

Educated Romania—Focusing on Inclusive Policymaking After 30 Years of Shifting Reforms in the Romanian Education System



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Abstract Romanian education policy was notoriously plagued by instability and a tendency to escape the normal policymaking cycle via top-down highly politicised reforms. After almost three decades, a new initiative by the President of Romania attempts to promote a more inclusive style of policymaking that would ensure wider societal support to upcoming educational reforms. The purpose of this article is to set the background to the wider discussion on Romanian higher education, placing it inside the context of the country's efforts to reform its schools and universities via the Educated Romania project, on which the authors had the privilege of working. It aims to create a long-term, structured vision on which to centre future education reforms and to correct some of the imbalances that have emerged in Romanian education over the past few decades. The conclusion also analyses the chances of its survival in the current Romanian political and administrative status-quo.

1 Context

Education as a policy topic has become increasingly prominent in Romanian public debates in recent years. A slew of international reports has recently shone light on the poor performance of Romanian education compared to its European peers. PISA scores have placed the country near the bottom among European states, indicating structural quality issues in secondary education. Early school leaving rates have remained high and have surpassed the country's Europe 2020 target. Similarly, the country has failed to lift education attainment, with the share of tertiary education graduates among persons age 30–34 at the very bottom of the EU league table (European Commission 2020). Research has been another contentious topic, with

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Romania suffering from a limited output and low funding, again placing well shy of European averages. The country has seen setbacks in major research infrastructure projects such as the flagship Extreme Light Infrastructure—Nuclear Physics (ELI-NP) and is lagging in attracting European research funding.¹

Awareness of the fact that Romanian education is plagued by multiple issues is not new, and there has been a sense of urgency with regard to reforms since the 1990s. The transition from communism meant that the architecture of the education system started being, almost overnight, out of tune with new social and economic realities. Some communist-era constraints, for example, strict *numerus clausus* in higher education, were removed almost immediately after the 1989 Revolution. Others, such as the structure of the vocational education and training (VET) system, became the object of debates that stretched out over the upcoming decades. Procedures and transition requirements between cycles were gradually overhauled, with requirements for accessing upper secondary and tertiary education changing over time (Deca 2015).

In 1995, a new law regulating the structure of the education system was adopted, overhauling the patchwork of legal texts that had adapted the communist-era education system to contemporary realities. Nevertheless, regulatory changes continued unabated amid a desire by multiple political forces to leave a mark on the education system. These tendencies were further strengthened by the lack of a unified national strategy. In 1999, Education Minister Andrei Marga attempted the first major reform package, which saw the introduction of the “capacity examination” at the end of 8th grade, replaced trimesters with semesters in secondary education and attempted to increase decentralization at all levels. Crucially, they envisaged autonomous universities in a country that had long-lasting traditions of centralization.

The Marga reforms did not end a culture of back-and-forth changes in the education system, however. Legislative changes continued, balkanizing Romania’s regulatory landscape in a way that made it difficult for the education system to strategically support public policy goals. It was in the early 2000s that the most comprehensive higher education reforms in transition-era Romania were prepared. The impetus was external this time, with the country aiming to join the Bologna Process. As such, the Bologna-style 3-cycle system was introduced, with a mostly 3-2-3 configuration in terms of nominal years of study. Quality assurance processes and recognition procedures were overhauled, ECTS credits were introduced, and Romania started taking part in the Erasmus mobility scheme. These changes were transformative when it came to the structure of the higher education system, though their deeper internalization by the university sector remains open to debate (Deca 2016).

The mid-2000s were a time of exuberant change in Romania as a whole. European integration had made significant strides. Visas were lifted, and Romanians could travel freely. Legislation was aligned with that of the European Union (EU) ahead of full membership in 2007. The economy had turned a corner in 2000 and was now growing rapidly, with real wages increasing and job creation picking up pace in new sectors. Certain public sector jobs now required tertiary-level degrees or at least

¹<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-01607-7>, last accessed on 06.10.2021.

rewarded them with bonuses. Participation in higher education peaked. This period was the heyday of private education: no fewer than 410,000 students commenced their studies in private institutions in 2008/2009. In fact, private education and fee-paying public education now covered over 70% of Romania's 1,000,000+ students (CNFIS 2014).² Massification had led to public scandals on the issue of quality, with a growing perception that “everyone could go to university”. Demographic factors (the decline of birth cohorts after 1990), greater scrutiny over the quality of private education, a decline in employment and wages brought about by the global financial crisis, and a tighter control of fraud at the baccalaureate examination would ultimately halve student numbers in as little as four years.

As the global financial crisis was commencing, a second project of education reform was prepared under the patronage of then-president Traian Basescu. A presidential commission chaired by professor Mircea Miclea developed a set of recommendations that became the object of a political pact and, to a large degree, influenced the development of a new education law in 2010. Early in 2011, the law was passed under minister Daniel Funeriu. The law, nr. 1/2011, proposed sweeping reforms of the education system. Autonomy was further strengthened, with local authorities now being involved in pre-tertiary education in an increasing manner. The law impacted the entire education system, being transformative in nature but containing several provisions that were to be phased in over several years. Ultimately, political pressure meant that many of the more radical provisions were postponed *sine die*, while some were repealed altogether. The law was heavily modified over the following years, with some articles being changed multiple times, often in contradictory directions.

One prominent problem with education reform was the fact that the topic had become excessively politicized: party politics meant that narrow agendas were often more influential in dictating policy than any long-term concerns over the nature of the education system. In a few cases, even the same political parties managed to operate steep U-turns over a relatively short timeframe. For example, secondary level trade (VET) schools were abolished, then reinstated, and finally made a priority education stream benefiting from public scholarships all within the space of four years (2009–2013). Such inconsistencies have fueled both reform fatigue and reduced compliance, as the transitory nature of many regulatory changes led to an expectation of superficial or minimal implementation or generated a compliance culture metaphorically called by Falkner and Treib (2008a) “the world of dead letters”.

It was in these circumstances, and in a context of political cohabitation, that the “Educated Romania” project was born. A political project, initiated by a constitutionally neutral actor—the President of Romania—that was rooted both in a culture of broad consultation and in an acceptance of the need for a more *realpolitik* approach to legislative changes in the field of education.

²CNFIS, 2014 report—retrieved from <https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/fi%C8%99iere/studii%20si%20analize/2016/CNFIS/CNFIS-Raport-public2013-final.pdf>, last accessed at 06.10.2021.

2 A New Reform Agenda and a New Approach

The “Educated Romania” project, born in 2016, was initially a consultation exercise. Members of the public were surveyed via a website with regard to their views on the future of society and, consequently, how they see education contributing to that future. Surveys enabled them to select the societal transformations they believed education should strive to react to, but also a few direction points for the system as a whole.

In order to enable debates at the regional level, consultation events were organized in each NUTS-2 region (8 in total), with each region hosting a topic. The debates were geared towards the identification of problems deep within the education system as opposed to engaging with examples of good practice. For example, the debates on VET were held in the North-Eastern region rather than Transylvania (where most German-style dual VET schools are situated).

The topics covered in the consultations included: graduate profiles, the teaching career, vocational education and training, research, the assessment of learning outcomes, the internationalization of higher education, and functional illiteracy. At the end of the consultation process, an aggregation exercise was organized with the aid of the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI), producing an initial report. The report was based on both the regional conferences and the results of the online consultation, and it offered an initial synthesis of the prominent ideas covering the future development of Romanian education.³

This first document provided the outlines for a vision on the development of Romanian education, and work soon started on its further development. While the first stage of the project (2016–2017) was open to widespread public participation, the second focused on consulting experts (2017–2018). Seven working groups were created focusing on the main themes identified in the first stage. These were:

- The teaching career
- Equity in the education system
- The professionalization of educational management
- Vocational education and training
- Autonomy, quality and internationalization in Higher Education
- Accessible early childhood education
- Student assessment

Each working group contained a mix of NGO representatives, stakeholders (unions, student representatives, university representatives, etc.), public sector experts, and academics. Membership was broad, and towards the end of group-level drafting, a few persons in each group helped prepare a cross-sectorial document. Editorial work was conducted by the Education and Research Department in the Presidential

³https://www.presidency.ro/files/userfiles/Raport_atelier_integrare.pdf, last accessed at 06.10.2021.

Administration. Consultations with the public continued, although in a more hands-off manner. Civil society organizations could apply for “Educated Romania” label for their events, under the condition that they debate current issues in the education system and provide a report to the Presidential Administration. This approach was strategic from another viewpoint as well: prior attempts at reforming the education system had failed. They had often been railroaded and developed by fairly narrow groups of experts, leading to a lack of internalization within the wider system. As soon as the political alignment of the government and key parliamentary committees changed, reforms were often repealed with little resistance in the system. The system lacked the ownership to react negatively, which facilitated a culture of impunity when regulatory change had detrimental effects.

“Educated Romania” attempted to develop a vision and strategy in cooperation with other stakeholders, in as broad a fashion as possible. While this had the downside of necessitating steep compromises in certain areas (stakeholders do not necessarily agree on what reforms should entail), it did offer the benefit of a multifaceted dialogue and a certain level of grounding that allowed for more realism in identifying boundaries for any sustainable would-be regulatory changes.

Content-wise, the “Educated Romania” project was heavily focused on pre-tertiary education, which was a consequence of the fact that most of the serious issues in the system had roots at this stage. This is of particular importance for higher education as well, as prior policy interventions in the sector tended to be very insular. For example, efforts to improve access to higher education were often centered on social scholarships, facilitating access to low-cost dormitories, or offering academic support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. But these, themselves, only target those students that have actually managed to reach higher education.

As Hâj and Țucă (2021, present volume) point out, the share of young people aged 19 who meet the eligibility requirements to enter higher education is already low by European standards. Losses accumulate, over time, in each cohort and reflect early school leaving, emigration or failure to pass the baccalaureate exam. The share of young people who end up being eligible for entry to higher education is less than half of each cohort, a proportion that is lower than the educational attainment of a few other EU members. This is likely to be further aggravated in the future, as certain universities rely on recruiting students from demographically vulnerable regions, as Santa and Fierăscu’s paper (2021, present volume) noted.

As such, themes such as equity, transition reform, curricular reform, earlier entry to formal education, and others soon emerged as key elements within the project. The “Educated Romania” approach focused on trying to ensure that as many children and young people as possible benefit from a qualitative education that allows them to complete their upper secondary studies with a wide choice for future development.

This direction was clear when the thematic reports and an integrated vision document were released in December 2018 for public consultation.⁴ Hundreds of emails,

⁴<http://www.romaniaeducata.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Viziune-si-strategie-Romania-Educata.pdf> and <http://www.romaniaeducata.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Rapoarte-grupuri-de-lucru-Romania-Educata.pdf>, last accessed at 06.10.2021.

discussions, and further stakeholder events enabled the public to provide feedback. A EU-funded technical assistance project allowed contracting OECD experts to develop expansive policy proposals on the teaching career, early childhood education and training, funding and management. All these inputs enabled the development of a final document, ready to become the centerpiece for further education reform in Romania. This document was adopted by the government in July 2021.⁵

The final “Educated Romania” document, integrating the thematic reports and overall vision and strategy, further developed previous content themes and added new fields, including STEAM and a greater focus on literacy. The latter had been exposed as a major issue with societal implications during the Covid-19 pandemic, as misinformation hit Romania severely and contributed to a poor vaccination rate in a country that had participated in EU procurement. This final version of the report included several policy choices that were endorsed by the project’s initiator, the President of Romania. These included new educational routes for Vocational Education and Training (VET), with more bridges to higher education and to other routes (theoretical or vocational), competence-based exams at the end of the lower-secondary education, as well as at the end of high school, but also access to alternative routes for entering the teaching career. The report remains at the level of a strategic vision, with a clear understanding that an implementation plan would be developed and endorsed by the Government and the Parliament (from a legal reform point of view).

The document has already begun to shape Romanian education. The Romanian plan associated with the Recovery and Resilience Facility drew heavily from “Educated Romania” priorities, as has the National Defense Strategy,⁶ voted by Parliament. These developments are important for higher education, as they include a series of revolutionary proposals. Notably, universities are likely to become central components in the development of vocational centers of excellence, pairing them with campuses, secondary VET schools, and businesses in the creation of professional development ecosystems.

Of course, whether the approach proposed by “Educated Romania” proves its resilience and manages to push through a more long-lasting agenda than prior attempts at reforming the education system remains to be seen. With politics in Romania being notoriously fickle and with a culture of constant regulatory upheaval, the way in which the system reacts to a new reform proposal cannot be accurately predicted. Nevertheless, it is equally clear that the *status quo*, the product of incrementalism and prior reforms, has not had much impact.

⁵<http://www.romaniaeducata.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Raport-Romania-Educata-14-iulie-2021.pdf>, last accessed at 06.10.2021.

⁶https://www.presidency.ro/files/userfiles/Documente/Strategia_Nationala_de_Aparare_a_Tarii_2020_2024.pdf, last accessed at 06.10.2021.

3 Significance

Looking back at the history of education reforms in Romania and focusing on the higher education arena in particular, it is not difficult to see that many of the most significant and lasting reforms had roots in Romania's European integration process. The most visible case is that of Bologna-inspired reforms, but other changes were brought about by the need to implement the *acquis communautaire*⁷ in order to prepare for EU membership. Even today, it is often EU directives that spearhead notable modernization strides, for example, the case with residency rights for non-EU graduates (see Santa and Haj 2020) or the enhanced recognition of professional qualifications. We have already seen Romania placed in the position of being a policy borrower in areas such as internationalization (see Deca 2020), and this extends to other policies as well. Of course, when it comes to pre-tertiary education, policy borrowing is limited by the lack of significant European integration beyond issues that pertain to mobility or measuring the qualifications' attainment.

The idea of a domestic reform agenda is fraught with problems due to the lack of any barriers in reversing reforms at a later date or in reverting to a regulatory "frenzy". And it is here that we can see a gap between reforms with external drivers and reforms with internal drivers, at least when it comes to the longevity of implementation. In this regard, the "Educated Romania" project is an endeavor to spearhead homegrown reforms based on inputs from domestic stakeholders precisely with the idea of having sufficient consensus to reduce the temptation for later adjustments. If successful, it will reduce the distance between problems within the education system and policy development at the core of the national government, while at the same time not ignoring global realities and not becoming an instrument of party politics.

A large part of the success of the project will depend, in the authors' view, on the team responsible for implementation. The project lasted as the only large scale reform in education for the past six years due to a combination of strong political commitment from the President of Romania and democratic inclusive approach, which generated ownership throughout the system, but also, more notably, in the private and non-governmental (NGO) sector. Such assets are clearly needed in the next phases, coupled with an increased policymaking capacity at the level of the Ministry of Education.

For higher education, in particular, it is essential that the "Educated Romania" project succeeds. Many core issues in higher education are the product of secondary education's numerous failings and unresolved issues. From limiting university access due to poor education outcomes, to perpetuating urban-rural disparities and to focusing insufficiently on critical and analytical thinking, pre-tertiary education is possibly the predominant factor in ensuring a successful future for Romanian higher education.

⁷Acquis communautaire is used here as the accumulated legislation, legal acts and court decisions that constitute the body of European Union law.

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