

# Sustainability in the Higher Educational System in Romania

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## Abstract

*Sustainable development plays an important part in the life of EU. Higher educational institutions from member states, such as Romania need to make sure that they can play their part in the promotion of sustainable development. The purpose of this article is to make light in the way universities understand their role in promoting sustainable development and also, to share light over the Romanian market and its needs in coordination with the sustainable development efforts of Romanian universities.*

**Key words:** sustainable development, sustainability, higher educational system, universities

**J.E.L. classification:** I20, I23, I25

## 1. Introduction

Defining and approaching sustainability vary depending on the vision and interest of the research. Some insist on the ecological aspects of sustainability, others on the understanding of social and economic viability. Sustainability has become one key criteria for managers and defining sustainable development is not an easy task, having to deal with arguments between what is "right" and "fair", ethical dilemmas in choosing the right path in developing an organization. The Romanian educational system has been subjected to different pressures in the last 10 years, thus its managers need to find the right path in correspondence with the guidelines of the Talloires Declaration.

## 2. Literature review

The concept of sustainability is thus an advanced approach debated in a period in which the environmental problems caused by human activity require serious and advanced solutions.

One of the most frequently cited definitions of sustainable development is the one proposed by the UN World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987, chaired by the Prime Minister of Norway, in 1987. According to the Brundtland Report, sustainable development means "*ensuring development that meets the needs of present generations, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*". (Deneş *et al*, 2011, p.5)

The concept of sustainable development has initially had its generally accepted goal, the reduction of human ecological footprint. However, as time went by promoting environmental integrity opened the door for other social values such as equity between nations, individuals and generations. Thus, time and place took an important role into accepting, promoting and maintaining economic efficiency. (Bădescu, 2011, p.7)

## 3. Research methodology

The present article aims to answer more than one research question, but all of them are centered around the research problem of identifying the defining factors for sustainable education and applying them to the Romanian educational system. The quantitative data gathered can be defined as secondary data, since it is the data gathered by the Romanian National Ministry of Education regarding the evolution of the number of students. However, the present article also aims to

underline a new research method, by developing its own approach regarding the identification of new steps in developing a plan for sustainable development for the educational system. Identifying the instruments into developing plans for sustainable development can be considered itself as a new research method designed to help educational researchers around the world.

#### 4. Defining factors of sustainable education

The goal of sustainability is to ensure sustainable development. The European Union has set its goals regarding sustainable development such as:

- limiting the negative impact of climate change and its costs;
- minimizing the negative impact over the economy, society and environment of the transport system. This system is exceptionally important for our society in order to satisfy the economic, social and environmental needs of the European citizens;
- promoting durable consumption and production models, that are not affected by major economic, social and environmental disruptions;
- promoting a sustainable health system in a way which underlines the importance of equity and improves the protection capacity against risks that may endanger the health system;
- creating a society of social inclusion- this means promoting solidarity within generations, ensuring security and increasing the quality of researchers lives as a condition for increasing individual wealth.
- promoting durable development on a large scale, ensuring that the internal and external EU policies are in accordance with sustainable development and the international agreements of the EU.

Thus, the educational system is one of the key pillars into ensuring these EU objectives are met and at the center of it is the higher educational system which has the ability to support the creation of more professionals in one area instead of another.

There are various factors to which the current literature refers to, when explaining sustainable development. These factors can be comprised such as:

**4.1. Perception** – when a sustainability project has success within an educational system such as the higher educational system there has to be a high level of acceptance especially within the institution. One of the main reasons for this is the fact that such projects need long term development, and thus working with all the people involved requires resistance to criticism or implies the capacity of explaining its importance over and over again. Another thing regarding the perceptions of such projects is the fact that most educational managers are in office for a limited period of time so the perception of the viability of the project needs to have an impact on the next educational managers as well, due to its long-term nature. (Thomas *et al*, 2012, p.2)

**4.2. Approval** – in accordance to the perception factor, the initiatives need to be supported by the administrative leaders regardless of the institution they represent. In their commitment to long term projects, the educational leaders need to agree on the future of the educational system and the way it can help achieve the E.U. goals regarding sustainable development. They also need to agree upon each higher education institution's role into putting this in practice on a long term. The Talloires Declaration stands as a bench mark of good practices between university leaders and it can help set the foundation of sustainable development within the high education system in each E.U. member states. (Deneş *et al*, 2011, p.11)

**4.3. Beneficiaries** - the sustainable development projects need to bring added value with each of their programs, and departments, administrative bodies, and each individual that is involve in the higher educational system will benefit from them. The initiatives need to have nature that is accepted by everyone regardless of the field, rather than have an image of being imposed by a certain interest group, or have a perception of being "politically correct". All state holders must empower and straighten each program in a way that benefits the haul institution.

**4.4. Compatibility** - Each higher educational institution has its own characteristics, spirits of a culture, it functions in a different era and in a different community, where individuals tend to have different attitudes and aspirations. Many higher educational institutions have their own history and their own organization culture. Thus, each educational organization has its own "personality", its

own story and should try to feel in the ecology of higher education. Therefore, each initiative regarding sustainable development should be based on the identity of the institution.

**4.5. Involvement** – As it has been explained before, the sustainable development initiative in the higher educational system needs the support of all its states holders. When we refer to an educational organization's states holders, we talk about its managers, local and central authorities and nevertheless student organizations and other sponsors, as well. All of them should contribute into making good publicity for the new policies and initiatives. Also, if an initiative should fail, all of them should assume accountability. Thus, communities should be extremely involved in the life of higher educational institution, supporting their cause whatever it is.

**4.6. Legality** – An academic initiative regarding sustainable development should have a legal basis. This legal basis should first and foremost be in accordance with the countries loss, the government public policies, and, nevertheless it should be in accordance with the educational organizations status and by-laws. If one of these legal conditions isn't mate, it will be rejected by the authorities or it will lose its academic credibility.

**4.7. Accomplishments** – The initiative regarding sustainable development should be successful in gathering the necessary resources and also help the conservation process. When we talk about the necessary resources we refer to: grants, scholarships, contracts, state founding, public interest, recognition, and support from regional, international leaders. (Deneş *et al*, 2011, p.8)

## 5. The implementation of sustainable education projects

There are important areas where implementing and the institutionalization of a sustainability project in a university can have an impact:

- A. *Mission*
- B. *Strategic plan*
- C. *Budget*
- D. *Orientation*
- E. *Campus map and signage*
- F. *Construction policies*
- G. *Purchasing policies*
- H. *Student life*
- I. *The life of the residence*
- J. *Experience of the first year of student*
- K. *Curriculum review*
- L. *Partnership with the community*
- M. *Workforce development*

Before talking about implementing sustainable development initiative, it is mandatory to understand the role of higher education within the process of sustainable development in a society:

- the higher educational system has a limited role in educating students, by supporting them in their quest to gain knowledge, and by this they choose which type of information they provide to them, so that they live in the complex world of economic, social, and the environmental interactions. Thus, while being limited by the way that they cannot control how each individual will act accordingly, universities can choose their curriculum and the information provided, so that their students don't necessarily take advantage of the markets and society generally.
- Universities need to identify technical and social solutions in order to cope with the challenges presented by the development of sustainability. These solutions should be used as guidelines for future long-term projects.
- Universities should assume the position of catalysts when it comes to education, beyond their barrier of institutional pride, exchanging knowledge and ideas between themselves, but also with local communities, business communities, governments and other authorities.
- Universities should promote continuous improvement when it comes to the impact, their activity has upon the environment, the economy, and society.

Thus, the most important thing in the life of a higher education organization is being played but its curriculum, due to the fact that it can help shape the information students acquire, the way their student's life is being organized, and also the way the universities objectives are being achieved. (Thomas et.al., 2012, p.12)

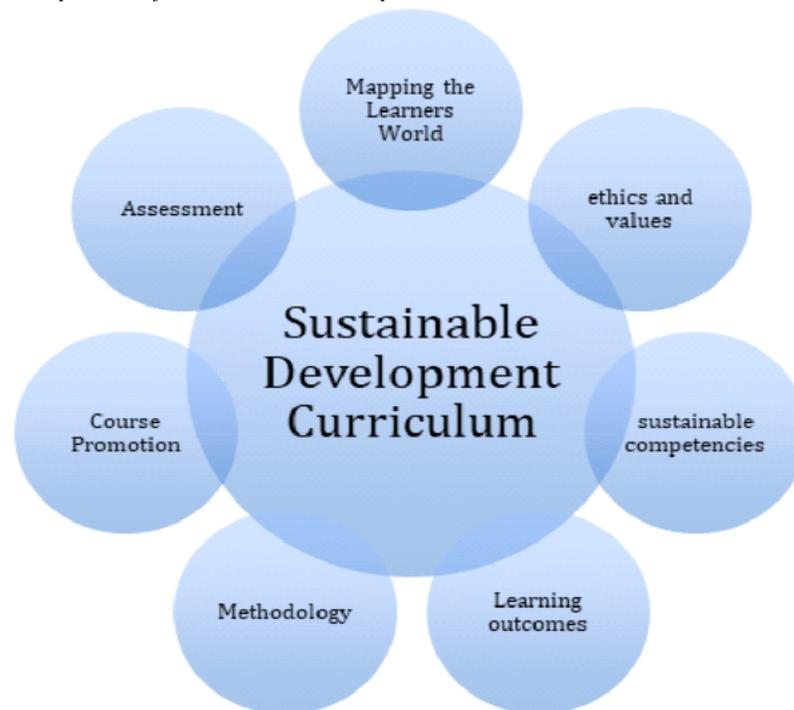
A well-designed curriculum can be developed over a clear vision of what the university wants to contribute to the sustainable development of a society. In this regard, a proper curriculum:

- should have clear purposes that reflect the national public policies in education, and the path where the government states its necessities regarding its labor workforce need.
- should promote the development of all individuals (staff and students) from an intellectual, personal, social and physical point of view.
- should set high expectations for everyone involved, from staff to students and nevertheless states holders.
- should to identify new knowledge, skills, attitudes and personal attributes. In this regard, universities their curriculum should support research and development.
- should be supported by clear values, both ethical and practical ones.
- should help each student in making a huge progress based on experiences, both inside and outside the university;
- should provide a coherent and relevant set of learning experiences, both during and outside of lessons;
- should encourage team work;
- should encourage the use/ development of new technology;
- should meet all the legal requirements.

Universities should use external expertise of different teachers in order to enrich the learning process. They should also provide opportunities so that learners can enjoy the benefits of a different approach in learning, including through disciplines, learning topics, thematic approaches, study areas of their choice and problem identification. (Younghan, 2019, p.3)

An advanced curriculum should also take into consideration the following aspects (Parkin *et al*, 2004, p.9):

Figure no. 1. Components of a Sustainable Development Curriculum



Source: self-processing

A well-designed curriculum is constantly evaluated:

- in order to find out the impact of providing (delivering) knowledge and skills, not just the supply itself;
- by using a wide range of indicators, which can reflect all aspects related to its objectives;
- by students, parents and custodians, as well as by the community with which the institution interacts.

## 6. Findings. Adapting the Romanian educational system

The recent developments in the Romanian Educational system have left to marks over the way its sustainability can be developed in the future:

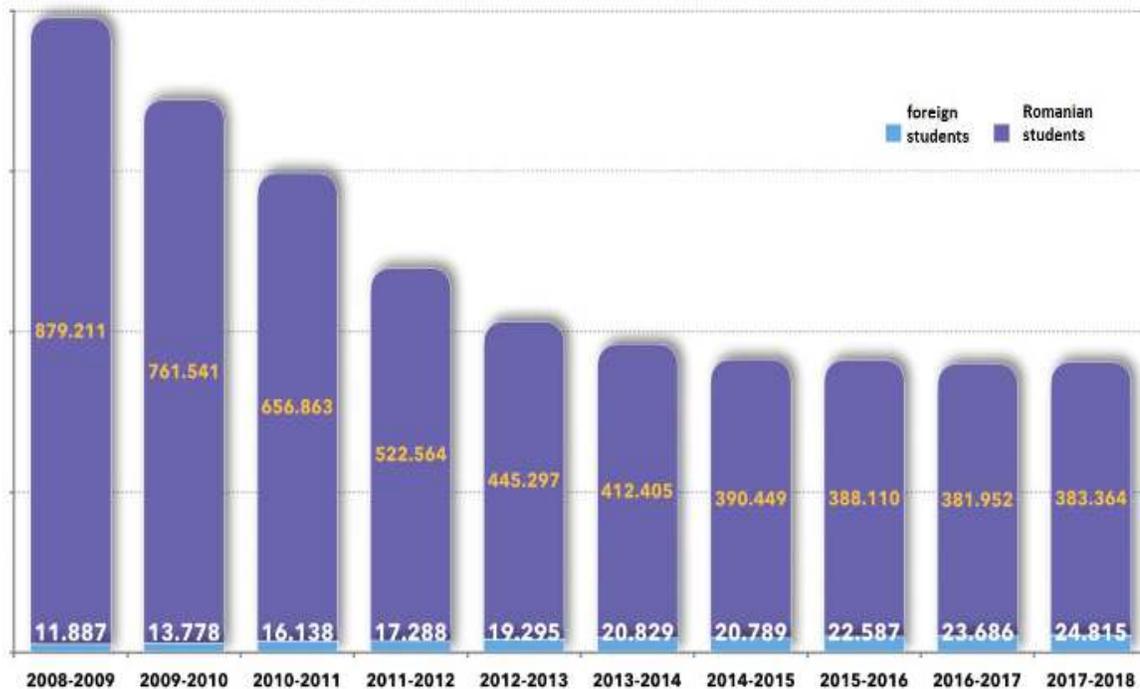
- first, since the 2009-2010 academic year (Figure 2), the number of students has decreased rapidly due to the fact that security measures have been implemented when the final examination of high-school students takes place, so that they prevent cheating.

- secondly many international IT companies have opened subsidiaries in the west part of the country but also in Bucharest as well.

- thirdly since 2007 most of the young Romanian workforce has been leaving the country towards western European countries.

These facts have played in a major role not only in reducing the number of students, but also in shaping the labor force that has stayed in the country. The recent COVID-19 pandemic crisis has shown a harsh truth regarding the Romanian health system, which has less medical staff than it should require. A solution to this fact might be that the number of foreign students in the country has doubled in the past 10 years, most of them being medical students. But if the medical health system in Romania might/can be saved by its foreign medical students, not the same thing can happen with other fields as well.

Figure no. 2. Total number of students in Romania



Source: self-processed data obtained from the National Ministry of Education (Romania)

Since the expansion of the IT sector, universities have seen their number of students being reduced even more due to the fact that IT companies offer free training for their employees. Thus, Romanian universities need not only to adapt their curriculum so that it can adapt to the Romanian market but also to take new steps in marketing themselves, so that they can increase their number of foreign students.

## 7. Conclusions

The Romanian higher educational system is transitioning to a phase where most of the private universities see their very own existence threatened while the public universities face the challenges of having to deal with less than half the number of students they were used to. While doing that, both private and public universities face the challenge of making sure that they can leave their mark over the evolution of mankind in a positive way. The Romanian educational system faces challenges regarding:

- developing and implementing sustainable developing initiatives that will ensure their own future;
- actions regarding developing and implementing sustainable developing initiatives that will help The European Union's reach its own goals in this matter.

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