

The Socio-Economic Challenges in Access to Romanian Higher Education. Student Perception and Funding Policy Directions



Oana-Alexandra Dervis, Elena Trifan, and Gabriela Jitaru

Abstract Access to education, specifically in relation to socio-economic background, is one of the enduring issues in educational research. The theme is particularly salient for the Romanian case from a policy perspective, given the increase in social polarisation specific to the post-communist transition and its effect on access to higher education. Recent reforms in university funding have started to address this issue, with the inclusion of several mechanisms that allocate financial resources according to university efforts towards social equity. The main objective of our research is to provide an overview of the policies concerning the inclusion of students from low socio-economic backgrounds and assess the degree to which progress has been made towards reaching current national targets regarding access to higher education. We argue that although significant improvements have been made at the level of policy initiative, more precise targeting is needed in order to meet labour market demands, given that most current efforts are directed either at fresh high school graduates or at diminishing the dropout rate. These efforts, even if 100% successful, will not prove sufficient given current demographic trends. Therefore, we consider another potential avenue for increasing student numbers, suggesting that an orientation towards non-traditional students (adult students) might be beneficial. With this in mind, in the second half of the paper, we explore the main characteristics and trends concerning Romanian mature students using the results from the EUROSTUDENT VI and EUROSTUDENT VII studies, with the goal of formulating policy proposals that aim to unlock the potential of this demographic.

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1 Introduction

Widening access to higher education remains one of the key political goals at the European level. For the last 20 years, the social dimension of education has been a central concern of the—now—49 countries of the European Higher Education Area, present both in the initial Prague Communiqué (2001) and recently reiterated in the Rome Communiqué (2020). Commitment to building inclusive higher education systems is also present in the European Commission’s Modernisation Agenda for Higher Education, making equal access to education a priority for action.

From an economic perspective, investment in education is indispensable given the highly skilled human capital needed to create jobs and sustain economic growth in modern digitalised societies. It is estimated that by 2025, over 50% of European jobs will require higher education qualifications. As a response, through the Europe 2020 Strategy, the European Commission has set the goal of achieving an education attainment of 40% among European citizens aged 30–34. Given the strain of past educational policy specific to the communist regime and subsequent transition period, Romania set a more modest goal of reaching 26.7% higher education graduates in the same age group. By 2020, this goal was not yet met.

However, increasing the number of beneficiaries of higher education is not just a question of economic growth. From a normative standpoint, it is deeply connected to the social commitment to equality of opportunity, as it concerns one of the services that can most influence an individual’s chances of achieving in life. Education’s twofold relation to social polarisation is well-documented. Firstly, striving for equal access to education can attenuate the imbalance in opportunity caused by other socio-economic inequalities (Augustine et al. 2009). Secondly, maintaining the status quo does not just preserve current inequalities (Calarco 2014) but is a clear-cut recipe for the entrenchment of privilege (Augustine et al. 2009). Empirically, many studies have also linked schooling with better health and longer life (Bauldry 2014; Zajacova and Lawrence 2018).

More recent studies have found “a large, positive, statistically significant and stable relationship between inequality of schooling and income inequality, especially in emerging and developing economies and among older age cohorts” (Coady and Dizioli 2018). The existing research suggests that education expansion will continue to contribute to reducing inequality, and while this role will diminish as countries develop, it could further be enhanced through a stronger focus on reducing inequality in the quality of education (Coady and Dizioli 2018). Finally, the data also shows that education has a positive impact on civic and social engagement (Campbell 2006)

Striving for equality of opportunity in education is a relevant goal from a pragmatic standpoint, as well. Increasing the rate of education attainment in order to maintain a competitive labour market does not easily translate into policy, as simply increasing

the number of admissions to universities might not have the intended results, given that limited access to education traditionally affects certain groups more than others. Therefore, one cannot talk about widening access to higher education without discussing the traditional barriers to access.

The paper is divided into three sections to provide an overview of the current Romanian situation concerning the inclusion of students, assess the degree to which progress has been made towards reaching current national targets regarding access to higher education, and explore possible avenues of improvement. Firstly, we present the available data on the socio-economic characteristics that make individuals more likely to face barriers in attending Romanian universities. Secondly, we argue that although significant improvements have been made at the level of policy initiative, more precise targeting is needed in order to meet labour market demands, given that most current efforts are directed either at attracting fresh high school graduates or at diminishing the university dropout rate. These efforts, even if highly successful, will not prove sufficient given current demographic trends and will not, in the end, fully satisfy economic and normative demands. Therefore, we take into consideration the inclusion of non-traditional mature students as a beneficial policy direction. With this in mind, in the last section of the paper, we explore the main characteristics and trends concerning Romanian mature students using the results from the EUROSTUDENT VI and EUROSTUDENT VII studies, with the goal of formulating policy proposals that aim to unlock the potential of this demographic.

2 Social Background as a Limiting Factor in Access to Higher Education

At the European level, the list of socio-economic characteristics that make individuals more likely to face barriers in attending university includes gender, age, physical or psychological impairments, geographical location, migration background, race and ethnicity, and the educational attainment and socio-economic background of parents (Eurostudent VI, Synopsis).

At the national level, from a socio-economic standpoint, there are significant discrepancies in access to higher education. According to data from national registries and INS (The National Statistics Institute), the most notable differences are tied to student background (rural/urban residence, which is closely correlated with parent educational attainment), ethnicity, disability, gender, and age.

When taking into consideration the most significant number of individuals between 18 and 24 years old excluded from tertiary education, the most relevant demographic group is represented by potential students from rural areas. In 2020, 53% of Romanians between 18 and 24 years resided in rural areas (INS), but rural residents made up only 28% of students enrolled in public universities (ANS). In other words, if you were the appropriate age and lived in a city in Romania, you were 150% more likely to be enrolled in a public higher education programme than a

rural resident. In numbers, only 132,071¹ rural residents attended university in 2020, compared to the 654,335 rural residents of the relevant age, while 457,230¹ urban residents attended university from a potential pool of 536,679.

Another severely underrepresented demographic is revealed when analysing the same age interval according to ethnicity. Roma individuals aged 18–24 made up 2.25% of the age group population in 2015 (Moldoveanu 2015), while they represented only 0.23% of enrolled students at the time—almost ten times less.

Individuals with a disability are also underrepresented in higher education, in 2020 accounting for 0.23% of students (according to data from ME, reported by universities in the ANS platform) while, according to official data, comprising 0.75% of the relevant age group (according to data from The National Authority for People with Disabilities). It should also be noted that individuals with disabilities make up roughly 19% of the population at European level, which signals that the unofficial number of individuals with a disability might be significantly larger and underreported in Romania, therefore making the discrepancy in higher education attainment even more pressing. 87 million persons in the EU have some form of disability, and only 29.4% of them attain a tertiary degree compared to 43.8% of those without disabilities.²

From the standpoint of gender, the Romanian situation is quite similar to the European one. Although women are the majority among students enrolled at higher education institutions, significant discrepancies in gender distribution can be outlined according to the subject area. While the gender representation is not as skewed in ICT and STEM-related fields,³ Romania compensates by having females overrepresented in Education by 80%, compared to the 40% average, according to the Eurostudent VI Synopsis of Indicators.

Finally, the age of students, while overlooked in the past, is starting to be acknowledged as a relevant factor when assessing the overall capacity for inclusion of an educational system (Kottmann et al. 2019). We would like to make the case that, especially if the overall level of educational attainment in the population is low, the inclusion of mature students becomes a salient issue from the standpoint of equity.

Given the evident socio-economic discrepancies between students who manage direct transition to higher education, a case can be made that the potential pool for mature students contains preponderantly individuals from families with lower socio-economic backgrounds. According to a 2019 EU report concerning social inclusion policies in higher education, in countries that have managed to continue increasing their student numbers (France, Ireland and Scotland), there is evidence that the most

¹Although the numbers mentioned also count older students enrolled in university, they, nevertheless, paint an accurate picture of the discrepancy.

²“European Commission presents the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030”, available at the following address: <http://www.inclusion-europe.eu/european-commission-presents-strategy-for-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-2021-2030/#:~:text=87%20million%20persons%20in%20the,17.8%25%20of%20persons%20without%20disabilities>.

³The gap between Romanian women and men enrolled in ICTs subjects is 27%, compared to a 60% average gap at the European level (DZHW 2018). The gap between Romanian women and men enrolled in STEM subjects is 12%, compared to a 17% average in the EU (EIGE Gender Statistics Database 2015).

well-off parts of the population are more likely to make the direct transition to university (Kottmann et al. 2019). This is consistent with other data which shows that, more often than not, age is not the only difference between mature students and their colleagues. A 2018 study⁴ by the UK Universities and Colleges Admissions Service revealed that older students are more likely to live at home while studying full-time and to favour universities with lower tuition fees. Also, applications tend to be higher when the job market is weaker and concentrated on specific vocational fields like medicine (especially nursing), education and social studies. Moreover, as age increases, so does the percentage of females and self-declared black students enrolled, with more than 70% of mature students over 31 enrolled in 2017 in the United Kingdom being female.

Currently, in Romania, there is no direct pathway into higher education for students without a Baccalaureate degree, and almost all students with the degree are likely to directly enrol in higher education. The situation is similar to the Irish one, where admission to the preferred study programme depends on points achieved in the final school examination, and just like in Ireland, students from higher social backgrounds have more (cultural, financial) resources available to achieve higher outcomes in the final exam. However, in recent years, Ireland has managed to raise the percentage of mature students to 18% (2015), while in 2020 Romania it remains significantly lower (according to data from the Romanian National Student Registry). The Irish progress has mostly been achieved by investigating and addressing specific inequalities facing particular groups, with mature students being explicitly targeted, along with students from manual or unskilled working classes, disabled/impaired students and students from the Irish traveller community.⁵

In the next section, we present the progress made in recent years towards a more inclusive admissions and educational attainment policy in Romania. Given the wide discrepancies presented so far, we argue that more remains to be done, specifically with regard to targeting specific groups in the population.

3 Romanian Challenges and Commitments to Increasing Access and Inclusivity

It is important to note that the first three categories of disparities mentioned in the previous section do not arise at the university level, but they are, at least partially, a consequence of inequalities persistent in and inherited from primary and secondary education. The distribution of individuals who pass the Baccalaureate exam is signif-

⁴UCAS, 2018, Admissions patterns for mature applicants, 2017 cycle, available for download at the following link: <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/mature-students-local-focused-and-female>.

⁵ Department of Education and Skills, 2011, The Irish National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 - Report of the Strategy Group, distributed by the Government Publications Sales Office, available at the following address: <https://www.education.ie/en/publications/policy-reports/national-strategy-for-higher-education-2030.pdf>.

icantly skewed towards non-Roma urban dwellers compared to the distribution in the population of individuals with these characteristics (CNFIS 2019). Therefore, when considering tertiary education, the pool of candidates is significantly constrained by previous educational attainment. Current Romanian targets in increasing population-wide educational access should take into account this limitation and propose policies that work around it. Presently, while this context is addressed in legislation and some projections, more could be done from a policy perspective.

Tertiary Education Attainment is one of the three pillars of reform in Romanian Tertiary Education, being focused on promoting and encouraging broad tertiary education attainment, particularly for underrepresented groups. The main directions of policy at national level⁶ plan to address the following: routes into tertiary education, financial support, underrepresented groups and non-traditional learners, and information regarding educational opportunities and outcomes.

According to the results of a background analysis meant to support the implementation of the measures outlined by the 2015–2020 National Strategy for Tertiary Education, limiting dropouts and absorbing all yearly Baccalaureate graduates, while welcomed interventions, would not suffice in order to increase the level of educational attainment among future 30 to 34-year olds.⁷ Reaching the goal of 26.7% higher education graduates in this age group by 2020 would require that these measures be complemented by policies designed to attract non-traditional learners and, more specifically, adults without a previous higher education degree.

The same analysis mentioned that increasing the number of all underrepresented groups in higher education should be a policy priority, identifying the low high school participation among students with low socio-economic status as one of the most pressing issues (only 6% of high school graduates come from rural area high schools, and they make up only 0.08% of higher education graduates). Another outlined proposed direction of reform concerned linking measures designed to increase the participation and graduation of students from underrepresented groups with measures aimed at study programme diversification in order to meet labour market and student demand directly.⁸ It was recommended that these actions be complemented by a national system of needs-based grants for covering program study costs and living costs. Counselling and special social support at a university level were also signalled as areas in need of significant improvements.⁹

In this direction, the Romanian Secondary Education Project (ROSE) is the most important national project (funded through a loan of 200 million EUR from the World Bank to Romania and to be implemented over a period of seven years, between 2015 and 2022) that has as primary objectives reducing dropout in upper secondary and

⁶According to the 2015–2020 National Strategy for Tertiary Education (accessed in 14.05.2021, with the following link: https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/fisiere%20articole/Strategie_inv_tertiar_2015_2020.pdf).

⁷Individuals who will be 30–34 years old in 2020.

⁸This is one of the actions comprised in the first pillar of the National Strategy.

⁹“Direcții strategice pentru dezvoltarea echității în învățământul superior”, accessible at the following address: https://iemu.forhe.ro/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/A4.2.4_Propuneri_de_direc%C8%9Bii_strategice_privind_echitatea.pdf.

tertiary education and increasing the rate of success at the bacalaureate exam in project-supported institutions.¹⁰ The component for higher education (University-Level Interventions and Bridge Programs) aims to support the needs of students at risk of dropping out from public institutions through two grant schemes, a non-competitive one (remedial programs, tutoring, counselling and support services for students, for over 85% of faculties that teach in fields of potential economic growth in Romania, such as agriculture, engineering, science and medicine) and a competitive one (summer bridge programs for high school students - courses, partnerships between high schools, universities and the labour market, tutoring programs in campus—or through learning centres, for academic support services, in line with student needs).¹¹

Alongside these actions, in order to support rural students or those from other disadvantaged groups and non-traditional students to participate in tertiary education, the Romanian Ministry of Education continues to implement several social programs: special places for rural graduates, scholarships, subsidies for accommodation and meals, partial subsidies for transport. According to data from the beginning of the current academic year 2020–2021, over 6,500 students were enrolled in “special places”, of which about 3,900 were students who graduated from high schools in rural areas, and 900 were Roma students. In the last academic year, about 26,000 social scholarships were awarded at the national level. In 2020, a policy impact analysis was published concerning social scholarships and “special places” allocation to graduates from rural area high schools. It aimed to demonstrate the correlations between the successful implementation of these social policies and the improvement of access and academic progress for direct beneficiaries. At the same time, a series of policy briefs were prepared on topics related to access to higher education or the distribution of social scholarships. These show that the number of social scholarships granted has increased by 30% in recent years, and their average value has increased by approx. 150%, while the share of funds for social scholarships in total funds allocated by universities for scholarships varies between 5% and 42% (PNR 2021).

However, even if students with rural backgrounds now have access to more opportunities, some inadequacies still persist. Firstly, potential beneficiaries are not very well-informed, with an impact study¹² reporting that most of the students that currently benefited from the policies concerning special places or other social benefits

¹⁰Information concerning “Proiectul Privind Învăţământul Secundar” is available at the following address: <http://proiecte.pmu.ro/web/guest/rose>.

¹¹Under the ROSE—University Grant Schemes program, all universities are implementing grants from the Student Support Competitive Grant Scheme and 38 grants for Learning Centres grants, and until now, 201 grants are in the implementation phase under the Non-Competitive University Grants Scheme (2021, PNR). In order to strengthen an inclusive approach (by supporting rural pupils, disadvantaged groups and non-traditional students), in the same project, 105 grants are in the implementation for university summer programs, representing the maximum possible number of grants of this type.

¹²Politici publice privind echitatea în învăţământul superior: Impactul politicii de alocare a locurilor speciale pentru absolvenţi ai liceelor din mediul rural, accesibil la adresa: https://uefiscdi.gov.ro/resource-825272-20210125_studiu-impact-allocare-locuri-absolventi-liceu--rural.pdf.

found out about these opportunities after or while they were already in the process of enrolling. Others were informed by their high school teachers who knew about the policy from former students. Even when informed, some candidates erroneously believed that the competition would be higher for occupying a special place than it would be for normal places. Therefore, without a wider popularisation of the measures, their impact will continue to be substantially diminished. This being said, given that the policy is still new, there are signs of improvement, and universities seem to be making timid progress in assimilating special places in their educational offer and better disseminating the relevant information to potential beneficiaries. And while finer tuning is necessary both in implementation and in monitoring the effects of the policy, there is room for optimism.

It must be noted, however, that the policies mentioned in the previous paragraphs do little to attract non-traditional learners and do not offer significant incentive for enrolment (nor information, for that matter) to individuals from older cohorts, with their implementation being focused primarily towards new high-school graduates. When promoting educational offers, universities are either content to only target this demographic, or lack the information, support or know-how to orient their efforts more widely.

This brings us to the wider policy context surrounding the issue of student participation. The public funding methodologies that regulate budget allocation to Romanian state universities must be mentioned as central in providing incentives for universities to increase access to higher education. While indirectly incentivising universities to increase the number of attending students by allocating budgetary resources according to the number of students enrolled in each study programme, the funding schemes also provide direct stimuli for inclusion.¹³ The two main components of institutional funding that directly reward or encourage and support universities implementing institutional policies aimed at disadvantaged students are the Institutional Development Fund and the Supplementary Funding. Both have been in place since 2016, and both have components that directly target these policies or their results:

(a) The Institutional Development Fund (FDI), which is a direct mechanism that supports universities in implementing their institutional strategic plan, is awarded based on the results of a project competition among universities, with one of the directions for funding being enhancing equity and social access to education. Through the FDI, 41 institutional projects that focus on equity and access have been implemented in 2020 in 41 Romanian Universities, with a total of over 200 projects being implemented since 2016.

(b) The Supplementary Fund (FS), which allocates financial resources based on performance indicators, comprises quality indicator 4.1 aimed at integrating people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Five percent of total Supplemen-

¹³The annual public funding methodologies can be consulted on the CNFIS webpage, available at the following address: <http://www.cnfis.ro/finantare/finantarea-de-baza/>. They are only available in Romanian.

tary funding (about 61 out of 1,218 million lei for 2020) is allocated each year according to this indicator.

The data linked to the implementation and evaluation of the two mechanisms permits an overview of the evolution of access to higher education among less advantaged groups (FS) and of the institutional directions taken to influence it (FDI). Thus, as emerging from a detailed preliminary analysis covering all projects implemented through the Institutional Development Fund from 2016 to 2018 (conducted in the project POCU 126766, *Quality in higher education: internationalization and databases for the development of Romanian education*, implemented by UEFISCDI in partnership with the Ministry of Education in the period 2019–2022), the main three general objectives which were pursued by over 77% of universities, out of the seven recommended at national level for the Equity and Labour Market Direction, concerned the promotion of the university's educational offer; improving counselling and career guidance services, and providing support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Specifically, in almost all cases, the three objectives were pursued through marketing campaigns in high schools from disadvantaged environments, supporting a number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, organising guidance and professional counselling programs and facilitating the procedure for enrolling to college for fresh high school graduates. While such initiatives were sorely needed in most Romanian universities, it is important to point out that they were all targeted either at the population of fresh baccalaureate graduates or at already-enrolled students with the goal of limiting dropouts.

In consequence, according to the data used for Supplementary Funding, it would appear that the number of individuals with a disadvantaged socio-economic background attending university has increased in the last four years, as can be observed in Fig. 1. However, this increase, although substantial compared to previous numbers, is still insufficient for current targets.

Therefore, although the incentives exist, more precise targeting is needed if we want the current progress made to be accelerated. As mentioned earlier, current policies tend to focus on a limited demographic - fresh Baccalaureate graduates, with little interest in exploring other avenues (at least in practice), while official statistics and prognosis suggest that this strategy will not be sufficient to meet the labour market for qualified workforce. Furthermore, ignoring other demographic groups has the downside of neglecting or limiting the fulfilment of equity-related commitments and targets.

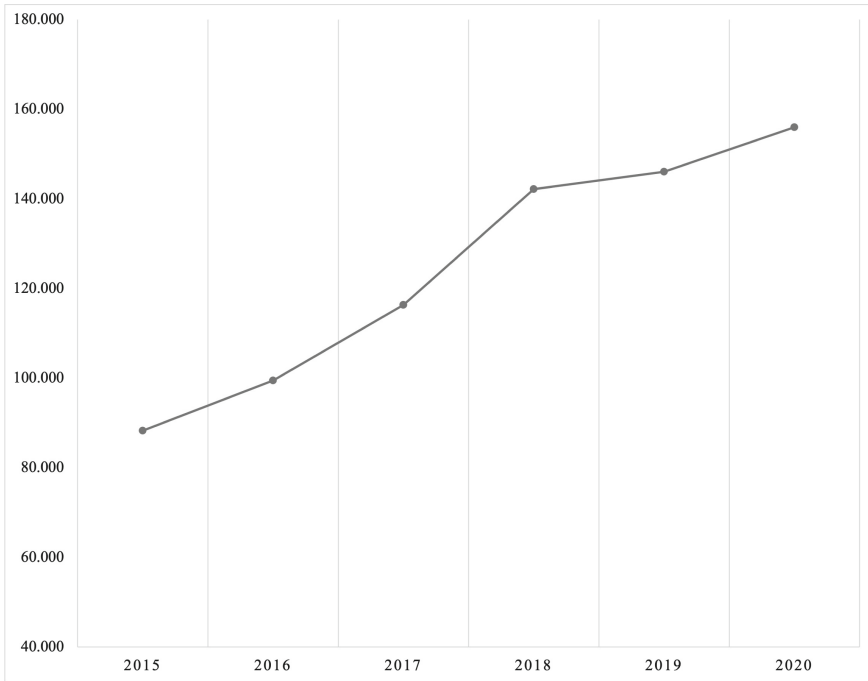


Fig. 1 The evolution of the number of disadvantaged students enrolled in Romanian universities 2015–2020

4 Mature Students as a Target for Further Policy—Eurostudent Results and Emerging Trends

In the previous section, we showed that existing policies at the university level are addressed either to a limited number of potential students who pass the Bacalaureate exam every year or to already enrolled students, with the goal of limiting abandonment among these demographics. However, it has also been pointed out that a significant demographic group is left out of major policy efforts towards increasing higher educational attainment. This section is dedicated to investigating the particularities of this demographic group, with the aim of exploring future policy avenues.

According to Eurostat, in 2020, a total of 601,600 Romanian adults from 25 to 29 years old finished upper secondary or postsecondary non-tertiary education,¹⁴ but they were yet to finish any tertiary studies. Most of these individuals are, of course, active on the labour market and would not consider broadening their educational attainment, as undertaking such a commitment while also working requires significant effort, but a comparison with other European countries reveals a significant

¹⁴Eurostat, “Population by educational attainment level, sex and age”, available at the following address: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/education-and-training/data/database>.

gap between the proportion of current mature students enrolled and the potential this demographic could have.

In order to identify the broader characteristics and needs that differentiate mature students from other members of the student population, this section presents the most relevant characteristics of this population in Romania, as they emerge from the recent Eurostudent survey (2020–2021). Where necessary, the results are supported by data from the Romanian National Student Registry (RMUR).

One important trend emerging from the Eurostudent results coupled with the official data shows that the number of mature students (30+ years old) has increased since 2017: in 2021, 17.5% of respondents are over 30 years old, compared with 12.6% in 2017. The official data from the National Student Registry (RMU) confirms this trend, although it is important to mention that the total percentages of mature students enrolled in Bachelor's programmes make up a lower share of the total.

Comparing students' backgrounds makes an important difference clear: mature students have a more disadvantaged socio-economic background. When looking at the highest educational attainment of parents, 34.6% of students over 30 have parents without any tertiary education background, while 28% of younger students do, as seen in Fig. 2. At the same time, for 37.6% of mature students, their parents are not well off, compared with 24.7% of all students. This aligns neatly with the international trends discussed in the first section of this paper.

In Romania, around 44% of mature students study in universities located in cities with less than 300,000 inhabitants, whereas only 29.2% of students aged 21 and younger study there. There is also a significantly higher percentage of mature students not studying in the capital city of Romania, 78.7%, compared to 68.9% of students

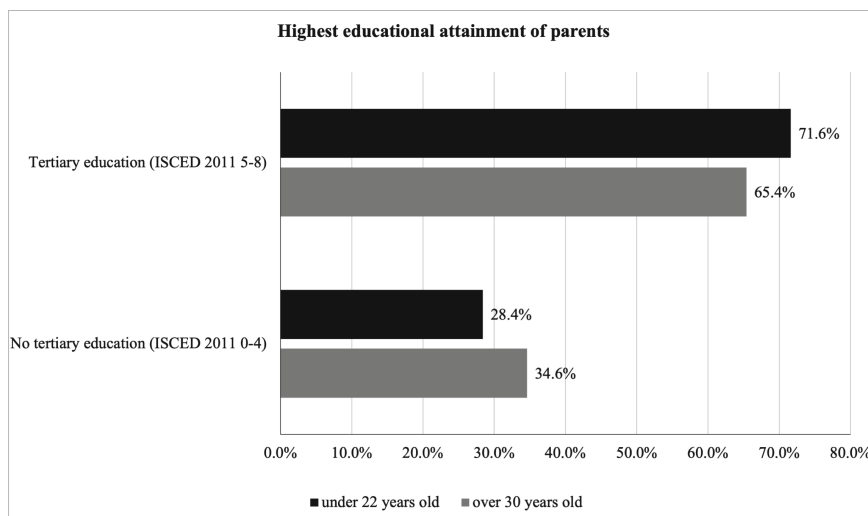


Fig. 2 Distribution of higher educational attainment of parents for two age categories, under 22 years old and over 30 years old

aged 21 or younger. However, looking at the results from 2017, it seems that there has been a slight decrease in younger students studying in big university centres and a slight increase in mature students studying there. This tendency is more in line with other Eurostudent countries, where younger students tend to study in smaller university centres, while mature students favour larger ones.

When looking at study programmes, 58% of mature students are enrolled for bachelor’s degrees, while 39.6% and 48.4% of students 22–24 years old, respectively 25–29 years old study for the same qualification. A percentage of 38.7% of mature students have entered higher education for the first time. Compared to 2017, there is a 10% increase, when the percentage of mature students that have entered higher education for the first time was around 28.

The duration of transition into higher education as well as between qualifications is clearly longer for mature students. Mature students transition to HE later in life, with 39.5% of them waiting more than two years before enrolling to university. At the same time, 59.7% of students aged 30 and over have delayed transition toward the master’s degree, compared to only 24.5% of those aged between 25 and 29 years old.

Regarding study difficulties, there are certain differences among age groups, as shown in Fig. 3. Mature students tend to experience difficulties due to having a job or childcare, while younger students have more difficulties pertaining to lack of motivation and/or other study-related matters. Mature students tend to have less self-declared study difficulties than other age categories, 42.1% of students aged 30 and over have not mentioned any difficulties concerning studying, while the percentages for the other age groups are lower—36.8% of students aged under 22 did not mention any difficulties, as well as 39% of students aged between 22 and 24 years old and 36.4% of students aged 25–29.

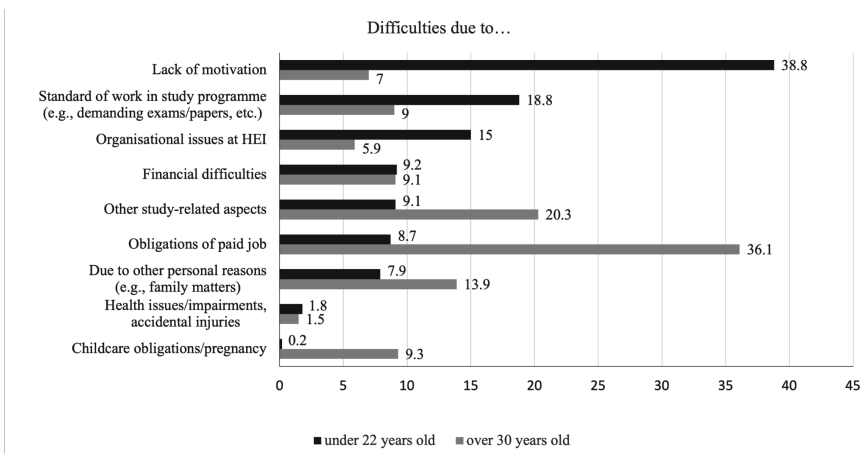


Fig. 3 Distribution of study related difficulties for two age categories, under 22 years old and over 30 years old

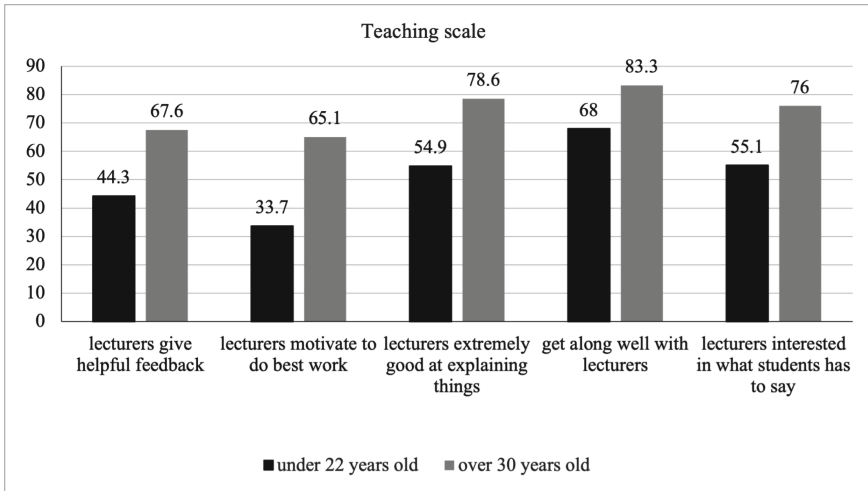


Fig. 4 Distribution of evaluation of lecturers for two age categories, under 22 years old and over 30 years old

When looking at how students evaluate their learning experience, there is also a significant difference between age groups. Younger students tend to rate their lecturers lower, as seen in the Fig. 4 below. Almost one third of them do not agree that their teachers give them helpful feedback, around 40% of them do not agree that their teachers motivate them to do their best work, and more than 15% of them do not agree that their lecturers are good at explaining things. Mature students, however, tend to appreciate their lecturers more.

As such, only 14% of them consider that their teachers do not give them helpful feedback, 17% do not agree that their lecturers motivate them to do their best work, and less than 8% do not agree that their lecturers are extremely good at explaining things. When looking at the teaching experience regarding the relationship of teachers and students, the same age differences apply. Mature students consider they get along with lecturers more than students in other age groups (83.3% vs. 69%) and feel that lecturers are more interested in what they have to say (76 vs. 57.2%).

Regarding relationships with their peers, all age groups seem to be getting along well with their colleagues. 62% of all students (the distribution is similar among all age groups) know a lot of fellow students to discuss subject-related questions, and 52% of all students (the distribution is similar among all age groups) have contact with many students enrolled in the same study programme.

Mature students seem to be more satisfied with their study settings and contents. Over 40% of students under 22 consider that “It is often hard to discover what is expected of them in their current study programme”, while only 24.5% of mature students feel the same way. About 70% of mature students would recommend their current study programme, and while the percentage of students in other age groups who would do the same is still high, it is lower by 12% by comparison. Although there

is an overall high sentiment of belonging in higher education, for mature students it tends to be higher.

Thoughts of changing the study programme or completely abandoning higher education are slightly higher among students between 22 and 30 years old – around 9.5% of them, while only 6.5% of younger (<22) and mature students (30<) consider that. Satisfaction with study conditions provided by the faculties also tends to be slightly higher among mature students, except for the provision of learning facilities where mature students tend to be a little more dissatisfied than younger students.

The same tendency is noticeable in regard to satisfaction in preparation for the labour market. Mature students are more satisfied with the support provided by the universities in preparation for future jobs and for the labour market, around 37% of them considering the support provided for a future job sufficient or entirely sufficient, with slightly smaller percentages for other age groups. About 53% of the mature students consider that their study programmes prepare them well and very well for the national labour market, while about 44% of younger students consider the same. The difference is maintained when speaking of the international labour market, around 35% of mature students believe that their study programmes prepare them well and very well for the international labour market, while only 25% of younger students believe the same.

Another important variation among students correlated with age concerns their living conditions. This has certain implications connected to living costs and other barriers to enrolment, like distance from the university, which might explain why mature students tend to favour smaller university centres closer to home. Younger students tend to live with their parents or in student accommodations, while older students live on their own or with their partner. When looking at the Eurostudent results from Romania, the difference is striking, especially considering the Covid-19 restriction, where most classes were organised online and living in student accommodation was restricted. While only 2.2% of mature students live in student accommodations, about 26.7% of younger students live there. Almost 72% of students below 22 are living with their parents, compared with 18% of students 30 and over, while 69% of mature students live with their partner/spouse, and only 13% of younger students do. Subsequently, 40.5% of mature students live with their own child(ren) or their partner's child(ren), while only less than 1% of younger students do. At the same time, the satisfaction with living accommodations tends to be higher as students age.

One of the most important differences among students regarding age is the relation with the labour market. Over 75% of students over 30 have had a job before becoming a student, compared with 38% of all students. And for a significant percentage of them, their jobs were connected with their current study programme: for 42.9% of them, their job was closely and very closely connected to their study programmes, while only for 20.1% of students below 22 this was the case. An important percentage of mature students have a job during the lecture period, with 80.3% having been working during the whole lecture period. For other age groups, the percentages are smaller: only 15.3% of students under 22, 41.2% of students between 22 and 25, and 62.3% of students between 25 and 30 are in the same situation.

Similarly, the motivation for working varies with the age of the students. More than 90% of mature students that have a job work to cover their living costs, almost 70% could not afford to be a student without a paid job, 72% work to support others, and 65% work to gain experience on the labour market, while only 61.4% of working students under 22 work to cover their living costs, only 31% could not afford to be a student without their paid job, only 15.5% work because they have to support others, and 64% of them work to gain experience on the labour market. Therefore, mature students, when assessing their time, would prefer to spend more time on taught classes and personal study time than on their paid jobs, while the lower percentage of younger students who are active on the labour market would prefer to spend more time on their paid jobs.

Given these differences, students' self-categorisation as students/workers varies significantly with age. The respondents under the age of 22 identify in higher degrees as students, close to three quarters of them, while only a quarter of the respondents over the age of 30 consider themselves primarily students (more than 80% of them identify as workers). And this tendency is obvious when looking at other age groups: 52.2% of students in the age category 22–24 consider themselves primarily students, while the percentage for those in the age category 25–29 the percentage decreases to 32.9%.

These differences regarding work life also have an impact on how students' income is composed. Younger students rely heavily on their families for financial support, as seen in Fig. 5.

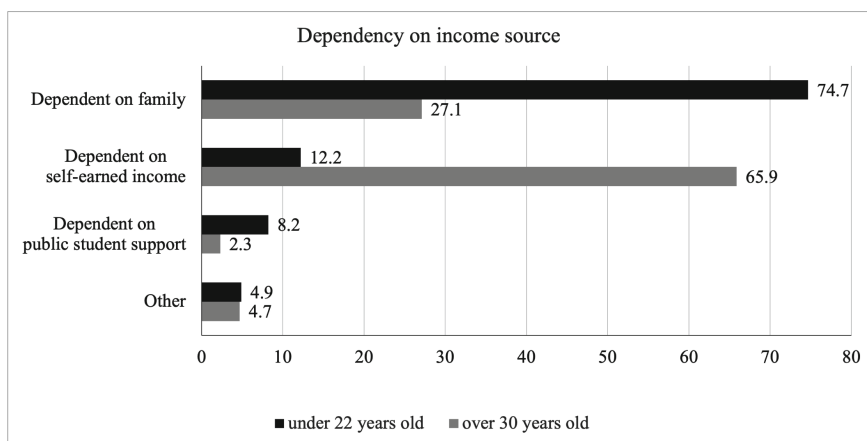


Fig. 5 Distribution of dependency on income source for two age categories, under 22 years old and over 30 years old

Support declines with age, as depicted in Fig. 6 below. At the same time, support from their partner increases with age. While the transfers in kind per month from outside the family are lower for all age groups, they are slightly higher for younger students (15.3% of students below 22 receive transfer in kind from outside the family, while only 7.2% of students 30 and over do).

The average amount of money a younger student (<22) receives is 839 RON, while older students receive smaller amounts. A significant difference lies in the distribution of income received from their paid jobs. For mature students, the average is 2,478 RON, while for students between 25 and 29 years old is 1,686 RON, for students between 22 and 24 years is 1,013, and for students below 22 years old it is only 305 RON. Thus, the total average amount of students' income (from all sources: parents, partner, job, etc.) varies from 1,609 RON for younger students to 3,462 RON for mature students.

In general, regarding other types of support from sources outside the family and their jobs, about 16% of students receive this kind of income, and there are some age specific differences. Students between the ages of 25 and 29 are more likely to be financing monthly living and study-related costs through savings from previous jobs. About 30% of them afford this, compared with 13.8% of those under 22, 22.5% of those 30 and over, and 20.5% of those between 22 and 24 years old. Students under 22 are financing their studies using other sources of income to a greater degree, such as inheritance, gifts of money, capital income, sales, prize money, etc. (18.5% of students under the age of 22, as opposed to 7.6% of students over the age of 30). Another interesting finding is that students under 22 years old benefit in a greater degree from public scholarships than older students, 72.7% of them, while this is true only for 43.8% of students over the age of 30.

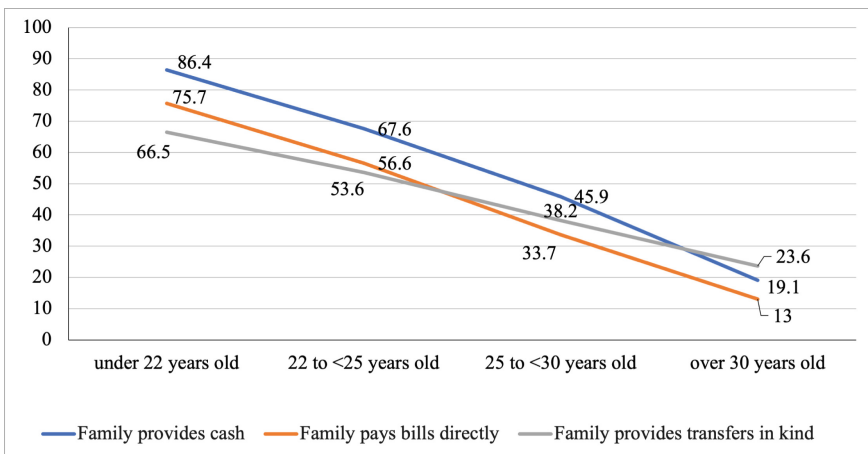


Fig. 6 Distribution of family support across all age groups

Another pattern regarding age emerges regarding financial difficulties. The most financially burdened students are those between 25 and 29 years old. Almost 30% of them stated that they experienced “serious” (16.1%) and “very serious” (13.4%) financial difficulties, and 57.6% of them could not afford to pay for an unexpected, required expense of 1,200 RON. However, for 33.8% of them, someone else (parents, family, partner etc.) could pay for it. At the same time 22.5% (9.7% very serious and 12.8% serious) of mature students experienced financial difficulties, and 47.4% of them could not afford to pay for an unexpected, required expense (however, only for 25.9% of them someone else could pay for it). This situation could be explained by the fact that while younger students are still supported by their families, and older students support themselves through their jobs, students in between these age categories are more financially vulnerable, as they become independent and lose support from their families as well as transitioning towards the labour market and occupying entry-level lower paid positions.

Another significant, even if predictable, difference presented in the chart above is that they are more likely to have children, with about 58.2% of them being parents, while only 0.3% of students under the age of 22, 2.1% of students between 22 and 24 years old, and 11.2% of students between 25 and 29 years old have had this experience (Fig. 7). This significantly influences their time budget and economic possibilities, translating into further challenges on the road to educational attainment. All the particular characteristics of adult students presented in this section should be taken into account when designing a policy targeted at this particular group, with further research being needed in order to tailor academic experiences to regional needs and expectations.

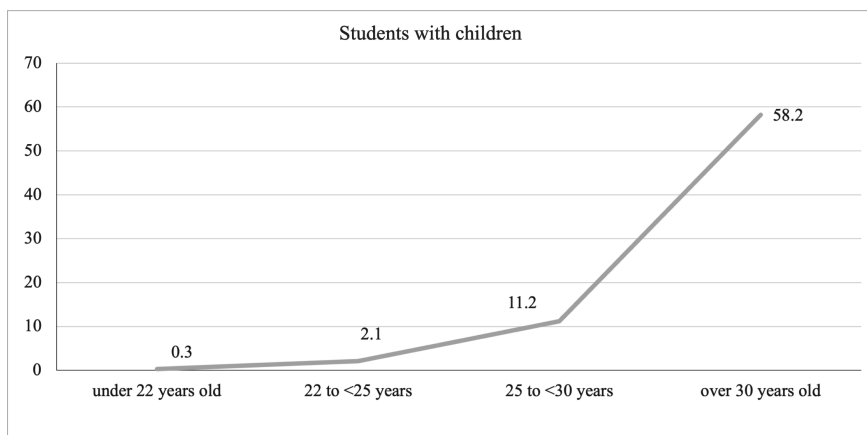


Fig. 7 Distribution of students with children across all age groups

5 Mature Student Inclusion—Public Policy Recommendations

When considering the need for better inclusion in higher education, as well as the current Romanian objectives, challenges, and demographics, mature students emerge as severely underappreciated targets for further policy. Given their particularities, outlined in the previous sections, and the current institutional priorities, we believe certain policy changes must be made to accommodate this demographic.

Firstly, flexibility and support should be key aspects in programs tailored for adult learners, especially concerning access to studies. Especially if the target is reducing inequalities generated by socio-economic background and exacerbated by previous levels of education (Toc 2018), adults should have opportunities for accreditation and certification of prior learning in order to open up progression opportunities. Currently, prior learning assessment and recognition, which would facilitate alternative routes to tertiary education enrolment, does not exist in Romania. Although there is some discussion surrounding relatively recent European initiatives concerning micro-credits (Iucu et al. 2021) and some commitments towards flexibility exist in the 2015–2020 National Strategy for Tertiary Education, these have yet to be translated into practice.

Bridging programs are one possible option in this direction, currently embraced by Australia, Ireland and Canada,¹⁵ while both Norway and South Africa provide alternative entry routes for adults that recognise informal learning and credit competencies. But according to the report of the Education and Training 2020 Working Group on Adult Learning 2014–2015 (European Commission), adult learners often need additional support not only to start but also to complete their learning journey: “Universities should provide and promote clear opportunities for learners to progress to further learning. To encourage participation and persistence, programmes should offer practical support on matters such as course fees, travel costs, childcare, and time off work. Teaching and learning need to occur as close as possible to participants’ local communities. Adult learning providers should be proactive in supporting learner retention, e.g. by providing options for restarting after dropping out”.

However, even if adults interested in studying do not have problems getting admitted to universities, the main challenge remains reaching them with desirable offers. The outreach effort currently undertaken by universities comprises addressing high schools and high school students, as covered in section II of this paper, with none to very little attention devoted to potential students that could follow non-traditional pathways into admission. Recommended strategies for capturing this demographic

¹⁵See, for example, the University of Toronto Bridging Pathway (<https://www.utm.utoronto.ca/future-students/bridging>). The pathway requires applicants to enrol in and successfully complete two half credits over the Fall and Winter academic sessions. Upon completion of the first year, students with medium scores are permitted to proceed to part-time degree studies, while students that manage higher than average scores become eligible to proceed to full-time degree studies. This is an alternative to an entry exam that requires preparation and likely disfavours candidates that haven’t had contact with the educational system for several years.

group are the provision of information, advice and guidance to community organisations, and the systematic organisation of campus visits, outreach visits and taster days specifically targeted at adults in the community. Additionally, partnerships between higher education providers and employers can create pathways for mature students to enter universities, with a corresponding benefit to businesses in creating better-educated, more highly qualified staff. In its *Ambition 2020* report, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES)¹⁶ argues that addressing the skill gap in the workforce will require a focus on the adult workforce and the development of innovative and flexible provision which meets the needs of employers and their staff.

Opening higher education to adults within the wider perspective of lifelong learning is a complex process that needs to be approached at a national, regional and institutional level. Policy and legislation, as well as financial incentives and social programs might be designed at a national level, but attracting students must also have a regional dimension, as it requires cooperation with external stakeholders and a tailored response to labour market needs. The two dimensions are brought together at an institutional level, where universities should have sufficient leeway for initiative, but significant incentive for policy improvement.

Finally, although it has clearly been shown in the previous sections that the higher education attainment of rural, poor, and under-represented minorities is disproportionately lower than the attainment of urban, higher income students, targeting mature students is not an unconnected policy direction. On the contrary, consistent empirical results, including the ones outlined in the previous sections, show that mature students have a more disadvantaged socio-economic background. Treating mature students as represented only by the dimension of older age would be a mistake, as they usually have a higher chance of being so-called “first generation scholars”, the first in their families to get higher education, and usually come from families that are not well-off. As such, policies that target them and encourage more individuals with similar backgrounds to join their ranks are policies that, in most cases, enable social mobility. But precisely because mature students are at the intersection between lower qualifications, socio-economic disadvantage, and sometimes disadvantageous gender roles, social support policies are necessary. Otherwise, the barriers in access present in society will be replicated at a smaller scale within the group of adults that might, in theory, be eligible to become mature students.

6 Conclusions

Given the socio-economic demands to increase access to higher education, as well as general equity considerations, one of the most efficient and justifiable policy strategies for the Romanian case should be to focus on mature students. According to

¹⁶UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2010, “Ambition 2020: World Class Skills and Jobs for the UK”, available at the following address: https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/1310/1/A2020_web_final.pdf.

the socio-demographic data describing the student population in Romania, several demographic groups are underrepresented. At first sight, it becomes clear that students from rural areas, students from ethnic minorities and students with disabilities are the most underrepresented individuals in Romanian higher education. However, after analysing the national data regarding secondary and tertiary education, two complementary issues arise. Firstly, most of the barriers in access in the Romanian educational system appear before entering higher education. The most disadvantaged members of society have difficulties in finishing secondary education at a conventional pace. Secondly, a series of analyses accompanying the National Strategy for Tertiary Education show that addressing the issues regarding access to tertiary education for the three previously mentioned groups, while still a priority, will not suffice for reaching the current target of 26.7% higher education graduates among citizens aged 30 to 34. Furthermore, even if this target would be achieved, labour market demands in the European Union would still exceed it.

Moreover, by analysing the steps undertaken to close the gap in education, such as the Romanian Secondary Education Project and other specific measures, i.e., special places for rural graduates, scholarships, subsidies for accommodation and meals, partial subsidies for transport, it becomes clear that further actions are needed in order to address the issues of inequality in higher education. The same conclusion can be drawn by examining the wider policies that provide incentives for the inclusion of students, such as the institutional funding methodologies for public universities. While progress has been made, significant space for improvement still remains.

Furthermore, targeting mature students does not imply neglecting the other disadvantaged categories, quite the contrary. Our analysis has shown that mature students tend to have a more disadvantaged background when compared with other age categories, coming from households where parents have no tertiary education and facing more financial distress than their younger peers. They also tend to study closer to home, in smaller university centres from smaller cities, closer to rural areas. Most importantly, adult learners are combining a full-time paid job with studying for a degree, and a higher percentage are also taking care of children. They tend to be more satisfied with their study conditions and feel the need to spend more time on studying than on their paid jobs, while they also need their paid job as they have higher incomes and expenses.

The information gathered through the Eurostudent VI and VII studies was a useful starting point towards identifying the most important aspects that need to be taken into consideration when drafting policies aimed at mature students. It underlined the necessity for more flexibility as well as the need for financial support to address particular challenges. One important step forward towards inclusion, as well as towards satisfying labour market demands, should be introducing pathways for recognising acquired skills. At the same time, these actions need to be paired with appropriate measures in reaching them regionally and locally with desirable offers, as well as with partnerships between higher education providers and employers.

To conclude, although Romania has undertaken important actions in tackling the issues of inequality in education, adequately addressing the population without

higher education from older cohorts could provide a much-needed step towards a more equitable and sustainable future.

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