

Romanian Public Sector Innovation from an Educational Perspective in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT: The article addresses the issue of the innovation capacity in the Romanian public sector from an educational perspective in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this article is to present how the public education sector has adapted to the new pandemic times and managed to continue the education and training process in the midst of the pandemic. This article was based on the illustration of the changes that occurred in the education system, both at European and national level, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the fact that the education system sought new solutions to carry out the education and training process and adapted to the new changes, it survived the impact of the pandemic.

KEYWORDS: innovation, public sector, education, digitalization

Introduction

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, both on a national and European (and global) level, the education systems underwent major changes (Rotaru 2020, 71-82). Thus, educational institutions have moved from face-to-face classroom activities to online activities. Of course, these changes have brought both advantages and disadvantages.

Among the advantages of going online is that people who have access to education can be "in two places at once" (both in the virtual classroom and at home). Another idea that is facilitated by online education is that students are "together but separate". The disadvantages of going online are that people can be distracted from the educational process, and the teacher's interaction with them encounters a communication barrier that can be characterized by a lack of physical interaction and a lack of close eye contact.

The pandemic has profoundly affected education and exacerbated already existing social inequalities, and the closure of schools has visibly disrupted the education process for students (UNICEF 2020, 4). It is precisely for this reason that the Romanian administration wants to become as innovative as possible and remove the educational barriers that have been created in the wake of the pandemic.

Theoretical aspects

To better understand the innovation of the education system, it is necessary to highlight and define certain concepts.

The public sector - is a necessity for any state economy and performs the following functions: the allocation function, which emphasizes the state's involvement in the market mechanism to determine the type and quality of a public service (Apgar and Brown 1987, 292); the income distribution function (refers to how the state is involved in the market through the process of adjusting the income and wealth

accumulated from economic transactions) and the stabilization function (ensures and protects public and private economic transactions). The public sector has a huge impact on each and every one of us, as it is a daily and undeniable presence (Miroiu and Rădoi 2002, 50-100) and it relates to the totality of decisions taken by the powers of the state as well as the ways in which these decisions evolve. The public sector is present in the economic life under many aspects such as public (state) education, public goods, public expenditure, public interest, public services, etc.

Education is a psycho-social activity, which is designed at the level of pedagogical goals and which aims to achieve the function of human formation-development (Cristea 1998, 186-190).

Innovation is the commercial or industrial application of something new, a new product, process or method of production, a new market or source of supply, a new form of business or financial organization (Schumpeter 1993, 353-363). The trend today, with regard to the innovation process, is a trend towards greater integration of technical, organizational and social innovation (Popescu 2016, 15).

Law 324/2003 defines innovation as an activity aimed at generating, assimilating, and exploiting the results of research and development in the economic and social sphere (Law 324/2003 approving Government Ordinance No. 57/2002 on scientific research and technological development 2003).

Innovation is a broad and complex concept, and as far as the education system is concerned, it refers to the use of new technological and methodological research and the replacement of outdated standards. Innovation in the education system emphasizes the development of educational processes so that the activities carried out within the educational process are learned in a quick and enjoyable way by those who have access to education.

As mentioned above, new barriers have recently appeared that make the educational process more difficult, but this does not mean that the original barriers have disappeared, on the contrary, they have become more important. Such barriers can be represented by educational conflict, surrounding noise, the effect of liveliness, the theory of perseverance, stereotypes, the lack of harmony between verbal and non-verbal communication, the incorrect use of paralanguage, as well as emotional blockages and others (Lesenciuc 2017, 22-23).

Innovative education system solutions from an EU perspective

Due to the pandemic situation, the education system has undergone a multitude of changes. This is why the European Union has stressed the importance of the Digitalization Strategy. According to the European Commission, the aim of the EU's digital strategy is to make this transformation work for citizens (European Commission 2019). At the same time, the strategy has also acquired new aspects concerning the digitalization tools used, because when human interactions are limited and restrictions are imposed, all activities, regardless of their nature, become digitalized. Digitalization is the process through which information undergoes a transformation into a digital format.

The European Union supports Member States in their efforts to provide citizens with the best education and training and also contributes to language teaching and learning by encouraging the mobility of students, trainees, teachers and young people.

To achieve the objectives set out in the education and training framework, the EU implements policies in various sectors, including educational institutions; vocational education and training; higher education; adult education and early childhood education and care.

The European Union has created a set of values on education, training, and delivery for the pandemic period, because it is absolutely necessary that during the

acceleration and development of digital change, education systems adapt. The European Union's values on training and educational attainment are:

- a) Digital education must respect the principle of social inclusion and be a strategic objective for all education and training institutions;
- b) In an era of digitalization, education must also become digitalized;
- c) Ensuring access to digital education for different categories of people;
- d) Digital education should play a key role in increasing equality and inclusion;
- e) All teachers must have digital skills;
- f) Digital literacy is essential for life in a digitalized world.

Investing in high quality education and training creates various benefits for both citizens and economic agents in society, and in order to achieve educational outcomes, it is necessary that the resources allocated to the educational process are adequate and appropriate.

The European Commission has adopted two initiatives that will strengthen education and help the European Union recover from the coronavirus crisis (European Commission 2020). The two initiatives regard the creation of a European education area and the creation of an action plan for digital education.

The creation of a European education area means that by 2025 there should be much closer cooperation between Member States so that all people benefit from quality education and training, and *the creation of an action plan for digital education* means mapping out a high-performance digital education ecosystem.

An innovative solution to ensure continuity in education and training activities refers to accessing online materials such as: online platforms, EU funded projects, Stay at Home Digital Toolkit, SELFIE - free tool to help schools make the most of digital technologies, Coding from home.

According to Save the Children (2020a), financial pressures on parents have led to an increased risk of child poverty, as follows:

Table 1. Child poverty in the European Union based on COVID-19

	Estimated number of children at risk of poverty	Percentage of children at risk of poverty in the total population of children
Sweden	200.000	10%
Spain	2.100.000	24%
Finland	112.000	11%
Italy	2.100.000	20%
Romania	1.300.000	34,6%
Kosovo	approx. 125.000	20,7%
Albania	approx. 160.000	20%

Source: Save The Children International (2020a)

Innovative education system solutions applied on a national level

Romanian education can be considered a European education due to certain aspects, among which we can mention: the quality of the value system it promotes; the type of educational institutions, as well as its legislative basis (Tudorică 2004, 43). The preparation for Romania's accession to the European Union involved making the education system of our country compatible with the European education system.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the educational process has largely taken place in the online environment, where Romanian educational institutions have encountered

difficulties regarding lack of predictability; existence of a marked digital divide between educational establishments; insufficiently developed digital skills for the efficient organization of the teaching process in the online environment and reduced access to technology (Ministry of Education and Research 2021).

Currently, the integrated approach to all aspects of digitalization of public services, including education, is ensured by the provisions of the National Strategy for the Digital Agenda Romania 2020.

The objectives of the Strategy for the digitalization of education are in line with European initiatives and programs on the role of digital technology in the development of education and training systems (Ministry of Education and Research 2021) and are represented by:

- European Commission Communication on the new Action Plan for Digital Education 2021-2027 - "Resetting Education and Training for the Digital Age";
- European Commission Communication on the creation of a European Education Area by 2025;
- New European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social equity, and resilience;
- Council Recommendation on education and training for sustainable competitiveness, social equity, and resilience;
- UNESCO Recommendation on Open Educational Resources.

The impact of online education in Romania

According to a study by Save the Children (2020b), the following issues have been identified regarding the situation in Romania:

- 47% of children used their mobile phone to take part in online courses,
- 27.2% of children had school subjects not covered during the school suspension,
- 47.5% felt bored during online classes, 32.7% felt tired, 27.1% felt angry,
- 57.4% of children said that playing games on their phone, tablet or computer was their main recreational activity,
- 54.7% of children mention internet addiction as the main threat.

According to the European Commission (2019), digital infrastructure in schools is underdeveloped, especially in rural areas. Very few schools are extremely well equipped and digitally connected. Only 14% of Romanian pupils in primary education (EU average: 35%), 16% in lower secondary education (EU average: 52%) and 31% in upper secondary education (EU average: 72%) study in such schools.

Conclusions

With the adoption of the National Strategy on the Digital Agenda, Romania has progressively integrated digital technology elements into its policies, curricula and training programs and, although major investments have been made at national level, the absence of monitoring and support mechanisms has resulted in a lack of sustainability of many of these initiatives.

The background of those receiving education and training has a significant influence on their performance, as it affects the inequality of opportunities. Even if measures have been taken to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, there is still a possibility that the move to e-learning in education will exacerbate existing inequalities.

Even though the shift to online learning and training activities has positive aspects (Rotaru 2016, 326-334), the negative ones tend to predominate through the emergence of boredom, the creation of addiction to Internet use, the use of online games, etc. Moreover, the shift to online has visibly disfavored people who do not have access to an

Internet connection tool, which leads to absenteeism caused by the inability to connect to online classes.

Even though Romania's spending on education remains among the lowest in the EU, the country has sought to become as innovative as possible in this respect and has tried to adapt to the new situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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