than traditional methods and provide appropriately challenging tasks that promote optimal learning growth. This theoretical alignment suggests significant potential for AI to enhance individualized instruction⁴.

Intelligent tutoring systems represent one of the most mature applications of AI in education. These systems combine artificial intelligence with cognitive science principles to provide personalized instruction that adapts to individual student needs. Modern ITS platforms can track student progress in real-time, identify knowledge gaps, and adjust instructional strategies accordingly.

Grammarly's educational applications demonstrate how NLP can support writing instruction. The system provides real-time feedback on grammar, style, and clarity while offering explanations for suggested corrections. This immediate feedback supports the iterative writing process and helps students develop stronger writing skills.

Chatbots and virtual assistants are increasingly being deployed to provide 24/7 student support. These systems can answer frequently asked questions, provide guidance on assignment requirements, and offer study tips. Georgia State University's Pounce chatbot successfully reduced summer melt rates by providing timely support to incoming students

³ S. Oxman, W. Wong & D.V., Innovations, White paper: Adaptive learning systems. *Integrated Education Solutions*. (2014).

⁴ M. Gerlich, *AI and personalized learning: bridging the gap with modern educational goals*. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2404.02798>. (2025).

during the crucial pre-enrollment period.

Learning analytics platforms also support instructional decision-making by providing educators with detailed insights into student engagement, comprehension, and progress. These data-driven insights enable more informed pedagogical choices and targeted interventions.

Personalized Learning Experiences

The most significant benefit of AI in education is its capacity to provide truly personalized learning experiences. Traditional classroom instruction, constrained by time and resource limitations, often follows a one-size-fits-all approach that may not meet the diverse needs of all students. AI systems can analyse individual learning patterns, preferences, and capabilities to create customized educational pathways that optimize learning outcomes⁵ for each student.

This personalization extends beyond simple content adaptation to include learning style accommodation, pacing adjustments, and multimodal content presentation. Students who learn better through visual representations can receive more graphical content, while those who prefer textual information can access detailed written explanations. The system can also adjust the complexity of language used in explanations to match student comprehension levels.

Research demonstrates that personalized learning approaches can significantly improve student engagement and achievement⁶. When students receive instruction tailored to their individual needs and interests, they are more likely to remain motivated and persist through challenging material. AI enables this level of personalization at scale, making it feasible to provide individualized instruction to large numbers of students simultaneously.

Enhanced Accessibility and Inclusion

AI technologies have tremendous potential to make education more accessible to students with diverse needs and abilities. Speech recognition and synthesis technologies can support students with hearing or visual impairments, while natural language processing can help students with reading difficulties by providing alternative text presentations.

Machine learning algorithms can identify patterns in student

⁵ S. Akgun & C. Greenhow, *Artificial intelligence in education: A systematic literature review*. (2021).

⁶ Q. Liu et al. *The Impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on Students' Academic Development*. Education Sciences. (2024).

behaviour that may indicate learning disabilities or other challenges, enabling early intervention and support. This proactive approach can prevent academic difficulties from compounding over time and ensure that all students receive appropriate accommodations.

Furthermore, AI can support multilingual learners by providing real-time translation services and culturally adapted content. This capability is particularly valuable in diverse educational settings where students may speak different native languages or come from varied cultural backgrounds.

Improved Assessment and Feedback

Traditional assessment methods often provide limited feedback and may not accurately capture student learning progress. AI-powered assessment tools can provide immediate, detailed feedback that helps students understand their mistakes and learn from them. These systems can also track learning progress over time, providing insights into long-term retention and skill development.

Formative assessment capabilities are particularly enhanced through AI applications. Instead of relying solely on periodic tests or assignments, AI systems can continuously monitor student understanding through their interactions with educational content. This ongoing assessment enables real-time adjustments to instruction and immediate support when students encounter difficulties.

Automated scoring systems for written work have evolved beyond simple grammar checking to provide substantive feedback on content organization, argument structure, and critical thinking. These systems can help students improve their writing skills through iterative feedback cycles while reducing grading burden on instructors.

Administrative Efficiency and Resource Optimization

AI applications can significantly improve administrative efficiency in educational institutions. Automated scheduling systems can optimize class assignments, room allocations, and resource distribution. Predictive analytics can inform enrolment planning and resource allocation decisions.

Grading automation, while controversial, can free up significant instructor time for more valuable activities such as individualized student mentoring, curriculum development, and pedagogical innovation. When properly implemented, these systems can handle routine grading tasks while allowing human educators to focus on higher-level instructional activities. Student support services can also benefit from AI applications.

Chatbots can handle routine inquiries, freeing up human staff to address more complex student needs. Predictive analytics can identify students who may need additional support services, enabling proactive outreach and intervention.

Gerlich (2025) found that ChatGPT promotes metacognitive laziness as learners become dependent on GenAI assistance, diminishing their own engagement in metacognitive processes. A recent meta-analysis⁷ of empirical studies on ChatGPT's impact on learning showed increased performance but diminished mental effort, questioning its effects on learning (Deng, 2024).

Privacy and Data Security

The implementation of AI in educational settings raises significant privacy and data security concerns. Educational AI systems typically require access to vast amounts of student data, including academic performance records, behavioural patterns, and sometimes personal information. This data collection raises important questions about privacy rights, data ownership, and potential misuse of sensitive information.

Students and parents may be uncomfortable with the extent of data collection required for AI systems to function effectively. Learning analytics platforms can track every click, pause, and interaction, creating detailed profiles of student behaviour and learning patterns. While this information is valuable for educational purposes, it also creates privacy risks if not properly protected.

Data breaches in educational technology systems have become increasingly common, exposing sensitive student information to potential misuse. Educational institutions must implement robust cybersecurity measures and establish clear data governance policies to protect student privacy while enabling AI functionality.

The question of data ownership is particularly complex in educational contexts. Students, parents, educational institutions, and technology vendors all have legitimate interests in educational data, but their priorities may conflict. Clear policies and agreements are needed to establish data rights and responsibilities.

⁷ X. Deng, et al. *The effects of ChatGPT on learning: A meta-analysis of empirical studies.* (2024).

Equity and Access Issues

While AI has the potential to improve educational equity, it also risks exacerbating existing inequalities if not carefully implemented. The digital divide means that some students may not have access to the technology infrastructure required for AI-powered educational tools. Schools in low-income areas may lack the resources to implement sophisticated AI systems, potentially widening achievement gaps.

Algorithmic bias represents another significant equity concern. AI systems trained on biased data or designed with implicit biases can perpetuate and amplify educational inequalities. For example, if an AI system is trained primarily on data from privileged student populations, it may not work effectively for students from different backgrounds or with different learning needs.

The cost of implementing AI systems can be prohibitive for many educational institutions, particularly those serving disadvantaged populations. This creates a risk that AI benefits will primarily accrue to well-resourced schools and students, further disadvantaging those who are already underserved.

Teacher Concerns and Professional Development

There are fears that AI systems may eventually replace human teachers or significantly diminish their importance in the educational process⁸. These concerns can create resistance to AI implementation and may hinder successful integration efforts.

Teachers often lack the technical knowledge and skills needed to effectively implement and use AI tools in their classrooms. Professional development programs are essential to help educators understand AI capabilities, learn to integrate these tools into their teaching practices, and develop the skills needed to work effectively with AI systems.

Pedagogical and Ethical Considerations

Questions arise about whether AI-driven education maintains the human elements that are crucial to effective teaching and learning. Education involves more than knowledge transmission; it includes character development, social learning, and the cultivation of critical thinking skills. There are concerns that over-reliance on AI may diminish these important aspects of education.

⁸ <https://edtechmagazine.com/k12/article/2024>

The use of AI in education also raises ethical questions about autonomy and agency in learning. If AI systems make most decisions about what students learn, how they learn it, and at what pace, students may have reduced opportunities to develop self-directed learning skills and personal agency.

There are also concerns about the transparency and explainability of AI systems used in education. Students and educators may not understand how AI systems make decisions about learning pathways, assessments, or recommendations. This lack of transparency can undermine trust and may make it difficult to identify and correct errors or biases.

Successful AI implementation in educational settings requires a thoughtful, gradual approach rather than wholesale transformation. Educational institutions should begin with pilot programs that test AI applications⁹ in limited contexts before scaling up to broader implementation. This approach allows for learning¹⁰, adjustment, and refinement of systems and processes.

The gradual integration strategy should prioritize areas where AI can provide the most immediate and obvious benefits while presenting the lowest risk. For example, schools might begin with AI-powered administrative tools or simple adaptive learning platforms before moving to more complex applications like intelligent tutoring systems or predictive analytics. Change management principles are crucial during this process. Stakeholders need time to understand AI capabilities, develop comfort with new technologies, and adapt their practices accordingly.

Professional Development and Training

Comprehensive professional development programs are essential for successful AI implementation. Teachers and administrators need to understand not only how to use AI tools but also how these technologies can enhance their educational practices. Training should address both technical skills and pedagogical applications.

Professional development should be ongoing rather than one-time training events. As AI technologies continue to evolve rapidly, educators need continuous learning opportunities to stay current with new

⁹ <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-023-00436-z>

¹⁰ M. Bond, et al. *A meta systematic review of artificial intelligence in higher education: a call for increased ethics, collaboration, and rigour*. International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education. (2024).

capabilities and best practices. This might include formal workshops, peer learning communities, and self-directed online learning opportunities.

Training programs should also address ethical and privacy considerations related to AI use in education. Educators need to understand their responsibilities for protecting student data and ensuring that AI applications are used in ways that benefit all students equitably. Students can also provide valuable insights into privacy concerns and preferences for how AI is used in their education.

Parent engagement is particularly important given privacy and data concerns. Parents need clear, understandable information about how AI systems work, what data is collected, how it is used and protected, and what benefits their children can expect to receive. AI implementation requires significant infrastructure investments, including hardware, software, network capacity, and technical support capabilities. Educational institutions must carefully plan these investments to ensure that they can support AI applications effectively and sustainably.

Cloud-based AI services may provide more accessible options for schools with limited technical infrastructure, but they also raise additional privacy and data security considerations. Institutions must carefully evaluate different deployment options and choose approaches that align with their technical capabilities and policy requirements.

Budget planning for AI implementation should include not only initial acquisition costs but also ongoing maintenance, support, and upgrade expenses. AI systems require continuous updates and improvements¹¹, and these costs must be factored into long-term financial planning.

Duolingo: AI-Powered Language Learning

Duolingo represents one of the most successful consumer applications of AI in education, with over 500 million registered users worldwide. The platform uses machine learning algorithms to personalize language learning experiences and optimize learning outcomes. Natural language processing capabilities enable the system to provide detailed feedback on pronunciation and grammar.

Duolingo's AI systems also conduct A/B tests on various aspects of the learning experience, from lesson structure to user interface design.

¹¹ S. Akgun, & C. Greenhow, *Artificial intelligence in education: A systematic literature review*. Expert Systems with Applications. Expert Systems with Applications, 178, 115040. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eswa.2021.115040>. (2021).

This continuous optimization approach has enabled the platform to achieve learning outcomes that compare favourably to traditional language instruction methods.

The success of Duolingo demonstrates the potential for AI to make high-quality education more accessible and affordable. The platform has enabled millions of people to learn new languages who might not otherwise have had access to language instruction.

Future Directions and Emerging Technologies

The rapid advancement of large language models and natural language processing technologies promises to revolutionize AI applications in education¹². These systems are becoming increasingly capable of understanding and generating human-like text, enabling more sophisticated interactions between students and educational AI systems.

Future tutoring systems may be able to engage in complex, nuanced conversations about academic content, providing explanations that are tailored not only to student knowledge levels but also to their interests, cultural backgrounds, and learning preferences.

AI tutors could analyze student responses to open-ended questions, identify misconceptions or gaps in understanding, and provide targeted feedback that helps students develop deeper conceptual understanding.

Immersive Technologies and AI Integration

The integration of artificial intelligence with immersive technologies such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) promises to create powerful new educational experiences. AI algorithms can personalize immersive learning environments, adapting scenarios, difficulty levels, and instructional support based on individual student needs and responses.

Virtual reality simulations powered by AI can provide safe, controlled environments for students to practice complex skills or explore dangerous or inaccessible locations. Medical students might practice surgical procedures in AI-enhanced virtual environments that adapt to their skill levels and provide real-time feedback and guidance.

Augmented reality applications can overlay AI-generated information and instructions onto real-world environments, creating contextual learning experiences that bridge theoretical knowledge and practical

¹² R.C. Clark, R.E. Mayer, *E-learning and the science of instruction: Proven guidelines for consumers and designers of multimedia learning* (4th ed). Wiley. (2016).

application. Students studying biology might use AR applications that identify plants and animals in their natural environments while providing detailed information about their characteristics and ecological roles.

Emotional AI and Social-Emotional Learning

Emerging research in emotional artificial intelligence holds significant promise for educational applications¹³. These systems can recognize and respond to student emotions, potentially providing support for social-emotional learning and mental health. Emotional AI systems could identify when students are frustrated, confused, or disengaged and automatically adjust instructional approaches or provide appropriate support. These systems might also help students develop emotional regulation skills by providing real-time feedback about their emotional states and suggesting coping strategies.

The integration of emotional AI with educational systems raises important privacy and ethical considerations, as these applications require access to sensitive information about student emotional states and behaviours. Careful consideration must be given to how this information is collected, used, and protected.

Principles for Ethical AI in Education

The development and implementation of AI systems in educational settings must be guided by clear ethical principles that prioritize student welfare, privacy, and educational effectiveness. These principles should address issues of fairness, transparency, accountability, and human oversight.

Fairness requires that AI systems treat all students equitably and do not discriminate based on protected characteristics such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, or disability. This requires careful attention to training data, algorithm design, and ongoing monitoring for bias and discriminatory outcomes.

Transparency means that students, parents, and educators should understand how AI systems work, what data they collect, and how they make decisions that affect student learning. Educational institutions must maintain human oversight of AI systems and be prepared to intervene when systems make errors or produce inappropriate results.

¹³ <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/379259445>

Educational AI systems should also help students develop critical thinking skills about technology use and algorithmic decision-making. Students need to understand how AI systems work and how to evaluate and question AI-generated recommendations and conclusions ¹⁴ . Educational institutions should also provide clear opt-out mechanisms for students and parents who prefer not to participate in AI-powered systems.

Human-AI Collaboration

Ethical AI implementation in education should focus on human-AI collaboration rather than human replacement. AI systems should be designed to augment and enhance human capabilities rather than substituting for human judgment and expertise. While AI can provide valuable data analysis, personalization, and routine task automation, humans must retain responsibility for important educational decisions and maintain meaningful relationships with students.

Professional development programs should help educators understand how to work effectively with AI systems while maintaining their professional autonomy and expertise. Teachers should be empowered to override AI recommendations¹⁵ when their professional judgment suggests different approaches would be more appropriate.

Conclusion

The integration of artificial intelligence in educational settings represents both an unprecedented opportunity and a significant challenge for the future of learning. As this comprehensive analysis has demonstrated, AI technologies have the potential to transform education by providing personalized learning experiences, improving accessibility, enhancing assessment and feedback, and optimizing educational resource allocation.

Privacy and data security issues must be addressed through robust technical safeguards and clear governance frameworks. Equity considerations require deliberate efforts to ensure that AI benefits all students rather than exacerbating existing educational inequalities. Teacher concerns about professional roles and job security must be addressed through comprehensive professional development and change

¹⁴ PMC. *Unveiling the shadows: Beyond the hype of AI in education*. (2024).

¹⁵ ResearchGate. AI in education: Enhancing learning experiences and student outcomes. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/379259445>. (2024).

management strategies that emphasize human-AI collaboration rather than replacement.

Looking toward the future, emerging technologies such as advanced natural language processing, immersive learning environments, emotional AI, and quantum computing promise even more sophisticated educational applications. However, these advances will require continued attention to ethical considerations and careful evaluation of their impacts on student learning and development.

Educational institutions, policymakers, technology developers, and educators must work collaboratively to realize the potential benefits of AI while addressing its challenges and risks. This will require ongoing dialogue, research, and adaptation as both AI technologies and our understanding of their educational applications continue to evolve.

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THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION THROUGH THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS OF ROMANIAN PRE- UNIVERSITY EDUCATION SCHOOLS

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Abstract: *Starting in 2007, the Romanian educational system began regulating the accreditation procedures of educational entities within the system and their effective implementation, making education the second regulated field in Romania, following the construction domain. The accreditation procedures, evaluation, and self-evaluation methodologies of schools and universities in the system (generically referred to as "educational entities") had as a convergent purpose the achievement of what was defined by the legislative-normative package developed, namely, "assurance of education quality". In our paper, we will analyze critically and proactively the main causes of the semi-failure of ensuring the quality of education in the Romanian educational system and, at the same time, formulate possible solutions regarding a correct technical approach to quality assurance, based on elements of quality management, already established for over 80 years.*

Keywords: *education; quality assurance; system; process; accreditation*

1. Introduction

The accreditation of educational entities is a "key aspect of external quality assurance". Schools are evaluated by specialized agencies called "external quality assurance agencies" based on predefined standards and criteria. Institutions that meet these standards are granted accreditation or certification, which signifies their commitment to quality education. Accreditation enhances an institution's reputation, facilitates student mobility, and provides assurance to stakeholders."¹

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¹ Ibid

Therefore, it is unanimously accepted internationally that accreditation of schools is similar to the guarantee that they provide that they can achieve "quality assurance." According to general approaches on this topic, "*accreditation is the recognition by a specialized (accreditation) agency that an educational entity maintains a certain level of educational standards.*"²

The school accreditation process in Romania, linked to quality assurance, began in 2005 with the development of a legislative and regulatory package on this issue and its effective implementation starting in 2007. The definition of school accreditation in the Romanian education system does not differ greatly from those mentioned above. Quality assurance in education is a requirement of the fundamental law on secondary education, Law No. 198/2023.

The idea of school accreditation is not new in the Romanian education system, with accreditation being frequently applied after 1990 only to schools that were entirely privately funded, also known as *private schools*. This type of school began to appear in Romania after 1990, as the communist regime did not allow private schools to operate in the Romanian education system before 1990! Thirty-five years after the change of political regime in Romania, at the time of writing, there were, according to official data, 1,094 private schools with *accredited status*.³ . These schools operate alongside 6,127 public schools⁴ (fully funded by the state), which have *the same accredited status*. The 7,221 schools are spread across the whole of Romania, operating in twice as many locations, with private schools generally concentrated in urban areas and/or close to them. Therefore, the processes specific to quality management at the level of the education system are very large, of the mega-process type! The 7,221 schools are currently organized and coordinated by school inspectorates in Romania's 42 counties (including Bucharest, which has an atypical school network!).

The distribution of the school network by place of residence (rural-urban) is particularly relevant from a quality assurance perspective, as the two environments have significantly different characteristics that strongly influence the process. Thus, most schools (11,580 locations/buildings) are located in rural areas, compared to 6,621 in urban *areas*. It is interesting to

² *Definition of Accreditation*, source:

<https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/schools/apply/the-basics-of-school-accreditation>

³ *Accredited and authorized educational institutions*, source:

<https://siiir.edu.ro/carto/#/rete>

⁴ *Ibid*

note that the proportion of students distributed by place of residence is exactly the opposite: *approximately 1 million in rural areas compared to 2 million in urban areas!*

This is an approximate "picture" of pre-university education in Romania, which is in a state of constant flux, both in terms of school locations and the almost constant decline in the number of students in the system.

The considerable differences between urban and rural areas in terms of the institutional capacity of schools (to organize and deliver educational processes at different levels of education) strongly influenced the process of developing and adapting the first school accreditation standards in Romania in 2007, based on which the accreditation process for schools in the system began in the same year. The process of accrediting schools in the system began in the same year.

Given the number of public schools (generically referred to as "state educational institutions") in the system, a special provision was introduced at the end of the legislation at that time, stating that "*all educational institutions and units operating legally on the date of entry into force of this emergency ordinance shall retain their status.....(AN: accredited school)*"⁵.

The significance of this provision was that any school in operation at the time was considered accredited, even if it had not been evaluated according to the new standards and even if it did not meet the requirements of the new accreditation standard! This was a very important provision because, at the time the law was enacted, there were over 9,000 public schools in operation. Although their number has gradually decreased to the aforementioned figure for the present (6,127), the evaluation of all schools in the system based on the accreditation standard related to quality legislation has not been completed even at the time of writing this article, for multiple reasons: a very large number of locations (over 18,000 locations for the 6,125 public schools with legal personality), their dispersion, especially of schools in rural areas, throughout the country, etc.

According to this legislative provision, this means that at the time the law came into force, the 6,125 public schools (operating in 18,000 locations) were considered to have achieved quality assurance in education! Clearly, this assessment is at least forced in the absence of rigorous evaluations!

⁵ Government Emergency Ordinance No. 75/2005, Art. 40, source:
<https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliuDocument/63367>

The study highlights that, although the financial costs of implementing and applying specific school authorization/accreditation procedures have been particularly high—in the order of several million euros—in the 20 years since they were introduced (in 2005), no realistic analysis of the progress of this important initiative has been carried out! Last but not least, the study emphasizes the imperative need to align *the terms and definitions*, which are largely erroneous, incomplete, or reinvented, used in the Romanian project on *quality assurance in education*, with the definitions and concepts specific to quality management.

2. Landmarks, concepts, and review of the specialized literature

Quality assurance – in the context of the literature

In most educational environments, school *accreditation* is an essential aspect, increasingly used to grant a status of trust by stakeholders. Accreditation is also important because it guarantees that schools with this status have achieved *quality assurance*.

Quality assurance in education in the European Union plays a key role, especially since 2009, with the approval and launch of the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council (18 June 2009) on the establishment of a *European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQARF)*. The text of the recommendation explicitly states the need to approach quality assurance and improvement on the basis of W.E. Deming's well-known PDCA cycle and to establish common criteria applicable to education and training systems (EFP in Romanian and VET in English).⁶

Surprisingly, in Romania, it was understood that the recommendation approved by the Council of Europe and the application of this important reference framework were intended only for vocational and technical education, an important but minor segment of the education system! Is this just a case of a "mistranslated" word game?⁷ The consequence of this "error" was the failure to apply the provisions of the framework in education systems (initial training) and in vocational training systems,

⁶ Ibid., points (10), (11), (12)

⁷ AN: The two phrases have similar translations in Romanian: Vocational Education and Training systems (VET systems = sisteme de educație și formare profesională and Vocational and Technical Education system (VTE system). Since 2010, we have drawn attention to this major error through numerous statements, including dedicated articles (N. Dragulanescu, R. China *Corrective actions and timely corrections in the current Romanian approach to ensuring the quality of education*, *Quality – Access to Success*, no. 4- 10, 2010, <https://submission.calitatea.ro/index.php/QAS/about>

with the obvious consequence that the two systems are not compatible on an important issue, such as *quality assurance*!

According to documents and definitions formulated in European institution publications, "*quality assurance involves the systematic review of the way in which education is provided, to maintain and improve its quality, equity, and efficiency. It includes school self-evaluation, external evaluation (including inspections), evaluation of teachers and school leaders, and student evaluation.*"

Consequently, does a school's *accreditation*, obtained through an external evaluation process based on specific accreditation standards covering the aspects mentioned in the definition, demonstrate that the school has achieved *quality assurance*? Perhaps we should also consider that *accreditation* is a *post-factum* process, while *quality assurance* involves preventive actions, i.e., *ante-factum* processes!

An analysis of approaches to the accreditation process of educational institutions in advanced education systems reveals the particular importance attached to the accreditation of a school, since, once this status is obtained, the "image" of the accredited institution becomes "instantaneously" different! The institution becomes much more credible and attractive to stakeholders.

*The American Council of Training and Development (ACTD)*⁸ It is one of the most reputable (international) accreditation agencies for schools and universities in the USA. ACTD distinguishes between *institutional accreditation*—which demonstrates an institution's ability to provide training programs at "*international quality standards*," and *program accreditation* of an institution (already accredited)—which demonstrates that the program undergoing accreditation meets "*ACTD international accreditation standards*." In ACTD's view, accreditation focuses on "*the relevance of the educational program (proposed for accreditation), the effectiveness of teaching methods, the transparency of institutional practices, and their student-centeredness!*"⁹

Given that the accreditation of educational institutions has gradually become a global industry, it is important to highlight the different approaches to the tools used by accreditation agencies. In the USA, for example, a school's accreditation is only valid if the accrediting agency is recognized by the US Department of Education.¹⁰

⁸ *American Council of Training and Development*, <https://www.actd.us/>

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ *Study in States*, source: <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/schools/apply/the-basics-of-school-accreditation>; U.S. Department of Education, <https://www.ed.gov/>

*The New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC)*¹¹ It is one of the major players in the school accreditation market in the US and internationally. NEASC's approach to accreditation is interesting, from our point of view, in that it develops different standards for different categories of schools: public schools, private schools, and different standards for schools outside the US (international schools). Even within "independent schools," the standards are separate for Catholic schools and Islamic schools!¹²

It should be noted that in Romania, the standards developed by specific agencies in the field are approved by legislative acts.¹³ They are the same for public and private schools. For schools operating under rules other than those specific to the Romanian education system, only certain requirements/criteria are developed by the respective agencies to identify them, especially in pre-university education, as there are no such situations in university education!

For a comparative analysis, we have chosen an example of the school accreditation process in the USA, based on the NEASC model. The accreditation standards formulated by NEASC for independent schools are 14 in number, structured into two categories: 6 *fundamental standards* (for institutional accreditation) and 7 *program standards*. All standards include the requirements and materials/documents necessary to provide evidence of compliance with the standard. Noteworthy elements of the standards include *a focus on students and on the financial stability of the institution to provide a safe academic environment for students*. Last but not least, we noted the need for an annual "opinion audit" so that *"the school can accurately identify current and long-term financial realities and challenges."*¹⁴

It should be noted that the six fundamental standards are systematically integrated into areas that reflect the school's status at the time of the evaluation and its prospects for maintaining and developing a climate conducive to high-quality educational processes. The program standards converge on the idea of student-centeredness. *Standard 14* is dedicated to strategic planning and validates the logical correlation

¹¹ *The New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC)*,
<https://www.neasc.org/about>

¹² Ibid

¹³ AN: Government Decisions

¹⁴ *Standards for Accreditation - Independent Schools*,
<https://www.neasc.org/standards-independent>

between "commitment to long-term viability and innovation."¹⁵ And the school's strategic planning!

Of particular note is the importance given to the accreditation process, which, in NEASC's approach, *is a cyclical process lasting 10 years!* It includes a *pre-accreditation* process, the actual *accreditation* process, a two-year *progress cycle* culminating in a *progress report*, and a five-year cycle based on the two-year progress report, both of which are submitted to the NEASC evaluation committee. These evaluation/self-evaluation sequences are supplemented by an annual report that the school principal must submit to NEASC.

The essential aspects of the evaluation process carried out by NEASC for accreditation are:

- A major concern is avoiding conflicts of interest. The commission's decisions are based exclusively on professional judgments that exclude conflicts of interest: previous, current, or future affiliation with the school being evaluated, affiliation with another school in the same educational system, a close relative affiliated with the school being evaluated, etc.
- The school sends the commission a self-evaluation report based on the accreditation standards, which will be carefully analyzed by the commission.
- There are two separate visits: one for the fundamental standards (1-6) and another for the program standards.
- The evaluation is based on compliance (binary judgment on the assessment of evidence related to the fulfillment of standards "met (MET)/not met (UNMET);
- For unmet standards, a maximum of one year is allowed for correction of the unmet standards.
- The differences between the self-evaluation report and the team's evaluation will be explained by the school.
- The report must not mention the names of school staff involved in the evaluation process, and recommendations are in the form of "recommendations" rather than requirements!

Following a sequential analysis of the specialized literature, some conclusions can be drawn regarding the approach to accreditation in various educational systems. It should be noted that these conclusions are

¹⁵ Ibid

based on the examples analyzed and represent the author's point of view in relation to the topic studied in the article:

- School accreditation is a comprehensive process that involves the evaluated school meeting standards specifically designed to define the school's performance at the time of evaluation.
- Verifying compliance with standards during the evaluation process involves a binary judgment: *yes/no, compliant/non-compliant*, which verifies compliance with the requirements of the standard. From this perspective, the evaluation visit is more of an inspection/audit visit (verification of compliance!), with the actual *evaluation – highlighting progress –* taking place over a long period of time, sometimes even 10 years! (e.g., NEASC).
- In most approaches, accreditation is a voluntary option for schools and is not mandatory.
- The accreditation standards formulated describe, in all situations, optimal levels of quality for the educational activities and processes evaluated!
- School accreditation is closely linked to quality assurance, being a guarantee of quality assurance, although this is an *ante factum* process, confirmed by accreditation, a *post-factum* process!
- *In most cases, it is not explained what quality assurance in education actually means, nor whether school accreditation is sufficient to achieve this important goal!*

Interesting observations on school accreditation (K-12) are made in the paper *Does Accreditation Lead to School Improvement? Perceptions of Educators in K-12 Settings* (Shal, Ghamrawi, Ghamrawi, 2024). The authors' criticisms focus on the accuracy of the self-evaluation reports produced by schools seeking accreditation and highlight an essential aspect of the functioning of accredited schools: *"accreditation does not improve student performance, but rather ensures that the school is closer to the model established by the accrediting body"*. In the same context, the authors draw on the opinions of experts who suggest that *"all accredited schools become homogeneous in terms of how they look and function, thereby restricting competitiveness and innovation."*¹⁶ This leads to the concept of isomorphism, a concept comparable to that of *neocolonialism* and *"McDonaldization."*¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 5

¹⁷ Ibid

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

Our study is based on public data provided by the main institutions with responsibilities in the field of education: the Romanian Ministry of Education, through its annual reports on the state of education, and ARACIP, through its reports and analyses carried out during its 18 years of effective activity in the field of school authorization and accreditation. At the same time, we also included public analyses and reports from some big-time institutions, like the World Bank and the OECD.

From the content of the above-mentioned reports, data relating to our topic, namely school accreditation and the impact of this process on the quality of education in the Romanian education system, were extracted and analyzed in particular.

3.2 Research tools and data analysis

Given our topic, the official reports on school accreditation and the tools used to carry out the accreditation process, we believe that a structured analysis of three key areas is relevant to clarify the essential issues addressed in this study:

- Conceptual analysis of the standards used and the effects of their use in the pre-university education system;
- Analysis of the methodology for evaluating schools for accreditation and its effects on the education system.
- Qualitative analysis of data on school accreditation, as reflected in public reports produced by the institutions responsible for this area, as mentioned above.

The current study is based only on publicly available official data on school accreditation. We have previously presented the evolution of the standards used in the secondary education system for school accreditation.

3.2.1 Assessment standards used in the evaluation of secondary schools

According to the definition established by ISO¹⁸ The definition of a standard is set out in *ISO/IEC Guide 2: 1996*.¹⁹

¹⁸ ISO: *International Organization for Standardization*, source:

<https://www.iso.org/home.html>

¹⁹ *What is an ISO standard?*, source: <https://www.qualitycert.ro/standard-iso-ce-este-si-cu-ce-beneficii-vine/>

The essence of the definition consists of several aspects related to the standard:

- **The consensus** by which the standard is established.
- **The optimum level** of activities is established by the standard.
- **The voluntary approach** to the standard by the organizations concerned.

A general definition of the concept of "standard" can be found in European Commission publications, which has the same "philosophy" as the definition given by ISO, with exactly the same essential aspects (consensus, optimum degree, voluntary approach).

Currently, secondary schools in Romania are evaluated based on *standards* approved by Government Decision No. 631/2022²⁰ Contrary to the general definitions agreed at the global level, the standards used in the evaluation of secondary schools are *mandatory* for authorization and accreditation, and optional for the "reference" standard! According to the normative act, the three standards (authorisation, accreditation (periodic evaluation), and reference) have the same structure:

- 16 criteria;
- 24 indicators;
- A considerable number of requirements (approximately 100).

A multi-level picture of the structure of the standards and their induction into the system is presented in Figure 1:

²⁰ Government Decision No. 631/2022 amending Annex to Government Decision No. 994/2020, p. 13. Source: <https://aracip.eu/categorii-documente/functionare-legala>

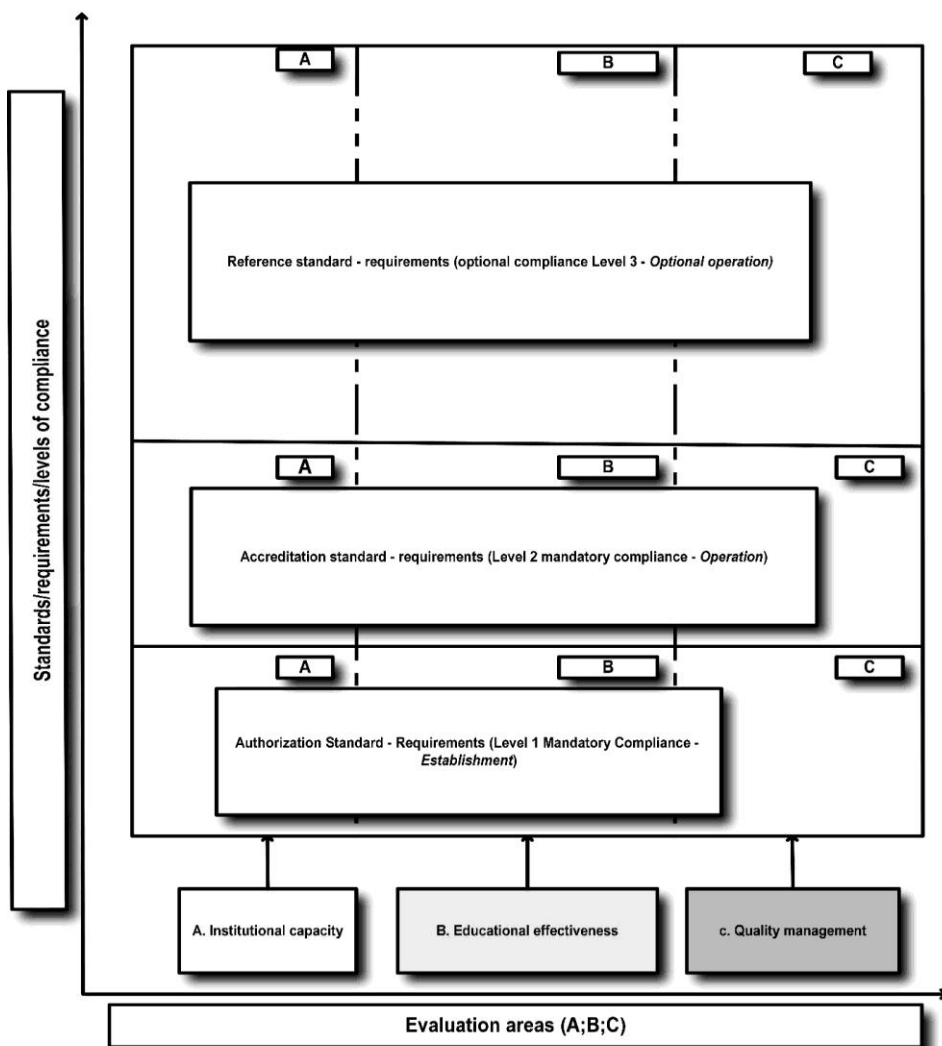


Figure 1: Multilevel structure of standards used in the evaluation of schools in the pre-university education system.

Source: authors

If we analyze the criteria underlying the construction of the standards, we consider that the one relating to *employability* is the most important, as this criterion links the program studied to the labor market, where the graduate will ultimately end up! The standard refers to this criterion through two requirements for accreditation: "B.85 and B.86":

"B.85. Monitoring the further destination of graduates, for each graduating class and for each level of education existing in the educational institution, based on a sample.

B.86. *Use of data on the further destination of graduates to improve the educational offer.*"²¹

Unfortunately, the requirements are formulated in general terms regarding the employability of a graduate and do not link to three essential aspects, in terms of identifying the employment of graduates in *the fields studied, in related fields, or in other fields!* In this case, the educational offer cannot be improved, given the superficiality of the data collected!

The following conclusions can be drawn regarding the standards used to evaluate Romanian schools for authorization/accreditation:

- The requirements of each standard are formulated in terms of "at least," which means that it is sufficient to meet the minimum requirements of the standard.
- The large number of requirements induces a status of self-sufficiency in meeting the accreditation standard, although, according to Romanian legislation, this defines a minimum level of quality. The aforementioned self-sufficiency leads to the emergence of a "minimum level" paradox (China, 2015): *"Maximum importance is given to the minimum level"*!²²
- The "C. Quality management" area of the standard is usually limited to the formulation of procedures related to the improvement of certain activities in the life of the school organization. This area does not reflect the need to implement a quality management system in the functioning of the organization!

3.2.2 Analysis of the methodology for evaluating secondary schools in Romania

The evaluation process for secondary schools in Romania is carried out based on Government Decision No. 993/2020²³. Among the provisions of the aforementioned normative act, we highlight several aspects that are significant for the evaluation process of secondary schools in Romania:

- School accreditation involves a preliminary stage: provisional operating authorization. At this stage, although the school is practically established, Romanian legislation does not recognize

²¹ Government Decision No. 631/2022, p. 13, source: <https://aracip.eu/categorii-documente/functionare-legala>

²² R. Chină, *Quality management in pre-university education*, Bucharest University Press. (2015)

²³ Government Decision No. 993/2020 (amended and supplemented by Government Decision No. 649/2022), source: Aracip, <https://aracip.eu/categorii-documente/functionare-legala>

the name "school." Obtaining provisional operating authorization requires meeting the requirements of the authorization standard, allowing the initiator to carry out the educational process by expanding its activities in the educational environment, but without the name "school"! According to current legislation in this area, the name "school" is obtained upon accreditation. It is important to note that during the period of operation under the authorization, although the educational process is carried out (enrolling children/students in study programs) and teaching staff are managed, these are carried out by the initiator (the initiating legal entity) and not by the educational entity. It follows that, during the period of operation with "provisional authorization" status, students and teaching staff at "authorized schools" cannot have the same rights as students and teaching staff at schools that have obtained accreditation!

- The evaluation is carried out by active teaching staff from the education system who, following training programs, become "evaluation and accreditation experts." Evaluation and accreditation experts are tenured teachers in the pre-university education system at schools other than the one being evaluated.
- As the evaluation is one of conformity, it is carried out based on a binary "yes/no" judgment, consisting essentially of verifying the conformity of the evidence (documents) presented by the "school" with the requirements of the accreditation standard. From this perspective, according to the philosophy of the evaluation process, school evaluation is at most "secondary" because the process is carried out by experts/teachers from within the system, not by independent experts with no connection to the school/education system!
- Once the evaluation process is complete and the accreditation standard requirements are met, the school obtains accreditation and is legally "established" by being granted legal personality. The next mandatory evaluation, called periodic evaluation, will take place after 5 years. This process also aims to maintain the school at the level of the accreditation standard requirements (minimum quality level) based on a compliance analysis.
- The evaluation process does not include steps to *highlight progress* between the primary (accreditation) and secondary (periodic) evaluations through the preparation of appropriate reports.

- The rating given by the accreditation agency for obtaining accredited school status is "satisfactory." Higher ratings are given for meeting any requirement of the reference standard – ratings of "good" and "very good" for meeting all requirements of the standard! In practice, this is impossible to achieve by any school in the system for multiple reasons: The functioning of a school is a dynamic process that can at any time lead to a "fall" below the requirements of one of the standards!

3.2.3 Analysis of the results obtained by the Romanian secondary education system in the PISA tests, correlated with the quality assurance approach in this system

A relevant benchmark for evaluating the performance of an education system is *the PISA tests*.²⁴, which are globally recognized for the depth of their analysis of the results obtained at the education system level, or what we have called *quality in education*! There is a clear correlation between the results achieved by an educational system and the quality assurance approach in education, since quality assurance in education means developing a package of measures, standards, and systemic procedures designed to contribute primarily to improving the performance of the system, as reflected in the results achieved *at the system level*! For these reasons, we have opted in our study to analyze the influence of quality assurance on the performance of the Romanian secondary education system, as reflected in the PISA tests.

PISA 2022 Results (Volume I)²⁵ shows us graphically the evolution of the performance of the Romanian secondary education system over a period of 10 years (2012–2022) (approximately 4 editions of PISA tests). The graphs presented in the report, on page 458, show that the results for the three areas assessed (mathematics, *reading*, science) showed a slight increase in the 2012 and 2015 editions, followed by significant declines in the next two editions (2018, 2022). The graphs show similar trends, with slight differences!

These graphs show that the system's performance does not differ much from previous PISA editions (2006, 2009), which leads us to

²⁴ PISA test, source: <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/pisa/pisa-test.html>

²⁵ PISA 2022 Results (Volume I), pp. 460-461 source: https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2022-results-volume-i_53f23881-en.html

conclude that the influence of the quality assurance process in education, with its main pillar being *school accreditation*, has been insignificant!

The best results obtained by Romania in the PISA tests were achieved in the 2012 and 2015 editions, after which, paradoxically, performance declined, even though the system-wide quality assurance process had matured considerably!

4. Conclusions

Since 2007, the Romanian education system has fully implemented new rules on the inclusion of new educational entities in the system through *the accreditation process*. Drafted in a hurry and without consistent links to the quality management already in place, verified, and applied in economic and business environments decades ago, the quality legislation in Romania introduced new *standards* and *procedures* for the accreditation of schools in Romania.

2025 marks a considerable period of 20 years since the application of the provisions of the legislation on quality assurance in education in Romania. The analysis carried out in this article highlights some important aspects:

1. By definition, according to Romanian legislation, the accreditation standard sets a minimum level of quality for the education provided by a school! It follows that, following accreditation, granted by ministerial order, the accredited school is certified as providing education at a minimum level of quality!

2. According to Romanian legislation, the standard that describes the optimal level of quality provided by the school is the reference standard (a clearly redundant name, since there can be no "reference" reference!). Following assessment based on the requirements of the reference standard, the school receives a rating or, according to changes in legislation, a "quality certificate" with no explicit intrinsic value!

3. It is very easy to see that quality legislation in Romania focuses on the level of accreditation (minimum quality level) and much less on the optimal level, which is much more important for quality assurance! This focus has created a paradox, mentioned in our paper, of the *minimum level* (accreditation) being given maximum importance. This paradox has created a unique situation in the system, in the form of self-sufficiency among schools that have obtained accreditation. Moreover, the paradox has "forced" the education system to "gravitate" around accreditation (minimum quality level)! The effects of this gravitation have been much

more profound: hindering *benchmarking* processes, stopping a real culture of quality, etc.

4. Our analysis highlights, as do other studies in the field, the flawed construction of the standards used to evaluate Romanian schools, primarily through failure to comply with the principles set out on page 9 regarding the development of standards (ISO): *consensus, optimal level, voluntary approach*.

5. The evaluation of schools in pre-university education is of *secondary importance*, as the evaluation process involves evaluators who are active in the education system (teachers, head teachers, etc.). It should be noted that school inspectorates are only observers in this process, even though they are responsible for the management of the schools under their authority!

6. The influence of the quality assurance process on improving quality in the education system over the 20 years since its implementation is insignificant, given the results obtained in the PISA tests mentioned in our paper.

In view of the analysis carried out and the aspects mentioned, we consider that a total "reset" of the entire quality assurance process is necessary, as the huge costs of non-quality generated in the system are growing exponentially, with devastating effects on the development of the Romanian education system.

Unfortunately, the latest changes to the legislation in this area²⁶. They have brought nothing new to the field! The new provisions are even more unclear, or "reinforce" the confusion in the old provisions.

Moreover, the latest regulations on the "contraction" of the pre-university education system at various levels (increasing the number of teaching hours, increasing the principal's workload, reducing the number of schools, increasing the number of students per class, etc.) may have even greater non-qualitative effects, creating a veritable "*pit of potential*" from which the pre-university education system will struggle to emerge in the coming years...!

²⁶ AN: We refer to the two laws that were drafted and approved in 2023: LIS 199/2023, <https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/legea-invatamantului-superior-nr-199-2023.pdf>, and LIP 198/2023,

https://edu.ro/sites/default/files/_fi%C5%9Fiere/Minister/2023/Legi_educatie_Romania_educata/legi_monitor/Legea_invatamantului_preuniversitar_nr_198.pdf

All these aspects lead to an obvious conclusion:

The accreditation of Romanian schools today is by no means a guarantee of quality assurance!

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EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND QUALITY ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

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Abstract: *This article examines the relationship between educational leadership and organizational culture, arguing that school performance is an emergent outcome of the interaction between leaders, policies, and practices. By combining scholarly literature with case studies, we propose an integrated framework for action: transformational-ethical-distributive leadership (TED), anchored in a culture of learning, trust, and continuous improvement. Indicators, tools, and recommendations are presented for principals and management teams to enhance the quality of education¹.*

Keywords: *educational leadership; organizational culture; quality of education; change; professional learning.*

Introduction

Educational leadership and organizational culture are key variables in explaining performance differences among schools. Although public policies define standards and resources, the way a school community works together – the decision-making process, the quality of relationships, expectations regarding learning – determines how resources are converted into outcomes.

In the academic literature, educational leadership is associated with the influence on student learning through strategic direction, teacher development, and the design of a culture conducive to effective teaching. Culture, in turn, acts as the school's "operating system": it establishes shared meanings and norms that either facilitate or block change. In today's educational context, schools face complex challenges that require not only efficient management, but also authentic educational leadership and a high-quality organizational culture.

Educational leadership is not limited to coordinating administrative activities, but also includes creating a stimulating environment for the

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¹ The term "quality" is used in the sense of fitness for purpose and continuous development.

development of teachers and students, promoting values such as collaboration, responsibility, and pedagogical innovation. Organizational culture, in turn, reflects how these values are embedded in the daily practices of the institution. This article analyzes the fundamental concepts of leadership and organizational culture, highlighting their interdependence and impact on school performance, and provides concrete examples from practice.

In recent decades, the educational process has undergone profound transformations due to social, technological, and economic changes. Schools are no longer simple spaces for the transmission of knowledge but complex organizations in which human factors, values, and institutional culture directly influence student performance and teacher satisfaction². In this context, educational leadership becomes a strategic tool, essential for implementing reforms and sustaining an efficient organizational culture. Organizational culture can be defined as “the set of values, norms, and practices that guide the behaviors of an institution’s members.” It determines how leaders and teaching staff interact, communicate, and cooperate, directly influencing the quality of the educational act and the institutional climate.

2. Educational Leadership: Definitions and Typologies

Educational leadership is a multidimensional concept that integrates managerial competences, interpersonal skills, and the ability to influence organizational culture. Leithwood and Jantzi define educational leadership as “the process through which school leaders motivate, influence, and support teachers in order to achieve common educational goals³.”

2.1 Types of Leadership in Schools

- **Transformational leadership** – The transformational leader inspires change through vision, involving teachers and students in the development of a culture of excellence. This type of leadership focuses on innovation, stimulating creativity, and engaging staff in decision-making⁴.

- **Distributed leadership** – This approach implies delegating responsibilities and encouraging collaboration among teachers. Each

² Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2010, vol. 4, p. 79.

³ Kenneth Leithwood, Doris Jantzi, *Transformational School Leadership for Large-Scale Reform*, Thousand Oaks, Corwin Press, 2006, vol. 1, p. 15.

⁴ Lee G. Bolman, Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2017, vol. 1, p. 50.

member of the team has an active role in achieving educational objectives. Studies show that schools with distributed leadership demonstrate higher levels of teacher involvement and professional satisfaction⁵.

- **Instructional leadership** – Emphasis is placed on the development of teachers' pedagogical skills and on improving student performance. Instructional leaders coordinate curricular activities, organize training, and monitor student progress⁶.

2.2. The Impact of Leadership on School Performance

Numerous studies demonstrate that competent educational leaders have a positive influence on student engagement, teacher motivation and performance, and the effective implementation of school reforms. A concrete example can be observed in schools in Timișoara, where the implementation of distributed leadership led to increased collaboration among teachers and a reduction in school dropout rates.

In contemporary society, education plays a central role in the development of individuals and communities. Through their decisions and leadership style, educational leaders influence not only the school atmosphere but also student performance. Educational leadership is not limited to the role of principal or manager; it encompasses all forms of influence on the educational process, from coordinating teaching staff to motivating students⁷.

Recent studies show that effectively led schools tend to have higher student achievement, a healthier institutional climate, and greater teacher involvement in the educational process⁸. Therefore, understanding the impact of leadership on school performance becomes essential for effective educational policies and professional development of teachers.

The specialized literature identifies several types of leadership in educational contexts:

- **Transformational leadership** – aims to inspire and motivate teachers and students to surpass ordinary limits, promoting innovation and continuous development⁹.

⁵ Michael Fullan, *The Principal: Three Keys to Maximizing Impact*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2014, vol. 1, p. 28.

⁶ Thomas J. Sergiovanni, *Leadership for the Schoolhouse*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2007, vol. 2, p. 38.

⁷ Mihai Popescu, *Educational Leadership: Theories and Practices*, Didactic and Pedagogical Publishing House, 2018, p. 23.

⁸ Andreea Ionescu, *School management and student performance*, Iași, Polirom, 2020, p. 45.

⁹ John Smith, *Transformational Leadership in Schools*, Routledge, 2017, p. 112

- **Transactional leadership** – is based on rewards and punishments to ensure compliance with rules and the achievement of set objectives. It is less flexible and innovative, but can be effective in rigid structures¹⁰.

- **Distributed leadership** – involves empowering multiple actors within the school, such as teachers and project coordinators, to make joint decisions and increase the efficiency of the educational process¹¹.

Each type of leadership has advantages and disadvantages, and its effective application depends on the institutional context, available resources, and student needs.

Effective leadership creates a positive school climate in which teachers feel supported and valued. This translates into more active involvement in educational activities, which, in turn, positively influences student performance. Motivated teachers are more likely to use innovative teaching methods and to build constructive relationships with students – key elements for academic success.

Students are sensitive to the behavior and leadership style of teachers and school management. A transformational leader, for example, can encourage students to be more engaged in learning, to develop critical thinking skills, and to achieve higher academic standards. In contrast, rigid and authoritarian leadership may reduce student motivation and performance.

Educational leadership is therefore a decisive factor in school performance. Transformational and distributed leadership styles prove to be the most effective in creating a positive and motivating environment for both teachers and students. Conversely, authoritarian or overly transactional styles may limit the potential of students and staff. Educational policies should encourage the development of school leaders capable of promoting innovation, collaboration, and the active involvement of all educational actors.

3. Organizational Culture in Schools

Organizational culture reflects the values and practices of the institution, influencing the way its members interact and develop professionally. Schein emphasizes that organizational culture includes

¹⁰ Maria Georgescu, *Transactional Leadership and its Impact on Education*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 2019, p. 67

¹¹ Ioana Marinescu, *Distributed Leadership in Schools*, Trei Publishing House, 2021, p. 89

visible artifacts, norms and values, as well as underlying assumptions that shape employee behaviors¹².

The organizational culture of schools can be analyzed through several components. Among them are fundamental values, behavioral norms, symbols, rituals, and traditions. Fundamental values reflect the school's mission and the principles that guide teachers' activities. For instance, a school may promote values such as mutual respect, academic excellence, or solidarity among students¹³.

Behavioral norms define how members of the school community interact with one another and with students. These may be explicit, such as school regulations, or implicit, reflecting the unwritten expectations of the educational community. Rituals and traditions—such as celebrating international days, organizing school competitions, or annual ceremonies—contribute to strengthening the school's identity and fostering a sense of belonging¹⁴.

Symbols, such as the school logo, uniforms, or institutional mottos, play a significant role in transmitting cultural values and messages. They allow students and teachers to recognize the school's identity and to feel part of a larger community¹⁵.

Research shows that a positive organizational culture can significantly influence student performance and teacher satisfaction. Schools with strong cultures promote teacher collaboration, parental involvement, and the creation of a safe environment for students. Thus, teachers are motivated to develop their skills and adopt innovative teaching methods, which in turn contribute to improving academic outcomes¹⁶.

On the other hand, a weak or negative organizational culture may generate conflicts among staff, demotivation, and a lack of engagement in school activities. Communication issues and the absence of a shared

¹² Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2010, vol. 4, p. 81.

¹³ Ion Popescu, *Organizational culture in educational institutions*, Bucharest, Didactic and Pedagogical Publishing House, 2018, p. 45.

¹⁴ Maria Ionescu, *School Management and Organizational Culture*, Bucharest, University Publishing House, 2020, p. 72.

¹⁵ Alina Georgescu, *Symbols and traditions in schools*, Iași, Polirom Publishing House, 2019, p. 33.

¹⁶ Radu Mihăilescu, *School performance and organizational culture*, Bucharest, Trei Publishing House, 2021, p. 101.

purpose can lead to lower student performance and a tense institutional atmosphere¹⁷.

3.1. Elements of a Quality Organizational Culture

An effective organizational culture is characterized by the following features:

- **Transparency and open communication** – information circulates freely across all institutional levels, reducing the risk of conflicts and misunderstandings¹⁸.
- **Collaboration among team members** – teachers work together, sharing experiences and best practices¹⁹.
- **Valuing performance and innovation** – teachers are motivated to implement new pedagogical methods²⁰.
- **Commitment to continuous professional development** – schools invest in teacher training and participation in professional development programs²¹.

3.2. Strategies for Developing an Effective Organizational Culture in Schools

Building an effective organizational culture requires the active involvement of school leaders, teachers, students, and parents. Some recommended strategies include:

- **Clearly defining school values and objectives** – these must be communicated to all members of the community and integrated into daily activities.
- **Promoting collaboration and dialogue** – regular meetings among teachers and discussions with parents and students contribute to strengthening organizational cohesion.

¹⁷ Sorin Petrescu, *Organizational problems in schools*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 2017, p. 58.

¹⁸ Lee G. Bolman, Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2017, vol. 1, p. 55.

¹⁹ Michael Fullan, *The Principal: Three Keys to Maximizing Impact*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2014, vol. 1, p. 35.

²⁰ Thomas J. Sergiovanni, *Leadership for the Schoolhouse*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2007, vol. 2, p. 42.

²¹ Michael Fullan, *The Principal: Three Keys to Maximizing Impact*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2014, vol. 1, p. 40.

- **Recognition and rewarding of performance** – acknowledging the achievements of students and teachers supports motivation and greater engagement in school life.
- **Continuous teacher training** – professional development programs and training allow teachers to adopt best educational practices²².

In addition, integrating technology into the learning process and creating an inclusive environment that values diversity contribute to building an adaptable and innovative organizational culture. Organizational culture in schools is not just a set of rules and procedures; it is an essential factor for educational success. The values, norms, and traditions of an institution influence the behaviors of teachers and students, contributing to the creation of a positive and effective learning environment. By implementing cultural development strategies, schools can promote collaboration, motivation, and academic performance, thus ensuring a long-term positive impact on the educational community²³.

4. The Interdependence between Leadership and Organizational Culture

Leadership and organizational culture influence each other reciprocally. Educational leaders shape culture by promoting values, setting standards, and stimulating collaboration²⁴. At the same time, organizational culture can either support or limit leaders' effectiveness. For example, a rigid culture characterized by resistance to change may hinder the implementation of innovative educational strategies, whereas an open and collaborative culture facilitates the rapid adoption of reforms²⁵.

Leaders have the capacity to shape and transform organizational culture through their behaviors, communication, and strategic decisions. For instance, a transformational leader can promote a culture based on innovation and collaboration, encouraging staff to take risks and actively

²² Elena Dumitrescu, *Professional Development of Teachers*, Bucharest, Didactica Publishing House, 2019, p. 89.

²³ Ioana Marinescu, *Cultural Change in Education*, Bucharest, Pro Universitaria Publishing House, 2022, p. 120.

²⁴ Thomas J. Sergiovanni, *Leadership for the Schoolhouse*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2007, vol. 2, p. 45.

²⁵ Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2010, vol. 4, p. 88.

contribute to organizational development²⁶. In contrast, authoritarian leadership may generate a culture rooted in conformity and fear of failure, limiting creativity and individual initiative²⁷.

Organizational culture also influences how leaders are perceived and accepted. In organizations with a participatory culture, leaders are evaluated based on their ability to facilitate collaboration and make transparent decisions. Conversely, in hierarchy-oriented cultures, authoritarian leaders tend to be more readily accepted, while transformative behaviors may be resisted²⁸. This interdependence suggests that leadership and culture cannot be analyzed in isolation; organizational success depends on the alignment of the two components.

The interdependence between leadership and organizational culture can generate significant challenges. Cultural change requires time and consistency in leaders' behaviors; superficial or contradictory changes may produce confusion and resistance. Moreover, cultural diversity in international organizations can create tensions between leadership styles and local values. Leaders must be aware of these dynamics and adopt flexible strategies adapted to context²⁹.

From a managerial perspective, recognizing the interdependence between leadership and culture can support recruitment, training, and evaluation processes for leaders. Organizations can develop mentorship, coaching, and organizational development programs that promote values and behaviors aligned with strategic objectives. Additionally, periodic evaluation of organizational culture can highlight discrepancies between declared values and actual practices, providing opportunities to adjust leadership styles³⁰.

The interdependence between leadership and organizational culture is thus a determining factor for organizational performance and sustainability. Leaders influence culture through their behaviors and decisions, while culture conditions how leadership is perceived and accepted. Understanding this relationship enables organizations to develop coherent management

²⁶ Warren Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader*, Basic Books, 2009, p. 76.

²⁷ Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *The Change Masters*, Simon & Schuster, 2011, p. 134.

²⁸ Kim S. Cameron & Robert E. Quinn, *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture*, Jossey-Bass, 2011, p. 199.

²⁹ Hofstede, Geert, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, McGraw-Hill, 2010, p. 88.

³⁰ Cameron, Kim S., *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture*, Jossey-Bass, 2011, p. 223

strategies and to promote a harmonious and productive work environment. Therefore, organizational success depends on harmonizing leadership style with cultural values and norms, thus creating a solid foundation for innovation, motivation, and long-term performance³¹.

5. Strategies for developing a quality organizational culture

1. Training competent leaders – training programs, mentoring and continuous professional development.
2. Promoting effective collaboration and communication – regular meetings, working groups and digital platforms for the exchange of ideas.
3. Continuous performance assessment – constructive feedback and monitoring of the progress of students and teachers.
4. Community and parent involvement – creating partnerships with local organizations, involving parents in educational decisions³².

Implementing these strategies contributes to creating a stimulating educational environment, in which institutional values are respected and promoted.

An essential step for developing a quality organizational culture is the clear definition of the values and mission of the organization. The fundamental values act as a guide for the accepted and expected behaviors within the organization. The coherent communication of these values to employees and their integration into internal policies creates a favorable environment for the development of a solid culture. Organizational leaders play a crucial role in shaping organizational culture. Leadership style must be congruent with the organization's values, and managers must be living examples of expected behaviors. Inspirational leaders who practice transparency, integrity, and open communication contribute to creating a positive organizational climate³³.

A quality organizational culture requires investments in the professional and personal development of employees. Training programs should not only target technical skills, but also the development of interpersonal skills and ethical values. Also, reward systems directly influence employee behaviors. Material or symbolic rewards for performance aligned with the organization's values reinforce the desired culture.

³¹ Edgar H Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, Jossey-Bass, 2010, p. 321.

³² Michael Fullan, *The Principal: Three Keys to Maximizing Impact*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2014, vol. 1, p. 42.

³³ R. Neagu, *Modern organizational management*, University Publishing House, 2018, p. 74

6. Conclusions

Educational leadership and quality organizational culture are fundamental pillars for the success of educational institutions. Competent leaders, who promote positive values and involve teachers and the community, contribute significantly to improving school performance and developing a healthy educational environment. The presented case studies demonstrate that investment in leadership training and strengthening organizational culture is reflected in student performance, teacher satisfaction and community involvement.

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DIAGNOSIS OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL RESILIENCE OF YOUNG PEOPLE FROM RURAL AREAS AND DEVELOPMENT DIRECTIONS IN CAREER ORIENTATION

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Abstract: *This research analyses psychological resilience in relation to personality traits and coping strategies in a group of 1st year students, within the career counselling activity, with the aim of identifying the directions for the development of skills to support students who have graduated from high schools in the rural environment to harmoniously adapt to the urban university environment. The results obtained by investigating 62 first-year students (age $m=20.6$, $SD=3.18$) at various faculties (Psychology, Communication and Public Relations, Physical Education and Sports), 31 being graduates of rural high schools and 31 being graduates from the urban environment showed that those who graduated from high school in the rural environment have statistically significant lower scores on certain dimensions of psychological resilience than those who graduated from high schools in the urban environment. At the same time, it is highlighted that emotional stability as a personality trait correlates statistically significant positive with psychological resilience at a general level and that certain dimensions of psychological resilience correlate with a series of coping strategies. In conclusion, the results show that the development of effective coping strategies and*

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psychological resilience of students in the first year of university studies is a need in career counselling activities. The small number of subjects gives this research the characteristics of a pilot study, and in future research the number of participating students will grow and the effect of the development programs on the performance and adaptation of students from the 1st university year will be evaluated.

Keywords: career counselling, mental resilience, personality, coping strategies.

1. General theoretical approaches

From a traditional perspective, career counseling represents a structured process focused on informing students and master's students (and other people) about professional prospects and the criteria to be achieved, on identifying the interests, values, skills and aptitudes necessary to access the respective profession and on supporting them in establishing the objectives and strategies necessary to achieve them, so as to achieve the best possible integration into the future profession starting from the current reality¹.

Modern concepts of career consider, in addition to the activities implied by the traditional perspective, the continuous assistance given to people in the complex process of adaptation to the changing work environment^{2,3,4}.

In addition to providing information on the steps to be taken to train in a profession, career counseling for students also aims to develop certain

¹ M. Jigău, *Career counseling – compendium of methods and techniques*, Sigma Publishing House, Bucharest, 2007.

² B. Livingston, J.L. Gloo, A.K. Ward, A.S. Gabriel, J.T. Campbell, E. Block & M. Shoss, Many Roads to Success: Broadening Our Views of Academic Career Paths and Advice. *Journal of Management*, 2024, 50(4), pp. 1186-1197.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/01492063241231505>.

³ Y. Zhao, H. Zeng & X. Deng, Chinese High School Students' Career Development: Associations with Academic Self-Efficacy and Motivation. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 2024, 91, pp. 101629.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0193397323001193>.

⁴ B.L. Gustmann de Castro, D.J. Cardoso da Silva, E. Da Silva Stertz, V.M. Flores Costa, L.F. Dias Lopes & C. Pereira de Sá, The Relationship Between Personality Traits, Career Adaptability, and Gender: Evidence of Professionals from Brazilian Technology Incubators. *Environmental & Social Management Journal/Revista de Gestão Social e Ambiental*, 2024, 18(1),

https://openurl.ebsco.com/EPDB%3Agcd%3A10%3A1625994/detailv2?sid=ebsco%3Aplink%3Ascholar&id=ebsco%3Agcd%3A173873488&crl=c&link_origin=scholar.google.ro.

skills necessary to integrate harmoniously both in the current academic environment and in the future, in the chosen profession⁵. Personality traits have a central place in adaptation and performance at work along with which social skills, stress management and managing relationships with others play an important role in effective adaptation and represent factors that can be developed in career counseling⁶.

Although, according to the study published by the National Center for Educational Policy and Evaluation (2025)⁷, most students from rural areas study in urban high schools and only 13.8% of them study in rural high schools, those in the last category who continue their studies by attending faculties located exclusively in urban areas represent a separate category in student counseling activities.

Beyond the challenge of adapting to a new environment (the university), students from rural areas may also encounter other challenges, such as: greater spatial distance from family and friends (associated with the perception of emotional distancing), identifying new friends (as social resources to facilitate the transition to the new environment), perceiving feelings of social alienation, (sometimes) the need for a part-time job to supplement income, perceiving the new environment as having a faster pace and generating more stress, etc.

All these perceptions and affective experiences of students can be more easily managed by developing resources collectively called “psychological resilience”. The American Psychological Association (APA) defines resilience as “*the process and outcome of successfully adapting to*

⁵ D. Wang, Y. Li & G. Wang, A Systematic Review on Career Interventions for High School Students. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2024, 15,

<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1461503/full>.

⁶ K. Otto, S. Sobiraj, S. Schladitz, M.E.G. Vásquez, R. Roe & M.B. Mabunda, Do Social Skills Shape Career Success in the Psychology Profession? A Mixed-Method Approach. *Zeitschrift für Arbeits-und Organisationspsychologie A&O*, 2019, 63 (2),

<https://doi.org/10.1026/0932-4089/a000293>.

⁷ National Center for Education Policies and Evaluation (CNPEE) (2025). Students' access to high school: Most students from rural areas study at a high school in the city / Over a thousand students commute to high school daily and spend between half an hour and an hour on the road - Report of the Ministry of Education, <https://www.edupedu.ro/accesul-elevilor-la-liceu-majoritatea-elevilor-din-mediul-rural-invata-la-un-liceu-de-la-oras-pesto-o-mie-de-elevi-fac-naveta-zilnic-catre-liceu-si-petrec-pe-drum-intre-o-jumatate-de-ora-si-o-ora/>

difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adaptation to external and internal demands”⁸.

There are other definitions of resilience, but it is noteworthy that most of them focus on the ability of people to recover from contexts that induce significant distress or to successfully adapt to difficult life events⁹. A resilient individual is characterized as having a positive view of stress and the ability to manage it effectively, adapt to changes and cope with adverse conditions¹⁰.

Factors such as personality structure, social support and coping style are considered to influence and moderate the emotional stress experienced and, at the same time, as leading to personal development¹¹.

According to APA (2024)¹², one of the important factors that contribute to the way people adapt to difficulties/traumatic situations and to the way resilience develops and manifests itself is the one that concerns the availability and quality of social resources. Resilience can change over time depending on the person's developmental level and interaction with the environment¹³ or with other people who provide support.

At a general level, the psychological resilience approach aims at three levels: 1) describing, defining and measuring psychological resilience by relating it to individual differences¹⁴; 2) studying resilience in its dynamic dimension, investigating the specific processes through which the

⁸ American Psychological Association, Resilience. *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, 2024, <https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience>.

⁹ I. Salisu & N. Hashim, Critical Review of Scales Used in Resilience Research. *IOSR Journal of Business and Management*, 2017, 19(4), III, pp. 23-33.
<https://doi.org/10.9790/487X-1904032333>.

¹⁰ C. Ozdemir & A. Kaplan, A, Factors Affecting Psychological Resilience, Self-Efficacy and Job Satisfaction of Nurse Academics: A Cross-Sectional Study. *International Nursing Review*, 2025, 72(1),
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/inr.13007e13007>.

¹¹ S. Joseph & P.A, Positive Adjustment to Threatening Events: An Organismic Valuing Theory of Growth Through Adversity. *Review of General Psychology*, 2005, 9(3), pp. 262-280, <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.9.3.262>.

¹² American Psychological Association, Resilience. *APA Dictionary of Psychology*, 2024, <https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience>.

¹³ J. Kim-Cohen & R. Turkewitz, Resilience and measured gene-environment interactions. *Development and Psychopathology*, 2012, 24(4), pp.1297-1306.
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¹⁴ C. Ozdemir & A. Kaplan, Factors Affecting Psychological Resilience, Self-Efficacy and Job Satisfaction of Nurse Academics: A Cross-Sectional Study. *International Nursing Review*, 2025, 72(1), <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/inr.13007e13007>.

associated factors appear and act¹⁵; 3) counseling individuals in order to capitalize on the potential for resilience^{16,17,18}.

In accordance with the specialized literature, the psychological resilience of students was analyzed on coordinates 2) and 3), thus establishing the general objective of the research.

2. Research

The general objective of the research aims, on the one hand, to analyze the psychological resilience of young people from rural areas and some variables associated with it (personality and coping strategies) and, on the other hand, to build a resilience development program within career guidance and counseling activities, in order to facilitate the adaptation of first-year students to university tasks and challenges in the urban environment.

This study will present the results of the first part of the research objective (analysis of the psychological resilience of rural youth and its associated variables), with the subsequent study to present the results of the psychological resilience development program after 1 year of implementation and its impact on students' adaptation to university tasks and challenges in the urban environment.

The subjects of the study were 62 first-year students from various faculties (Psychology, Communication and Public Relations, Ecology, Physical Education and Sport), of whom 31 completed high school in rural areas and 31 completed high school in urban areas. 42 were female and 20 male, with an average age of 20.6 years (SD=3.18), who completed the questionnaires in the combined Google Forms and paper version.

¹⁵ F. Motti-Stefanidi, Immigrant Youth Resilience in the Context of Challenging Receiving Societies. In Crockett, L. J., Carlo, G. & Schulenberg, J. E. (Eds.), *APA Handbook of Adolescent and Young Adult Development*, 2023, pp 407–423. American Psychological Association, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000298-025>.

¹⁶ S.M. Glăveanu, Adolescents' Resilience Evaluation Scale - ARES-i25 and the Analysis of its Psychometric Characteristics. *International Journal of Educational Psychology*, 2024, 13(1), pp.21–44, <https://doi.org/10.17583/ijep.12562>.

¹⁷ M. Golan, D. Cohen-Asiag. & G. Ankori, Fostering Resilience by Means of an Online Academic Course: Exploring the Mediating Effects of Self-esteem, Body Esteem and Mental Status. *Mental Health & Prevention*, 2023, 30, Science Direct, <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.mhp.2023.200268>.

¹⁸ S. Ionescu, *Assisted Resilience Treaty*, Trei Publishing House, Bucharest, 2013.

Methods

Three instruments were used to diagnose the students who were part of the research group (two of which are part of the computerized psychological assessment platform developed by Cognitrom – CAS++):

1) *The CP5F personality questionnaire*, developed by Monica Albu in 2008 based on the FFPI questionnaire – Five-Factor Personality Inventory designed by Hendriks in 1997¹⁹. CP5F contains 130 items, intended to assess the five superfactors of the “Big Five” model (Extraversion, Emotional Stability, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness and Autonomy), but also includes a scale (called Social Desirability) to identify people whose answers are not in line with reality, either because they want to create a favorable image of themselves, or because they answer randomly or want to appear different from the rest of the people (ibidem, p.66).

2) *The Cognitive-Emotional Coping Questionnaire (CERQ)* developed by N. Garnefski, V. Kraaij and P. Spinhoven and translated and adapted for the Romanian population by A. Perțe and I. Țincas (coordinators) in 2010²⁰. This is a self-assessment questionnaire that measures adults’ cognitive coping strategies and has 36 items that refer exclusively to what a person thinks and not to what they actually do when going through threatening or stressful life experiences. The CERQ assesses nine cognitive coping strategies, as follows: acceptance; self-blame; rumination; positive refocusing; refocusing on planning; positive reappraisal; putting into perspective; catastrophizing and blaming others.

3) *ARES – i25 psychological resilience assessment scale*, built by Glăveanu in 2024 and published in the *International Journal of Educational Psychology*, 13(1)²¹ containing 25 items distributed on the following scales:

1. tenacity and self-efficacy – the competence to evaluate the life situation and the steps necessary to solve various problematic contexts and personal resources/limits, as well as the ability to organize resources to solve problems;

2. self-confidence – reflects a positive image of oneself, obtained in objective relation with intuition and capabilities;

¹⁹ COGNITROM, CP5F in the Computerized psychological assessment platform CAS++, 2024a, <https://www.cognitrom.ro/produs/evaluare-psihologica>.

²⁰ COGNITROM, CERQ in the Computerized psychological assessment platform CAS++, 2024b <https://www.cognitrom.ro/produs/evaluare-psihologica>.

²¹ S.M. Glăveanu, Adolescents’ Resilience Evaluation Scale – ARES-i25 and the Analysis of its Psychometric Characteristics. *International Journal of Educational Psychology*, 2024, 13(1), pp. 21–44, <https://doi.org/10.17583/ijep.12562>.

3. ability to learn from life experiences (personal and/or those of other people);

4. rapid recovery after negative life events – tolerance towards negative affects and the state of uncertainty, recovery after failure in adopting resolute means, identification of sources of support, focus on achieving the goal and resistance to disruptive factors;

5. social and family resources – represent the factors external to the person that play a supportive role in coping with various life problems and in demonstrating resilience.

Analysis and interpretation of results

In order to investigate the first part of the research objective, the dimensions of psychological resilience were analyzed on two groups of 1st year students (group 1 – graduates of a rural high school, group 2 – graduates of a urban high school) by applying the t-test for independent samples (using PASW Statistics version 19), the results being presented in table no. 1:

Table 1. Results obtained by the two groups of 1st year students: G 1 (graduates of a rural high school) and G 2 (graduates of a urban high school) on psychological resilience and its dimensions

Investigated variables	Student groups				t	Df
	G1		G2			
	M	SD	M	SD		
Psychological Resilience	62.11	19.23	63.28	22.13	36.04	60
Tenancy and Self-Efficacy	18.84	6.29	19.37	7.35	25.38	60
Self-Confidence	19.20	5.17	19.04	4.89	21.11	60
Ability to Learn from Personal Experience	11.06	3.58	12.87	4.12	33.57	60
Recovery from Difficult Life Situations/Trauma	15.28	5.62	15.64	5.961	22.86	60
Family and Social Resources	10.56	2.46	12.33	3.08	21.14	60

The comparison of the psychological resilience scores obtained by the two groups revealed the existence of differences between students in group 1 (graduates of a rural high school) and those in group 2 (graduates of a urban high school), and in two dimensions of resilience the results were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Thus, students in group 1 have

lower scores on the dimension "Ability to learn from personal experience" (M=11.06; SD=3.58) than those in group 2 (M=12.87; SD=4.12) and on the dimension "Family and social resources" (M=10.56; SD=2.46, compared to M=12.33; SD=3.08 in the case of the second group). These results show the need to intervene through career guidance activities to increase psychological resilience in group 1.

The relationship between psychological resilience and personality, but also between psychological resilience and coping strategies of first-year students was analyzed using the Pearson correlation coefficient statistical procedure (from PASW Statistics version 19), the results being presented in tables no. 2, 3 and 4:

Table 2. Correlations between psychological resilience and its dimensions and personality traits of first-year students

Variables psychological resilience and its dimensions/personality traits	Extraversion	Emotional stability	Conscientiousness	Agreeableness	Autonomy
Psychological Resilience	.13	.71**	.16	.11	-.04
Tenacity and Self-Efficacy	.19	.31	.24	.22	.13
Self-Confidence	.12	.11	.15	.08	-.04
Ability to Learn from Personal Experience	.14	.12	.27	.09	-.23
Recovery from Difficult Life Situations/Trauma	-.16	.18	.07	.03	-.19
Family and Social Resources	-.26	.23	.17	.11	-.27

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The analysis of the table of correlations between psychological resilience and its dimensions and personality traits shows that only the correlation between resilience and emotional stability is highly statistically significant ($p < 0.01$); thus, first-year college students who have a high level of emotional stability also manifest an increased level of resilience.

Table 3. Correlations between psychological resilience and its dimensions and effective coping strategies of first-year students

Variables psychological resilience and its dimensions/effective coping strategies	Acceptance	Positive refocus	Refocus on planning	Putting things into perspective	Positive reappraisal
Psychological Resilience	.54*	.59**	.66**	.43*	.84**
Tenacity and Self-Efficacy	.33	.36	.82**	.29	.42
Self-Confidence	.58**	.81**	.45**	.48**	.77**
Ability to Learn from Personal Experience	.64**	.72**	.67**	.73**	.54*
Recovery from Difficult Life Situations/Trauma	.66**	.71**	.72**	.55**	.68**
Family and Social Resources	.80**	.67**	.55*	.59**	.74**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

From the analysis of the correlation table, numerous positive correlations (significant and highly statistically significant) are identified between psychological resilience and the effective coping strategies "Acceptance" ($r=.54$), "Positive Refocusing" ($r=.59$), "Refocusing on Planning" ($r=.66$), "Putting it into perspective" ($r=.43$), "Positive Reappraisal" ($r=.84$).

Also, numerous positive correlations are identified between the dimensions of psychological resilience and effective coping strategies: between "Tenacity and Self-Efficacy" and "Refocusing on Planning" ($r=.82$), but also between the rest of the dimensions of psychological resilience and all the effective coping strategies presented in table no. 3, from which it results that psychologically resilient students use effective coping strategies more frequently in confronting the challenges of the first year of university study.

Table 4. Negative correlations between psychological resilience and its dimensions and ineffective coping strategies of first-year students

Variables psychological resilience and its dimensions/ ineffective coping strategies	Self-blame	Rumination	Catastrophizing	Blaming others
Psychological Resilience	-.62**	-.71**	-.86**	-.78**
Tenancy and Self-Efficacy	-.73**	-.37*	-.67**	-.84**
Self-Confidence	-.64**	-.81**	-.43**	-.87**
Ability to Learn from Personal Experience	-.56**	-.76**	-.63**	-.55**
Recovery from Difficult Life Situations/Trauma	-.48**	-.64**	-.82**	-.58**
Family and Social Resources	-.32*	-.41*	-.37*	-.39**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Table no. 4 reveals the statistically significant negative correlations ($p < 0.05$) and strongly significant ($p < 0.01$) between psychological resilience and ineffective coping strategies: "Self-blame" ($r = -.62$), "Rumination" ($r = -.71$), "Catastrophizing" ($r = -.86$) and "Blaming others" ($r = -.78$).

At the same time, it is observed that all dimensions of psychological resilience correlate significantly negatively with ineffective coping strategies, resulting in students with a low level of psychological resilience frequently using ineffective coping strategies, and, relating the result to the research objective, increasing resilience is identified as a development direction through programs specifically dedicated to facilitating the harmonious integration of first-year students into the particularities of the university environment.

3. Conclusions

The general objective of the research aimed, on the one hand, at analyzing the psychological resilience of young people in rural areas and some variables associated with it (personality and coping strategies) and, on the other hand, at building a resilience development program to facilitate the rural-urban transition.

Since the general objective is complex, it was carried out in two stages: the first focused on diagnosis (results presented in the current paper) and the second on intervention to increase resilience (results that will be presented in subsequent studies).

In this research, the data obtained by analyzing psychological resilience in the two groups of first-year students proved that the group of students who had completed high school in rural areas had lower scores (statistically significant) than the one who had graduated from high school in urban areas on the following dimensions of resilience: "Ability to learn from personal experience" and "Family and social resources", but on the other dimensions ("Tenacity and self-efficacy", "Self-confidence" and "Recovery after difficult life situations/trauma") the differences are statistically insignificant.

The analysis of the relationship between resilience and personality traits revealed that students with a high level of emotional stability (as a personality trait) demonstrate a high level of psychological resilience.

Regarding the relationship between resilience and coping strategies, numerous significant correlations were identified, which shows that resilient students more frequently use effective coping strategies such as: "Acceptance", "Positive Refocusing", "Planning Refocusing", "Putting into Perspective" and "Positive Reappraisal", and students with a low level of resilience more frequently use ineffective coping strategies, such as: "Rumination", "Self-blame", "Blaming others" and "Catastrophizing".

The data obtained in the research provide information about the level of psychological resilience and its dimensions, about coping strategies as factors associated with resilience and identify development directions, so that first-year students have premises for harmonious integration into the university environment.

The results obtained, although statistically significant, represent a pilot study (with inherent limitations related to the small number of participants). In future research, a larger number of students will be investigated, as well as the effects of psychological resilience development programs on university results.

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BUSINESS STRATEGIES IMPLEMENTED IN THE INTERNATIONALIZATION PROCESS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: *This paper highlights some relevant aspects related to the adoption of business behaviours by the higher education institutions for implementing strategical solution in order to expand globally, also to face increasing competition and challenging times. In the first steps of the higher education internationalization strategies, universities were focused on the mobility of students and professors, as well as the organization of educational events. In the last decade, higher education internationalization strategies have moved to another level, based on very specific international agreements, such as opening new branches and campuses abroad, franchising various programs to another university, or merging with another university. This evolution was accompanied by collaborative projects related to scientific research, publications and international conferences, generating the development of a global research network. The main result of this paper is to highlight the trend of transforming university education into a global business industry, through the use of business internationalization strategies specific to multinational companies.*

Keywords: *higher education, internationalization, business models, development strategies.*

Introduction

During the last decades, universities have strived to be the best suppliers of college experiences within a complex transformational process from providers of education to business ventures. In this context, universities have changed the perspective on education, where students

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are consumers, and university presidents act as chief executive officers managing the university experiences, in this process adapting study programs according to demand, competition and tuition prices.

Nowadays, the major economic changes and challenges facing universities are also related to the adaptation of various concepts and organizational methods from enterprises within the universities' management. Even the business vocabulary in education is in a permanent evolution. The key marketing messages are focused on students and their parents who are invited, attracted, persuaded to "pay for a college experience", this being possible with "approximately USD 30,000 in student loans³". The specific reports highlight the student loan debt accumulated at the national level, as in the case on the United States (USD 1,800 billion, in 2024)⁴.

Universities have been under pressure from multiple financial, social and political demands, their management being increasingly oriented towards the sources to rise efficiency, a concept taken from the business world. Therefore, within the universities' boards the main objectives are shared between university curriculum and financial problems, the last ones being critical for their future. They have relied predominantly on market logic in an attempt to survive and become administrative universities, such approaches taking them away from the purpose of higher education: the academic project⁵. This process was initiated in the United States and now followed by many countries, generating the current phenomenon of increasing numbers of students (massification) and academics employed to teach and direct their research. At the same time, leadership positions are increasingly filled by professionals with business skills rather than academic expertise⁶.

³ Citizens, How much is a \$30,000 student loan per month?, (2025), accessed at: [https://www.citizensbank.com/learning/how-much-is-a-30000-student-loan-per-month.aspx#:~:text=The%20payments%20on%20a%20\\$30%2C000%20student%20loan,ba sed%20on%20the%20repayment%20plan%20you%20select..](https://www.citizensbank.com/learning/how-much-is-a-30000-student-loan-per-month.aspx#:~:text=The%20payments%20on%20a%20$30%2C000%20student%20loan,ba sed%20on%20the%20repayment%20plan%20you%20select..)

⁴ M. Hanson, *Student Loan Debt Statistics*, (2025), accessed at: <https://educationdata.org/student-loan-debt-statistics>.

⁵ B. Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty. The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters*, Oxford University Press, (2011), accessed at <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-fall-of-the-faculty-9780199782444?cc=za&lang=en&>.

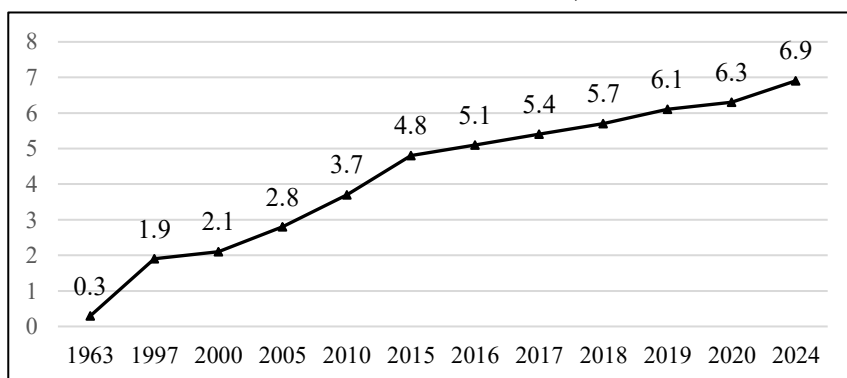
⁶ S. McKenna, *Here are five signs that universities are turning into corporations*, *The conversation*, (2018), accessed at <https://theconversation.com/here-are-five-signs-that-universities-are-turning-into-corporations-93100>.

The first steps of the higher education internationalization process

During the last decades, the internationalization process has transformed the higher education landscape, generating a variety of benefits to students, institutions, communities and countries. This has also generated the great brain race with implications for brain train, brain gain, and brain drain. As well, education internationalization has become a significant force for change: for people (students, professors, scholars or researchers), for programs (twinning, franchise and virtual), and for providers (partnerships, education hubs commercial and competitiveness models, and branch or satellite campuses).

The data related to international student mobility emphasis that in 2024, nearly 6.9 million students were in mobility programs worldwide, with an increase of 43.7% compared to 2015 (Figure 1). One of the major challenges was pandemic crisis, the mobility restrictions affecting this evolution, in 2020 higher education institutions closed in 185 countries affecting about 1.5 billion learners. However, the pandemic also demonstrated the capability of online teaching and learning innovations shifting also the potential of international exchange⁷.

Figure 1: The international student mobility, during 1963-2024 (in millions of students)



Source: Author's representation based on data published by Time

⁷ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Future of international mobility will combine physical and digital experiences to reach a wider range of students, (2022), accessed at

<https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/2022/02/25/future-of-international-mobility-will-combine-physical-and-digital-experiences-to-reach-a-wider-range-of-students/>.

Association⁸ and Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development⁹.

Regarding the geographical distribution of students in international mobility programs, Europe hold the first position (with approximately 39% at the international level in 2020), followed by Asia (25%), North America (20%), Australia and New Zealand (8%), Latin America and the Caribbean (4%) and Africa (3.5%)¹⁰. As revealed in Figure 2, in terms of incoming mobility, the European countries have hosted the biggest share of mobile students, while the English-speaking countries (United States, United Kingdom, Australia and Canada) remain the most attractive student destinations overall, the four countries receiving approximately 40% of all internationally mobile students. In European Union, France, Germany and Italy are the first destinations, ranking in the top ten destination countries worldwide, due to their cultural and academic exchange traditions within Europe and beyond. Between 2015 and 2022, many Asian countries experienced significant growth in student mobility, accounting for the largest number of students studying abroad. China ranks the first position in outgoing mobility (with 18.7% of total international students, in 2022¹¹), followed by India (11.3%) and Vietnam (2.8%, with an increase of 95% during 2015-2020¹²).

⁸ G. Guillerme, *International student mobility at a Glance 2022: Global analysis*, (2022), accessed at <https://timeassociation.org/2022/11/28/international-student-mobility-key-numbers-2022>.

⁹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *What are the key trends in international student mobility?* (2025),

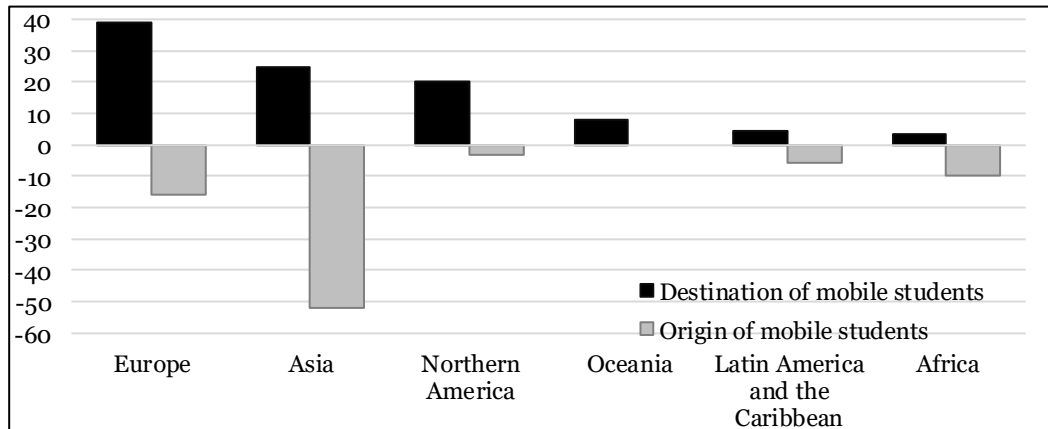
https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/03/what-are-the-key-trends-in-international-student-mobility_495dcfac/2a423a76-en.pdf.

¹⁰ G. Guillerme, *op. cit.*, (2022).

¹¹ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *op. cit.*, (2025).

¹² G. Guillerme, *op. cit.*, (2022).

Figure 2: Destination and origin countries of mobile students, by global regions, in 2020 (in % of total students)



Source: Author's representation based on data published by Time Association¹³

The organisation of a variety of events such as international week or educational fairs is another form of higher education internationalization process, in this case the business marketing strategies being intensively used¹⁴. These events focused on student recruitment, workshops or networking sessions, in-person or online in difficult time of pandemic crisis, facilitate the interaction between students and university' offers, as the first ones to make well informed decisions. These are also good opportunities for university staff to meet and network for joint educational and research projects.

As one of the most prosperous regions and also the major international student recruitment markets in the world, Europe is a study abroad market that cannot be missed, the European Union allocating millions of euros to its internationalization activities as scholarships, as it is Erasmus program. The student fairs in Europe facilitate the opportunity for meeting students, offering both traditional education fairs and online recruitment event, for all study levels, from bachelor, master and doctoral studies to master of business administration programs¹⁵.

¹³ G. Guillerme, *op. cit.*, (2022).

¹⁴ M. Gębarowski, *Educational fairs as a form of promotion of higher education institutions*, (2012), accessed at: <https://bibliotekanauki.pl/articles/213007>.

¹⁵ EducationFair.net, *Discover Education Fairs to Connect with Global Students*, (2025), accessed at: <https://www.educationfair.net/>.

The economic growth and the availability of scholarships enable more and more students from many emerging countries to study overseas. Africa and the Middle East are the newest student recruitment markets, nine countries from this area allocating important funds for investments in education in the coming decade. Consequently, education fairs in Africa and the Middle East are frequented by many European and Anglo-Saxon universities interested into the global diversification of their student recruitment process, using more marketing channels.

Summarizing, as important steps in internationalization of higher education, the mobility students and professors' programs, as well as organisation of and participating in educational fairs offer major opportunities for universities to share their educational and scientific experiences, as well as to agree on university partnerships and common projects in educational and scientific areas.

The economy of higher education internationalisation

The economic value of the internationalization of education is difficult to be accurately measured as a global figure, mainly because the criteria for collecting and reporting data at the national level vary significantly. However, various studies and reports highlight the substantial contribution of education sector to national economies, the total global education market being estimated at USD 7,300 billion for 2025 and projected to reach USD 10,000 billion by 2030. As a segment of the overall market, the international education market is expected to grow from USD 196 billion in 2022 to USD 433 billion by 2030¹⁶.

Higher education institutions have numerous ways of generating revenue to run their budgets, educate their students and sustain all the specific activities including research. The tuition fees paid by students for getting their degrees are completed by a diversity of funds dedicated to universities, depending on they are public or private institution, or operate on a profit or non-profit basis. The government funds are provided to educational institutions in different ways, the most used being: student aid (including grants, scholarships, work-study, and loans), grants for research and contracts for goods or services. Besides, a diverse

¹⁶ Holoniq Platform, \$196B International Education Market set to reach \$433B by 2030 @ 7.4% CAGR, (2022), accessed at: [https://www.holoniq.com/notes/196b-international-education-market-set-to-reach-433b-by-2030-7-4-cagr#:~:text=\\$196B%20International%20Education%20Market%20set%20to%20reach%20\\$433B%20by%202030%20@%207.4%25%20CAGR](https://www.holoniq.com/notes/196b-international-education-market-set-to-reach-433b-by-2030-7-4-cagr#:~:text=$196B%20International%20Education%20Market%20set%20to%20reach%20$433B%20by%202030%20@%207.4%25%20CAGR).

range of alternative funds streams such as auxiliary services, grants and donations, licensing research, offering professional training and executive education, renting out facilities and real estate, and partnering with local businesses and industries for events and projects. They can also monetize academic entrepreneurship, sell merchandise, and develop online content to expand their reach and income¹⁷.

Typically, the data related to the direct economic impact of international students includes tuition fees and living expenses, while the broader economic benefits, such as the long-term contribution of skilled graduates to the workforce and the enhancement of a country's cultural and academic landscape, are often harder to quantify but are widely recognized as significant. As a relevant example, in the United States, the international students are a major economic force, according to the Association of International Educators NAFSA, during the 2023-2024 academic year, the international students and their families contributed with USD 43.8 billion and supported nearly 378,175 jobs at the national level¹⁸.

Business strategies implemented in the internationalization process of higher education

Over the last years, there has been an increase in the use of business strategies in universities. Thus, in addition to the development of international programs and courses, the processes of internationalization of higher education include the formation of strategic partnerships, the use of social networks and digital marketing to attract students from all over the world. As well as, there are taken into account the efforts for building a solid brand reputation through international accreditations and quality assurance processes. In this regard, similar to a company, institutions allocate significant financial resources dedicated to internationalization efforts and adapt the organizational structures in order to support the comprehensive involvement in international activities¹⁹.

¹⁷ Hanover Research, BEST PRACTICES Diversifying and Generating Revenue July 2023, (2023), accessed at: <https://www.insidehighered.com/sites/default/files/2023-09/Best%20Practices%20-%20Diversifying%20and%20Generating%20Revenue%20%281%29.pdf>.

¹⁸ National Association of Foreign Student Advisers, International Students Contribute Record-breaking Level of Spending and 378,000 Jobs to the U.S. Economy, (2024), accessed at: <https://www.nafsa.org/about/about-nafsa/international-students-contribute-record-breaking-level-spending-and-378000-jobs>.

¹⁹ F. van den Hende, C. Whitsed & R.J. Coelen, *An Organizational Change Perspective for the Curriculum Internationalization Process: Bridging the Gap Between Strategy and*

The international perspective of foreign markets has evolved so that more and more prestigious universities, with recognition and also financial and organizational capabilities, have entered other educational markets abroad. Opening a new university *branch* requires extensive strategic planning, financial investment and approval from accreditation bodies and host governments, involving market studies, cultural adaptation, securing infrastructure and developing local operational plans. In this regard, after the obtaining the necessary academic and regulatory approvals, the foreign institution had to manage cultural and linguistic differences, adapt academic programs, ensure quality and equivalence of education, all of these necessitating proper local staff and management²⁰. Internationally, there are numerous universities that have taken these steps and today are examples of success. A relevant example in this area is the University of Birmingham Dubai, as an extension of the UK's prestigious university, launched in 2018, its success being supported by the growing regional demand for high-quality international higher education. This university offers the same degrees as its UK campus and serve as a platform for research activities in the United Arab Emirates. The project aims to equip students with future-ready skills, foster innovation through collaborations, providing a diverse and inclusive learning environment and approaching the key current challenges such as artificial intelligence and environment²¹. As well, United States' universities are leaders in the international education market, with global networks developed worldwide. For example, the New York University, a trailblazer in creating a global education network, has developed two degree-granting campuses in Abu Dhabi and Shanghai, and a large variety of educational programs operating in academic centres on all continents²². The geographical diversification of activities also acts as a hedging strategy, so that the current political challenges regarding the

Implementation. Journal of Studies in International Education, 27(3), 520-538, (2022), accessed at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/10283153221105321>.

²⁰ L.M. Harding & R.W. Lammey, Operational Considerations for Opening a Branch Campus Abroad, (2011), accessed at: <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ946024>.

Higer Learning Commission, Additional Location and Branch Campus Reviews, (2025), accessed at: <https://www.hlcommission.org/accreditation/cycles-and-processes/additional-location-and-branch-campus-reviews/>.

²¹ University of Birmingham, History and heritage of our Dubai campus, (2025), accessed at: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/dubai/about/campus/history-heritage>.

²² American Universities Abroad, Discover A Truly Global Degree, (2025), accessed at: <https://www.americanuniabroad.com/>.

changes of migration policies by the United States administration can be overcome by American universities with international activities. Therefore, the process of opening new campuses abroad is proving to be an increasingly valuable strategy²³.

During the last decades, universities have initiated various international agreements based on *franchising* model with a foreign university, to offer all or parts of their academic programs. In this context, the franchising higher education has become a real business²⁴. Consequently, national regulatory systems have adapted their legal framework so that this collaboration model can offer a foreign university degree without the student having to attend the main campus²⁵. According to franchise business model, the foreign university retains overall responsibility for the content, quality and standards of the program, while the local institution takes care of the day-to-day administration, teaching and student support. While the term franchise might not always be used, several foreign universities have established a significant presence in many emerging countries through partnerships with local education institution. For example, the recent national education regulations adopted in 2020 pave the way for many international universities interested to operate in India²⁶. Turkey is a strong destination for university franchising due to its growing international student population, increasing focus on quality education, and a strategic geographical location. The living and tuition costs compared to other countries, the internationally recognized degree programs, the diverse academic offers, and the supportive environment

²³ A. Esaki-Smith, U.S. Universities Launch Overseas Campuses To Beat Visa Hurdle, (2025), accessed at:

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/annaesakismith/2025/05/20/us-universities-launch-overseas-campuses-to-beat-visa-hurdles/>.

²⁴ J. Dickinson, How franchising higher education became big business, (2023), accessed at: <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/are-we-witnessing-the-return-of-the-cashpoint-college/>.

²⁵ C. Tennant, Higher Education franchising is not the problem. Rogue providers and regulatory gaps are, (2025), accessed at:

<https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/05/13/higher-education-franchising-is-not-the-problem-rogue-providers-and-regulatory-gaps-are/>.

²⁶ A. De, 2025, More foreign universities are choosing India for offshore campuses, here's why, accessed at: [https://bestcolleges.indiatoday.in/news-detail/more-foreign-universities-are-choosing-india-for-offshore-campuses-heres-why#:~:text=The%20National%20Education%20Policy%20\(NEP,favourable%20legislation%2C%20and%20tax%20breaks.](https://bestcolleges.indiatoday.in/news-detail/more-foreign-universities-are-choosing-india-for-offshore-campuses-heres-why#:~:text=The%20National%20Education%20Policy%20(NEP,favourable%20legislation%2C%20and%20tax%20breaks.)

for international students, make Turkey an attractive market for foreign educational institutions²⁷.

Another business strategy adopted in the higher education field is merger. As in business environment, a university merger occurs when two or more higher education institutions combine to form a single new entity. The reasons for such a decision are often related to the increase of financial stability, expand of academic programs, and improve the competitiveness. This type of strategy is frequently used at the national level, the United States and United Kingdom offering examples in this area. In 2022, Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania was formed by the merger of three institutions in Pennsylvania's state system of higher education: Bloomsburg University, Lock Haven University, and Mansfield University, this merger being a strategic move to consolidate resources and enhance the overall academic offers of the state's public university system²⁸. Another successful story is the University of Manchester formed in 2004 by the merger of the Victoria University of Manchester and the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology, creating a single, larger research-focused institution aiming for international prominence. This merger was driven by many reasons, such as pooling resources, improving research capabilities, and increasing global competitiveness, which led to the creation of the largest university in the United Kingdom at the time²⁹.

Conclusions

The internationalization of higher education has become a strategic imperative for universities around the world, driven by competition and globalization, as well as academic performance goals. Universities are increasingly open to adopting business strategies to attract international students, engage in cross-border collaborations, and expand their influence globally. Economic, social and political perspectives are key elements on the agenda of university management globally. Therefore, future international strategic plans of higher education institutions have to

²⁷ StudySehir, *Are Turkish universities recognized?*, (2025), accessed at: <https://studysehir.com/study-in-turkiye/are-turkish-universities-recognized/>.

²⁸ Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania, *About us*, (2025), accessed at: <https://www.commonwealthu.edu/about>.

²⁹ I. Davis, *How to make a uni merger work: the Manchester experience*, (2021), accessed at: <https://campusmorningmail.com.au/news/how-to-make-a-uni-merger-work-the-manchester-experience/>.

be creative and flexible, ambitious, forward thinking and agile in order to take advantage of the disruptive changes in this complex field, as well as to create unique opportunities for entrepreneurship and innovation.

Our investigations reveal that universities are increasingly adopting business internationalization strategies traditionally used by multinational companies to enhance competitiveness and expand their global scope. Once the domain of corporate giants, these strategies are now increasingly applied in the higher education field. As multinational companies establish subsidiaries abroad, universities open branch campuses in strategic regions, serving as hubs for student recruitment, research and local engagement. At the same time, universities license or franchise their curriculum or brand to partner institutions abroad, allowing international expansion without full ownership. Similar to multinational companies, universities are engaged in academic partnerships and joint ventures with foreign institutions. Given the latest expansion of digital technologies, higher education institutions have demonstrated the adaptability, developing online education platforms and hybrid programs to reach international students and extend their global coverage and influence. As well as, the universities' decision makers have developed their abilities to navigate regulations, accreditation standards, and even political climates.

Summarising, universities are no longer just educational institutions, but global knowledge enterprises. By adopting multinational companies' strategies, they enhance global reputation and rankings, diversify revenue streams, foster innovation through cross-border collaboration and prepare students for future careers.

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION – EDUCATION POLICIES IN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

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Abstract: *The development of early childhood education (ECE), one of the most effective investments in human capital development, is at the heart of European and national education policies. Education policies targeting this segment aim to expand access, improve service quality, and support social equity. In Romania, despite some progress in terms of legislation and institutions, challenges remain in relation to the participation of children, especially those from vulnerable groups, infrastructure, and qualified staff. The article identifies public policies in this area and recommends strategic directions for strengthening the early childhood education system.*

Keywords: *European strategies, national public policies on early childhood education, ECEC programs.*

Introduction

Among the first studies of early childhood development, we mention those of Arnold Gesell: "The Mental Growth of the Preschool Child" (1925), followed by "An Atlas of Infant Behavior" (1934), in which the author introduced one of the first systematic models of the stages of child development through filmed observations or one-way mirrors, launching early concepts that inspired developmental neuroscience. During the same period, the first books addressed to parents by specialists appeared, advising parents on how to care for their babies, such as Benjamin Spock's "The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care." Francois Dolto wrote about the psychological development of young children and offered advice on raising young children. This research made use, in part, of

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imaging technologies, which objectify existing hypotheses, such as psychological structuring in the context of the formation of neural structures. It has been demonstrated that these structures are directly influenced by the quality of the child's interaction with their environment, and especially with the adults closest to them. Rene Spitz published the article "Hospitalism – An Inquiry into the Genesis of Psychiatric Conditions in Early Childhood"¹ (1945), followed by "Hospitalism: A Follow-Up Report"² (1946), articles in which he documented the emotional and somatic effects of long-term separation, observing institutionalized children deprived of direct maternal contact.

The first elements of a formalised and institutionalised system for children between 0 and 3 years of age appeared in the first half of the 19th century, with the pedagogical initiatives of Robert Owen and Friedrich Fröbel. Robert Owen, an English utopian socialist, founded in 1816 a "New Institute for Character Training" for children aged 1 to 10, with two distinct sections: one for children aged 1 to 3 and another for those aged 3 to 6. This is considered one of the first examples of a formal educational institution for very young children, which included educational activities, games, gymnastics, and excursions, emphasizing the intuitive and social development of the child.

At the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, the influence of modern pedagogy led to the establishment of the first kindergartens. Friedrich Fröbel, a German educator, founded *the* first *Kindergarten* in Germany in 1837, bringing the concept of institutionalized early education. According to Fröbel's vision, kindergarten was a place where children learned through play, creative activities, and special educational materials, emphasizing the importance of emotional and cognitive development.

In Romania, early education began to take shape in the 19th century. The first forms of preschool education appeared in 1852, when a "school for young children" was established in Iași³. This was followed by the opening of the first official kindergarten in 1854, also in Iași, which used Romanian as the language of instruction.

¹ The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child, Volume 1, 1945.

² The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child, Volume 2, 1946.

³ Gabriel Țarălungă, *History of Education in Romania*, Didactic and Pedagogical Publishing House, 2014.

After 1989, the adoption, conceptualisation, and initiation of the first elements of early childhood education in Romania were the work of ministers Andrei Marga and Mircea Miclea. Specific objectives and measures related to early childhood education were set out in the National Strategy for Reducing Early School Leaving 2015-2020.

The first 1,000 days of life, when 80% of neural connections are formed, are the most important days for brain development, with neuroscience highlighting the impact of experiences during this period on the future adult. Early childhood education (0–6 years) plays an essential role in the cognitive, emotional, and social development of the child, having a direct impact on long-term educational and professional trajectories. International studies show that interventions during this period have the highest return on investment in education. At the European and national level, educational policies dedicated to early childhood education have become a priority, but challenges related to accessibility, quality, and equity remain significant. Educational policies must combine European standards with local realities, and collaboration between the state and communities, professionals, and parents is part of the solution.

In Romania, progress is visible but fragmented. Vision, consistency, sustainable funding, and professional training for those working in early childhood education are needed.

The ECEC strategic framework

The UN 2030 Agenda and *the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals* stipulate (SDG 4 *Quality Education*, Target 4.2) that by 2030, all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care, and education so that they are ready for primary education.

The related indicators refer to:

- 1) The proportion of children aged 24 to 59 months who are on track in terms of health, education, and psychosocial well-being, broken down by sex;
- 2) The rate of participation in organized early education (one year before the official school age), broken down by gender.

The European Strategic Framework for Cooperation in Education and Training 2021-2030 ⁴ has the overall objective of supporting the

⁴ Official Journal of the European Union, 2021/C 66/01, February 26, 2021. EUR-Lex

implementation of reforms to continuously develop and adapt education and training systems and includes the objective of participation in early childhood education and care. Thus, by 2030, at least 96% of children between the ages of 3 and the age of compulsory primary school enrolment should participate in early childhood education and care. Priority area 1 *Quality, equity, inclusion, and success in education and training* includes the action *Implementing the European Quality Framework for high-quality early childhood education and care systems*.

*The Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022–2027)*⁵ covers six priority areas:

- Children's freedom from violence;
- Equal opportunities and social inclusion;
- Access to and safe use of technology;
- Child-friendly justice;
- Every child's voice;
- Children's rights in emergencies and crises.

This strategy includes both components for the continued implementation of existing priorities and innovative elements to address new challenges in the field of children's rights.

*The European Pillar of Social Rights*⁶ (2017) serves as a reference framework for monitoring the performance of EU Member States' employment and social policies using a social scoreboard and incorporates the following objective into its Action Plan: *Increasing the provision of formal early childhood education and care services*.

*The European Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)*⁷ is a document adopted by the Council of the European Union in 2019, which provides common principles and guidelines for quality assurance in early childhood education and care services in all Member States. This voluntary reference framework is intended for national, regional, and local authorities to improve the quality and accessibility of

⁵ Children's Rights in Action: from continuous implementation to joint innovation, 23 February 2022, officially launched: Rome Conference, 7–8 April, 2022.

⁶ signed on November 17, 2017, at the Gothenburg Social Summit.

⁷ adopted by the ET2020 Working Group and officially presented at the Athens conference in June 2014. It was subsequently officially launched by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Education and Culture at the 'Great Start in Life' conference in Brussels, 30 November–1 December 2016.

early education services (0–6 years), in line with UN Goal 4.2 2030 and the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2017). ECEC promotes a shared vision of a fair start for all children in Europe. Although non-binding, it has already been adopted as a benchmark for good practice in many Member States and is supported by the European Commission through policies and funding (e.g., Erasmus+, European Social Fund, etc.).

The European Commission's Recommendation on Strengthening Integrated Child Protection Systems at the National Level⁸ endeavors to assist Member States in the development and enhancement of their national child protection frameworks through an integrated approach, with a focus on the interests and needs of children. This recommendation is associated with the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2021) and complies with the suggestions put forth by the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union, and the Committee of the Regions regarding multisectoral coordination in child protection. The provisions include, among others:

- Professional training for those involved in ECEC, social assistance, and other relevant actors;
- Rapid and integrated response in cases of violence against children;
- Proactive prevention, early identification, reporting, comprehensive support, and psychosocial support, both offline and online;
- Physical and digital safety of children;
- Training and information for parents on the safe use of digital media;
- Exchange of good practices, monitoring, awareness-raising, and professional training;
- Alignment with existing EU legislation on children's rights and anti-violence legislation.

An accompanying communication - "Putting Children's Interests First" - includes an annex containing relevant EU instruments (legislation, policies, funds, supporting documents) and a Staff Working Document.

In 2002, the European Council set concrete targets for early childhood education and care (ECEC) for the first time at the Barcelona Summit (March 15–16, 2002):

⁸ EU Recommendation 2024/1238 of April 23, 2024

"Member States should remove obstacles to women's participation in the labor market and, in this context, provide childcare services by 2010 for:

- at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age, and
- at least 33% of children under 3 years of age."

The objectives were:

- Increasing children's participation in early childhood education services;
- Improving the work-life balance of parents, especially mothers;
- Reducing gender gaps in employment and promoting equal opportunities.

These targets became a key benchmark in EU policies on ECEC, and were subsequently reiterated and updated in *the Europe 2020 Strategy*; *the European Pillar of Social Rights* (2017); and *the European Care Strategy*, which proposed updating the targets for 2030.

The Barcelona Declaration, adopted in November 2022, sets out two recommendations on early childhood education and care. The first recommendation of the EU Council encourages Member States to increase participation in these services and follows on from the original "Barcelona targets" set by the European Council in 2002. It is therefore recommended that:

- at least 45% of children under the age of three benefit from early childhood education and care measures. (Specific targets apply to Member States that have not yet achieved the 2002 targets, including Romania);
- at least 96% of children between the ages of 3 and the age of compulsory primary school enrollment should benefit from early childhood education and care measures.

The second recommendation refers, among other things, to eliminating territorial disparities in the availability of and access to long-term care, particularly in rural and depopulated areas, ensuring quality criteria and standards in all long-term care facilities, and promoting autonomy and independent living.

The Barcelona Declaration was reinforced by *the EU Council Recommendation on early childhood education* (December 2022, implementation post-2023), which includes recommendations on staff-child ratios, group sizes, distribution of the service network, and reducing costs for parents.

The Tashkent Declaration and Commitments for Action to Transform Early Care and Education, adopted at the UNESCO Conference on November 16, 2022, in the broader context of achieving Goal 4.2 (UN 2030 Agenda) reaffirms the right of every child (0–8 years) to access quality early care and education and calls for strong political commitments, increased funding, and integrated policies for early care and education. The Declaration defines a global roadmap for transforming early childhood education through clearly stated rights, significant funding, professionalization, pedagogical innovation, integrated governance, and transparent monitoring.

The European Care Strategy (2022–2023)⁹ aims at accessible and quality care, including early childhood education, and was accompanied by two Council recommendations adopted in December 2022. The first refers to the revision of the Barcelona Targets for children's participation in early childhood education by 2030. The second recommends:

- a minimum duration of participation based on age, to facilitate parents' access to the labor market: a minimum of 25 hours/week for children under 3 years of age; a minimum of 35 hours/week for those over 3 years of age;
- ensuring high-quality, accessible, and evenly distributed ECEC, including in rural and disadvantaged areas;
- reducing costs for parents and implementing rights, with no gaps between paid parental leave and the start of early education;
- promoting dedicated measures for groups such as children from poor families, children with disabilities, migrants, or Roma children to ensure equal participation in the ECEC system;
- the need for decent wages and attractive working conditions for ECEC staff;
- professional support through continuous training, recognition, and social dialogue in the sector;
- intensifying the collection and analysis of comparative data on ECEC participation, service quality, and territorial distribution, broken down by gender, socio-economic status, etc.

⁹ Communication from the Commission: COM(2022) 440 final – "A European care strategy for caregivers and care receivers," September 7, 2022, Communication from the European Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions.

*The Council conclusions on inclusive, learner-centered practices in early childhood education and care and in schools*¹⁰ (doc. 6289/25) contain several key messages on early childhood education:

1. The vital role of ECEC

- Early childhood education and care are considered fundamental for addressing social inequalities from the very beginning of a child's life, as well as for promoting their holistic psychosocial development.
- ECEC is recognized as an essential foundation for inclusive, quality learning throughout life.

2. Accessibility and inclusion

- There is an emphasis on the need to guarantee free, equitable, and non-segregated access to ECEC, including for children with special educational needs, from vulnerable backgrounds, or from minority groups.
- The importance of clearly informing all families about rights and benefits is emphasized to increase participation and trust in services.

3. Professionalism and staff training

- The professionalization of educators is promoted through qualification standards, access to continuing education, and professional recognition comparable to that of primary school teachers.
- There is a need to develop skills for managing diversity and the individual needs of children.

4. Adapted curriculum and inclusive pedagogy

- The curriculum for early years groups should include a balance between socio-emotional development, language, engagement through play, contact with nature, art, and physical activity.
- Empathy, cultural and linguistic diversity, bilingualism, and the appropriate use of digital technologies for young children are promoted.
- Continuity between ECEC and primary school and collaboration between educators and teachers is encouraged.

¹⁰ Published under the title 'Council conclusions on inclusive, learner-centred practices in early childhood education and care and school education' (C/2025/2796), 21 May, 2025.

5. Transparent monitoring and evaluation

- It is recommended to implement self-assessment tools, guided observation, questionnaires, and methods to ensure children's participation by listening to their opinions and ideas.
- The aim is to develop an evidence-based policy on inclusive practice in ECEC.

An in-depth analysis of the challenges of social convergence for Romania ¹¹ (March 2025) shows that "the participation of children, particularly those under 3 years of age, in ECEC is low and significant challenges remain in terms of early school leaving, especially in rural areas and among marginalized communities."

*The European Child Guarantee*¹² is a key initiative of the European Union that aims to ensure that all children in the EU have equal and free access to essential services, with a focus on children in vulnerable situations or at risk of poverty and social exclusion. The main goal is to combat child poverty and inequality by guaranteeing access to essential public services for all children, especially the most disadvantaged.

Member States must ensure that all children have free, effective, and inclusive access to:

- Early childhood education, schooling, and extracurricular activities—including support for school materials and transportation;
- Healthy meals during school – at least one free main meal per day;
- Healthcare – including prevention, diagnosis, and treatment;
- Adequate nutrition – combating malnutrition and obesity;
- Adequate housing – support to avoid evictions and substandard conditions.

Member States' obligations include appointing a national coordinator and developing a National Action Plan (for 5 years), which should include:

- concrete measures and clear deadlines;
- a dedicated budget;

¹¹ European Commission Staff Working Document (SWD (2025) 223 final), accompanying the Council Recommendation on Romania's economic, social, employment, structural, and budgetary policies (COM(2025) 223)

¹² Recommendation of the Council of the European Union on the European Child Guarantee, June 14, 2021, Council Recommendation (EU) 2021/1004

- indicators for monitoring and evaluation;
- the involvement of children and civil society in the development and evaluation of measures.

In January 2024, the European Commission supplemented the European Child Guarantee with a *Monitoring Framework*, which included data and indicators for free access to early childhood education. This allows for a statistical analysis of access to key services for children in need, using Eurostat indicators and external sources.

One of the ways to monitor and report on the achievement of ECEC objectives is through the Eurydice Network. A 2025 Eurydice report highlights disparities in public spending on ECEC between Member States (including Romania¹³). The report recommends greater investment, regulations, and consistent support for families, plus measures for professionals in the ECEC system. In addition, UNESCO and its partners (including the World Bank) produce a global report on ECEC progress every two years.

Annually, through the European Semester mechanism, *the Country Report and the Education and Training Monitor* play an essential role in monitoring and guiding national policies, including in the field of early childhood education, by providing analyses of ECEC participation, results from monitoring the accessibility, quality, and equity of the education system, and making recommendations for investments and expansions of ECEC services.

At the national level, the most important policy documents on early childhood education are *the National Strategic Framework for Education and Training at all levels* (Romania Educated) and *Component C15 Education of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan* (PNRR).

The *Educated Romania* vision states that, at the age of 6, children should:

- be autonomous, creative, emotionally balanced, curious, and sociable;
- acquire practical skills (hygiene, communication, organization), language skills (Romanian and international languages), socialization, and the ability to choose between options;

¹³ Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe - 2025

- show empathy, tolerance, understanding of financial values, and interact constructively with the family-school environment.

According to the same document, the strategic objectives for early childhood education (0–6 years) are as follows:

1. Modernization of the legislative and institutional framework
 - Review and harmonize legislation for an integrated system, including quality early childhood education;
 - Implementation of a quality assurance system adapted to pre-school and preschool levels.
2. Expanding and modernizing infrastructure
 - Increasing the number of nurseries and kindergartens, including by facilitating the involvement of employers;
 - Transforming existing facilities into extended-day services for children up to 6 years of age;
 - Clarifying funding and standard equipment.
3. Ensuring the quality of early education
 - Modern curriculum, including values, STEAM, social-emotional skills, and multidisciplinary safety;
 - Digital systems for monitoring child progress;
 - Initial and continuing training for educators/teachers for ages 0–3.
4. Social awareness and parental education;
 - National campaigns to support and advocate for the importance of early childhood education;
 - Integrated parenting/family education strategies for parents.

The Educated Romania target for 2030 is to increase participation in preschool education to 30% for children up to 3 years of age and to 95% for children between 4 and 6 years of age. The value of the indicator *Participation in early childhood education* (for ages 3 to the age of compulsory enrollment in primary school) for 2030, according to the MEC Institutional Strategic Plan 2026-2029, is 81%.

The EU Council (Education, Youth, Culture and Sport - May 12, 2025) reaffirms that inclusive education, based on fundamental rights, is essential for a fair, democratic, and competitive society. Early childhood and school education must provide equal opportunities for all children, regardless of their background, through flexible, student-centered practices and tailored support. Great importance is attached to early childhood education and prevention, with inclusive education starting in

kindergarten and primary school in order to prevent exclusion and dropout and to support the harmonious development of all children. The importance of continuous teacher training, the use of data and assistive technologies, the involvement of families, and collaboration between institutions is emphasized to respond to diversity and reduce inequalities. The negative impact of recent crises on access to education is also recognized, and the need for evidence-based policies is emphasized.

Member States are invited to adopt integrated strategies, promote inclusive mindsets and practices in schools, support teachers, and leverage EU programs (e.g., Erasmus+) to support inclusive education and the active participation of all students.

ECE legislative framework

Law No. 198/2023 on pre-university education (2023) strengthens the status of early childhood education within the national education system and introduces measures to expand access and improve the quality of educational services for pre-school and pre-primary children. Types of early education programs are established: normal and extended (nurseries + kindergartens); complementary services (playrooms, community kindergartens, etc.) are provided where there are not enough places in traditional institutions; quality standards are established and a clearly defined teaching norm is ensured: one teacher or educator position for each group with a normal program, two for an extended program. Employers who set up nurseries/kindergartens for their own employees are also encouraged through dedicated incentives.

Law No. 199/2023 creates the legal framework for initial training bachelor's degree programs in "Early Education" and "Primary Education Pedagogy," provides for the certification of specific skills through these programs as preparation for a teaching career, and introduces mandatory teaching practice in pre-university institutions, based on framework agreements between universities and practice schools or similar institutions, and supports the possibility of creating pre-university institutions within universities, ensuring practice structures and their integration into the school network, with specific funding and regulations.

By joint order of the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Family, Youth, and Equal Opportunities, the Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity, and the Ministry of Development, Public Works, and Administration, the Intersectoral Committee for Early Education (CIET) was established. This Committee has developed and approved the

Intersectoral Framework Program for the development of unified, inclusive, and quality services for early childhood education and the related Operational Plan. These constitute a PNNR milestone for the implementation of Reform 2. *Development of a unified, inclusive, and high-quality early education service system*, Pillar VI: *Policies for the new generation*, Component C15. Education.

By ministerial order (2023), the Graduate Training Profile was approved, defining the essential behavioral indicators for the harmonious development of preschoolers. The document aligns the curriculum, individual progress assessment, and fundamental benchmarks for successful early childhood education.

Also, by ministerial order (2024), with the support of UNICEF and Step by Step, *the Fundamental Benchmarks for Early Childhood Learning and Development* were updated. These provide a framework for curriculum development, progress monitoring, and evaluation of educational programs in nurseries and kindergartens, preparing children for the transition to primary education.

Starting with the 2023-2024 school year, the Methodology for enrolling children in preschool and pre-preschool education and complementary early education services will be applied. According to this methodology, the age, place of residence, parents' place of work, and other social criteria guide the process of assigning children to schools.

The document *Profile and professional standards of teachers in pre-university education, by career stage and level of education*¹⁴ (2024), organized into seven areas with key values (each area being transposed into generic competencies), contains the professional standards for early childhood education teachers, by career stage (bachelor's degree, teaching degree II, teaching degree I).

The methodology for establishing and organizing bachelor's degree programs in "Early Childhood Education" sets out the complete regulatory and curricular framework for these 3-year, 180 ECTS programs. The programs are organized into three main areas:

- Fundamental elements of early childhood education
- Curriculum, teaching, and pedagogical practice
- Research in educational sciences

¹⁴ ROSE Project, Ministry of Education 2024.

The subjects can be grouped into modules to facilitate internships or international mobility, and teaching practice accounts for at least 15% of the total number of hours.

The structure of the Classification of Occupations in Romania (COR) has been updated with two important occupations for early childhood education: early childhood education teacher and early childhood education caregiver.

According to the Pre-university Education Law No. 198/2023, Article 192(1)(p), both early childhood nurses and early childhood caregivers are classified as auxiliary teaching staff.

- Both positions fall *within the same legal category*, having the same status as auxiliary teaching staff—with the same salary scheme, grading, and employer rights, according to Government Emergency Ordinance No. 128/2023, effective January 1, 2024.
- The basic salaries for both positions (zero grade) are set out in positions 98 and 99 in the Annex

William Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" presents a nuanced exploration of love, marriage, and the often unrealistic expectations that inevitably accompany these institutions. The present essay examines how marriage is depicted as both restrictive and challenging, yet ultimately valuable within the socio-cultural context of the play.

Reflecting its origins in a courtly marriage, the play articulates a sophisticated Renaissance philosophy concerning the nature of love in both its rational and irrational manifestations. This perspective is illustrated through the depiction of significant disparities in the expectations placed upon men and women. Hermia exemplifies this tension as she resists her father Egeus's insistence that she marry Demetrius, thereby asserting her desire for autonomy and authentic affection rather than merely acquiescing to societal expectations.

Conversely, men are generally afforded a broader range of achievements and aspirations. They are encouraged to pursue careers, adventures, and personal accomplishments that can lead to social recognition. Demetrius, for instance, initially pursues Hermia out of a sense of entitlement, thinking he can claim her because that is what society expects of her.

Another example is the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta. Their relationship is rooted in conquest and power dynamics, which reflect the

expectations of a hierarchical society. Theseus, as the Duke of Athens, represents a figure signifying his authority, and his marriage to a conquered queen, Hippolyta, suggests that marriage can also be about control and possession rather than something much purer.

- GEO and are identical for nurses and early childhood caregivers.
- For the position of early childhood caregiver, there is an Order of the Ministry of Education (OMEC No. 7.842/2025 approving the job description and for self-assessment/assessment for the purpose of establishing the annual rating for auxiliary teaching staff employed as early childhood caregivers) approving the job description and self-assessment/annual assessment form for this position.

The classification and salary conditions of the nurse are identical to those of the caregiver, because both are included in Art. 192(p) as auxiliary teaching staff. Regarding job descriptions and evaluation forms, the existing regulations only apply to caregivers.

The standard cost per preschool and pre-preschool child has been updated by Government Decision (2025) for both state and private and religious pre-university educational institutions, accredited and authorized, free of charge, as follows:

- for the component dedicated to salary expenses, bonuses, and related contributions (coefficient 1): 9,620 lei/preschool-pre-school;
- for the component dedicated to goods, services, and continuing education (coefficient 1): 704 lei/preschool-pre-school.

The National Action Plan for the implementation of the Child Guarantee (2023) was adopted by a Government Memorandum. The measures proposed in the "Child Guarantee" will be correlated with those of *the National Strategy for the Protection and Promotion of Children's Rights, "Protected Children, Safe Romania" 2023-2027*¹⁵.

Participation in early childhood education

In Romania, the participation of children under three years of age in formal education and care is low. Among the preschool population, discrepancies continue to exist depending on the area of residence. The choice of parents in rural areas not to send their children to kindergarten

¹⁵ <https://www.news.ro/social/guvernul-a-aprobat-memorandumul-privind-planul-national-de-actiune-pentru-implementarea-garantie-pentru-copii-1922405931002023101021366321>

at a younger age is determined both by various access difficulties (e.g., long distances between home and kindergarten) and by cultural or specific socio-economic factors. The data highlight the need for continued support for education in rural areas through specific projects and measures to develop the network of preschool education institutions and support participation in early childhood education.

One challenge for increasing participation in preschool education and care in Romania is to expand the participation of disadvantaged groups, such as children from poor socio-economic groups and ethnic minorities, especially the Roma community. Increasing participation in early childhood education among children from these groups is important to ensure that they have the best start in life. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to be stimulated at home, which is particularly important for early language development and child development in general. Families from less privileged backgrounds may also be less prepared to meet their children's nutritional and health needs.

Participation in early childhood education (from the age of 3 to the age of compulsory primary school enrollment) was 74.8% in 2022, compared to the European average of 93.1%. In 2023, the early childhood education participation rate in Romania for children aged between 3 and the start of compulsory education (i.e., ISCED 02 – pre-school) was 75.7%, compared to the European average of 94.6%.

As in 2022, in 2023, the following countries exceeded the 96% threshold (EU target): Belgium (98.0%), Spain (97.7%), France (100%), Denmark, Sweden, Portugal, and Lithuania. In 2023, the following countries also reached or exceeded this threshold Hungary, and the Netherlands. Romania remains in the category of countries with the lowest rates in the EU, alongside Greece (68.8%), Slovakia (78.6%), and Bulgaria.

In 2023, the highest rates of risk of poverty and social exclusion among children under 6 in the European Union were reported in Romania: 39.0%, Spain: 34.5% and Bulgaria: 33.9% (Eurostat, July 2024). The data indicate a significant decrease in the percentage of children aged 0 to 5 at risk of poverty and social exclusion in Romania and Serbia between 2015 and 2023. In Romania, this reduction was 14.4 percentage points, and in Serbia, 15.3 percentage points¹⁶.

¹⁶ Eurostat statistics, collected through UOE surveys (collected annually by UNESCO, OECD, and Eurostat), are accessible through the Eurostat portal and highlighted in official reports of the European Commission.

Starting in 2024, there are tax breaks for employees in Romania who enroll their children in daycare or kindergarten. The employer can cover the nursery or kindergarten costs for each of the employee's children, up to a maximum of 1,500 lei/month/child, these costs being completely exempt from income tax and social contributions for the employee. The benefits can only be granted if the early education institution (nursery or kindergarten) is accredited or authorized by ARACIP (Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-university Education) and are not mandatory (the employer decides whether or not to offer this amount from its own budget). The employer can deduct these amounts from income tax, up to a limit of 5% of the company's payroll, and they are not granted if there are no actual costs for the nursery or kindergarten (e.g., free state kindergarten).

Current challenges

- Lack of infrastructure – especially in rural areas (insufficient nurseries and kindergartens).
- Underfunding of services and teacher training.
- Unequal access to early childhood education depends on region, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity.
- Insufficiently qualified teaching staff, especially in nurseries.
- Lack of an integrated approach between education, health, and social protection

Objectives of educational policies for early childhood education

- Ensuring universal access to nurseries and kindergartens by expanding the network of nurseries and kindergartens.
- Developing integrated services (education + health + social protection).
- Promoting the inclusion of children with special educational needs and from vulnerable groups (Roma, poor families, etc.).
- Granting facilities, with priority for disadvantaged communities and rural areas
- Professionalization of human resources
- Mandatory initial and continuing training for educators and caregivers.
- Recognition of professional status and increasing the attractiveness of careers in early childhood education.
- Integration of services for children

- Continuing training for teaching and support staff in early childhood education
- Creation of clear mechanisms for monitoring service quality.
- Use of data in policy-making (evidence-based).
- Ensuring a coherent framework for supporting children and families; Involving the community and parents.
- Awareness campaigns on the importance of early childhood education.
- Support for vulnerable parents (counseling, support groups, parenting education).

National ECE projects and programs

The early childhood education reform project (€129 million), funded by the Council of Europe Development Bank and the Romanian Government, aims to build and equip 399 new kindergartens, of which 24 are currently under construction, and work on the last nine kindergartens is due to start in July 2025.

As part of the POCU *Inclusive and Quality Early Education* project, 2,400 childcare workers and educators completed the *Early Education Curriculum Empowerment* program. An awareness campaign was carried out, and the following were developed: educational materials, normative documents on the quality of pre-school education, as well as *the Pre-school Early Education Guide*.

Calls POCU/658/6/2 and POCU/664/6/2 on *the Development of Pre-school Education Services* (€15 million) supported the increase in the participation of children under two years of age in pre-school education, with a focus on disadvantaged families and isolated communities. The projects promoted partnerships between parents and educational institutions. In less developed regions, 15 projects were completed, and in Bucharest-Ilfov, six projects were completed.

Through the Call for Proposals *for the Development of Complementary Early Education Services*, funded by the PNRR, communities where there are not enough nurseries and kindergartens can set up complementary early education services such as playrooms, playgroups, community kindergartens, and the like, which will function as structures of educational institutions.

Through the PNRR project *Training of over 21,000 early childhood education professionals* (€13.7 million), at least 600 trainers were trained (348 in the field of curriculum and 252 in the field of monitoring early

childhood education services), and over 21,000 people from standard and complementary early education services were trained.

The PEO call *Diversification and flexibilisation of early childhood education services* (€120 million) aims to finance measures dedicated to diversifying and flexibilising socio-educational support services by supporting strategic actions/measures at the local level (county councils, town halls) to improve access to early childhood education for children aged 3 months to 6 years.

The PEO project *for a unified system for inclusive and quality early education* (€23.1 million) will provide specialist training for 400 teachers (methodology teachers) from teacher training high schools/high schools with vocational teaching classes, mentoring for 10,350 early childhood educators and teachers, training workshops and scholarships for 2,800 11th grade students from teacher training high schools, as well as the development of 7 methodological guides for early childhood education.

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TEACHER'S NONVERBAL LANGUAGE: UNIMPORTANT DETAIL OR INFLUENCING FACTOR IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

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Abstract: *"This article explores the role of nonverbal language in didactic communication, with a focus on its impact on the teacher-student relationship and on school performance. The main theoretical concepts are analyzed, and concrete examples from Romanian schools are presented. Through a synthesis of the specialized literature, the paper highlights that the teacher's gestures, facial expressions, posture, clothing, and eye contact contribute essentially to creating a positive educational climate and increasing teaching effectiveness. The conclusions emphasize the need for awareness and the development of nonverbal communication skills in teacher training".*

Keywords: *educational process, communication, nonverbal language, education*

Introduction¹

Nonverbal language represents the entirety of messages conveyed through gestures, facial expressions, posture, and body movements, without using words. In the educational context, it plays an essential role, as teachers not only transmit information through words but also through their behaviors and attitudes. In Romanian schools, the teacher's nonverbal language is often underestimated; however, it can significantly influence the students' learning process.

Studies in the field suggest that the way a teacher uses their body and facial expressions can influence how students perceive lessons and develop their attitudes towards learning. For example, a teacher who smiles and maintains constant eye contact with students can create a more open and friendly atmosphere, fostering trust and student engagement. On the other hand, encouraging gestures and an appropriate tone of voice can stimulate students' confidence in their own abilities.

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¹ A.N. This paper is part of the Bachelor's thesis currently being developed by the author, under the coordination of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Remus CHINĂ, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Dimitrie Cantemir Christian University.

Nonverbal language represents an essential tool in didactic communication, having a direct influence on the classroom atmosphere and the teacher-student relationship. According to Albert Mehrabian (1971), in interpersonal communication, 55% of the impact is transmitted through body language, 38% through tone of voice, and only 7% through words. This fact highlights the importance of nonverbal communication in the educational process, where the teacher serves as a model of expression and behavior.²

Nonverbal language is a silent form of communication. Silence sends nonverbal signals about the communication situations in which we participate; it helps to obtain feedback and informs both the sender and the receiver about the clarity and meaning of an idea within interpersonal exchanges. Silence can be interpreted both as a sign of acceptance and as a sign of disinterest. Researcher Braithwaite (apud Samovar, Porter, 2004) states: *"One of the fundamental competencies, both linguistic and cultural, is knowing when not to speak in a certain community. Therefore, understanding where and when to be silent and the meaning of silence means having a projection into the fundamental structure of communication."*³

I. Signs, signals, codes, and channels in nonverbal communication

I.1 Kinesics

Communication through gestures, facial expressions, and body movements, termed *kinesics* by Ray Birdwhistell, the founder of this discipline, has several characteristics: it is strictly codified; it depends on a socio-cultural community, with each culture possessing its own norms in this regard; it is integrated into a multi-level system, involving the use of space and time concerning the intensity, duration, and amplitude of gestures or movements; it is contextualized, with its meanings deriving from the context in which the interaction takes place (Rovența-Frumușani, 1999).

In education, it is one of the most important forms of nonverbal communication that teachers use, often without being aware of its importance. Body movements communicate attitudes towards another person as well as the desire to control the audience. American researchers

² Albert Mehrabian, ed. al. *Silent Messages*, Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1971, p. 51-52.

³ Septimiu Chelcea, Loredana Ivan, Adina Chelcea, ed. al. *Nonverbal Communication: Gestures and Posture*, Comunicare.ro Publishing, 2005, p. 40.

Ekman and Friesen (apud Roventă-Frumușani, 1999) developed a classification of the gestural repertoire:⁴

Emblems are conventional gestures that have a clear and well-established meaning within a specific culture. They function like signs understood by members of that culture without the need for verbal explanations. In the educational field, such emblems are frequently encountered, as these gestures have a clear meaning and teachers often use them, especially in lower grades, because students respond quickly to them without additional explanations. A raised hand = "I want to speak" or "Quiet, please."

A finger placed on the lips = "Be quiet!"

A thumbs up = "Very good" or "OK."

A thumbs down = "Not good" / "Rejected."

A waving hand = "Goodbye" or "Hello."

Illustrators are those movements of the hands or body that accompany and complement speech, helping to illustrate or clarify the verbal message. They cannot replace words (as emblems do), but they visually support them, making communication more expressive and easier to understand.

For example: moving the hands to show the size or shape of an object: "It was this big!" (while the teacher extends their arms).

Pointing a finger at a spot on the board or on a map helps students visually follow the explanation.

Moving the hands up or down to indicate an increase or decrease (e.g., "the grade went up").

Using the hand to mimic a moving object, such as a wheel or a door opening, during demonstrative lessons.⁵ Affective displays are gestures that express emotional states. They are not necessarily intentional or controlled; rather, they often appear spontaneously and reflect a person's genuine emotions, such as joy, sadness, nervousness, empathy, or enthusiasm.

A sincere smile conveys warmth, empathy, and openness. A teacher who smiles at students encourages communication and participation, while a frown signals dissatisfaction or disagreement, even if it is not verbally expressed.

⁴ Vasile Frunză, *The Theory of Didactic Communication*, Didactic and Pedagogical Publishing House, 2013.

⁵ A. Paese, & B. Pease ed. al. 2006. *Body Language*, Polirom Publishing.

Raising an eyebrow may indicate surprise, suspicion, or curiosity, while looking down or teary eyes can indicate sadness or compassion. Energetic hand gestures and a bright look in the eyes demonstrate enthusiasm and engagement during teaching.

Regulators are gestures used to maintain control during communication, such as movements of the head or body that indicate the speaker's desire to gain the listener's approval, to take the floor, or to show agreement with what the speaker is saying.

Examples include:

- Slightly raising the hand with the palm facing forward - "Wait a moment" or "Do not speak now."
- Extending the arm toward a student - "It is your turn to speak."
- Slightly tilting the head and using the "come here" gesture with the hand - "I want to hear what you have to say."
- Raising the hand to ask for silence - a gesture frequently used by teachers.
- Maintaining sustained eye contact with a student - a signal for engagement or the unspoken question "Do you have something to say?"

Body manipulators are gestures and movements involving touching one's body or objects, determined by certain emotional states that the communicator may try to control or mask.

In the classroom, we often encounter gestures such as stroking or playing with the ends of one's hair, rubbing the hands, twisting fingers together, repeatedly touching the face, neck, or ears, tapping a pen on the desk, or playing with a ring or necklace.

As can be seen from this classification, gestures serve different functions: complementing, emphasizing, coordinating, substituting, and others. They can be innate or acquired, voluntary or involuntary, culturally codified or personalized. According to Birdwhistell⁶ the hand alone can generate approximately 5,000 verbalized gestures. Nonverbal messages communicated through gestures can have an impact and feedback equal to or even greater than verbal messages. Gestures define an individual's social belonging and the sense of group identity, being directly connected to behavior.

Gestures support or complement the verbal message. For example, a teacher who points to the board while explaining or makes a "stop"

⁶ S. Chelcea, L. Ivan, & A. Chelcea, ed. Al., *Nonverbal Communication: Gestures and Posture*, Comunicare.ro Publishing, 2005, p. 41-43

gesture when asking for silence is using gestures that reinforce the message. Broad, calm gestures convey confidence, while fast or abrupt gestures can create a sense of nervousness in the classroom.

I.2 Proxemics

The term *proxemics* was first used by E.T. Hall in a study from 1963 and later in another published in 1968.⁷ Proxemics is the study of the physical distance between individuals during interaction. It shows us how close or far we stand from each other and what this distance signifies depending on the context.

According to Delhees (apud Septimiu Chelcea), in the context of nonverbal communication, the relevant concepts are: social distance, personal space, and private sphere.

Social distance refers to the degree of intimacy in contact that people desire or tolerate in a given situation. In addressing the question of what determines the differences in this regard between individuals and cultures, Delhees (1994) considers the following factors important: the needs and characteristics of the communication partners, cultural socialization, the communication context, the degree of mutual familiarity, and the gender and age of the individuals interacting.

Following studies conducted in the USA, E. Hall identified four fundamental distances:

Intimate distance: from direct physical contact up to 45 cm;

Personal distance: between 45 cm and 120 cm;

Social distance: between 120 cm and 350 cm, which is the main working zone in the classroom;

Public distance: over 350 cm.

Personal space is defined by Delhees (1994) as a “protective bubble” that accompanies a person everywhere. It serves to maintain personal distance and differs from one individual to another.

Cultures that emphasize individualism, such as those in the United Kingdom, the United States, Germany, Australia, Sweden, and others, generally have rules that require a greater distance between communication participants. In collectivist cultures, such as Arab, African, and South American cultures, the distances between participants are noticeably smaller. In some Asian cultures, students maintain a distance from their teachers as a sign of esteem and respect.

⁷ S. Chelcea, L. Ivan, & A. Chelcea, ed. al. 2005. *Nonverbal Communication: Gestures and Posture*, Comunicare.ro Publishing, p. 45–47

In primary school, teachers are physically and emotionally closer to their students. In high school, distancing is more pronounced, and proxemics becomes part of the teacher's "authority."

In modern schools, where collaborative learning is practiced, proxemics is much more dynamic (desks are moved, students work in circles, and the teacher moves around among the students).

I.3 Oculesics or Eye Contact

A large part of nonverbal communication takes place through eye contact.

The German author Delhees⁸ differentiates between two fundamental types of visual behavior in humans: directing the gaze towards someone and averting the gaze, which can take various forms and express different intentions, inner states, feelings, and attitudes. Eye contact is used both to attract or to distance someone, to communicate sympathy or antipathy, desire or rejection, and generally, messages transmitted visually are correctly decoded. Despite cultural differences, Delhees (1994) believes that in its basic forms, visual language is as intelligible as verbal communication. Even if the receiver has difficulties in accurately and subtly decoding the message, they are capable of distinguishing whether positive or negative feelings are being transmitted, specifically sympathy or antipathy.

Eye contact serves to control the level of intimacy in interaction. The closer individuals are positioned to one another, the less eye contact they maintain, and the shorter the duration of their gaze.

The Role of Eye Contact for Teachers

Capturing attention: When the teacher looks directly at the students while explaining, it captures their attention more effectively than words alone.

Classroom control: With a simple look, a teacher can calm a noisy classroom or "correct" a student without interrupting the lesson. It is the most elegant form of nonverbal authority.

Supporting communication: The teacher establishes eye contact with a student who is speaking, validating them and giving them confidence.

Evaluating reactions: By observing students' eyes, the teacher "reads" their level of understanding, engagement, fatigue, or confusion, providing valuable instant feedback.

⁸ Ibidem

Building relationships: Sincere and balanced eye contact conveys warmth, openness, and respect—essential in the teacher-student relationship, especially in primary education.

1.4 Facial Expressions

Among facial expressions, the smile holds a special place within nonverbal forms of expression, being the most important gesture of greeting and an invitation to communicate. It appears in many forms and expresses different emotions and feelings: joy, sympathy, friendship, but also antipathy. Therefore, the Romanian language contains numerous adjectives to describe smiles: broad, charming, friendly, disarming, embarrassed, uncertain, fake, nervous, etc. The Romanian language has approximately 360 epithets to aesthetically classify the smile and around 325 epithets to describe the psychological characteristics and peculiarities of the person who laughs.

The smile can also express mixed feelings. When people smile out of obligation, they display a forced, frozen smile, situations in which some elements of the genuine smile remain while others are missing.

Facial expressions in teachers' activities serve to convey authenticity; students “sense” whether the teacher truly believes what they are saying based on their facial expression. A warm smile supports encouragement, a serious expression emphasizes a warning, and an expressive face is more engaging than an impassive one, especially in lower grades.

Facial expressions also provide instant feedback, allowing a student to know immediately whether they have answered correctly or incorrectly just by observing the teacher’s facial reaction.

1.5 Olfactics – Olfactory Signals

Olfactory communication refers to the influence of smells on perception, emotions, and social interaction. In the educational context, it does not transmit a direct message, but it contributes to the atmosphere and affects the overall impression of a person.

A teacher who pays attention to personal hygiene conveys respect for themselves and for their students. Poor hygiene can distract, disturb, or undermine authority.

A subtle and pleasant perfume can create an agreeable environment, while a strong or persistent fragrance can become disturbing, especially in closed spaces such as a classroom.

Although it does not depend solely on the teacher, the smell within the classroom (ventilation, cleanliness, the scent of the chalkboard, or educational materials) influences the students' emotional comfort and their ability to concentrate.

Regarding the use of scents obtained through chemical processes, such as perfumes and other similar products, these practices have a millennia-old tradition in both European and non-European civilizations.

I.6 Vocalics or Paralanguage

Paralinguistics⁹ deals with the analysis of vocal phenomena that accompany and support speech, being in a reciprocal relationship with it.

Paralanguage refers to the speech characteristics that are physiologically noticeable, such as the way words are articulated, pronunciation, accent, and speech rhythm. Paralanguage is the element that adds "color" and "personal character" to verbal language.

It is important for the teacher to pronounce words correctly to avoid confusion. Clear and correct pronunciation helps students understand lessons more effectively.

Teachers can emphasize key words to highlight important information or to underline essential points in the lesson, while the rhythm of speech can make lessons more engaging or can create a sense of monotony. A varied rhythm and correct cadences help maintain students' interest. It is essential for the teacher to pronounce words correctly to avoid confusion.

There are two categories of paralinguistic means of expression. The first category includes the characteristics of the voice: vocal register, volume, tempo, rhythm, and resonance. The second category includes different forms of sound expression, such as laughter, sighing, crying, yawning, mumbling, whistling, groaning, and "filler" sounds like "uh," "um," etc., also referred to as "speech failures." A particular case is the pauses in speech. (Delhees, 1994). According to the German researcher, these have been relatively little studied compared to other forms of nonverbal communication.¹⁰

Paralinguistic means of expression have an implicit metacommunicative function, indicating how verbal communication

⁹ S. Chelcea, L. Ivan, & A. Chelcea, ed. al., *Nonverbal Communication: Gestures and Posture*, Comunicare.ro Publishing, 2005.

¹⁰ Vasile Frunză, ed. al., *The Theory of Didactic Communication*, Didactic and Pedagogical Publishing House, 2013.

should be understood. The decoding and interpretation of messages are carried out in correlation with other forms of nonverbal communication, such as gestures, facial expressions, and posture. Emotions, their intensity, and the communicator's moods are signaled by these means that accompany verbal communication and can have various functions: complementing, substituting, coordinating, among others. *"Many para- or extralinguistic characteristics are culturally determined. They provide indications about the geographical region, the group to which the individual belongs, and even the individual's social status."*¹¹

In primary education, teachers who have calm, controlled voices and emphasize verbal encouragement (combined with an appropriate tone) can create a safe environment, stimulating children's emotional development. In middle and high schools, teachers who use dynamic vocalics, varying volume and rhythm depending on the subject taught (for example, slower and deeper for serious topics or faster and more enthusiastic for interactive topics), can capture students' attention and help them remain motivated and engaged.

Foreign language teachers in Romanian schools need to pay special attention to pronunciation and accent to help students correctly learn a new language. Speech cadence and word emphasis are fundamental elements in teaching a foreign language.

Vocalics refers to the way the sounds of the voice are used, such as tone, rhythm, intensity, and timbre. It encompasses the entire vocal range used by the teacher to support understanding and the clarity of the message.

Depending on how the teacher adjusts their tone of voice (higher or lower), the message may seem more authoritative or more empathetic. For example, a higher tone can express enthusiasm or curiosity, while a deeper tone can signal seriousness and authority.

Speaking rapidly can indicate urgency or excitement, while slower speech can provide time for understanding and reflection. A volume that is too low may prevent the message from being heard by the entire class, while a volume that is too high may be perceived as aggressive or disturbing. A moderate and clear volume is essential. Pauses between sentences or ideas allow students to process the information and help create an atmosphere of calm and concentration.

¹¹ S. Chelcea, L. Ivan, & A. Chelcea, ed. al. *Nonverbal Communication: Gestures and Posture*, Comunicare.ro Publishing, 2005, pp. 192-196.

Vocalics and paralanguage ensure that the teacher's message is clear and accessible. Students need to understand not only the words but also their tone and rhythm in order to correctly assimilate the information.

A teacher who adjusts their vocalics to convey enthusiasm, care, or support helps students feel emotionally connected to the lesson. A warm, enthusiastic voice delivered in a dynamic rhythm can stimulate students' curiosity and motivation. In contrast, a boring and monotonous tone can lead to a decrease in attention and interest. A teacher who uses a consistent and authentic vocalics conveys credibility and trust, while coherent paralanguage contributes to establishing a relationship of authority.

In some Romanian schools, especially in rural areas or schools with limited resources, some teachers may not be aware of the impact of vocalics and paralanguage on the educational process, and this can affect the quality of teaching.

Additionally, it is important for teachers to pay attention to their level of fatigue, as speaking in a monotonous tone due to tiredness can affect students' attention and may lead to ineffective communication.

I.7 Haptics or Physical Contact

This form of nonverbal communication, which involves the sense of touch and beyond, holds its importance and significance in human interactions, referring to ideas of intimacy, power relations, and social status. Like communication through eye contact, tactile communication is related to the issues of spatial communication, as well as to other means and signs.¹² In education, physical contact can play an important role in building relationships and influencing the classroom atmosphere. However, it is a sensitive topic that requires a balance between emotional support, respect, and safety measures.

When a teacher uses physical contact appropriately, it can express affection, support, or encouragement. For example, a light touch on the shoulder or a friendly pat can strengthen the emotional bond between teacher and students and can contribute to creating a positive learning environment.

Especially in primary education, students may experience a high level of anxiety when facing learning difficulties. A supportive gesture, such as a "high-five," can convey a message of encouragement and safety, helping them overcome challenging moments. Positive,

¹² Chelcea, S. L. Ivan, & A. Chelcea, ed. al., *Nonverbal Communication: Gestures and Posture*, Comunicare.ro Publishing, 2005, p. 70-74.

respectful physical contact that occurs only when necessary can create a sense of comfort and security. In many cases, students need validation and trust to feel supported in their learning process.

In Romania, physical contact between teachers and students is regulated by educational and ethical norms and is accepted under certain circumstances, but it must always be respectful and appropriate to the students' age. Especially in primary education, where children are more vulnerable and need more affection and encouragement, light touches from teachers are more frequent and can contribute to developing a trusting relationship between students and teachers.

I.8 Clothing

The clothing and colors chosen by teachers play a significant role in nonverbal communication within the school, having an impact on the classroom atmosphere, on students' perceptions, and even on the relationship between teachers and students. Although it may seem like a minor detail, the clothing choices of a teacher can influence how they are perceived by students and, implicitly, the effectiveness of the educational process.

Colors are an important element in creating a learning environment. Different colors can have psychological effects on students and can influence the atmosphere of a lesson. Here are some common colors and how they can influence students' perceptions and behaviors:

White is a color associated with purity and neutrality. A teacher who wears white can convey a message of clarity and authority, which can encourage students to be more attentive and focused.¹³

Blue is often associated with calmness and trust. It is a color that fosters creativity and communication. Teachers who choose to wear blue clothing can stimulate a calm and collaborative atmosphere, making it easier for students to accept and engage with them.

Red is often associated with energy, passion, and attention. Teachers who wear red can draw students' attention to an important topic but should be aware that red can also stimulate agitation or overexcitement in certain situations. It is a color that can be used to highlight a point of interest or to draw attention to an essential topic.

Green is often associated with patience and balance. It is a color that has a calming effect and can help reduce stress. Teachers who wear green can help create a relaxed and learning-friendly atmosphere.

¹³ K. Haller ed. al., *The Psychology of Colors*, Baraque Books & Arts, 2019, p. 136-138

Black is a formal color that can signal authority and professionalism. Although it can appear elegant and respectful, it is important for teachers not to overuse black, as it may create an overly severe atmosphere and can make students feel distanced.

Yellow is associated with optimism and creativity. It is a color that stimulates positive thinking but can also become overwhelming if overused. Teachers can wear a yellow accessory to add a touch of energy without negatively affecting the classroom atmosphere.

The teacher's clothing is an essential factor in forming the first impression and can influence how students perceive the authority and professionalism of the teacher. It can also affect the relationships between teachers and students, creating either a learning-friendly environment or, on the contrary, one in which students do not feel comfortable.

Here are some important considerations:

Choosing a professional clothing style can convey respect to students and contribute to maintaining a serious climate within the school. Teachers who dress appropriately for the school context help students understand the importance of education and the subjects they are learning.

Teachers should choose clothing that is comfortable yet appropriate for the educational environment. It should not be too formal or too *casual*. Additionally, the clothing style should reflect respect for the students and the educational institution.

It is important for teachers to maintain their own personal identity in their chosen attire. This can help students perceive teachers as authentic and approachable, while also maintaining a reasonable level of respect for the teacher and the educational environment.

II. The teacher's nonverbal language - part of their intellectual product in relation to the classroom

Educational processes do not occur spontaneously, without prior preparation. Otherwise, their positive results are random and/or accidental. The teacher-student relationship involves a limited-time interaction, especially during the main process—the class/lesson. The time allocated for this essential process is “calibrated” according to the students'/children's capacity for perception, so that within this time, the process reaches its optimal level of effectiveness and efficiency (achieving the proposed objectives with maximum results).

The teacher-student relationship, within the time allocated to the lesson, actually takes place as a sequence of numerous processes through which the class progresses under the coordination of the teacher.

Therefore, the teacher—as the process manager (in this context)—bears the enormous responsibility of managing both the fundamental educational process—the class/lesson—and the preparatory processes before the lesson even begins.

Authors concerned with the management of educational quality highlight an important point (Chină, 2015): *“From the moment they enter the classroom to the moment they leave, the teacher ‘delivers’ to the students their own intellectual product”*¹⁴. It is worth noting that the teacher’s intellectual product consists of several components (subject-matter preparation and its scientific level, communication skills, and nonverbal language that complements verbal communication)¹⁵.

Consequently, nonverbal language is extremely important in the teacher-class interaction process, as through it, the teacher conveys essential messages related to the formation of what we call education.

The teacher’s responsibility in effectively and efficiently managing core educational processes is significant, primarily through refining their own intellectual product, of which nonverbal language is an essential component.

We note that the other components of the teacher's intellectual product in relation to the classroom will be studied in future works and/or in the bachelor's thesis developed on this topic.

III. Conclusion

Nonverbal communication represents an essential pillar in the educational process, profoundly influencing the relationship between teacher and students, as well as the effectiveness of the teaching process. Although words play an important role in transmitting information, gestures, facial expressions, posture, tone of voice, proximity, facial expressions, and physical appearance provide the emotional and relational context in which learning takes place.

Through kinesics, meaning body movements, teachers can express enthusiasm, authority, openness, or empathy. Gestures such as

¹⁴ R. China, *Quality Management in Pre-University Education*, Universitară Publishing, Bucharest pp. 325. (2015) DOI: [10.5682/9786062801830](https://doi.org/10.5682/9786062801830)

¹⁵ Ibidem

illustrators, affective displays, or regulators contribute to clarifying the message, maintaining order, and building a positive climate. For example, a simple “quiet” gesture with the palm can have a greater impact than a repeated verbal request.

Eye contact is another vital component. A teacher who maintains balanced eye contact with the class inspires confidence, conveys interest, and shows engagement. In contrast, avoiding eye contact may be perceived as a sign of insecurity or disinterest.

Clothing and the colors chosen contribute not only to the formation of the first impression but also to establishing a suitable atmosphere. Warm and light colors can stimulate good mood and communication, while clothing style can emphasize either authority or openness on the part of the teacher.

Haptics, or physical contact, is a sensitive yet relevant aspect, especially in primary school, where gentle supportive gestures can convey a sense of security. Of course, this must be managed responsibly, respecting personal and cultural boundaries.

Olfactics, although subtle, also influences students’ perception. Pleasant scents and personal hygiene contribute to a healthy and friendly climate, while unpleasant odors can distract or even negatively affect students' mood.

Vocalics and paralinguistics, such as tone, rhythm, and intensity, play a central role in capturing attention, conveying emotion, and supporting message comprehension.

From the above, it is clear that nonverbal language cannot be considered a mere insignificant detail in the educational process. On the contrary, it represents an essential factor in influencing the teacher-student relationship, classroom atmosphere, and the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process. Nonverbal communication—through facial expressions, gestures, posture, proximity, eye contact, or even clothing and scent—complements and often amplifies verbal messages, offering clarity, emotion, and authenticity.

A teacher who masters and harnesses nonverbal language becomes more persuasive, empathetic, and approachable in the eyes of students. Such a teacher manages to maintain attention, reduce tensions, support students in expressing themselves, and create a safe and motivating educational environment. Thus, nonverbal language proves to be a strategic pedagogical tool, which, when consciously integrated into the educational act, can make the difference between an ordinary lesson and a memorable one.

Therefore, it is not merely a decorative detail, but a central element in the architecture of didactic communication, capable of supporting, shaping, and enhancing learning.

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BULLYING IN THE ROMANIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: CAUSES, FORMS, AND TEACHERS' PERCEIVED SOLUTIONS

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Abstract: *Bullying in the school environment represents a major issue, with complex effects on students' emotional and academic development. In this context, teachers play a central role in identifying and preventing the phenomenon, through the attitudes and educational practices they adopt. The present study employs a descriptive and exploratory design, using a standardized questionnaire administered to a sample of 114 teachers from primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary education, originating from both urban (84.2%) and rural (15.8%) settings. The results indicate that bullying is consistently perceived as present: 40.3% of respondents consider it "rare," 31.6% "occasional," and 21.0% "occasional-frequent." The most frequently reported forms are verbal bullying (96.5%) and social/emotional bullying (70.2%), while cyberbullying (36.8%) and physical bullying (33.3%) appear less often. Among the identified causes are negative social role models (35.9%), lack of empathy among students (31.6%), and insufficient parental involvement (27.2%).*

The conclusions highlight that teachers predominantly employ reactive strategies, yet they almost unanimously acknowledge the importance of empathetic education as a fundamental solution for preventing bullying and for fostering a positive and inclusive school climate.

Keywords: *bullying, empathy, antibullying intervention, actionable empathy*

Introduction

Numerous studies have highlighted the negative impact of bullying on students' mental and emotional health, as well as on their academic

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performance¹. Classical definitions of this behavior emphasize three fundamental criteria: the repetitiveness of aggressive acts, their intentional nature, and the existence of a power imbalance between the aggressor and the victim². Bullying manifestations may be direct, including physical aggression, teasing, or threats, but also indirect, through the spreading of rumors, lies, or the public dissemination of private information or images³.

While the effects of the phenomenon are well documented, the ways in which it can be counteracted through an educational approach grounded in moral and prosocial values remain less explored. Recent literature suggests that integrating practices such as empathy, compassion, and moral development into the educational process may contribute to fostering a safe and inclusive school climate, in which interpersonal relationships are based on respect and solidarity⁴. Such a holistic and preventive approach gains particular relevance in multicultural contexts, where prosocial values can support social cohesion and inclusion.

The Phenomenon of School Bullying

Bullying is internationally recognized as a global issue, with studies conducted on every continent⁵. Bullying is a subtype of proactive aggression, characterized by a power imbalance between aggressors and victims, occurring repeatedly over an extended period of time⁶. This form of aggression may be direct—physical or verbal—or indirect, through the spreading of rumors or the dissemination of private information in the public sphere⁷.

¹ S.R. Jimerson et al., Advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in school psychology: Be the change. *School Psychology Review*, 50(1), 1-7, 2021.

² E. Menesinia and C. Salmivalli, Bullying in schools: the state of knowledge and effective interventions, *Psychology, health & Medicine*, 2017, Vol. 22, no. s1, 240-253.

³ S.R. Jimerson & N. Huai, N. International perspectives on bullying prevention and intervention. In S.R. Jimerson, S.M. Swearer, & D.L. Espelage (Eds.), *Handbook of bullying in schools: An international perspective* (pp. 571-592). New York, NY: Routledge, 2010.

⁴ K. Rajaleid, S. Laftman, & B. Modin. School-Contextual Paths to Student Bullying Behaviour: Teachers Under Time Pressure are Less Likely to Intervene and the Students Know It! [Article]. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 64(5), 629-644., 2020.

⁵ S.R. Jimerson et. al, *op. cit.*

⁶ M.E. Solberg, D. Olweus. Prevalence estimation of school bullying with the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire. *Aggress. Behav.* 2003, 29, 239-268.

⁷ E. Menesini & C. Salmivalli, C. Bullying in schools: the state of knowledge and effective interventions, *Psychology, Health & Medicine*, 22:1, 2017.

The psychological and emotional effects can be overwhelming for children who become victims of bullying. Constantly subjected to such aggression, regardless of its specific form, victims often face depression, low self-esteem, social isolation, and even suicidal thoughts^{8,9}.

Because it occurs frequently in the school setting¹⁰, students who are victims of bullying are not only targeted by aggressors but are often isolated and even rejected by larger peer groups¹¹. This phenomenon exerts a clearly detrimental impact on victims' physical and mental health, as well as on their overall psychosocial functioning. While aggressors have traditionally been viewed as individuals with limited social skills who resort to bullying as a means of attaining social status, recent research has demonstrated a highly significant positive correlation with narcissistic traits¹². In general, aggressors tend to be popular leaders, yet are often disliked by their peers, even though they hold a certain level of notoriety and authority within the student group¹³.

In much of the contemporary literature, a distinction is made between aggressors and bully-victims, who successively experience both roles. Neuropsychological research has found that the cognitive processes of aggressors tend to support the use of aggression¹⁴. The tendency to engage in bullying is driven by the aggressor's perception of violence as a positive force.

Bully-victims combine the vulnerabilities of both roles, being simultaneously exposed to the negative consequences of victimization and the risks associated with aggressiveness. In a bullying situation, all

⁸ A. Cook, J. Ogden & N. Winstone, The effect of school exposure and personal contact on attitudes towards bullying and autism in schools: A cohort study with a control group. *Autism*, 24(8), 2178-2189, (2020).

⁹ E. Menesini & C. Salmivalli, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

¹⁰ M. Fekkes, F.I. M. Pijpers & S.P. Verloove-Vanhorick. *Bullying: Who does what, when, and where? Involvement of children, teachers and parents in bullying behavior*. Health Education Research, 20, 81-91, 2005.

¹¹ G. Gini, T. Pozzoli & K. Bussey, *The role of individual and collective moral disengagement in peer aggression and bystanding: A multilevel analysis*. Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 43, 441-452, 2015.

¹² D. Pepler, W. Craig, P. O'Connell. Peer processes in bullying: Informing prevention and intervention strategies. In: *Handbook of bullying in schools*. Routledge, 2009, p. 469-478.

¹³ T. Vaillancourt, S. Hymel & P. McDougall. Bullying Is Power: Implications for School-Based Intervention Strategies. *Journal of Applied School Psychology*, 19(2), 157-176, 2003.

¹⁴ E. Menesini & C. Salmivalli, *op. cit.*, p. 245.

children are victims—both the one who directly suffers the consequences of aggression and the perpetrator of the violent behavior^{15,16} Research has shown that even peers who witness bullying often experience empathic distress, manifested through emotions such as fear, anger, sadness, guilt, and disgust, which may foster heightened anxiety and a sense of helplessness. Bystanders can assume different roles, ranging from reinforcing the aggressor or actively participating in the aggression to engaging in pro-victim intervention aimed at supporting the targeted student¹⁷.

It has been found that prosocial students and those who intervene to defend victims exhibit a high level of empathy¹⁸, In other words, defenders are children who possess the capacity to understand the cognitions and emotions of others¹⁹. Empatia ar putea prezice rolul copiilor de a fi apărători sau spectatori pasivi²⁰.

Empirical evidence suggests a significant, though variable, association between defender behavior and empathy. Other study²¹ explains that boys who help victims or act as defenders are those who exhibit a high level of empathy.

Empathy and School Bullying

Empathy constitutes a fundamental element in both the understanding and management of bullying. A substantial body of

¹⁵ C. Salmivalli, K. Lagerspetz, K., Björkqvist & A Kaukiainen. Bullying as a group process: Participant roles and their relations to social status within the group. *Aggressive Behavior*, 22, 1-15., 1996.

¹⁶J. Lodge & E. Frydenberg. *The role of peer bystanders in school bullying: Positive steps towards promoting peaceful schools*. Theory into Practice, 44(4), 329–336, 2005.

¹⁷ C. Salmivalli. Participant role approach to school bullying: Implications for interventions. *Journal of Adolescence*, 22 (4), 453–459, 1999.

¹⁸ I. M. Endresen & D. Olweus. Self-reported empathy in Norwegian adolescents: sex- differences, age trends, and relationship to bullying. In D. Stipek, & A. Bohart (Eds.), *Constructive and destructive behavior. Implications for family, school, society* (pp. 147 165), 2001.

¹⁹ C.D. Correia, Belief in a Personal Just World of Bullies, Victims, and Defenders, *European Psychologist*, vol 13, 2008.

²⁰ A.B. Nickerson, D. Mele, D. & D. Princiotta, Attachment and empathy as predictors of roles as defenders or outsiders in bullying interactions. *Journal of School Psychology*, 46, 687–703, 2008.

²¹ A. Bellmore, J. You & M. Hughes (2012). A two-method investigation of early adolescents' responses upon witnessing peer victimization in school. *Journal of Adolescence*, 35, 1265–1276, 2012.

research has demonstrated a strong link between elevated levels of empathy and the cultivation of a positive school climate, one marked by reduced aggressiveness and an increase in prosocial behaviors²². Empathy refers to the capacity to recognize, comprehend, and share the thoughts, emotions, and feelings of others^{23,24} describe empathy as “a complex phenomenon composed of a variety of sub-skills and systems,” thereby highlighting its multidimensional and interconnected nature. Empathy can be differentiated into cognitive and affective components. Cognitive empathy entails the intellectual understanding of another individual’s mental and emotional state, involving perspective-taking as well as the recognition of the other’s thoughts and intentions²⁵. Affective empathy, by contrast, involves experiencing another’s emotions and responding appropriately to their emotional state, thereby contributing to a sense of being seen and understood²⁶.

Studies indicate that in working with teachers, cognitive empathy is particularly relevant, as they must simultaneously manage the needs of the entire class and respond appropriately to complex situations, including those involving bullying. By contrast, for students, the development of affective empathy is essential for reducing aggressive behaviors and fostering a climate of mutual support²⁷. Nevertheless, a purely emotional form of empathy may prove detrimental for teachers, as it can lead to compassion fatigue or personal distress, thereby reducing their capacity to intervene effectively. Empathy is more appropriately conceptualized as a multidimensional construct and an integrative process that encompasses cognitive appraisal, affective resonance, and behavioral responsiveness,

²² T.H.J. Noorden van, G.J.T Haselager, A.H. N., Cillessen, & W.M. Bukowski. *Empathy and involvement in bullying in children and adolescents: A systematic review*. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 44(3), 637-657, 2015.

²³ S. Baron-Cohen. & S. Wheelwright, *The empathy quotient: An investigation of adults with Asperger syndrome or high functioning autism, and normal sex differences*. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 34(2), 163-175, 2004.

²⁴ P. Swan & P. Riley, *Social Connection: Empathy and Mentalization for Teachers*. Pastoral Care in Education, 33(4), 220–233. Haettu 21.10.2024 osoitteesta, 2015.

²⁵ E.J. Lawrence, P. Shaw, D. Baker, S. Baron-Cohen & A.S. David. Measuring empathy: Reliability and validity of the empathy quotient. *Psychological Medicine*, 34(5), 911-920, 2004.

²⁶ E.J. Lawrence, *op. cit.*, p. 911-920.

²⁷ P. Stavrinides, S. Georgiou and V. Theofanous. Bullying and empathy: a short-term longitudinal investigation. *Educ. Psychol.* 30, 793–802, 2010.

rather than as a mere byproduct of understanding another's emotions²⁸. Other specialists²⁹ describe five stages of the empathic process in adults, with the final step being the most significant: the observer undertakes actions aimed at alleviating the suffering of the other person. Thus, empathy is not confined to emotional understanding but extends to empathic action, or actionable empathy, whereby individuals respond to the needs of others through tangible forms of support.

In addition, empathy shapes students' prosocial behaviors, playing a central role in the perception of situational severity and in the capacity for action. Teachers must remain sensitive to students' suffering and be able to transform this understanding into an appropriate response, while at the same time balancing the needs of the entire class³⁰. Thus, empathy should not be regarded as merely a passive response, but rather as an active component in the management of undesirable behaviors such as bullying. Low levels of empathy may generate significant difficulties in navigating the social environment, particularly during childhood, where diminished empathic capacity has been associated with impaired peer relationships, hostility, and even violent behavior³¹. With regard to violent behavior, it has been postulated that bullying is closely associated with low levels of empathy³². Therefore, these key aspects underscore whether the defender role is influenced by students' ability to differentiate between their own thoughts and feelings and those of others, as well as by their capacity to take a stand on behalf of those who are harmed.

Conversely, higher levels of both cognitive and affective empathy are associated with the assumption of the defender role in bullying situations, whereas lower levels may lead to increased aggressiveness, hostility, and antisocial behaviors³³. Thus, the ability to understand others' perspectives

²⁸ D. Krzesni, Empathy. *Counterpoints*, 503, 33-54.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/45136520>, 2015.

²⁹ L.E. Marshall & W.L. Marshall, *Empathy and antisocial behaviour*. *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, 22(5), 742-759, 2011.

³⁰ J.S. Yoon, *Predicting teacher interventions in bullying situations*. *Education and treatment of children*, 2004, 37-45.

³¹ M.L. Mayberry, D.L. Espelage, Dorothy L., Associations among empathy, social competence, & reactive/proactive aggression subtypes. *Journal of youth and adolescence*, 2007, 36.6: 787-798.

³² D. Jolliffe, D.P. Farrington, *Examining the relationship between low empathy and bullying*. *Aggressive Behavior: Official Journal of the International Society for Research on Aggression*, 2006, 32.6: 540-550.

³³ M.L. Mayberry, D.L. Espelage, 2007, *op. cit.*

and to resonate with their emotions contributes to the development of prosocial relationships and to the prevention of aggressive behaviors.

In this context, empathy emerges as a key variable. It constitutes the foundation of healthy social relationships, being associated with prosocial behaviors and the reduction of conflict³⁴. Traditional stereotypes portray aggressors as anxious, insecure students with modest academic performance; however, subsequent research has shown that some aggressors may be socially competent and capable of recognizing the mental states of their peers, yet without acknowledging or assuming responsibility for the emotional consequences of their own actions³⁵. Low levels of empathy are correlated with aggressive behaviors and with the adoption of risk-taking conduct, such as alcohol or substance use³⁶, whereas heightened empathy fosters cooperation, solidarity, and inclusion³⁷. Nevertheless, recent meta-analyses have shown that the association between empathy and aggressiveness is only moderate, indicating the need for further research to clarify the relationship³⁸.

From the victims' perspective, research suggests that they display higher levels of both cognitive and affective empathy compared to aggressors, a characteristic that may function simultaneously as a resource and as a vulnerability³⁹.

Consequences, Empathy, and the Role of Teachers in Prevention

Teachers play a crucial role not only in transmitting academic knowledge but also in shaping students' attitudes, behaviors, and values. In

³⁴ N. Eisenberg, N. Eggum, L. Di Giuta, Laura. Empathy-related responding: Associations with prosocial behavior, aggression, and intergroup relations. *Social issues and policy review*, 4.1: 143-180, 2010.

³⁵ D. Pepler, W. Craig, P. O'Connell, Peer processes in bullying: Informing prevention and intervention strategies. In: *Handbook of bullying in schools*. Routledge, 2009. p. 469-478.

³⁶ S. Caravita, M.H. Beauchamp, R. Thornberg, Novel Developmental Perspectives on the Link Between Morality and Social Outcomes. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2022, 13: 888373.

³⁷ G.K. Ahmed et al. Risk factors of school bullying and its relationship with psychiatric comorbidities: a literature review. *The Egyptian Journal of Neurology, Psychiatry and Neurosurgery*, 2022, 58.1: 16.

³⁸ I. Zych, V.J. Lorent. Affective empathy and moral disengagement related to late adolescent bullying perpetration. *Ethics & Behavior*, 2019, 29.7: 547-556.

³⁹ M.J. Boulton & D.J. Hawker Verbal bullying – The myth of sticks and stones. In D. Tattum & G. Herbert (Eds.), *Bullying: Home, school and community* (pp. 53-63). London: David Fulton, 2000.

this context, it becomes increasingly important to examine the feasibility and effectiveness of integrating moral and prosocial values into educational practices, with the aim of supporting the prevention and reduction of bullying⁴⁰. Such an approach holds the potential to generate a more empathic and inclusive educational environment, responsive both to students' needs and to the cultural ethos specific to our society. Understanding teachers' perceptions of this phenomenon, as well as the role empathy plays in the teacher-student relationship, is essential for the development of school settings that are safe, harmonious, and culturally sensitive.

The scholarly literature emphasizes that teachers' responses to bullying are often characterized by uncertainty and a lack of consistency. Crothers & Kolbert⁴¹ have shown that many teachers are not always certain about how to intervene, while students' perceptions of the effectiveness of such interventions differ substantially from those of teachers.

Teachers' perceptions and attitudes function as critical determinants of both their intervention readiness and the perceived efficacy of their responses. Yoon⁴² has shown that teachers tend to overestimate both the frequency with which they detect bullying incidents and the extent to which students report such situations, with perception-reality gaps occasionally exceeding 30%. Grumm and Hein⁴³ have found that teachers who perceive bullying as an immutable, stable phenomenon are less inclined to intervene and tend to employ passive strategies, whereas those who believe in the possibility of change display proactive behaviors and adopt positive strategies. Consequently, the way in which the nature of aggressive behavior is interpreted largely determines the effectiveness of the educational response.

Teachers, however, do not act solely as mediators of values but also serve as social and moral role models for students. Healthy relationships with teachers likewise function as indicators of students' self-image and

⁴⁰ K. Dutkova, J. Holubcikova, M. Kravcova, P. Babincak, P., Tavel & G.A. Madarasova, *Is Spiritual Well-Being Among Adolescents Associated with a Lower Level of Bullying Behaviour? The Mediating Effect of Perceived Bullying Behaviour of Peers*. *J Relig Health*, 56(6), 2212-2221, 2017.

⁴¹ L.M. Crothers, J.B. Kolbert. Teachers' management of student bullying in the classroom. In: *Handbook of Bullying in Schools*. Routledge, 2009. p. 535-544.

⁴² J.S. Yoon (2004), *op. cit.*

⁴³ M. Grumm, S. Hein, Correlates of teachers' ways of handling bullying. *School Psychology International*, 2013, 34.3: 299-312.

social integration, thereby reducing the risk of marginalization and the emergence of aggressive behaviors⁴⁴.

Furthermore, the formal integration of moral education as a distinct curricular discipline has been recommended, serving to institutionalize the socialization of prosocial values and to systematically shape students' moral orientations and attitudinal development through value-based curriculum design ⁴⁵. Teachers' responsibility extends beyond the transmission of knowledge, encompassing their role as agents of social change through the cultivation of empathy and the integration of moral and prosocial values as integral components of the educational process.

Social problems within the classroom, such as bullying, are inherently moral in nature⁴⁶.

Empathic teachers demonstrate a strong moral concern for their students and, over time, develop deeper relationships that foster students' self-esteem and sense of personal worth. The teacher-student relationship also establishes emotional bonds that cultivate trust, thereby generating a safe classroom environment that promotes empathy, mutual respect, responsibility, and solidarity among students. These values, understood as foundational to character development, contribute to the creation of an inclusive and harmonious classroom climate that discourages aggressive behaviors and strengthens group cohesion.

The current study

Building upon the existing body of literature as well as the premises outlined above, the present study advances the following main hypothesis: victims of bullying exhibit higher levels of both cognitive and affective empathy than aggressors, a characteristic that may function simultaneously as a vulnerability factor and as a resource for the development of prosocial behaviors. At the same time, the study seeks to explore the extent to which teachers' empathy – particularly its cognitive dimension, essential for managing complex classroom situations – may influence the prevention and reduction of aggressive behaviors. In this regard, the research aims to clarify the extent to which the implementation

⁴⁴ C. Williams et al. Self-regulation as a protective factor against bullying during early adolescence. *Youth*, 4.2: 478-491, 2024.

⁴⁵ B. Jevtic, *Teachers' pedagogical actions affecting the moral development of personality*. Problems of Education in the 21st Century, 58, 67-81, 2014.

⁴⁶ B. Jevtić, 2014, *op. cit.*

of empathic education among teachers is reflected in the overall school climate and in the quality of interpersonal relationships among students.

Research Objectives

The objectives of the present study are as follows:

1. To investigate differences in empathy among students identified as aggressors, victims, and bystanders within the phenomenon of bullying.
2. To identify predictors of bullying behavior, such as levels of empathy, social status, or reported emotional experiences.
3. To analyze teachers' perceptions regarding the frequency, causes, and forms of manifestation of bullying in schools.
4. To evaluate the significance of empathic education and prosocial values as preventive tools and as means of fostering a positive and inclusive school climate.

In relation to the formulated objectives, the research is based on the following hypotheses:

1. Students who are victims of bullying exhibit higher levels of both cognitive and affective empathy compared to student aggressors.
2. Teachers perceive bullying as a frequent phenomenon in schools but tend to identify verbal and relational forms (e.g., isolation, humiliation) more often than cyber or physical forms, as indicated by questionnaire data.
3. Teachers identify the primary causes of bullying as a lack of empathy among students, limited parental involvement, and the influence of negative social role models, findings that align with the literature on the role of social capital and environmental factors in the development of aggressive behaviors.
4. Teachers regard empathic education as an essential factor in the prevention of bullying; however, its implementation in schools remains limited or dependent on individual initiatives. This discrepancy between perceived importance and actual implementation highlights the need for systematic training programs and institutional support.
5. Higher levels of empathy – among both students and teachers – are associated with reduced aggressive behaviors and the development of a more inclusive school climate, thereby validating the role of empathy as a predictor of prosocial behavior and as a determinant of the effectiveness of anti-bullying interventions.

Material and method

The study employed a descriptive and exploratory design, drawing on a mixed-methods approach that combined quantitative and qualitative perspectives. Data were collected through a standardized questionnaire administered to teachers working in primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary education, across both urban and rural contexts. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The sample included demographic information such as gender, age, teaching level, professional experience, and school setting.

The questionnaire, entitled “School Bullying and the Role of Empathic Education – Teachers’ Perspectives and Practices,” consisted of five sections: (I) demographic data; (II) perceptions of bullying; (III) intervention and responsibility; (IV) empathic education; and (V) suggestions and solutions. The instrument was distributed online, and responses were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods and thematic coding.

The quantitative analysis examined frequencies, percentages, and mean scores, as well as associations between demographic variables and perceptions of bullying. The qualitative analysis of open-ended questions enabled the clustering of responses into themes such as lack of resources, parental disengagement, the need for teacher training, and the importance of inter-institutional collaboration.

Through the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data, the study provides a comprehensive account of the phenomenon of bullying, capturing both its measurable dimensions and the nuanced perceptions of teachers.

Participants:

Within the present research, data were collected from a sample of 114 pre-university teachers originating from both urban and rural areas of Romania. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and the diversity of respondents provides a relevant perspective on the phenomenon of bullying and on the role of empathic education in schools. The gender distribution indicates a clear predominance of female teachers (93.0%, $n = 109$) compared to male teachers (7.0%, $n = 4$). This proportion reflects the overall structure of the Romanian teaching workforce, where women represent the overwhelming majority. The majority of participants were employed in urban schools (84.2%, $n = 96$), while only 15.8% ($n = 18$) worked in rural schools. Distribution across teaching levels shows that

61.4% (n = 70) of respondents taught at the primary level, 24.6% (n = 28) at the lower-secondary level, and 14.0% (n = 16) at the upper-secondary level.

Professional experience within the sample was heterogeneous, covering all stages of the teaching career. A total of 42.1% (n = 48) of respondents had more than 20 years of teaching experience, while 35.1% (n = 40) were at the beginning of their careers, with between 0 and 5 years of experience. The remaining teachers were distributed as follows: 10.5% (n = 12) with 6–10 years of experience, 10.5% (n = 12) with 11–15 years, and 1.8% (n = 2) with 16–20 years of teaching activity. This structure allows for the comparison of perceptions according to career stage.

Respondents' ages ranged from 24 to 58 years, with a concentration in the 31–50 age bracket, corresponding to the most professionally active segment. As such, the sample captures perspectives from both novice teachers and highly experienced educators in the stage of professional maturity.

Overall, the structure of the sample adequately reflects the demographic and professional realities of the Romanian teaching workforce, providing a relevant framework for analyzing perceptions and practices related to school bullying.

Results

With regard to the frequency of bullying, the results indicate that 40.3% of respondents reported it as occurring "rarely," 31.6% as "occasionally," and 21.0% described it as "occasionally frequent." Only 7.0% considered the phenomenon to be "nonexistent" in their school. The mean scores fall within the mid-range of the scale, confirming the perception of bullying as a constant phenomenon, even if not one of extreme intensity.

As for the identified causes, the most frequently mentioned were negative models from the media and society (n = 41), the aggressor's emotional or behavioral problems (n = 38), lack of empathy among students (n = 36), absence of clear sanctions (n = 32), and parental disengagement (n = 31). This distribution suggests a convergence of social, emotional, and institutional explanations for the phenomenon.

At the level of observed forms of bullying, verbal bullying (96.5%, n = 55) and emotional/social bullying (70.2%, n = 40) predominate. Cyberbullying (36.8%, n = 21) and physical bullying (33.3%, n = 19) are reported less frequently, a pattern that may indicate either lower incidence

or difficulties in recognizing these manifestations within the school context.

An additional analysis examined the relationship between the causes identified by teachers and the number of bullying forms they reported. Specifically, the focus was on whether mentioning lack of empathy as an explanatory factor influenced the diversity of forms recognized. The results reveal clear differences between the two respondent categories. Teachers who regarded “lack of empathy among students” as a major cause of bullying reported, on average, 2.61 forms of bullying. By comparison, those who did not mention this factor identified only 1.95 forms. The difference is statistically significant (Mann-Whitney $U = 524.5$, $p = 0.010$). This finding suggests that teachers who interpret bullying through the lens of empathy possess a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. They tend to acknowledge not only overt manifestations (e.g., verbal insults) but also more subtle or emerging forms, such as emotional or cyberbullying. In contrast, respondents who do not associate the phenomenon with a lack of empathy appear to restrict their perception to a narrower range of manifestations.

To synthesize teachers’ overall perception of the phenomenon, a composite bullying perception index was constructed. This index integrates three dimensions: the frequency of bullying as reported by respondents (1 = never, 4 = occasional-frequent), the number of bullying forms observed, and the number of causes identified. The resulting index ranges from a minimum score of 3 to a maximum score of 14. The overall mean is $M = 8.37$ ($SD = 2.35$), reflecting a moderate level of global perception of the phenomenon. The distribution is slightly positively skewed (Skewness = 0.57) and nearly normal in terms of kurtosis (Kurtosis = 0.27). However, the Shapiro-Wilk test indicated a significant deviation from normality ($W = 0.95$, $p = 0.019$), suggesting the presence of distinct groups of teachers—some with moderate scores and others with very high scores.

With regard to preparedness for intervention, 59.6% of teachers reported feeling somewhat prepared, 38.6% indicated that they were unprepared, and only 1.8% considered themselves very well prepared. This distribution reflects a degree of willingness to intervene, but also reveals a lack of confidence and of the resources necessary for the effective management of bullying cases.

In terms of intervention strategies, the most frequently employed approaches include individual discussions with the students involved,

informing school leadership or the school counselor, and collaborating with parents. Preventive activities at the classroom level were reported less frequently, confirming that reactive approaches predominate over proactive ones.

The obstacles identified include the absence of a clear methodology, weak responses from school leadership, insufficient specialized support (counselors, psychologists), and excessive teaching workload. These findings suggest that, although teachers are aware of the phenomenon and willing to intervene, the institutional framework does not provide adequate support for anti-bullying actions.

A consistent result concerns the importance attributed to empathic education: nearly all teachers regarded it as “very important” for bullying prevention. Nevertheless, its implementation at the institutional level was reported as occasional or dependent on individual initiatives, with only rare cases in which it is explicitly embedded in the organizational culture of the school.

Regarding activities considered useful for fostering empathy, respondents most frequently mentioned role-playing, reading and analyzing morally themed stories, and guided debates. These methods are perceived as effective insofar as they encourage active student engagement and stimulate personal reflection.

To examine whether teachers’ perceptions of the frequency of bullying differ by school setting or level of instruction, a Chi-Square (χ^2) test of independence was applied. With respect to school setting (urban/rural), the results indicated no statistically significant association between the variables ($\chi^2(3) = 0.40$, $p = 0.94$). The distribution of responses shows that both urban and rural teachers perceive bullying at comparable frequencies, with “rare” and “occasional” responses predominating. This result suggests that the phenomenon is perceived as relatively uniform, regardless of the geographical context in which the school operates.

Regarding the level of instruction (primary, lower-secondary, upper-secondary), the analysis likewise revealed no significant differences between groups ($\chi^2(6) = 7.48$, $p = 0.28$). Teachers across all three educational levels reported similar frequencies of bullying, indicating that the phenomenon is not confined to a specific stage of schooling but rather cuts across the entire educational spectrum.

In conclusion, teachers’ perceptions of the frequency of bullying are not influenced by school setting or level of instruction. This result reinforces the understanding of bullying as a generalized phenomenon,

present across schools irrespective of location or educational cycle, underscoring the importance of prevention and intervention measures that are applicable throughout the entire educational system rather than tailored only to particular contexts.

The data analysis sought to determine whether teachers' perceptions of the frequency of bullying were influenced by their length of teaching experience. To this end, a Chi-Square (χ^2) test of independence was conducted, revealing a statistically significant association between the two variables ($\chi^2(12) = 22.06, p = 0.037$).

The distribution of responses highlights important differences across experience groups. Novice teachers, with 0–5 years of seniority, reported bullying as being present to a greater extent, with approximately half of them selecting the categories "occasional" and "occasional-frequent." This trend may be explained by heightened attention to classroom group dynamics, as well as by limited experience in managing conflict situations, which may lead them to perceive aggressive behaviors more intensely.

Teachers with medium experience (6–15 years of seniority) provided responses more evenly distributed across "rare," "occasional," and "occasional-frequent." This group appears to reflect a realistic yet varied perception of the phenomenon, oscillating between acknowledging its frequency and regarding bullying as a problem occurring only sporadically.

By contrast, teachers with more than 20 years of experience stand out in that the overwhelming majority categorized bullying as "rare" (62.5%), and none reported the phenomenon as occurring "occasional-frequent." This result may have several explanations: experienced teachers may be more effective in preventing conflict situations and maintaining classroom control, or the phenomenon may be underreported due to an increased tolerance toward certain aggressive behaviors or their normalization as "natural" within the school context.

In conclusion, the analysis shows that perceptions of bullying differ significantly according to professional experience. Early-career teachers tend to report bullying more frequently, whereas highly experienced teachers are more inclined to minimize its presence, regarding it as relatively rare. This result suggests that professional experience shapes both teachers' sensitivity to bullying manifestations and the way they evaluate the frequency of the phenomenon within the school context.

Table 1. Distribution of bullying frequency perception by professional experience

Professional Experience	Never	Occasional	Occasional - frequent	Rare
0–5 years (n = 40)	4 (10.0%)	12 (30.0%)	14 (35.0%)	10 (25.0%)
6–10 years (n = 12)	0 (0.0%)	2 (16.7%)	6 (50.0%)	4 (33.3%)
11–15 years (n = 12)	0 (0.0%)	8 (66.7%)	2 (16.7%)	2 (16.7%)
16–20 years (n = 2)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)
over 20 years (n = 48)	4 (8.3%)	14 (29.2%)	0 (0.0%)	30 (62.5%)
Total (N = 114)	8	36	24	46

To examine the relationship between teachers' socio-demographic characteristics and their perceptions of bullying, Spearman correlations were calculated between respondents' age, professional experience, reported frequency of bullying, and their self-declared level of preparedness for intervention.

The results revealed a significant negative correlation between teachers' age and their perception of bullying frequency ($\rho = -0.38$, $p = 0.003$). Younger teachers thus tend to report bullying as more present ("occasional" or "occasional-frequent"), whereas older teachers are more likely to consider it rare. This trend was also confirmed for professional experience, where a significant negative correlation with reported bullying frequency was identified ($\rho = -0.36$, $p = 0.006$). Novice teachers and those with limited seniority perceived bullying as more frequent, while teachers with more than 20 years of experience reported it as less common.

In contrast, the analysis did not identify a significant relationship between professional experience and the perceived level of preparedness for intervention ($\rho = 0.08$, $p = 0.575$). This result suggests that the sense of competence in managing bullying is not determined by years of service but rather by access to resources, ongoing professional development, and institutional support.

Table 2. Spearman correlations between age, professional experience, bullying perception and preparedness

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Age	—	0.82***	-0.38**	0.05
2. Professional experience		—	-0.36**	0.08
3. Bullying frequency			—	-0.12
4. Preparedness for intervention				—

Note: ρ = coefficient Spearman. ** $p < 0,01$; *** $p < 0,001$.

To identify the factors that might influence teachers’ perceptions of bullying frequency, a binary logistic regression was conducted. The dependent variable was the perceived frequency of bullying, recoded into two categories: “never/rare” (0) and “occasional/occasional-frequent” (1). Predictors included in the model were age, professional experience (ordinal), school setting (urban/rural), and level of instruction (with “lower-secondary” as the reference category). The resulting model showed that none of the variables constituted a statistically significant predictor of bullying perception (all p values > 0.05). Nevertheless, the interpretation of the coefficients reveals several noteworthy trends

Table 3. Logistic regression predicting teachers’ perception of bullying frequency

Predictor	B (Coef.)	OR (expB)	p-value
Age	-0.018	0.982	0.664
Professional experience	-0.341	0.711	0.210
School setting (1 = urban)	0.378	1.459	0.636
Primary level (vs. lower-secondary)	-0.691	0.501	0.362
Upper-secondary (vs. lower-secondary)	-0.993	0.370	0.334
Constant	2.226	9.260	0.196

Thus, both age (B = -0.018, OR = 0.98, p = 0.664) and professional experience (B = -0.341, OR = 0.71, p = 0.210) displayed negative coefficients, suggesting that older and more experienced teachers were less likely to report bullying as frequent. In other words, the probability of perceiving the phenomenon as present decreases with increasing age and professional seniority, although the effects were not statistically significant. With respect to school setting, urban teachers were more likely to report bullying as frequent (B = 0.378, OR = 1.46, p = 0.636) compared to their rural counterparts. However, this effect was not statistically significant, suggesting that such differences cannot be generalized. Regarding level of instruction, primary (B = -0.691, OR = 0.50, p = 0.362) and upper-secondary teachers (B = -0.993, OR = 0.37, p = 0.334) reported bullying less frequently than lower-secondary teachers (the reference category). Although the effects were not significant, this tendency aligns with the literature highlighting a higher incidence of bullying during lower-secondary education. From the overall perspective of the model, the results suggest that teachers’ perception of bullying is not determined exclusively by demographic and professional variables. The observed

tendencies indicate possible roles for age, experience, and educational context, but decisive factors appear to lie more in the organizational climate, institutional support, and teachers' direct experiences with the phenomenon.

Although the logistic regression analysis did not identify significant demographic predictors of bullying perception, teachers' responses highlight several contextual and institutional factors that complement the quantitative picture. Exploratory interpretation of the data revealed recurring thematic categories, offering a qualitative perspective on the challenges encountered and the solutions proposed for managing bullying. Beyond the numerical data, the analysis of open-ended responses allowed for the identification of themes reflecting teachers' perceptions of both the obstacles they face in addressing bullying and the strategies they consider effective in reducing it.

Insufficient resources and lack of training. A significant proportion of respondents (54.4%, $n = 31$) mentioned the absence of clear intervention methodologies and specialized training programs as major barriers to bullying prevention and management. This finding suggests that teachers' sense of preparedness depends more on institutional support and opportunities for professional development than on accumulated classroom experience.

The role of the family and deficient collaboration with parents. More than half of the teachers (54.4%, $n = 31$) identified parental disengagement as a key factor sustaining the persistence of the phenomenon. The lack of effective school-family collaboration is perceived as a constant barrier, undermining the coherence and effectiveness of interventions.

Institutional responsibility. Nearly two-thirds of teachers (56.1%, $n = 32$) pointed to the absence of clear sanctions and weak responses from school leadership as obstacles in addressing bullying cases. This highlights that bullying is perceived not merely as an individual problem but also as a systemic issue rooted in organizational shortcomings and the absence of firm school policies.

The necessity of empathic education. Almost all respondents considered empathic education to be "very important" in preventing bullying. Among the strategies proposed, the most frequently valued methods were role-playing (mentioned by over 70% of respondents), reading and analyzing morally themed stories, and guided debates. These activities are perceived as interactive and effective, fostering students' direct engagement and stimulating critical reflection.

Overall, these findings confirm that teachers view bullying not solely as an individual behavioral problem but as a complex phenomenon shaped by institutional resources, family involvement, and the educational strategies implemented.

Table 4. Perceived barriers and solutions to bullying management

Thematic category	N	%
Insufficient resources and lack of training	31	54,4
Lack of parental involvement	31	54,4
Lack of sanctions / weak institutional responses	32	56,1
Need for empathic education (socio-emotional activities)	40+	>70,0*

Discussion

The results of this research confirm that teachers perceive bullying as a constant presence in schools, even though the reported frequency ranges from “rare” to “occasional-frequent.” This finding aligns with previous studies⁴⁷, which demonstrate that bullying is a transversal issue within educational contexts and cannot be attributed exclusively to a particular geographical setting or instructional level. Our statistical analyses confirmed this idea: teachers’ perceptions of bullying did not differ significantly between urban and rural schools, nor across primary, lower-secondary, and upper-secondary cycles.

Professional experience, however, emerged as a relevant factor. Novice and less experienced teachers reported bullying more frequently, whereas those with over 20 years of experience were more likely to categorize it as “rare.” This result, corroborated by Spearman correlations and Chi-Square analyses, suggests the existence of generational differences in teachers’ sensitivity to bullying. Comparable studies ⁴⁸ indicate that novice teachers are more inclined to interpret aggressive behaviors as bullying, while more experienced teachers may either manage such situations more effectively or develop a greater tolerance toward conflictual manifestations. This finding supports the hypothesis that ongoing professional development and reflective practice play an essential role in shaping both perceptions and interventions regarding the phenomenon.

⁴⁷ P. Swan & P. Riley, 2024, *op. cit.*
⁴⁸ R. Thornberg, H. Delby, How do secondary school students explain bullying?. *Educational Research*, 2019, 61.2: 142-160, 2019

With respect to the identified causes, the data converge with the international literature: lack of empathy among students, parental disengagement, and the influence of social and media role models were the most frequently cited. The significant association between mentioning “lack of empathy” and identifying a greater number of bullying forms ($M = 2.61$ vs. $M = 1.95$, $p = 0.010$) indicates that teachers who interpret the phenomenon through this lens develop a more complex and nuanced view of its manifestations. This result confirms the central role of empathy as an explanatory factor⁴⁹.

Regarding preparedness for intervention, most teachers reported feeling “partially prepared,” reflecting a positive attitude but also a lack of confidence in the resources and tools available. Comparative analyses revealed no significant differences between urban and rural contexts, suggesting that the issue is generalized rather than context-specific. Likewise, the absence of a significant correlation between professional experience and perceived preparedness indicates that initial and ongoing training, rather than seniority, determine teachers’ sense of competence.

The qualitative dimension of the study complements these results. Teachers emphasized four major themes: (1) insufficient resources and training, (2) deficient collaboration with parents, (3) insufficiently assumed institutional responsibility, and (4) the importance of empathic education. These categories reinforce the idea that bullying cannot be understood solely as an individual behavior but must be viewed as a systemic phenomenon shaped by school–family relationships, institutional policies, and educational strategies. The ecological perspective⁵⁰, supports this view, showing that effective interventions require the simultaneous involvement of teachers, students, parents, and school leadership.

The composite index of bullying perception, with values ranging from 3 to 14 ($M = 8.37$, $SD = 2.35$), highlights the existence of distinct perception profiles: one group of teachers who minimize the phenomenon and another who report it as frequent and diverse. This polarization reflects the lack of a unified representation of bullying among teachers and underscores the necessity of training programs designed to harmonize understanding of the phenomenon while providing clear instruments for action.

⁴⁹ D. Jolliffe, D.P. Farrington, 2006, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ M.L. Mayberry, D.L. Espelage, 2007, *op. cit.*

Limitations

The present study highlights several limitations that must be considered when interpreting the results. First, the relatively small sample size restricts the extent to which the conclusions can be generalized. Second, reliance exclusively on teachers' self-reports may have introduced perceptual biases and a heightened degree of subjectivity in evaluating the phenomenon of bullying. Moreover, the cross-sectional design of the research does not allow for the establishment of causal relationships but only the identification of correlations and tendencies. In addition, the absence of more detailed open-ended responses limited the qualitative dimension of the analysis, an aspect that could be addressed in future studies.

Another significant limitation stems from the preliminary character of the study. Data collection was restricted to quantitative measures from a relatively small number of participants, which considerably reduces the generalizability of the findings. A larger-scale case study incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data from teachers and students would be far more representative. Qualitative data obtained through interviews or classroom observations would have allowed for triangulation of findings and a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Nevertheless, as a preliminary study, this research provides valuable insight into teachers' levels of empathy within a particular school context. The reviewed literature confirms the importance of teachers' empathy in both the intervention and prevention of bullying situations. It thus becomes evident that teachers must give increased attention to students' holistic well-being as a fundamental premise for fostering a positive school climate and mitigating bullying behaviors.

Future research could expand the analysis by including larger and more diverse samples, integrating the perspectives of teachers, students, and parents. Furthermore, the use of mixed-method approaches (quantitative and qualitative) and longitudinal designs would enable a deeper understanding of the dynamics of bullying and the effectiveness of prevention and intervention strategies.

Conclusions

The present study has shown that teachers perceive bullying as a constant phenomenon within Romanian schools, regardless of geographical setting or instructional level. Statistical analyses confirmed that perceptions of bullying frequency do not differ significantly between urban and rural schools or across educational cycles, suggesting the

generalized nature of the problem. However, professional experience significantly shapes perception: novice teachers tend to report bullying more frequently, whereas highly experienced teachers are more likely to consider it rare.

The causes identified by respondents converge on socio-emotional and institutional factors, with particular emphasis on lack of empathy among students, limited parental involvement, and the absence of clear organizational sanctions. The association between citing lack of empathy and identifying a greater number of bullying forms confirms the central role of empathy in explaining and recognizing the phenomenon.

With regard to intervention strategies, teachers predominantly employ reactive methods (individual discussions, informing school leadership, collaborating with parents), while preventive classroom-level activities are less frequently reported. The main obstacles identified include insufficient resources, poor collaboration with families, and limited institutional support. At the same time, nearly all teachers underscored the importance of empathic education and socio-emotional activities as fundamental solutions for bullying prevention.

The composite bullying perception index revealed the existence of distinct perception profiles, confirming the lack of a unified representation of the phenomenon among teachers. This finding underscores the need for coherent, systematized training programs designed to foster a shared understanding and provide effective tools for intervention.

In conclusion, empathy is more than the emotional understanding of others: it constitutes a complex, multidimensional process that combines cognitive perception, affective resonance, and action. Within the school environment, this capacity is essential for both teachers and students in preventing and managing bullying, supporting victims, and fostering a safe and harmonious climate. The development of actionable empathy through practical methods—such as drama techniques—represents an innovative and effective strategy for transforming emotional understanding into concrete action and preventing aggressive behaviors.

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