

THE STATE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION IN ROMANIA

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Online distance education, now commonplace in various countries of the world, is still a relatively new educational modality for learners in Romania. The rapid growth and increased use of a wide variety of computer- and networked-based technologies, as well as the transition in schools between traditional learning methods to more modern modalities employing e-learning systems, are the driving change for online learning within Romania today. Implementation of computer-based educational systems in Romania, as has been the case in most countries, encountered many challenges but also achieved a number of key technological milestones. This article provides an overview of the implementation of online distance learning within the country of Romania.

Romania is located in southeastern Europe (see Figure 1). The country shares a border with Hungary, Ukraine, Bulgaria, and The Republic of Moldova. Romania has a population of 20 million persons and is one of the largest countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

The country has a geographic area of 92,043 square miles, slightly larger than the U.S. State of Minnesota. The capital of Romania is Bucharest, which has an approximate population of 1.9 million people. Of 20 million Romanian citizens, a significant number of minorities are represented, including Hungarian (6.5%), Roma (3.3%), Ukrainian (0.3%),

German (0.2%), Turkish (0.1%), Serb (0.1%), Slovak (0.1%), and others (0.4%) (Eurostat, 2016). Romania's primary language Romanian, one of the Romance languages of Europe—residing within the group encompassing French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese, for example—that traces its origin back to the old Roman Empire. Although some 80% of Romanians profess Eastern Orthodox religious membership, other religions represented in the population include Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Judaism, and others (Eurostat, 2018).

The name “Romania” comes from the Latin word *Romanus*, which means “citizen of the

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Source: TUBS (2011). Retrieved from https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/39/Romania_in_Europe_%28-rivers_-_mini_map%29.svg

FIGURE 1
Romania in Europe

Roman Empire,” but the modern country of Romania was born within the context of the 19th century. In 1862, the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia were united, forming The Romanian United Provinces. In 1866, the creation of a constitution established the name “Romania” for the country. From this point, the nation was affected by a variety of internal and external political processes from both Western and Eastern powers, and in 1878, the Romanian War of Independence led to the of The Kingdom of Romania. This point marked

the start of the modern country of Romania. From 1947 until 1989, Romania was ruled by a communist dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu. It was through democratic reform that allowed Romania in 2007 to be granted membership in the European Union (EU) (Romanian National Institute of Statistics, 2011).

Interestingly, while Romania is a member of the European Union, the country is not in the Eurozone (i.e., those countries within the EU that use the Euro for currency), but, rather, uses its own indigenous currency, the Roma-

nian *Leu*, although Euro denominated currency is accepted in many major Romanian businesses.¹ Romania has also been a NATO member since 2004 and has remained active in NATO missions since that date.

Although Romania has experienced strong economic growth since its admission to the EU, the country retains some of the highest poverty rates within the EU. According to the Romanian National Institute of Statistics, Romania has the highest level of relative poverty of the current 28 EU member States. Romanian income per adult is lower than 60% of the population's median income.² One of the key challenges that impede the development and the growth of Romania are governance and institutional challenges (The World Bank, 2016), including a lack of partnership between enterprises, universities, and other public institutions. The weak nature of such frameworks, particularly for research institutes, has led to low level of relevancy. Empirical economic research studies are therefore not used to benefit or improve the economy. Some have therefore argued that the Romanian Government should focus on increasing research development and implementation, especially for advanced technologies that will help Romania be more competitive on the international market (cf. Sandu & Dinger, 2007).

These challenges within Romania can, in part, be traced to the country's prior experience with a long and painful communist regime of government that ruled the country from 1948 to 1989 under President Ceausescu. Ceausescu was widely viewed as doing vast damage to Romania's economy during these years (Ives, Runceanu, & Cheney, 2014; Marga, 2002). During the 41 years under Ceausescu, Romanians were forced to follow communist-based rules, enroll in the official Communist Party, and provide consistent support for Ceausescu without open political debate (Marga, 2002). During the time the communist regime was in power, the Socialist Republic of Romania aligned the country's education system to that of the Soviet Union

and, more generally, a Leninist orientation of education. The communist-led government restricted the amount of teaching and learning in areas such as science, technology and art: this was the result of the fears of a dictatorial system that believed these areas of study interfered with building a broader communist society (Istrate, 2007). The communist system of government controlled educational policies, with the ostensible goal of improving the economic system of the country, including expansion of vocational and training schools (Ives et al., 2014).

In 1990, Romania began the transition from a socialist economy to a democratic, free-market economy. Although this transition was "marked by great economic hardship, including high unemployment, skyrocketing inflation, and shortages of consumer goods" (Constantin, Goschin, & Danciu, 2011), just 1 year later, Romania began to experience an upward trend in economic growth and, after a time, commenced accession negotiations with the European Commission. The process of these negotiations was challenging and were delayed (arguably be attributed to the country's history with an extended previous communist background), but eventually resulted in a successful accession to the European Union in 2007 as part of the so-called "fifth wave" of EU enlargement. Today, Romania remains fully engaged in the European Union as an active member of Europe.

TRADITIONAL EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS IN ROMANIA

As in most market-driven economies, Romania employs a mixture of public and private educational institutions. Education in Romania is based on free tuition and possesses an egalitarian orientation. There are currently some 56 State higher education institutions and some 30 privately held educational institutions. The official Romanian educational system organized by the government consists of: (a) pre-school education (students 3–6 years old);

(b) primary education (Grades 0–4); (c) middle school (Grades 5–8); and (d) high school (Grades 9–12). All educational institutions, whether they be public or private, are required to adhere to national standards as set forth by the government (Marga, 2002). The higher education system includes undergraduate, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral programs, similar to the approach employed within the United States. In the majority of these higher educational levels, students may be enrolled full-time or part-time, and may include the use of some form of distance learning (Romanian National Institute of Statistics, 2011).

The length of an undergraduate or bachelor's degree program of study depends upon the specialty or major. For example, students who are enrolled in areas such as sciences, humanities, social and economic, political sciences, fine arts, and sports, are required to be registered for six semesters (3 years). Majors such as the technological sciences, engineering, technical, agriculture and forestry required 12 semesters of enrollment (6 years). The length of a master's program across all majors is 2 years; doctoral studies range from 3 to 4 years. The duration of a postdoctoral program is 1 year.

In contrast to some other European countries, the majority of master's and doctoral studies may include both traditional and online modalities for coursework. If students do not choose to pursue a college degree, these students have the option to enroll for applied specialized educational programs to equip them to fill such jobs as mechanics, hairdressers, nurse assistants, and others. These specialized programs typically last for two semesters but may be longer depending of the specific area of specialization (Eurostat, 2011). However, teachers practicing in such areas often receive less teaching preparation than those in other European countries (Romania-Insider, 2018), particularly in the area of best teaching practices or hands-on experience. Areas such as special education and students from disadvantaged groups are underserved in Romania (UNESCO, 2017).

During the academic year 2014–2015, there were 3.73 million children and students enrolled in schools; 50% of these students were male, and 70% of learners were enrolled in schools located within urban areas (Romanian National Institute of Statistics, 2011). Additionally, more than 95% of students studied in public schools, leaving only some 5% enrolled in private schools. Romanian educational statistics reports also show that during the academic year of 2014–2015, there were 258,149 registered teachers working in public schools, the majority of whom were female (76%).

According to the National Statistics Institute, the most common areas of study include business, management, law, engineering, and construction (National Institute of Statistics, 2018). Unfortunately, the major of “education” itself is not one of the more common or popular areas of studies, due to low teachers' wages (Romanian National Institute of Statistics, 2011). A full-time Romanian teacher earns approximately 120 RON (191 EUR, or about U.S.\$225 at the 2018 exchange rate) per month, which is the same rate as the Romanian minimum wage. Romania is ranked among the last in educational pay when compared to other European countries (Ardelean, 2014).

LEGAL FRAMEWORKS OF DISTANCE LEARNING IN ROMANIA

There are three general legislative frameworks that currently support the development of distance education in Romania: the *Law on Education of 1995*; the *Law of Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions*; and the *Diploma Recognition of 1993* (Eurostat, 2018). In 1998, additional legislation related to distance education was passed by the Romanian National Legislature (the bicameral Parliament of Romania, consisting of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate). That legislation included the *Statute of Open Distance Education*, which established support for the systematic development of distance education within universities and nonprofit educational institu-

tions (The World Bank, 2016). The Statute also required by law that universities that design online courses also establish distance education centers and to submit all newly developed distance courses for approval through their various University Senates. Once a distance course is validated and accredited through the process established by the Statute, the course is then deployed online and, finally, nationally announced using mass-media-based communication.

The slower development of e-Learning in Romanian higher education is mainly due to factors such as internal resistance to change, financial dynamics, and unqualified decision makers (Goldback & Hamza-Lup, 2017). Goldback and Hamza-Lup (2017) report that only some 15% of faculty in higher education are willing to attend professional development in order to learn the effective implementation of e-Learning tools in their classrooms. The majority of faculty, according to this source, are resistant to using technology because of insufficient knowledge and information regarding the importance of e-learning in higher education.

Financial constraints and unqualified decision makers are other reasons for why e-learning has developed slower than in some other European countries. As is widely understood, successful e-learning implementation requires strong background knowledge of online instructional design principles, skills which the majority of Romanian administrators do not yet possess. On the other hand, the governmental organizations in Romania have demonstrated rapid progress in obtaining e-learning technologies with significant amount of financial support received from EU grants (Gabureanu, 2004; Goldbach & Hamza-Lup, 2017).

E-LEARNING IN ROMANIA

Early Steps Toward e-Learning in Romania

Factors in the development of educational initiatives Romania in the early 1990s, particu-

larly the integration of computer-based hardware, reflected similar elements documented within the bulk of distance learning literature. Fodorean (2016), for example, defined distance learning as a “flexible form of education that gives students the opportunity to choose the place, space, and timing of benefit from educational services; to study individually and independently and benefit from instructional support/non-instructional respectively—the tutorial system” (p. 369). Distance learning is also defined as “one form of self-education which provides opportunities for those people who are unable for different reasons to attend conventional institutions” (p. 1). Additionally, distance learning was shown to be cost effective and, for some individuals, a facility for enhancing their career opportunities (Asandului, & Ceobanu, 2008).

During Romania’s transition period into the use of online distance learning for education, a variety of national and international Romanian foundations began to pilot a number of technology-based projects intended to increase the number of computers within Romanian schools. The increase in access to computers laid the groundwork for implementation of online e-Learning programs. In 1998, the Babes-Bolyai University set up the *Center for Continuous Training and Distance Learning*, which was designed for the support of distance learning courses at Babes-Bolyai in the Colleges of Psychology, Educational Sciences, History, and Administrative Studies. Such initiatives established the framework for e-Learning in Romanian higher education and, more importantly, made possible the education for anyone within Romania, regardless of their physical location (Chis, Lacurezeanu, Nistor, Pop, & Tirca, 2009).

Barriers faced by such Romanian distance education systems as they emerged within Romania’s historical and cultural background were examined in a study by Vasiu, Andone, and Robu (2008). After the fall of the country’s communist regime in 1989, the Romanian government required a number of changes to its labor force, including new methods of

education and increased training opportunities for organizational employees. In 1997 Andrei Marga, the Romanian Minister of Education, implemented modified curricula, school programs, and a textbook update initiative for the Romanian school system. Marga sought to “improve the quality of learning, teaching, and the whole organization and management of education” (p. 124) through these initiatives.

One result of these initiatives was the demand placed upon universities to increase student recruitment. Limited funding, however, continued to be a challenge for existing educational institutions, which have been operating within the traditional educational modality for decades. Many Romanian youth were required to secure jobs before enrolling in a university program, or to attempt to find employment while simultaneously taking courses. Balancing students’ economic employment needs while simultaneously being required to attend regularly scheduled face-to-face classes at an educational institution was difficult, and pressure to implement a different modality of education emerged. Thus, the Romanian education system began to consider how e-Learning could be leveraged to address such issues facing students wishing to extend their education.

While Romanian online distance education may have helped alleviate some of the competing demands of work and school experienced by students, the implementation of the earliest Romanian e-Learning classes and programs also produced new challenges. Many of the difficulties experienced when e-Learning was first introduced mirror those experienced by many other countries, including the United States, such as challenging traditional views of education held by university personnel, lack of qualified e-learning personnel to coordinate online programs, a reduction in the number of teachers remaining in the profession (e.g., many qualified Romanian personnel left teaching and moved to positions in the private sector because of the difference in pay rates), and lack of funding sources to purchase Internet connectivity and acquire other modern, com-

puter-based communication equipment (Asandului, & Ceobanu, 2008).

Acceptance and Perceptions of E-Based Systems in Romania

Some researchers today contend that online education and promotion of such programs within Romania remains within an “infancy period” compared with other Western countries (Wang & Sun, 2010, p. 20). Wang and Sun also state that there is limited data available for online providers to even develop advertising strategies for such programs (p. 21). In the last decade, Romania has developed the technological infrastructure and resources to facilitate e-Learning, which is implied by the rapid growth in the number of Internet users. In another concomitant measure, Romanian consumers hold favorable opinions about online advertising, and prefer an open and free market economy (cf. Petrovici & Marinov, 2007). Romanians also tend to perceive online advertising “as informative, entertaining, and fulfilling a social role” (p. 4). Romania, though a relatively small country, has made demonstrable efforts in the transition to a modern and democratic system in spite of changes endured arising from relics of its past communist regime.

The 2007 accession of Romania to the European Union provided advantages to the country that also affected Romania’s overall capabilities to successfully develop and deploy e-Learning programs. For example, Romania has been able to use monetary incentives and funding mechanisms to develop its technological infrastructure, including Internet access (Demirbilek, 2010). The number of Romanian Internet users increased 54% within the country during this period (Petrovici & Marinov, 2007). This high-growth statistic not only shows the raw connectivity growth figures, but also implies a generally positive disposition toward Internet-based approaches within the country.

Romania now experiences multiple examples of this positive disposition toward online

connectivity. For example, one-third of Internet users in Romania now use online stores for purchasing at least some of their goods (Eurostat, 2018). Online advertising within Romania has also increased, with the Romanian online advertising market estimated at 8.4 million euros in 2007, up 52.8% from 5.5 million euros in 2006 (Ying & Shaojing, 2010, 2018). Some examples of online advertising include banking, personal care, information technology, automobiles, telecom services, real estate, and insurance sales. The sum of these measures argues that there is a generally positive, active, and growing group of online users in Romania who are developing fundamental required skills for successful online learning experiences.

Research on E-Learning in Romania

The first research project related to the use of computers in Romanian schools was conducted in 1990 under the auspices of The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and in collaboration with the Institute of Education Sciences (Fodorean, 2016). The project provided technology equipment for six Romanian school labs and also organized two national conferences relating to the importance of technology in education. During the years 1992-1996, the Soros Foundation equipped 314 schools with computers in four main cities in Romania (Bucharest, Iasi, Cluj, and Timisoara). Satellite antennas were set up for communication between schools within these four main cities. The Soros Foundation-funded project cost approximately 4 million U.S. dollars, with some of these funds used in training teachers of these schools how to use UNIX so that they might be better able to support students (UNIX was considered a key technology at that time applicable to the distance learning context in Romania). During the same period of time, a non-governmental organization, Educating for an Open Society, provided 110 computers to Romanian public schools along with intensive training courses for teachers in

how to use information and communication technology (ICT). These projects were aimed to improve instructors' skills on how to use and implement modern e-Learning technologies in schools (Gabureanu, 2004; Istrate, 2007).

Romanian educational institutions were relatively quick in shifting from simply possessing computer technology to making use of such technology to access e-based content (Hutanu, Ileana, & Achim, 2004). Some studies have been undertaken to examine how online and mobile training in Romania was accomplished in the early years of the new millennium. Demirbilek (2010), for example, examined attitudes and perceptions of adult trainers on mobile games, the extent of use and distribution of mobile devices in adult education, and the preferences toward game genres by adult educators. Demirbilek (2010) noted that adult Romanian educators often display a willingness to continue learning about the most effective methods for deploying technology devices in courses. Demirbilek also found that adult educators are more inclined to implement mobile technologies in their classrooms if the implemented content is based upon the educators' own suggestions and recommendations, not simply those of arising from external curriculum developers. Romanian adult educators were found to prefer: (a) software applications suitable with Windows Mobile OS or other operating systems; (b) graphically interfaced tools; (c) synchronized tools; (d) game genres (puzzle, quizzes, matching, and simulation); (e) game play on the topic of language learning, communication skills, culture themes, computer literacy, or learn to solve problems; (f) open source applications preferred for future improvements; and (g) commercial games are more appreciated in terms of quality (Demirbilek, 2010). Additionally, Demirbilek argued that curriculum planners should take into consideration those technologies most preferred by adult Romanian educators and include those specific technologies into new online curriculum proposals, as this may assist Romanian students in learn-

ing more easily and with greater enjoyment. Romanian students' perceptions of lifelong learning may also be improved through this approach.

The “Official” Start and Early History of E-Learning Initiatives within Romania

The implementation of distance education or e-Learning in Romania officially began in 1995, but the lack of financial resources within the country slowed down the process from that point forward. The first Romanian distance education system was established in 1996 and was funded by the nations of Poland and Hungary; the name of the project was The Assistance for Restructuring Their Economies (Hutanu & Achim, 2004). In 1996, several regional distance education centers were created throughout Romania: The Centre at the University of Bucharest; The Centre at the “Lucian Blaga” University in Sibiu; The Centre at the West University in Timisoara; and The Centre of the CODECS Foundation in Bucharest. This was also the “dawn” of the creation of private and state universities opening their own distance education centers in Romania.

Due to lack of collaboration with the existing centers at the national level, the period between 1990–1996 saw stagnation (and some crises) in Romanian online learning. The Assistance for Restructuring Their Economies established an academic consortium in distance education called the Trans-Regional Network in Distance, which promoted common quality standards aimed to support all distance education centers across the country (Hutanu & Achim, 2004). Additionally, a national organization to coordinate the quality and the standards for the distance education centers was established, the National Council for Academic Education and Accreditation (Consiliul Național de Evaluare Academică și Acreditare a Instituțiilor de Învățământ Superior, or NCAEA). Trans-Regional Network in Distance and the National Council for Academic Education and Accreditation activities, in

addition to other existing distance education centers and events, are regulated under the *Romanian Law of Education* (no. 84/1995).

The Assistance for Restructuring Their Economies also funded another Romanian national program, *Tempus TEMIS*, in 1998–1999. As a result of this project, seven additional distance education centers were established within the country of Romania. All seven distance education centers were equipped with modern technology-based equipment and the materials necessary for supporting a successful distance learning center. Project leaders at each site were established to assist in the training of personnel and staff at the various centers (Vasiu et al., 2008).

In 1996, the Tempus Drum Program, using funding secured from the European Union, established the Open Access Multimedia Learning Center to promote and implement new teaching methods using technology (UNESCO, 2017). Objectives of the Tempus Drum Program included: (a) promotion of new technologies to create a flexible and education; (b) implementation of the new technologies within existing universities and institutions; (c) development of new courses, including support materials such as videos and audiotapes; and (d) development of new higher education e-learning courses that were in conformity to European Union standards. As result, the center, with the support of these EU funds, designed and deployed 18 distance education courses through the Tempus Drum Program (Vasiu et al., 2008). The Tempus Drum Program elevated distance learning and its associated Centers as a priority on the part of both educational and political leaders.

During the academic year of 1998–1999, Romanian schools began to emphasize the use of technology within instruction to both teach and support students, as well as to establish a fuller understanding of student audiences attending such classes. In the same year, two large programs were established: the Sistemul Educational Informatizat Education IT-based System and RoEduNet, a Romanian educational research network, also a member of the

European research and education network, GÉANT. The creation of these programs furthered Romanian online learning potential, and additional public and private institutions were spurred to design even more projects supporting the use of technology within public education systems in Romania.

One such example, implemented by the University of Alba Iulia, was named the Integrated Environment Learning for Distance Education (Hutanu, Ileana, & Achim, 2004). The Integrated Environment Learning for Distance Education is structured across three distinct learning modules: a communication environment, a course maker or designer module, and an evaluation/assessment module. All modules are designed to support students, faculty, and course designers working within the distance education setting. Hutanu et al. (2004) found that the majority of Romanian course instructors implement this type of program within their distance teaching efforts, but others nevertheless remain “demoralized” and overwhelmed with the approach, primarily due to a lack of training. (As is common with countries making large economic shifts from older economic models, Romania continued to struggle with schools and institutions with insufficient technological tools.) This situation could only be addressed by having students enroll in traditional and blended courses, rather than fully online courses. In spite of the challenges, Romanian students expressed their support of a blended distance education approach. A study conducted by Asandului and Ceobanu (2008) found that more than 60% of college students preferred blended courses, with only 10% of students choosing to register for fully online distance learning courses or programs. Asandului and Ceobanu (2008) also reported that college students wish to have more technologically advanced training and opportunities for implementing technology within their distance and blended courses.

By 2000, many Romanian national and international organizations supported new initiatives aimed to integrate educational activities using technology into schools’ curricula.

For example, Procter & Gamble, in partnership with IBM, MER, ProTV (Romanian local television), and the Save the Children Fund selected 160 schools to receive technology tools, based on a competition of proposals (Istrate, 2007). The partnership provided approximately 800 computers (5 computers for each school) across Romania, further contributing to the infrastructure required to establish and sustain online learning.

A shift from the deployment of technology-based tools in schools to the access to e-Content and to virtual learning was noted by Istrate (2007). One example is a project called Take Part Two, designed to “provide young people the opportunity to take active and responsible roles in European multicultural societies, by creating an ICT based platform for collaboration, exchanging opinions and decision-making on local and global issues” (p. 3). This project was also implemented in other European counties, including Denmark and the United Kingdom. Istrate provided a list of programs developed to support high education institutions, including the Romanian Education Network (RoEduNet), the IT Based System, the eLearning Romania Programme, and the Knowledge Economy Project. All these programs contain a strong educational component in addition to theory-based student and faculty support for online learning settings. An academic database for universities from which professors and personnel can access students’ data (e.g., grades, attendance figures, etc.) was also implemented. Students’ personal information in this database, while captured, is accessible only by university personnel; other student data, such as the national exams scores, may be viewed by other schools and universities.

The Romanian Ministry of Education is currently implementing changes to student assessment by providing the online assessment options and has initiated “e-lessons” for a variety of subjects. For example, the “e-lessons” are implemented at the high school level using the framework of Romania’s Computerized Educational System (Asandului & Ceobanu,

2008). Romania's Computerized Educational System has also assisted the move toward online learning by introducing e-learning in the Romanian educational system through the use of electronic tools.

Romanian E-Learner Student Demographics

Some 95% of Romanian students enrolled in online distance education courses also work full-time or part-time, 70% within their area of study (Vasiu et al., 2008). About 60% of online students are between the ages of 25–30, and with only a small percent (about 5%) aged between 18–20. The majority of students enrolled in online education are male (80%). The dropout rate is, remarkably, only 25%, a very low rate compared to other online distance programs worldwide. This rate, while low, is in part because some course instructors, following a blended modality for their courses, require occasional face-to-face meetings each semester, and some employers are not willing to accommodate this requirement for employees, forcing students to withdraw from blended modality distance courses.

The fact that only 31% of students by 2002 in Romanian higher education have taken an online course may arguably provide evidence of insufficient accessibility of such courses (Vasiu et al., 2008). The majority of students examined by Vasiu and colleagues found that 66% preferred blended learning, with only 10% of students preferring fully online distance learning. This could potentially be the result of insufficient faculty training in developing and deploying fully online courses, including support and encouragement of learners studying in the online environment.

Romanian Distance Education Institutions

Romania currently is home to four major institutions that have developed online education departments and make use of current technological methodologies within their courses.

We next briefly introduce each of these institutions.

First, the Centre for Resources, Documentation, Information and Services for Open Distance Learning (CREDIS) is a distance education department established in 1994 by the University of Bucharest (<https://en.uni-buc.ro/>). CREDIS uses the identical curriculum and materials as traditional schools, specializing in 15 areas of study. The Center makes use of CD-ROMs, e-books, audio-video tapes, websites, and virtual laboratories within their online courses. CREDIS student assessment is accomplished formatively via technology-based tools, such as electronic portfolios.

Second, the National School for Political and Administrative Studies is an example of a post high school educational system using the distance education modality (<http://www.insse.ro/cms/en>). It was established in 1991 as a postgraduate program, following the model of the schools of governance in France, Belgium, Great Britain, and the United States. The rules and regulations for National School for Political and Administrative Studies admission and examinations are similar to those of a traditional educational program.

Third, the University Politehnica of Bucharest, has implemented a variety of projects in the field of e-learning. The most important is the Socrates-Minerva project, "Romanian-European eUniversity" (RE2U), launched in October 2002 (RE2U, 2018). RE2U (which can be seen at <http://www.elearning.ro/re2u-romanian-european-euniversity>) is designed to promote an informed, critical use of ICT to support the innovative developments of the Romanian higher education system. The project also aims to develop a Romanian virtual university based on innovative learning methodologies and emerging ICTs.

Fourth, the Babes-Bolyai University (BBU) in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, is a state institution of higher education that developed the Center for Continuous Training and Distance Learning in 1998, offering online distance learning courses for psychology and educational sciences, history and philosophy, and political

and administrative Studies (Universitatea Babeş-Bolyai din Cluj-Napoca, 2018). Babeş-Bolyai University is a university that aims to provide the best distance learning education opportunities but does not seek to replace the traditional face-to-face classroom.

This brief overview of some of the major distance and online education efforts in Romania clearly reflect that distance learning within the country remains in an “emerging” stage but has nevertheless made great strides in a relatively short amount of time (Chis et al., 2002). Although much work remains to be done, solid accomplishments in infrastructure, technology tools, and the development of a skilled base of educators trained in online educational methods point toward a growing online education movement in Romania for the 21st century.

THOUGHTS ON DISTANCE EDUCATION EFFORTS IN ROMANIA

The European Union defines e-learning as “the use of new multimedia technologies and the Internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services, as well as remote exchanges and collaboration” (UNESCO, 2017, p. 17). As a new official member of the European Union, Romania must carefully take heed to align with decisions made in accordance with European standards (i.e., EU standards developed in Brussels, Belgium and Strasbourg, France, the twin capitals of the EU) concerning e-Learning. The EU’s stated goal is to accelerate the development of e-Learning for students in higher education, including Romania, to achieve an “informational society through innovative educational methods” (p. 3).

Unfortunately, Romania, like any country emerging from a large national economic and politic transformation, encounters numerous challenges related to the implementation of modern e-learning systems, and there remains a great need for additional research to examine the efficacy of the applied uses of e-learning at

the higher education level. As of 2006, Asandului and Ceobanu (2008) reported a high number of Romanian institutions taking part in distance education efforts, including 107 tertiary education institutions, 770 faculty members, and 716,464 students enrolled in the 2005/2006 academic year (Bucharest, Iasi, Cluj, and Timisoara together held 46.10% of tertiary education institutions and 59.37% of the students enrolled in 2005/2006 academic year). This is a somewhat surprising statistic, given the short time in which such achievements have been made.

There are both advantages and disadvantages for online learning in a country such as Romania which has only recently by historical standards undergone such significant cultural, economic, and political transformations. One main advantage is the flexibility of online learning and the potential cost effectiveness of such systems, if properly designed and deployed. Additionally, since higher education has become a global reality, students can now achieve a “world orientation” by participating in online courses with students from different geographic regions. Online courses also benefit students, in that these courses, by their very nature, require students to possess fundamental technological skills; those technological skills provide advantages to students who are competing with others for jobs that require increasing amounts of technology-based skills.

Looking at the literature, it is also apparent that e-learning in Romania requires greater attention from educational leaders and the Romanian Ministry of Education if Romania is to meet the EU’s declared standards for online education. In order to develop distance education institutions in Romania that meet these standards, universities will be required to overcome numerous challenges; for example, building a nationally approved standardized training program for all online educators to ensure that their online teaching methodologies are at the highest standards, and that course content and materials conform to Romanian national regulations.

As in most countries, there is not unanimous agreement on the value of online education. According to the report *Equity in the Romanian Higher Education System* (UEFIS-CDI, 2013), distance education has a negative connotation in Romania, mostly promoted by media sources, because of the existence of low-quality distance instruction. Because online distance education is still a relatively new undertaking in Romania, there is limited research to demonstrate the effectiveness of the different online learning approaches that can be undertaken at the national level. Nevertheless, in spite of some perceived negative connotations, Romanian universities in general continue to view distance education as a fundamental component of the future of instruction, one that will increase access to higher education for greater and more diverse groups of Romanian learners.

Unsurprisingly, a key challenge for distance education in Romania is the lack of funding for implementing online programs. Funding issues not only impact infrastructure, but also the equally important factor of online teacher preparation for successfully implementing successful online courses and programs. School administrators, for example, cannot afford to purchase the newest educational software required to deploy online courses. Faculty and university personnel are not yet fully prepared for successful online teaching because they do not possess the appropriate skills to perform and address specific objectives related to the curriculum within the online modality. Retaining a traditional mentality of education that presupposes a face-to-face setting for education, these instructors are less confident in the online teaching space and are therefore less likely to invest in the modality. Standing in contradiction is the fact is that, in high schools with well-trained personnel for online instruction, distance-taught students perform better academically than in traditional Romanian classes, and also possess outstanding results in national and international contests, and educational Olympiads (Fodorean, 2016).

Romania continues to implement many national projects designed to improve the quality of online education training for instructors, with the goal of providing distance education at all levels of the national education system. Even with the undeniable challenges faced by all countries undergoing this process, online education in Romania has become a complement to educators in the last few decades due to an increased understanding of how distance learning-based tools can enhance the work of developing distance-based courses.

Another key challenge to online education in Romania is teachers' attitudes toward the online educational modality. Istrate (2007) stated that most teachers and administrators feel overwhelmed in the online context and often complain about the quality of the software for implementing distance education, as well as the lack of training for implementing such tools. Due to lack of training, the "fear of the unknown" and, perhaps, a lack of initiative, some teachers remain entrenched in the traditional face-to-face model of instruction (Gabureanu, 2004). In spite of the fact that most school administrators still feel optimistic about the change witnessed in some teacher's attitudes toward online education, lack of funding and additional strong legislation supporting distance education continues to exert resistance toward change. It is well known that specialized training of school personnel and university faculty is crucial for effective implementation of online education; further complicating this factor in Romania is the ongoing shortage of modern technology required to support such training. It would be wise for school administrators to consider restructuring school curricula to make them more efficient and flexible for all students, including online education options. A more flexible approach toward the Romanian curriculum would also ease the process of student evaluation (Andronic, Andronic, Doval, Lepadatu, Negulescu, & Raulea, 2012), making it a doubly worthwhile national goal to pursue.

The rate of growth of e-learning in Romanian universities is increasing, but nevertheless

remains insufficiently strong, affected by the rigidity of the traditional curriculum, as well as the reluctance of instructors to consider supporting online education modalities. To overcome challenges, Andronic et al. (2012) have provided a list of suggestions and recommendations for improving distance education programs in Romania. They suggest that: (1) the Romanian Ministry of Education should implement new laws supporting within schools the embedding of online programs alongside traditional methods; (2) higher education institutions should design new courses and training opportunities for preparing future educators and school professionals in the technologies required to support and sustain high-quality online learning experiences; and (3) students themselves should become more involved in the online learning process and learn how to demonstrate to the world the skills they have acquired in this setting.

Romania's recent interactions with various European and international institutions often result in valuable collaborations that propel greater implementation of online education within the country. Romanian educators and school administrators should seek out and participate in such collaborations to assist in the development of native Romanian online programs. Romania, as stated earlier, can also further its progress toward additional quality online learning programs through a stronger legislation foundation initiated within the Romanian government. Nevertheless, Romania should not strictly adopt a "wait and see" mentality while government develops further legislation. Individual schools, institutions, teachers, and students should all be more proactive and positive attitude toward online education if the country is to keep pace with other countries' ongoing efforts in this key and growing area of education.

Romanian universities, companies, schools, and private intuitions should all be both individually and collectively improving the quality of online education, emphasizing its practical aspects and its links with the realities of this century's technology-oriented labor market.

Romanian policymakers should create more flexible legislation that attracts international investors to invest in online Romanian education. Specific training for developing highly competent educators for the online setting needs to be more aggressively implemented, and to a wider audience of educators, both those already in the system, and those newly entering the profession. The Ministry of Education of Romania can play an important role by assisting in making the teaching profession more competitive and more financially rewarding, especially for new graduates who are more comfortable with the technologies needed to support successful online education initiatives.

And lest we forget, it must always be kept at the forefront of all professionals working in Romanian online education that the *quality* of their developed courses is key to any nation's online education efforts. In the end, Romania needs graduates who are able to say that they learned what they needed to learn, enjoyed it while they did, and can further the online learning movement through first-hand testimonials. Romanian online education has a bright future if the many factors mentioned in this article coalesce to achieve this view of education for every person wishing to be educated in Romania.

NOTES

1. It is a common mistake to conflate the "European Union" with the "Eurozone." The European Union is a political union of nations within Europe, but not all EU countries use the Euro for their official currencies. Currently (2018), eight other EU countries besides Romania similarly are outside the Eurozone: Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Hungary, Poland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.
2. The EU country with the second highest relative poverty rate is Spain at 22.2%, followed by Greece (22.1%), Bulgaria and Estonia (21.8% each), Latvia (21.2%), Portugal (19.5%), Croatia and Italy (19.4% each), and Lithuania (19.1%).

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