



State of the art – Age management in educational sector in Romania

Project: Solutions to age related issues in education sector

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Age and active ageing in Romania

The most important demographic challenges faced by the Romanian society in the present are the decline of population size and the change of its structure, with the proportion of older population increasing and the young population shrinking. Within the population aged 55 years and above that increased in both absolute and relative terms in the period of interest for this report (2010–2016), the fastest growing proportion was its older population subgroups of 65–74 and 85+.

At the same time, in the next 30 years, it is estimated that the population aged 65 and above could go from 17.4 in 2016 to as high as 32.6 (highest estimate, under low fertility assumption) according to Eurostat projections (Eurostat 2019f). In this timeframe, the ‘old old’ population might see a fourfold increase.

Romania, in its National Strategy for the Protection of the Elderly and the Promotion of Active Aging, considers the main elements of the general framework of active ageing:

- 1) prolonging life and healthy aging;
- 2) promoting employment at older ages;
- 3) increasing the social and political participation of older groups and
- 4) reducing the dependency of the elderly and improving long-term care services.

The elderly population is an underutilized resource of the Romanian economy, which it does difficult to reach an occupancy rate of 70%. In Romania, the employment rate among the population aged 25 to 54 is only 2 percentage points lower than the EU average, while the same rate for the population aged 55-64 is 9 points lower percentage.

Active engagement with labour market is decreasing with age, the employment rate being generally lower for the age groups 60–64 and 65–69, which covers the retirement age for women and men in Romania (see Table 8). Until 2000, the statutory retirement age was 57 for women and 63 for men and it grew gradually since then. Currently the statutory retirement age is 60 years and nine months for women and 65 for men. As expected, employment rate is the lowest after the age of 70, even though it remains high in Romania as compared to other EU countries.

Age issue in education sector

In educational sector, the investment remains low in EU comparison, and funding mechanisms to support equity are weak. In 2019, general government spending on education was equivalent to only 2.8% of GDP, significantly below the EU average of 4.6% and the lowest percentage in the EU. Traditionally, underinvestment is particularly felt in pre-university education. Basic funding and existing correction coefficients are insufficient to meet schools' needs. As a result, excessive enrolment leading to overcrowding is often used as a solution by schools in rich urban areas to hire top teachers. Because schools in small cities and in rural areas tend to have less students and smaller classes, they are not able to attract highly qualified teachers even if they receive more funding per student. In any case, the attractiveness of schools in rural and disadvantaged areas for highly qualified staff is usually limited. The system of complementary funding by local authorities tends to favour schools in richer municipalities, thus reinforcing inequalities in the system (World Bank, 2018).

About one out of four of teachers (26%) in Romania are aged 50 and above (OECD average 34%). This means that Romania will have to renew about one out of four members of its teaching workforce over the next decade or so. At the national level, almost 8,000 teachers aged between 65 and 88 teach in Romanian schools, according to data from the Ministry of Education for 2021, ie 3.96% of all teachers. But the attractiveness of the profession is constantly lowering, especially because low entry requirements for teacher education programmes and traditionally low salaries (OECD, 2017). University graduates are not coming to fill vacancies. Although the Ministry claims that it is taking measures to attract young people to the system, schools in the country lack more than 1,500 teachers. The young specialists refuse to get hired because of the low salaries, the busy schedule, but also the bureaucracy.

Shortages are reported for qualified primary school teachers and for lower secondary school teachers in ICT, sciences, foreign languages and the arts. The number of candidates in the national competition for teaching positions (i.e. titularizare) would normally be sufficient to fill vacancies, but less than 50% of candidates obtain the required mark. In addition, the relatively high number of positions filled by staff without proper qualifications remains a challenge, particularly in schools in rural and remote areas. The number of support specialists (e.g. special education teachers, school counsellors, Roma mediators, etc.) is often insufficient. For example, a school counsellor is expected to work with 800 students, but in practice the student/counsellor ratio is 2.5 times higher.

Strengthening the teaching profession remains a key priority for modernising the school system. Romania's aspirations to raise learning outcomes and develop a competency-focused student-centred approach to teaching and learning largely depend on its teachers (OECD, 2020). In October 2020, a pilot master's programme in pedagogics started in eight universities. It explores a new model of initial teacher education that could replace the current socio-pedagogical module, which offers very little practical preparation, especially in modern teaching techniques and inclusive pedagogy (OECD, 2017). However, with less than 30% of school teachers older than 50 and the overall number of teachers expected to decline in line with the student population, any reform of initial teacher education will only affect a minority of the profession in the next few decades (OECD, 2020). This implies that updating and modernising teachers' knowledge and skills will primarily be achieved by working with the existing teachers. Although a high percentage of Romanian teachers take part in professional development, the content and delivery of courses is not perceived as sufficiently adapted to their needs (ISE, 2018), and participation is often restricted by high costs (OECD, 2019a). At the same time, attracting highly motivated teachers to work in disadvantaged schools, including in rural areas, remains a key challenge.

Romanian universities face an important problem, which is reported at the level of the entire university environment. There is a growing lack of interest among young people in entering the university system as teachers. According to the figures requested by "Clean Romania", the city's universities have percentages around, on average, around 15% in terms of teachers under the age of 35 who take up positions. According to the representatives of the universities, there are several reasons why young people do not go for an academic career. In the first phase, it would be about the low salaries at the level of assistant, the fact that many tenured positions are blocked, at some faculties, by professors who have reached retirement age, but are kept with the consent of the Senate, but also the fact that there is a very long buffer period in order to access an academic position. A student who completes his or her undergraduate and master's studies must also take a doctorate, and then, as far as positions can be filled when vacant, he/she will enter the one for an indefinite period.

Measures taken and priorities to follow

Some systemic regulation measures applied in primary and secondary education in Romania, in order to preserve active ageing and to protect senior teachers are:

- ✓ Teachers who have reached retirement age can remain active until the age of 68, by submitting an application to this effect.
- ✓ Teaching staff with a seniority in education of over 25 years, with the first teaching degree, benefit from the reduction of the teaching norm by 2 hours per week, without reducing the salary. The purpose of this law can be easily perverted, as the danger is that age and not competence are wrongly rewarded, given that the law applies to teachers who have been in education for 25 years. But the measure also has positive aspects. Teachers can use their free time to raise and mentor other teachers who are at the beginning of their teaching career and need guidance and examples of good practice. This type of activity on the part of tenured teachers with a lot of experience in the education system would have an impact on the educational act. Two hours that teachers do not teach, they can invest in mentoring two or three young teachers. However, the condition is the existence of a well-defined set of criteria for the teachers who form the body of the mentoring teachers, on whom and on the basis of which criteria you select them.
- ✓ The mentoring activity in the field of education is summarized to the pedagogical practice of students who intend to pursue a teaching career after graduating from university, under the coordination of a professor the faculty attended and a professor of pre-university education, appointed, in collaboration with the mentoring inspector within the County Inspectorate. But there are many local programs of support and counseling for beginning teachers, given the difficulties faced by young teachers enrolled in national exams. The beginner teacher faces different level of needs, some of them depending on the integration of the work content, the acceptance and assimilation in the community. The help offered by senior mentors is sometimes very significant and important for the future professional in education.

Directions of improvement for further supporting active ageing and age management measures in educational sector:

- ✓ Promoting positive public image of old age by public awareness campaigns
- ✓ Inclusion of age management topic in education and making it visible on public agenda, involving various actors (researchers, educational experts, NGOs, local administration, practitioners), in order to identify the needs of seniors working in education and the resources available, and to initiate common programmes.

- ✓ Motivate educational employers to invest more in a healthy work environment and to maintain the health state of employees for longer.
- ✓ Encourage educational employers to keep older teachers longer in employment by offering fiscal advantages — e.g., eliminating certain payroll-related taxes such as those for unemployment and maternity.
- ✓ Encourage educational employers to create age-friendly working spaces and to promote formal employment with other activities, e.g. learning new skills or provision of care or to adjust to their health needs.
- ✓ Elaborate policies targeted at senior teachers, which consider employment history, age, gender, specific health risks, and provide specific counselling and access to services shaped to fit the needs and resources for senior teachers.

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