

ANALYSIS OF EUROPEAN FINANCIAL INTERVENTIONS TO STRENGTHEN EDUCATION IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *The European Union's education policy supports actions in the field of education through specific funding mechanisms at Member State level with the aim of contributing to addressing common challenges and building the 'European Education Area'. The study aims to analyse the funding programmes in the field of education, for pre-school and compulsory education, implemented in Romania in the period 2014-2022, from the Structural and Investment Funds of the European Union. For this purpose, through secondary data, an analysis among the main funding programmes was carried out. The results of this study outline an overview of the main components of the funding programmes in the field of education.*

Key words: *education policy, funding programmes, European funds, strengthening education*

1. Introduction

The main policy instrument and backbone of regional policy through which the European Union shows its solidarity with partner countries is the European Regional Policy (López-Bazo, 2020). As one of the important investment policies of the Union, it pursues the reduction of the economic, territorial and social disparities between the regions of the European Union by supporting job-creating activities competitiveness, economic growth, improving quality of life and sustainability (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2021).

Education, shaping an inter-connected and diversified world, can contribute to building generations with a greater concern for global and intercultural issues, capable and ready to take action for sustainability and for collective well-being (Mostafa, 2020).

EU education policy is designed to support actions in the field of education through specific funding mechanisms at state level and to contribute to overcoming common challenges, but the responsibility for implementing education reforms lies with each

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country according to existing priorities and economic and political possibilities (European Commission, 2020).

The funding programmes aim to implement numerous measures to build the "European Education Area" (European Commission. Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC), 2021), as funding plays an important role in the development of education (Woessmann, 2016). These measures include: increasing the resources allocated from public funds especially to primary education, increasing the participation of pre-school children from disadvantaged backgrounds in quality education, introducing differentiated education programmes, standardising school admission regulations and reducing school drop-out rates (European Commission, 2021). In recent years, numerous strategies, national programmes and projects have been developed to increase the quality of education in Romanian schools. Although as a result of the implementation of the projects, progress has been made among the direct beneficiaries and schools supported (Ministry of European Funds, p.28), they have failed to contribute significantly to the improvement of the Romanian education system (Ministry of European Funds, 2020b, p.7), as migration and social difficulties remain problematic.

As education is the most important factor for sustainable personal development and employment (Ministry of European Funds, 2020a, p.369), in the context of limited sustainability of interventions, a retrospective evaluation of EU-funded interventions in Romania in the field of education is needed in order to support key actors in the process of preparing effective and sustainable future funding programmes.

2. Methodology

This study aims to analyse the funding programs in the field of education, for pre-school and compulsory education, implemented in Romania, in the period 2014-2022, from European Union Structural and Investment Funds through secondary data. In order to identify the main features of the funding programmes implemented in Romania in the field of education, an analysis based on secondary data was carried out.

To carry out the research, the following objectives were established: (O1) Identify the main aims and specific objectives of the funding programmes in the field of education, for pre-school, pre-school and compulsory education; (O2) Identify the actions supported by the funding programmes; (O3) Identify the main expected results; (O4) Identify the main indicators of achievement and outcome; (O5) Identify the target group and type of education addressed by the funding programmes; (O6) Identify the financial aspects related to: Financial allocation of the call for projects, sources of funding, European Union co-financing rate, minimum and maximum eligible amounts; (O7) Identify the development regions of Romania for which the funding was intended.

In order to carry out the study, the following were identified as the main programmes financed by the European Union Structural and Investment Funds in the field of education in Romania, for pre-school, pre-school and compulsory education, implemented in the period 2014-2022: Regional Operational Programme, Priority Axis 10 - Improvement of educational infrastructure, programmes: "Improvement of

educational infrastructure - Pre-school and pre-school education"; "Improvement of educational infrastructure - Compulsory education".

Human Capital Operational Programme, Priority Axis 6 - Education and Skills, programmes: "School for all"; "Quality education in crèches nationwide"; "Development of pre-school education services"; "Stimulating participation in education of children with parents working abroad"; "Curriculum - primary and secondary education"; "Support for reducing early school leaving"; "Second chance"; "Professionalization of teaching careers!"; "Motivated teachers in disadvantaged schools!"; "Supporting initial teacher training for pre-university education!".

Erasmus +, the EU programme for education, training, youth and sport.

From these, the main education funding programmes relevant to pre-primary, pre-school and compulsory education that have been selected are:

- "Improvement of educational infrastructure - Pre-primary and pre-school education";
- "Improvement of educational infrastructure - Compulsory education";
- "School for all";
- "Motivated teachers in disadvantaged schools";
- "Development of pre-primary education services";
- "Stimulation of participation in education of children with parents working abroad";
- "Second chance".

Data on these programmes were collected from the funding guidelines published on the official websites of each programme and analysed through the content matrix. The analysis aimed to identify the main features of the funding programmes implemented in Romania in the field of education for pre-primary, pre-school and compulsory education in the period 2014-2022, the items analysed being: type of education to which the funding is addressed; main purpose of the project call; principles and sub-themes; specific objectives; supported actions; main expected results; common and specific output indicators; project and result indicators; identification of the target group; regions where funding can be requested; funding sources; European Union co-financing rate; communication and promotion of the programmes. A comparative analysis of the main funding programmes was also carried out.

3. Results and Discussions

Objective 1. Identify the main aims and specific objectives

The main aims of the funding programmes, in order of frequency of occurrence, are: increasing school participation, lifelong learning, vocational training, preventing and reducing early school leaving, improving the quality of education. Less addressed are: equitable access to education and returning to school. The most common 'principles' and 'sub-themes' addressed are: non-discrimination, improving information and communication technologies, social innovation while the less addressed are sustainable development and gender equality. The specific objectives most frequently addressed by the funding programmes analysed are: increasing participation of children from

disadvantaged backgrounds in pre-primary and pre-school education and improving the skills of teaching staff to promote quality pupil-centred education services and an inclusive school". The least addressed objectives are: reducing early school leaving through integrated measures to prevent early school leaving and to provide equal opportunities for socio-economically disadvantaged communities, and re-engaging early school leavers in education and training.

Objective 2. Identify actions supported by funding programmes

The actions supported by the funding programmes have a uniform approach, including: construction, rehabilitation, modernisation, extension, equipment of educational infrastructure; actions with a direct impact on facilitating access to education, prevention and reduction of early school leaving; actions aimed at improving and diversifying the educational services offered; programmes aimed at human resources in schools with a view to attracting and retaining competent human resources; development of managerial skills; actions to improve children's participation in education from an early age and to prevent early school leaving; support for the development of second-chance programmes; lifelong career guidance and counselling services; provision and promotion of second-chance programmes; promotion of mobility measures for teaching staff.

Objective 3. Identify the main expected results

The most important expected results are: provision of quality education services, creation of conditions for quality education, increased participation in education, reduction and prevention of early school leaving, reintegration into education and training. Less frequent results were the promotion of equal access to quality pre-primary, primary and secondary education and inclusive schools.

Objective 4. Identify key output and result indicators

The most frequent output indicators are: number of teachers and auxiliary staff supported, number of pre-school children supported, number of school children supported. Less frequently addressed indicators are: number of pre-schoolers supported, number of young people and adults supported. The most frequently addressed outcome indicators are: number of teaching and support staff who have improved their skills and certification; number of children, young people and adults who have completed second-chance programmes; total number of participants in the educational process. Less addressed indicators are: number of children, young people and adults who obtain a qualification on completion of second-chance programmes.

Objective 5. Identify the target group and type of education targeted by the funding programmes

The target group most targeted by the funding programmes is: primary and secondary school pupils, young people and adults, teaching and support staff, parents, followed by pre-school and pre-school children, parents/guardians or carers of children with parents working abroad, upper secondary school pupils. The target group targeted by only one

funding programme is teaching staff in early childhood education and care. Most funding programmes are aimed at pre-school, primary, secondary, pre-primary and upper secondary education.

Objective 6. *Identify financial issues related to the financial allocation of the call for projects, funding sources, EU co-financing rate*

The financial allocation of the call for projects ranges from 75.83 million euro (from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the State Budget (BS), of which 63.89 million euro ERDF) to 25 million euro (EU + BS of which 21 116 250 euro EU). Most frequently, the source of funding is provided by the European Social Funds - EDF + BS. Only two programmes are financed from ERDF + BS. The minimum and maximum eligible amounts are between 200 thousand euro and 50 million euro. The co-financing rate from the European Union is a maximum of 85% in the less developed regions and a maximum of 80% in the Bucharest-Ilfov region.

Objective 7. *Identify the development regions of Romania for which funding has been earmarked*

In this respect, priority is given to less developed regions such as North East, South East, South Muntenia, South West Oltenia, West, North West and Centre, which have priority access to funding. At the same time, the Bucharest-Ilfov region, the most developed region in Romania, is also eligible for most of the programmes analysed.

4. Conclusions

Funding programmes can become important tools for improving education if they are properly and effectively designed and implemented so as to contribute to personal well-being and positively influence the course of European economic development.

Supporting the development of education in Romania is addressed by numerous European funding programmes that aim to ensure improved quality of education and equitable access to training. Interventions to support pre-primary, pre-school and compulsory education are focused on pupils and their needs and aim to remove the barriers that prevent them from going to school and to make school an enjoyable and quality environment. Specific objectives of these programmes include: preventing early school leaving and school segregation; ensuring equal opportunities, anti-discrimination, school inclusion; lifelong learning targeting groups at high risk of leaving school early focusing especially on children from the Roma minority ethnic group and children coming from rural, socio-economically disadvantaged communities.

The main limitation of the research arises from the analysis of a small sample of programmes and projects implemented in Romania, addressed to pre-school, preschool and compulsory education. Future research should cover all programmes and projects that have funded education in Romania. Also, an extension of the analysis to programmes and projects implemented in the EU and a comparison of the existing situation in Romania compared to other EU Member States could provide a comprehensive picture of the EU programmes and projects funding education.

The literature generously addresses the issue of education from the perspective of funding, costs and efficiency of funded programmes and projects, but there are still unexplored facets, and the study carried out in this paper has provided additional information to complete the state of knowledge in the field. The overview of funding programmes in the field of education can enrich the literature and help guide policy makers towards measures that can lead to the sustainable development of Romanian education.

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