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Reviews of National Policies for Education

# Education and Skills in Romania

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# Foreword

On 25 January 2022, the OECD Council decided to open accession discussions with Romania. On 10 June 2022, the Council adopted the Roadmap for the accession of Romania to the OECD Convention [C/MIN(2022)25/FINAL] (the Roadmap) setting out the terms, conditions and process for accession to the OECD. The Roadmap provides that in order to allow the Council to take an informed decision on the accession of Romania, Romania will undergo in-depth reviews by OECD technical committees listed in the Roadmap, including the Education Policy Committee.

Without a doubt, big ambitions are reshaping Romania's education landscape. In 2023, the government passed new legislation and unlocked record levels of national and EU funding to improve the quality and reach of education and training. The goal is not only to raise standards in the classroom, but also to equip more Romanians with the skills needed to thrive in a fast-changing economy.

Two years into the reform process, the challenge now is to turn this vision into a lasting reality, ensuring that reforms lead to sustained improvements in learning outcomes while helping to close persistent equity gaps. Despite impressive progress since Romania's democratic transition, including rising living standards and stronger public institutions, deep regional and socio-economic divides remain. Nearly one in three Romanians is at risk of poverty or social exclusion, rising to almost one in two in rural areas. While dynamic urban centres such as Bucharest continue to grow and offer greater opportunities for learning, employment, and upward mobility, many rural and disadvantaged areas still face significant barriers to accessing quality education and training—limiting the life chances of too many young people.

Addressing these challenges will require ensuring that more children, especially in disadvantaged and Roma communities, can engage in early education and care, that students receive the support they need to stay in school, and that those who have left education early are offered meaningful opportunities to reintegrate education or the labour market. It also means investing in the capacity of government and reviewing funding arrangements to ensure they are aligned with the scale and ambition of national goals.

This report was prepared to support the accession review discussion of the Education Policy Committee with Romania. It draws on OECD research and international experience to explore how Romania can build on its reform efforts to deliver on the twin goals of quality and equity in education and training. It assesses Romania's education and skills policies across the full learning lifecycle—from early childhood education and care through to tertiary education and adult learning—using five principles that underpin effective education systems:

- A strong focus on improving learning outcomes.
- Equity in educational opportunity.
- The capacity to collect and use data to inform policy.
- The effective use of funding to support improvement.
- Inclusive, multi-stakeholder engagement in policy design and implementation.

In accordance with Paragraph 28 of the Roadmap and upon request of Romania, the Education Policy Committee agreed to declassify this report and publish it under the authority of the Secretary-General, in

order to allow a wider audience to become acquainted with its content. Publication of this document and the analysis and recommendations contained therein do not prejudge in any way the outcome of evaluations conducted as part of Romania's accession process to the OECD.

The analysis recognises Romania's achievements to date and offers concrete recommendations to help translate policy ambitions into sustained progress. Above all, we hope this report will support Romania in building an education and skills system that delivers excellence and opportunity for all.

**Andreas Schleicher,**

Special Advisor on Education Policy to the Secretary-General,

OECD Director for Education and Skills

# Acknowledgements

This report is the result of an assessment of Romania's policies and practices in the field of education and skills, informed by international experience and policies and practices from OECD countries. The review draws on various sources, including a background report prepared by the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research (*Ministerul Educației și Cercetării*) and an OECD visit in October 2023 to scope the main policy issues and interview relevant stakeholders.

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# Table of contents

Foreword 3

Acknowledgements 5

Acronyms and abbreviations 10

Executive summary 12

1 Assessment and Recommendations 14
- Quality of programmes and outcomes: Building foundations for lifelong learning and productive employment 15
- Equality of opportunity and access: Bridging the urban-rural divide 20
- Good governance: Building capacity to drive system reform 24
- References 29

2 Education and skills in Romania: Driving inclusive growth 32
- Context 33
- Main features of the education and skills system in Romania 38
- Trends in access, learning outcomes and equity 49
- References 56
- Notes 61

3 Early Childhood Education and Care: Giving all children a strong foundation for life 62
- Section I: Overview of the early childhood education and care system 64
- Section II: Performance in early childhood education and care 76
- Section III: Assessment and policy recommendations 82
- References 101
- Notes 107

4 School education: Giving every student a fair chance to succeed 108
- Section I: Overview of schooling in Romania 109
- Section II: Performance in schooling 125
- Section III: Analysis and policy recommendations 129
- References 146
- Notes 151

5 Tertiary education: Creating a more attractive, relevant and accessible system 152
- Section I: Overview of tertiary education in Romania 154

Section II: Performance in tertiary education 168
Section III: Analysis and policy recommendations 174
References 189
Notes 196

6 Skills: Building the workforce for a modernising economy 197
Section I: Overview of the skills system in Romania 199
Section II: Overall performance of Romania in skills development 209
Section III: Analysis and recommendations 215
References 228

## FIGURES

Figure 1.1. Romania's education system leaves many students without basic competencies, creating long-lasting challenges for both individuals and economic growth 17
Figure 1.2. Participation in education in Romania is below OECD levels, particularly for children under 3, in upper secondary education, and learners living in rural areas 21
Figure 1.3. Public spending on education in Romania is low, particularly in the early stages, and while inter-ministerial coordination has improved, there is potential for stronger collaboration 25
Figure 2.1. Romania is growing at a fast pace compared to other OECD countries and regional peers 34
Figure 2.2. There are significant differences across regions in GDP per capita and risk of poverty 34
Figure 2.3. Romania has low levels of labour market participation, particularly among women, older adults and youth 35
Figure 2.4. Romania's working-age population is decreasing fast 36
Figure 2.5. There are significant differences across counties in GDP per capita 37
Figure 2.6. Structure of the education system in Romania 39
Figure 2.7. The majority of students across education levels are enrolled in public institutions 40
Figure 2.8. Ability grouping in Romania is high by international comparison 41
Figure 2.9. In Romania most students in upper secondary education pursue a vocational track 42
Figure 2.10. Horizontal and vertical governance of the education and skills system in Romania 43
Figure 2.11. The Romanian education system relies predominantly on public funding, which is low by international comparison 45
Figure 2.12. Per-student expenditure is low, particularly for primary and post-secondary non-tertiary education 46
Figure 2.13. Romania's absorption rate of EU funds has been low 48
Figure 2.14. In Romania enrolment in ECEC is low across age groups 49
Figure 2.15. Participation in secondary education remains low, and early school leaving is high in Romania 50
Figure 2.16. Tertiary attainment in Romania is low by international comparison 51
Figure 2.17. Romania still has a high share of students that do not meet minimum proficiency levels 52
Figure 2.18. In Romania tertiary graduates have high employment rates 53
Figure 2.19. The urban-rural gap in performance is heavily influenced by socio-economic status 54
Figure 2.20. Romanian students in rural areas are less likely to participate in education, and enrolment rates have declined since 2015 55
Figure 2.21. Romania has one of the highest urban-rural disparities in the share of NEET in the EU 55
Figure 3.1. Recommendations on ECEC 63
Figure 3.2. Ongoing efforts aim to improve coordination among various ministries working on policies that support ECEC 64
Figure 3.3. Most children in ECEC attend public facilities 66
Figure 3.4. In Romania spending on ECEC is low compared to OECD countries 67
Figure 3.5. Annual expenditure per child has increased, yet it remains below international standards 68
Figure 3.6. Private expenditure on early childhood education is lower than all OECD countries 69
Figure 3.7. ECEC settings draw on a range of different profiles with different qualification levels 71
Figure 3.8. Pre-primary teaching staff experience a slow salary progression 72
Figure 3.9. Enrolment rates are below international standards at all ages, but have recently increased for children aged 2 and under 77
Figure 3.10. Romania has one of the longest and more generous parental leaves available to mothers 78

Figure 3.11. Mothers in Romania are less likely to work compared to mothers in OECD and CEE countries, and those who do are more likely to be in full-time employment 79
Figure 3.12. 15-year-old students who engaged in ECEC display better mathematics performance, after controlling for socio-economic status 80
Figure 3.13. Child-staff ratios are above the OECD average for children under 3 81
Figure 3.14. Rural-urban inequalities in ECEC enrolment remain high 82
Figure 3.15. Recommendations and actions on quality of programmes and outcomes in ECEC 83
Figure 3.16. Recommendations and actions on equality of opportunities and access in ECEC 90
Figure 3.17. Recommendations and actions on good governance in ECEC 95
Figure 3.18. ECEC receives significantly less public funding than other education levels in Romania 96
Figure 3.19. Summary of recommendations and actions on ECEC 100
Figure 4.1. Recommendations on school education 109
Figure 4.2. Romanian principals report lower responsibility for course content and student assessment than in the OECD 111
Figure 4.3. Romania's upper secondary programmes include three high-school tracks, as well as shorter initial vocational education and training programmes 112
Figure 4.4. Upper secondary school admission policies in Romania focus to a great extent on academic performance in the Grade 8 national examination, and less so on students' interests 114
Figure 4.5. In Romania, a low but increasing share of students enrol in upper secondary VET programmes that combine school and work-based learning 115
Figure 4.6. Funding for school education remains low 116
Figure 4.7. In Romania, local governments provide complementary funding to schools 118
Figure 4.8. Romania's school leaders report engaging in instructional leadership practices to a higher extent than international peers, but need training to do so effectively 120
Figure 4.9. Teachers in Romania report a relatively high level of need for professional development in approaches for individualised learning and assessment 121
Figure 4.10. Romania has relatively low enrolment rates in school education 125
Figure 4.11. In Romania, the share of students who lack basic proficiency in science, reading and mathematics, has remain relatively stable at high levels 126
Figure 4.12. Romania shows low levels of academic resilience compared to OECD and CEE countries participating in PISA 127
Figure 4.13. Romania has the largest rural/urban disparities in participation and learning outcomes in the CEE region 128
Figure 4.14. Recommendations and actions on quality of programmes and outcomes in school education 129
Figure 4.15. Recommendations and actions on equality of opportunities and access in school education 135
Figure 4.16. Recommendations and actions on good governance in school education 142
Figure 4.17. Summary of recommendations and actions on school education 146
Figure 5.1. Recommendations on tertiary education 153
Figure 5.2. The Ministry of Education, supported by several bodies, governs tertiary education 154
Figure 5.3. Students are predominantly enrolled in public tertiary education 156
Figure 5.4. Romanian universities have comparatively limited organisational autonomy 158
Figure 5.5. Romania's investment in tertiary education is lower than most OECD countries 161
Figure 5.6. Romanian tertiary education provision is almost completely reliant on public funding 162
Figure 5.7. Public funding for TEIs is largely determined by student numbers and performance, with relatively small allocations for institutional development 163
Figure 5.8. Most scholarships are still merit-based, while the volume and mix of scholarship types awarded varies from year to year 165
Figure 5.9. Online and hybrid tertiary education programmes are heavily regulated in Romania 167
Figure 5.10. Romania has made relatively limited progress on tertiary education attainment 169
Figure 5.11. Romania is a net exporter of students for credit mobility 170
Figure 5.12. Romania has fewer staff per student than most OECD tertiary education systems 171
Figure 5.13. Romania's employment premium for tertiary education attainment is above average 172
Figure 5.14. Tertiary education remains low in rural areas 173
Figure 5.15. Recommendations and actions on equality of opportunities and access in tertiary education 175
Figure 5.16. Recommendations and actions on quality of programmes and outcomes in tertiary education 180
Figure 5.17. Recommendations and actions on good governance in tertiary education 184
Figure 5.18. Summary of recommendations and actions on tertiary education 189
Figure 6.1. Recommendations on skills 198
Figure 6.2. Responsibilities for adult learning are primarily split between the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity 199

Figure 6.3. Inter-ministerial coordination in Romania could be strengthened 200
Figure 6.4. Romania's public expenditure on labour market training programmes is among the lowest in the EU 202
Figure 6.5. Employers play an important role in the provision of non-formal adult learning 204
Figure 6.6. In Romania, very few enterprises provide continuing vocational training (CVET), compared to other countries in the EU 205
Figure 6.7. In Romania, participation in adult education and training is low 210
Figure 6.8. Romania has a high share of youth not in education, employment or training 210
Figure 6.9. Most Romanians have attained mid-level qualifications 211
Figure 6.10. In Romania, a high share of individuals work in fields different to their field of study 212
Figure 6.11. In Romania, very few young people and adults have at least basic digital skills 213
Figure 6.12. In Romania, very few adults living in rural areas participate in education and training 214
Figure 6.13. In Romania, women are more likely than men to cite costs and family responsibilities as reasons for not participating in training 215
Figure 6.14. Recommendations and actions on quality of programmes and outcomes in skills 216
Figure 6.15. Recommendations and actions on equality of opportunities and access in skills 220
Figure 6.16. Recommendations and actions on good governance in skills 224
Figure 6.17. Summary of recommendations and actions on skills 228

## TABLES

Table 3.1. Types of ECEC settings and programmes in Romania 66
Table 6.1. In Romania, public funds support a range of adult education and training programmes 202

## BOXES

Box 1.1. Romania's technical accession review in the area of education and skills 15
Box 2.1. Key legal frameworks setting objectives for education and skills in Romania: 47
Box 3.1. Leveraging digital technologies for professional development monitoring, skills recognition and needs identification – examples from OECD countries 85
Box 3.2. Parental education and comprehensive family support provision 95
Box 3.3. Comprehensive models for family policies 99
Box 4.1. Systematic support for professional collaboration in Ontario (Canada) 134
Box 4.2. Strengthening the labour market relevance of upper secondary VET programmes 139
Box 4.3. Sharing expertise among local authorities to enhance school improvement efforts in Scotland 143
Box 5.1. Examples of centralised, transparent student support systems in OECD countries 176
Box 5.2. Measures to improve adults' access to tertiary education in Ireland and Spain 178
Box 5.3. An adaptive and targeted model of external quality assurance in Norway 182
Box 5.4. Supporting TEIs' improvement through individualised institution contracts 186
Box 6.1. Despite strong economic growth, rapid population decline, and high emigration have led to a shrinking labour force and skills shortages 201
Box 6.2. Enhancing adult digital skills 219
Box 6.3. Financial incentives for SMEs to provide adult education and training 221
Box 6.4. Promoting the use of skills assessment and anticipation to inform policy and provision 227

# Acronyms and abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| ALMP | Active Labour Market Policy |
| ANC | National Qualification Authority |
| ANOFM/PES | National Agency for Employment |
| ARACIIP | Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance and Inspection in Pre-University Education (previously ARACIP) |
| ARACIS | Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education |
| CEE | Central and Eastern Europe |
| CNFIS | National Commission for the Financing of Higher Education |
| CRED | EU-funded Relevant Curriculum, Open Education for All project |
| CSI | County School Inspectorates |
| CVET | Continuing vocational education and training |
| ECEC | Early Childhood Education and Care |
| EU | European Union |
| EMIS | Education Management Information System |
| ESF+ | European Social Fund (previously ESF) |
| ISCED | International Standard Classification of Education |
| IVET | Initial vocational education and training |
| NEET | Neither in employment nor in education or training |
| NRRP | National Recovery and Resilience Plan |
| PISA | OECD Programme for International Student Assessment |
| PNRAS | National Program for Reducing School Dropout |

| | |
|---|---|
| PPP | Purchasing power parity |
| RPL | Recognition of Prior Learning |
| SAA | Skills assessment and anticipation |
| SEN | Special education needs |
| SIIIR | Ministry of Education's main education data management system |
| SMEs | Small and medium-sized enterprises |
| STEM | Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics |
| TALIS | OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey |
| TEI | Tertiary education institutions |
| UEFISCDI | Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding |
| VET | Vocational education and training |

# Executive summary

Romania's education and skills system is undergoing a period of profound transformation. Backed by an unprecedented level of national and European funding, new legislation adopted in 2023 sets out an ambitious vision to enhance the quality and availability of education and training. These reforms aim to equip all learners with the skills they need to thrive—whether in further study, the workplace, or society more broadly. The reforms come at a time of real opportunity. Poverty is declining and inequality is narrowing, yet sharp divides remain—especially between urban centres and rural communities, where more than half the population is still at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This review examines how Romania can learn from OECD evidence and experience to enhance the role of education and skills in inclusive development.

## Quality of programmes and outcomes

While a minority of Romanian students reach levels of excellence comparable to their peers in other European and OECD countries, many more leave school without mastering the basic competencies needed to participate fully in society. According to the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), nearly 4 in 10 students perform below basic competency in reading and science, and five in ten in mathematics. Weak learning foundations contribute to high dropout, with nearly one in four students leaving school before completing upper secondary education. Challenges are particularly acute in small rural schools serving disadvantaged communities.

Recent reforms have directed significant investment toward improving student learning and reducing dropout. Romania has taken steps to strengthen initial teacher education and in-service training, notably through mentorship and collaboration. It has also begun aligning post-secondary and adult learning with the needs of learners and the labour market, including plans to introduce short-cycle tertiary programmes and "dual" vocational bachelor's degrees that combine classroom and work-based learning.

This review highlights three considerations to help Romania take forward planned reforms. Prioritising the early implementation of teacher mentorship and collaboration in the schools and sectors that would benefit most—especially rural primary school clusters and nurseries, a sector now expanding and transitioning from a childcare to a care and educational role —would be an important way to ensure these reforms reach those who need them most. Strengthening school leadership, by clarifying the pedagogical responsibilities of school leaders and encouraging more distributed models could support improvements within schools and across school clusters. A clear national vision and coordination mechanisms for new mid-level qualifications, including dual vocational programmes and future ISCED 5 offerings, will be equally important to help align provision with learner needs and economic priorities, and ensure stronger engagement with industry partners in their design and delivery.

## Equality of opportunity and access

While Romania has expanded its education system, large disparities in participation and outcomes persist between rural and urban areas. Enrolment remains below the OECD average across all levels, with particularly wide gaps in early childhood and upper-secondary education. Rural students are less likely to attend early childhood education and care (ECEC), more likely to drop out of school, and are significantly underrepresented in tertiary education. Adults in rural areas also participate in training at less than half the rate of their urban peers. Limited provision in rural regions, combined with high levels of poverty and geographic concentration of tertiary education institutions and training providers in major cities, continue to constrain access and opportunity. The Roma community, overrepresented in poor rural areas, remains one of the most marginalised groups, with high dropout rates and low participation in early childhood, school, and tertiary education.

Romania has introduced policies aimed at improving outcomes for vulnerable learners, including expanding social supports to help disadvantaged students complete upper-secondary education and access tertiary education. The Ministry of Education lowered the starting age for compulsory education and is investing in new nurseries and complementary early learning settings. Efforts are also under way to strengthen the quality of upper-secondary vocational education by expanding dual VET programmes that integrate work-based learning—an important step for promoting equity, as disadvantaged students are overrepresented in vocational tracks.

Designing policies with a deliberate focus on expanding quality education and training opportunities in rural communities—such as through careful planning of the ECEC and school network and more flexible forms of provision—could help to bridge the rural/urban coverage of education and training. Strengthening support to help vulnerable students overcome demand-side barriers, including financial and administrative barriers and limited access to information, would be an important step in enabling all learners to take full advantage of expanded provision. Addressing potential implementation challenges for dual VET in rural areas, where schools may face difficulties in offering a diverse curriculum and engaging employers, will be key to ensuring the model works for all communities.

## Good governance

Romania's reform agenda is focused on strengthening governance in education across several fronts, from how institutions are funded, evaluated, and supported, to how inter-sectoral policies are coordinated across government. To better coordinate the deployment of EU funds, Romania has taken steps to improve inter-ministerial collaboration, particularly in early childhood education and skills policies. The country also aims to increase public expenditure on education to at least 15% of total government spending, and review quality assurance and support policies to place a stronger focus on improvement.

This review identifies three main areas where Romania might learn from OECD evidence and experience to make the most of these governance changes. It suggests that the country reconsiders the overall funding model for education, by reprioritising public expenditure towards the early and primary years, attracting private funding, and enhancing the efficiency of spending. It also provides recommendations on how Romania could accelerate efforts to modernise the education governance architecture, with the aim of striking a better balance between accountability and institutional autonomy. Finally, it recognises the positive steps taken to improve inter-ministerial collaboration, particularly on ECEC and skills policies, and suggests avenues to build on these efforts and help Romania develop a more coherent inter-sectoral policy framework to advance national goals for child development, poverty reduction, and women’s employment.

# 1 Assessment and Recommendations

Romania's education reform agenda, launched in 2023, represents an ambitious attempt to modernise the system and improve quality and availability of education and training across all levels. Aimed at equipping learners with the skills needed to progress within the education and training system and the labour market, it seeks to foster more inclusive and sustainable growth. This chapter summarises key findings and recommendations from the report, focusing on where the country's education and skills system stands in relation to OECD Members and peers in the Central and Eastern European region, and where evidence and policy examples from across the OECD can help Romania come closer to OECD benchmarks of quality, equity and good governance.

Romania's current reform agenda, introduced in 2023, represents the country's most ambitious attempt to modernise education since the post-democratic transition period. Backed by unprecedented levels of national and EU funding, new legislation aims to enhance the quality and availability of education and training across all levels. The goal is to equip learners with the skills they need to progress within the education system and contribute to the country's economic future.

Romania's push for education reform comes at a critical juncture. While poverty levels have fallen across all regions, and income inequality has narrowed, stark disparities remain. The prosperous Bucureşti-Ilfov region continues to pull ahead, leaving much of the rural population behind. More than half of Romanians in rural areas remain at risk of poverty and social exclusion. By equipping vulnerable populations with the skills needed for productive employment, Romania can work toward a more equitable and sustainable future—one where the fruits of economic progress are shared more broadly across society.

This report explores how Romania can learn from OECD evidence and experience to ensure the success of its ambitious reforms. It evaluates how Romania's education and skills policies align with those of OECD countries and provides recommendations for further alignment (see Box 1.1). This chapter outlines the key findings and recommendations from the review.

### Box 1.1. Romania's technical accession review in the area of education and skills

On 22 January 2022, the OECD Council invited Romania to open formal accession discussions. On 10 June 2022, the OECD Council adopted the Roadmap for the accession of Romania to the OECD Convention [C/MIN(2022)25/FINAL], setting out the terms, conditions and process for accession to the OECD. Under this roadmap, the EDPC has been requested to conduct an in-depth technical review of Romania in the area of education and skills. This report provides input to this process by evaluating national policies and practices in Romania compared to those of OECD countries. It does so according to five Accession Core Principles that are essential to effective education systems: a strong focus on improving learning outcomes; equity in educational opportunity; and good governance, in particular collecting and using data to inform policy; leveraging funding to steer reform; and engaging stakeholders in policy design and implementation. Drawing on OECD research and experience in the area of education and skills, the review examines the extent to which Romania's policies and practices align with these core policy principles. It also provides recommendations on how Romania can improve policies and practices to advance the country towards OECD standards of education attainment and outcomes.

## Quality of programmes and outcomes: Building foundations for lifelong learning and productive employment

Romania is at a critical stage in its economic and social development. Once propelled by structural reforms, its economic growth has slowed in recent years, a familiar trend for nations as they move beyond middle-income status. To advance to higher levels of prosperity, Romania must embrace innovation and continue expanding more advanced, higher-value industries. Central to this transformation is an education system that equips all citizens with the skills to thrive in a modern economy.

In Romania, this requires not only retaining talent within the education system but also providing those who have dropped out of school with opportunities to develop the foundational skills needed for lifelong learning and productive employment. Ongoing reforms mobilise substantial national and EU investments to improve the quality and relevance of the education and skills system, with an emphasis on ensuring all students develop functional literacy –defined as the ability to locate, interpret, and use information to solve

problems routinely faced in today's world– as well as more advanced skills for the labour market. This review focuses on two reforms that will be central to this transformation. First is how to make a success of the planned changes to the model of teacher professional leadership. Here we look at how school leadership can be strengthened to enable the type of continuous, job-embedded support that research shows to be most effective in bedding down new approaches to teaching and learning. Second is how to design more flexible post-secondary pathways to meet the needs of both learners and the economy.

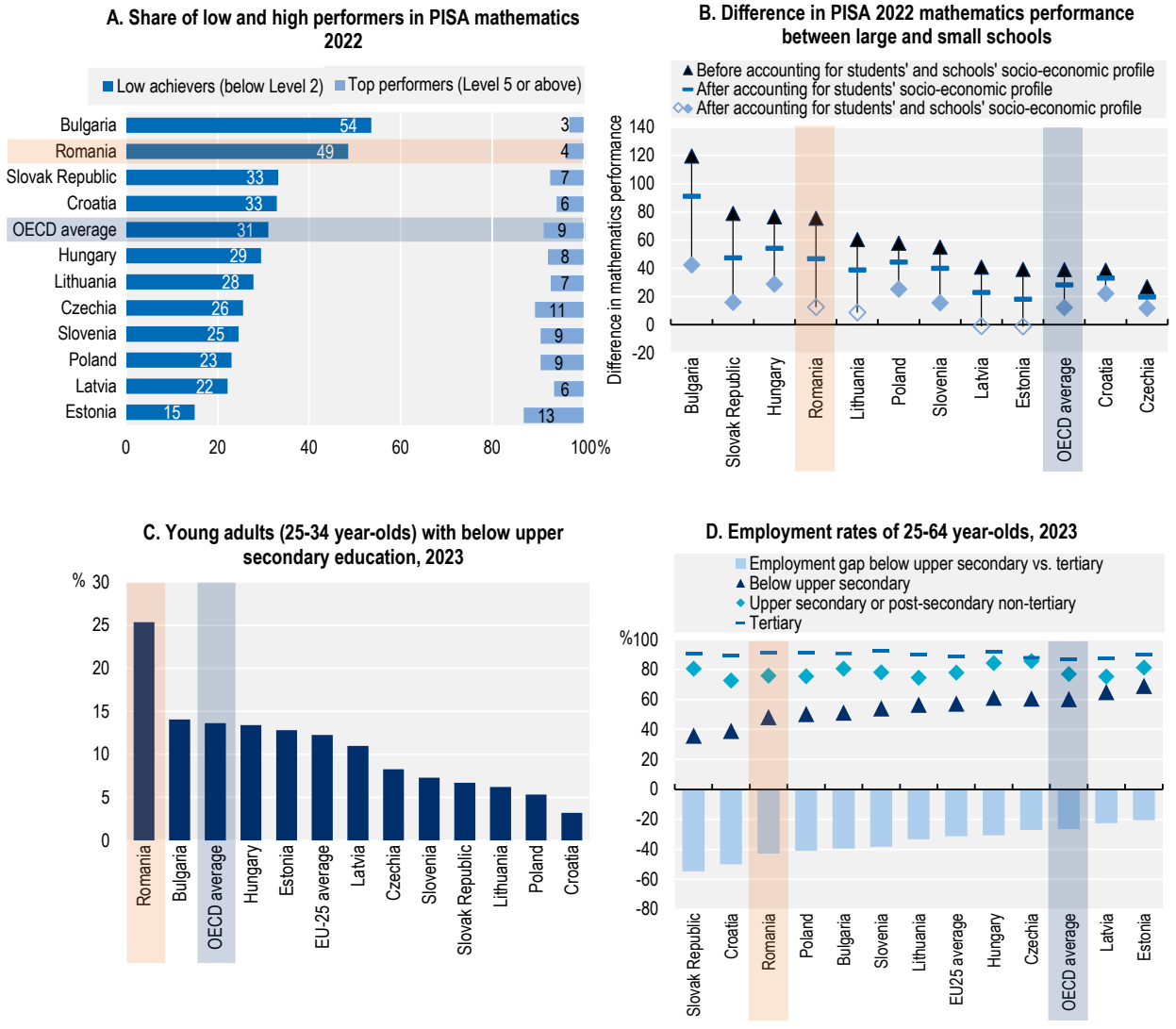
### *How does education quality in Romania compare to OECD benchmarks?*

While a minority of Romanian students reach levels of excellence comparable to their peers in other European and OECD countries, many more leave school without mastering the basic competencies needed to participate fully in society. As Figure 1.1 shows, according to the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), only a minority of students are mastering basic competencies. While top performers achieve outcomes comparable to their peers in OECD countries, nearly four in ten young Romanian students score below basic competency levels in reading and science and five in ten in mathematics (OECD, 2023[1]). With weak foundations, a significant number of students – close to one in four – leaves school before completing upper secondary education, which most countries recognise as the minimum level of education necessary to participate fully in society. Poor learning outcomes are particularly evidenced in Romania's smallest schools, which typically serve disadvantaged rural populations.

To improve learning outcomes, ongoing reforms are directing substantial investments into strengthening teacher preparation and continuous professional development through mentorship and collaboration. These initiatives hold great promise in enhancing teachers' capacity to make informed decisions on curriculum delivery, classroom management, and assessment practices. However, further support is needed to develop school leaders as strong pedagogical leaders. In 2018, Romania's principals identified a high priority for professional development in promoting collaboration among teachers, designing in-school professional development, and using data to drive school-wide improvements (OECD, 2019[2]).

Another challenge in Romania is the limited offer of diverse skills development pathways. These help individuals progressively and flexibly gain new qualifications from upper secondary education to tertiary education and adult learning. Vocational streams, which enrol most students in upper secondary education in Romania (57% in 2022), have historically provided students with few opportunities to pursue more applied programmes at the post-secondary and tertiary levels (OECD, 2022[3]). In 2018-2019, only 46% of students in a vocational upper secondary education stream passed the baccalaureate compared to 88% in the more prestigious academic track (Hâj and Ţucă, 2022[4]). A significant share of vocational students also disengages from their studies and drop out of school, with a dropout rate of 3.1% in 2020-2021, nearly double that of students in the academic stream (Hâj and Ţucă, 2022[4]; Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[5]). This early disengagement generates long-lasting consequences for their employment prospects. Plans to introduce short-cycle and vocational tertiary pathways aim to offer realistic and aligned education opportunities for students coming from vocational and technical upper secondary education and potential alternative pathways to graduation for students who might otherwise drop out. While these plans are positive, there are signs that further policy development and supports will be required for their full implementation. There is also scope to provide more personalised upskilling and reskilling support to Romania's most vulnerable adults. Participation in skills-focused programmes is low, with the latest data showing Romania's public expenditure on labour market training programmes was the second lowest in the EU in 2020 (Eurostat, 2020[6]).

## Figure 1.1. Romania's education system leaves many students without basic competencies, creating long-lasting challenges for both individuals and economic growth




Note: *In Panel B empty diamonds show the change in mathematics performance is not statistically significant.*
Source: OECD (2023[1]), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en; OECD (2023[7]), PISA database 2022, https ://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/; OECD (2024[8]), *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en.

### *What can Romania learn from OECD policy and practice to improve education quality?*

#### *Policy message 1: Continue with the planned transformation of how teachers are trained and supported*

Romania recognises that raising educational outcomes begins with those who work most closely with children and students: teachers. The government has introduced ambitious reforms to modernise teaching. These include a shift in how teachers teach, with an integrated curriculum for early and pre-primary education, and a school curriculum that encourages more individualised, formative teaching practices and focuses on developing critical 21st-century skills. The changes also focus on how teachers are prepared and supported to grow professionally. A new bachelor's in early education and a new master's in teaching

were introduced to provide more advanced qualifications, sending a valuable signal that teaching is a skilled profession. These new programmes also feature a practicum under the coordination of a mentor teacher, addressing previous shortcomings in initial teacher preparation, particularly the limited guidance and practice for developing pedagogical skills. To support practicing teachers, schools are expected to organise collaborative learning communities, and assign mentors to help individual teachers improve their practice. Mentorship and collaboration are amongst the most effective in-service training strategies to improve teaching. However, creating a collaborative culture in schools is no small feat, and requires a deep transformation in how teachers learn and work together (OECD, 2019[9]).

This review highlights two key considerations to help Romania progressively role out mentorship and collaboration. First, is to focus early implementation on the sectors and schools that stand to benefit the most from these efforts. Research across different contexts suggests it is generally difficult to identify, train and manage enough highly qualified mentors, making mentorship schemes more effective when delivered on a smaller scale (Boeskens, Nusche and Yurita, 2020[10]). In Romania, embedding these practices into daily routines will be particularly critical in the early stages of education when students build the foundations for learning and acquire basic competencies. This applies both to pre-primary and primary schools, especially small rural schools organised in clusters. Second, is to develop early childhood education and care (ECEC) and school leadership roles and practical resources to facilitate collaborative professional learning. Addressing structural factors like the competitive teacher merit-pay scheme, and high-stakes in-school teacher appraisal processes will be important to promote a school culture that welcomes critical peer-to-peer feedback. However, additional measures can help actively develop these new ways of working. Central to these efforts is ensuring that ECEC and school leaders are prepared to guide teacher learning and collaboration (see Policy message 2). This review also highlights practical resources that OECD countries, such as New Zealand and the United States, have developed to facilitate teamwork focused on improving pedagogy. These range from guidance to facilitate collaborative inquiry groups and manage teachers' time, to resources that accompany the curricula and help teachers deliver competency-based teaching, formative assessment and stimulating activities for young children.

### *Policy message 2: Strengthen leadership to support pedagogical improvements within ECEC settings and schools and across school clusters*

Reforms place a strong emphasis on improving pedagogical practice, particularly in areas that research shows are most effective for inclusive learning and where teachers in Romania need further development. For example, active learning strategies, differentiated instruction, and providing feedback to students. Building this capacity requires school leaders who foster peer-learning and collaboration, and who give teachers the support and space to apply these strategies in the classroom. In Romania, the current distribution of leadership responsibilities makes this difficult. Important tasks, like teacher in-school appraisals, curriculum implementation, and school self-evaluation and improvement planning are distributed across school commissions, often handed to staff who may lack the necessary expertise. Meanwhile, principals who are responsible for a school cluster including their own school and other satellite schools are not always prepared or supported to lead improvements across their clusters.

Quality improvements in Romania's least performing schools could be strengthened by developing a leadership model for school clusters. Around six out of ten schools, and eight out of ten ECEC settings, are part of a cluster, and satellite schools, which are often small rural schools, tend to face greater challenges in promoting quality teaching and learning (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[5]). This report highlights three key policies to help school leaders play a more prominent role in supporting good teaching. First, assigning school and ECEC leaders, rather than commissions, more direct responsibility for core pedagogical leadership tasks –such as in-school appraisals and professional development– would enable them to implement a more coherent, school-wide approach to pedagogical planning and quality improvement. Second, distributing leadership can also help leaders manage these new responsibilities and progressively build specialised expertise. For instance, formalising pedagogical leadership roles in

areas such as special education, formative assessment, and professional development could help drive system-wide improvements and offer a more differentiated career path for staff motivated to take on new responsibilities. In ECEC settings attached to a larger school and supervised by the school principal, this could be advanced by giving current ECEC coordinators and experienced ECEC teachers greater responsibilities and training to lead professional development within their setting. Finally, Romania's ongoing efforts to expand job-embedded mentorship and in-service training programmes for school and ECEC leaders are particularly promising and will be key to ensuring leaders develop the expertise needed for these tasks. This review provides examples from the OECD of mentorship schemes that support both individual principals and leadership teams, as well as professional development programmes for teachers aspiring to take on responsibilities in leading the development of peers in their school. It also highlights the value of expanding tailored induction and professional development programmes for nursery leaders with a focus on early childhood development, as the sector is growing and transitioning from being solely childcare-focused to a broader care and educational role.

None of this, however, can be achieved without addressing the administrative burden on schools and ECEC settings. According to the latest OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), in 2018, 93% of Romania's principals reported being frequently tied up by paperwork, the second-highest figure among all participating countries (OECD, 2019[2]). Plans to introduce an integrated education data management system may reduce the multiple, often duplicative data requests made to schools, but more significant efforts to reduce schools' administrative burden will be essential if school leaders are to focus on pedagogical leadership and their own professional development.

### *Policy message 3: Better align post-secondary education and adult learning with the needs of individual learners and the economy*

While this review underscores the importance of investing in the quality of ECEC and schooling, this will take time and the demands of Romania's emerging high-skills industries are pressing now. This is why this report also examines measures to improve adult skills today, while expanding the education training pathways available to young people. Data shows that upper secondary students in vocational tracks in Romania are more likely to drop out, with lasting consequences for their employment prospects. One contributing factor is the limited availability of applied pathways beyond upper secondary education, which can leave vocational students with few opportunities for further education. This can lead to disengagement and a higher risk of early school leaving.

Romania has taken steps to address the skills gaps in its adult population. Participation in second chance programmes has nearly doubled over the past decade, and investments under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) aim to expand adult education and training opportunities, focusing on foundational, entrepreneurial, and digital skills. These are positive steps to address Romania's traditionally limited adult learning provision. This review highlights two possible avenues to further extend the impact and reach of adult education and training, particularly for the most disadvantaged adults. Moving forward, greater investment in activation programmes –including adult training, and personalised job-search counselling offered by the public employment services– would help unemployed individuals access the reskilling and upskilling they need to re-enter the labour market. Continuing to expand second chance education nationwide will also be crucial to ensure those without upper secondary qualification can return to education, build foundational skills, and obtain the certification needed to pursue higher levels of education or progress in their careers.

The government also plans to diversify tertiary education with the introduction of "dual" vocational bachelor's degrees combining classroom and work-based learning, and short-cycle tertiary programmes (ISCED 5), which are currently absent from the system. This review identifies two priorities to help Romania advance a more coherent and relevant post-secondary offer. First is to develop more supports at national level for tertiary education institutions (TEIs) to engage with industry partners. As international research

shows, securing employer engagement even on a shorter-term basis to collaborate on work-based learning can be a challenge. Introducing degree-length dual education will require coordinated effort on the part of the government to properly incentivise the long-term engagement of employers in its development and operation. Second, Romania could establish a clear national vision and operational plan for mid-level qualifications, including short-cycle (ISCED 5) qualifications. Developing such a vision and plan at national level can contribute to a more coherent and integrated strategy for professional education, based on a clearer delineation of provider profiles.

## Equality of opportunity and access: Bridging the urban-rural divide

Promoting equity and inclusion in education for vulnerable learners, particularly those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, Roma communities, and with special education needs (SEN), is a priority for the system. This is especially pressing in rural areas, where nearly half of population is at risk of poverty and about one in three are self-identified Roma (Eurostat, 2023[11]; European Commission, 2022[12]). Many of the government's current policies have the potential to improve outcomes amongst the most disadvantaged rural populations. The Ministry of Education and Research (hereafter the Ministry of Education) lowered the starting age for compulsory education to include the last two years of pre-primary education in 2020 and is currently in the process of building new nurseries and complementary settings, such as community kindergartens, toy libraries and play groups, throughout the country. This is important to ensure that all of Romania's children, particularly young children from disadvantaged, rural and Roma communities, receive a strong start in life and in their education. Similarly, the Romanian government has expanded social supports to help disadvantaged students –including rural and Roma students– complete upper secondary education and access tertiary education.

A second government priority is to enhance the quality of upper secondary vocational education and training (also referred as Initial Vocational Education and Training, IVET). As in many OECD countries, socio-economically disadvantaged students in Romania are overrepresented in vocational upper secondary tracks and tend to achieve lower levels in both foundational and transversal competencies compared to their peers in academic tracks (OECD, 2023[13]). To ensure vocational pathways better cater to the diverse aptitudes of students, and lead to productive employment opportunities Romania plans to gradually expand the availability of 'dual' vocational programmes at the upper secondary years. These programmes will be organised in partnership with local employers and will include a stronger emphasis on work-based learning. Successfully implemented, these measures can promote greater equity in education by providing disadvantaged students with more relevant skills and better employment prospects. This report focuses on two areas critical to ensuring equal opportunities for all students to succeed in education and the labour market: expanding provision in underserved rural areas and strengthening support for vulnerable students and families to overcome demand-side barriers.

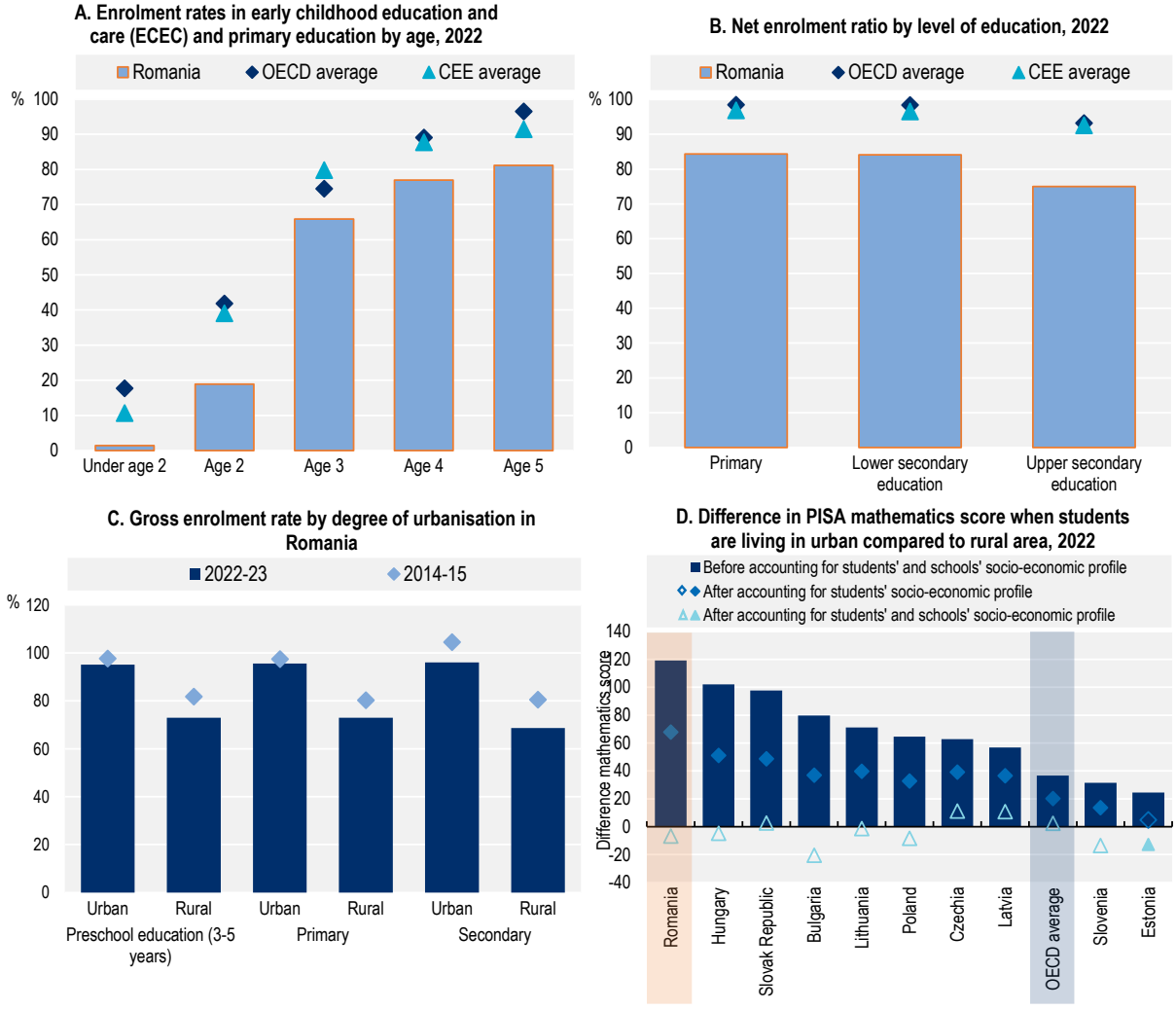
### *How access and equity in Romania's education system compare to OECD benchmarks?*

Figure 1.2 summarises indicators of participation in education and training in Romania, compared to the OECD and peers in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region. While Romania's enrolment rates are below the OECD average across all levels, the most pronounced gaps are in ECEC and in upper secondary education. In tertiary education, Romania has made significant progress, nearly doubling the attainment rate of 25-64-year-olds from 10% in 2002 to 19% in 2023 (Eurostat, 2023[14]). However, the country's tertiary attainment rate still remains well below the OECD average of 41% (OECD, 2024[8]).

Behind the national averages lie significant differences between Romania's rural and urban regions, with high and growing disparities in participation and learning. The difference in PISA performance between rural and urban 15-year-olds is the highest among OECD and CEE countries. Children in rural areas are also far less likely to attend ECEC compared to their urban peers, and rural students are at a higher risk

of dropping out of school. In rural areas, only six out of ten secondary students completed upper secondary education in 2022, compared to nine out of ten in urban areas (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[15]). This partly explains low enrolment in tertiary education: while 45% of Romanian school children are living in rural areas, just 24% of tertiary education enrolments come from rural students (World Bank, 2019[16]). Rural adults are also half as likely to participate in training, with only 16% taking part in 2022 compared to 36% in cities (Eurostat, 2022[17]). Overrepresented in poor rural areas, the Roma Community is one of the most marginalised groups in Romania. Estimates suggest that many Roma students remain out of school or drop out before completing compulsory education, and are severely underrepresented in ECEC and tertiary education (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023[18]; Dervis, Trifan and Jitaru, 2022[19]).

## Figure 1.2. Participation in education in Romania is below OECD levels, particularly for children under 3, in upper secondary education, and learners living in rural areas




Source: OECD (2024[8]), *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators*, https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en; UIS (2022[20]), Total net enrolment rate by level of education, https://data.uis.unesco.org/#; Ministry of Education (2023[15]), Raport privind starea învățământului preuniversitar din România 2022 – 2023 [Report on the state of pre-university education in Romania 2022-2023], https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/_fi%C8%99iere/Minister/2023/Transparenta/Rapoarte_sistem/Raport-Starea-invatamantului-preuniversitar-2022-2023.pdf; OECD (2023[21]), PISA database 2022, https ://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/

Limited education and training provision in rural regions and high poverty remain significant barriers to increasing participation, particularly in the early and post-secondary levels. Close to 45% of Romania's population lives in rural areas, yet only 10% of nurseries are located in these regions (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[5]). Of the 83 TEIs in the country, 29 are located in Bucureşti, and the remainder are mainly located in the cities of Cluj-Napoca, Iaşi and Timişoara (National Institute of Statistics, 2023[22]). During periods of demographic decline, as Romania is currently experiencing, TEIs outside the main cities tend to be harder hit by falling enrolment than institutions located in more attractive urban areas, jeopardising their continued operation (OECD, 2023[23]). Similarly, companies offering adult education and training are predominantly based in the Bucureşti-Ilfov region and other large urban areas (Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity of Romania, 2019[24]).

### *What can Romania learn from OECD policy and practice to improve equality of opportunity and access to education?*

*Policy message 4: Target funding and digital programmes to expand quality education and training in disadvantaged rural and Roma communities*

By targeting services towards disadvantaged rural communities, Romania can significantly improve the education outcomes and life chances of children and young adults in these areas. Currently, while nearly half of the population lives in rural regions, a disproportionately small share of education provision reaches them. To close this gap, policies must directly expand access in these places, particularly in early childhood education, tertiary education, and adult learning, where opportunities are most limited. This report highlights three promising avenues to achieve this.

The first is rethinking network planning so that local authorities' decentralised efforts are better coordinated and informed by evidence of need. This is important both to expand ECEC services in areas with the most significant unmet needs and to consolidate the school network in ways that guarantee better quality without precluding student access. OECD countries that have reorganised their networks have typically relied on robust analyses of provision and demand forecasts, alongside a national strategy for school network reform. Such strategies set the overall direction for organising the network and establish core principles for local decision-making, such as consulting with the school community. Coordination platforms at the county level can also support network planning by bringing together local authorities and other relevant stakeholders and enabling resource sharing and joint service provision. Such coordination platforms have been implemented in Portugal to share information and develop integrated network plans at the regional level, based on the local plans of participating municipalities.

Second, Romania could introduce targeted funding schemes to expand provision in disadvantaged communities. In early childhood education and care, targeted national funds could complement local investments in infrastructure and transport, focusing on local authorities with low revenues or limited capacity to access EU funds. This approach would help increase provision in areas of high need. In tertiary education, special grants could encourage students to move and enrol in designated TEIs outside major cities. Similar scholarship schemes have been implemented in some OECD countries to counter the "magnet" effect of large urban areas and support the economic viability of TEIs in regional locations. For adult education, creating stronger financial incentives for the private sector to invest in training will be instrumental to expand provision. Mechanisms like a training levy could channel funds for adult education towards firms in sectors or regions crucial to Romania's development. This would particularly benefit SMEs, which despite representing 68% of private sector employment, invest far less in adult education and training compared to larger companies in urban centres (Eurostat, 2022[25]).

Finally, Romania should continue advancing efforts to develop more flexible provision to reach rural communities. While in ECEC, ongoing efforts to diversify provision in complementary settings are expanding coverage in remote and disadvantaged areas, similar targeted initiatives for improving rural

access in tertiary education have yet to gain significant attention in the national debate. Romania should explore possibilities to use the increased digital capacity developed through its NRRP projects to develop innovative ways to provide supported remote access to tertiary education programmes. This could be progressed through developing high-quality online programmes, or through hybrid means where students first complete a period of remote study and then progress to in-person study at a TEI campus.

*Policy message 5: Break down participation barriers for vulnerable students so they can fully benefit from expanded educational opportunities*

Increasing supply in Romania's lagging rural regions is a first necessary step to address the rural-urban education divide, but other factors –such as financial barriers, administrative constraints, and limited information and awareness– also play a significant role, particularly in the early years, tertiary education and adult learning. Romania has already implemented a number of initiatives aimed at supporting rural students, Roma communities, and those with special education needs (SEN), including scholarships, tuition-free places, and welfare support. Building on these efforts, Romania should take additional steps to orient the system towards greater equity of access.

This report provides examples of how the Ministry of Education could raise parents' awareness on the importance of early education and care and engage them as active participants in their child's early learning and development. In Romania, many parents and caregivers are not fully aware of the benefits that quality early education and care can have on children's development. For instance, a recent survey on the public perception of early education in Romania shows that six in ten respondents mentioned education as an essential need for their young children, but only a third understood the concept of early education (IRES, 2021[26]). Possible options include expanding existing information campaigns by using new channels to reach parents, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds –such as school mediators in disadvantaged communities, and healthcare settings like maternity wards– and integrating parental education programmes into a broader package of social services for families and children, rather than offering them as standalone initiatives. Initiatives such as *'1000 premiers jours'* (first 1000 days) in France, and the Sure Start Children's Centres in the United Kingdom provide relevant examples on how parental awareness and education programmes can be delivered through different channels and combined with other forms of support for families.

This review also recommends policies to address demand-side barriers in tertiary education and adult learning. In tertiary education, Romania should consider streamlining the current admissions process to make it easier for all applicants to navigate, while at the same time opening new admissions routes that serve a wider share of the adult population. Currently, access to tertiary education requires the baccalaureate diploma, cutting off a large share of the population. Even those achieving the baccalaureate must navigate complex decentralised admission processes. Options include introducing centralised admissions, and organising supplementary admission tracks for mature students who are not transitioning directly from upper secondary education but may wish to return to education later in life. Such admission tracks for mature students exist in OECD countries like Ireland and Spain. Other ways to promote access to tertiary studies would be for Romania to rebalance the allocation of tuition-free places and scholarships to favour students with the greatest financial need, and ensure that all students have clear, transparent information about tertiary education options and their entitlements to state support.

In adult education and training, improving the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning (RPL) is also a means to enable more personalised learning pathways that address individual needs and reduce training time. Romania's current RPL system covers only vocational qualifications up to level 3, excluding post-secondary and tertiary education (ISCED 4+). Providing opportunities for more advanced qualifications would make RPL a more attractive and valuable option for individuals, especially for those seeking to certify learning at the post-secondary level. Involving stakeholders can also help expand services and take-up. Trade unions and NGOs can help raise awareness about RPL opportunities and

advocate for the interests of their constituencies, while enterprises can contribute by recognising RPL certifications and incorporating RPL into their training and recruitment practices.

*Policy message 6: Create a delivery plan to roll out dual vocational education in rural areas*

In Romania, improving the design of upper secondary education is particularly important for equity. Currently, upper secondary programmes differ in quality, and some of them do not offer equal opportunities to master foundational skills. Ongoing plans to enhance Initial Vocational Education and Training (IVET) in Romania by implementing dual VET programmes that incorporate more work-based learning are promising. Evidence suggests a focus on work-based learning can reduce dropout rates and facilitate smoother transitions into the workforce (OECD, 2018[27]). However, the challenge lies in scaling this initiative and motivating and supporting companies, especially in rural and disadvantaged areas, to offer high-quality training opportunities.

Three considerations will be essential for the successful rollout of dual IVET in rural Romania. First, smaller rural IVET schools would benefit from increased collaboration with larger providers to be able to offer their students greater curricular diversity, and to find sufficient partner companies for work-based learning. The government's plan to develop 29 regional campuses that will co-locate vocational dual education at secondary, post-secondary and tertiary level is a positive step to address this. Such integrated sites form an important part of the VET landscape in established OECD VET systems, such as Austria and Germany. These dual campuses could provide vocational students from rural schools with opportunities to attend some courses delivered by universities or post-secondary, non-tertiary colleges, including in a hybrid format. They could also host cooperative platforms to engage employers at regional and sectoral levels (see Policy message 3).

Structuring programmes to alternate between longer, uninterrupted periods of classroom learning, and work-based training could also help reduce the need for frequent, long commutes between vocational schools and workplaces, a common challenge for rural students. Finally, providing training and on-site support for company trainers in small rural businesses will be essential to help them develop the pedagogical skills to effectively pass on their specialised knowledge and support students in building foundational and transversal competencies in more applied, practical settings.

## Good governance: Building capacity to drive system reform

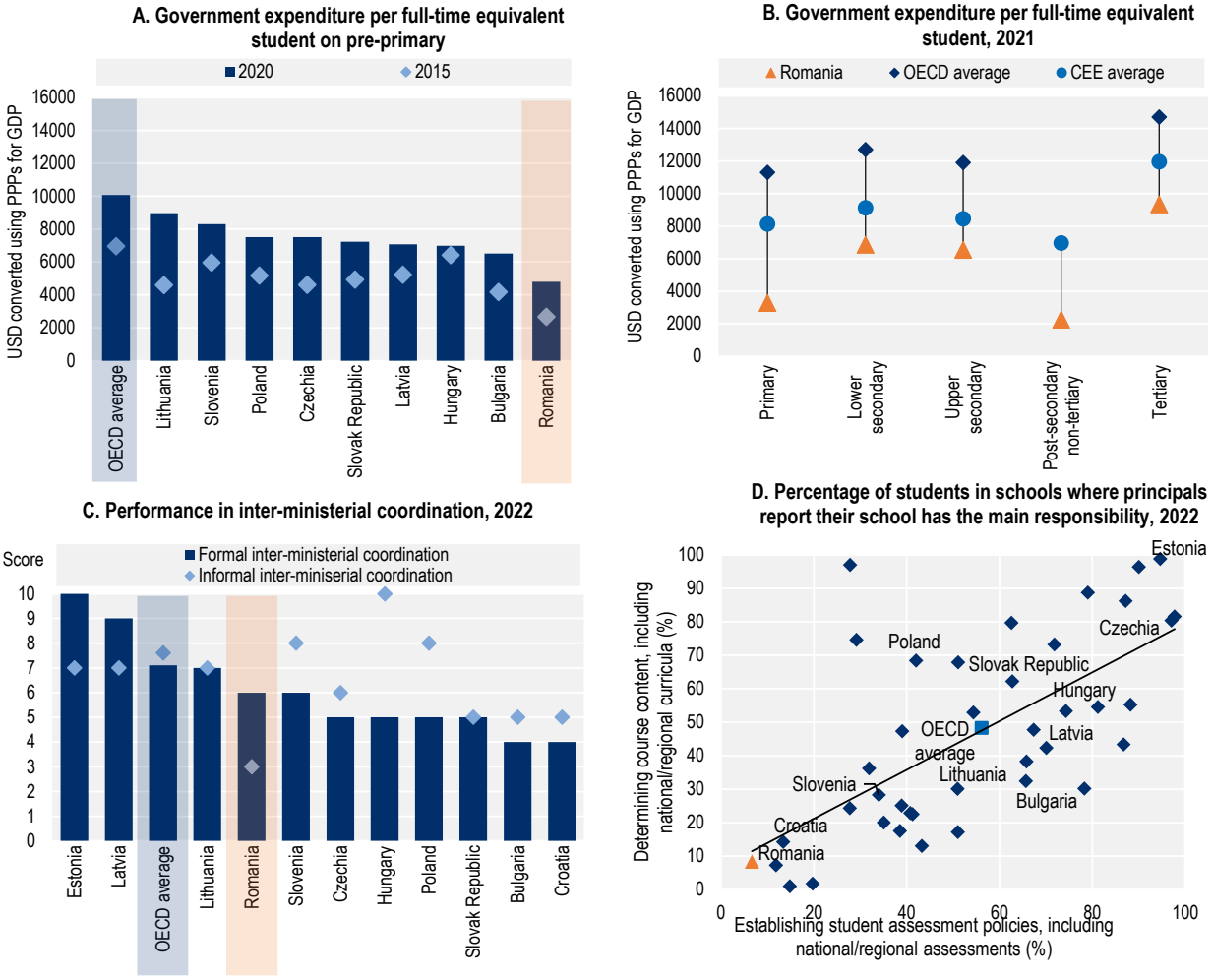
Romania's reform agenda is focused on strengthening governance in education across several fronts, from how institutions are funded, evaluated and supported, to how inter-sectoral policies are coordinated across government. A key goal is to gradually increase public expenditure on education to at least 15% of total government spending by 2027. Achieving this target, coupled with economic growth, would represent a significant increase in education funding compared to recent years, when public spending on education has remained below 10% of total government expenditure (Eurostat, 2022[28]).

Beyond funding, policy reforms will attempt to strike a better balance between accountability and the support needed to strengthen institutional capacity. County School Inspectorates (CSI) will be restructured into County Directorates for Pre-University Education, shifting their focus away from inspection and towards helping ECEC settings and schools improve. Meanwhile, quality assurance frameworks, from ECEC to tertiary education have been simplified with a streamlined set of indicators, placing greater emphasis on continuous improvement. To better coordinate the deployment of EU funds, Romania has taken steps to improve inter-ministerial collaboration, particularly in early childhood education and skills policies. To make the most of these governance changes, Romania should consider reprioritising funding in favour of the early stages of education while enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of spending decisions, accelerate efforts to strengthen professional agency at the frontline, and further reinforce cross-sectoral coordination to ensure greater policy coherence.

### *How does education governance and funding in Romania compare to OECD benchmarks?*

Figure 1.3 provides an international comparison of funding and inter-ministerial coordination within Romania's education and skills sector. Government spending in ECEC and from primary to tertiary education in Romania has remained low and is concentrated in tertiary education. In 2021, public expenditure on early childhood education and care (ECEC) accounted for 1% of total government spending, while public spending from primary to tertiary education represented 6.4%. Both figures are below the OECD averages of 1.7% for ECEC and 10% for primary to tertiary levels (OECD, 2024[8]). With 96% of total education funding coming from public sources, these low levels of government spending result in particularly low per-student spending, especially in ECEC –despite recent increases– and primary education (OECD, 2024[8]).

## Figure 1.3. Public spending on education in Romania is low, particularly in the early stages, and while inter-ministerial coordination has improved, there is potential for stronger collaboration




Note: The latest available data for Romania on government expenditure on educational institutions per full-time equivalent student in pre-primary is of 2020.

Source: OECD (2021[29]), Expenditure on educational institutions per full-time equivalent student, http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/eu; OECD (2023[30]), *OECD Skills Strategy Ireland: Assessment and Recommendations*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/d7b8b40b-en; OECD (2023[13]), PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en

Similar to many OECD countries, Romania's governance structures vary across different levels of the education and skills system. Some of these arrangements are evolving as the country seeks new ways to drive improvements. Since the 2021-2022 school year, the Ministry of Education has been gradually integrating nurseries into the education system to enhance the quality and availability of ECEC services, previously overseen by local authorities under the Ministry of Health, which focused mainly on childcare. In the skills sector, responsibilities are split between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity, supported by various specialised bodies. Although this division is common across OECD countries, coordination in Romania remains weak, often resulting in duplicated efforts and fragmented policies. This fragmentation reflects a broader pattern of relatively weak inter-ministerial coordination in Romania.

Recent measures to shift quality assurance from compliance to enhancement and give institutions more support are important steps to help them use their autonomy more effectively. Despite efforts over the past decade to grant schools more flexibility, especially in curriculum adaptation, Romania's school principals report some of the lowest levels of perceived responsibility for decisions on course content and student assessment among all PISA-participating countries. Various factors might explain this, from limited capacity and guidance on how to assume these new responsibilities, to continued high levels of bureaucratic controls outside and inside schools that take schools' time and attention away from instructional tasks. Similarly, while universities naturally enjoy a degree of autonomy, they are still subject to strong bureaucratic control in most areas of their organisation, and need to develop their internal capacity for research, innovation, entrepreneurship, and engagement with external stakeholders (OECD/European Union, 2019[31]).

### *What can Romania learn from OECD policy and practice to improve the governance of its education and skills sector?*

*Policy message 7: Refocus funding to early childhood and primary education to address spending gaps that cement disadvantage, while improving efficiency of spending across all levels*

Reaching the new public spending target for education would mark a step change in total funding for the sector. However, Romania does not appear to be considering how this increase could benefit the early stages of education, where sustained investments are most needed to improve quality and help more young students build strong foundations for learning. This review recommends Romania reconsiders its funding model, by reprioritising public expenditure towards the early stages of education, attracting private funding, and enhancing the efficiency of spending.

First, Romania should consider reprioritising public expenditure in favour of the early, pre-primary and primary years. Research shows that investment in the early stages of education generates substantial social and private returns, particularly for children and families from less privileged backgrounds (Dougherty and Morabito, 2023[32]). While tertiary education also offers high returns, these are largely private, benefiting individual graduates through better wages and employment prospects (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2018[33]). In Romania, where students from disadvantaged backgrounds face barriers to access tertiary education, these returns disproportionately benefit their wealthier peers. Currently, public funding per student in tertiary education is almost double that of ECEC and nearly three times that of primary education. This gap is all the more significant considering Romania has the highest child poverty rate in the EU (Eurostat, 2023[34]). Shifting public expenditure towards the early stages of education, and pursuing efforts to improve quality, can steer the system towards greater equity. This review suggests ways to do this, for example by setting targets or minimum benchmarks for an increase in the share of the education budget allocated to these sectors over the period to 2027, while encouraging investment from private sources in tertiary education and adult learning.

Second, proactive efforts to leverage alternative funding sources would help increase total investments, especially in ECEC. Many countries in the EU and the OECD have tapped into private sources to expand childcare services and address demand that the public sector cannot fulfil. If well designed, such approaches can increase provision while also improving equity. One option could be introducing parental fees for children from higher socio-economic backgrounds attending nurseries while ensuring free places for those who cannot afford to pay. This would increase funding for the sector, while ensuring public resources benefits those young children and families that need it most. Another, complementary option is to encourage private investment from employers in publicly managed nurseries, using incentives such as tax exemptions, or general business credits to cover childcare expenditures. These efforts would help expand coverage in large, dynamic, urban areas facing significant unmet demand and allow public funds to prioritise and target more disadvantaged areas.

Increases in funding will take time to implement, which is why this review emphasises the need for Romania to give more attention to the efficiency of spending decisions. While the Ministry of Finance closely monitors state budget allocations, the Ministry of Education has yet to regularly analyse the efficiency and effectiveness of its spending. Two valuable tools for this –spending reviews that assess value for money, and policy evaluations– could be applied more systematically. Beyond these general measures to improve efficiency across all levels, this review identifies specific opportunities to enhance efficiency and effectiveness of spending in the schooling and tertiary education sector. Consolidating the school network is expected to lead to efficiencies and savings, which could be reinvested in improving rural schools. In the tertiary sector, Romania could also benefit from reflecting on the efficiency and effectiveness of its main funding model for TEIs, particularly the balance of emphasis between rewarding performance and supporting institution development. A substantial share of Romanian TEIs' budgets depends on performance-related funding, yet the indicators and weightings used for its calculation are complex, not clearly substantiated and can lead to year-on-year instability in funding allocations. Meanwhile, only 1.5% of the overall funding pot is allocated for institutional development, which supports institution-level projects aligned with nationally set strategic goals. Romania could consider revising the current performance funding model for TEIs, with a view to simplifying the calculation methodology, better promoting stability of funding and providing clearer articulation of how the indicators and weightings used align with current reform efforts. Reallocating a sizeable share of its current performance-based fund towards institution development and prioritising the allocation of the newly increased fund in ways that can support all institutions, will also be important to develop TEI's ability to improve their performance.

### *Policy message 8: Fast-track the modernisation of education governance by strengthening institutional autonomy but maintaining accountability*

Ongoing reforms are shaping governance in education to better balance accountability with the support needed for institutions to take charge of their own improvement. This is crucial, as data reveals that school leaders in Romania need more support to evaluate school quality, plan for improvement, and exercise instructional autonomy (OECD, 2020[35]). Two reform goals show particular promise to achieve this: reinforcing counties' on-site support to ECEC settings and schools, and moving toward a more differentiated, enhancement-focused approach to quality assurance.

The steps taken to refocus County Directorates' roles on monitoring and support are positive. Their geographical proximity to ECEC settings and schools positions them well to guide the development of positive learning environments. Building trust between County Directorates and schools, and strengthening counties' competencies to coach and support them, will be critical to support a successful transition. Trust with schools might be difficult to build since Country Directorates still influence decisions on teacher pay and promotion, which can undermine their supportive role. Romania should review the role of the Directorates in these high-stakes decisions. Developing the capabilities of County Directorate staff – both in data literacy to monitor schools and work on school improvement strategies, and soft skills to coach school teams – will be equally important for them to assume their new role. The Ministry of Education plays

an important role here. It will need to reform how it manages county directorates, engaging less in top-down control and instead focusing on enabling of cross-county learning and collaboration. Scotland's Collaborative Improvement (CI) initiative provides an example of a national effort to foster collaboration among local authorities overseeing and supporting schools.

Licensing and quality assurance processes can also contribute to building institutional capacities. Notably, ECEC centres, particularly nurseries, would benefit from more guidance to organise their physical space and acquire materials that enable rich child-staff interactions. A consolidated licensing framework offering clear guidance on space, furniture and materials, along with training and on-site support for leaders and local authorities in charge of acquiring materials and infrastructure, can help ensure investments to expand the sector are used to create the types of spaces that support children's learning and development. Developing bespoke quality evaluation frameworks for the early and pre-school years, with statements of practice illustrating what very good practice looks in these settings, would also help ECEC professionals and evaluators understand and work towards national quality standards.

In tertiary education, efforts to improve quality are ongoing. The most recent updates to the methodology in 2024, although not yet implemented in practice, appear clearly targeted towards supporting a more differentiated approach to external quality assurance processes. Looking forward, Romania's efforts to improve the quality and outcomes of education programmes could be further supported by setting a clearer national vision for the system that distinguishes TEIs horizontally (by mission and orientation) and vertically (by performance across different domains). These distinctions would create the basis for a more strategic approach to quality assurance and enhancement, one that is more focused on development. This would also allow more resources to be channelled towards capacity-building and supporting innovative practices in TEIs.

Efforts to enhance the direct support provided to education institutions and shift towards a more differentiated, enhancement-oriented approach to quality assurance will require investments in Romania's data infrastructure and analytical capacities. This is essential to enable the timely identification of challenges and ensure interventions are targeted where they are most needed.

### *Policy message 9: Create a more unified approach to policymaking by supercharging efforts to enhance cross-ministerial collaboration and policy coherence*

Drawing on EU funding, Romania has taken steps to improve inter-ministerial collaboration, particularly on ECEC and skills policies. Investments through Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) aim to strengthen coordination among various ministries working on policies that support early childhood education (Portal Legislativ, 2023[36]). Similarly, to streamline consultation on skills policy, in 2020 the Ministry of Labour established the National Coordination Group bringing together representatives from various ministries, the education and training sector and industry and social partners. The group meets regularly to discuss policies on labour market skills demand, quality assurance, and funding in adult education.

While these coordination platforms are a positive step forward, they have the potential to do much more – not only in aligning EU investments but also in helping Romania develop a more coherent policy framework to advance national goals for child development, poverty reduction, and women's employment. This is especially important for policies that support young children and families. Currently, investments in welfare and social policies for children and families are not always efficient or mutually reinforcing in encouraging ECEC participation and better outcomes. For instance, the social safety net does not adequately protect children against poverty. Similarly, while generous parental leave entitlements offer important support, the larger portion reserved for mothers, combined with weak return-to-work incentives and relatively rigid working hour regulations, may make it more challenging for families, especially mothers, to balance caregiving and professional aspirations (OECD, 2022[37]). Romania's new inter-sectoral committee for early education, created to coordinate NRRP investments in the sector, is well placed to facilitate inter-ministerial

coordination in planning and budgeting policies for families and children. To enhance its effectiveness, the committee would benefit from becoming a more permanent platform beyond the NRRP, and involving the Ministry of Finance, which currently does not appear as one of its core members.

Romania can also consider additional measures to strengthen coordination on skills policies between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour. One option is to establish a coordinating committee responsible for vocational education, adult learning, occupational standards, vocational qualifications, and skills assessments and anticipation. This would help align efforts and streamline processes across existing agencies and ministries. A complementary option is to develop a single cross-sectoral and cross-ministerial skills strategy. This would move away from the current system where each ministry operates its own separate strategy, with some overlapping objectives and differing timeframes.

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# 2 Education and skills in Romania: Driving inclusive growth

Romania's education and training system is undergoing its most comprehensive reform agenda since the country's transition to democracy. These efforts come at a critical juncture: while a minority of Romanian students reach levels of excellence comparable to their peers in other European and OECD countries, many students, particularly in rural and disadvantaged areas, leave school without mastering the basic competencies needed to participate fully in society. Strengthening education is crucial for equipping individuals with the skills required to sustain more inclusive growth and bring living standards closer to the OECD. This chapter provides context and background for the analysis and recommendations that follow. It offers a comparative overview of Romania's education and skills system, focusing on its structure, governance, funding and objectives, and explaining how these relate to the wider socio-economic and political context. The final section examines the major trends in access, learning outcomes, and equity.

## Context

Since transitioning to democracy Romania has made impressive strides in raising its economic performance, lifting living standards and strengthening public institutions. The country's GDP per capita has increased at a fast pace, while poverty levels have decreased across all regions. However, despite this progress, large parts of the population have not reaped the benefits of economic growth. One in three Romanians – and close to one in two Romanians living in rural areas – are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. While the income gap between the richest and poorest citizens has declined over the past decade, it remains high by international comparison. Developing a more inclusive economy will be essential for placing Romania on a more sustainable path to growth.

Enhancing educational outcomes through better policies and practices is central to this endeavour. New legislation issued in 2023, backed by an unprecedented level of national and EU funding, promises to transform the quality and the availability of education at all levels. This is crucial not only for improving learning outcomes for children and youth, which are currently low by OECD standards, but also for developing the skills base needed to sustain economic growth and bring living standards closer to OECD levels.

This review examines how Romania can learn from OECD evidence and experience to take forward these reforms. The next four chapters provide an overview of education and skills policies in Romania across the core domains of early childhood education and care (ECEC); schooling; tertiary education; and lifelong learning and skills, to show where the country stands today in relation to OECD Members, and where evidence and examples from across the OECD can help Romania come closer to OECD benchmarks of quality, equity and good governance. This introductory chapter provides context and background for the analysis and recommendations that follow. It offers a comparative overview of key features and trends of the country's education and skills system and explains how these relate to the wider socio-economic and political context.

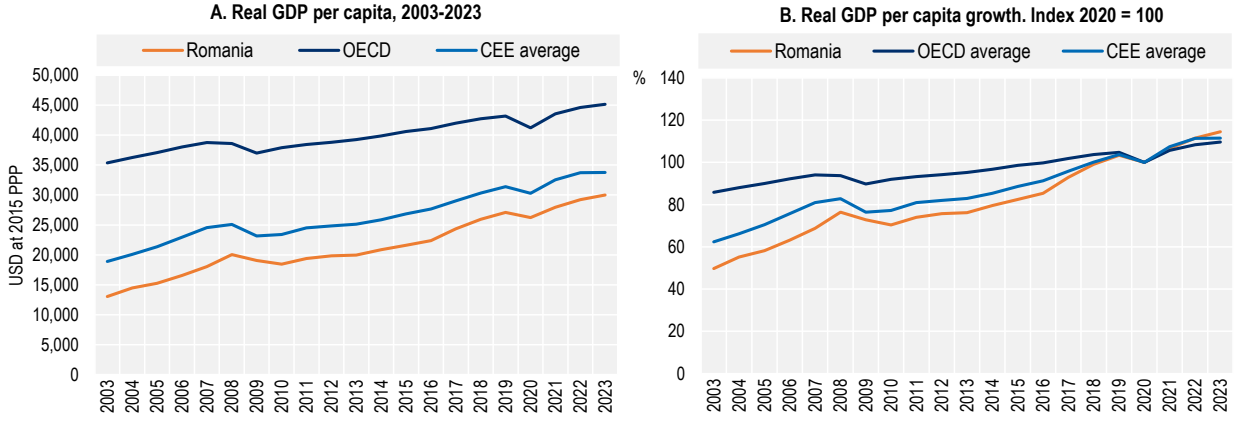
### *Socio-economic and political context*

*Romania is approaching the OECD average national income per capita, but still faces structural growth constraints*

Romania has experienced remarkable economic growth over the last decades. The country's GDP per capita has increased at a fast pace, converging towards the OECD average (see Figure 2.1).[1] While the economy is still characterised by its relatively large agriculture and manufacturing sectors, the service sector is growing rapidly. For instance, the Information and Communications sector expanded from 5.1% of GDP in 2013 to 7.1% of GDP in 2023, surpassing the EU average of 4.8% (Eurostat, 2023[1]).

Despite this positive economic performance, there are prevailing constraints to productivity and growth. Romania has a dual economic structure, with a small number of large foreign-owned companies that coexist with a significant share of small, low-productivity domestic firms. Domestic firms tend to be informal, undercapitalised, and have a weak capacity to absorb technology (OECD, 2024[2]).

## Figure 2.1. Romania is growing at a fast pace compared to other OECD countries and regional peers

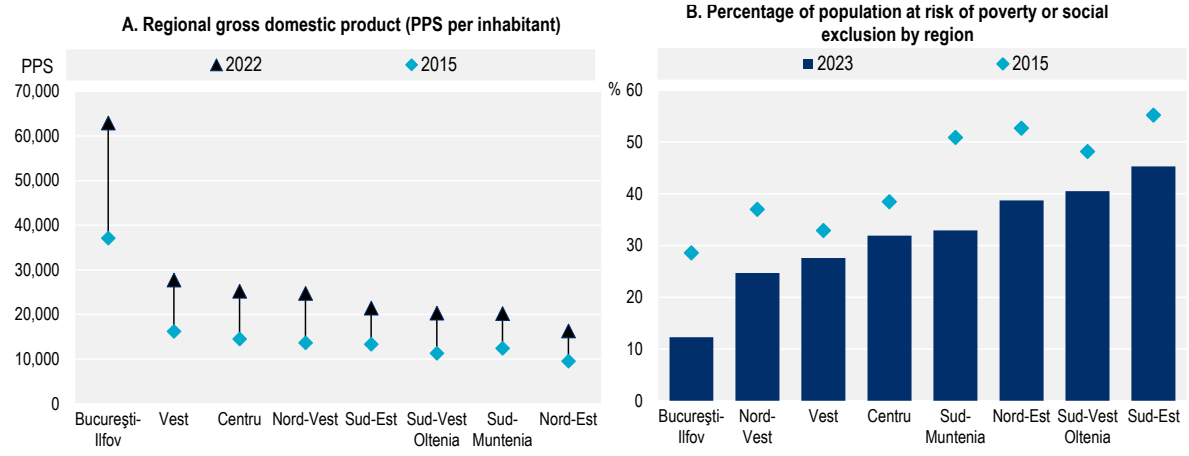



Source: OECD (2023[3]), Economic Outlook 115, Gross domestic product, volume, USD at 2015 Purchasing Power Parities, http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/br

*The benefits of economic growth are unequally distributed, with large and widening urban-rural disparities in living standards*

Regional disparities in economic growth and living standards are significant and increasing (OECD, 2025[4]). While the Bucureşti-Ilfov region has reached levels of GDP per capita comparable to prosperous regions in other EU countries like Île-de-France in France, most other regions have witnessed much slower economic growth, and maintain high levels of poverty (see Figure 2.2). In 2023, five out of eight of Romania's regions had over 30% of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion, well above the EU average of 21%. In the Sud-Vest Oltenia and Sud-Est regions, this rate surpassed 40%, contributing to Romania having the highest levels of poverty in the EU (Eurostat, 2023[5]).

## Figure 2.2. There are significant differences across regions in GDP per capita and risk of poverty




Note: *Panel A ranked in descending order of regional GDP and Panel B ranked in ascending order of percentage of population at risk of poverty of social exclusion by region.*
Source: Eurostat (2022[6]), Regional gross domestic product (PPS per inhabitant) by NUTS 2 regions, https://doi.org/10.2908/TGS00005; Eurostat (2023[5]), People at risk of poverty or social exclusion by NUTS 2 regions, https://doi.org/10.2908/TGS00107.

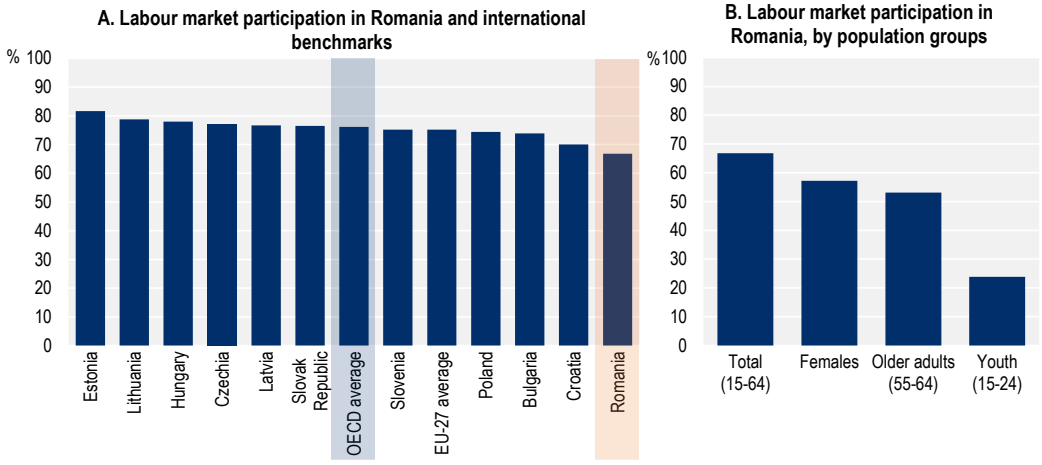
Poverty continues to be predominantly rural. In 2023, an estimated 45% of Romanians living in rural areas were at risk of poverty, compared to 19% of those living in cities (Eurostat, 2023[7]). These areas tend to rely heavily on agriculture, have high informality and inactivity rates, and struggle with depopulation. Compared to other OECD countries, Romania's policy response to tackle inequality is limited, be this in the form of social protection or more progressive tax and benefit policies. For instance, the direct cash transfers provided to rural households are insufficient to offset the burden of indirect taxes, such as the value-added tax (VAT) of goods and services (OECD, 2022[8]).

### *The labour market shows low participation rates among youth, women and Roma, and high levels of informality*

Romania's labour market participation rate remains low by OECD standards (OECD, 2025[4]). A significant share of the working-age population remains inactive or occupied in low-productivity informal jobs. In 2023, 67% of the working-age population was employed or actively seeking employment, compared to an OECD average of 76% (OECD, 2023[9]). Women, older adults and youth are particularly detached from the labour market (see Figure 2.3).

## Figure 2.3. Romania has low levels of labour market participation, particularly among women, older adults and youth

Labour participation rate (15-64 year-olds), % of population, 2023




Note: *Ranked in descending order of labour participation rate.*
Source: OECD (2023[9]), Employment and unemployment by five-year age group and sex - indicators, http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/bo

While Romania's youth unemployment remains higher than the EU average, the overall trend has improved in recent years. The youth unemployment rate for those aged 15-24 dropped from 29% in 2011 to around 22% in 2023 (Eurostat, 2023[10]). However, youth within this age group account for more than one in three (37%) of all inactive individuals (Eurostat, 2023[11]). This contributes to Romania having the highest share of 18- to 24-year-olds not in formal education, employment, or training (NEET) in the European Union. In 2023, 22% of youth were NEETs in Romania, compared to 12% on average in the EU (Eurostat, 2023[12]). Romania's gender participation gap is also the largest among EU countries and 9 points higher than the OECD average (only 57% of women work or look for work, compared to 76% of men) (OECD, 2023[9]). The gap is particularly pronounced for older women aged between 55 and 64, and Roma women (OECD, 2024[2]).

In addition to low participation, informality is widespread, with estimates ranging from 14.5% to 30% of total employment (OECD, 2022[8]). This exceeds estimates for most OECD and Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. Informality is particularly prevalent in rural areas, where approximately 72% of workers in the agricultural sector are employed in informal jobs (ILO, 2018[13]).

### *Romania has the largest Roma population in Europe*

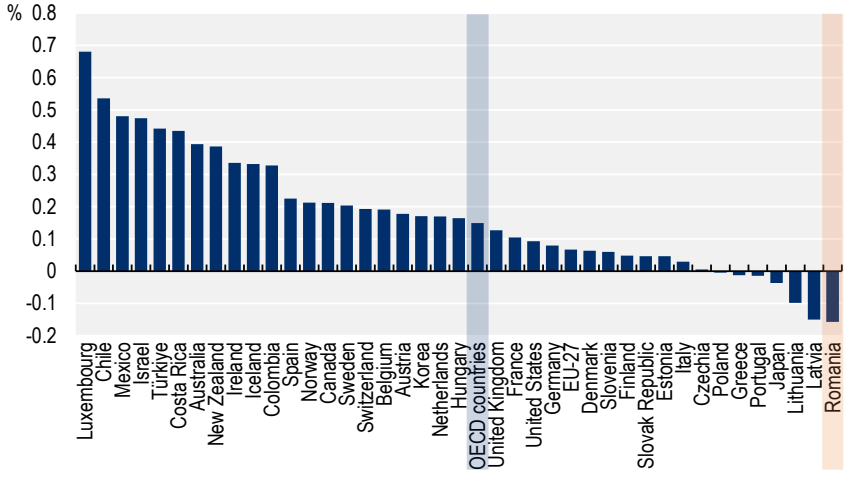
The majority of Romania's population consists of Romanians, accounting for almost 90% of the total population of approximately 19 million (OECD, 2023[9]; Eurydice, 2023[14]). The country recognises 18 ethnic minorities, with Roma being the second largest minority after Hungarians (Eurydice, 2023[14]). While figures vary considerably, Romania is estimated to have the highest Roma population in Europe, ranging from 3 to 13% of the total population (or up to 2.5 million individuals) (European Commission, 2022[15]; Rutigliano, 2020[16]). The Roma are overrepresented among residents in marginalised rural areas, which struggle with limited access to infrastructure, education, housing and health services (European Commission, 2022[15]).

### *Romania's population is ageing and declining at a much faster pace than many OECD and Central Eastern European countries*

Romania has lost approximately 3.7 million people in the past 30 years and has experienced a more significant drop in the working-age population than OECD countries (see Figure 2.4). This is mainly a consequence of emigration, though the country's birth rate has also fallen over this period and is now below the replacement level (OECD, 2023[17]; OECD, 2025[4]). Since 2008, around 3.2 million Romanians, including many young and skilled professionals, have emigrated to work abroad (Eurostat, 2022[18]). Demographic projections suggest the population will continue to decline, from 19 million to around 15 million by 2070 (OECD, 2022[8]). This trend is expected to be particularly steep among younger cohorts. Current projections foresee a 32% drop in the population under 20 by 2070, most likely leading to a further decline in the absolute number of students enrolling in education and training (Eurostat, 2023[19]).

## Figure 2.4. Romania's working-age population is decreasing fast

Percentage change of working-age population (15-64 year-olds), 2002 to 2022




Note: *Ranked in descending order of percentage change of working-age population.*
Source: OECD (2022[20]), Historical population data, http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/d9

*Romania is a unitary state with a centralised government*

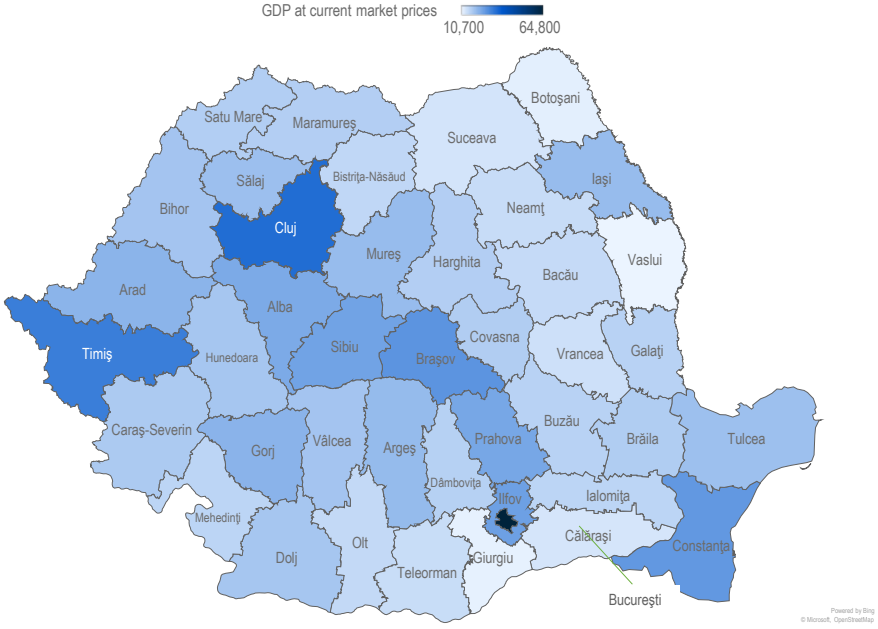
In Romania, tax collection, and public spending on public services like education and health are largely centralised. While the country's main administrative units – counties and municipalities – have revenue-raising powers, their ability to generate revenues is limited. On average, they only generate 18.7% of revenue from their own tariffs, fees, and other sources (e.g. property income and social contributions) compared to the EU average of 56.8%. This makes them highly dependent on transfers from the central government (European Committee of the Regions, 2021[21]).

County and municipal governments have some responsibilities over the planning and delivery of social services. For instance, counties manage some public health units and specialised social services (such as services for the elderly), while municipalities are in charge of urban planning, local public transportation, specialised social services, and school infrastructure (including nurseries, kindergartens and schools). However, local capacity to fulfil these responsibilities varies significantly, partly due to the substantial differences in the economic and demographic characteristics of counties and municipalities (see Figure 2.3). For example, Constanţa County, with 34% of its population residing in rural areas, has a GDP per capita almost three times higher than Vaslui, which is predominantly rural (59%) (National Institute of Statistics, 2023[22]; National Institute of Statistics, 2022[23]; Eurostat, 2021[24]). Local revenue-raising capacities also vary significantly across local authorities. Between 2016 and 2019, a wealthy municipality like Brasov had a total income of 128.50 million lei (USD 78.9 million PPP), with nearly 24% generated from local revenues. This is almost six times the total income of Alexandria, which amounted to 21.25 million lei (USD 13.1 million PPP), with only 9.2% sourced locally (IMF, 2022[25]).[2]

While there have been proposals to group counties into regions, cross-county functions remain limited in Romania. The country currently has eight development regions, which are defined by law, but lack administrative or legal personality. These regions are primarily used for the administration and investment of EU funds and statistical reporting.

## Figure 2.5. There are significant differences across counties in GDP per capita

GDP at current market prices, purchasing power standard per inhabitant, 2021




Source: Eurostat (2021[24]), Gross domestic product (GDP) at current market prices by NUTS 3 regions, https://doi.org/10.2908/NAMA_10R_3GDP

*Romania's government programme highlights OECD accession and investments in education and skills as central to meeting growth and inclusion goals*

The Government of Romania outlines its national priorities in the government programme approved by Parliament every four years. The current programme for 2021-2024 details the foreign and domestic policy priorities for this period. Romania's top foreign policy priorities include accession to the OECD, entering the Schengen area, and strengthening its profile in NATO. Key domestic priorities include fostering the green transition, digital transformation, and inclusive growth, with a focus on the country's disadvantaged rural regions. The government programme recognises that national investments in education and skills are crucial for equipping individuals with the knowledge needed to contribute to a more inclusive society. It highlights measures to modernise teaching, invest in initial teacher education, and make curricula more relevant to labour market needs through stronger partnerships with businesses (Government of Romania, 2021[26]).

*Romania is taking steps to enhance integrity in the public sector, but corruption is still an issue*

In Romania, corruption is perceived as a major issue. In the last Eurobarometer, 78% of individuals reported there is corruption in national, local or regional public institutions, and 54% considered it acceptable to give a gift to receive something from the public administration or a public service (European Commission, 2022[27]). The appointment of public servants is also prone to political interference, particularly at the highest levels. While these positions should be filled through open competition, there seems to be a widespread use of temporary appointments to sidestep the meritocratic selection process (OECD, 2023[28]; OECD, 2016[29]).

Romania's new National Anti-Corruption Strategy 2021-2025 aims to address many of these challenges. Notable objectives include evaluating the effectiveness and efficiency of public policies and strengthening the civil service profession by developing performance evaluation and avoiding temporary appointments. Beyond these cross-cutting national measures, the strategy identifies education as one of eight priority sectors that require targeted action. Specific measures include introducing codes of ethics for teachers and school inspectors and strengthening the integrity of student high-stakes examinations and standardised tests (Government of Romania, 2021[30]).

## Main features of the education and skills system in Romania

Figure 2.6 illustrates how Romania's education and skills system is organised and structured in relation to the main levels of the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). The system stands out for the long duration of compulsory education, which following recent reforms now spans from ages 4 to 18. In OECD countries, compulsory education typically begins with primary education at the age of 6 and ends with the completion or partial completion of upper secondary education at the age of 16 (OECD, 2024[31]).

Early childhood education and care is provided in nurseries (*Creșă*) for children aged 0-3 and in kindergartens (*Grădiniță*) for children aged 3-5. In most cases, the same school unit provides both primary education (*Școală primară*) and lower secondary education (*Școală Gimnazială*), while upper secondary education is generally provided in a separate unit (*Liceu*).

There are three main tracks in upper secondary education: theoretical, aptitude-based and technological upper secondary schools (*Liceu filiera Teoretică, Liceu filiera Vocațională, Liceu filiera Tehnologică*). Technological schools offer four-year initial vocational education and training programmes (IVET). As an alternative to traditional upper secondary tracks, students have the option to pursue a three-year IVET

programme, which is also offered in a “dual” format where schools partner with local companies to design the programme and provide practical training contracts to students (*Școala Profesională / Școala Profesională în Sistem Dual*).

Tertiary education institutions in Romania include universities (*Universitate*) that offer bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral study programmes (ISCED 6-8), and colleges (*Colegiu*), which are located in accredited tertiary education institutions and provide a relatively unusual offer of post-secondary, non-tertiary ISCED 4 qualifications. While Romania currently does not provide short-cycle undergraduate education (ISCED 5), recent reforms foresee the development of such programmes. Post-secondary non-tertiary education and adult training are relatively underdeveloped: only 3% of adults (25-64 years) have completed post-secondary non-tertiary education, compared to 6% on average in OECD and 5% in the OECD-EU countries[3] (OECD, 2024[31]).

### *Structure of education*

Romania’s Constitution states that all individuals have the right to education and that public education should be free-of-charge. In 2020, Romania expanded compulsory education to include two years of pre-school, and the whole upper secondary cycle. As a result, compulsory education comprises the last two years of pre-school, a primary education cycle (Grades 0-4), a lower secondary cycle (Grades 5-8) and four years of upper secondary education (Grades 9-12).

## Figure 2.6. Structure of the education system in Romania

<table>
<tr><th>ISCED level</th><th>Starting age</th><th>Grade</th><th colspan="4">Education programme in English and Romanian (certification when applicable)</th></tr>
<tr><td>8</td><td></td><td></td><td colspan="3">Tertiary education - Doctoral studies - Studii universitare de doctorat<br>(Doctoral degree)</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>7</td><td></td><td></td><td colspan="3">Tertiary education - Master - Studii universitare de master<br>(Master's degree)</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>6</td><td></td><td></td><td colspan="3">Tertiary Education - Bachelor - Studii universitare de licență<br>(Bachelor's degree)</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>5</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>4</td><td></td><td></td><td colspan="3">Post-secondary non-tertiary education - Învățământ postliceal (Certificate of professional education)</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="6">3</td><td>19</td><td>13</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>18</td><td>12</td><td rowspan="5">Upper secondary general education, theoretical high school - Liceu filieră teoretică (Baccalaureate)</td><td rowspan="5">Upper secondary general education, aptitude-based high school - Liceu filiera Vocațională (Certificate of professional qualification/Baccalaureate)</td><td rowspan="5">Upper secondary general education, technological (vocational) high school - Liceu filiera Tehnologică (Certificate of professional qualification/Baccalaureate)</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>17</td><td>11</td><td rowspan="4">Upper secondary vocational education, initial vocational education and training/ dual VET - Școala Profesională/ Școala Profesională în Sistem Dual (Certificate of professional education)</td></tr>
<tr><td>16</td><td>10</td></tr>
<tr><td>15</td><td>9</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="4">2</td><td>14</td><td>8</td><td colspan="4" rowspan="4">Lower secondary education - Școală Gimnazială</td></tr>
<tr><td>13</td><td>7</td></tr>
<tr><td>12</td><td>6</td></tr>
<tr><td>11</td><td>5</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="5">1</td><td>10</td><td>4</td><td colspan="4" rowspan="5">Primary education - Școală primară</td></tr>
<tr><td>9</td><td>3</td></tr>
<tr><td>8</td><td>2</td></tr>
<tr><td>7</td><td>1</td></tr>
<tr><td>6</td><td>0</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">02</td><td>5</td><td></td><td colspan="4" rowspan="2">Kindergarten - Grădiniță</td></tr>
<tr><td>4</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td>3</td><td></td><td colspan="4"></td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">01</td><td>2</td><td></td><td colspan="4" rowspan="3">Nursery - Creșă</td></tr>
<tr><td>1</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>0</td><td></td></tr>
</table>

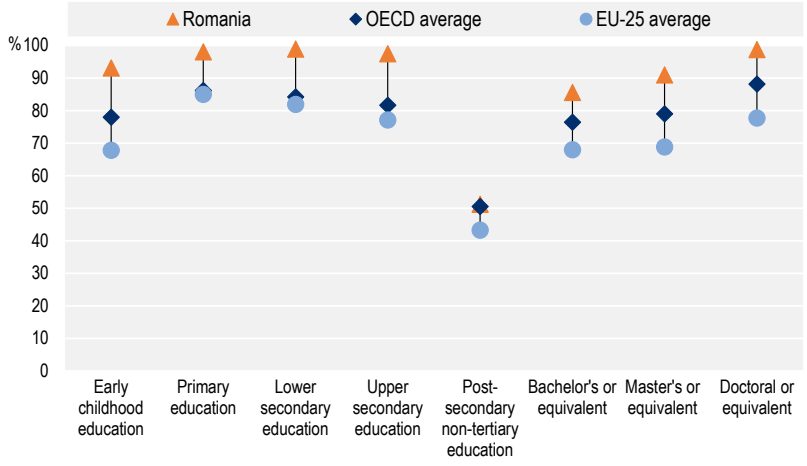
Note: Compulsory education in blue.
Source: Ministry of Education (2023[32]), Accession candidate country's self-assessment of policies and practices in the area of education and skills: Guidelines and questionnaire Romania.

*Public provision of education and training dominates at all levels, with the private sector representing only 5% of the total enrolment*

In Romania, the provision of both compulsory and non-compulsory education is largely public (see Figure 2.7). The distribution of enrolment between public and private institutions has remained practically unchanged in the last decade for all education levels (OECD, 2022[33]). Notably, the share of enrolment in private institutions at pre-school and tertiary levels is low when compared to most OECD and EU countries. Many countries in the OECD and the EU have allowed the private sector to expand in pre-school and tertiary education to address demand that the public sector cannot meet.

## Figure 2.7. The majority of students across education levels are enrolled in public institutions

Students enrolled in public educational institutions by education level, 2022




Note: *Ranked in order of level of education.*
Source: OECD (2022[33]), Distribution of enrolled students and graduates by type of institution, http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/bm

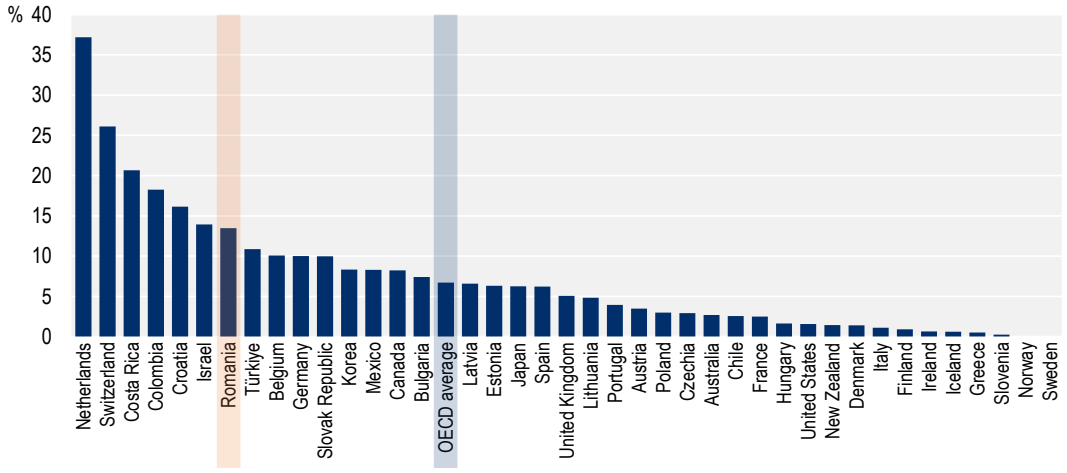
*The school system is highly segregated by achievement and socio-economic background*

Students in Romania are first selected into different education tracks around the age of 14, through the national Grade 8 examination (*Evaluarea Națională*). This is a similar age and grade for selection as in other OECD countries offering diverse pathways in upper secondary education. The Grade 8 examination carries high stakes for students in Romania, as there is strong competition to enrol in the most prestigious theoretical high schools and avoid vocational programmes that are generally perceived to be of low quality (OECD, 2020[34]).

PISA provides comparative data for 15-year-old students, the majority of whom are in upper secondary school. Here, grouping by ability within schools and classes is pronounced. While the percentage of 15-year-old Romanian students grouped by ability for all subjects fell by almost 15 points between 2018 and 2022 (standing at 13.5% in 2022), it remains almost double the OECD average (see Figure 2.8). This likely reflects the fact that by age 15, many students are enrolled upper secondary education, where student orientation is closely linked to their academic performance.

## Figure 2.8. Ability grouping in Romania is high by international comparison

Percentage of students in schools where students were grouped by ability into different classes for all subjects based on principals' reports, 2022




Note: *Ranked in descending order of percentage of students where students were grouped by ability into different classes for all subjects.*
Source: OECD (2023[35]), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en.

### *Education and training provision varies markedly between urban and rural areas*

Educational institutions, particularly those offering early childhood educational development and post-secondary education and training, are largely concentrated in urban areas. The vast majority of nurseries are located in cities and towns, with only 10% located in rural areas (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[32]). Opportunities to complete secondary education and enrol in further education are also limited in rural areas. For instance, while early school leaving is particularly high among rural students, second chance programmes are underdeveloped in these areas. Similarly, of the 83 tertiary education institutions in the country, 29 are located in București, and the remainder are mainly located in the cities of Cluj-Napoca, Iaşi and Timişoara (National Institute of Statistics, 2023[36]). The scarcity of educational and training opportunities in the more rural parts of the country is a significant challenge, considering the economic imperative to develop and dynamise these areas, and the very low levels of education attainment and skills among the rural population.

Primary and secondary provision is universal, but rural schools have some distinctive features. They are often small, satellite schools managed by the leadership team of a larger school (with which they form a legal entity). These schools tend to enrol fewer students and organise teaching in multi-grade classrooms where students from different grade levels are taught together by a single teacher. In contrast, urban schools are typically larger, and many operate on multiple shifts to accommodate their growing student population (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[32]).

### *While most students follow a vocational education and training pathway in upper secondary education, opportunities for progression in further education, training or employment are limited*

Romania directs most students (57%) into vocational tracks from the start of upper secondary education (see Figure 2.9). However, these programmes provide limited opportunities for further education, training or employment. A single national examination in Grade 12 (the baccalaureate) determines whether

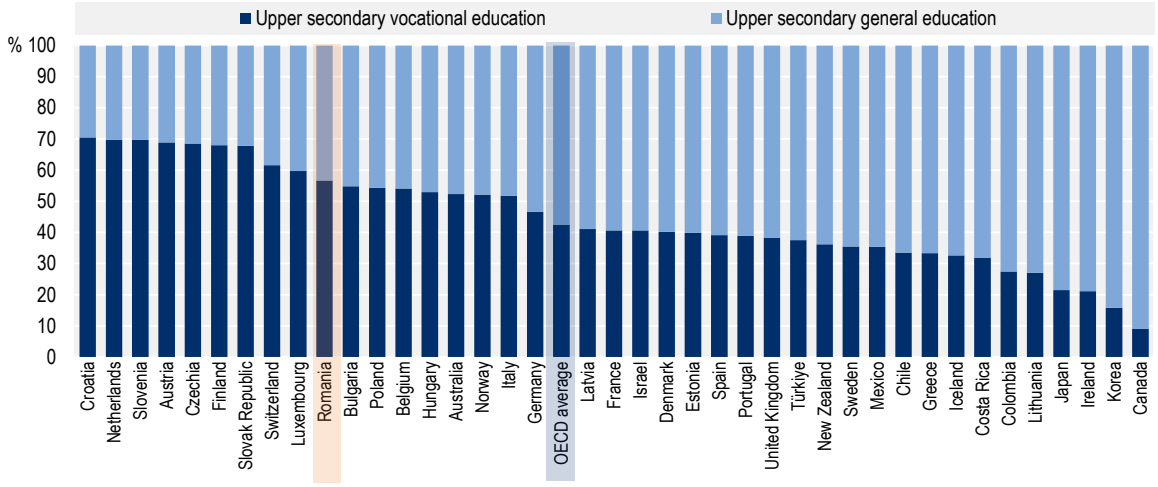
students can enrol in tertiary education. There are plans to review the baccalaureate to better align it with the diverse upper secondary pathways. Starting in the 2025-2026 school year, students in aptitude-based and technological streams will be assessed on disciplines relevant to their profile (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[37]; European Commission, 2023[38]).

Upper secondary vocational programmes are also insufficiently aligned with employers' needs. One reason is their relatively low emphasis on work-based learning. Learning often occurs in classroom settings or school workshops and laboratories, limiting students' exposure to employers' practices and expectations and reducing their opportunities to develop the specialised knowledge required in the labour market, (CEDEPOF, 2021[39]).

Ongoing reforms aim to address this challenge. By 2029-2030, the aim is to deliver all secondary vocational education in a dual format. New legislation also introduces a new dual model of vocational bachelor's degrees to provide a coherent pathway from dual vocational upper secondary education to tertiary education (see Chapters 3 and 4).

### Figure 2.9. In Romania most students in upper secondary education pursue a vocational track

Percentage of students by programme orientation in upper secondary, 2022




Note: *Ranked in descending order of percentage of students in upper secondary vocational education.*
Source: OECD (2022[40]), Upper secondary students enrolled in vocational programmes (%), http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/bs

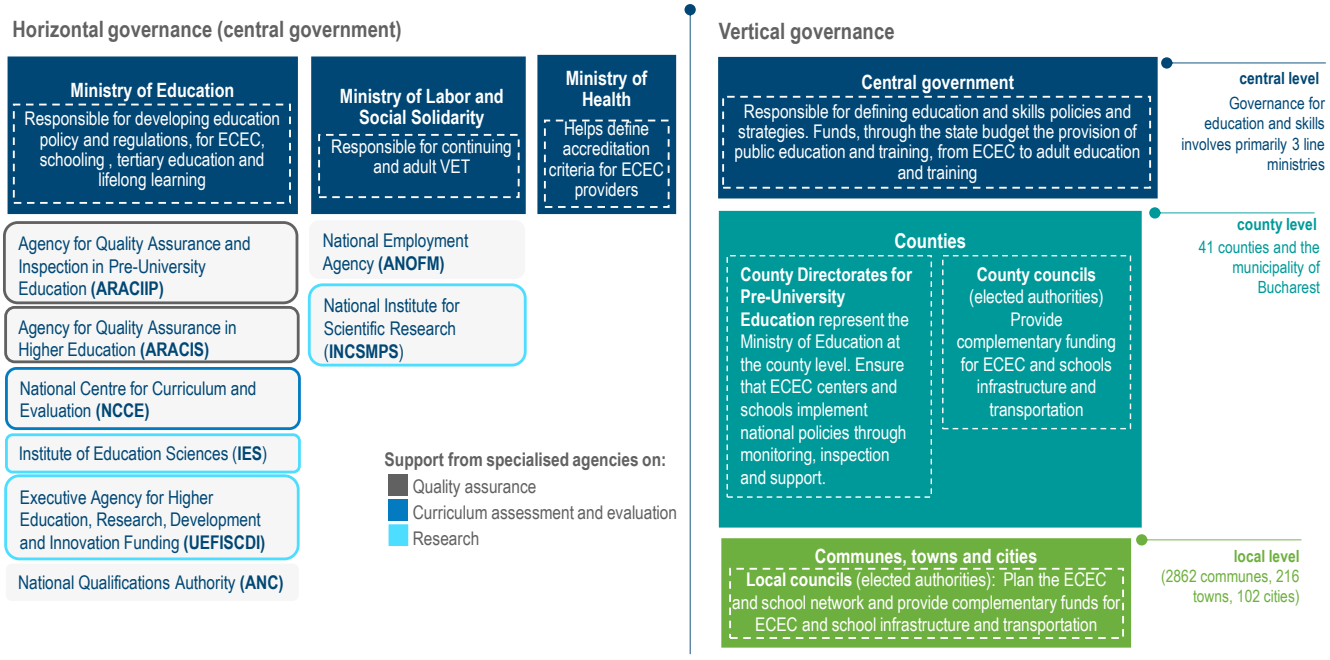
## *Governance of the education and skills system*

*The Ministry of Education is responsible for setting the education system's overall strategy and policy, and receives technical support from specialised bodies*

The Ministry of Education is responsible for developing education policy and regulations as well as coordinating and overseeing the system, from the early years, pre-school and compulsory education through to tertiary education (Eurydice, 2022[41]). It receives technical support from several specialised bodies covering areas such as curriculum development, national assessments and examinations, quality assurance, vocational education and educational research (see Figure 2.10). These bodies, most of which are subordinate to the Ministry of Education, have a specific and complementary mandate to that of the Ministry, and employ staff with relevant technical expertise. However, they have been weakened by low and unstable funding, declining staffing levels, and a lack of procedures to ensure the data and evidence they produce are used by the Ministry of Education to inform policies.

Ongoing reforms aim to strengthen existing bodies and develop new specialised professional functions. For instance, school evaluation responsibilities will be consolidated under a single agency (the Agency for Quality Assurance and Inspection in Pre-University Education, ARACIIP) and two new national centres will be established focusing on inclusive education and on developing the teaching profession.

## Figure 2.10. Horizontal and vertical governance of the education and skills system in Romania




Note: The figure does not cover all government bodies involved in education and skills policies. It focuses on key bodies discussed in the analysis and recommendations.

### *Counties and education institutions have autonomy in specific areas, yet they do not always have the capacity or support to exercise it effectively*

In the pre-university system, County School Inspectorates (CSIs) represent the Ministry of Education at the county level. They oversee the implementation of national policies in schools, appoint school principals, provide continuous professional development through their affiliated teacher training houses, and together with local authorities (municipalities, which include communes, towns and cities) are primarily responsible for planning the school network (see Figure 2.10 above). Until recently, they also conducted individual teacher appraisals and school inspections. However, ongoing reforms reorganise CSIs into County Directorates for Pre-university Education, and strip away most of their inspection responsibilities to focus more on school support.

There have been efforts in the last decade to grant schools more autonomy, especially more flexibility to adapt the curriculum. Many of these efforts are backed by the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), which funds initiatives to support schools in areas like curriculum innovation, and student assessment. However, schools still need to build the capacity to do so effectively. They receive little guidance and continue to face a high administrative workload that takes their time and attention away from these instructional tasks. Similarly, while universities naturally enjoy a degree of autonomy, they are still subject to strong bureaucratic control in most areas of their organisation, and have limited internal capacity for research, innovation, entrepreneurship and engagement with external stakeholders (Dobbins, 2017[42]; OECD/European Union, 2019[43]). Ongoing reforms aim to strengthen educational institutions' capacity to exercise their responsibilities. For example, in the case of tertiary education institutions (TEIs), they shift

quality assurance processes from compliance to enhancement, giving TEIs greater responsibility for their own improvement.

### *The Ministry of Education shares responsibility for skills and adult learning with the Ministry of Labour and other bodies*

The governance of skills and adult learning – defined in this report as education and training targeting adults, or youth who are out of the formal education system – is primarily split between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity (Ministry of Labour hereafter), who work alongside several specialised agencies. While many OECD countries have similar governance arrangements, in Romania coordination between ministries could be strengthened, since in some instances there is duplication and fragmented policy interventions. Romania has taken some steps to improve inter-ministerial collaboration, especially in data collection, analysis, and use related to skills needs and vocational training programmes (see Chapter 5). In addition, in 2020 the Ministry of Labour established a National Coordination Group to streamline consultation on skills policy. The group brings together representatives from line ministries, the education and training sector—including vocational training providers—NGOs, industry and social partners.

### *Systemic issues related to public governance in Romania are apparent in the education and skills sector*

Some of the challenges in Romania's public governance are also present in the education and skills sector. As in other Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, the sector has a legalistic culture characterised by an emphasis on the role of legal instruments in policymaking, and frequent legal amendments. This has often directed the focus of policymakers and educators towards compliance with legal requirements, with less attention paid to important aspects of policy implementation, monitoring and evaluation (Deca and Santa, 2022[44]).

Frequent turnover among both high-ranking political officials and civil servants as well as capacity constraints within the Ministry of Education create additional barriers for effective policy planning and implementation. The Ministry of Education faces challenges in attracting and retaining enough qualified public servants, and appointments and career progression are often influenced by political affiliations (OECD, 2016[29]). As a result, the Ministry has not sufficiently developed important capacities for strategic budgeting and planning, nor for monitoring and evaluating programme implementation (OECD, 2024[45]; OECD, 2024[2]). Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) includes measures to strengthen line ministries' capacity for strategic budgeting, planning, and procurement (OECD, 2024[2]; OECD, 2024[45]).

### *Romania is taking measures to develop its education data infrastructure, but capacity and resources to analyse and report data need strengthening*

Romania has many of the building blocks of system-monitoring and evaluation in place. Dedicated professional institutions conduct education policy research and evaluations, and a range of education databases for ECEC, school education and tertiary education are already in place. Additionally, the country conducts national student assessments to collect information on learning outcomes in primary and lower secondary education, as well as studies to assess student outcomes in tertiary education and anticipate the skills needed in the labour market.

While ongoing reforms introduce positive measures to strengthen the data infrastructure and promote greater data use, noticeable gaps remain. For instance, with EU funding support, Romania is integrating its data platforms for pre-tertiary and vocational education and training and has further plans to invest in schools' digital skills. However, the Ministry of Education needs more specialised teams to maintain and

develop its education databases, conduct statistical analysis, and report data in a way that is useful to national and county authorities, educational institutions, and the broader public. Such investments are important if the education data is to inform policy and practice.

### *Funding of the education and skills system*

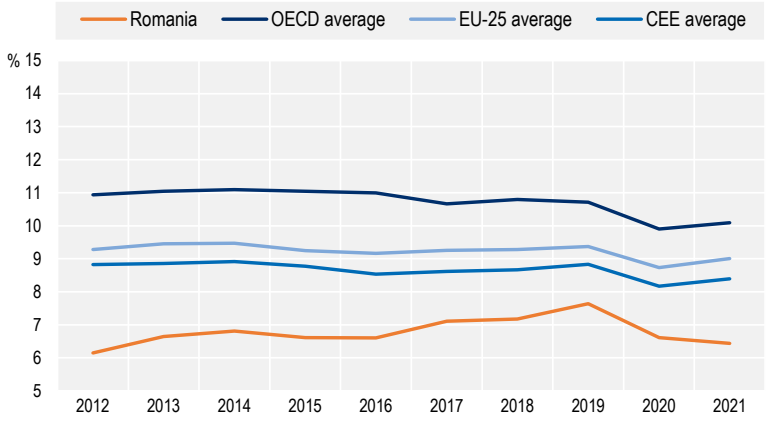
*The education and skills system relies predominantly on public funding, which is low but set to increase*

The bulk of total expenditure in education stems from public sources (96% of total), whereas the private sector contributes only a minimal share (see Figure 2.11) (OECD, 2024[31]). Private spending in early childhood education and care, as well as tertiary education is low compared to other OECD and CEE countries.

Government spending on education has remained relatively stable at very low levels (see Figure 2.11). In the last 10 years, expenditure on primary to tertiary education has averaged 6.8% of total government expenditure, and 10% or less when considering total funding for the entire education sector (Eurostat, 2022[46]; OECD, 2021[47]). This is well below public spending across OECD countries, and the lowest among Central and Eastern European countries (OECD, 2021[47]). Positively, the new legislative package aims to increase the share of public expenditure on education to at least 15% of total government expenditure by 2027. Achieving this increase would mark a step change in total funding for the sector.

**Figure 2.11. The Romanian education system relies predominantly on public funding, which is low by international comparison**

Percentage of total government expenditure in education, 2012-2021

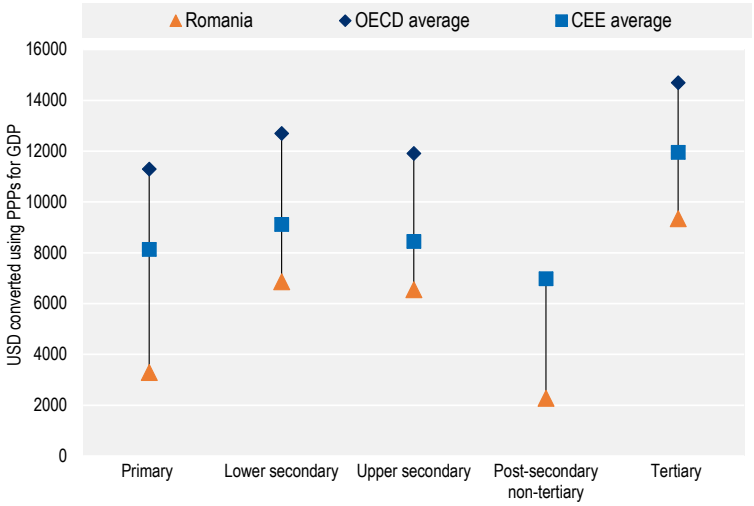



Note: Total expenditure in education includes general government, private sector (households and other non-educational private entities) and rest of the world (international sources).
Source: OECD (2021[47]), Share of total government expenditure on education, http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/cs

The overall low levels of government spending in the education sector result in low public spending per-student. Romania's average public expenditure per student from primary to tertiary education is USD 6 030, less than half the OECD average (USD 12 163) and the lowest among CEE countries (OECD, 2021[48]). Public per-student expenditure is particularly low in primary and post-secondary non-tertiary education (see Figure 2.12). While larger education budgets do not automatically translate into better student outcomes, when spending is below a certain threshold it is hard to ensure quality outcomes for all children (OECD, 2017[49]).

## Figure 2.12. Per-student expenditure is low, particularly for primary and post-secondary non-tertiary education

Government expenditure on educational institutions per full-time equivalent student, 2021




Note: *Ranked by educational level.*
Source: OECD (2021[48]), Expenditure on educational institutions per full-time equivalent student, http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/cx

*Most public spending for education and training comes from the central government budget*

Public funding for education comes primarily from the state budget. In 2021, central funding constituted as much as 71% of total government expenditure on ECEC, 76% on primary, secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education and 100% on tertiary education (OECD, 2024[31]). The remaining public funding was provided by county and municipal budgets.

Central funding to public education institutions is mainly allocated through a per-capita funding formula, which has been recently revised to better reflect need. These funds are mainly used for staff salaries and administrative costs. Consequently, education institutions rely on other funding streams such as local authorities in the case of schools, kindergartens and nurseries, or performance-based funding from the Ministry of Education in the case of tertiary education institutions (TEIs) to cover other expenses. This may lead to disparities, as schools in socio-economically deprived areas, or TEIs with lower internal capacity may be less likely to receive funding outside of the funding formula (World Bank, 2022[50]; CNFIS, 2022[51]). Positively, and similar to many OECD countries, the pre-university education law plans to supplement the funding formula with targeted funds to disadvantaged schools.

### *Objectives of the education and skills system and major reforms*

*The 2023 laws on pre-university education and higher education represent the most recent in a series of waves of education reform and modernisation*

Since its transition to democracy, Romania has undergone three major waves of education reform, with major legislation passed in 2005, 2011, and, most recently, in 2023. New legislation maintains many of the organisational and operational structures of the education system. For example, the new laws preserve the same educational stages, national assessments and examinations, and career progression steps for teachers as the provisions that have been in place since 2011. However, there are notable changes to the organisation of nurseries, school leadership and funding, and upper secondary and tertiary pathways, highlighted in Box 2.1.

### Box 2.1. Key legal frameworks setting objectives for education and skills in Romania:

The 2023 law on pre-university education covers ECEC, primary and secondary education. Notable goals include:

- **Integrating nurseries into the national education system:** The law reaffirms the unitary system in early childhood education and care (ECEC) introduced in 2021-2022, where the Ministry of Education oversees kindergartens (for children aged 3-6) and nurseries (for children under 3) that were previously managed by municipalities. It also introduces, for the first time, a standard cost per child enrolled in nursery, establishing the basis for funding these services from the national budget.
- **Raising the standards and status of teachers and principals.** The law includes plans to develop professional standards, with differentiated roles and responsibilities for teachers and principals, to guide initial teacher education, certification and career development. It raises teacher salaries and introduces structured mentorship and professional development opportunities in schools.
- **Providing more equitable funding.** The per-student funding formula for ECEC and schools will include a new equity weighting for learners with special educational needs (SEN), disadvantaged facilities, and school consortia involving rural and urban schools. Schools in priority investment areas will receive targeted resources and support, while vulnerable and academically outstanding students will benefit from larger scholarships.
- **Expanding dual secondary education.** The law aims to transition all upper secondary vocational education and training programmes (referred to as initial vocational education and training, IVET) into the dual system by 2029-2030. The main vehicle for achieving this objective is the establishment of dual education clusters which are intended to co-locate vocational secondary, post-secondary and tertiary education within the same physical campus.

The 2023 law on higher education covers bachelor, master and doctorate programmes, as well adult training. Notable goals include:

- **Aligning programmes with the labour market.** Romania plans to diversify tertiary education to improve labour market relevance by developing a new "dual" model of vocational bachelor's degrees, combining classroom and work-based learning. These new tertiary programmes will provide a full pathway for students transitioning from vocational upper secondary to tertiary education. The Educated Romania plan also envisages the future introduction of ISCED 5 level education, which is currently not offered in Romania.
- **Reducing university dropout.** The law introduces a national programme to reduce university dropout, including measures to support transitions to tertiary education, provide career counselling and guidance, and roll out second chance programmes.
- **Increasing university enrolment of vulnerable students and in STEM fields:** The law continues to reserve a number of university places for students from rural upper secondary schools and Roma background, and adds two new categories: students with disabilities, and students under the social protection system. The law also defines a minimum amount for university scholarships and increases the share of scholarships for students in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields.

Source: Ministry of Education of Romania (2023[37]), *Legea învăţământului preuniversitar nr. 198/2023 [Pre-university education law no. 198/2023],* https://lege5.ro/Gratuit/geztqmjtgq2tm/legea-invatamantului-preuniversitar-nr-198-2023/3; Ministry of Education of Romania (2023[52]), *Legea învățământului superior nr. 199/2023 [Higher education law no 199/2023],* https://edu.ro/sites/default/files/_fi%C8%99iere/Minister/2023/Legi_educatie_Romania_educata/legi_monitor/Legea_invatamantului_superior_nr_199.pdf

The 2023 laws mark a break with past waves of reform in two other major ways. First, they are the first to be grounded in a long-term vision, set out in the "Educated Romania" report. The report, coordinated by the Presidential administration, is considered to provide the most comprehensive reform vision for the sector, and the first to systematically diagnose issues, draw on international evidence, and adopt a timeframe extending beyond electoral cycles. Wide consultation took place to build both societal and cross-party support and reach a shared understanding of the system's goals for 2030 (President of Romania, 2021[53]). The report also drew on international evidence to identify ways in which Romania could work towards achieving its goals. Second, ongoing reforms are distinct for their strategic use of EU funding. Several measures outlined in Educated Romania and included in the new laws, were integrated into the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), securing significant funding for their implementation over the period 2021-2026.

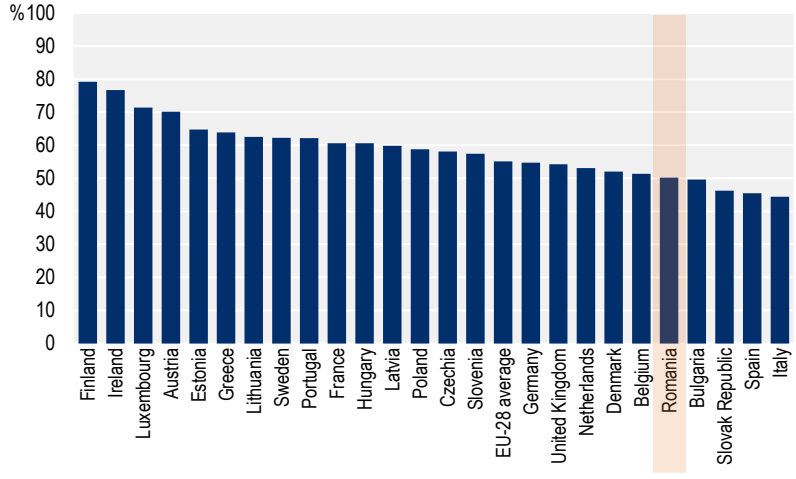
*EU funding will have a significant impact on whether and how the national reform agenda gets implemented*

In Romania, EU funding for education is substantial and increasing. Notably, the EU-funded National Recovery and Resilience Plan 2021-2026 (NRRP) has recently allocated EUR 3 515 million for education and training, which represents the highest sectoral allocation after sustainable transport (European Parliament, 2023[54]). NRRP funds will be instrumental to advance the implementation of planned measures, as previous reform efforts have often been held back by a lack of resources.

However, in the past, Romania has faced challenges to spend EU funds effectively (see Figure 2.13) (OECD, 2022[8]). To address this, the NRRP includes measures aimed at enhancing line ministries' strategic planning and budgeting capacities, and simplified mechanisms for implementing investments. These efforts are essential to improve the absorption of EU funds and align resources with national policy goals. A 2024 report by the European Commission has noted recent progress in the absorption of Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) grants and other EU funds, particularly in fostering the green and digital transitions (European Commission, 2024[55]).

## Figure 2.13. Romania's absorption rate of EU funds has been low

Cumulative execution of EU funds (% of total allocations) for the 2014-2020 period, as of end 2020




Note: *Ranked in descending order of the percentage of cumulative execution of EU funds.*
Source: OECD (2022[8]), *OECD Economic Surveys: Romania 2022*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/e2174606-en.

## Trends in access, learning outcomes and equity

### *Access and participation*

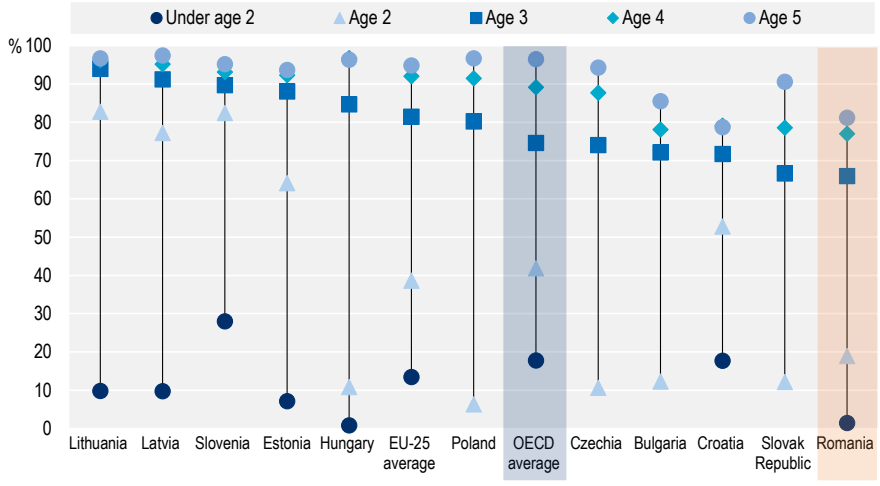
*Romania is working to expand participation in early childhood education and care*

Ongoing reforms aim to improve participation in ECEC from low baseline levels, most notably by making the two years of pre-primary education mandatory and expanding the network of pre-schools and nurseries throughout the country. Overall participation in ECEC is low at all ages (see Figure 2.14). In 2022, 75%, of children aged 3-5 were enrolled in pre-primary, compared to the OECD average of 84%, representing the lowest rate among the Central and Eastern European countries (OECD, 2022[56]). Notably, the participation rate for children aged 3-5 has also dropped by about 9% since 2013, making Romania one of the few countries in the region experiencing a decrease in participation in pre-primary, together with Bulgaria (OECD, 2024[31]).

Enrolment is particularly low for children under the age of 3, with only 8% of this group participating in formal childcare, compared to an average of 24% in the OECD (OECD, 2022[56]). Informal care is widespread, with estimates showing that in 2019 more than 50% of Romanian children aged 0-5 were cared by relatives, friends or neighbours (OECD, 2024[2]).

### Figure 2.14. In Romania enrolment in ECEC is low across age groups

Enrolment rates in early childhood education and care (ECEC) and primary education by age, 2022



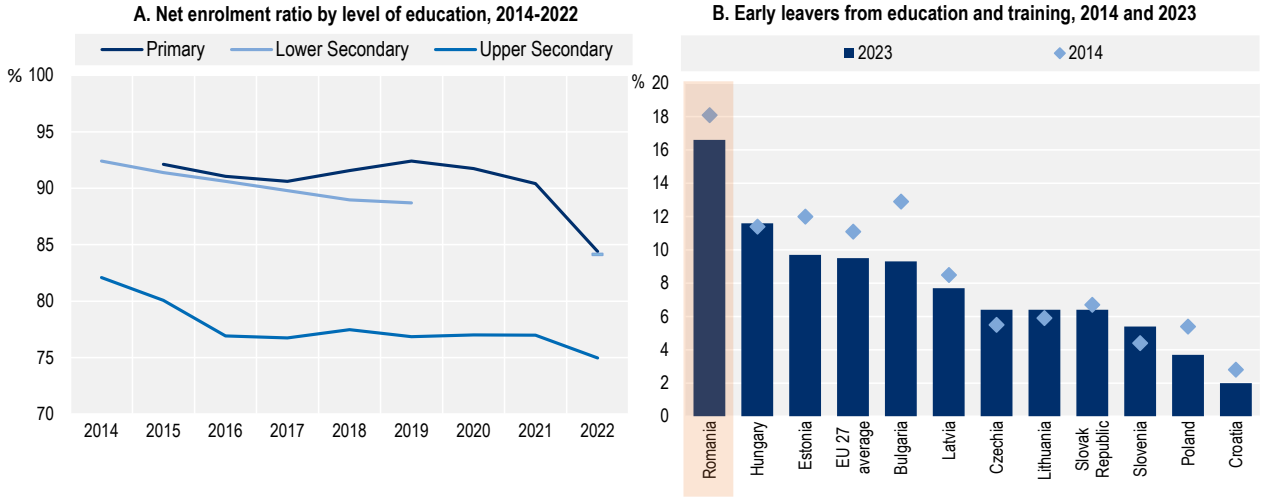

Note: *Ranked in descending order of the enrolment rate at age 3.*
Source: OECD (2024[31]), *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators*, https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en.

*In contrast to most OECD countries, Romania has not yet achieved universal participation in primary education and still has low enrolment in secondary education*

In Romania, participation in school education is low compared with OECD standards. The latest comparable data from 2022 shows net enrolment rates (reflecting students of the appropriate age) stood at 84% in primary (compared to 98% OECD average), 84% in lower secondary (98% OECD average) and 75% in upper secondary education (93% OECD average) (UIS, 2022[57]). These low participation rates have remained relatively stable over the past decade.

Low participation rates in secondary education are largely the result of high dropout. Transitions from lower to upper secondary, and then into tertiary education are particular weak points of the education system. Romania has the highest rate of early school leaving in the EU (see Figure 2.15), and in 2022, around 21% of 15-year-olds and 22% of 16-year-olds were out-of-school (Eurostat, 2022[58]). A national programme for reducing school dropout, along with the recent extension of compulsory education until Grade 12 aim to retain students in the system and signal the importance of upper secondary education in providing opportunities to progress to further education and in the labour market.

## Figure 2.15. Participation in secondary education remains low, and early school leaving is high in Romania



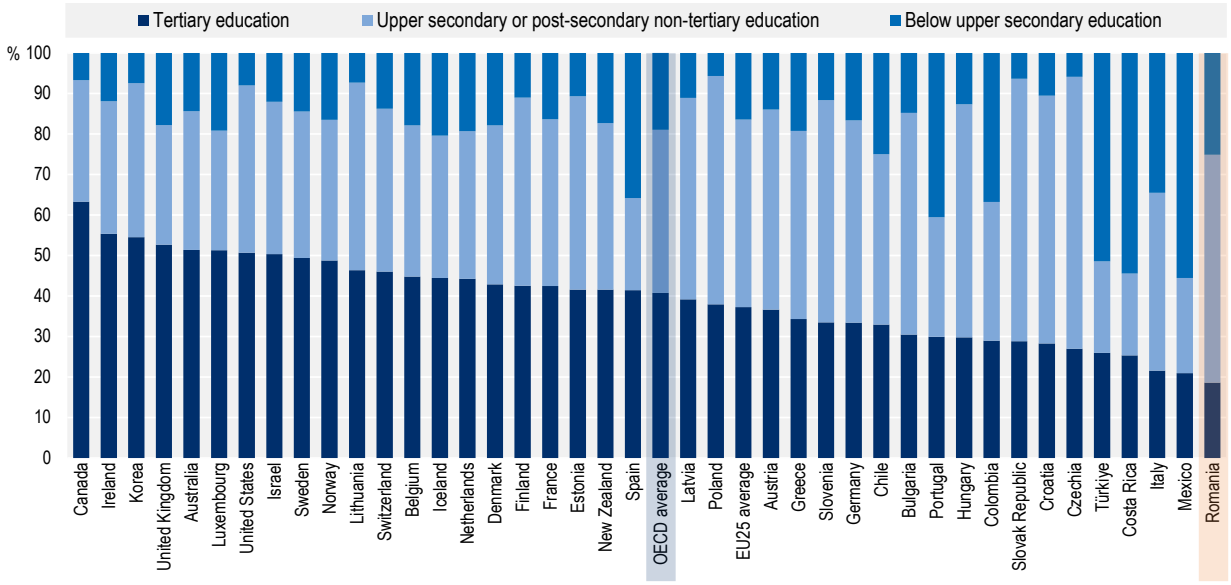

Note: *Panel B ranked in descending order of the percentage of early leavers from education and training in 2023.*
Source: UIS (2022[57]), Total net enrolment rate by level of education, https://data.uis.unesco.org/#, and Eurostat (2023[59]), Early leavers from education and training by sex and degree of urbanisation, https://doi.org/10.2908/EDAT_LFSE_30

### *Despite a significant increase, Romania has the lowest tertiary attainment rate compared to OECD countries*

The tertiary attainment rate in Romania has experienced a remarkable increase in recent decades. In 2023, 19% of Romanians aged 25-64 had a university degree, compared to only 10% in 2002 (Eurostat, 2023[60]). However, tertiary attainment rates remain well below the average attainment rate in the OECD (41%) and the OECD-EU (37%) (OECD, 2024[31]). According to a recent entry cohort study, approximately 52% of Romanian students who enrolled in a bachelor programme in 2015-16 graduated with a degree two years after the theoretical duration of the programme (Herteliu et al., 2022[61]).

## Figure 2.16. Tertiary attainment in Romania is low by international comparison

Percentage of adults (25-64 year-olds) with a given level of education as the highest level attained, 2023




Note: *Ranked in descending order of the percentage of 25-64 year-olds with tertiary attainment.*
Source: OECD (2024[31]), *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators*, https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en.

*Participation in adult education and training is comparatively low, but has improved in recent years*

While expanding, participation in adult education and training is low. In 2022, 26% of adults aged 25-64 had participated in learning within the last 12 months of being surveyed, a stark improvement relative to previous years (e.g. in 2016, this figure stood at 7%) but still well below the EU average (47%) (Eurostat, 2022[62]). Individuals with lower levels of education are much less likely to take part in adult education and training than more educated individuals. Nationally, only 7% of adults with lower secondary education or less participated in education or training, compared to 25% of individuals with upper secondary and post-secondary education, and 46% of individuals with tertiary education (Eurostat, 2022[62]).

### *Quality and outcomes*

*Many young Romanians do not meet minimum proficiency levels in science, reading and mathematics*

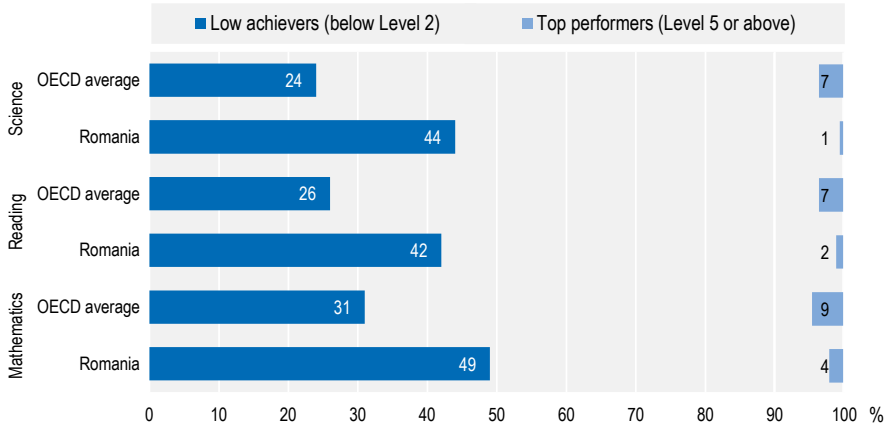
In the 2022 survey of the OECD Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA), Romania's 15-year-old students performed below most EU peers in science, reading and mathematics, outperforming only Bulgaria and Cyprus. This is largely explained by the high share of students who score below the baseline level of proficiency (level 2) and the low share that reach level 5 or 6 (OECD, 2023[63]). An estimated 49% of students did not meet minimum proficiency in mathematics, 44% in science and 42% in reading (see Figure 2.17). Since 2006, the share of students scoring below level 2 has remained stable at these high levels.

However, while low by overall OECD standards, Romania's performance is above that of many other PISA participants with similar expenditure levels. In mathematics, for example, Romania performs better than Colombia and Uruguay, despite relatively similar levels of expenditure. Moreover, between 2006 and 2022,

the national coverage of the PISA test increased significantly. In 2006, 72% of all 15-year-olds in Romania (5 118 participants) took the test, while in 2022, this rose to 76% (more than 7 300 participants). Maintaining relatively stable levels of performance with a larger cohort is itself an indicator of progress (OECD, 2023[64]).

## Figure 2.17. Romania still has a high share of students that do not meet minimum proficiency levels

Percentage of low and top performers in PISA 2022




Note: Below level 2 is less than 420.07 score points in mathematics, less than 407.47 score points in reading and less than 409.54 score points in science. Level 5 or above is at or above 606.99 score points in mathematics, at or above 625.61 score points in reading and at or above 633.33 score points in science.
Source: OECD (2023[63]), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en.

### *As in all OECD countries, Romanian students who experience lower levels of anxiety and exhibit a growth mindset are more likely to achieve higher academic scores*

PISA assesses a range of student attitudes, emotions and behaviours that can influence academic achievement (Lee and Stankov, 2018[65]; OECD, 2023[35]). In Romania, learning anxiety, and a growth mindset appear to have the largest influence on students' mathematics achievement in PISA, after accounting for students' and schools' socio-economic background.

Mathematics anxiety captures negative emotions towards learning, such as feeling powerless or stressed. Overall, Romania's 15-year-old students witness similar levels of mathematics anxiety as their peers in the OECD. For instance, about six out of ten Romanian students reported often worrying that math classes will be difficult for them or that they will obtain poor marks (the same that the OECD average of 60%) (OECD, 2023[63]). A one-point increase in the index of mathematics anxiety was associated with a nine-point decrease in Romanian students' mathematics scores (OECD, 2023[63]).

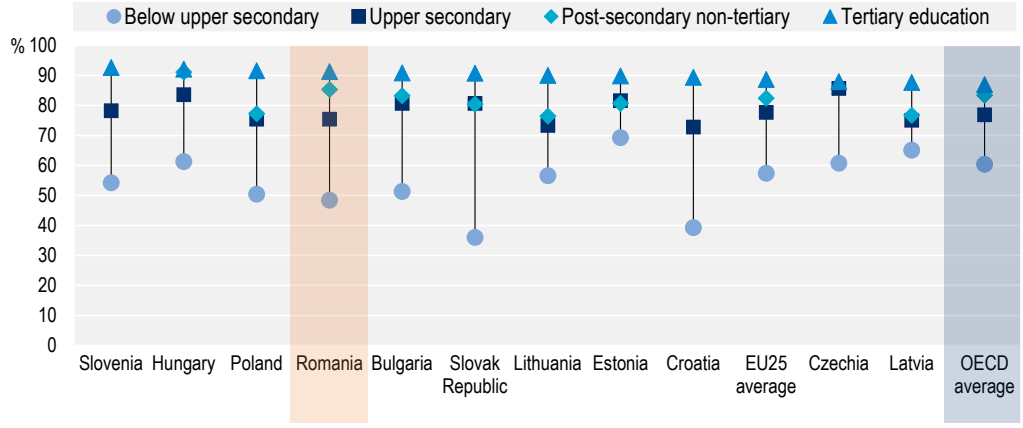
Students with a growth mindset believe their intelligence can be developed through effort, good strategies, and support from others. In Romania, around 43% of 15-year-old Romanian students consider their intelligence is something they can change, below the OECD average of 58% (OECD, 2023[63]). In Romania, these students had lower levels of anxiety, and scored on average 12 points higher in mathematics than their peers who believe their abilities and intelligence are fixed traits (OECD, 2023[63]).

*The returns of tertiary education are high, reflected in better employment prospects and higher salaries for university graduates*

In Romania, obtaining a university degree yields substantial benefits in the labour market. Some 91% of 25–64-year-olds with a tertiary degree are employed, slightly above the OECD average for similarly educated individuals (see Figure 2.18). Close to one in three tertiary students graduate from in-demand STEM programmes (28%) a larger share than in most countries in the OECD (24% on average) and the OECD-EU (25%) (OECD, 2022[66]).

### Figure 2.18. In Romania tertiary graduates have high employment rates

Percentage of employed 25-64 year-olds by educational attainment, 2023




Note: *Ranked in descending order of the employment rate of population with tertiary education.*
Source: OECD (2024[31]), *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators*, https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en.

Tertiary graduates have much better employment prospects than less educated workers in the country: 75% of upper secondary graduates (vocational and general) are employed against 48% of those with less than upper secondary education (see Figure 2.18). Romanian tertiary education graduates also enjoy substantial salary premium over those with lower levels of education. Compared to upper secondary graduates, workers with a tertiary degree earn on average 43% more (OECD, 2024[31]).

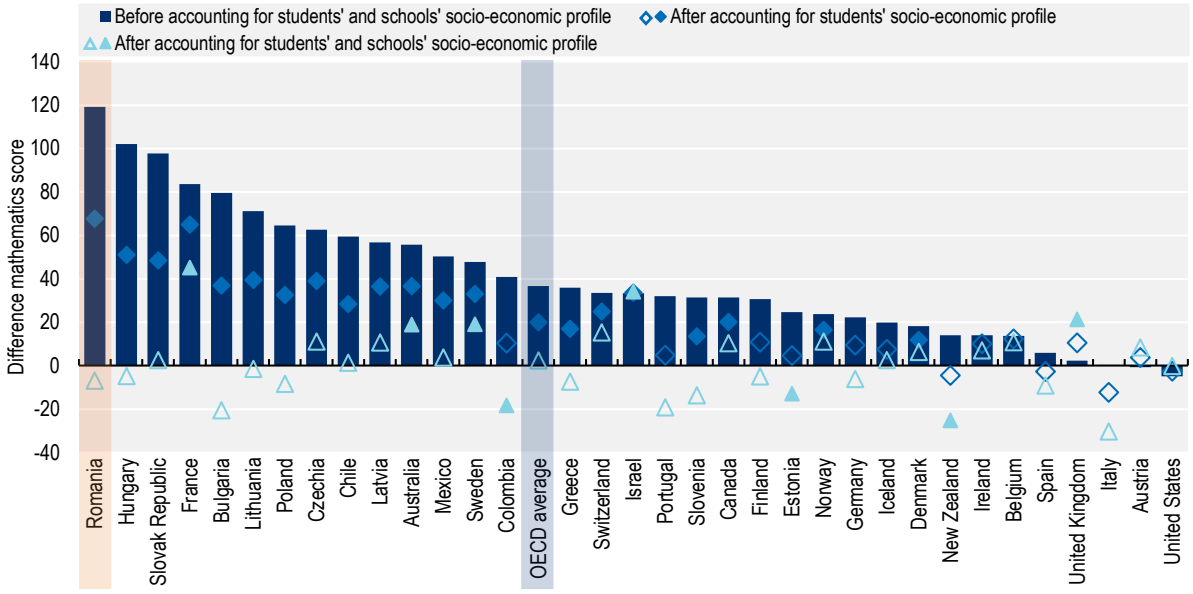
## *Equity*

*Social inequality has contributed to deep and widening disparities in access to education and achievement between rural and urban students*

Rural students face overlapping barriers to learning and participation, largely based on their socio-economic background. In PISA 2022, students in rural schools scored on average 119 points lower in mathematics compared to students in urban schools before accounting for students' and schools' socio-economic outcomes (OECD, 2023[64]). After accounting student and school profile differences are no longer significant, suggesting that the concentration of disadvantage within the school has a meaningful influence on learning outcomes. Disadvantaged students are disproportionately represented in rural areas, where 45% of the population is at risk of poverty and around 27% are self-identified Roma (Eurostat, 2023[7]; European Commission, 2022[15]). The difference in PISA performance between rural and urban students is the highest among OECD and CEE countries (see Figure 2.19).

## Figure 2.19. The urban-rural gap in performance is heavily influenced by socio-economic status

Change in mathematics performance when students report living in urban area compared to those living in rural area, 2022




Note: *Empty triangles/diamonds show the change in mathematics performance is not statistically significant. Ranked in descending order of the difference in mathematics score before accounting for students' and schools' socio-economic performance.*
Source: OECD (2023[64]), PISA database 2022, https ://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/

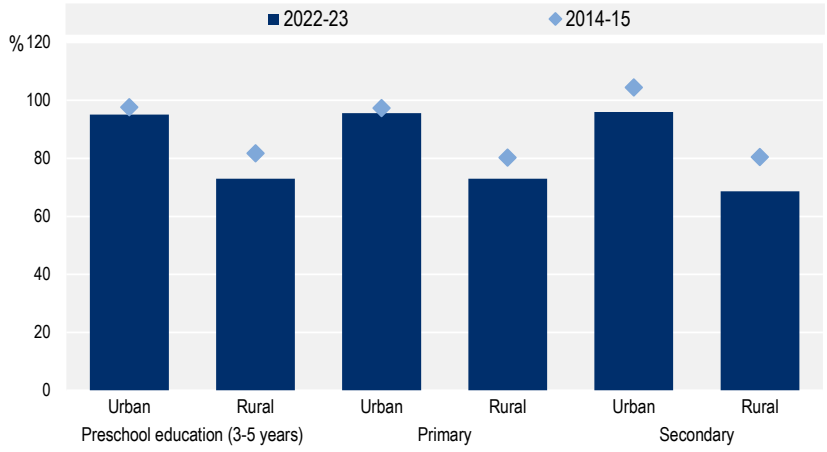
### *The rural-urban gap in learning outcomes is shaped by disparities in earlier education opportunities that persist as students progress through the education system*

Rural-urban disparities in participation emerge early on and persist as students progress through the education system. Children living in rural areas are far less likely to participate in early childhood education and care, compared to children living in cities (see Figure 2.20). Rural students are also more likely to be absent, and to drop out from primary and secondary school (OECD, 2023[64]). While in 2023 3% of 18- to 24-year-olds in cities left school before completing upper secondary education, this rate stood at 28% in rural areas (Eurostat, 2023[67]).

Low academic achievement and attainment and significant socio-economic barriers, combined with a limited offer of second chance and post-secondary education programmes in rural areas, make it difficult for rural students to pursue education beyond the secondary level or to successfully transition into the labour market. In rural areas, only 61% of secondary students graduate from upper secondary education, compared to 90% in urban areas (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[68]). This disparity partly explains why only 5% of 15-64-year-olds living in rural parts of the country have completed tertiary education, compared to 32% in cities (Eurostat, 2023[69]). Romania also has the highest share of youth in rural areas who are neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET) in the EU, and the second largest rural-urban gap (see Figure 2.21).

## Figure 2.20. Romanian students in rural areas are less likely to participate in education, and enrolment rates have declined since 2015

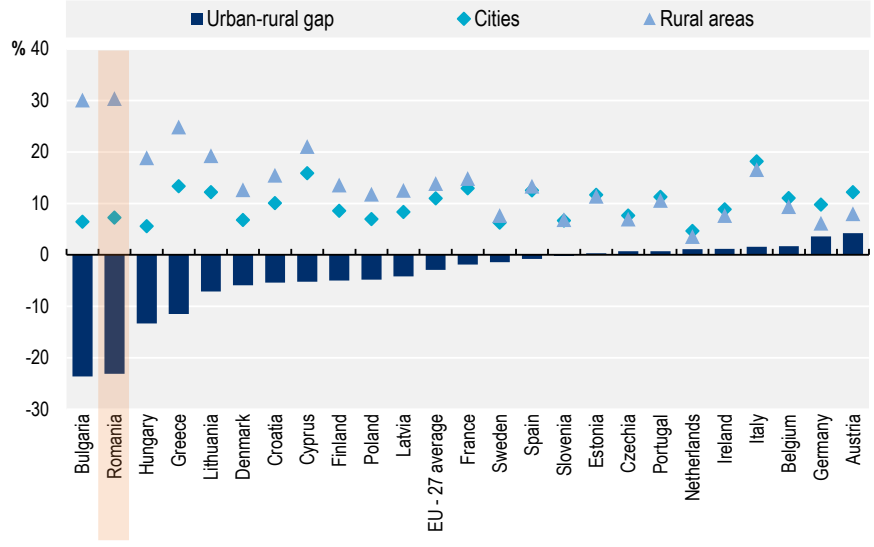
Gross enrolment rate by education level




Source: Ministry of Education of Romania (2023[68]), Raport privind starea învățământului preuniversitar din România 2022 – 2023 [Report on the state of pre-university education in Romania 2022-2023], https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/_fi%C8%99iere/Minister/2023/Transparenta/Rapoarte_sistem/Raport-Starea-invatamantului-preuniversitar-2022-2023.pdf

## Figure 2.21. Romania has one of the highest urban-rural disparities in the share of NEET in the EU

Percentage of 18 to 24 years-old neither in employment nor in education and training, 2023




Note: *Ranked in descending order of the urban-rural difference in the percentage of 18 to 24 years-old neither in employment nor in education and training.*
Source: Eurostat (2023[70]), Young people neither in employment nor in education and training by sex, age and degree of urbanisation (NEET rates), https://doi.org/10.2908/EDAT_LFSE_29

*Ongoing efforts aim to support the participation and achievement of Roma children and youth, as they are particularly vulnerable in the education system*

Estimates suggest that many Roma students remain out of school or drop out before completing compulsory education. According to a 2021 survey by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 27% of Roma children aged 3-5 in Romania attended pre-school, below the average participation of the general population (see Access and participation above) (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023[71]). Estimates suggest that close to eight out of every ten of out-of-school children and youth in Romania are Roma (Rotaru, 2019[72]).

Roma students face high levels of segregation in schools. This contributes to low academic achievement and dropout and leads to low labour market participation for Roma. In 2021, only around one in five Roma aged 20-24 reported completing at least upper secondary education, and just 1% of those aged 30-34 had completed tertiary education. This partly explains very low labour market participation, with only around 41% of Roma declared being in paid work. Education and labour market outcomes remain well below those of the general population (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023[71]).

Romania is implementing several measures to increase Roma children's and youth's participation in education and enhance their chances of success in school and later in life. These initiatives include summer kindergartens to ease the transition into primary education. They also provide community and school mediators to facilitate schools' communication and involvement with Roma families, and reserved places in tertiary education (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[68]). In addition to measures to increase funding for disadvantaged students and schools (described above), the Ministry of Education has recently received technical assistance from the EU to systematically monitor school segregation and develop policies to promote integration and diversity in schools.

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## Notes

[1] CEE average comprises the following Central and Eastern European countries: Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, and Slovak Republic.

[2] National currency values have been converted using purchasing power parity (PPP) rates.

[3] OECD-EU (or EU-25) refers to the 25 countries that are Members or accession countries of both the European Union members. The 25 countries are Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden.

# 3 Early Childhood Education and Care: Giving all children a strong foundation for life

Romania is taking important steps to improve access to quality early childhood education and care (ECEC). In recent years, the country has progressively transitioned to an integrated system, lowered the age of compulsory education, and invested in new ECEC facilities and staff training. However, compared to OECD countries, enrolment in Romania's ECEC sector remains low—particularly among children from disadvantaged, rural, and Roma backgrounds—and has declined in recent years. This chapter explores how Romania can build on its promising reforms and learn from OECD evidence and experience to enhance the skills and support for ECEC professionals, expand coverage in disadvantaged areas, remove barriers to participation, and ensure adequate funding and more effective resource allocation to support families and young children.

Romania increasingly recognises the power and promise of early childhood education and care (ECEC), particularly for disadvantaged children who stand to gain the most from early learning and developmental support. In the past years, the Romanian government has embarked on a range of reforms to raise participation in ECEC, expand coverage and enhance the quality of services. It has progressively transitioned to an integrated system, lowered the age of compulsory education, and devoted substantial funds from the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) to new facilities and staff training.

This growing commitment to ECEC is well-timed to address prevailing challenges in the sector. ECEC enrolment rates are below the OECD average at every age and have been declining in recent years. As in most OECD countries, children from low socio-economic backgrounds, including those from rural areas or of Roma origin, are less likely to participate in ECEC programmes. Despite growing recognition of the benefits of ECEC and the emphasis given to the sector in recent policies, funding for the sector remains lower than for other education levels and below international standards. This chapter highlights how Romania can learn from OECD countries to build on its promising initiatives and policy reforms aimed at promoting equal access to quality ECEC services. It focuses on policies to enhance the skills and support provided for ECEC professionals, expand ECEC coverage in disadvantaged areas and remove barriers to participation. It also provides avenues to ensure adequate funding and a more effective resource allocation to support families and young children.

## Chapter 3 at a Glance

- **Section I:** Provides an overview of Romania's ECEC sector, focusing on how policies compare internationally.
- **Section II:** Compares the sector's performance with OECD benchmarks on international indicators.
- **Section III:** Provides recommendations on how Romania can learn from OECD evidence and experience to further improve ECEC.

### Figure 3.1. Recommendations on ECEC

| | |
|---|---|
| Quality | Better align the ECEC professional development offer with staff individual and collective needs |
| | Expand entry pathways into ECEC roles and revise the ECEC career structure |
| | Provide more guidance and support to staff, ECECcentres, and local authorities on how to create positive learning environments for young children |
| Equality | Plan and develop the ECEC network to reach children who need it most |
| | Enhance demand for ECEC services, and strengthen parental involvement in children's education, through programmes targeting the most disadvantaged families |
| Gover-nance | Increase investment for early education and care services to provide universal coverage of high quality |
| | Strengthen the planning and allocation of public resources to support young children and families |

## Section I: Overview of the early childhood education and care system

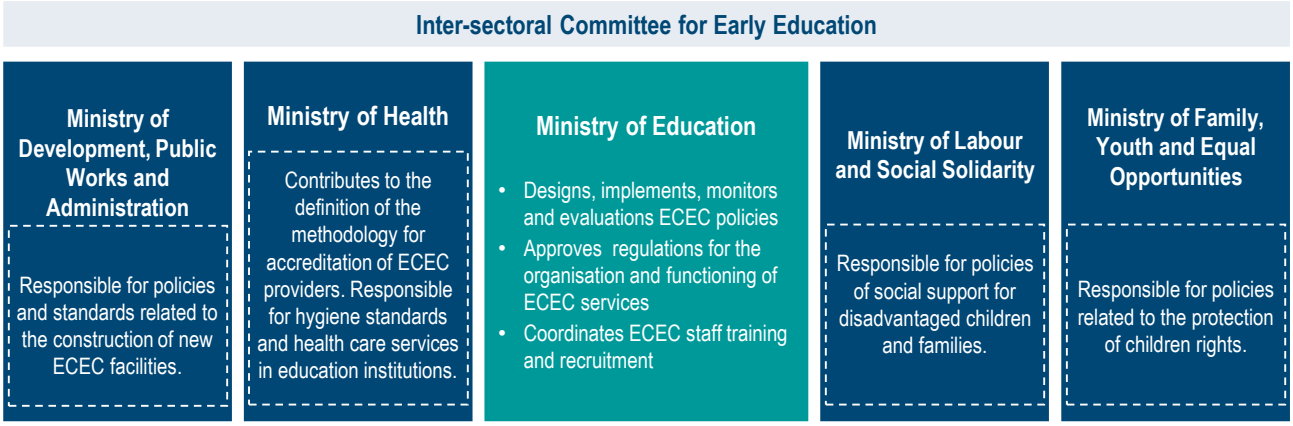
### *Governance and structure*

*Romania is moving towards an integrated ECEC system*

As in most OECD countries, ECEC is divided into two age-based cycles in Romania: early childhood educational development, referred to as "ante pre-primary education" (ISCED 01, for children aged 3 months – 3 years), and pre-primary education (ISCED 02, for children aged 3-6). From the 2021-2022 school year, the Ministry of Education has been gradually integrating nurseries into the education system, as part of government efforts to improve the quality and availability of ECEC services. Previously, nurseries had been overseen by local authorities under the authority of the Ministry of Health, with a focus primarily on childcare. The Ministry of Health continues to help define accreditation criteria for ECEC providers related to hygiene and school health care standards, while the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration defines infrastructure quality requirements and supervises the construction of new ECEC facilities.

Investments through Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) aim to strengthen coordination among various ministries working on policies that support early childhood education (Portal Legislativ, 2023[1]). NRRP funds supported the development of a national intersectoral collaboration framework for early childhood education that outlines responsibilities for the ministries involved and includes annual implementation plans. An intersectoral committee for early education has also been established to coordinate the delivery of planned measures (see Figure 3.2). However, the Ministry of Finance, responsible for providing funding for the sector, currently does not appear as one of its core members.

**Figure 3.2. Ongoing efforts aim to improve coordination among various ministries working on policies that support ECEC**




Source: Ministry of Education of Romania (2023[2]), Accession candidate country's self-assessment of policies and practices in the area of education and skills: Guidelines and questionnaire Romania; Portal legislativ (2023[1]), ORDIN 5407 17/08/2023, https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/277069

*The Ministry manages the ECEC sector through its county representations, though local authorities have an important say on network planning and infrastructure*

As with other levels of education, the Ministry of Education determines ECEC policies and regulations centrally. Implementation is overseen by the 42 County School Inspectorates (CSIs), which are the

Ministry's representatives at the county level. The 2023 pre-university education law introduced significant changes to the balance of responsibilities between central government and CSIs.

These changes are most notable in the area of quality assurance, where the majority of inspection responsibilities are being transferred from CSIs to the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance and Inspection in Pre-University Education (ARACIIP, previously ARACIP). CSIs themselves will be reorganised into County Directorates for pre-university education (County Directorates, hereafter) and the focus of their work will shift from control to support. Here, they will be able to draw on the expertise of the affiliated County Centres for the Teaching Career and Centres for Educational Resources and Assistance.

Local public authorities (communes, towns, and cities) have a limited role in ECEC policy in Romania except in the areas of network planning and infrastructure, where they have an important function in the allocation of services, and in the construction, maintenance, and rehabilitation of ECEC facilities. While local governments often have a better understanding of the needs of local communities, they currently receive relatively limited support to plan their ECEC network. Inadequate investments in the ECEC network can have implications for the equity and efficiency of provision.

### *ECEC provision in Romania is primarily public and centre-based*

ECEC is mainly provided in formal public settings. These include kindergartens (for children aged 3-6) and nurseries (for children aged 3 months to 3 years), though as of 2023 nurseries represented only 3% of all ECEC settings (see Table 3.1). A distinct feature of the ECEC network in Romania is the organisation of individual institutions within larger clusters. In the 2022-2023 school year, most ECEC institutions (76%) were managed by either a larger kindergarten (in the case of nurseries) or a school (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[2]). The remaining 24% of ECEC facilities were independent "legal entities", meaning that they operated under their own leadership, without being subordinate to another institution. This feature of Romania's ECEC network has implications for the development of specialised leadership in ECEC settings that are managed by a school.

The majority of ECEC settings are public institutions[1] (see Table 3.1). In 2022, less than 7% of children were enrolled in private institutions (see Figure 3.3). Since 2023, Romania has sought to expand the provision of complementary services, such as toy libraries (also called "ludothèques"), play groups, and community kindergartens. These complementary services are seen as a means to increase coverage in remote and disadvantaged communities, as well as in areas with high unmet demand (see Main reform priorities below).

Young children from vulnerable families can also access day-care centres, which provide social services for children from birth and up to age 18. Young children can attend these centres in addition to formal ECEC settings (Ministry of Labor and Social Justice of Romania, 2019[3]). These centres are not part of the education system. They are administered by public local authorities and authorised by the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity.

Beyond the above, informal childcare arrangements are widespread. In 2019, more than 50% of children aged 0-5 were cared for informally, including by relatives, friends or other informal caregivers (OECD, 2019[4]). However, contrary to most EU countries, in Romania there is no publicly regulated home-based provision (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019[5]).

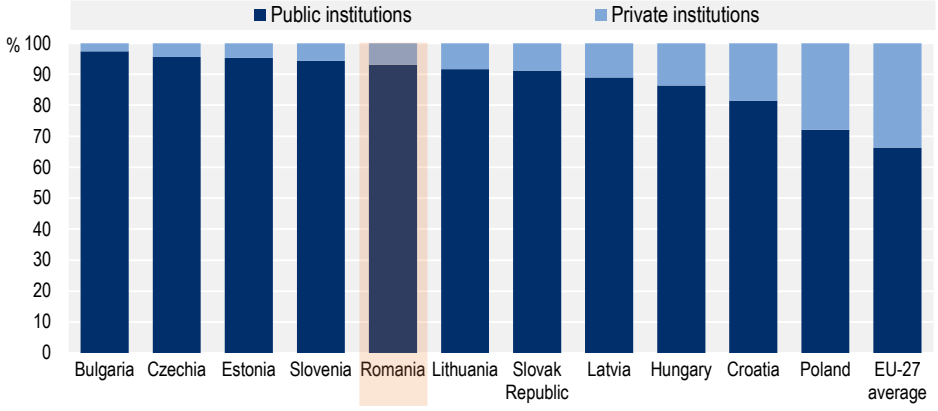
### Table 3.1. Types of ECEC settings and programmes in Romania

| ECEC settings | Type of ECEC programme | ISCED classification | Theoretical starting age | Duration | ECEC settings in school year 2022-23 | | Daily/Weekly length |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | Public | Private | |
| Nurseries | Early childhood educational development | ISCED 01 | 3 months | 3 years | 334 | 29 | 5h/day; 25 h/week (regular programme) OR 10h/day; 50h/week (extended programme) |
| Kindergartens | Pre-primary education | ISCED 02 | Age 3 | 3 years | 10,002 | 656 | 5h/day; 25 h/week (regular programme) OR 10h/day; 50h/week (extended programme) |
| Complementary ECEC services (ludothèques, play groups, community kindergartens) | Early childhood educational development / Pre-primary education | ISCED 01/02 | 3 months | 6 years | 95 | 3 | 5h/day; 25 h/week<br>Minimum duration for an effective intervention: 2h/day, 100h/year (ludothèques and play groups); 5h/day, 3 days/week (community kindergarten) |

Note: Includes all ECEC facilities, public and private, regardless of their legal status.
Source: Ministry of Education of Romania (2023[2]), Accession candidate country's self-assessment of policies and practices in the area of education and skills: Guidelines and questionnaire Romania.

### Figure 3.3. Most children in ECEC attend public facilities

Percentage of children enrolled in public and private institutions (government-dependent and independent private institutions), ISCED 0, 2022




Note: *Ranked in descending order of percentage of children enrolled in public institutions.*
Source: Eurostat (2022[6]), Pupils enrolled in early childhood education by sex, type of institution and intensity of participation, https://doi.org/10.2908/EDUC_UOE_ENRP01.

*Romania is progressively extending compulsory education to include the pre-primary years*

Starting in 2020, Romania extended compulsory education to include the last two years of pre-primary (for children aged 4 and 5), with plans to further lower the starting age to 3 years old by 2030. This progressive lowering of the starting age brings Romania closer to common practice across the OECD. In almost half of OECD countries, pre-primary is mandatory, and in several countries, children have the legal entitlement to attend early childhood education before the compulsory starting age (OECD, 2024[7]).

However, Romania currently has no legal entitlement to ECEC for children under age 5, although the Ministry of Education introduced priority enrolment for all 4 and 5-year-old children in kindergarten. Insufficient facilities and human resources remain two important barriers to participation.

### *Funding of ECEC*

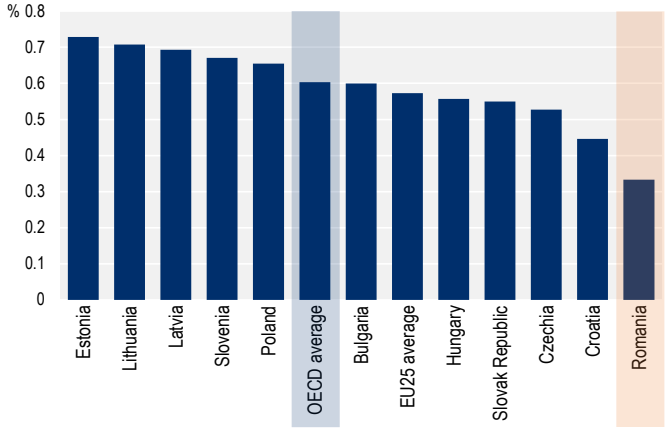
*Total spending in ECEC has increased in recent years, but remains below international standards*

While the share of total spending devoted to ECEC (ISCED 01 and 02) has been rising, Romania devoted 0.4% of GDP to ECEC in 2021, less than half the OECD and EU-25 average of 0.9% (OECD, 2024[7]). These cross-country differences reflect variations in legal entitlements, participation intensity, and starting ages. Therefore, focusing on children aged 3-5 provides a more consistent basis for comparison. Data for this age group shows that Romania's expenditure remains below that of other Central and Eastern European (CEE) and OECD countries (see Figure 3.4).

As a result, per-child expenditure remains below OECD levels (see Figure 3.5). In 2021, annual total expenditure per child (ISCED 01 and 02) amounted to approximately USD 5 521, compared to USD 12 749 on average across the OECD. The average annual expenditure on pre-primary education has increased to a larger extent in Romania compared to other CEE countries as well as the OECD and EU averages, although this increase has been coupled by a reduction in the number of enrolled children (see Figure 3.5). As in OECD countries, per-child spending on early childhood educational development (USD 14 183 spend per child in 2021) is substantially higher than for pre-primary education (USD 5 201 in 2021) (OECD, 2024[7]). The 2023 law aims to progressively increase annual public expenditure for education, to meet at least 15% of total government expenditure (see Chapter 2).

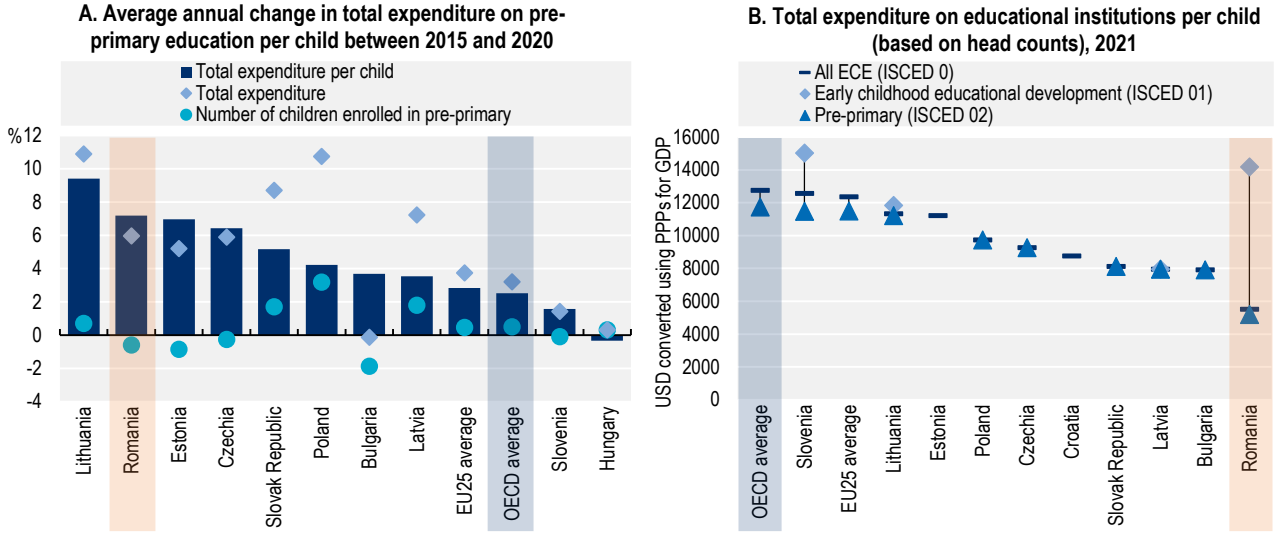
## Figure 3.4. In Romania spending on ECEC is low compared to OECD countries

Expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of GDP for all children aged 3 to 5 enrolled in ECE and primary education, 2021




Note: *Ranked in descending order of expenditure as a percentage of GDP.*
Source: OECD (2024[7]), *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en.

## Figure 3.5. Annual expenditure per child has increased, yet it remains below international standards




Note: *Ranked in descending order of average annual change in total expenditure on pre-primary education per child between 2015 and 2020. Ranked in descending order of total expenditure on educational institutions per child in all ECE.*
Source: OECD (2023[8]), *Education at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en; OECD (2024[7]), *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en.

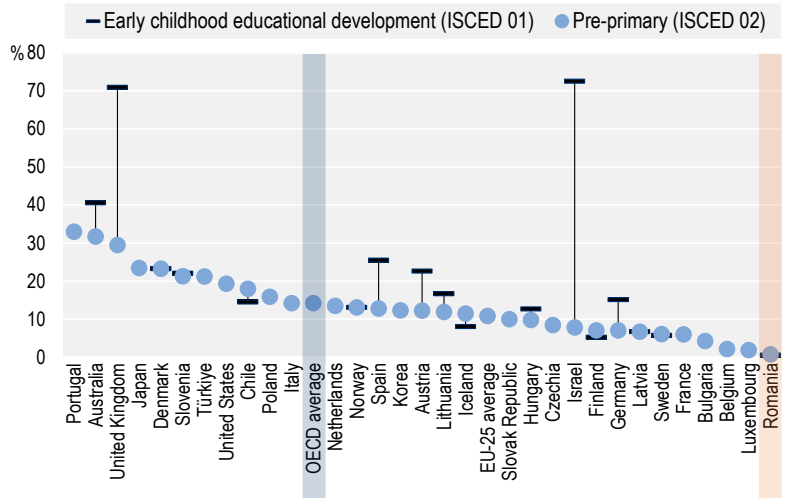
### *Most spending for ECEC is public, and stems from central government*

In Romania, most expenditure for ECEC is public. Private funding represents a small share: in 2021, private funding represented just 0.8% of total expenditure on early childhood development (ISCED 01) and 0.5% on pre-primary education (ISCED 02) (see Figure 3.6). This is lower than in the OECD, where countries have often relied on private funding to increase coverage where public provision has not been able to keep up with demand.

In 2021, international funding, primarily from the EU, accounted for around 3% of total expenditure on ECEC in Romania (OECD, 2021[9]). These resources play a critical role in financing investments to expand the sector. For instance, between 2013-2024 Romania built 364 kindergartens through the EU-funded Early Education Reform Project (PRET). More recently, the NRRP has allocated funds to build 124 new nurseries and 98 complementary education and care services by 2025. Additionally, both the NRRP, and the Education and Employment Program (PEO) 2021-2027 fund large-scale training of ECEC staff. NRRP finances training for 19 950 staff, including teachers, educators, and quality monitoring personnel in both standard and complementary early education services, prioritising newly established ones (Ministry of Investments and European Projects of Romania, 2021[10]). The PEO aims to train 10 350 ECEC staff with focus on curriculum, quality and access.

## Figure 3.6. Private expenditure on early childhood education is lower than all OECD countries

Relative proportions of private expenditure on early childhood education (after public to private transfers), 2021




Note: *Ranked in descending order of average pre-primary (ISCED 02).*
Source: OECD (2021[9]), Distribution of government, private and non-domestic expenditure on educational institutions, http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/f5

In 2021, central funding represented 71% of total government expenditure in pre-primary education, with local governments covering the remaining 29% (OECD, 2024[7]). In contrast, local authorities have historically provided the bulk of funding for early childhood development (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[2]). However, following the recent transfer of nurseries from local authorities to the Ministry of Education, these costs will now be primarily funded by the central government based on a per-capita funding formula, in line with the funding model used for kindergartens and schools (see Chapter 2).

### *Local authorities play an important role in funding infrastructure and ad-hoc subsidies for families, but their capacity to do so varies*

Local authorities are responsible for the construction and maintenance of ECEC settings, and for raising capital funds for ECEC, either from their own revenues, or through applying for national or international funding. Poorer localities typically have lower revenues to invest in infrastructure. In addition, Romania lacks system-level mechanisms to target capital funding to specific areas, apart from prioritising funding demands stemming from disadvantaged localities, from localities with a growing population or that demonstrate strong parental demand. This means smaller rural municipalities, with lower administrative capacity or sparse demand – including those with concentrations of low-educated families who may be less informed about the benefits of ECEC – are less likely to raise capital funding than larger and more advantaged ones, even if they face higher socio-economic disadvantage.

A similar situation occurs with ad-hoc family subsidies. While public nurseries do not charge fees, families must cover the costs of meals for children enrolled in extended programmes. Local authorities can provide ad-hoc subsidies from their own revenues to help low-income families cover ancillary costs of childcare. However, as with infrastructure, poorer localities might not have the same capacity to provide these subsidies as wealthier ones. In the absence of national targeted programmes to allocate funds based on evidence of need, communities in socio-economically deprived areas are at a disadvantage.

## *ECEC Workforce*

### *ECEC settings employ staff with diverse qualifications*

Romania's ECEC centres employ a diversity of staff (see Figure 3.7). Two main types of professionals work directly with children in pre-primary education: pre-primary teachers, and educators. Pre-primary teachers need a bachelor's degree (ISCED 6), and educators need at least a specialised high-school degree (ISCED 3). The Ministry of Education has repeatedly sought to raise the minimum qualification requirements for all pre-primary teaching staff to ISCED 6, yet some still enter with the minimum requirement of ISCED 3 (as the option to train in a pedagogical high school remains).

While minimum qualifications at ISCED 3 are below the formal requirements in many OECD countries, in practice, pre-primary educators often enrol in bachelor's or master's degree programmes to gain a teacher status and move up in the salary scale (European Commission, 2022[11]). Currently, most pre-primary staff hold a bachelor's degree (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, Eurydice, 2023[12]).

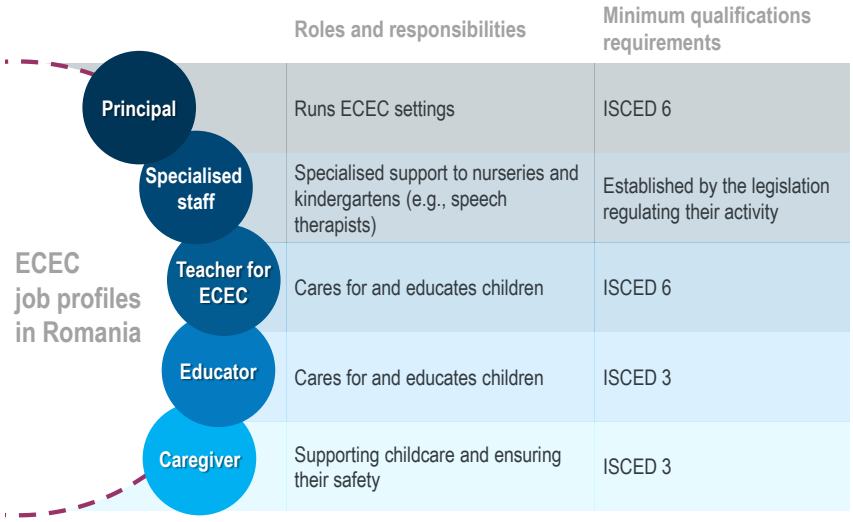
With the recent integration of nurseries into the education system, nurseries have also opened teaching positions to promote early learning and development, with minimum qualification in pedagogy at ISCED 3 level (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[2]). Similar to pre-primary educators, qualifications for early years educators are lower than in the OECD. While there is some variation, the majority of OECD countries require minimum qualifications at post-secondary level (ISCED 4) (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2023[13]; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019[5]).

Currently, in nurseries, there are two main staff profiles: early years educators, who are the main practitioners working with children, and caregivers. Previously, not all nursery staff were required to have specialised training on child development. However, as of 2022, early years educators are required to have a high-school degree in pedagogy (ISCED 3), whereas caregivers must have a high-school diploma, in any field, and complete a 30-hour training module on early childhood education (Government of Romania, 2022[14]).[2]

### *ECEC settings in Romania would benefit from stronger pedagogical leadership*

Leaders of nurseries and kindergartens need a university degree and experience in early childhood education and care. However, since most ECEC facilities are kindergartens attached to a larger school, their leadership teams are not always specialised in the early and pre-primary years. These facilities operate under the school principal's supervision, who appoints a coordinator from within the ECEC staff. ECEC coordinators remain 'peers among peers', and typically have roles limited to providing information about regulatory changes in the system and professional development opportunities. As a result, it is possible that many ECEC centres face challenges in providing strong pedagogical leadership for the pre-primary and early years.[3]

## Figure 3.7. ECEC settings draw on a range of different profiles with different qualification levels




Source: Ministry of Education of Romania (2023[15]), Legea învăţământului preuniversitar nr. 198/2023 [Pre-university education law no. 198/2023], https://lege5.ro/Gratuit/geztqmjtgq2tm/legea-invatamantului-preuniversitar-nr-198-2023/3; Oberhuemer and Schreyer, (2018[16]), Early Childhood Workforce Profiles in 30 countries with key contextual data, https://www.seepro.eu/ISBN-publication.pdf

### *Efforts are underway to improve the quality of initial preparation for ECEC staff and to upskill and expand the nursery workforce*

Romania has introduced policies to ensure consistency in initial education, given that the quality of initial preparation for ECEC staff has generally been mixed. Notably, initial education programmes are now expected to align with professional competency profiles. However, accreditation procedures do not yet require providers to demonstrate how their study programmes help candidates develop key competencies in the early education curriculum. This can lead to significant variation in the quality and relevance of initial education. To address this, the Ministry of Education has introduced a new "Early Education" bachelor's programme for future ECEC teachers, with the first cohorts expected to start in 2025. This programme, which will be provided in three tertiary education institutions (TEIs) in Bucureşti and Iași, is informed by the recently developed profile and professional standards for educator and teachers in early education. The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) has also defined quality standards for the new bachelor, which will be revised in line with the profile, the professional standards and other curricular directions from the Ministry of Education.

In addition, the Ministry of Education introduced in 2023 new in-service training programmes to enable existing and new staff to reskill as part of efforts to address shortages of qualified specialists in nurseries. For example, practicing pre-primary and primary school teachers, and those with qualifications in pre-primary or primary education are able to retrain to work in nurseries. These individuals can be transferred directly to nurseries and will have until 2025 to complete a specialised in-service training course on early education and care in order to remain in post (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[2]). Existing nursery staff will also be able to retrain to fill educator positions until September 2028.

### *Ongoing reforms aim to develop opportunities for centre-based, collaborative learning*

In-service professional development has traditionally consisted of individual participation in courses. Other than the teacher pedagogical circles, ECEC staff have limited opportunities to engage as a team in collaborative learning. Teachers and educators are required to accumulate a specific number of credits from accredited external training providers to be eligible for promotion and financial rewards (Ministry of

Education of Romania, 2023[2]). Along with other barriers, such as training sessions being held at inconvenient times or days for staff, this may lead staff to prioritise training options based on the number of credits they offer or their scheduled time, rather than their quality or relevance.

In a positive move, the 2023 pre-university education law aims to develop centre-based opportunities for teachers to learn and develop professionally. It introduced structured mentorship for novice and practicing teachers, as well as the expectations that ECEC centres and schools organise peer-learning communities. The 2019 curriculum reform for ECEC introduced collaborative learning activities for staff as part of their weekly schedule. In addition to the 25 teaching hours, 3 hours per week are allocated for collaborative learning at the school level. These are promising measures, as mentorship and collaboration are amongst the most effective strategies to transform teaching and caring practices (Boeskens, Nusche and Yurita, 2020[17]).

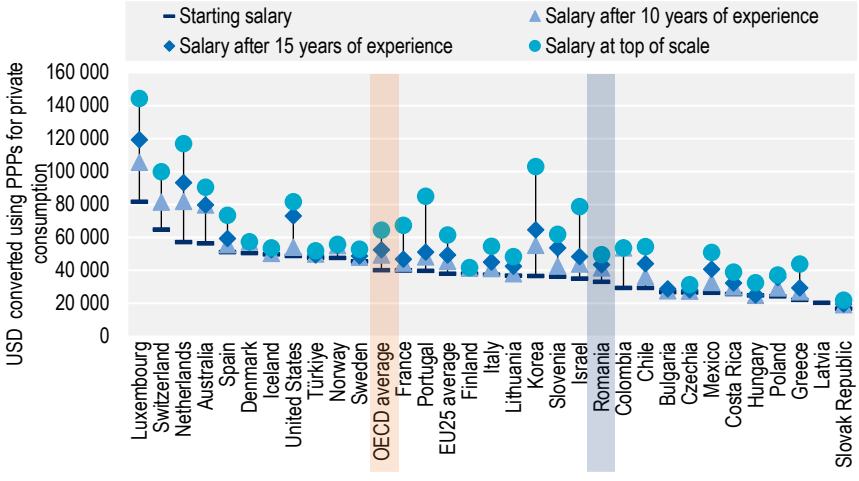
### *A relatively slow salary progression lowers the attractiveness of ECEC careers, but there are plans to address this*

Pre-primary teacher salaries in Romania are below those of international peers. For example, in 2023 the annual average salary for pre-primary teachers (ISCED 02) in Romania stood at USD 33 267 PPP, compared to the OECD average of USD 40 167 PPP and the OECD EU average of 38 039 (OECD, 2024[7]). Salary progression for teachers in Romania is also slow with relatively modest increases after 10 and 15 years of experience, and significant raises occurring only at the top of the salary scale (see Figure 3.8). Recent reforms aim to address this. In 2023, the Ministry of Education increased the base pay for teachers with further plans to reduce the time it takes to reach the top of the salary scale (OECD, 2024[18]).

Nationally, the salaries of ECEC teaching staff are more competitive with salaries of primary and secondary teachers than in most OECD and CEE countries. For instance, lower secondary teachers earn, on average, 18% more than pre-primary teachers in the OECD, while in Romania this difference is only of 4% (OECD, 2024[7]).

## Figure 3.8. Pre-primary teaching staff experience a slow salary progression

Pre-primary teachers' statutory salaries, based on the most prevalent qualifications at different points in teachers' careers, 2023




Note: Annual salaries of full-time teachers in public institutions, in equivalent USD converted using PPPs for private consumption. *Ranked in descending order of starting salary.*
Source: OECD (2024[7]), *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en.

*There is scope to develop tools and processes to identify teachers' and educators' professional development needs*

OECD countries generally rely on two types of practices to monitor staff quality and identify professional development needs, although there is large variation between countries in the extent to which these practices are used: external monitoring of overall staff practice, often conducted through inspections; and internal appraisal, generally carried out through staff self-evaluations and centre-based reviews (OECD, 2015[19]). In Romania, external monitoring, previously carried out through CSI inspections and now transitioning to ARACIIP under the new legislation, looks at overall staff practice (see below). However, in the past, this information has not appeared to be analysed or used to inform professional development. In addition, individual teachers are evaluated externally through "specialty inspections" to determine promotion. However, these appraisals gather limited authentic evidence of practice and, again, do not appear to be used by inspectors to shape training (Kitchen et al., 2017[20]).

ECEC centres may benefit from additional tools – such as observation forms – to collect evidence of practice, and use appraisal results to orient staff to relevant learning, for instance through an individual professional development plan (OECD, 2024[18]; Kitchen et al., 2017[20]). This would provide opportunities for staff to openly discuss professional development needs and identify areas for collaborative learning within and across centres.

Moreover, information on the profile and training needs of staff appears to be limited. Ongoing reforms aim to establish a new national centre for the professional development of teachers, which among other tasks, will be responsible for collecting periodic information on teachers' and educators' training needs and monitor their participation in professional development. The Ministry of Education is also developing a questionnaire to survey nursery staff on their training needs.

### *Monitoring and quality assurance practices*

*Romania has established quality standards for licensing, external evaluation, and self-evaluation of ECEC settings, yet there is room to strengthen these processes*

Kindergartens, and since 2021 nurseries, are licensed and evaluated by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance Pre-university Education (ARACIP, which will become the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance and Inspection in Pre-university Education, ARACIIP). ARACIP's licensing framework, also called "provisional operating authorisation" establishes minimum requirements for new nurseries and kindergartens, including compliance with regulations regarding the provision of health, care and nutrition services, and the physical environment (Government of Romania, 2020[21]).

The Ministry of Education has also developed guidelines on operating requirements – e.g. opening hours, maximum group size – as well as standards for the use of space and materials in ECEC settings (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2022[22]; Government of Romania, 2022[14]; Government of Romania, 2022[23]). While these standards define the minimum requirements to operate, they are dispersed in different ministerial orders, and many are drafted in general, legal terms. In addition, ECEC settings, and in particular nurseries, appear to need more hands-on support to organise the physical space and acquire materials that enable rich child-staff interactions. The absence of a consolidated licensing framework and support makes it hard for prospective providers and existing settings to have a clear and comprehensive overview of the minimum standards new nurseries should follow.

With regards to evaluation, ARACIP has recently revised its evaluation standards and process in an attempt to make them more useful for schools and ECEC centres. For example, standards, which apply to both external evaluation and self-evaluation, are now less compliance-oriented and more focused on examining practices, while the external evaluation process devotes more time to the observation of teaching and learning and less to reviewing paperwork (Eurydice, 2022[24]; Ministry of Education of

Romania, 2023[25]). However, ARACIP is yet to develop resources to help apply its standards to the ECEC sector. Recognising that many ECEC settings are managed by a larger school, most standards in the framework are common to all pre-university institutions, and some are specific for ECEC settings. Descriptors provide a list of requirements rather than statements of practice that help evaluators and ECEC centres visualise what good practice looks like. Furthermore, while there are evaluators specialised in ECEC, they seem insufficient to meet national needs. In 2022, from the 434 external evaluators, only 19 evaluators had a pedagogical qualification in pre-primary and none yet in the earlier years.

*Romania collects data on ECEC settings, but the scope and analysis of data, and its use to steer the expansion of the sector remains limited*

ECEC centres submit information primarily through the Ministry of Education's main education data management system (SIIIR). SIIIR collects extensive administrative data on children enrolled in formal ECEC settings and the institutions they attend. This includes the number of children enrolled, as well as individual details such as names, gender, and mother tongue. It also gathers detailed data on facilities' infrastructure and material resources.

Ongoing reforms aim to strengthen the education data infrastructure by expanding SIIIR to create an integrated education data management system that centralises various education databases. These efforts provide an opportunity to streamline data collection from ECEC centres and schools and allow for more detailed analyses on the supply of ECEC services to inform the sector expansion.

Despite these initiatives, limited statistical capacity, combined with data gaps can often prevent ministries and governmental agencies' staff from analysing and using data to inform policy. For example, SIIIR's modules on human resources and financing are not yet fully operational. Moreover, while the Ministry of Education collects data on ECEC places through SIIIR, and produces analyses on overall trends, over time, and by rural/urban areas, there appears to be a lack of more detailed analysis on the distribution of places by type of provider (nurseries, kindergartens, complementary services), location, quality of services, and state of existing infrastructure. These data and analysis gaps that exist in many OECD countries make it difficult to monitor the supply of ECEC services and inform the sector's expansion.

### *Curriculum frameworks and pedagogy in ECEC*

*Romania has an integrated curriculum framework that takes a holistic approach to child development*

In 2019 Romania introduced an integrated curriculum for early education, covering the pre-primary and early years (children aged 0 to 6) (OECD, 2019[26]). The curriculum has many positive features. It is structured for different age groups (children aged under 3 and aged between 3-6) and balances pre-academic skills with whole-child development, including physical, social, emotional and cognitive growth, as well as language development and attitudes towards learning. It emphasises many modern concepts for early childhood education, like child-centred education, and active learning, and promotes continuity with the first years of primary education (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[2]; OECD, 2020[27]).

*Teaching staff need more resources and support for the implementation of the curriculum*

The curriculum provides teachers and educators with a range of principles for their interactions with children, such as individualisation, play-based learning, diversity of learning contexts and situations, and partnership with families and communities. The curriculum also features six annual study themes, with broad examples of the different types of activities, timetables, and behaviours teachers can observe to assess children's development.

Teachers have received some support to translate the new curriculum into their day-to-day work. For instance, the Ministry of Education provides regular guidance notes on curricular implementation to CSIs, who are responsible for monitoring and supporting ECEC settings, and in 2019 compiled a report with updated examples of good teaching practice in ECEC. More recently, in 2024, the Ministry of Education updated learning and development standards for children aged 0-7, initially developed in 2010 (UNICEF, 2010[28]; Ministry of Education of Romania, 2024[29]). However, opportunities to receive guidance, from external evaluators and centre leaders are still limited, as specialty inspections are usually conducted for career progression purposes and most ECEC centres lack strong pedagogical leadership. Stakeholders reported early career staff often rely on collaborations and support from peers to understand and implement the curriculum into their practices.

### *Family and community engagement*

Romania places a strong emphasis on family and community engagement, both for the families of children already enrolled in ECEC settings, and for those who receive informal care at home. At the centre level, ARACIP's evaluation framework and the Early education curriculum highlight the importance of parental involvement and cooperation, and the Ministry of Education provides training modules for ECEC professionals on this topic through the PRET programme and other accredited providers.

Romania has also developed campaigns on the benefits of ECEC services and parental education programmes to engage families in children's education and development. This is particularly important in Romania, where relatively traditional norms surrounding childcare among certain population groups, coupled with low levels of parental education and high poverty, limit families' awareness of the benefits of ECEC and their ability to provide stimulating learning environments at home (Gromada and Richardson, 2021[30]). A recent survey on the public perception of early education in Romania shows that 6 in 10 respondents mentioned education as an essential need for their young children, and only one out of three understood the concept of early education (IRES, 2021[31]). However, this survey was conducted before nurseries transitioned to an educational role.

### *Digital technologies for the ECEC sector*

So far, digital technologies in early childhood education and care settings have primarily served administrative and communication purposes in Romania, facilitating interactions with various stakeholders including education authorities and parents (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[2]). The Ministry of Education is actively working to develop a national digital framework for education. These efforts include investments in digital teaching and learning resources, as well as training programmes for ECEC teachers and educators. For instance, while the curriculum for Early Education does not explicitly cover early digital literacy, it recommends that educators provide activities to develop children's digital competencies whenever resources are available. Romania has also produced open resources for teachers and parents on distance early education, which are accessible online (CRED, n.d.[32]). These include guidelines to create engaging home learning environments, ensure safe screen time management, as well as interactive games for children. In addition, the NRRP provides funds to develop continuous training programmes for ECEC professionals, with modules on digital education in the pre-primary and early years (European Commission, 2021[33]).

### *Main reform priorities*

As noted, Romania is moving towards a unitary, integrated ECEC sector, and is taking important steps to improve the quality and coverage of ECEC services. EU funds play an important role: approximately EUR 347 million from the Romanian National Recovery and Resilience Plan will be allocated to support

integration, quality and expansion efforts (Ministry of Investments and European Projects of Romania, 2021[34]). In summary, notable areas of reform include:

- ***Building a unitary ECEC sector:*** the Ministry of Education has recently taken over the management of nurseries which were previously overseen by local authorities. Existing large nurseries will become independent educational units, while smaller ones will be integrated into larger independent kindergartens or schools offering pre-primary services. This transition aims to ensure all young children in formal settings have their developmental and learning needs addressed.
- ***Improving quality of early educational development***: There are several measures intended to increase the quality of services in the early years. Nurseries have recently become subject to the same licensing procedures and quality monitoring as kindergartens and are expected to implement the integrated Early education curriculum. Importantly, as noted above, nurseries now need to hire teaching staff, trained in early childhood educational development.
- ***Increasing enrolment in ECEC services***: Romania also aims to raise enrolment in early education and care in line with international standards, primarily by building new public nurseries and complementary ECEC services and increasing the number of qualified ECEC staff. The goal is that at least 22% of children under 3 and 95% of children aged 4-6 are enrolled in ECEC services by 2027 (Government of Romania, 2023[35]).

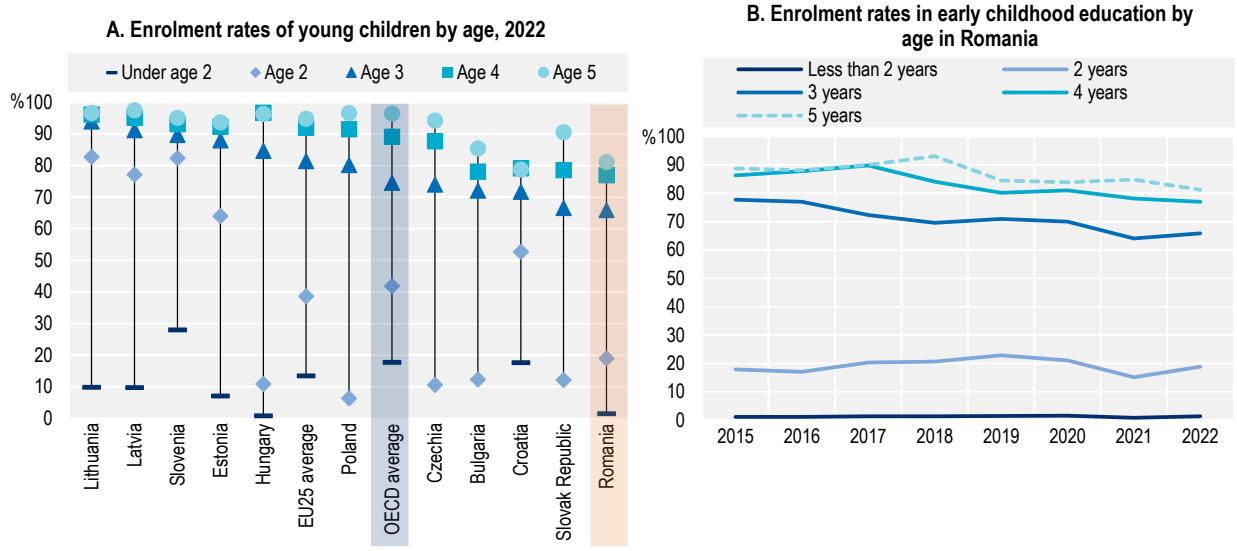
## Section II: Performance in early childhood education and care

### *Access and participation*

*Enrolment rates in early childhood education and care fall below the OECD average, especially among children under the age of 3*

The net enrolment rate in early childhood education and care (reflecting children of the appropriate age) falls below the OECD and EU average across all age groups (see Figure 3.9). Enrolment is particularly low at the earlier stages of education. At age 2, the enrolment rate stood at 19% in Romania in 2022, compared to 42% on average across the OECD and 39% on average across EU countries. Romania is one of the few countries in the region experiencing a decrease in participation for children aged 3, 4 and 5, together with Bulgaria (OECD, 2024[7]). Between 2015 and 2022, participation rates for these ages declined (see Figure 3.9). However, there have been positive developments: enrolment for children under the age of 2 increased from 0.8% in 2021 to 1.4% in 2022, and for 2-year-olds, it rose from 15% to 19% over the same period (OECD, 2024[7])

## Figure 3.9. Enrolment rates are below international standards at all ages, but have recently increased for children aged 2 and under




Note: Panel A includes education programmes meeting ISCED criteria and other registered ECEC services outside the scope of ISCED. *Ranked in descending order of percentage enrolment in ECEC and primary at age 3.* Panel B shows the percentage of young children enrolled in ECE as a percentage of corresponding age population.

Source: OECD (2024[7]), *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en; Eurostat (2022[36]), Pupils in early childhood and primary education by education level and age – as % of corresponding age population, https://doi.org/10.2908/EDUC_UOE_ENRP07

### *Romania's extended parental leave policies contribute to the low participation rates of children under the age of 3*

Romania offers a generous parental leave by international standards (see Figure 3.10), with a significantly larger portion reserved for mothers ("maternity leave") compared to fathers ("paternity leave") (Gromada and Richardson, 2021[30]; OECD, 2024[37]). Parents can take up to two years of leave after the birth of a child, or up to three years in the case of children with disabilities. During this period, they receive 85% of their previous year's income, subject to minimum and maximum payment limits (OECD, 2023[38]).

## Figure 3.10. Romania has one of the longest and more generous parental leaves available to mothers

Duration of paid parental and home care leave available to mothers, and the average payment rate across paid parental and home care leave available to mothers for an individual on national average earnings, 2023


Note: Striped bars indicate payment rates based on net earnings. *Ranked in descending order of number of weeks of paid parental and home care leave.*
Source: OECD (2023[38]), *OECD Family Database*, PF2.1.B. Paid parental and home care leave available to mothers, https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm.

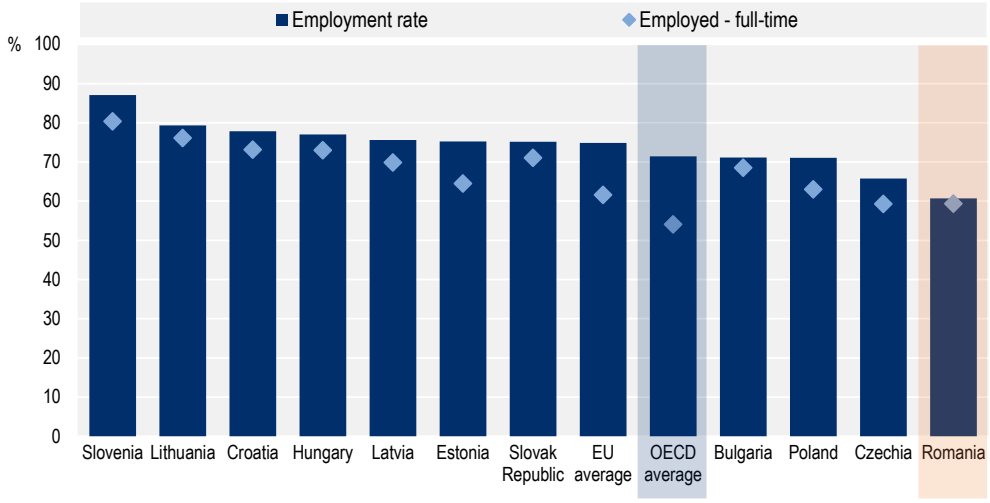
### *There is room to strengthen incentives for mothers to return to work when their children are young*

In Romania the maternal employment rate (61%) is below the OECD average (71%) and surpasses only Italy and Greece in the EU (OECD, 2021[39]). Amongst working mothers, nearly all are employed full-time (see Figure 3.11). There are few opportunities available for part-time employment. While labour laws have been relaxed in recent years, regulations on part-time, temporary, and other non-standard work arrangements still remain quite restrictive and part-time jobs are uncommon (OECD, 2024[37]). The limited offer of flexible jobs may make it difficult for working mothers and fathers to balance the demands of childcare and work (OECD, 2025[40]).

Low maternal employment can also be attributed to the limited incentives for mothers to return to work, especially those in low-earning jobs. For instance, in Romania, when a low-earning mother with a working partner and young children takes up full-time work, she loses more than 60% of her gross employment earnings to higher taxes, lower benefits and childcare costs. This is above the EU average of almost 50% and higher than in most EU countries, except for Ireland, Cyprus, Denmark, Czechia, and Slovenia (Rastrigina and Pearsall, 2023[41]). In addition, while parents on leave can receive an insertion bonus if they return to work early, the limited offer of subsidised childcare alternatives often means they have to hire nannies and therefore the reinsertion bonus is absorbed by childcare costs (OECD, 2024[37]).

## Figure 3.11. Mothers in Romania are less likely to work compared to mothers in OECD and CEE countries, and those who do are more likely to be in full-time employment

Employment rates (%) for women (15-64 year-olds) with at least one child aged 0-14, 2021 or latest available year




Note: Full-time employment is defined as usual weekly working hours of 30 or more per week in the main job. *Ranked in descending order of employment rates for women with at least one child aged 0-14.*
Source: OECD (2021[39]), *OECD Family Database*, LMF1.2 Maternal employment, https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm.

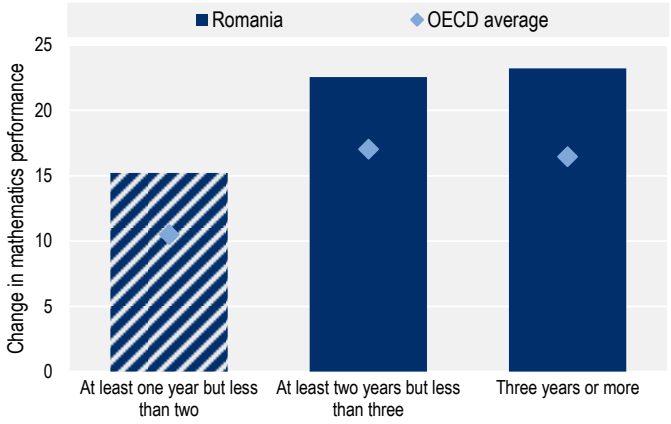
### *Children's learning and development outcomes*

*In Romania, longer participation in early childhood education and care is linked to improved learning outcomes later on*

According to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), in Romania, as in the OECD on average, longer participation in ECEC seems to be associated with better performance for students aged 15, even after accounting for students and schools' socio-economic profiles (see Figure 3.12). Students who attended ECEC for at least two years achieved higher scores in mathematics in PISA and were also significantly less likely to have repeated a grade later on, compared to students who had not attended ECEC at all or had attended for less than a year (OECD, 2023[42]).

## Figure 3.12. 15-year-old students who engaged in ECEC display better mathematics performance, after controlling for socio-economic status

Change in mathematics performance when students had attended ECEC for the following length of time, compared to not having attended, or having attended for less than a year, after accounting for students' and schools' socio-economic profile




Note: Striped bars show the change in mathematics performance is not statistically significant. *Ranked by years of ECEC attendance.*
Source: OECD (2023[42]), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en.

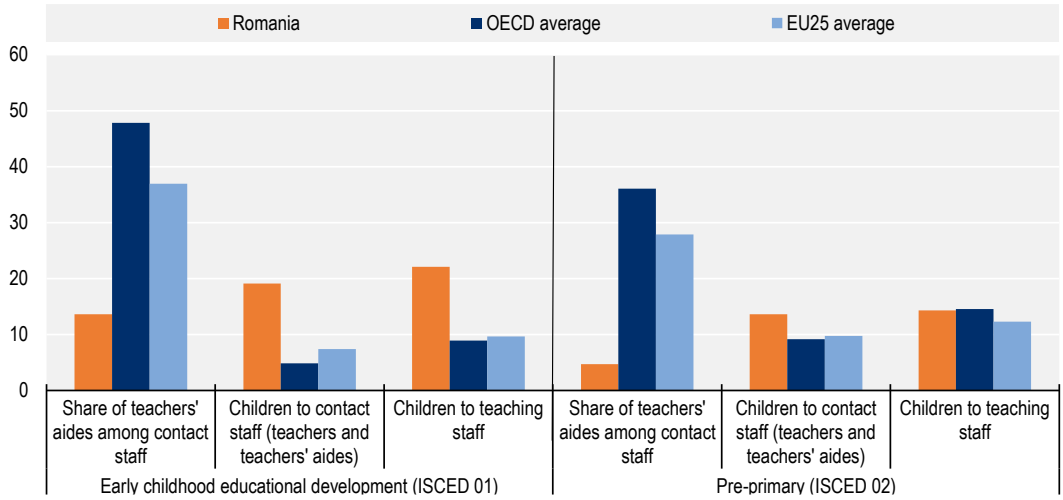
### *Child-staff ratios in nurseries are high by international comparison*

While in Romania ECEC participation seems to be associated with better student outcomes, there is potential to further enhance the quality of children's educational and developmental experiences. Quality interactions between staff and children, often referred to as "process quality" are essential to support children's cognitive and socio-emotional development. These interactions are shaped by various structural features of quality, including child-staff ratios. In 2022, Romania's ratio of children to educators was high compared to international standards. While national standards foresee lower ratios, collected data shows that for every teacher in early childhood educational development there were 22 children (ISCED 01) compared to 9 in the OECD average (see Figure 3.13). This can compromise the quality of staff-child interactions.

In pre-primary education, Romania's child-to-staff ratios are similar to the OECD average, but there is a notably low share of teacher assistants among the staff directly working with children (5% relative to an OECD average of 36%) (see Figure 3.13). These support roles provide greater flexibility in recruitment and can work with teachers and educators to provide children with more individualised attention and care (European Commission, 2020[43]).

### Figure 3.13. Child-staff ratios are above the OECD average for children under 3

Ratio of children to staff in early childhood education (ECE), by level of education,2022



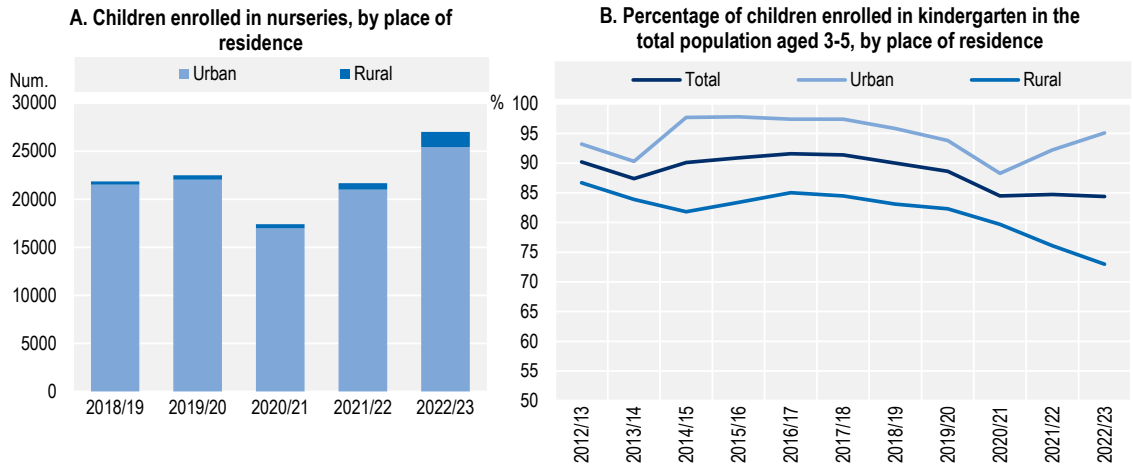

Source: OECD (2024[7]), *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en.

## *Equity*

*Children from low socio-economic backgrounds, rural areas or of Roma origin tend to participate less in ECEC*

Despite almost half of the population residing in rural areas – where close to one in two residents is at risk of poverty, and 27% self-identify as Roma– 10% of all nurseries are situated in rural areas (Eurostat, 2023[44]; European Commission, 2022[45]; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023[46]). Specifically, there are only 37 nurseries serving rural areas nationwide (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[2]). Enrolment rates across all age groups are significantly lower in these areas. For instance, in 2022-23, only 6% of all children enrolled in nurseries lived in rural areas (see Figure 3.14). The difference is less pronounced in pre-primary education, where 42% of all children in pre-primary are enrolled in rural areas (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[47]). While the pre-primary enrolment gap between rural and urban areas was narrowing in the pre-pandemic period, it has been widening since 2021 (see Figure 3.14). Enrolment rates are particularly low among the Roma population: estimates suggest in 2021, only 27% of Roma children participated in pre-primary education (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023[46]).

## Figure 3.14. Rural-urban inequalities in ECEC enrolment remain high




Source: Ministry of Education of Romania (2023[47]) Raport privind starea învățământului preuniversitar din România 2022 – 2023 [Report on the state of pre-university education in Romania 2022-2023], https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/_fi%C8%99iere/Minister/2023/Transparenta/Rapoarte_sistem/Raport-Starea-invatamantului-preuniversitar-2022-2023.pdf

## Section III: Assessment and policy recommendations

### *Quality of programmes and outcomes: Enhancing the skills and support provided to ECEC professionals*

Romania has taken important steps to improve the quality of early education and care, particularly in the early years. As nurseries transform from sites of childcare to child development and education, they will be subject to the same licensing procedures and quality monitoring as kindergartens. To fulfil their new educational mission, nurseries are implementing the national integrated Early education curriculum and hiring teaching staff.

In a context of rapid expansion, success will largely depend on attracting, training, and supporting sufficient staff for delivering high-quality ECEC. The 2023 pre-university education law places welcome emphasis on making teaching an attractive, rewarding and high-skilled career through better pay, and a new approach to professional development with much greater emphasis on job-embedded learning and collaboration. Building on these measures, Romania could consider additional steps to better prepare all staff to work with young children and attract new professionals into the sector. This includes strengthening the quality and relevance of initial education and continuous training, and supporting ECEC centres and staff to develop positive environments and implement the pedagogical approaches promoted in the national ECEC curriculum. This section draws on OECD evidence and examples to recommend potential avenues Romania can consider to make the most of these reforms and build a strong ECEC workforce.

## Figure 3.15. Recommendations and actions on quality of programmes and outcomes in ECEC

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Quality | 3.1 Better align the ECEC professional development offer with staff individual and collective needs | • Developing programme guidelines for ECEC initial education and training providers.<br>• Strengthening the identification of professional development needs and aligning in-service training with staff needs and national priorities.<br>• Expanding job-embedded professional development opportunities based on mentorship and collaboration.<br>• Providing tailored induction programmes and professional development for ECEC leaders.<br>• Strengthening the leadership role of ECEC coordinators and experienced teachers. |
| | 3.2 Expand entry pathways into ECEC roles and revise the ECEC career structure | • Attracting and training unemployed or inactive candidates to the ECEC sector and recognising prior learning to address staff shortages.<br>• Revising ECEC staff profiles to diversify and professionalise key roles. |
| | 3.3 Provide more guidance and support to staff, ECEC centres, and local authorities on how to create positive learning environments for young children | • Supporting staff to implement the ECEC curriculum through practical resources and reduced administrative work.<br>• Providing guidance for centre leaders and local authorities on the organisation of ECEC settings, particularly nurseries.<br>• Developing resources and support to ensure quality assurance for ECEC settings is consistent, relevant, and focused on improvement. |

### *Recommendation 3.1. Better align the ECEC professional development offer with staff individual and collective needs*

The Ministry of Education could build upon and strengthen existing mechanisms to ensure consistency and quality across the diverse range of initial education and training providers and better align in-service training with the needs of ECEC staff. More attention needs to be given both to developing a well-functioning system to identify professional learning needs across the sector and to the preparation of ECEC leaders, particularly in ECEC centres that are not legal entities and are part of a school. Collaborating with the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity in designing active labour market policies is also a potential avenue to attract new professionals to the sector.

#### Developing programme guidelines for ECEC initial education and training providers

Romania has taken important steps to ensure consistency and quality of initial teacher education. Notably, the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) is currently working to develop quality standards for the new bachelor's in early education. These standards will be adapted based on the profile and professional standards for educators and teachers in ECEC.

In advancing these efforts, ARACIIP should consider updating quality standards and provider guidelines not only for the new bachelor's programme but also for the existing programmes at ISCED levels 3 and 4, and the in-service upskilling and reskilling programmes for practitioners who want to take on a teaching role in nurseries. As Romania rolls out its new quality standards, it can draw on Ireland's experience. Ireland recently updated its accreditation procedures to standardise the wide range of initial education programmes for ECEC professionals. After research and stakeholder consultations, in 2019 the Irish Government published the 'Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education Degree Programmes for the Early Learning and Care Sector'. These specify minimum requirements for programme content, duration, and practicum. To oversee implementation, the government formed a Qualifications Advisory Board to ensure compliance with these standards (European Commission, 2020[43]; OECD, 2021[48]).

### Strengthening the identification of professional development needs and aligning in-service training with staff needs and national priorities

Information on staff profiles, professional development needs and activities will be essential to provide a relevant in-service training offer. There are several strategies Romania can pursue to systematically collect evidence of staff development needs at the system, centre, and individual level:

- **Collecting sector-wide data on staff profiles and professional development needs***:* The Ministry is currently developing a questionnaire to identify training needs among nursery staff. This positive one-off survey could be conducted on a regular basis (e.g., every 3-5 years), and expanded to cover staff working in kindergartens and in complementary early education services. Sector-wide training needs surveys can be carried out at the national level through international or national data collection efforts, or at the county level through harmonised surveys, potentially managed by County Centres for the Teaching Career. Beyond collecting staff self-reported data, the Ministry of Education could train actors working directly with ECEC centres and staff –such as ECEC leaders, teacher mentors, external appraisers and County Directorate staff– to gather direct evidence of staff needs and convey the information to institutions responsible for teachers' professional development.
- **Defining and monitoring a range of professional learning indicators for ECEC staff:** Regularly monitoring a broader range of variables, such as staff working conditions, participation in professional development activities by type, barriers to participation and perceived impact would help the Ministry of Education, and County Centres for the Teaching Career better address challenges related to the quality, relevance, and inclusiveness of the professional development system. It would also provide critical information to strengthen the links between skills acquired through professional development and career advancement.

  To collect this information, the Ministry of Education could more systematically draw on existing sources such as inspection or quality assurance reports, or engage in new data collection efforts, such as the teaching staff surveys described above. Some OECD countries have also provided teaching staff with guidance and resources – including digital tools – to help them assess their own training needs and report on their learning activities. Such self-assessments help align training with individual need and preferences and capture more informal forms of professional learning (see Box 3.1).
- **Drawing on the newly established commission for teachers' professional development to identify training needs within each centre:** The 2023 pre-university education law creates a new commission responsible for teachers' professional development within each education institution. The commission identifies needs and opportunities, monitors staff engagement in training and career progression, and coordinates peer mentorship within the institution. Evidence on training needs collected at the commission level can be aggregated at the centre level to understand collective in-service training needs and develop a professional learning plan for the centre.

  To ensure the commission provides meaningful guidance, its members must be able to identify training needs, orient staff to relevant training opportunities in early education and care and have dedicated time to fulfil their role effectively. They may need regular training in needs assessment techniques and to keep up to date with any changes in possible training routes for ECEC staff. This should be coupled with targeted resources for ECEC staff training to ensure that needs assessments translate into concrete steps for improvement and skills development.

### Box 3.1. Leveraging digital technologies for professional development monitoring, skills recognition and needs identification – examples from OECD countries

**Professional Learning Passport - Wales**

The Professional Learning Passport (PLP) allows school teachers' engagement in continuous professional learning to be recorded and supported, in line with the Professional Standards for Teaching and Leadership. Teachers use the Passport to upload materials, lesson plans or resources that showcase their professional learning and can also engage in collaborative work with peers through the PLP.

**Online Teacher Self-Assessment Tool - Australia**

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership launched an online Teacher Self-Assessment tool so teachers can review their practice against the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers and identify areas for further development, professional learning planning and setting career goals. Australia also provides a High-Quality Professional Learning Toolkit to guide teachers in designing a professional learning plan in line with the needs they identify, which includes access to a range of implementation resources.

Source: Minea-Pic, A. (2020[49]), "Innovating teachers' professional learning through digital technologies", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 237, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/3329fae9-en; Boeskens, L., D. Nusche and M. Yurita (2020[17]), "Policies to support teachers' continuing professional learning: A conceptual framework and mapping of OECD data", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 235, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/247b7c4d-en; Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (n.d.[50]), High Quality Professional Learning Toolkit, https://www.aitsl.edu.au/teach/improve-practice/high-quality-professional-learning-toolkit (accessed 26 July 2024).

#### Expanding job-embedded professional development opportunities based on mentorship and collaboration

The Ministry of Education has goals to encourage more teacher-led and collaborative professional development. These are commendable efforts, as centre-embedded approaches such as coaching and mentoring are particularly effective models of professional development for ECEC staff (OECD, 2020[51]; Kraft, Blazar and Hogan, 2018[52]). Previous OECD analysis provides recommendations on the importance of providing training and support for mentors (OECD, 2024[18]). Romania might consider the approach taken by the Government of Victoria (Australia), which developed a Coach and Mentor Training Programme that equips experienced early childhood teachers and educators with coaching and mentoring skills and provides opportunities for career advancement (Victoria Government, n.d.[53]).

Efforts to deploy mentoring at scale will take time and will likely need to initially focus on centres and teachers with greater needs. In this context, professional learning communities both within and across ECEC centres hold great potential to support collaborative staff development. These require dedicated time, commitment from leaders, and a culture that welcomes critical peer feedback. Providing practical guidance, resources for collaboration, and training leaders and teaching staff will also be important to facilitate effective collaborative professional learning (see Chapter 4) (OECD, 2021[54])

These communities can facilitate whole-centre approaches to training, whereby all staff involved in interactions with children have the opportunity and time to learn together, exchange on their practices and critically reflect as a team on what the professional learning experience means for their daily practice. France, for example, has developed a model called local initiative training ("*Formations d'initiative locale*"), where training programmes are organised at the request of educational institutions and tailored to their

specific needs. School leaders conduct internal consultations bringing together all teaching staff to identify specific training needs and objectives at the school level. Based on these consultations, schools can seek assistance from regional training academies to refine their training requirements, and benefit from on-site training sessions that bring together the entire school team (OCDE, 2024[55]).

Promoting professional learning across ECEC centres can also be beneficial, especially for nurseries as they transition to an educational role. Some nurseries and kindergartens in Romania already collaborate in professional development. County Directorates could expand these initiatives and pair ECEC centres, allowing staff from different settings to observe each other, collaborate during professional learning days, or work together on specific topics.

#### Providing tailored induction programmes and professional development for ECEC leaders

Effective ECEC leaders create enabling conditions for staff to deliver high-quality experiences for children, including by facilitating their professional development and fostering a culture of collaboration (OECD, 2022[56]; OECD, 2021[57]; OECD, 2020[51]). In Romania, most ECEC facilities are kindergartens attached to a larger school, which means they do not always have leadership teams specialised in ECEC. Romania should consider expanding tailored induction programmes and professional development opportunities focused on ECEC management and pedagogy for these leaders.

In the case of nursery leaders, it is crucial that induction and professional development programmes include a specific focus on early childhood development. This is important to ensure that newly appointed leaders coming from kindergartens or other positions in the education system are prepared for the specificities of the early years and are able to develop a physical and pedagogical environment that enables rich child-staff interactions.

Reducing ECEC leaders' administrative workload would also enable leaders to devote more time to their own professional development and to engage in pedagogical leadership (OECD, 2020[51]). Planned investments in an integrated education data management system is a welcome development in this respect. However, providing more administrative support —especially for leaders overseeing ECEC as part of a school cluster— would further advance these efforts (see Chapter 4).

#### Strengthening the leadership role of ECEC coordinators and experienced teachers

The Ministry of Education might also consider developing a more distributed ECEC leadership structure to leverage the specialised expertise of existing staff in ECEC centres attached to schools. This could be progressed by giving current ECEC coordinators and experienced teachers more responsibilities and training to lead professional development within their settings. Such distributed leadership can free up leaders' time, facilitate career diversification and offer more opportunities for ECEC staff to receive formative feedback to improve their practices. For instance, as part of their functions, staff with leadership responsibilities in the area of professional development could guide the work of the commission responsible for teachers' training. They could also conduct formative, centre-based appraisals to support job-embedded learning and steer centre-based professional development activities.

Such distributed leadership responsibilities require, however, allocating sufficient time and training for staff to perform these activities. For instance in England (United Kingdom), the *National Professional Qualification for Leading Teacher Development* supports the development of teachers who have or aspire to have responsibilities to lead the development of other teachers in their school (OCDE, 2024[55]).

*Recommendation 3.2. Expand entry pathways to an ECEC role and revise the ECEC career structure*

Attracting and retaining qualified staff in ECEC settings is core to Romania's efforts to expand its ECEC network and integrate nurseries into the education system. Achieving this will require proactive efforts to recruit more teaching and care professionals. While attracting staff from kindergartens to nurseries can help mitigate staff shortages in the medium term, it risks creating shortages at the pre-primary level. This could slow down efforts to raise pre-primary participation, especially as Romania progressively lowers the compulsory age for education and so requires more pre-primary teaching staff.

Romania will need to consider policies to attract and retain more qualified staff in ECEC settings beyond those coming from kindergartens. There are a range of promising avenues to achieve this. Flexible training/retraining programmes and recognition of prior learning (RPL) targeting individuals with weak labour market attachment and who are motivated to work in the ECEC sector can help extend the pool of qualified ECEC professionals, while promoting the integration of these individuals in the labour market. Training and skills recognition initiatives will also be relevant to upskill and/or reskill existing nursery staff aspiring to take on a teaching role but lacking formal qualifications to do so. In addition, a more diversified career structure could enhance the attractiveness of the ECEC teaching career, making it more appealing to new entrants and providing motivation for those already in the profession to stay and advance in their roles.

**Exploring opportunities to attract and train unemployed or inactive candidates to the ECEC sector and recognising prior learning to address staff shortages**

Designing a combination of active labour market policies to attract and prepare unemployed and inactive individuals for ECEC roles could help expand the ECEC workforce and support the inclusion of populations with weak labour market attachment. Given the barriers these groups face, activation is inherently challenging, yet it may present an option worth exploring to address staff shortages. Romania's Ministry of Education could collaborate with the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity to develop measures to identify and proactively contact individuals with weak labour market attachment, who may have prior experience in the sector, or display interest in working with young children and acquiring the formal qualifications needed to become ECEC staff. The government could direct them to ECEC education and training to develop foundational and specialised skills and provide continued support and professional development after job placement. Tax reform is also essential to enhance participation incentives for low-skilled workers (OECD, 2024[37]). While designing these measures, the government's focus needs to remain on ensuring the quality of the teaching process through qualified ECEC staff.

Efforts to recognise and validate relevant skills gained outside of ECEC, along with flexible education and training programmes can help candidates, and especially women, balance training with other responsibilities, and acquire the formal qualifications and skills required to enter the ECEC profession more rapidly (OECD, 2019[58]). Some of the recommendations provided in Chapters 5 and 6 —such as introducing short-cycle tertiary programmes including in hybrid format, offering more flexible admission routes for adults who are not making a direct transfer from upper secondary education, and raising awareness about opportunities to recognise prior learning— will be particularly relevant to expand the number of qualified professionals entering the ECEC sector.

Flexible retraining programmes and skills certification would also benefit nursery staff who have valuable skills and experience working with young children but lack formal qualifications to work as educators. As noted, the Ministry of Education plans to develop new in-service training programmes to enable existing nursery staff to retrain to fill educator positions. In developing such programmes, Romania can look at examples from different OECD countries. For instance, Australia and New Zealand have implemented programmes to support experienced unqualified staff become qualified ECEC professionals without having

to engage in a full ECEC training programme (OECD, 2019[58]). As with new entrants to the profession, recognition of prior learning, managed by existing providers of ECEC education and training providers, would enable staff to have their previous skills, knowledge and experience recognised and count towards an ECEC qualification.

#### Revising ECEC staff profiles to diversify and professionalise key roles

A differentiated career structure is a means to formalise important roles to support improvements in the system, and to motivate staff wishing to take on new or higher responsibilities (OECD, 2024[18]). The Ministry of Education could review the career structure of ECEC staff in Romania to provide opportunities for career growth across a range of pathways, requiring different levels of qualifications and skills, and progressing jointly with salaries. Multi-stage careers can encompass horizontal transitions (i.e. specialisation in specific tasks) and vertical transitions (i.e. increasing responsibilities, such as moving into leadership roles) (OECD, 2020[51]). The Ministry of Education could develop competency frameworks for various roles to support horizontal and vertical career progressions.

For instance, in 2016 Ireland introduced the role of Inclusion Coordinator, a specific leadership position to enable more inclusive environments in ECEC settings. ECEC staff aspiring to take on an Inclusion Coordinator role must complete an award provided by The Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) programme, which offers part-time, blended training at ISCED 5 level and builds on a Competency Framework for Inclusion in ECEC (OECD, 2021[48]).

### *Recommendation 3.3. Provide more guidance and support to staff, ECEC centres, and local authorities on how to create positive learning environments for young children*

Romania's integrated curriculum for early education encourages child-centred and active learning and aims to foster the holistic development of children. However, stakeholders reported that ECEC staff in Romania, particularly new entrants to the sector and staff in nurseries, would benefit from more support to translate the curriculum into high-quality and meaningful interaction and stimulating activities for young children. As nurseries transition to an education role, teams will also need guidance to adjust their space, furniture and materials to support children's holistic development. This section draws on OECD experience to suggest how Romania might assist ECEC staff in implementing the curriculum and designing learning environments that enable higher process quality, and ultimately lead to better children's outcomes.

#### Supporting staff to implement the ECEC curriculum through practical resources and reduced administrative work

ECEC initial education, induction, and ongoing professional development should place strong emphasis on helping staff understand the curriculum and translate it into practice. To further help both practicing ECEC staff and families appropriate the principles, practices and learning outcomes that ECEC services should meet, the Ministry of Education, along with the National Centre for Curriculum and Evaluation and the planned National Centre for Teacher Training and Career Development, could develop a bank of resources and make them easily accessible in a single platform. This would enhance access to existing curricular materials, such as the 2019 report with examples of good teaching practice, and learning and development standards for children aged 0-7, while also incorporating additional support material.

In the United States, for example, the Head Start programme, which supports the learning and development of disadvantaged children, provides staff with a range of practical resources. These include online tip sheets, video samples of instructional strategies, training modules, and disability guides (OECD, 2022[59]). Developing such support materials in collaboration with experienced ECEC practitioners would help ensure the content is user-friendly and applicable in real-life settings.

Reducing the burden of administrative work for ECEC staff would also provide more opportunity to engage in higher-quality interactions with children, plan meaningful activities, and implement the curriculum effectively. Even with high-quality practical support materials accompanying the curriculum, improving quality will be challenging unless this issue is addressed. Chapter 4 explores this topic in greater detail.

#### Providing guidance for centre leaders and local authorities on the organisation of ECEC settings, particularly nurseries

ECEC centres, particularly nurseries, need more guidance as well as regular feedback and support to organise the physical space and acquire materials that enable rich child-staff interactions through various group formats, indoor and outdoor activities, and learning through play. Pedagogical spaces and materials should be planed and organised so that they are conducive to children's active engagement, and exploration, and tailored to children's interests and abilities (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2017[60]). To help ECEC facilities create stimulating and safe environments Romania can consider:

- **Developing a unified licensing framework:** Romania has defined minimum operating requirements for ECEC facilities. However, these standards are dispersed in different ministerial orders. A consolidated licensing framework would make them more easily accessible for prospective providers. For instance, in England (United Kingdom), the Department of Education developed the Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework. This framework sets the standards that school-based providers and childminders must meet for the learning, development and care of young children from birth to age five. It specifies learning and development requirements, and safeguarding and welfare requirements (Department for Education, 2023[61]).
- **Offering clearer guidance and hands-on support to organise the physical space and acquire furniture and materials:** While Romania has developed guidance on how to organise ECEC setting's physical space, they are drafted in general terms. Building on these existing guidelines, more detailed information on the organisation of ECEC settings, along with training and potentially on-site support for leaders and local authorities in charge of acquiring materials and infrastructure, can help ensure investments are used to create the types of spaces that support children's development. Guidance and examples (e.g. videos, images) should be provided for both the types of furniture acquired for nurseries (such as the types of beds and tables) and how this furniture is distributed within the nursery to create a stimulating and safe learning environment (e.g. using flexible beds that can be regrouped in a small part of the room and can provide more space for pedagogical activities for older children). Observation tools that evaluate the overall quality in ECEC settings, including space and furnishing, such as the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale, can be used to set standards for infant or toddler spaces.

#### Developing resources and support to ensure quality assurance for ECEC settings is consistent, relevant, and focused on improvement

ARACIP has developed criteria to evaluate ECEC centres, but it has yet to develop resources to help ECEC professionals understand and apply them effectively. The 2023 pre-university education law provides impetus to address this in two ways. First, it consolidates ARACIIP as the main national evaluator of ECEC facilities and increases the number of evaluators. While these measures can improve the consistency of evaluations, more can be done to enhance their relevance to ECEC settings.

A number of inspectorates in OECD countries have developed bespoke evaluation frameworks for the early and pre-primary years, with statements of practice that help evaluators and ECEC centres visualise and understand what very good practices looks in their setting. Ensuring there are sufficient qualified

evaluators for the early and pre-primary years will also be important to provide ECEC settings with the specialised guidance they need to improve.

Second, the 2023 law gives County Directorates an explicit support role. As part of this role, local support teams in County Directorates could help new nurseries and complementary early education services prepare their licensing process and effectively implement requirements for the organisation of ECEC settings from the onset. They could also monitor established settings, help them organise their physical environment, and access additional support – e.g. from County Centres for Educational Resources, mentors, or peers– to improve the learning, stimulation and care that young children receive.

### *Equality of opportunities and access: Expanding ECEC coverage in disadvantaged areas and removing barriers to participation*

Romania has taken significant steps to increase access to early childhood education and care. Starting in 2020, the Ministry of Education lowered the starting age for compulsory education to include the last two years of pre-primary (for children aged 4 and 5) and is in the process of building new nurseries and complementary settings throughout the country.

This section examines policies that would help Romania raise participation, in particular for those disadvantaged children who stand to benefit the most from early education. Drawing on examples from OECD countries, it highlights how the Ministry of Education could steer service expansion to ensure provision meets the diverse needs of children and families. It also suggests measures that can help overcome some of the demand-side barriers to participation in Romania, that range from limited awareness to traditional family norms.

**Figure 3.16. Recommendations and actions on equality of opportunities and access in ECEC**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Equality | 3.4 Plan and develop the ECEC network to reach children who need it most | • Enhancing ECEC network planning to reconcile network efficiency with the need to reach the most disadvantaged children.<br>• Using national investments to complement local funding, targeting areas most in need.<br>• Building local capacity to plan the ECEC network and raise capital funds.<br>• Developing diversity of ECEC provision while ensuring quality. |
| | 3.5 Enhance demand for ECEC services, and strengthen parental involvement in children's education, through programmes targeting the most disadvantaged families | • Reinforcing information campaigns to raise awareness about the benefits of ECEC.<br>• Improving parental education to engage families in children's learning and development. |

*Recommendation 3.4. Plan and develop the ECEC network to reach children who need it most*

Currently, Romania's ECEC infrastructure does not meet demand across the country, and further provision will be needed to reach Romania's participation goals, particularly in urban and isolated rural areas. The Ministry of Education typically prioritises capital funding requests from localities that demonstrate high parental demand or that are experiencing a growing population. The NRRP also allocated funds to expand complementary services in disadvantaged or isolated areas, especially in rural settings. However, these services might not be sufficient to meet all needs. As a result, smaller rural areas, which typically have declining populations and face cumulated disadvantage, may struggle secure sufficient funding to expand ECEC coverage to meet their needs.

Investing in ECEC in disadvantaged areas would yield substantial benefits, including reducing early school leaving, and supporting parental employment. It can also help increase the attractiveness of less developed regions and slow down emigration and further population decline. National policies to expand

service coverage and transportation in these areas – through clear guiding principles for network development, coordinated network planning, and targeted funding and capacity-building – can help ensure Romania's growing investments in ECEC pay off and deliver their potential benefits for the most vulnerable children and communities.

### Enhancing ECEC network planning to reconcile network efficiency with the need to reach the most disadvantaged children

To ensure network planning aligns with national policy goals for expanding the sector and reach the most disadvantaged children, Romania would benefit from developing a long-term strategic planning perspective at the system level. This could entail:

- **Defining a national strategy to organise the network:** As a first step, the Ministry of Education could develop a national strategy, including guiding principles to organise the network and criteria to guide investment decisions (see also Chapter 4). A long-term strategic perspective on the organisation of the ECEC network would need to be accompanied by investments in high-quality data and reliable forecasts of future demand for early education and care to monitor infrastructure needs in the sector (see Recommendation 3.7 below). Better coordinating ECEC infrastructure investment with other local investments is an additional means to ensure ECEC settings reach areas most in need. For instance, integrating requirements for the construction of ECEC centres into urban planning and housing development projects could help ensure new facilities are built in areas with rising populations and alleviate over-crowding.
- **Enhancing coordination mechanisms for ECEC network planning**. With more than 3 000 local authorities in the country, the government could create planning and coordination platforms at the county level to prevent fragmentation in network planning (OECD, 2018[62]). This would require collaboration between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration, county councils, and existing associations of local authorities, such as intercommunity development associations and association of municipalities. These platforms would bring together relevant stakeholders in the organisation of the ECEC network and facilitate a better match between demand and supply, especially where urban centres face incoming demand from nearby rural areas. They could also allow small local authorities or those with limited capacity to engage in resource sharing and joint ECEC service provision. For instance, in Portugal, municipalities can organise themselves as inter-municipal communities (*Comunidades Intermunicipais,* CIMs). These communities provide a platform to share information and develop integrated network plans at the regional level, based on the local plans of participating municipalities. They also play a role in helping central authorities steer and regulate the educational offer (OECD, 2018[62]).

  The Ministry of Education could allocate resources and assign and train dedicated staff within County Directorates to facilitate their involvement in county coordination platforms, foster collaboration between local authorities in need, and provide guidance to local authorities seeking to apply for ECEC capital investments (see section below).
- **Allocating additional transportation funding to ECEC facilities that need it most:** Reliable transportation to the nearest ECEC centre should be ensured in rural areas with insufficient children for an ECEC centre. Convenient transportation is crucial for young children's safety, enhancing ECEC participation and offering parents more flexibility to work. The Ministry of Education could provide targeted funds to local authorities and ECEC centres that need it most.

### Using national investments to complement local funding, targeting areas most in need

National investments can help address inequalities by targeting communities where local investments are sub-optimal or inconsistent. This requires a clear understanding of local unmet needs. In Romania, identifying individual children who are not enrolled in ECEC and are at developmental risk is challenging. This task involves triangulating data on individual child-level indicators, which is often spread across multiple databases from different public service providers. Meanwhile, some risk factors, such as having a Roma background, are generally underreported due to concerns about stigmatisation, and emigration results in a constantly changing population, making it difficult to identify and track children who may need support.

Given these challenges, the government can consider geographic area targeting for the progressive expansion of the ECEC sector. The 2023 pre-university education law introduced the concept of priority investment areas in education that will benefit from additional central funding (see Chapters 2 and 4). Central-led interventions or programmes to expand access to ECEC in Romania could target disadvantaged areas first, while building their capacity for accessing EU or other funds. One approach could be to target ECEC capital funds to disadvantaged rural areas or cities with a relatively stable population. Local authorities that do not show high levels of disadvantage could continue to rely on standard national or EU funding applications and local ECEC investments. Cooperation between the Ministry of Education and local authorities should be integral to expanding the sector, as local authorities are well-positioned to identify needs and challenges at a local level.

### Building local capacity to plan the ECEC network and raise capital funds

Local authorities are primarily responsible for planning the ECEC network and managing the associated infrastructure. Decentralised planning helps adapt early education and care services to local needs. However, it requires adequate investments in local capacity to secure and use capital funding. Low absorption of EU funds remains a critical challenge in Romania due to limited capacity and low quality of project preparation (OECD, 2022[63]). Although the government has simplified application procedures for NRRP and national funds, local authorities with stronger capacity and prior experience with EU funds are naturally more likely to successfully access ECEC capital investments.

Measures to develop local capacities will therefore be critical to ensure a more equitable expansion of services for the early years. This can be achieved through stronger collaboration and resource sharing between local authorities, and through partnerships with existing associations in the system. Some localities have already relied on other local authorities with more capacity to apply for funding on their behalf. These efforts could become more systematic. Coordination platforms could facilitate such collaboration and match localities depending on their need for support.

The Ministry could also consider partnering with existing associations of local authorities to identify capacity needs, enhance communication about existing funding opportunities, and deliver staff professional development programmes that build the capacity of small or disadvantaged localities to apply for and manage ECEC capital funding.

### Developing diversity of ECEC provision while ensuring quality

In Romania, nurseries and kindergartens already offer flexible opening hours and attendance days. The Ministry of Education is also taking additional steps to diversify provision through the creation of community kindergartens, toy libraries and play groups. These are welcome efforts to expand coverage in remote and disadvantaged communities as well as in areas with high unmet demand. However, if these new complementary services are to make a difference to child outcomes, providers will need more guidance to engage with families, as well as sufficient qualified staff.

Complementary services are not only a means to expand provision but also offer a space where families can learn about the benefits of ECEC services and receive guidance on how to support their child's development and learning. Such parental engagement efforts are important to build trust in ECEC services, promote positive parenting behaviours and encourage further participation in early education and care. For example, in Toronto (Canada), EarlyON Child and Family community centres provide free programmes to parents and children to strengthen adult-child relationships, support parent education and foster healthy child development. Centres provide an environment for children to play, learn and interact with other children, while qualified staff offer support and advice to families. Public libraries in the city also run a range of programmes for children aged five or under and their families to foster their love of reading.

Another key priority for Romania will be to attract sufficient qualified staff to work in complementary services. Hiring and training staff from the local community is one way to address staff shortages, especially in settings within hard-to-reach or marginalised communities. This can also enhance parental involvement, as locally hired staff are more likely to be familiar with the context and culture of the communities they serve (European Commission, 2020[43]). Flexible initial education programmes, accessible to aspiring ECEC professionals in disadvantaged rural and Roma communities will be important to support these efforts (as noted above, in Recommendation 3.2).

Hungary's alternative day-care model can provide relevant insights. Inspired by the Sure Start programme pioneered in the United Kingdom, Hungary established Sure Start Children's Houses (SSCHs) in disadvantaged areas with a high proportion of Roma population. These centres offer a variety of services tailored to individual families, ranging from parental support and health counselling to play activities for children. Key staff members at these centres are Roma, well-known within their community, and trained in intercultural mediation (European Commission, 2019[64]). An evaluation showed SSCH centres helped children develop their social skills and vocabulary and appeared to have positive effects on parenting skills (HÉTFA Kutatóintézet, 2016[65]).

### *Recommendation 3.5. Enhance demand for ECEC services, and strengthen parental involvement in children's education through programmes targeting the most disadvantaged families*

Greater coverage and flexibility of provision (see the examples of Toronto, Canada and Hungary in the previous recommendation) can make a significant difference in access to early learning and development opportunities, but other factors, such as parental preferences, beliefs, and behaviours also play a crucial role. In Romania, many parents and caregivers are not fully aware of the benefits that quality early education and care can have on children's development. Stakeholders have also reported that some parents have had negative perceptions of the quality of formal nursery services, probably because nurseries previously focused on childcare and had few qualified staff.

Tackling these demand-side barriers is important in Romania, in particular for children living in poverty and in Roma communities. Socio-economically disadvantaged families generally have fewer appropriate play and learning materials at home, tend to spend less time interacting with their child, and have lower awareness of effective parenting techniques (Duncan et al., 2023[66]). Romania has already implemented a number of initiatives to raise caregivers' awareness on the importance of early education and care and engage them as active participants in their child's early learning and development. There are ways that Romania could learn from OECD country experience to expand these efforts, so they have greater impact and reach.

#### Reinforcing information campaigns to raise awareness about the benefits of ECEC

Enhancing parental demand for early learning programmes will be central to the success of expansion efforts. Romania's Quality and Inclusive Early Childhood Education project has already developed

accessible messages explaining the benefits of early childhood education and care for children aged 0-6, the different range of public services available, as well as some features parents can look for to recognise quality in early education and care settings. The Ministry of Education could do more, however, to disseminate these messages through channels aimed at reaching parents and in particular those from the most marginalised backgrounds. These include school mediators working in disadvantaged communities, and general media campaigns.

To promote early awareness, the Ministry of Health, in coordination with the Ministry of Education, could also offer this information to expectant parents directly in health care centres and maternity wards. For instance, in France, as part of the *'1000 premiers jours'* (first 1000 days) programme, parents receive a 'welcome to parenthood' bag at the maternity ward. The bag contains essential items for the baby's first few months and includes references to online resources (website and mobile app) to promote healthy behaviours and provide information about available support services, as well as options for childhood education and care.

Even if parents are informed of potential benefits and options available, perceived quality can influence parental decisions to enrol their children in formal early education and care. The transition of nurseries from local authorities to the Ministry of Education provides a new opportunity to transform nurseries into genuine places where young children develop and learn. As Romania progressively expands and develops the quality of the sector, information campaigns could play a crucial role in making these improvements broadly visible. This will be important to enhance public confidence in the quality of early education and care and increase demand.

### Improving parental education to engage families in children's learning and development

Families are children's first educators. Romania has already implemented various programmes to engage parents in their child's development, and the new legislative package foresees the introduction of a National Strategy for Parental Education. Notwithstanding these positive initiatives, parental education programmes alone cannot address the multiple barriers that prevent disadvantaged families from supporting their children's learning and development. Poverty, as well as other physical and emotional stressors, can impact families' ability to provide nurturing home environments.

A number of OECD countries provide parental education programmes as part of an integrated package of social services for families and children. Services can range from counselling and financial advice to training modules on effective parenting techniques. Integrated social services, which can be coordinated by a single agency, or co-located in the same space, eliminate the need for individuals to navigate multiple agencies to access the support they need.

In Romania, the Ministries of Education, Health and Labour have piloted integrated community services to combat poverty and social exclusion and have expanded these services to 2 000 local communities. Moving forward, these ministries could consider adding a strong parental education component to further engage families in children's learning and development. In doing so, it will be important to ensure service professionals across agencies and ECEC facilities collaborate closely, including engaging in joint training, to identify the needs of children and families and coordinate service provision (OECD, 2022[59]). Initiatives in the United States and in the United Kingdom show how parental education programmes can be combined with other forms of support for families (see Box 3.2).

### Box 3.2. Parental education and comprehensive family support provision

***Supporting parental education***

The Early Head Start programme in the United States begins before birth and runs until children are aged three years old. It involves a range of options that are available depending on the area, including home-based services (e.g. weekly home-visits), centre-based services (e.g. education and child development services delivered in a centre) and family childcare services (e.g. education and child development services delivered in a private home or family-like setting). It supports parents as primary caregivers to enhance their self-efficiency in terms of housing stability, education, and financial security. In addition, centre-based services also align to the needs of young parents enrolled in school settings by adjusting service delivery to the school year requirements and ensuring home-based services during the summer break.

***Addressing cumulated disadvantages through co-located services***

Since 1999, Sure Start Children's Centres in the United Kingdom provide a range of services for families and children from pre-birth to age 11 in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. These centres offer support and advice on child and family health, parenting, financial planning, training, and employment. Some centres also provide early learning and care for young children. They feature co-located services—including education, antenatal and primary healthcare, adult learning, and parenting classes—and are designed based on local needs. Centres involved co-located agencies were designed based on local needs, and relied on strong leadership.

Source: ECLKC (2023[67]), *Early Head Start Programs*, https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/programs/article/early-head-start-programs (accessed on 17 May 2024); Melhuish, Belsky and Barnes (2018[68]), *Sure Start and its Evaluation in England,* https://www.child-encyclopedia.com/pdf/expert/integrated-early-childhood-development-services/according-experts/sure-start-and-its-evaluation

## *Good governance: Increasing and effectively allocating resources to support families and young children*

The policy measures discussed earlier in this chapter can support higher quality and equity in the provision of ECEC services. However, achieving the country's ambitious expansion and quality goals will require additional funding, as well as a stronger coordination among national agencies in policy planning and delivery. This is important if national investments to support families and mothers are to encourage participation in early learning and promote greater parental choice. The below examples from OECD evidence and experience provide policy insights on how Romania might change the funding of the sector and strengthen cross-sectoral collaboration to ensure adequate levels of funding and more efficient spending in policies that benefit children, mothers and society at large.

### Figure 3.17. Recommendations and actions on good governance in ECEC

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Governance | 3.6 Increase investment for early education and care services to provide universal coverage of high quality | • Giving higher priority to ECEC in the public education budget.<br>• Harnessing private funding for the expansion of the nursery network. |
| | 3.7 Strengthen the planning and allocation of public resources to support young children and families | • Monitoring needs for early education and care.<br>• Developing a central mechanism to pool, distribute and monitor capital investments for ECEC.<br>• Designing a coherent policy framework for young children and families. |

*Recommendation 3.6. Increase investment for early education and care services to provide universal coverage of high quality*

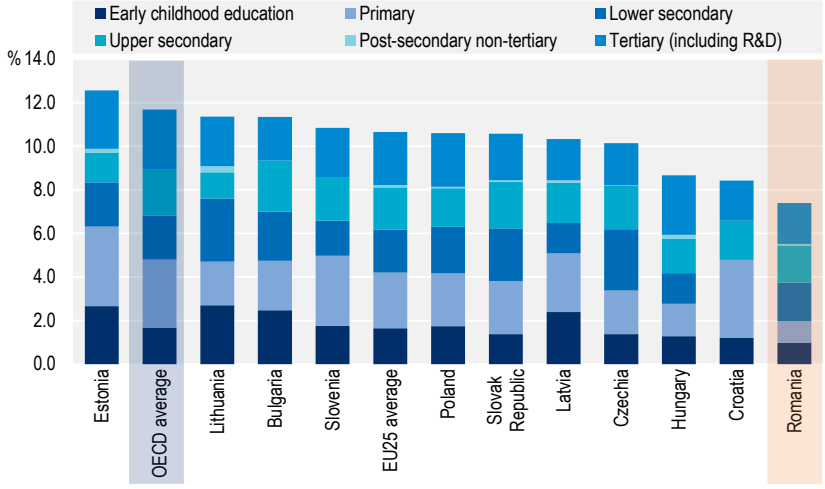
Romania has significantly increased funding for early education and care in recent years. This shift is largely driven by the mobilisation of EU funds and increases in government spending. However, expenditure per child is still low compared to international practices. The significant new investments required to expand services, grow the workforce, and improve the quality of provision highlight the need for Romania to rethink how it funds the sector. This implies a reprioritisation of public expenditure in favour of early education and care, together with proactive efforts to identify and leverage alternative funding sources. This would help Romania increase total investment, and at the same time ensure public funding benefits those young children and families that need it most.

**Giving higher priority to ECEC in the public education budget**

The 2023 pre-university law aims to increase the share of public expenditure for education to at least 15% of the total government expenditure by 2027. Meeting this target, combined with ongoing economic growth, would translate into a notable increase in funding for education compared to previous years, when public spending has been consistently below 10% of total government expenditure (Chapter 2) (Eurostat, 2022[69]). However, Romania does not seem to be considering how this increase would benefit the early years. Currently, ECEC receives significantly less funding compared to other levels of education (see Figure 3.18). This gap is all the more significant considering Romania has the highest child poverty rate in the EU (Eurostat, 2023[70]). International evidence suggests that investing in quality early childhood education and care yields substantial benefits for society as well as for children and families (Dougherty and Morabito, 2023[71]). Therefore, as funding increases, Romania should consider prioritising additional spending on the early years. One way to do this would be by setting targets or minimum benchmarks for an increase in the share of the education budget allocated to ECEC over the period to 2027. The Institutional Strategic Plan (ISP) that the Ministry of Education is required to develop under the NRRP to support more strategic planning and budgeting would be the natural place to do this.

## Figure 3.18. ECEC receives significantly less public funding than other education levels in Romania

Government expenditure on education, by education level as a percentage of total government expenditure, 2021




Note: *Ranked by descending order of government expenditure on education.*
Source: OECD (2024[7]), *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en.

### Harnessing private funding for the expansion of the nursery network

Reprioritising public expenditure in education in favour of the early years can help Romania secure some of the important investments needed in the sector. However, in the context of low overall government spending, such reallocation will likely be insufficient to achieve the sector's expansion goals. Many countries in the EU and the OECD have tapped into private sources to expand childcare services and address demand that the public sector cannot fulfil.

One option would involve introducing parental fees for children from higher socio-economic backgrounds while ensuring free places for those who cannot afford to pay. In all nine OECD countries participating in the TALIS Starting Strong Survey, some publicly managed centres charge private fees, ranging from 22% of centres in Iceland to 95% in Norway (OECD, 2019[72]). A parental fee proportional to parents' income would enable Romania to fund the creation of additional places in nurseries.

International experience shows that these income-based nursery fees need to be carefully designed. In Romania, it will be particularly important to account for potential work disincentives for second earners in the family, who are typically women (OECD, 2022[63]). Considering other family characteristics besides income would also help improve the targeting of subsidised fees. For example, single parents, families with multiple children, or Roma families may face additional challenges that aren't fully captured by income alone (OECD, 2020[73]). France provides an example on how benefits are determined by a broader range of criteria. Parents typically pay monthly childcare fees that vary based on their income. They also receive childcare allowances determined by their income level and number of children, and there is also a specific allowance available for separated parents (Paull and Wilson, 2020[74]).

A second, complementary option is to encourage private investment from employers in publicly managed nurseries. This strategy would require providing incentives – such as tax exemptions, or general business credits to cover childcare expenditures – so companies finance nurseries for their workers. Such efforts would help expand coverage in large, dynamic, urban areas facing significant unmet demand and allow public funds to target more disadvantaged areas. Placing employer-supported nurseries under public management, and subjecting them to the same standards, regulations and monitoring activities as public nurseries, would help the Ministry of Education oversee and assure the quality of provision.

#### *Recommendation 3.7. Strengthen the planning and allocation of public resources to support young children and families*

Romania has mobilised national and EU funding to expand the ECEC sector. Securing these investments is positive and necessary to meet national expansion targets. However, additional resources will not have the desired impact on child outcomes unless spending effectiveness is addressed. So far, capital funds to expand ECEC services have been allocated primarily based on local demand, rather than according to evidence of need. Meanwhile, investments in welfare and social policies for children and families are not always efficient or mutually reinforcing in encouraging ECEC participation and better outcomes. For instance, the social safety net does not adequately protect children against poverty, and a long parental leave, and relatively rigid regulations on working hours are not helping families, and especially mothers, balance their caregiving and professional aspirations as well as they might (OECD, 2022[63]).

This underscores the need for Romania to strengthen its cross-sectoral policy planning and administrative capacity. Important initiatives are already underway. Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan includes measures to strengthen line ministries' capacity for strategic budgeting, planning, and procurement. Complementary reforms also aim to strengthen the government's digital infrastructure and data management (OECD, 2024[37]; OECD, 2024[18]). However additional steps focused on ECEC policies are needed. Improving the availability and reliability of routine data on ECEC provision and need, and developing a central mechanism to track, manage and allocate capital funds would support better planning for the sector and help reach the most vulnerable populations. A coherent policy framework will also be

important to provide families with more balanced choices and allocate public resources to their best advantage.

### Monitoring needs for early education and care

Given the current disparities in access, decisions on where to invest and locate new ECEC centres need to be based on national analysis of population profile, demographic trends, and available places. This evidence will be essential to direct investments where they would have the greatest impact. It would also strengthen the Ministry of Education's position in budget negotiations with the Ministry of Finance (OECD, 2022[75]). Such analysis could involve:

- *Estimating gross demand*: by collecting data on the number of children under the age of 3 and 6 in each local authority. Local data sources, such as birth records can provide more up-to-date information than decennial census data. To identify localities in greater need, Romania could combine this data with population projections and area-based indicators of poverty. These indicators might include education levels, single-parent rates, occupation and employment rates, and dependency ratios in each area.
- *Monitoring supply of ECEC places:* by conducting analyses on the distribution of places, disaggregated by type of provider (including nurseries, kindergartens, and complementary services), location, quality of services provided, and the state of existing infrastructure.
- *Understanding local preferences*: As Romania develops complementary services, local authorities can be supported to conduct surveys to identify the type of provision that would best fit the needs and preferences of their communities.

### Developing a central mechanism to pool, distribute and monitor capital investments for ECEC

The mechanisms used to distribute capital funds play an important role in ensuring that these funds reach the areas and facilities in greater need of investment (OECD, 2018[62]). As many OECD countries, Romania, relies on a mix of sources, including EU funding, national funding and local (municipal) funding to invest in its pre-school infrastructure. However, the Ministry of Education does not have a centralised database to monitor the availability and use of capital funds, or a mechanism to distribute them in a way that prioritises projects likely to reach communities in greater need.

A centralised fund can allow for better coordination and planning, ensuring that resources from different funding sources for capital investments are consolidated and funds are allocated where they are most needed. It can make it easier for the Ministry of Education to have a comprehensive view of funds available, and monitor the allocation and use of resources (OECD, 2022[75]). It can also build capacity for planning and disbursement at delivery levels, through the feedback that such monitoring allows.

The successful management of this fund would require that the Ministry of Education develops capacities to conduct needs assessments (as noted above) and strengthens its administrative capacity to plan, budget and monitor multi-annual capital investments (OECD, 2024[18]). For instance, Colombia introduced an Education Infrastructure Fund (*Fondo de Financiamiento de la Infraestructura Educativa*, FFIE) within the Ministry of Education to implement the National Educational Infrastructure Plan (*Plan Nacional de Infraestructura Educativa,* PNIE) and finance projects for the construction, expansion or rehabilitation of education infrastructure, including at the pre-primary level. The resources of the fund stem from the government budget, financial returns from investments of the Fund's resources, international cooperation, local authorities, and the private sector (OECD, 2022[75]; FFIE, n.d.[76]).

### Designing a coherent policy framework for young children and families

A coherent policy framework considering social policies for children, families and mothers is important to achieve national goals for child development, poverty reduction and women's employment and allocate resources in an efficient way. In Romania such coherence needs to be strengthened. Romania stands out internationally in terms of having particularly generous parental leave entitlements, that enable mothers to take extended breaks from work after having children. While the effects of parental leave policies on female employment are mixed, challenges can arise in countries like Romania where incentives for mothers of young children to return to work remain weak, even after accounting for return-to-work bonuses and the option to earn small amounts of money while on leave (OECD, 2024[37]). These policies may be associated with negative socio-economic outcomes, from low female labour market participation and a declining population.

As highlighted by previous OECD analysis, investments to expand access to quality early education and care services for children under 3 provide an opportunity to progressively reduce the duration of parental leave and divide parental leave more evenly among mothers and fathers, as done in several OECD countries (OECD, 2024[37]). Romania has already taken positive steps to allocate more parental leave to fathers. Since 2023, two months of out of the two-year parental leave entitlement are reserved for the secondary caregiver, doubling the previous one-month period of non-transferable leave, which was primarily intended for fathers. Progressively reducing the parental leave and dividing leave more evenly among parents, combined with more flexible regulations of working hours, would offer several benefits to families, mothers, and society at large. First, these measures would provide parents, and especially mothers, with more choices in selecting childcare and work arrangements that best meet their and their children's needs. This is important to increase women's participation in the labour market, raise living standards and reduce poverty. Second, they would also enhance fathers' involvement in their children's education, contributing to shift conservative views about childcare as the primary responsibility of mothers.

A progressive reduction in maternity leave in the long term would free up public resources previously allocated for extended leave and return-to-work incentives, which could be redirected to support the expansion of the ECEC sector. Norway has developed a coherent family policy framework that helps mothers and fathers balance their professional and childcare responsibilities (see Box 3.3). Romania could envisage a similar approach, which would need to be adapted based on its available funding for ECEC.

#### Box 3.3. Comprehensive models for family policies

**The Norwegian family policy framework**

Families in Norway are supported by a wide range of family policies that combine generous paid parental leave with universal and affordable early childhood education and care from age 1. The aim of the Norwegian model is to guarantee children develop under safe economic and social conditions and foster overall well-being of families. Both mothers and fathers have specific amounts of parental leave reserved just for them, plus there is additional leave they can share. Compared to other OECD countries, the parental leave is almost twice as long than the average for fathers and shorter for mothers. Parental leave is complemented by universal and affordable childcare from age 1 with discounts on parental fees for kindergartens. Research evidence shows that the availability, quality and affordability of ECEC in Norway are also linked with higher fertility.

Source: OECD (2023[77]), *Exploring Norway's Fertility, Work, and Family Policy Trends*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/f0c7bddf-en.

Finally, all efforts to ensure greater policy coherence in early childhood education and care will largely depend on stronger cross-sectoral coordination. Romania's new intersectoral committee for early education, created to coordinate NRRP investments in the sector, is well placed to facilitate inter-ministerial coordination in planning and budgeting policies for families and children. To enhance its effectiveness, the committee would benefit from becoming a more permanent platform beyond the NRRP, and involving the Ministry of Finance, which currently does not appear as one of its core members. With its comprehensive view of different sectoral budgets, the Ministry of Finance can help streamline public resources for children and families to avoid duplication and ensure greater complementarity. Ireland's Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children, and their Families provides an example of how Romania might plan a system of integrated, cross-sectoral, and high-quality supports and services for the early years (Government of Ireland, 2019[78]).

## Figure 3.19. Summary of recommendations and actions on ECEC

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Quality | 3.1 Better align the ECEC professional development offer with staff individual and collective needs | • Developing programme guidelines for ECEC initial education and training providers.<br>• Strengthening the identification of professional development needs and aligning in-service training with staff needs and national priorities.<br>• Expanding job-embedded professional development opportunities based on mentorship and collaboration.<br>• Providing tailored induction programmes and professional development for ECEC leaders.<br>• Strengthening the leadership role of ECEC coordinators and experienced teachers. |
| | 3.2 Expand entry pathways into ECEC roles and revise the ECEC career structure | • Attracting and training unemployed or inactive candidates to the ECEC sector and recognising prior learning to address staff shortages.<br>• Revising ECEC staff profiles to diversify and professionalise key roles. |
| | 3.3 Provide more guidance and support to staff, ECEC centres, and local authorities on how to create positive learning environments for young children | • Supporting staff to implement the ECEC curriculum through practical resources and reduced administrative work.<br>• Providing guidance for centre leaders and local authorities on the organisation of ECEC settings, particularly nurseries.<br>• Developing resources and support to ensure quality assurance for ECEC settings is consistent, relevant, and focused on improvement |
| Equality | 3.4 Plan and develop the ECEC network to reach children who need it most | • Enhancing ECEC network planning to reconcile network efficiency with the need to reach the most disadvantaged children.<br>• Using national investments to complement local funding, targeting areas most in need.<br>• Building local capacity to plan the ECEC network and raise capital funds.<br>• Developing diversity of ECEC provision while ensuring quality. |
| | 3.5 Enhance demand for ECEC services, and strengthen parental involvement in children's education, through programmes targeting the most disadvantaged families | • Reinforcing information campaigns to raise awareness about the benefits of ECEC.<br>• Improving parental education to engage families in children's learning and development. |
| Governance | 3.6 Increase investment for early education and care services to provide universal coverage of high quality | • Giving higher priority to ECEC in the public education budget.<br>• Harnessing private funding for the expansion of the nursery network. |
| | 3.7 Strengthen the planning and allocation of public resources to support young children and families | • Monitoring needs for early education and care.<br>• Developing a central mechanism to pool, distribute and monitor capital investments for ECEC.<br>• Designing a coherent policy framework for young children and families. |

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## Notes

[1] In Romania, ECEC can be provided by public, private or confessional institutions that require accreditation from ARACIP.

[2] The module must cover at least the principles of early childhood education, holistic approach to the child and teamwork, and education and supporting families for the development of parenting skills.

[3] Pedagogical leadership refers to support for staff development, creating a culture of trust, facilitating peer learning, promoting the implementation of the curriculum, etc. (Douglass, 2019[79]).

# 4 School education: Giving every student a fair chance to succeed

This chapter analyses key features of Romania's school system and proposes measures to ensure that all young Romanians acquire the skills they need for work or future learning. Romania can build on several ongoing efforts, including a new competency-based curriculum, plans to increase public funding, and measures to introduce more flexible vocational pathways with stronger work-based learning. The chapter recommends ways to provide teachers with on-site support, including guidance from school leaders and peers to implement the curriculum and improve student outcomes. It also explores measures to promote equity, including by reviewing the school network, and enhancing the quality and labour market relevance of vocational tracks. Finally, the chapter suggests avenues to strengthen the capacity of local education authorities to support school improvement and foster a school culture that values and effectively uses data for learning.

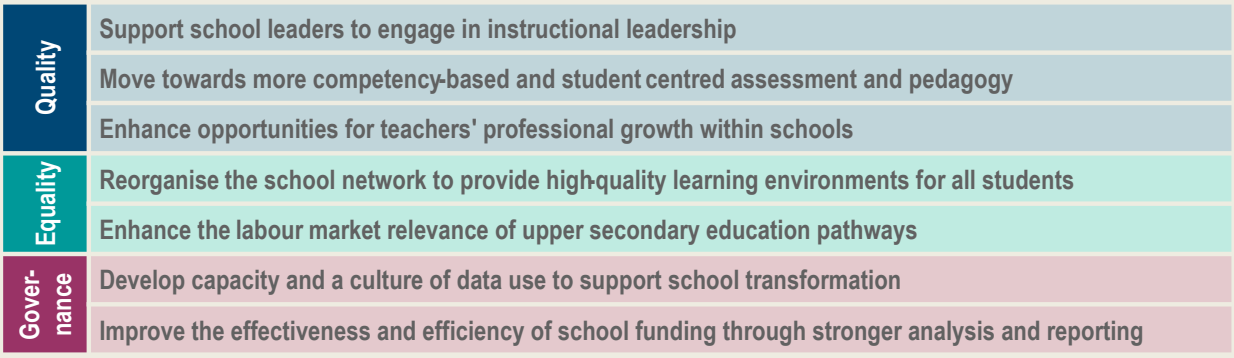
Romania is undertaking ambitious reforms to improve the quality and relevance of its school system. It has committed to increase funding for the sector, rolled out a new competency-based national curricula, and set out plans to introduce more flexible VET pathways with stronger work-based learning. These much-needed changes come at an opportune time for Romanian education. Despite some improvement, learning achievement, as measured by the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), has stagnated at low levels, leading too many young Romanians to leave school without the foundational skills required for work and lifelong learning. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially those living in rural areas and enrolled in vocational tracks, are at particular risk of falling behind.

This chapter examines how Romania can build on its ongoing school reforms to help raise the quality of teaching and learning for all students. It focuses in particular on policies to strengthen the impact of school leaders and teachers, address geographic disparities in learning opportunities, and better fund and support school improvement.

## Chapter 4 at a Glance

- **Section I:** Provides an overview of Romania's school sector, focusing on how policies compare internationally.
- **Section II:** Compares the sector's performance with OECD benchmarks on international indicators.
- **Section III:** Provides recommendations on how Romania can learn from OECD evidence and experience to further improve school education.

### Figure 4.1. Recommendations on school education




## Section I: Overview of schooling in Romania

### *Governance and structure*

*The Ministry of Education is responsible for setting the education system's overall strategy and policy, and receives technical support from specialised bodies*

The Ministry of Education holds all key responsibilities for the strategy and policy of school education in Romania. Policies are determined centrally in Bucureşti, with most operational decisions directed by the Ministry and implemented through its local representatives, the 42 County School Inspectorates (*inspectorate şcolare judeţene*, CSIs). Local political authorities, namely counties and municipalities, play a limited role in shaping education policy. However, they do play a role in managing school infrastructure

and transportation, and in providing complementary funding for these and other school services, such as extracurricular activities and canteens (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[1]).

As in most OECD countries, the Ministry can draw on the expertise of a network of specialised bodies, which provide technical support in curriculum development, assessment and examination, school quality assurance, vocational education and educational research (see Chapter 2). While these semi-independent institutes hold critical responsibilities for quality improvement, they face shortages of qualified staff and other resources, and their mandates are not always clear.

Ongoing reforms aim to strengthen Romania's specialised bodies so they can better support government policymaking and delivery. For instance, school evaluation responsibilities, which are currently fragmented, will be consolidated under a single national agency (the Agency for Quality Assurance and Inspection in Pre-University Education, ARACIIP) (see below). Reforms also promise the creation of two new national centres to advance national priorities on inclusive education, and the professional development of teachers. However, resourcing remains a concern.

### *County School Inspectorates have significant influence over school planning and resourcing decisions*

Historically, CSIs have served as agents of government control and administration. They oversee the implementation of national policies in schools, appoint school principals who have passed a national contest, provide continuous professional development for school staff through their affiliated teacher training houses and, together with local authorities, have the main responsibility for planning the school network. They also lead individual teacher appraisals, referred to as "specialty inspections" and, until recently, undertook school inspections.

Over the past decade, there have been attempts to rebalance CSI functions to focus more on school support. There have also been important efforts to address conflicts of interests and perceptions that roles are offered in exchange for political support, notably with the introduction of centralised procedures for the appointment of school principals. These reforms have been given new impetus under the 2023 Law, notably by reorganising CSIs into County Directorates for Pre-university education (*Direcțiile județene de învățământ Preuniversitar,* County Directorates hereafter), and stripping away many of their inspection functions. However, concerns identified in previous OECD analysis regarding the role of CSIs in teacher promotion still persist (see below) (OECD, 2024[2]).

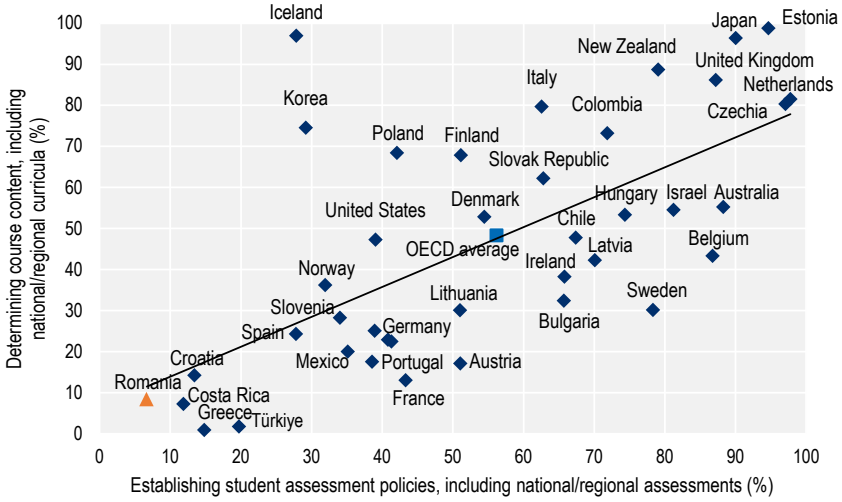
The Ministry of Education has a unit that oversees and supports CSIs. The unit has benefited from EU and other external funds to promote cross-county exchanges in areas like teacher training and curriculum implementation and organises regular meetings to discuss issues of common concern. However, there is still significant scope for the unit to further enhance cross-county collaboration and resource-sharing, particularly to strengthen CSIs' school improvement functions or to providing guidance in key areas such as school network planning.

### *Recent reforms have sought to give schools more instructional autonomy, yet schools report low levels of decision-making responsibility*

There have been efforts in the last decade to give schools more responsibility, including more flexibility to adapt the curriculum. However, in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Romanian principals report among the lowest levels of perceived responsibility for decisions on course content and student assessment across participating countries (see Figure 4.2). Various factors might explain this, from limited capacity and guidance on how to assume these new responsibilities, to continued high levels of bureaucratic controls outside and inside schools that take schools' time and attention away from instructional tasks.

## Figure 4.2. Romanian principals report lower responsibility for course content and student assessment than in the OECD

Percentage of students in schools where principals report that their school has the main responsibility for determining course content and student assessment policies




Note: "School" refers to the principal, teachers or members of school management team and school governing board.
Source: OECD (2023[3]), PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en

### *School-level governance is complex and bureaucratic*

School governance in Romania stands out for its complexity. The school board is the school's main management body involving school staff, parents, and local authorities. The school board, generally presided by the school principal, is responsible for adopting and executing the school budget, making staffing decisions, and approving the curriculum. There are six additional school commissions specialised in different domains such as quality assurance, curriculum implementation, teachers' professional development, and inclusion. These governance arrangements can facilitate teacher and parent involvement in school planning. Nonetheless, they make it difficult to ensure an integrated school-wide approach to instructional planning and quality improvement. Core tasks related to teaching and learning are fragmented across commissions and focused on administrative process rather than improving practices and outcomes. This also adds to the administrative responsibilities of school principals, again taking time away from instructional matters (see Teachers and School leaders below).

### *Schooling is structured into three cycles, offering diverse pathways in upper secondary education*

School education is organised in primary education (*Școală primară*), covering the preparatory grade and grades 1-4 (ages 6 to 10), lower secondary education (*Școală Gimnazială*) covering grades 5-8 (ages 11 to 14) and upper secondary education (*Liceiu*) covering grades 9-12 (ages 15 to 18). In most cases, primary and lower secondary education are provided by the same school, while upper secondary education is offered in a separate institution. With the recent extension of mandatory pre-primary education (see Chapters 2 and 3), schools are also increasingly combining pre-primary with primary education. Most primary and secondary schools are public – In 2022 the private sector represented 2% of total student enrolment in primary education and 1% in lower secondary education (OECD, 2024[4]).

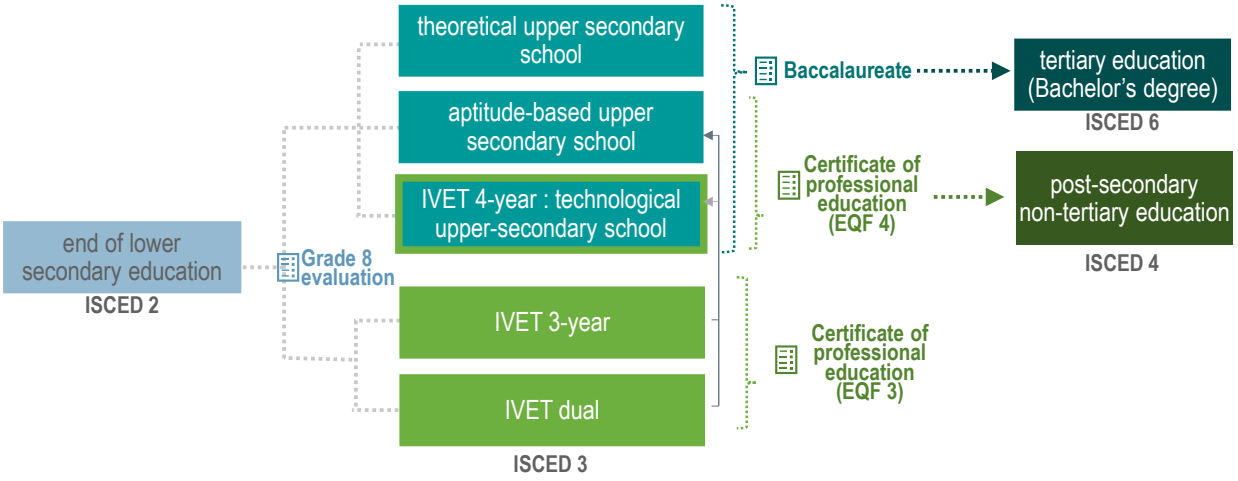
There are three main upper secondary pathways: theoretical, aptitude-based and technological tracks (*filiera teoretică, liceu filiera vocațională, filiera tehnologică*) (see Figure 4.3). The more prestigious theoretical and aptitude-based upper secondary schools follow the general curricula, the latter focusing on the arts, sports, theology, the military or educational pedagogy. They attract students that want to pursue tertiary education. Technological schools offer four-year initial vocational education and training (IVET) programmes that combine a general and a professional curriculum. These programmes focus on technical, service, natural resource or environmental protection fields. Vocational courses are primarily delivered in a school-based setting, with approximately 25% of the time allocated to work-based activities (CEDEFOP, 2021[5]). These three upper secondary education tracks culminate in a common school-leaving exam (the Baccalaureate), with technological and aptitude-based students also taking an additional examination to obtain a certificate of professional competencies (Level 4 EQF). More than half of upper secondary students (57%) enrol in an IVET track (OECD, 2022[6]).

*Like many OECD countries, Romania also offers shorter, more applied vocational pathways*

As an alternative to the four-year IVET programmes provided in technological schools, students in Romania have the option to pursue a three-year IVET track. Since 2017-2018, this shorter IVET programme can also be taken in a "dual" format (*Școala Profesională/ Școala Profesională în Sistem Dual*). Both three-year IVET and dual IVET programmes integrate theoretical learning with practical learning, devoting up to 50% of learning time to work-based learning (CEDEFOP, 2021[5]). Graduates from these programmes obtain a certificate of professional education (Level 3 EQF) and can transition into adult education or the labour market. However, because these shorter IVET programmes do not prepare students for the Baccalaureate, students cannot directly apply for entry to tertiary education. To pursue tertiary education, students must transfer to a technological upper secondary programme, complete two additional years of study (grades 11 and 12) and pass the Baccalaureate.

The main distinction between dual and non-dual IVET is the extent to which individual companies are involved. Dual programmes are established at the request of local companies, which sign a partnership agreement with the school and local authority. Local businesses offer practical training contracts to students enrolled in the programme. In 2022-23, the share of students enrolled in dual IVET programmes constituted 4.7% of the total IVET population in upper secondary education, compared to 24% in the three-year IVET programme, and 71% in the four-year IVET track (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[1]).

## Figure 4.3. Romania's upper secondary programmes include three high-school tracks, as well as shorter initial vocational education and training programmes



### *The selection, pathways and certification of upper secondary programmes limit student engagement and progression into higher levels of education*

The design of upper secondary education in Romania does not support equality of opportunity as well as it could. From a comparative perspective, a number of issues stand out regarding policies for selection, programme design and certification. First is the reliance on academic examination results for admissions into upper secondary pathways, in contrast to wider evidence of aptitude and interests (see Figure 4.4). There is strong competition to enrol in the most prestigious general education upper secondary programmes. Socio-economically disadvantaged students are less likely to excel academically and therefore tend to be directed to IVET programmes, regardless of their personal preferences and goals (OECD, 2020[7]).

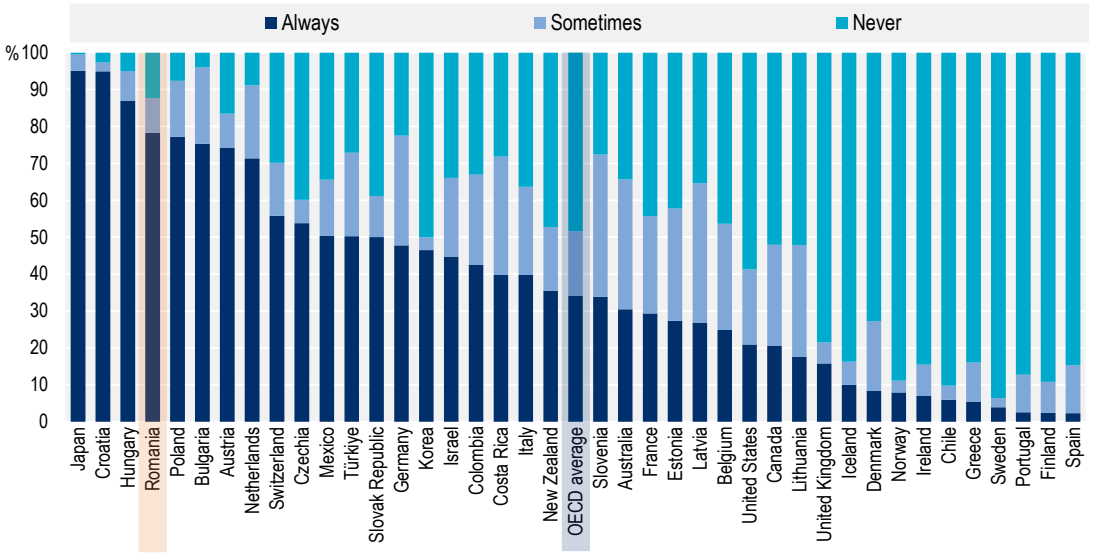
Second is the lack of permeability of upper secondary tracks. IVET programmes, both technological and shorter IVET streams, provide limited flexibility for students to transition to other upper secondary tracks. While in principle students in technological upper secondary programmes can transfer to the theoretical track based on their academic results, they may need to sit additional exams. This contrasts with a growing number of education systems in the OECD, which increasingly ensure permeability across upper secondary programmes, so that students can transition into other tracks or combine content, based on their evolving aspirations and interests (Stronati, 2023[8]).

Finally, a single national examination in Grade 12 (the Baccalaureate) determines whether students can enrol in tertiary education. It is academically focused and does not assess technical or applied skills. National data shows that students in the technological IVET track have much lower success rates at the Baccalaureate, compared to students in the theoretical track, and are therefore less likely to enrol in tertiary education (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[1]). While IVET students can also earn a certificate of professional education that grants them entry to post-secondary non-tertiary education, few pursue education at this level. In 2023 only 3% of 25–34 year-olds held a post-secondary non-tertiary qualification (OECD, 2023[9]).

The new 2023 Law introduces changes to the Baccalaureate to make it more adapted to different upper secondary pathways. Starting in the 2025-2026 school year, students in aptitude-based and technological streams will be assessed on disciplines relevant to their profile (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[10]; European Commission, 2023[11]).

## Figure 4.4. Upper secondary school admission policies in Romania focus to a great extent on academic performance in the Grade 8 national examination, and less so on students' interests

Percentage of students in schools where student's record of academic performance is considered for admission to school, based on principals' reports, 2022




Note: *Ranked in descending order of percentage of students in schools where student's record of academic performance is always considered for admission to school.*
Source: OECD (2023[3]), PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en

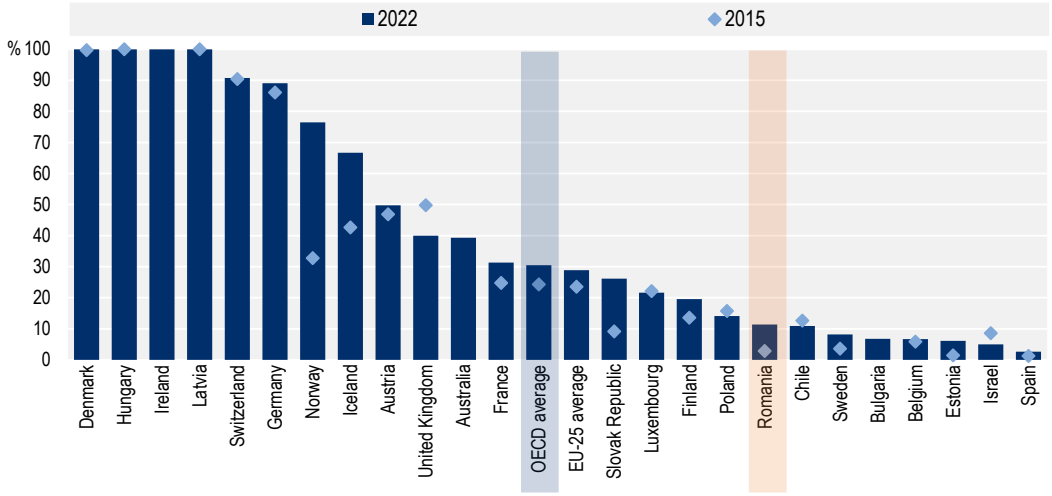
### *IVET programmes are not sufficiently aligned with the labour market, but efforts are underway to expand work-based learning opportunities*

Upper secondary IVET programmes place a low emphasis on work-based learning, which OECD research has shown to be a determinant feature of VET programme quality (see Figure 4.5) (OECD, 2018[12]). As noted, learning in technological upper secondary programmes primarily takes place in a classroom setting, and while shorter IVET programmes allocate more time to work-based learning, stakeholders interviewed for this review stressed this often happens in school workshops and laboratories, simulating a workplace environment rather than involving actual employers. As a result, students' exposure to employers' practices and expectations is limited, providing them with relatively little opportunity to develop in-depth applied knowledge and an understanding of the real-world workplace (CEDEFOP, 2021[5]).

Ongoing reforms aim to address this challenge. Notably, Romania plans to gradually increase the availability of "dual" vocational programmes organised in partnership with local employers and with a stronger element of work-based learning. Starting in 2025-2026, the Ministry of Education will phase out three-year IVET programmes, offering only the 4-year technological programmes exclusively in a dual format. Students will still have the option to obtain certificate of professional education (NQF level 3) after completing three years (European Commission, 2023[11]). New legislation also introduces a new dual model of vocational bachelor's degrees to provide a coherent pathway from upper secondary vocational programmes to higher education (see below and Chapter 5).

## Figure 4.5. In Romania, a low but increasing share of students enrol in upper secondary VET programmes that combine school and work-based learning

Share of upper secondary vocational students enrolled in combined school- and work-based programmes (2015 and 2022)




Note: Combined school- and work-based programmes are defined as programmes where at least 10% but less than 75% of the curriculum is presented in the school environment or through distance education. Therefore, the work-based component of a school- and work-based programme would be a minimum of 25% and a maximum of 90%. *Ranked in descending order of share of upper secondary vocational students enrolled in combined school- and work-based programmes in 2022.*
Source: OECD (2022[13]), Share of students enrolled in school and work-based programmes, http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/gl

### *The school network is large and dispersed, with many small, rural schools, making quality improvements challenging*

With over 16 500 schools, most of which are small, satellite schools, the school network has not adapted to changing demographics. Urban schools are typically large, and many operate on multiple shifts to accommodate the growing urban student population (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[1]). Although this approach enables a more efficient use of school facilities, it risks lowering the quality of learning by creating a stressful environment with shorter breaks for teachers and fewer chances for students to access support outside teaching hours (OECD, 2018[14]; Government of Romania, 2022[15]). In contrast, rural schools are often small satellite sites attached to a larger main school. Satellite schools face challenges in attracting and retaining qualified teachers and securing sufficient resources to deliver a high-quality provision. One reason is that principals in main sites often lack support to address the specific needs of the satellite schools under their responsibility, such as managing shared teaching staff and resources across sites.

Ongoing reforms seek to optimise the use of school resources by promoting school consortia between rural and urban schools. These consortia encourage the mobility of specialised teaching staff, shared facilities and a joint provision of courses. However, other important mechanisms to manage the school network in ways that promote quality, equitable access and efficiency seem to be underutilised. For example, the Ministry of Education has not defined a clear strategy or criteria to review small schools for potential closure or consolidation, or analysed and adapted the funding formula to encourage network optimisation. This means that local authorities are required to develop proposals to reorganise the network every year without a guiding framework, sufficient data or incentives to adjust their educational offer to a changing number of students. Similarly, national investments in school infrastructure appear to be disconnected from network planning (OECD, 2024[2]).

*Romania is taking steps to promote the inclusion of students with special education needs in mainstream education*

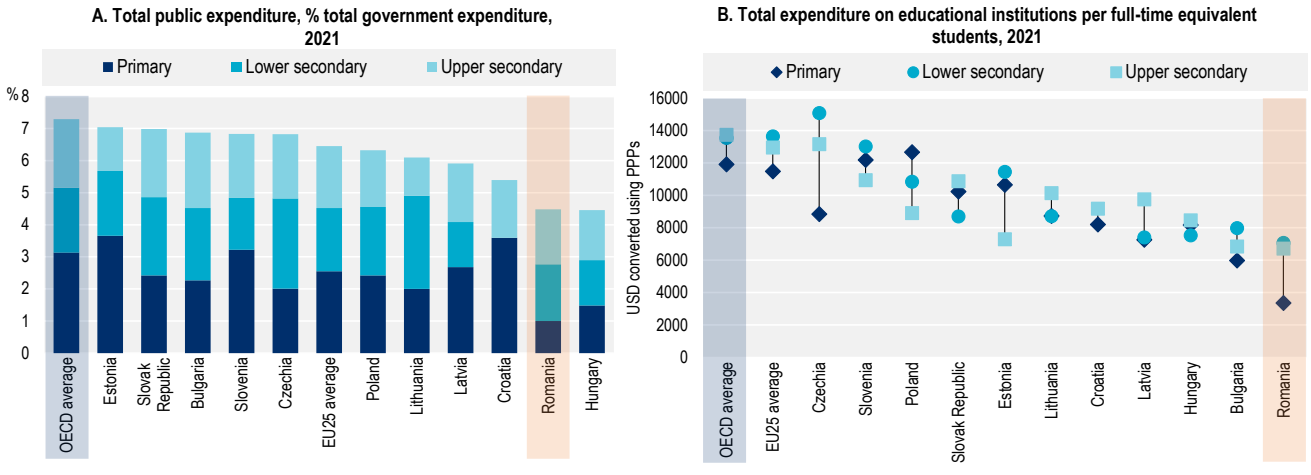
In Romania, students with Special Education Needs (SEN) can attend either special education or mainstream schools. According to the latest OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), in 2018, 12% of lower secondary teachers in Romania reported teaching in classes where more than 10% of students had special needs, compared to the OECD average of 27% (OECD, 2020[16]). The 2023 Law aims to accommodate SEN students, to the greatest extent possible, in mainstream schools. The law reviews the funding formula, increasing the standard cost per student by 75% for schools enrolling students with SEN. It also introduces a multi-tier support model with four levels of support tailored to students' needs. Students with milder needs should be accommodated in mainstream schools, and only those requiring the highest level of specialised support will attend special education schools. Schools can draw on Country Centres for Educational Resources and Assistance to access a range of resources multi-disciplinary specialist teams (e.g. counsellors, speech therapists, psychologists, school mediators, social workers, and support teachers) (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[10]). These changes are in line with international practice. Most OECD countries have started to provide more inclusive education for students with SEN in mainstream school settings, recognising that integration can improve the learning experience of SEN students and reduce their marginalisation (Brussino, 2020[17]).

## *Funding of school education*

*Funding for school education is low but set to increase*

According to the latest available data, primary and secondary education received 4.5% of total government expenditure in 2021. This stands below the OECD average of 7.3% and is the second lowest spending among Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries (see Figure 4.6). This translates into very low levels of per student expenditure, in particular at primary level, where spending is less than a third of the OECD average (see Figure 4.6). The new legislative package aims to increase public expenditure for education, bringing spending levels closer to OECD and EU standards (see Chapter 2) (Government of Romania, 2020[18]). This increase is necessary, yet it will take time to implement, making the efficiency and effectiveness of interim spending decisions critically important.

### Figure 4.6. Funding for school education remains low




Note: *Panel A ranked in descending order of total public expenditure to primary and secondary. Panel B ranked in descending order of total expenditure on primary and secondary education.*
Source: OECD (2024[4]), *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en.

### *The Ministry of Education funds schools primarily through a per-capita funding formula, and has plans to provide additional targeted funds to disadvantaged schools*

Romanian schools rely largely on public funds determined by a per-capita funding formula. These funds account for an estimated 87% of total funds received by schools (World Bank, 2023[19]). In recent years, the funding formula has been revised to better reflect need, by including adjustments to provide additional funds to small and rural schools, and more recently – with the 2023 Law – to schools enrolling disadvantaged students and students with special education needs (SEN). While these changes are intended to improve equity, they also create a more complex formula, making it harder to anticipate how much funding each school or locality will receive, and potentially undermining incentives to rationalise the school network. This is important in Romania's context, where the benefits of having smaller, more accessible schools appear to be often offset by the challenges of attracting qualified teachers and supporting good teaching (OECD, 2024[2]).

Similar to many OECD countries, ongoing reforms also plan to supplement the main funding mechanism with targeted programmes that channel additional funds to disadvantaged schools. The 2023 Law introduced the concept of priority investment areas in education to concentrate sizeable resources and integrate social and educational services in the most disadvantaged communities. Additionally, Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) includes the provision of targeted grants for schools with high rates of early school leaving (European Commission, 2021[20]). These grants are designed to enable schools to better support vulnerable students as they transition from lower secondary to upper secondary education (European Commission, 2021[20]).

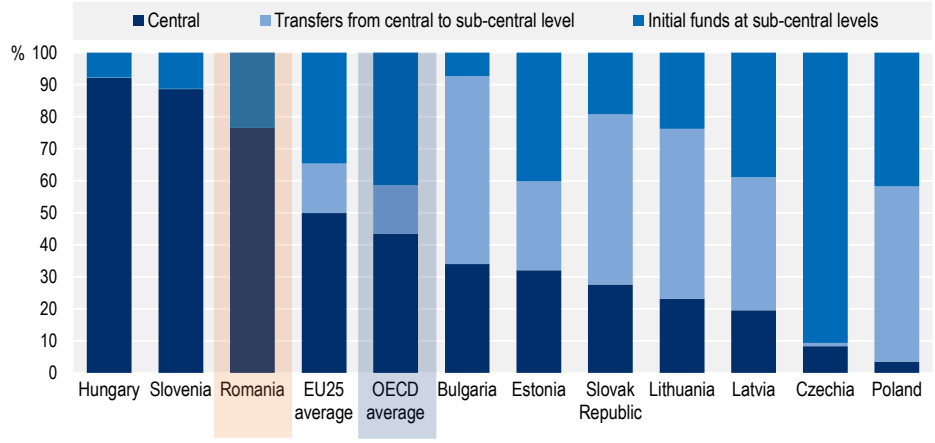
### *While most school funding comes from the central government, local funding makes a difference to schools*

Most funding for current expenditure in school education comes from the central government budget and is primarily absorbed by staff salaries and administrative costs. In 2021, staff compensation accounted for 88% of current expenditure in primary education, 77% in lower secondary education and 74% in upper secondary education (OECD, 2024[4]). However, local authorities (communes, towns and cities), may also provide complementary funding to cover investment in infrastructure, transportation, extracurricular activities, teaching materials and other ancillary costs. This leaves institutions in socio-economically deprived areas at a disadvantage, as poorer localities typically have lower revenues (see Chapter 2).

Romania's NRRP has allocated over EUR 1 billion to supply schools with essential teaching materials, easing their reliance on local funding for these needs (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[1]). Despite this support, mechanisms for resource transfers between different levels of government, which could alleviate these disparities in local funding in the longer-term, such as targeted grants from central government to local authorities, do not exist in Romania (see Figure 4.7) (World Bank, 2022[21]; CNFIS, 2022[22]).

### Figure 4.7. In Romania, local governments provide complementary funding to schools

Distribution of sources of total government funds devoted to primary, secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education, by level of government, 2021




Note: The share and composition of public funds allocated to schools by central and sub-central governments includes current and capital expenditure. *Ranked in descending order of percentage of public funds allocated to schools by the central government in primary, secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education.*
Source: OECD (2024[4]), *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en.

## *Teachers and school leaders*

### *Romania's teaching workforce is predominantly female and slightly younger than the average in the OECD*

Similar to all countries in the OECD, in Romania men are underrepresented in the teaching profession. However, Romania's gender gap is larger: men represent 7% of primary teachers (17% in the OECD on average) and 29% of upper secondary vocational teachers (43% in the OECD) (OECD, 2024[4]).

While there is no overall teacher shortage, the government is concerned about its ability to attract adequately qualified candidates into the profession, especially to work in rural schools. Romania's share of teachers above age 50 is slightly below the OECD average, in both general and vocational tracks. In 2022, 36% of teachers in general USE were aged 50 or older, and 38% in vocational programmes, compared to the OECD averages of 39% and 43% respectively (OECD, 2024[4]). However, there are emerging shortages of qualified teachers in STEM subjects. An estimated 41% of science teachers, and 47% of math teachers are aged above 50 (Universitatea din București, 2021[23]).

### *Romania is taking measures to increase the attractiveness of the teaching career through better pay*

While teacher salaries in Romania remain low compared to the OECD average, and salary progression is slow and based primarily on seniority, there have been significant improvements in recent years (OECD, 2024[2]). In 2022, the annual average salary of a general upper secondary teacher in Romania was of USD 33 085, below the OECD average (USD 53 119) (OECD, 2023[24]). Recognising the need for more competitive wages, in 2023-2024 the government increased teachers' salaries by an average of 50% (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[1]).

Romania also has a reward scheme – "merit pay" – which is intended to reward and motivate good teachers. This bonus can represent 25% of a teacher's basic salary and is granted for a five-year period

to 16% of teachers in each discipline. Previous OECD analysis has raised concerns regarding its effectiveness and integrity (Kitchen, 2017[25]; OECD, 2024[2]). While some OECD countries provide salary rewards based on teachers' performance or other factors, these rewards are rarely allocated as a significant percentage of teachers' base salary as is the case in Romania (OECD, 2019[26]). The OECD has signalled more effective ways to recognise and reward good teaching, making closer links between performance, promotion and pay (OECD, 2024[2]).

*Romania has a clearly defined career structure for teachers, but there are weak links between promotion, pay and performance*

Romania's teacher career includes three levels: Beginning Teacher, Didactical Qualification Level II and Didactical Qualification Level I. Teachers can also compete for "professor emeritus" status 15 years after earning their last didactic degree, which provides additional benefits. The 2023 Law introduces changes to this structure. It keeps the same levels but sets out plans to develop new teacher standards that clarify expectations for different career levels and create new roles for teachers (e.g. teacher mentors). Certification and promotion decisions will also draw on more authentic evidence of the quality of teaching practice, moving away from a narrow reliance on teacher examinations. Developed by tertiary education institutions, these examinations include written and oral tests on pedagogy and subject knowledge, and influence promotion decisions at different stages of teachers' career paths (OECD, 2024[2]). However, pay growth across levels will remain relatively flat. Recent reforms also do not address long-standing concerns about how promotion decisions are taken in Romania, in particular the influential role of CSIs in the process and the risks this poses to the integrity and consistency of teacher promotion.

*Teacher professional development is being overhauled, with much greater emphasis on job-embedded learning to improve teachers' pedagogical skills*

Romania has recently strengthened initial teacher education with the development of a new master's in teaching. A master's programme, introduced in 2020-2021, includes a practicum under the coordination of a mentor teacher, addressing previous shortcomings in initial teacher preparation, particularly the limited guidance and practice for developing pedagogical skills.

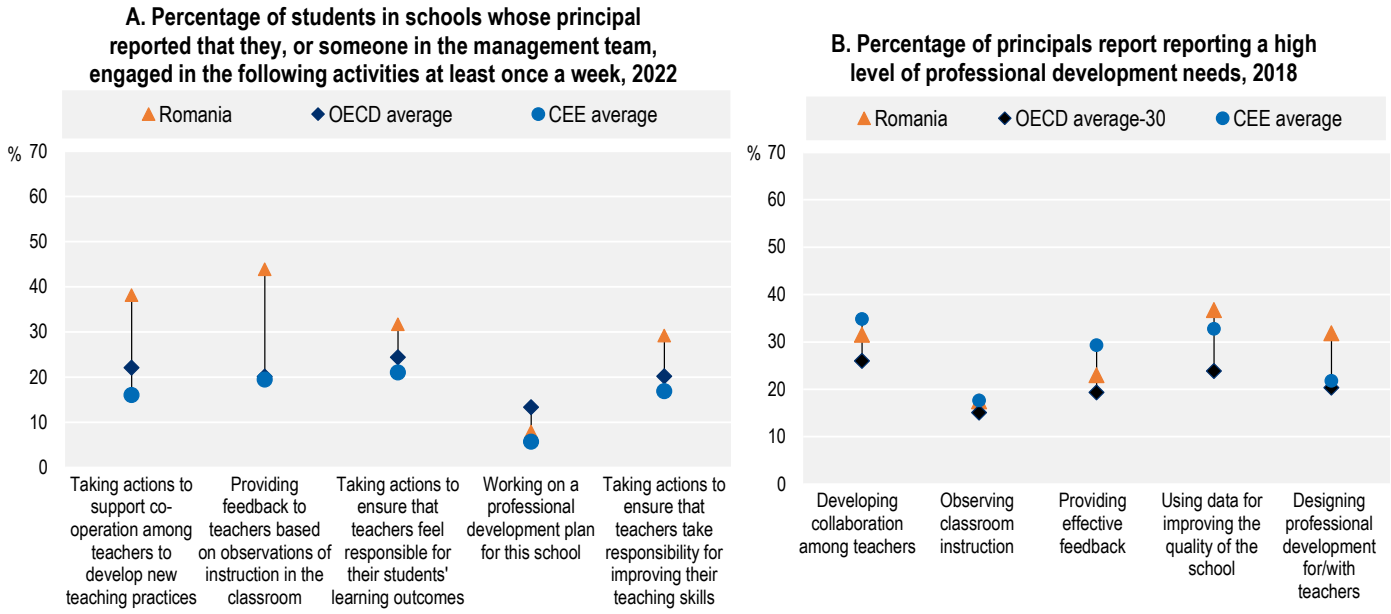
The 2023 Law also plans to address long-standing concerns with teachers' continuous professional development, which has typically consisted of short training outside schools, often of poor quality and relevance. It introduces structured mentorship for practicing teachers and sets expectations for each school to organise learning communities that promote collaborative learning among teachers. These learning opportunities have been shown to be particularly effective in supporting teacher professional growth, as they connect learning to the specific challenges that teachers face in their classroom (OECD, 2019[26]). Such systems of peer collaboration are commonly used to improve teachers' instructional practices across the OECD.

One important aspect of school-based professional development that current reforms do not address, and that could make mentorship and peer learning more effective, is regular teacher appraisal. Annual in-school teacher appraisals are not currently designed in a way that help teachers improve their teaching practices. These reviews are undertaken by a committee, including actors from outside the school, and principals lack the mandate or expertise to lead the process (Kitchen, 2017[25]). Appraisers review teachers' self-evaluation, along with other information, such as CSI inspections and student results in national exams and academic competitions, and can conduct classroom observations, though these are not systematically included. At the end of the process, teacher receive a summative appraisal mark, which determines their eligibility to compete for salary bonuses and career advancement. Given the high-stakes nature of these regular appraisals, they offer limited space for formative feedback, and do not systematically identify areas for improvement that could be addressed through continuous professional development (Kitchen, 2017[25]; OECD, 2024[2]).

*School leaders need support to become effective pedagogical leaders*

Romanian principals, or members of the school management team, report higher levels of engagement in instructional tasks than their peers in many OECD countries, yet several factors stand in the way of them doing so effectively. While school leadership positions —principals and deputy principals — are intended to be filled through open competition, not all positions are consistently filled through this process. For example, in 2021-2022, 20% of all positions remained vacant, and had to be filled by principals and deputy principals appointed by CSIs through secondment for a fixed period. Stakeholders have expressed concerns that political affiliations or connections to local officials may influence these appointments, potentially undermining the independence of appointment decisions and affecting the quality of leadership (Kitchen, 2017[25]; Ministry of Education of Romania, 2021[27]). Dedicated professional standards that illustrate expected competencies and practices for school leadership roles are yet to be approved. In addition, the pre-service training new principals receive covers generic knowledge and skills on educational management, rather than the competencies needed for instructional leadership and school improvement. As a result, Romanian principals report a relatively high need for support in important areas, such as teacher professional development and using data to improve school quality (see Figure 4.8).

## Figure 4.8. Romania's school leaders report engaging in instructional leadership practices to a higher extent than international peers, but need training to do so effectively




Source: OECD (2023[3]), PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en; OECD (2019[28]), TALIS 2018 Results (Volume I): Teachers and School Leaders as Lifelong Learners, TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/1d0bc92a-en

In addition, principals are burdened with administration that limits their time to engage in instructional leadership. A large proportion of Romanian principals (93%) report that they are often reviewing school administrative procedures and reports, the second highest percentage amongst all TALIS-participating countries, after Bulgaria (OECD, 2020[16]). The administrative burden on principals is further exacerbated by the shortage of administrative support staff, even in cases where principals manage multiple satellite schools. For instance, only 39% principals in Romania reported having a deputy principal in the school management team, well below the OECD average of 82% (OECD, 2020[16]).

Complex school governance also limits principals' role as instructional leaders. As noted, many important instructional tasks are undertaken by school commissions where principals often have a limited say and whose focus is largely administrative (OECD, 2020[29]). The 2023 Law intends to give principals more authority in important areas such as teacher appraisal and school quality assurance, but it falls short in removing the bureaucratic processes and structures in schools that currently limit principals' roles.

### *Curriculum framework*

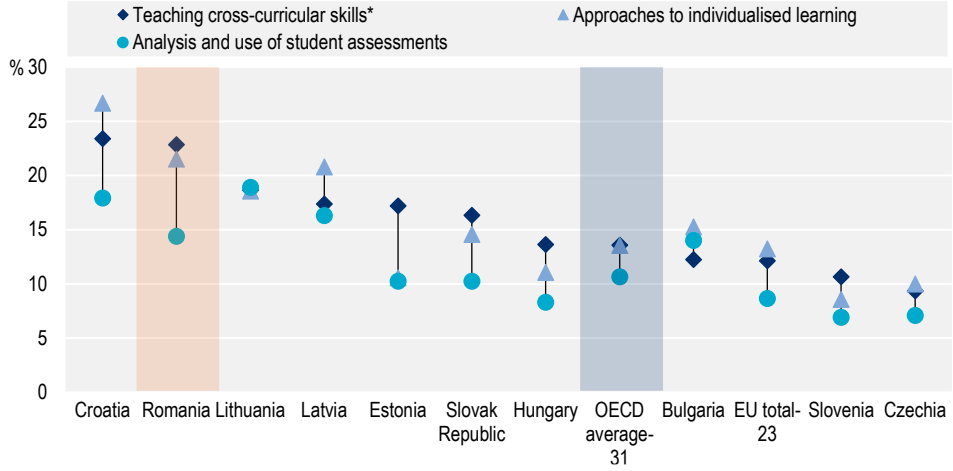
*Romania is rolling out a new competency-based curriculum*

Over the last decade, Romania has been implementing a significant curriculum reform. Informed by the EU Reference Framework of Key Competencies, the new curriculum encourages more student-centred learning and places greater emphasis on the application of knowledge and the development of cross-curricular or "21st century" competencies, such critical thinking, creativity and collaboration. This is in line with reforms seen across an increasing number of OECD countries, where student agency, real-world relevance and "learning to learn" are increasingly at the fore (OECD, 2020[30]). The new curriculum has been progressively rolled out in primary and lower secondary education since 2012-2013 and its implementation in upper secondary education is planned to start in 2025-2026 (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[31]; Ministry of Education of Romania, n.y.[32]).

The new curriculum represents a significant departure from previous teaching and learning strategies in Romania. It requires a shift in pedagogical approaches, away from teacher-led, rote-memorisation and subject-specific methods of instruction towards more personalised, competence-based approaches that focus on fostering higher order abilities and the practical use of knowledge in real-life settings. These are areas where Romanian teachers report a high need for professional development (see Figure 4.9).

## Figure 4.9. Teachers in Romania report a relatively high level of need for professional development in approaches for individualised learning and assessment

Percentage of teachers reporting a high level of need for professional development in the following areas




Note: *For example, creativity, critical thinking and problem solving. *Ranked in descending order of percentage of teachers reporting a high level of need for professional development in teacher cross-curricular skills.*
Source: OECD (2019[28]), *TALIS 2018 Results (Volume I): Teachers and School Leaders as Lifelong Learners*, TALIS, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/1d0bc92a-en.

As in many countries that have embarked on similar reforms, there remains a gap between curriculum intent and teaching practice in Romania's classrooms (OECD, 2020[33]). To address this, through the EU-funded Relevant curriculum, Open Education for All (CRED) project, Romania has developed resources and large-scale training to help teachers adopt new instructional practices. An evaluation of the programme showed that while teachers gained a better understanding of the curriculum's expectations, they need additional support to develop lesson plans, activities, and assessments that bring these expectations to life in the classroom. The role of school leadership in bridging the gap between policy and practice is also highlighted (Horvath, 2023[34]).

### *Assessment and evaluation practices*

*Classroom assessments tend to focus on evaluating students at the end of a learning period rather than on providing feedback to shape and deepen future learning*

Previous OECD analysis has highlighted several weaknesses in classroom assessment policies and practices in Romania as compared with practices across the OECD. High-stakes exams in grades 8 and 12 weigh heavily on the system, with a significant backwash on classroom practice both in terms of curriculum narrowing (teaching to the test) and the marginalisation of low-achieving students. Romania has taken some steps to mitigate these negative impacts - for example by no longer counting a students' marks from school assessment throughout lower secondary (grades 5-8) in the final Grade 8 exam. However, other issues raised previously by the OECD, such as the emphasis the exams place on the memorisation of subject-based knowledge rather than the competencies in the curriculum, remain as obstacles to improvements in classroom assessment and student outcomes (Kitchen, 2017[25]).

Some government policies reinforce a narrow focus on summative test scores. Teacher promotion and rewards, school evaluation and student scholarships are still closely tied to students' test scores. This reinforces the emphasis on norm-based grading, where teachers assign marks based on students' performance relative to their peers, rather than the criterion-referenced approach intended by the curriculum that evaluates students based on absolute levels of mastery. In addition, the types of resources that many OECD countries have developed to encourage more formative assessment methods, from proficiency levels and item banks to guidance on how to provide feedback and differentiation, have long been planned, but are yet to be introduced.

Efforts have been made to improve teachers' assessment literacy as part of the reforms to professional development outlined above. However, understanding of core assessment concepts and techniques remains weak, in particular with regards to how to use assessment formatively – to identify learning needs and adjust teaching accordingly– and how to assess complex competencies in the curriculum (Kitchen, 2017[25]). The new Law sets out plans to develop learning and assessment standards for all levels of education, including standards on functional literacy.[1] Moreover, a second phase of the EU-funded Relevant Curriculum, Open Education for All (CRED) project, approved in 2024, support efforts to develop assessment standards and enhance teachers' assessment literacy.

*Romania aims to standardise and digitalise national student assessments*

The 2023 Law introduces plans to digitalise and standardise national census-based student assessments in grades 2, 4 and 6. This is expected to address a notable gap in Romania's assessment framework. Paper-based administration, lengthy reporting delays and absence of standardised marking prevent the current national assessments from providing comparable data to monitor the system's performance over time or help teachers benchmark student achievement against national standards (OECD, 2024[2]).

While reforms promise to improve the reliability of national assessments, other previously identified concerns remain. Of particular importance is the risk that such extensive external assessment, alongside

national exams, and international assessments, detracts focus and resources from developing other assessment resources more useful to teachers in the classroom. Many OECD countries are increasingly focused on how to create a balanced national assessment framework, where external tests are deployed more selectively, and greater attention is given to practices - such as diagnostic tests and moderation - that can improve the quality of classroom assessment judgments. This question of balance appears largely absent in the discussion of national assessment reform in Romania.

### *Romania is taking measures to develop its education data infrastructure*

Until recently, Romania had one of the least developed Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) in the EU (OECD, 2024[2]). The current data management system, called SIIIR, has some important features of a modern EMIS, such as a unique student identifier, and automatic reports that help actors filter and analyse selected data. However, limited national investment and shortage of specialised staff within the Ministry of Education have made it difficult to maintain and develop the platform. In addition, while SIIIR collects large amounts of data from the education system, this data is not easily accessible to schools. Data is not displayed in a user-friendly format, but instead presented in lengthy tables that require a higher level of data literacy than what is typically available in schools (OECD, 2024[2]).

The Ministry of Education plans to make significant investments to strengthen the education data infrastructure, notably by building on SIIIR to establish a new, integrated system. This provides an opportunity for the Ministry to connect its data management system to other important datasets needed to monitor national education quality and equity goals, such as school financial data, and student standardised testing results. Reforms have also introduced changes to improve data entry and use by schools. These include a new central unit within the Ministry tasked with providing IT support and strengthening the capacity of actors to use the EMIS platform, and the redefinition of County Directorates' functions to include coaching schools in the entry and use of data.

### *Ongoing efforts aim to make school evaluation more useful for schools*

Until recently, Romania had two parallel school evaluation processes, led by the CSIs and the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education (ARACIP). This duplication is uncommon across education systems in the OECD and the EU, where evaluation responsibilities are generally consolidated in one independent, national school evaluation body. The 2023 law established ARACIIP as the main independent evaluator, aligning Romania with international practice.

Recent reforms also introduced a number of positive changes to the organisation and conduct of school evaluations. ARACIIP's new evaluation framework places a stronger focus on the quality of the teaching and learning process rather than on verifying compliance with national policies and regulations. The agency also has plans to develop a cadre of permanent evaluators to work alongside contracted experts. These evaluators would assure the quality of evaluations and help apply standards consistently across schools (Eurydice, 2022[35]; Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[31]).

Despite these positive steps, there are still areas where school evaluations may not fully serve as a helpful resource for schools. For instance, while empowering schools to take the lead on quality improvement has been a long-standing national goal, school leadership teams receive limited resources and support to lead meaningful self-evaluations and improvement planning for their schools. Common supports available in many OECD and EU countries, such as coaching, exemplar case studies, and accessible school data to enable contextualised comparisons and monitor progress over time, are also yet to be developed in Romania. Additionally, while many EU countries use school evaluation results to promote system-wide learning through initiatives like school pairing and peer-learning networks, such a systematic approach is currently lacking in Romania.

### *Use of digital education technology*

Most schools in the country report having adequate levels of digital infrastructure and resources. According to the latest round of PISA, only 26 % of students were enrolled in schools where principals reported a lack of digital resources, very similar to the OECD average of 24% (OECD, 2023[3]). In terms of preparedness for digital learning, almost all principals reported most of their students have teachers with the necessary skills to integrate digital devices in instruction (97.9%) (OECD, 2023[3]). However, the extent to which teachers are doing this effectively remains unclear. Only 65% of teachers reported feeling confident in supporting student learning through the use of digital technology, suggesting that approximately one in three teachers might feel they lack relevant skills in this area (OECD, 2019[28]).

Ongoing investments are directed towards enhancing schools' digital infrastructure, pedagogical resources, and teachers' digital competences. Both the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), and the World Bank-funded Romania Secondary Education Project (ROSE) invest in digital equipment, pedagogical resources, and training to help school principals and teachers use digital technologies for personalised learning (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[1]; Government of Romania, 2022[15]). With NRRP funding, Romania is on track to train at least 100 000 public school teachers by 2026, nearly half of the country's active teaching workforce (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[1]).

### *Main reform priorities*

In summary, the main reform goals for the school sector signal significant changes across the board. These changes impact how schools are evaluated, funded and supported, how teachers develop professionally, and how students learn and progress in secondary education. Immediate to medium-term priorities will be significantly shaped by EU funding, notably the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) and the European Social Fund (ESF) (see Chapter 2). Three notable areas of reform include:

- **Developing teacher capacity to deliver the new competency-based curriculum**. Although the new school curriculum has been progressively introduced over the last decade, recent reforms and investments provide new impetus to improve its implementation in the classroom. Measures outlined above focus on strengthening school support and teacher professional development, through the redefinition of CSI's role from control to support, mentorship to strengthen instructional leadership, and expectations for schools to promote professional learning communities for teachers. With EU funding Romania will continue to provide large-scale training for teachers, school leaders and CSI staff, and develop a suite of open instructional resources– including digital resources – for curriculum implementation.
- **Improving the relevance and attractiveness of vocational tracks and reducing dropout in secondary education.** Since 2020, Romania has undertaken a number of initiatives in this direction, notably by strengthening mechanisms to monitor vocational graduates' transitions to employment, anticipate labour market needs, and evaluate VET policies (see Chapter 6). Another key reform objective is the transition of IVET programmes into a dual format by 2029-2030 and the development of a new dual stream in tertiary education (see Chapter 5). These measures aim to provide IVET students with more opportunities for applied learning, higher qualifications and smoother transitions into the labour market. To advance these goals, Romania will establish 29 regional campuses for dual education. These campuses will bring together universities, upper secondary schools, local authorities, and the private sector to offer a range of vocational qualifications and provide students with opportunities for applied learning. Romania also plans to provide additional financial and academic support to disadvantaged IVET students, develop professional training standards for IVET teachers, and strengthen quality assurance processes for IVET providers.

- **Introducing a number of policies to improve equity and inclusion in school education**. Besides allocating additional funding to support disadvantaged students and schools, both through the funding formula and targeted school grants and scholarships, the 2023 law establishes a new National Centre for Inclusive Education. The centre will be tasked with developing, implementing and evaluating policies that promote the inclusion of students with special educational needs and other at-risk groups in mainstream education, notably through multi-tier interventions that provide different levels of support according to student need.

  Romania is also making significant investments to reduce early school leaving. The National Program for Reducing School Dropout (PNRAS), currently implemented in over 2 500 schools, aims to identify effective measures to enhance participation in school education. The Early Warning Mechanism in Education (MATE) supports these efforts by collecting real-time data on early risk factors, helping schools identify students at risk of dropping out and develop tailored measures to address challenges at the individual, class, and school levels.

## Section II: Performance in schooling

### *Access and participation*

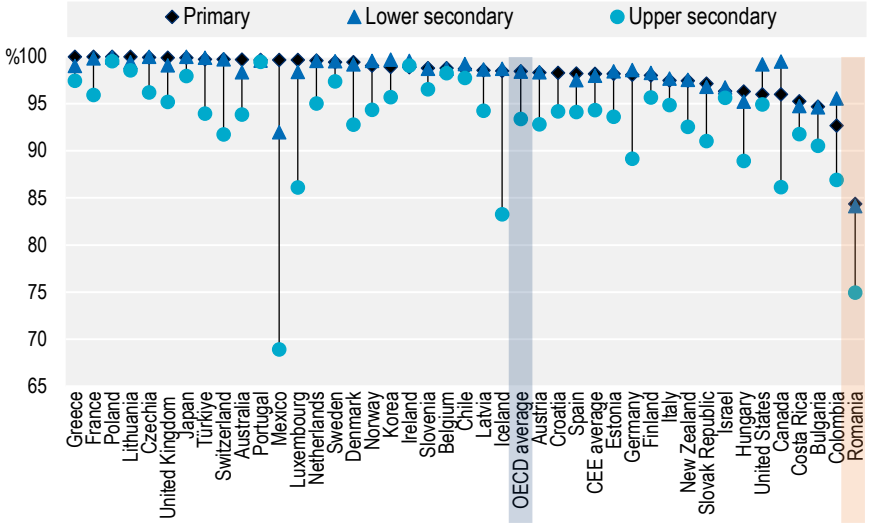
*Enrolment in primary and secondary education is low by OECD standards*

Contrary to most OECD countries, Romania has not yet achieved universal participation in primary education and still has low enrolment in secondary education (see Chapter 2). In 2022, net enrolment rates (reflecting students of the appropriate age) in primary and secondary education ranked among the lowest when compared to OECD and the lowest among CEE countries (see Figure 4.10).

Low participation rates in secondary education are closely associated with high student dropout. In 2022, around 20% of 15-year-olds and 22% of 16-year-olds were out-of-school (Eurostat, 2022[36]). High dropout in secondary education is likely the result of progressive disengagement that begins in earlier grades.

### Figure 4.10. Romania has relatively low enrolment rates in school education

Total net enrolment by level of education, 2022




Note: *Ranked in descending order of total net enrolment in primary education.*
Source: UIS (2022[37]), Total net enrolment rate by level of education, https://data.uis.unesco.org/#

## *Quality, learning and well-being outcomes*

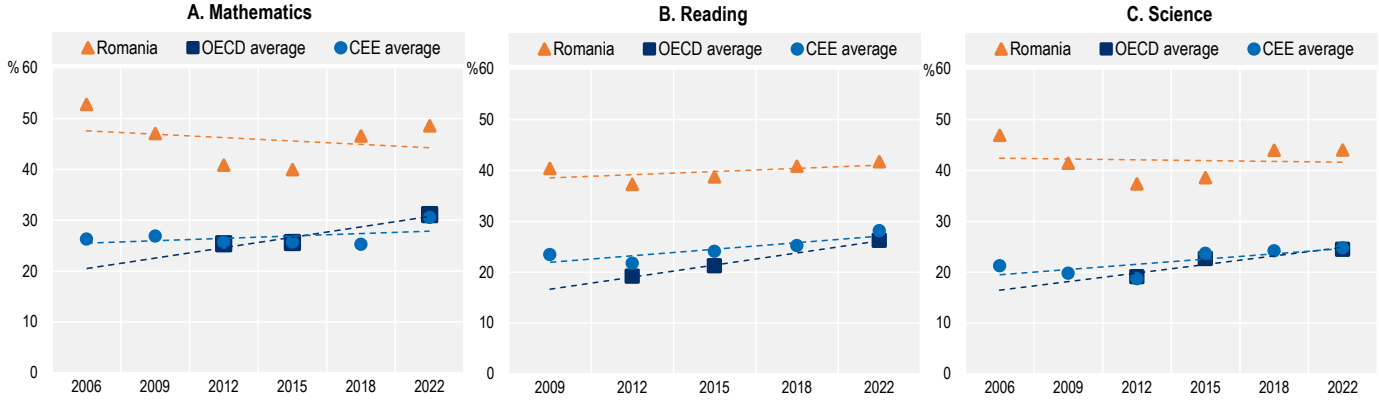
### *Close to half of Romanian students do not master basic competencies by age 15*

Student performance in Romania in reading, mathematics and science, as measured by the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), is the third lowest in the European Union, after Bulgaria and Cyprus. This is largely driven by a high share of students who scored below the baseline level of proficiency (level 2), considered the minimum level for students to participate fully in society, and a very low share of top performers reaching level 5 or 6. The share of students scoring below level 2 in all three subjects has remained consistently high since 2006 (see Figure 4.11).

However, while low by overall OECD standards, Romania's performance is above that of other PISA participants with similar expenditure levels, like Colombia and Uruguay. Moreover, between 2006 and 2022, the PISA sample expanded its coverage of 15-year-olds in the country, increasing from 72% of the total 15-year-old population in 2006 to 76% in 2022. Maintaining relatively stable levels of performance despite this broader cohort, is itself an indicator of progress (see Chapter 2).

### Figure 4.11. In Romania, the share of students who lack basic proficiency in science, reading and mathematics, has remain relatively stable at high levels

Percentage of low performers (below level 2)




Note: Below level 2 is less than 420.07 score points in mathematics, less than 407.47 score points in reading and less than 409.54 score points in science.
Source: OECD (2024[38]), PISA database 2022, https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/

### *Performance-related anxiety and a growth mindset influence students' academic performance*

PISA assesses a range of student emotions, attitudes and behaviours that can influence academic achievement (Lee and Stankov, 2018[39]; OECD, 2023[3]). In Romania, two non-cognitive characteristics appear to have the largest influence on students' mathematics achievement, after accounting for students' and schools' socio-economic background: learning anxiety, and a growth mindset. Overall, Romanian 15-year-old students experience similar levels of mathematics anxiety as their OECD peers, but fewer exhibit a growth mindset, with 43% of students who believed intelligence can be developed through effort, good strategies, and support from others, compared to 58% across the OECD. In Romania, students with a growth mindset scored on average 12 points higher in mathematics than their peers who believed their abilities and intelligence are static traits (OECD, 2023[40]) (see Chapter 2).

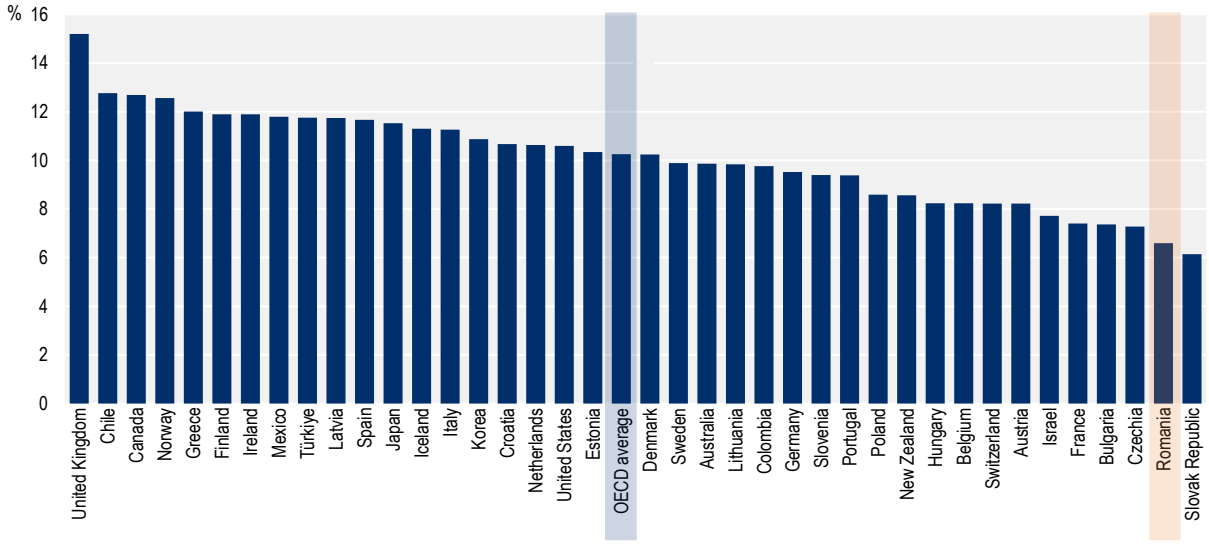
## *Equity*

### *Romania has a small share of disadvantaged students who succeed academically*

As in most OECD countries, student learning outcomes are associated with socio-economic background. However, in Romania, student background is a much stronger predictor of performance. The share of disadvantaged students who performed in the top quarter of performance in mathematics (6.6%) – and who are considered "resilient" in PISA – is the second lowest when compared with OECD and CEE countries participating in PISA, only after the Slovak Republic (6.1%) (see Figure 4.12).

### Figure 4.12. Romania shows low levels of academic resilience compared to OECD and CEE countries participating in PISA

Percentage of resilient students in mathematics*

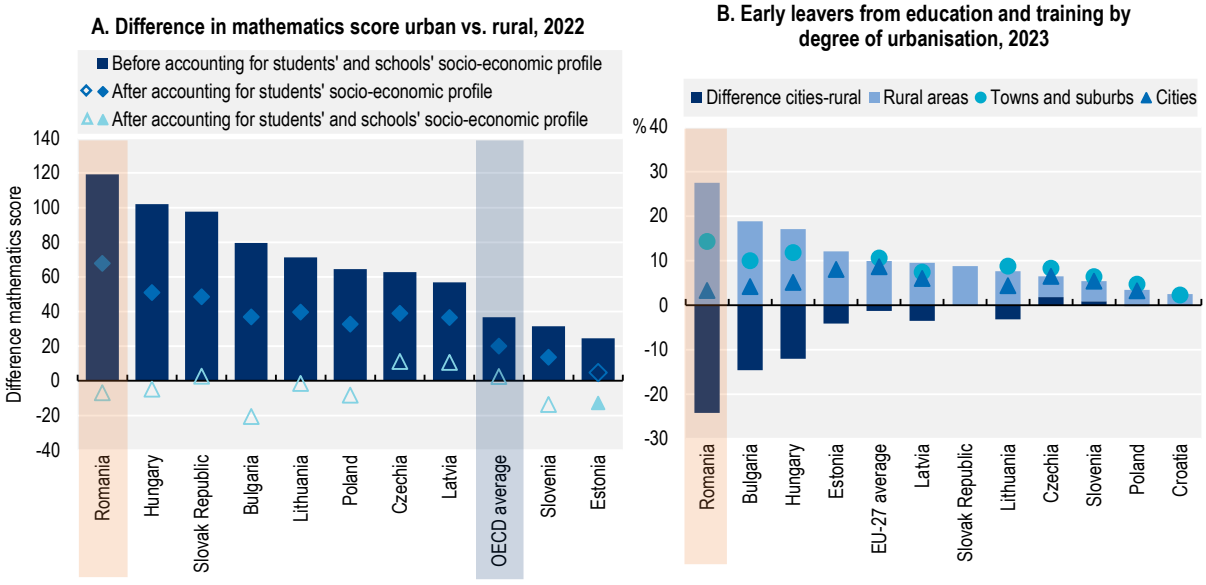



Note: * Resilient students in mathematics are disadvantaged students who scored in the top quarter of performance in mathematics amongst students in their own country. *Ranked in descending order of percentage of resilience students in mathematics.*
Source : OECD (2023[40]), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en.

### *Participation and outcomes vary considerably between rural and urban schools*

Students in rural areas face overlapping barriers to learning and participation, largely based on their socio-economic background (OECD, 2024[38]). For instance, in PISA 2022, students in rural schools scored on average 119 points lower in mathematics compared to students in urban schools, before controlling for students' and schools' socio-economic status. The difference is no longer significant after accounting for student and school background, suggesting the concentration of disadvantage in rural schools has a strong influence on learning outcomes. This is the largest gap amongst PISA participating countries and is higher than in other CEE countries (see Figure 4.13). Low learning outcomes are closely linked with student disengagement and subsequent early school leaving (OECD, 2023[41]). In 2023, in rural areas, 27.5% of 18- to 24-year-olds had left school before completing upper secondary education, compared to only 3.3% in cities (Eurostat, 2023[42]).

## Figure 4.13. Romania has the largest rural/urban disparities in participation and learning outcomes in the CEE region




Note: *Panel A ranked in descending order of difference in PISA 2022 mean mathematics score of students in urban areas compared to rural areas before accounting for socio-economic profile. Empty triangles/diamonds show the change in mathematics performance is not statistically significant. Panel B ranked in descending order of early leavers from education and training in rural areas.*
Source: OECD (2024[38]), PISA database 2022, https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/; Eurostat (2023[42]), Early leavers from education and training by sex and degree of urbanisation, https://doi.org/10.2908/EDAT_LFSE_30.

### *Romania has a relatively large Roma population, that faces severe barriers to accessing and progressing in school education*

While estimates vary and issues of underreporting exist, Romania has the largest Roma population in Europe (see Chapter 2) (Rutigliano, 2020[43]). Roma children and youth face severe socio-economic marginalisation and persistent inequity in terms of access to high-quality schooling. Estimates suggest that over 80% of out-of-school children and youth in Romania are Roma (Rotaru, 2019[44]).

Roma students enrolled in school face high levels of segregation[2] and are at higher risk of dropping out of school than non-Roma students. A 2021 survey covering eight EU countries[3], found that in Romania, one out of two Roma students aged 6 to 15 were enrolled in schools where the majority of students are Roma (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023[45]). Segregation exacerbates the marginalisation of Roma students, and prevent interactions with more advantaged peers, which evidence shows can help improve learning outcomes. This contributes to academic underachievement, disengagement and eventual dropout. According to the same survey, only 22% of Roma respondents aged 20 to 24 had completed at least upper secondary education, in stark contrast with 83% of the general population within the same age group (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023[45]).

Romania is implementing a range of measures to enhance the inclusion of Roma children and youth in school education (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[46]). Since 2001, the Ministry of Education has hired school mediators that work with Roma families to facilitate their communication and involvement with their child's school. Other measures include teaching in Romani language and the organisation of extracurricular activities with Roma parents. In addition to the measures outlined above to improve equity and inclusion, the Ministry of Education has recently received technical assistance from the EU and UNICEF to strengthen its capacity to monitor, prevent, and combat school segregation.

## Section III: Analysis and policy recommendations

### *Quality of programmes and outcomes: Enhancing the impact of school leaders and teachers*

Currently, schools in Romania are not fully supporting all students in their learning. Many students do not attain basic levels of competency by the age of 15 and are disengaged from school, as evidenced by PISA results. Over the last decade, Romania has been implementing a new curriculum that encourages more student-centred learning and the development of cross-curricular or '21st century' competencies. This approach aims to make learning more relevant, engaging, and tailored to students' needs. However, teachers will need sustained guidance, including from their leaders and peers, if they are to translate the curriculum's intent into their classroom practice and improve student outcomes. Drawing on rich evidence and experience across the OECD, this section highlights policies Romania could consider in its ongoing efforts to enhance the impact of school leaders and teachers, and encourage them to embrace new ways of teaching, working and learning together.

### Figure 4.14. Recommendations and actions on quality of programmes and outcomes in school education

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Quality | 4.1 Support school leaders to engage in instructional leadership | • Investing in specialised expertise to inform school leadership policies.<br>• Distributing leadership responsibilities within and across schools more effectively.<br>• Expanding job-embedded professional learning opportunities for school leaders, guided by professional standards. |
| | 4.2 Move towards more competency-based and student centred assessment and pedagogy | • Further revising the grade 8 assessment to align with the curriculum.<br>• Ensuring continued provision of guidelines and resources for formative assessment and inclusive, differentiated teaching.<br>• Developing additional resources to help teachers deliver competency-based teaching. |
| | 4.3 Enhance opportunities for teachers' professional growth within schools | • Supporting schools to allocate more teacher time for peer learning and collaboration.<br>• Developing guidance and resources to help schools facilitate meaningful learning communities. |

*Recommendation 4.1. Support school leaders to engage in instructional leadership*

School leadership can have a powerful impact on student learning. Strong instructional leaders create the conditions for effective teaching and learning within the school. This includes setting clear expectations and standards for teaching and learning, providing support, feedback and resources, and building a positive school culture that promotes professional growth and encourages innovation and improvement (OECD, 2019[26]; OECD, 2020[16]). While Romanian principals engage in some instructional leadership tasks, they report limited support to develop as instructional leaders.

These challenges are compounded by a complex school governance structure, where core instructional leadership tasks are fragmented across multiple commissions. This makes it difficult for school leaders to implement an integrated, school-wide approach to instructional planning and quality improvement. The Romanian government acknowledges these challenges and is undertaking reforms to strengthen the school leadership profession. The Ministry plans to introduce structured mentoring for school leaders and has secured funding from the NRRP to train 10 000 school leaders and inspectors. This section provides insights on how Romania can advance these efforts and enable leaders to play a stronger instructional role.

### Investing in specialised expertise to inform school leadership policies

Romania is taking important steps to professionalise school leadership roles. In 2016 it introduced a merit-based, open competition to select new school leaders, and plans to develop professional standards and expand in-service professional development opportunities directly linked to school leaders' daily work. However, building school leadership is a long-term process. OECD countries implementing similar reforms have found it useful to establish a dedicated institution or unit within the Ministry of Education to maintain a strong focus on school leadership over time. This can help to consolidate expertise and ensure coherence across different leadership policies. As part of efforts to strengthen school leadership, a number of OECD countries have also partnered with academic institutions to access independent scientific advice and technical support, and progressively build their own internal capacity in this area.

For example, over the past decade, Chile has professionalised school leadership through measures similar to those planned in Romania. These include creating a Good School Leadership Framework with standards of practice, introducing a national standardised selection process, and implementing a new training programme led by the Centre for Pedagogical Training, Experimentation, and Research (CPEIP), akin to Romania's planned national centre for teachers. More recently, Chile established three leadership centres, each with a specific regional and thematic focus –such as leadership in vocational education and training – and in partnership with different academic institutions. Chile's leadership centres conduct research, develop tools and resources for school leaders, offer training, and advise the Ministry of Education on leadership policies (Santiago et al., 2017[47]).

### Distributing leadership responsibilities within and across schools more effectively

The current distribution of leadership responsibilities in Romanian schools does not help school leaders to play a meaningful role in instructional planning and quality improvement. On the one hand, schools have multiple commissions responsible for key instructional tasks, including teacher professional development, curriculum design, and school evaluation and improvement. These critical responsibilities are fragmented and often delegated to school staff who lack the necessary experience and training to perform them effectively. On the other hand, principals who are responsible for a cluster including their own school and several satellite schools, often are not sufficiently prepared or supported to lead improvements across their clusters (Kitchen, 2017[25]).

Plans to develop new professional standards for the school leader profession provide an opportunity to rethink how school leadership is organised and distributed within schools and across school clusters. In doing so, Romania might consider:

- **Assigning school leaders direct responsibility for instructional and improvement tasks.** Previous OECD analysis has highlighted three areas where granting school leaders a more central role would be particularly important. First, school leaders could conduct in-school appraisals for teachers, providing developmental feedback, and replacing the current appraisal process led by commissions (OECD, 2024[2]; Kitchen, 2017[25]). Second, school leaders could play a more central role in shaping the professional development activities offered to school staff. Third, they could have more responsibility for school self-evaluation. These changes would enable school leaders to implement a more coherent, school-wide approach to instructional planning and quality improvement. At the same time, they would help reduce the number of school commissions, stripping away many of the bureaucratic processes that divert principals' attention from instructional tasks.
- **Developing a school leadership model for school clusters.** Distributed leadership roles will be important to support instructional improvement within school clusters. Schools overseeing large clusters should more systematically benefit from deputy principals who assist with their administrative and instructional tasks. Additionally, Romania could develop and formalise other

cluster leadership roles in areas such as special education, formative assessment, and early childhood education and care for schools overseeing ECEC settings (see Chapter 3). To identify the most relevant roles, the Ministry of Education could collect information on the specific administrative and instructional support needs of school principals in clusters. National guidelines on the ideal leadership staff to student ratios would help ensure human resources are allocated where they are most needed. For example, Austria has formalised a range of leadership roles specific to school clusters. This includes a school cluster management team, with cross-site leadership functions such as school development, teacher organisation, and professional development (Federal Ministry, 2019[48]). Each school with more than 200 students within the cluster is entitled to an area manager who supports the cluster management team at that site.

**Expanding job-embedded professional learning opportunities for school leaders, guided by professional standards**

Plans to develop job-embedded professional learning opportunities for school leaders are among the most positive measures introduced by the 2023 law. This initiative promises to address long-standing concerns about school leaders' limited preparation in important areas such as leading school self-evaluation and improvement planning, and supporting teachers in implementing student-centred, competency-based teaching approaches. Romania could draw on the experience of some OECD countries in developing its leader mentoring scheme. Three considerations merit highlighting:

- **Carefully selecting and training mentors and taking a targeted approach**: Experience shows it is essential to invest in selecting and developing mentors to ensure they have the necessary skills and experience and a good understanding of adult learning principles. A gradual approach to scaling mentoring is helpful to balance costs and maintain quality. This might mean targeting resources by, for example, starting with early career leaders, or those working in disadvantaged school clusters (OECD, 2019[26]).
- **Using standards of good practice to guide mentoring activities**: Mentoring activities should connect to professional standards that set out clear expectations for the competencies and practices required for school leaders. In developing these standards, Romania could look at the Transformational Leadership Framework developed by the United States' New Leaders foundation. This framework, based on the examination of over 100 high-performing schools, defines effective leadership practices to improve student learning at the system, school, and team levels (OECD, 2019[26]). It is not used to evaluate principals, but instead intended to help external mentors and appraisers identify priority areas to support schools.
- **Combining individual and collective mentoring for school leadership teams**: Mentoring can be beneficial for broader leadership teams (and not just for the school principal) but in Romania efforts have focused narrowly on principals and their deputies. Romania could learn from examples such as Colombia's Transformative School Principals programme, which provides managerial and educational training to entire school leadership teams. The programme includes four weeks of intensive training followed by 36 weeks of continuous support within the school. It involves individual and group coaching and the development of a two-year transformation plan (OECD, 2019[26]).

### *Recommendation 4.2. Move towards more competency-based and student-centred assessment and pedagogy*

Romania's new curriculum encourages more student-centred learning, placing greater emphasis on the development of transversal "21st century" competencies and the practical use of knowledge in real-life settings. While these measures have the potential to enhance student engagement and learning, changes in teaching practices have been slow to take effect. Teachers will need a range of support and guidance

to bring these expectations to life in the classroom. This section suggests potential changes to the national Grade 8 examination that would encourage learning across the breadth of the curriculum. It discusses how to support teachers to integrate assessment into the learning process to monitor student progress, provide timely feedback, and incorporate differentiation strategies in their classrooms. Finally, it highlights the need for additional specialised resources to help Romania's teachers plan and implement cross-curricular lessons and adapt instruction to students' needs.

### Further revising the Grade 8 assessment to align with the curriculum

The high-stakes exam in Grade 8 weighs heavily on the system, with negative consequences for student learning, motivation and progression (Kitchen, 2017[25]). The Ministry of Education has taken some steps to address this. Student results from earlier grades in lower secondary (grades 5-8) no longer count towards the final Grade 8 exam. This reduces the pressure of classroom assessments in lower secondary education and allows earlier assessments to be refocussed on learning rather than demonstrating performance. This can support students to identify and reveal gaps in their knowledge or to feel it is safe to make mistakes, both of which are integral to effective learning.

At the same time, these changes further raise the stakes of the Grade 8 examination. Decisions about the placement of students into upper secondary programmes need to consider broader evidence of aptitude and interests rather than simply one exam. Romania could review the composition of the final grade and include marks from school assessments in grades 7 and 8, as recommended in previous OECD analysis (Kitchen, 2017[25]). Moving from numerical grades to proficiency levels could also support a shift to a system that is designed for all students to succeed. Proficiency levels would signal whether students have met national learning goals in upper secondary education. Plans to develop national learning and assessments standards are a positive step in this direction.

There are also other shortcomings of the current Grade 8 exam that have not yet been addressed. The content and format of the exam could better reflect the competency-based curriculum. As recommended in earlier OECD analysis, this includes broadening both the types of tasks used for assessment and the domains that are assessed. Assessing students not only in their knowledge of a topic but also in their ability to apply that knowledge (e.g. using more open-ended tasks or multiple-choice questions that present students with more complex options and authentic contexts) would support the competency-based curriculum (Kitchen, 2017[25]).

### Ensuring continued provision of guidelines and resources for formative assessment and inclusive, differentiated teaching

Romania has yet to introduce the types of resources seen in many OECD countries to help teachers assess where students are in their learning and differentiate their instruction. Teachers in Romania still focus mainly on grading students and recording and reporting summative results. Without regular formative assessment of student learning to understand their challenges, tailoring instruction to meet student needs becomes difficult. To address this, Romania should move forward with its plans to create a national resource bank. Of particular importance are resources specifically for assessing student progress in the knowledge and competencies covered by the new curriculum, exemplars of feedback that help students understand how they can progress, and guidelines and examples for the design of individual learning plans informed by assessment.

The experience of other countries has shown that it is important to develop a clear concept and scope for such a resource bank and to allocate the necessary funding and staff to its development (OECD, 2023[49]). New Zealand provides an example for how such a tool can support teachers to implement effective formative assessment. Since the early 2000s, Assessment Resource Banks (ARBs) serve as a repository of curriculum-aligned, classroom-based resources that facilitate assessment for learning. The content development process is teacher-driven to ensure that the resources are practical and beneficial in real

classroom settings. Teachers pilot and trial resources before they are validated for inclusion. Teachers can also submit their own assessment resource/tool to be shared with others. The platform compiles nearly three thousand formative assessment resources that teachers can browse to select for example, the curriculum area they want to assess and compare the different assessment tools available. It also provides specific tasks to measure student learning in English, Mathematics and Science, based on learning progression frameworks (OECD, 2023[49]).

**Developing additional resources to help teachers deliver competency-based teaching**

In recent years, the Ministry of Education in Romania has been providing targeted training and new resources to help teachers align their practices with the new learning goals. It has now set aside additional funding to develop further materials, including resources to support teachers' use of digital technologies for new ways of teaching.

Resources that teachers have found helpful in other countries undertaking similar reforms, include targeted grade-level frameworks with examples of learning activities that promote competencies (e.g. critical thinking, creativity) combined with guidance, such as marked exemplars, on how to assess such competencies; Curriculum materials such as project kits, real-world problem-solving tasks and case studies that encourage students to apply knowledge, and interactive platforms where teachers can access tutorials and demonstrations of competency-based teaching practices (Gouëdard et al., 2020[50]).

### *Recommendation 4.3. Enhance opportunities for teachers' professional growth within schools*

Romania is taking steps to revitalise the teaching profession and increase its appeal. Emphasising teacher professionalism can support an ethos of continuing improvement and prompt schools and teachers to respond proactively to the changing demands of the teaching profession (Mezza, 2022[51]). Romania could do more to encourage schools to view professional learning as an ongoing part of teachers' day-to-day work and enable teachers to work collaboratively to help each other learn (OECD, 2019[26]). This can be particularly beneficial for Romanian teachers, who are younger than the OECD average, and many of whom are still adapting to new pedagogies focused on student competencies.

Romania has recognised the benefits of teacher development that is embedded as a collective practice within schools. Creating a collaborative culture in schools, however, is a considerable undertaking for any school system. This is also true for Romania where individual merit pay and high-stakes appraisal create a competitive environment for teachers, and a heavy curriculum leaves little time for teachers to collaborate. International experience demonstrates that collaboration requires support for schools and teachers to adjust their schedules and guidance on how to facilitate meaningful and collaborative professional development activities in schools.

**Supporting schools to allocate more teacher time for peer learning and collaboration**

Professional learning among peers in schools requires time away from routine teaching to observe each other's practice, reflect collectively, and provide feedback. In Romania teacher contracts include a 40-hour work week, which accounts for tasks beyond teaching in the classrooms (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[1]; Eurydice, 2023[52]). This contractual arrangement provides a good basis for developing collaborative practices (OECD, 2019[26]). However changing time management habits can be difficult. Providing guidance and support will be essential if Romanian schools and teachers are to leave sufficient room for professional collaboration.

Some OECD countries have developed national frameworks to guide schools and teachers in the best use of their time, in collaboration with schools. These frameworks typically reflect national priorities, such as professional collaboration, while leaving schools sufficient discretion to manage individual teachers' time.

They provide guidance on how teachers can redistribute their time for routine tasks, such as grading and administration, and how schools can coordinate teacher schedules to facilitate professional exchange (OECD, 2021[53]). Frameworks for teachers' use of time can also allocate specific days for school-based professional learning. In Romania, this might involve dedicating some "methodological days", currently designated for external training, to school-based professional learning.

#### Developing guidance and resources to help schools facilitate meaningful learning communities

Job-embedded, collaborative learning represents a significant shift in how Romanian teachers develop professionally. Until recently, apart from the relatively formal teacher "pedagogical circles", teachers had few opportunities to engage and learn as a team, and principals had a limited role in guiding professional development in their school. For teachers to perceive these communities as meaningful learning opportunities, schools will need much more guidance on how to facilitate teamwork focused on improving instructional practices. This requires, at a minimum, clear leadership roles to direct the team's work, defined activities that focus on instructional and organisational improvement, and a school culture that welcomes and promotes critical peer-to-peer feedback (OECD, 2019[26]).

A number of OECD countries have developed portfolios of resources and support to guide learning communities in schools. For instance, Ontario in Canada has developed practical briefs for teachers to form collaborative inquiry groups (see Box 4.1).

### Box 4.1. Systematic support for professional collaboration in Ontario (Canada)

Ontario's Ministry of Education has focused heavily on supporting effective teacher collaboration. This includes capacity building briefs that offer practical strategies for teachers and leaders to refine their practices in a collaborative inquiry process. As part of this process, teachers in teams research and address specific challenges in their school, employing Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles and using some of the following practices:

- Co-teaching classes, with shared planning, execution and reflection.
- A "Teaching Learning Critical Pathway" involving data gathering, analysis and planning for a teaching unit, followed by assessment and reflection.
- Looking at student work: discussing student work based on common assessment criteria; deconstructing curriculum to understand how it translates to student learning and examining student learning progression across grades.
- Monitoring "marker students", that is focusing on a small group of students, sharing assessment results, and evaluating teaching strategies based on their learning outcomes.

Source: OECD (2019[26]), Working and Learning Together: Rethinking Human Resource Policies for Schools, https://doi.org/10.1787/b7aaf050-en

### *Equality of opportunities and access: Addressing regional disparities in learning opportunities*

While Romania's top performing students in PISA demonstrate similar levels of advanced knowledge and skills as their peers in other OECD and EU countries, overall levels of achievement are low. A large majority of students are not mastering core foundational competencies. Low-achieving students are disproportionately represented in rural areas, where 45% of the population is at risk of poverty and around

27% self-identify as Roma (see Chapter 2). Socio-economic background is also closely associated with students' choices and orientations in upper secondary education. Disadvantaged students are overrepresented in vocational tracks, which tend to be of low quality and provide limited opportunities for further education.

Ongoing reforms introduce a number of policies to improve equity and inclusion in school education, ranging from changes in the funding formula to better align funding with need, and targeted school grants and scholarships, to the creation of a new National Centre for Inclusive Education. However additional steps will be needed to give all students a fair chance to succeed in their schooling and beyond. Two key areas warrant special focus: the planning and organisation of the school network to guarantee access and high-quality provision, and the design of upper secondary pathways, and in particular, of vocational tracks.

## Figure 4.15. Recommendations and actions on equality of opportunities and access in school education

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Equality | 4.4 Reorganise the school network to provide high-quality learning environments for all students | • Defining a national strategy for school network reform with a focus on quality and equity.<br>• Using national levers to guide local school network planning.<br>• Streamlining responsibility for school transportation and allocating central funding for transportation based on need. |
| | 4.5 Enhance the labour market relevance of upper secondary education pathways | • Ensuring that vocational programmes have clear profiles and build strong foundational and transferable skills.<br>• Tailoring school leaving certification to different upper secondary routes.<br>• Supporting the implementation of a dual VET system in disadvantaged regions and ensuring training is of high quality. |

### *Recommendation 4.4. Reorganise the school network to provide high-quality learning environments for all students*

Local authorities in Romania need to adapt their school networks to respond to rapid demographic decline, particularly in rural areas. So far, efforts have focused largely on organising schools into clusters, where one larger school oversees smaller satellite schools. However, the benefits of satellite schools for increasing access in rural areas have been often offset by difficulties in attracting enough qualified teachers and ensuring teaching quality in these schools. Recent reforms aim to address this by providing financial incentives to form school consortia, allowing rural and urban schools to share resources, including specialised teaching staff and facilities.

While improving resources in small satellite schools is a positive step, local authorities will need more guidance and support to plan and organise their school networks in ways that improve efficiency and guarantee quality provision. Currently Romania lacks both a guiding national framework, and data and incentives to support local authorities to adjust their educational offer to changing numbers of students. This section highlights potential measures Romania can consider, including a national strategy to reorganise the school network, regulations and procedures to support network planning, and clear responsibilities for student transportation.

#### Defining a national strategy for school network reform with a focus on quality and equity

To ensure that the school network is more strategically organised to support quality and equity in learning opportunities, the Ministry of Education could develop a national strategy for school network reform. This strategy could outline the overall direction for organising the school network and provide core principles for local decision-making, such as consultation with the school community. The national strategy could draw on existing options for school network reform, namely clustering, consortia, and closure, but more clearly describe the advantages and limitations of the different options, the trade-offs they involve, and the

criteria and processes for selecting and implementing them. In recognition of the difficulty of school closures (e.g. in remote areas), the strategy could also lay out measures to support quality in schools that cannot be closed (e.g. through virtual classrooms that connect schools).

School network reform involves navigating various interests and needs, making it difficult in any context. The process of developing a national strategy therefore would benefit from a broad engagement of all major stakeholders to build shared understanding and support for change. In Romania, this includes the local authorities in charge of managing the school infrastructure and representatives from parent and student groups, including those from vulnerable populations, particularly Roma. Underpinning the national strategy with a robust analysis of the current network's shortcomings in terms of quality and equity, along with assessing the benefits and costs of various reform options, can help mobilise support for its implementation. Clearly demonstrating how the strategy will lead to tangible improvements for students can be equally critical in gaining widespread backing. In the medium term, as the population declines, network reorganisation is expected to lead to efficiencies and savings. Since students in rural schools often have lower learning outcomes, largely influenced by their disadvantaged socio-economic background, the strategy should ensure that any savings are reinvested in improving rural schools.

Portugal's experience with school network reform to address inefficiencies and inequalities demonstrates the value of national leadership for school network reform and of bringing stakeholders on board. The reform was guided by a clear vision and criteria that specified which schools could be closed and what they should be replaced with. The commitment to invest resources freed up through the reform in improvements of the school infrastructure and pedagogical offerings, such as after-school programmes, helped create support for the reform (OECD, 2018[14]; Radinger and Boeskens, 2021[54]).

#### Using national levers to guide local school network planning

Romania could make more strategic use of different policy levers to implement the proposed national strategy and help reorganise the school network. These include regulations like minimum school and class sizes, specific procedures for the review of small schools, and monetary and in-kind incentives to consolidate schools (OECD, 2018[14]). Previous OECD analysis has provided insights on how Romania could make more strategic use of these different levers (OECD, 2024[2]).

Suggested measures include defining a robust process and relevant criteria for the review of small schools before they are included in network reform measures. For instance, in Scotland, criteria include a low projected student enrolment, low occupancy levels, high operating costs, a significant decline in student performance and an urgent need for investment that is deemed disproportionate (OECD, 2018[14]).

As Romania reviews its school funding formula, authorities should also analyse whether the funding formula is supporting or discouraging school network optimisation. For instance, a strict per-capita formula places schools with a higher number of students at an advantage, whereas a formula considering different variables of disadvantage (e.g. school size, isolation) can support smaller schools. One approach could involve revising the formula to better support consolidation, while protecting small and isolated schools in underserved areas that should not be closed (e.g. through direct grants). In-kind incentives, such as investments in school infrastructure can also support local authorities in rationalising their network. For instance, in Portugal, decisions to consolidate schools were matched with financial support to make visible improvements to the infrastructure of host schools and guarantee school transport for students (OECD, 2018[14]).

#### Streamlining responsibility for school transportation and allocating central funding for transportation based on need

Ensuring adequate school transportation is a crucial aspect of school network organisation, especially in contexts with declining student demographics and network consolidation. Students in Romania have the

right to free public transportation and are reimbursed for any out-of-pocket expenses they incur to commute to school. However public transportation schedules do not always align with school timetables, and in some remote and rural areas, public options are entirely lacking. This contributes to low attendance, truancy and dropout (OECD, 2023[41]).

Fragmented responsibilities for student transportation and a disconnect between transportation and network planning make it difficult to guarantee adequate provision. While local authorities are primarily responsible for network planning, the organisation of school transportation can fall to county councils, local authorities, or schools, depending on the context. With no single entity ultimately in charge, transportation planning can be inconsistent, resulting in overlapping transportation routes, or underserved areas. Adequate school transportation is also hindered by funding issues. The Ministry of Education provides most funding for student transportation, and local authorities and schools can contribute additional funds. However, there are no clear processes to allocate central transportation funding to the areas and schools that need it most.

To address this, the government could create platforms at the county level for coordinating network planning and school transportation. This would require collaboration between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Administration, county councils, and existing associations of local authorities (as discussed in Chapter 3). Ensuring that county platforms have access to data and analyses on the local transportation offer and unmet needs, will be important to guarantee a good provision (OECD, 2024[2]). The Ministry of Education could also provide targeted funds to local authorities or schools in areas where public transportation arrangements are lacking or insufficient.

### *Recommendation 4.5. Enhance the labour market relevance of upper secondary education pathways*

High-quality upper secondary education programmes, pathways, and certifications are essential to enhance students' core skills and prepare them for tertiary education or the labour market (Perico e Santos, 2023[55]; Stronati, 2023[8]). In Romania, improving the design of upper secondary education is particularly important for equity. Currently, upper secondary programmes differ in quality, and some of them do not offer equal opportunities to master foundational skills. Technological upper secondary programmes, with their limited scope for applied learning in work-based settings, and heavy academic load, often fail to support student success as demonstrated by poor learning outcomes and career prospects.

Ongoing reforms recognise and address these issues. They foresee transforming all IVET programmes into a dual format of delivery, introducing more flexibility for students to change tracks through a modular approach, and new methods of assessing and certifying learning, adapted to each programme. The following actions draw on lessons learned from other countries for how these changes can be implemented.

#### Ensuring that vocational programmes have clear profiles and build strong foundational and transferable skills

Offering differentiated VET programmes in upper secondary education is a means to cater to an increasingly diverse student population (Stronati, 2023[8]). In Romania, students can choose between a four-year technological high-school programme, or a more applied three-year IVET programme. In practice however, technological high-school programmes have lacked a clear applied profile, with their strong focus on academic content offering no real alternative to general programmes. Meanwhile, dual IVET programmes still enrol a very small share of students (4.7% of all IVET students in 2022-2023) (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[1]).

The Ministry of Education is reforming the existing upper secondary VET offer. Romania aims to phase out three-year IVET programmes, offering only the 4-year technological programmes exclusively in a dual format. Students will still have the option to obtain certificate of professional education after completing 3

years. The Ministry recognises that this transformation will be gradual as it takes time to engage employers and equip them with the capacity to deliver quality workplace learning. The experiences of OECD countries point to a number of policies Romania can consider strengthening the labour market relevance of these vocational programmes, ensuring they provide relevant knowledge and skills as well as giving access to continuing education. These include:

- **Preserving differentiated vocational programmes at the upper secondary level**: It is positive that the Ministry of Education will provide students the option to pursue a full 4-year technological IVET programme, while still allowing them the opportunity to obtain a certificate of professional education after completing three years. To cater to the diverse interests of students, including those who may prefer less academically focused programmes, the Ministry could continue to offer programmes with varying intensities of work-based learning. In all cases, the emphasis should be on providing applied learning experiences with employers, rather than relying on school workshops and laboratories that simulate a workplace environment. For instance, in the Netherlands, upper secondary vocational qualifications can be obtained either through school-based VET with a solid work placement, or through a more extensive apprenticeship (see Box 4.2). Differentiated vocational pathways have a number of advantages. They provide students with more choices regarding how intensely they wish to study applied learning. They also give employers different options to engage with the education system in ways that fit their capacity.
- **Ensuring all students have a chance to master foundational and transversal competencies:** PISA data shows that in Romania, students in vocational tracks achieve lower levels in both foundational (reading, science, and mathematics) and transversal (such as creative thinking or global competence) competencies compared to their peers in academic tracks. This makes it particularly important for Romania to carefully consider how VET programmes can best help students who might have previously struggled academically to master core competencies (OECD, 2018[14]). OECD analysis focusing on how different systems teach mathematics in upper secondary school found that balancing applied, and school-based instruction provides vocational students with multiple opportunities to learn mathematical concepts at varying levels of complexity and enables them to see the direct relevance of these skills while also acquiring broader mathematical knowledge. Employers could play a role in determining the content and teaching methods of mathematics in the workplace, as is the case in Switzerland, for example (OECD, 2024[56]). Moreover, curriculum design and teaching practices can foster positive attitudes towards mathematics. Key strategies that could be adopted in Romania include reinforcing basic numerical and spatial skills, reducing time pressure during assessments, and enhancing teachers' ability and confidence to teach mathematics (OECD, 2016[57]).
- **Providing valued certification:** The experience of OECD countries highlights the importance of introducing valued certification adapted to vocational upper secondary tracks. To ensure that more applied programmes do not become dead ends for students and to enhance the long-term outcomes of vocational graduates, these certifications should signal parity with academic certifications and provide students with options for progressing to tertiary education and further training. This leads to the next action: on how Romania might adapt the school leaving examination.

### Box 4.2. Strengthening the labour market relevance of upper secondary VET programmes

***Differentiated vocational pathways in the Netherlands***

VET programmes in the Netherlands are delivered at lower secondary, upper secondary and tertiary levels. Students can choose from a wide range of pathways, which provide different levels of emphasis on practical subjects and working arrangements.

Upper secondary vocational qualifications (MBO) can be obtained either through a school-based track, including a work placement (20-60% of learning in the workplace), or through a work-based track (60% or more of learning in the workplace). This approach to VET allows a broader offer that might be beneficial for weaker economic regions or during recessions, when it is difficult to obtain apprenticeships.

There are many possible progression routes after upper secondary education. Post-secondary non-tertiary education (MBO 4) (ISCED 4) generally follows a curriculum focused on entry to the labour market, but the programmes also provide a pathway into tertiary education. Higher professional education (HBO) (ISCED 5) consists of a two-year programme leading to an associate degree. Given that associate degree programmes largely coincide with the first half of professional bachelor programmes, their graduates have the opportunity to follow another two-year-long programme in order to receive a professional bachelor's degree. A substantial share of post-secondary, non-tertiary graduates enter an HBO programme: in the 2020-21, 44% started an HBO course.

Source: OECD (2022[58]), *The Landscape of Providers of Vocational Education and Training*, OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/a3641ff3-en; CEDEFOP (2021[59]) Vocational education and training in Europe. Netherlands, https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-in-europe/systems/netherlands-u2; Kuczera, M. (2017[60]), "Striking the right balance: Costs and benefits of apprenticeship", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 153, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/995fff01-en.

#### Tailoring school leaving certification to different upper secondary routes

Romania recognises that reforming upper secondary education will necessitate a review of how learning is examined and certified. Educated Romania has set an objective to reform the current examination system, adopting a more flexible, modular approach adapted to the needs of students pursuing any track. This is a positive step, as the current assessment and examination approach is neither well aligned with the curriculum nor designed to encourage and recognise the diverse pathways Romania aims to create.

Romania could consider the following steps as it reviews examination and certification in upper secondary education:

- **Advance plans to provide school leaving examinations adapted to each track, while ensuring that all certificates have parity within the national qualifications framework**. The new 2023 Law sets out plans to review the structure of the Baccalaureate, to make it more adapted to different upper secondary pathways. Notably, students in the IVET stream will be assessed on subjects relevant to their specialisation. These efforts to adapt the school leaving examination to different learning pathways, while ensuring equal value for all certifications, are a step towards recognising the specific skills of vocational students and providing them with a fairer chance to progress into tertiary education. In France, for example, students at the age of 18 can take either the *Baccalauréat général*, *technique* or *professionnel*. All qualifications are achieved at the same level in the country's National Qualifications Framework. However, the content and assessment are different. As students in the *Baccalauréat professionnel* spend time learning on the job and less time on general subjects, they take differentiated examinations in these general subjects. All

these different types of the Baccalaureate provide access to tertiary education, but they are each a pathway to different specific options (OECD, 2023[61]).

- **Defining a set of core, common examination subjects:** Many countries have established a common core of subjects for all students taking a given certificate, typically in mathematics and the national language, while allowing for some level of subject choice. Choice needs to be limited to allow for depth and focus on learning, but some flexibility supports a balanced approach that provides a broad educational foundation and caters to individual student interests.
- **Allowing students to choose subjects for advanced qualifications.** This gives students across the ability range the chance to certify their skills in key subjects depending on the programme they study and on where they want to go with completion of upper secondary education. For example, Ireland's Leaving Certificate offers three levels in subjects like Irish and mathematics, accommodating varied student aspirations. While all students need a solid basis in mathematics, not all students need high level mathematics required for scientific careers.
- **Including tasks that are assessed in school or, in the case of dual VET, in the workplace:** This could include alternative assessments, such as portfolios, projects or extended essays and reports. Such formats can ensure that important competencies that cannot easily be captured in a time-bound written central examination – especially important transversal competencies like collaboration, problem solving and creativity - are valued and recognised.

In addition to a valued school-leaving examination, most systems provide VET credentials and qualifications that are developed with industry partners. This is currently the case in Romania. Continuing these certifications alongside the central school-leaving examinations is important to facilitate transitions into the labour market and/or further training. This would help build stronger and more diverse skills development pathways, whereby individuals can progressively and flexibly gain new qualifications from upper secondary education, and up to tertiary education and adult learning (see Chapters 5 and 6).

#### Supporting the implementation of a dual VET system in disadvantaged regions and ensuring training is of high quality

Efforts to enhance Initial Vocational Education and Training (IVET) in Romania by implementing dual VET programmes that incorporate more work-based learning are promising. Evidence suggests a focus on work-based learning can reduce dropout rates and facilitate smoother transitions into the workforce (OECD, 2018[14]). However, the challenge lies in scaling this initiative and motivating and supporting companies, especially in rural and disadvantaged areas, to offer high-quality training opportunities.

The implementation of work-based learning involves balancing the apprentice's value to the company against the costs incurred (OECD, 2018[14]). In Romania, stakeholders have expressed concerns that companies may be reluctant to invest in training students, as there is no guarantee the students will accept a job with the company afterwards. To address cost barriers, the Ministry of Education supports students by subsidising professional scholarships and provides financial incentives to companies to encourage participation—including tax benefits, and support to cover training expenses.

Beyond cost, other challenges in adopting dual VET, particularly in rural areas, need to be addressed. Dual VET schools in these areas may not be able to offer their students the same curricular diversity as larger, urban schools, and to find sufficient partner companies for work-based learning. The government's plan to develop 29 regional campuses that will co-locate vocational dual education at secondary, post-secondary, and tertiary level is a positive step to address this. Such integrated sites form an important part of the VET landscape in established OECD VET systems, such as Austria and Germany (Musset et al., 2013[62]). These dual campuses could provide vocational students from rural schools with opportunities to attend some courses delivered by universities or post-secondary, non-tertiary colleges, including in a hybrid format. They could also host cooperative platforms to engage employers at regional and sectoral levels (see Chapter 5). By offering employers a centralised point of contact to engage with the full range

of dual vocational education providers in the region (from secondary to tertiary levels), these platforms can facilitate their involvement in developing and delivering training.

Logistical challenges related to travel between vocational schools and workplaces must also be addressed, especially if students have to commute long distances for work-based learning opportunities. Some countries, such as Norway, structure apprenticeships with two years in school followed by two years in the workplace to minimise the need to regularly travel between schools and workplaces. Similarly, Ireland and Canada use longer alternating phases between college and workplace to reduce commuting issues, a model that could suit Romania's rural context (OECD, 2018[14]).

Finally, ensuring quality in VET programmes as they scale means providing training and support to companies to ensure they can adequately facilitate student's work-based learning. VET trainers in companies bring up-to-date industry knowledge and experience but might lack the pedagogical skills required for their role (OECD, 2021[63]). This issue may be even more acute in small businesses in rural areas. Ensuring that training and support measures are available and accessible for company trainers in these small rural businesses will be of critical importance.

Romania is already making progress in this area, with pilot projects in 29 dual education campuses allocating a budget to train in-company instructors. As these efforts advance, Romania could look at the experience of OECD countries with well-developed VET systems, such as Germany and Norway. In Germany, an "Ordinance on Trainer Aptitude" defines the pedagogical knowledge and competences expected of in-company training staff, which include both occupational skills specific to their profession, and pedagogical knowledge. Companies involved in work-based learning must demonstrate that at least one staff member is qualified to train apprentices. In-company training staff also receive guidance from training advisors. Norway's Directorate for Education offers free instructional resources for company instructors online, and apprenticeship training agencies, which are organisations established by companies, assist small and medium-sized enterprises with supervision and administrative tasks.

### *Good governance: Driving forward changes in governance and funding to help schools learn and improve*

Romania's school system is evolving to support schools more effectively on their improvement journeys. County Directorates are expected to relinquish most of their inspection responsibilities and become centres for support and monitoring. The Ministry of Education is also strengthening the existing data infrastructure with a new integrated data management system and plans to deliver training for school staff on data entry and use. These changes provide a solid basis to develop a culture of continuous school improvement based on data insights and professional guidance. However, transforming long-standing roles in the system, and building capacity for greater and more meaningful use of data, will require time and impetus.

At the same time, the new law sets outs plans to gradually increase public spending on education and direct more funding to schools located in disadvantaged areas. These measures will be necessary to take forward many of the reforms described in this chapter, including investments in the system's professional capabilities, and addressing geographical disparities in educational outcomes. To sustain social support for fiscal efforts for schooling, and ensure targeted funds to disadvantaged schools improve teaching and learning, the Ministry of Education will need to invest in stronger analysis and reporting. This section recommends potential avenues Romania can consider strengthening the governance of school education.

## Figure 4.16. Recommendations and actions on good governance in school education

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Governance | 4.6 Develop capacity and a culture of data use to support school transformation | • Developing County Directorates' capacity to support school improvement.<br>• Providing schools with accessible data for self-evaluation and improvement planning. |
| | 4.7 Improve the effectiveness and efficiency of school funding through stronger analysis and reporting | • Strengthening analysis on the effectiveness and efficiency of spending on schools.<br>• Designing an effective area-based funding programme for schools. |

### *Recommendation 4.6. Develop capacity and a culture of data use to support school transformation*

The steps taken to refocus County Directorates' roles on school monitoring and support are positive. Their close proximity to schools means they are well placed to help schools improve. However, the Ministry of Education could do more to improve organisational processes and capacity. For County Directorates, this is a significant change which challenges the traditional top-down and bureaucratic approach to governance. A successful transition will require clarifying roles and reshaping how staff in schools and County Directorates perceive their responsibilities, as well as building the technical competencies of county staff in school support. The ministry will also need to foster a school culture that values and effectively uses data for learning. Experience shows that making data available in a more user-friendly way and coaching school leadership teams can help schools exploit this information for their own improvement.

#### Developing County Directorates' capacity to support school improvement

Previous OECD analysis has highlighted some of the measures Romania can consider to support counties in their transition from a control to a support role (OECD, 2024[2]). Of these, two merit restating in the context of this review: building trust between County Directorates and schools and strengthening counties' competencies to coach and support schools.

Trust with schools might be difficult to build since Country Directorates still influence decisions on teacher pay and promotion, which can contradict their supportive role. As a priority, Romania should review the role of the Directorates in these high-stakes decisions. Building the capabilities of County Directorate staff, for example through professional development and coaching, will also be important for them to assume their new role. Staff need both hard skills like data literacy to work on school improvement strategies and soft skills to engage with schools in a collaborative manner. The Ministry of Education plays an important role here and will need to reform how it manages County Directorates, engaging less in top-down control and seeing its role as an enabler of horizontal learning and collaboration. The experience of other countries engaging in efforts to improve local school support highlights the potential of horizontal exchange for building the capacity of local staff (see Box 4.3). These measures will need to be underpinned by an effective governance structure, where counties and ARACIIP play complementary roles and coordinate closely on school evaluation and support (OECD, 2024[2]).

### Box 4.3. Sharing expertise among local authorities to enhance school improvement efforts in Scotland

Scotland's Collaborative Improvement (CI) initiative, launched in 2021 by Education Scotland – the system's agency responsible for supporting quality and improvement – and the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES) – a professional association of educational leaders and managers – aims to foster collaboration among local authorities overseeing schools. The initiative promotes the sharing of effective practices and focuses on common goals. Each month, one local authority hosts a three-day CI exercise with a team from Education Scotland and volunteers from other authorities, focusing on enhancing their improvement planning based on a chosen topic. This topic is selected from the host's self-evaluation and refined with Education Scotland.

ADES forms the core team, choosing members for their expertise and to ensure diverse representation. During these sessions, the team supports the host authority, involving school leaders and practitioners in the process. Following the visit, the host authority prepares an evaluative summary to highlight strengths and areas for further attention, integrating findings into their improvement planning.

All 32 local authorities have participated in the initiative, finding value in both the direct support received and the professional development opportunities for volunteers. Authorities are encouraged to maintain collaborative relationships post-visit, enhancing the initiative's impact. By October 2024, every local authority is expected to have hosted an exercise, with discussions ongoing about the project's future.

Source: Education Scotland (2023[64]), *Collaborative Improvement*, https://education.gov.scot/improvement/research/collaborative-improvement

**Providing schools with accessible data for self-evaluation and improvement planning**

Schools need to draw on a range of information to understand what influences student outcomes in their context and what quality of education they are providing. Good qualitative data, in the form of evaluative questions and observation protocols, are particularly important, as they help schools reflect deeply on their teaching and learning practices and how they can be improved. However, quantitative data – such as student scores in national assessments and examinations, attendance, and dropout – also plays an important role in school self-evaluation and improvement planning. Specifically, such data can help schools monitor their own progress over time and serve as a benchmark for how they compare to similar schools.

Planned measures to offer training on the use the EMIS platform is a first important step to improve schools' ability to efficiently input and extract data. However, if schools are to use the data to inform their work, Romania will need to address user-interface design. Portals that allow users to visualise and export data in a real-time and user-friendly format are a common strategy to facilitate access and use of information. Such portals are most helpful for school self-evaluation when they allow schools to create tailored reports, charts and figures, see visual representations of progress towards selected indicators, and make contextualised comparisons across schools operating in similar contexts or serving groups of students with similar profiles (Abdul-Hamid, 2014[65]; Abdul-Hamid, 2017[66]). Countries like Estonia offer a successful model. Building on its existing data information system (EHIS), Estonia recently developed 'A New Performance View for Schools,' an interactive interface that provides schools with an overview of key indicators, helping them better understand their performance.

Building a culture of meaningful data use will also require professional development activities and technical support to improve the data literacy of school leadership staff (OECD, 2013[67]). For instance, in Denmark and Wales (United Kingdom), external staff work with schools as learning consultants and "challenge

advisors", respectively. An important part of their job is to support school leadership in cultivating a belief in the utility and importance of data for decision-making, and to develop the necessary knowledge, skills, and motivation to effectively interpret and use data, and make changes based on data insights.

### *Recommendation 4.7. Improve the effectiveness and efficiency of school funding through stronger analysis and reporting*

The Ministry of Education intends not only to increase the level of resources available for school education, but also to allocate more resources to the most disadvantaged schools. Fulfilling these commitments will be the cornerstone for implementing many of the reforms laid out in Educated Romania and the recommendations of this report to improve the quality and equity of schooling. Increases in funding will take time to implement, making it critical to ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of current spending decisions. This requires a fundamental shift in how resource decisions are taken, from a focus on covering costs to a focus on how funding can deliver improvement. In Romania two areas warrant particular attention: expanding the use of evidence to inform and justify national spending decisions, and ensuring resources channelled to school in priority investment areas are used effectively to improve teaching and learning.

#### Strengthening analysis on the effectiveness and efficiency of spending on schools

Demonstrating effectiveness and efficiency can help build social consensus about fiscal efforts for schooling and maintain support for planned investments. In Romania, funding from the state budget is monitored closely and in detail by the Ministry of Finance's database Forexbug, but the Ministry of Education itself does not engage in active analysis of the efficiency and effectiveness of its spending. It will be important for the ministry to expand its use of evidence to inform and justify spending decisions. There are two relevant tools for this, regular spending reviews that assess value for money, and policy evaluations, both of which are currently underutilised in Romania.

Concerning spending reviews, as part of its commitments under the NRRP, Romania will complete a pilot spending review in education, after which future reviews are planned on a regular basis. Romania could plan these reviews in line with a multi-annual budgeting cycle. A number of OECD countries have opted for this option, as integrating spending reviews within the budget preparation process can help embed fiscal discipline and focus attention on how funds are being used to improve outcomes (Fakharzadeh, 2016[68]; OECD, 2017[69]).

Concerning policy evaluations, in Romania these are usually focused on the evaluation of specific projects, typically to comply with funding regulations from the European Commission. The Ministry of Education could consider investing in key institutions like the Institute of Educational Sciences to create a strong hub for external evaluation and designing and funding a multi-annual policy evaluation plan. Defining a standard process to use evaluation results to inform policy decisions would further support an increased focus on learning from evaluation results to direct funding. For instance, in the United States, many federal grants for education are distributed using a tiered system based on the efficacy evidence of each programme. Programmes with limited or no evaluation receive less funding, while those with substantial supporting evidence are allocated more resources (OECD, 2022[70]).

#### Designing an effective area-based funding programme for schools

The planned reforms aim to strengthen equity weights in the school funding formula and establish a targeted programme to assist schools within designated priority investment areas. This approach is promising. As the experience of OECD countries suggests, targeted programmes can help to compensate for inequities, especially if combined with a stable funding allocation that promotes equity (OECD, 2022[70]). Area-based funding programmes could be complemented by policies to address disparities in local

revenue-raising capacity, such as targeted national investment programmes in school infrastructure and transportation (see Chapter 3), as well as fiscal equalisation measures.

Several countries have set up similar targeted funding streams for disadvantaged schools. Their experiences suggest it is important to:

- **Select the right indicators for targeting these resources**, which means taking into account the geographical concentration of disadvantage and students' individual risk. Recent OECD analysis highlighted how combining area-based and student-specific indicators would allow resources to be targeted more precisely, ensuring that funding reaches the schools and students most in need (OECD, 2024[2]). It is also important that the criteria used for including schools are transparent to stakeholders and based on research evidence (OECD, 2017[69]; OECD, 2022[70]).
- **Provide multidimensional support** to better address the multifaceted needs of disadvantaged students. In Ireland, for example, the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme provides schools with a high concentration of socio-economically disadvantaged students with a range of supports, along with targeted funds. Some of these supports include programmes for continuous professional learning for teachers, expanded access to the School Meals Programme, and the Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) that aims to build a positive relationship between families and schools (OECD, 2024[71]).
- **Support schools in their use of funding.** Countries with similar programmes have targeted external school evaluations and support to ensure additional funds are effectively used to make a difference to disadvantaged students. Their experiences show, however, that it is important integrate these processes into existing planning and evaluation cycles to avoid adding administrative burdens. In Chile, schools are required to outline, in their school improvement plans, how targeted funds will support disadvantaged students, and the specific activities planned to improve teaching and learning. In England (United Kingdom), and the Flemish Community of Belgium, the national school inspectorates closely monitor outcomes for disadvantaged students and assess how beneficiary schools address their needs. These inspections are designed to help schools effectively use additional funding to improve learning outcomes for target groups (OECD, 2017[69]). If Romania's national school evaluation agency, ARACIIP, moves towards a differentiated approach, as suggested previously by the OECD, it could focus external evaluation on schools receiving targeted funding, and collaborate with County Directorates to ensure these schools receive sustained support to plan and implement improvements (OECD, 2024[2]).

## Figure 4.17. Summary of recommendations and actions on school education

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Quality | 4.1 Support school leaders to engage in instructional leadership | • Investing in specialised expertise to inform school leadership policies.<br>• Distributing leadership responsibilities within and across schools more effectively.<br>• Expanding job-embedded professional learning opportunities for school leaders, guided by professional standards. |
| | 4.2 Move towards more competency-based and student centred assessment and pedagogy | • Further revising the grade 8 assessment to align with the curriculum.<br>• Ensuring continued provision of guidelines and resources for formative assessment and inclusive, differentiated teaching.<br>• Developing additional resources to help teachers deliver competency-based teaching. |
| | 4.3 Enhance opportunities for teachers' professional growth within schools | • Supporting schools to allocate more teacher time for peer learning and collaboration.<br>• Developing guidance and resources to help schools facilitate meaningful learning communities. |
| Equality | 4.4 Reorganise the school network to provide high-quality learning environments for all students | • Defining a national strategy for school network reform with a focus on quality and equity.<br>• Using national levers to guide local school network planning.<br>• Streamlining responsibility for school transportation and allocating central funding for transportation based on need. |
| | 4.5 Enhance the labour market relevance of upper secondary education pathways | • Ensuring that vocational programmes have clear profiles and build strong foundational and transferable skills.<br>• Tailoring school leaving certification to different upper secondary routes.<br>• Supporting the implementation of a dual VET system in disadvantaged regions and ensuring training is of high quality. |
| Governance | 4.6 Develop capacity and a culture of data use to support school transformation | • Developing County Directorates' capacity to support school improvement.<br>• Providing schools with accessible data for self-evaluation and improvement planning. |
| | 4.7 Improve the effectiveness and efficiency of school funding through stronger analysis and reporting | • Strengthening analysis on the effectiveness and efficiency of spending on schools.<br>• Designing an effective area-based funding programme for schools. |

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## Notes

[1] Functional literacy refers to a set of skills that enables individuals to make independent decisions, achieve their goals, develop their potential, and actively participate in society. It includes the ability to understand, use, and evaluate texts; mathematical literacy, which involves applying reasoning and mathematical tools to describe and explain phenomena; and scientific literacy, which enables individuals to engage with science-related issues and interpret data and evidence critically as informed citizens (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[10]).

[2] Segregation in education refers to a form of discrimination within educational institutions where students are physically separated from their peers based on their ethnicity, disability or SEN, the socio-economic status of families, disadvantaged group status, residential background, or academic performance. This separation can occur in groups, classrooms, rooms, or buildings (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[10]).

[3] Bulgaria, Czechia, Greece, Spain, Croatia, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Romania and Slovak Republic. Also covered North Macedonia and Serbia.

# 5 Tertiary education: Creating a more attractive, relevant and accessible system

This chapter explores policy options to create a more attractive, relevant and accessible tertiary education system that can better meet the needs of Romania's modernising economy. It outlines measures that Romania can consider to strengthen institutional capacity, enhance trust in the system, and make tertiary education accessible to a wider range of learners. Striking a better balance between merit and social need in tuition fee policy, centralising admissions and social scholarship allocations, and taking steps to expand provision outside main cities could all help promote greater equity of access. The analysis also highlights the value of greater differentiation and more flexible and targeted quality assurance to drive quality improvements in the sector. At the system level, it recommends rethinking the existing funding mechanism for tertiary education institutions, clarifying Romania's vision for professional tertiary education, and addressing risks to integrity.

Several efforts have been made to reform and modernise the Romanian tertiary education system in recent decades. The 2023 revision of the tertiary education law was founded on the long-term vision of the "Educated Romania" strategy, developed through extensive public consultation – a welcome development after years of policy volatility in the sector. Public investment has increased substantially, and steps have been taken to modernise administrative functions and develop more robust evidence for policymaking. Capacity for carrying out external quality assurance functions has also been strengthened in recent years.

At the same time, analysis of the system shows several areas where further progress is needed. Many functions and decisions vital to improving accessibility and equity are administered by institutions, despite acknowledged deficiencies in internal institution governance and low public trust. Many important policy processes, including differentiation of institutions, external quality assurance and allocating public funding to institutions are heavily based on indicators and complex formulas, and appear to foster a compliance culture among institutions rather than supporting their innovation and excellence. While improving access to tertiary education is a policy priority, overall, tertiary education attainment continues to be a privilege enjoyed by a minority within Romanian society and is especially limited among rural and Roma students. This chapter outlines policy options that Romania can consider to build capacity and enhance trust in the system, reduce equity gaps and make tertiary education accessible to a wider range of learners.

## Chapter 5 at a Glance

- **Section I:** Provides an overview of Romania's tertiary sector, focusing on how policies compare internationally.
- **Section II:** Compares the sector's performance with OECD benchmarks on international indicators.
- **Section III:** Provides recommendations on how Romania can learn from OECD evidence and experience to further improve tertiary education.

### Figure 5.1. Recommendations on tertiary education

| | |
|---|---|
| Equality | Prioritise need, clarity and consistency in the allocation of public financial support for students, including funded study places |
| | Simplify and expand admission routes into tertiary education |
| | Expand efforts to support tertiary provision outside of the main cities |
| Quality | Establish clear national frameworks for the horizontal and vertical differentiation of Romanian TEIs |
| | Develop a more flexible and targeted strategy for external quality assurance in tertiary education |
| Governance | Rebalance funding to better support TEI development |
| | Clarify Romania's vision for professional tertiary education |
| | Take action to promote trust and confidence in the tertiary education system |

## Section I: Overview of tertiary education in Romania

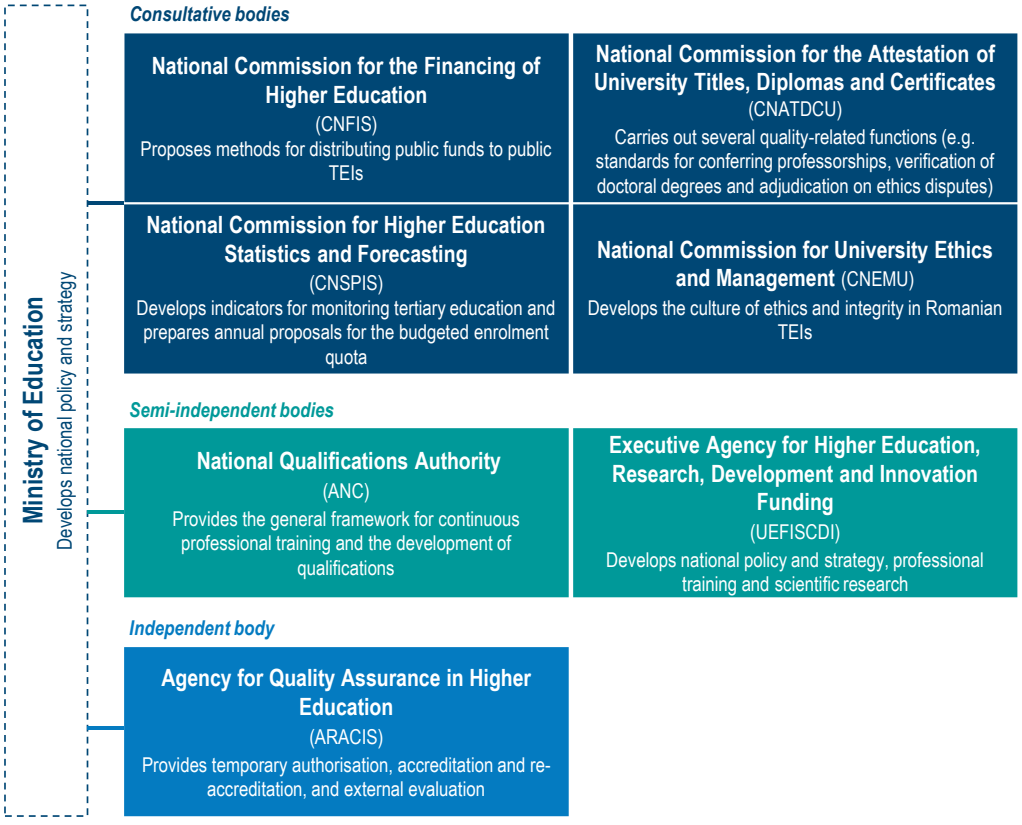
### *Governance and structure of the tertiary education system*

*Tertiary education is centrally governed, with multiple national bodies involved in regulation and oversight*

Since the 1990s, tertiary education governance in Romania has evolved from a highly centralised, state-controlled system to a more decentralised model focused on institutional autonomy, accountability and alignment with European standards (Dobbins, 2017[1]).The Ministry of Education develops national policy and strategy with respect to tertiary education, supported by the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI), a public body under its authority, while research policy is led by the Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digitalisation. UEFISCDI plays an important role, supporting consultative activities and providing policy analysis, data and evidence to support national strategies in tertiary education and research. UEFISCDI also conducts research, including projects that track inputs, outputs and outcomes of the tertiary education system, and inform the distribution of national funding to TEI's.

The work of the Ministry of Education and UEFISCDI is supported by specialised national commissions of representatives from TEIs, which play an integral role in decision-making on the funding and regulation of tertiary education (see Figure 5.2).

**Figure 5.2. The Ministry of Education, supported by several bodies, governs tertiary education**




Source: Ministry of Education of Romania (2023[2]), Legea învățământului superior nr 199/2023 [Law on higher education no. 199/2023], https://edu.ro/sites/default/files/_fi%C8%99iere/Minister/2023/Legi_educatie_Romania_educata/legi_monitor/Legea_invatamantului_superior_nr_199.pdf

While each country has a unique approach to tertiary education governance and policy development, Romania's mode of interaction between the Ministry of Education and some consultative commissions is unusual. Typically, in most OECD countries the line Ministry or a designated public agency develops proposals for the allocation of resources, consulting widely with representative stakeholder bodies. However, in Romania it is the consultative commissions that take on this role. The National Commission for Higher Education Statistics and Forecasting (CNSPIS) and the National Commission for the Financing of Higher Education (CNFIS), comprised at any one time of representatives from a subset of TEIs, develop detailed recommendations on an annual basis for allocating these resources. Based on these recommendations, the Ministry of Education prepares a draft proposal, which undergoes consultation with relevant stakeholders before it is finalised and approved. The current process has at times created tension between the Ministry and some TEIs, relating to perceived injustice in allocations to individual institutions (Badescu, Mihut and Sum, 2018[3]). More recently, in 2023, operating regulations of the CNFIS were revised that emphasise the role of the Ministry in coordinating the commission and introducing new regulations on membership and measures to counteract potential conflict of interest (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[4]).

Outside of the academic expert commissions, institutions organise their representation through the National Council of Rectors and various consortia of universities with common approaches, fields of study or views on the development of the system. Examples include the Universitaria Consortium which brings together many of the larger general and regional universities, the Romanian Alliance of Technical Universities (ARUT) representing five of the largest technical universities, and consortia organised by fields of study such as G6- Medicine and Pharmacy University Alliance Association. Unlike in many OECD countries, institutional representative bodies are not formed along the lines of distinct nationally recognised subsectors or categories of institutions.

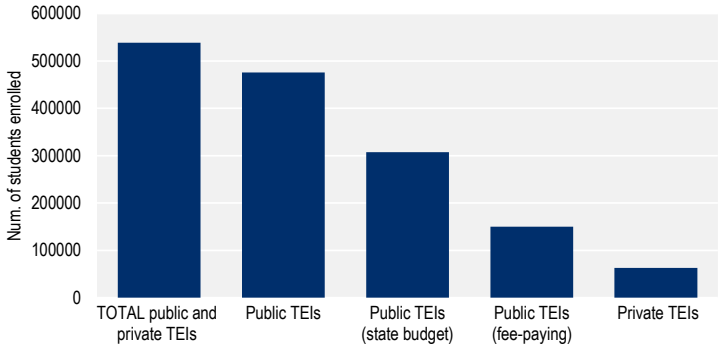
### *Most students pursue full-time education in public institutions, with provision concentrated in wealthier urban areas*

In line with the European Bologna process, Romanian public and private TEI's offer bachelor's and master's degree programmes and doctoral study programmes (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[5]). The government has sought in recent years to improve efficiency through consolidation. In 2022/23, there were 83 TEIs in Romania, consisting of 53 public and 30 private institutions, a decline from 127 institutions (including 70 private) in 2000 (National Institute of Statistics, 2023[6]). In 2022/23 the vast majority (almost 90%) of students were enrolled in public institutions (see Figure 5.3). There are some notable differences between public and private TEIs. Public institutions have on average more students than private institutions. Public TEIs also offer most of their programmes full-time, with fewer places for part-time education than private ones (public TEIs have 2.92% of maximum tuition capacity in part-time programmes, compared to 9% in private TEIs). In addition, while most public TEIs offer doctoral studies (48 out of 53 institutions), only 3 private TEIs provide education at this level (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[7]).

Consolidation is particularly important given Romania's demographic decline in recent decades, which has progressively shrunk consecutive entry cohorts. The number of 20-24 year-olds in Romania has halved since 2000 (Eurostat, 2023[8]), while the number of enrolled students peaked in 2007/08 at approximately 900 000 students before progressively declining to its current level of around 540 000 students[1] (National Institute of Statistics, 2023[6]).

### Figure 5.3. Students are predominantly enrolled in public tertiary education

Students in Romanian tertiary education institutions, 2022/23




Source: CNFIS (2022[9]), *Raportul public anual 2022. Starea finanțării învățământului superior [The state of higher education financing]*, http://www.cnfis.ro/rapoarte-cnfis/

TEIs are concentrated in large cities within wealthier regions. Of the 83 TEIs, 29 are in the city of București, with the remainder mainly in Cluj-Napoca, Iaşi, and Timişoara (National Institute of Statistics, 2023[6]). During periods of demographic decline, as Romania is currently experiencing, TEIs in small urban areas, which are typically closer to students from rural areas, tend to be harder hit by falling enrolment than institutions located in more attractive urban areas (OECD, 2023[10]). In Romania, evidence indicates that many universities can recruit only from a single "recruitment basin" and that these are dwindling in size (Santa and Fierăscu, 2022[11]). For example, the university in Târgu Jiu, where most students come from the local county, is particularly vulnerable to demographic decline. Declining student numbers are already negatively affecting the economic viability of some TEIs. Many already have had to resort to applying for emergency public funding or other compensatory mechanisms (Santa and Fierăscu, 2022[11]). Without intervention, the situation of many universities, particularly outside of the main cities, is likely to worsen - demographic projections suggest the population under 20 will decline by more than 30% by 2070 (Eurostat, 2024[12]) (see Chapter 2).

#### *Romania lacks a clear differentiation of TEIs both horizontally, by institutional type, or vertically, by quality and prestige*

TEIs in Romania may be comprehensive, with study programmes in different fields, or specialised in one single field (e.g. agronomics, medicine, engineering or arts). The fields of study and study programmes organised within each faculty, along with the maximum tuition capacity for each programme/field, are established by government decision on an annual basis. Despite distinctions according to field of specialisation, and the noted differences between public and private TEIs, in many ways the tertiary education landscape in Romania is characterised by a more homogeneous approach than that found in most other OECD countries (Usher and Williams, 2022[13]). For example, Romania lacks a formal horizontal differentiation of institutions found in many other countries, where TEIs are clearly categorised by orientation or type of provision, such as binary systems (for example in the Netherlands or Austria) or colleges dedicated to short-cycle higher education or mid-level qualifications (for example community colleges in the United States or post-secondary ISCED 4 and 5 providers in Norway).

The government has sought to improve differentiation of missions by proposing three TEI types - advanced research universities, teaching and research universities and teaching-only TEIs. A project aiming to revise Romania's quality assurance framework, developed and piloted a methodology to classify TEIs according to this framework, dividing TEIs into different groups by specialisation and grading them according to the intensity of their activities in each specialisation using a complex set of metrics (QAFIN, 2018[14]). This

activity-based methodology for classifying institutions is not common practice in OECD countries. To date, it has not yet been formally adopted in Romania, and is not used, for example, to differentiate external quality assurance processes, allocate of funding, or as a grouping for statistical reporting.

Attempts to provide a clear vertical differentiation of TEIs have also not provided a clear outcome. Few institutions achieve elite status through placement in international rankings. Recent national efforts to measure and compare institution performance have yielded conflicting and overly complex rankings, which seem to have not gained traction in the system. For example, in 2016 a "metaranking" of institutions was introduced, with the methodology established by Ministerial order and overseen by an expert group, based on the placement of Romanian TEIs in international rankings. This metaranking is used to indicate high-performing institutions for the purposes of deciding on the allocation of research funding but a different set of indicators of research performance is used when allocating general performance-based funding.

### *There are plans to introduce new tertiary programme types*

Romania plans to diversify tertiary education to improve labour market relevance by developing a new "dual" model of vocational bachelor's degrees, combining classroom and work-based learning. The Educated Romania plan also envisages the future introduction of tertiary programmes at ISCED 5 level, which is currently not offered in Romania. ISCED 5 programmes are increasingly prevalent in OECD countries, enrolling an average of 19% of first-time tertiary entrants in 2022 (OECD, 2022[15]). These are welcome changes as historically, the provision of tertiary programmes has lacked diversity, with few opportunities for work-based and research-informed learning.

Romania also offers a form of post-secondary education, known as "non-university tertiary education", provided at colleges located within accredited TEIs and focusing on vocational domains. These colleges target students from vocational high schools who have not passed the upper secondary baccalaureate exam. Students completing studies at a non-university college are awarded a college diploma (***diplomã de absolvire a unui colegiu***) at the post-secondary non-tertiary qualification level (ISCED 4). However, graduates may not progress to enrol in tertiary education unless they also pass the baccalaureate. There are currently 18 such colleges attached to 16 universities in Romania, primarily located in large cities. In 2023/2024, 1 287 students were enrolled in these programmes, representing a small share of the approximately 75 thousand post-secondary, non-tertiary education students (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[5]).

### *Romania has made progress in strengthening institutional governance, yet integrity remains a concern as does weak leadership capacity*

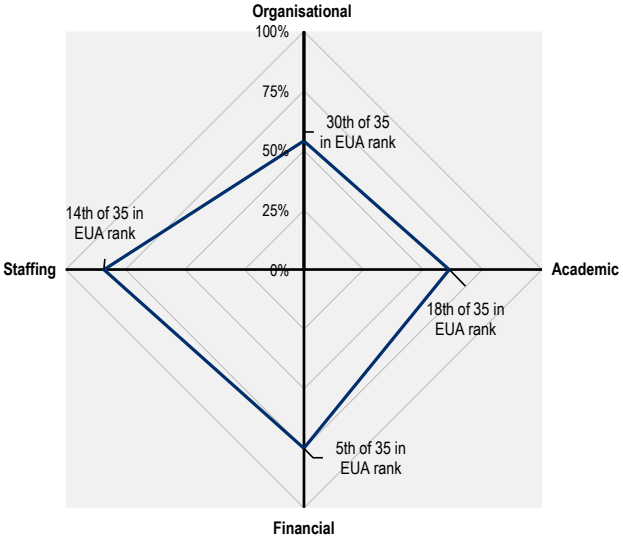
Autonomy is a fundamental principle of tertiary education, and Romania's constitution and 2023 tertiary education law guarantees TEIs' academic freedom and right to establish and implement their own mission, institutional strategy, structure, activities, and many organisational functions. The Ministry of Education has implemented measures to strengthen transparency and accountability to support this autonomy. For example, institutions are required to report annually to the Ministry of Education on their operations and activities, the financial situation of the institution, quality assurance activities and graduate outcomes. Romania has also progressed on ethics and integrity mechanisms in tertiary education, many supported by legislation. Each TEI has an Ethics Commission, including staff and students, and a national University Ethics and Management Council (CEMU) has been operating since 2016. The success of these initiatives has been acknowledged at European Commission level.

While Romania has come a long way in strengthening the professional independence and ethical climate of TEIs, national policies have long recognised the need to increase some elements of TEI autonomy while simultaneously strengthening their capacity for strategic leadership, effective decision-making, and internal governance (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[5]). Romania ranks relatively low in the EU in terms

of organisational autonomy. This includes the capacity of TEI's to define their own leadership model, the composition and structure of their governance bodies, and internal academic structures (see Figure 5.4). Even though Romania ranks relatively highly in Europe for financial autonomy, certain restrictions may hinder system development. For instance, TEIs can only create legal entities if the state is the majority shareholder, must transfer all spin-off company profits to the state, and need government approval to spend privately raised funds (EUA, 2023[16]).

## Figure 5.4. Romanian universities have comparatively limited organisational autonomy

University autonomy scores (out of 100%) in Romania and position within European countries, 2023




Note: Scores range from 1-100% where 1%=low autonomy and 100% = high autonomy. The country with the highest score in each dimension ranks 1st, while that with the lowest score ranks 35th.
Source: EUA (2023[16]), University Autonomy in Europe IV - the scorecard 2023, https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/eua%20autonomy%20scorecard.pdf

### *National initiatives to strengthen university governance are promising but not yet addressing the main challenges*

There are three notable challenges in TEI's internal governance. First is the concentration of power among rectors and other academic leaders. High-performing institutions across OECD countries tend to have widely distributed academic leadership and successfully cultivate a sense of ownership for strategic development across individual schools and faculties, as well as at the most senior levels of the organisation (OECD, 2022[17]). While rectors in Romania may be appointed by open competition or elected by academic staff and student representatives for a maximum of two five-year terms, legal loopholes have allowed some rectors to extend their terms of leadership for a longer period, and there are ongoing concerns about nepotistic interplay between public servants and senior leaders in some TEIs (European Parliament, 2024[18]). As a result, rectors in some TEIs may eventually hold their positions for more than two decades – with more than half of rectors elected in 2023 commencing their third or fourth term, many of them unopposed (Cocea, 2024[19]). Excessively long leadership terms risk creating organisational stagnation, instilling a more autocratic culture within TEIs, and preventing students and staff from benefiting from the innovative perspectives of talented potential leaders.

Second, TEIs in Romania have not sufficiently invested in institution-wide "horizontal" initiatives to develop capacity for research, innovation, entrepreneurship, and engagement with economic sectors

(OECD/European Union, 2019[20]). This has restrained their ability to effectively update curricula to ensure labour market relevance and invest in research and innovation (OECD/European Union, 2019[20]). Third, despite measures to strengthen ethics, in recent years the system has continued to witness frequent reports of quality problems and ethics violations, including high-profile cases of plagiarism and academic dishonesty, which are likely to have damaged public trust (Ghiațău, 2021[21]; Ives et al., 2017[22]).

National initiatives have aimed to strengthen university governance and internal organisational capacity. For example, as part of the project *"Developing the capacity of the Ministry of National Education to monitor and forecast the evolution of higher education in relation to the labour market"*, a Centre for the Professionalisation of University Management was established and training courses in university management were attended by 500 management staff across the higher education sector (EUA, 2021[23]). However, such capacity-building initiatives appear sporadic and have only been implemented at the project level (OECD/European Union, 2019[20]). As noted below, there are also signs of a change in orientation in quality assurance procedures (see System information and quality assurance below).

### *Decisions on student admission rely on a selective baccalaureate exam and a decentralised placement system with implications for equity and inclusion*

Across the OECD, admission practices to TEIs vary from highly selective in countries like Finland and Sweden, to open admission in the Netherlands, Austria and Czechia. Romania leans towards the more selective end of this spectrum, though the approach to selection is distinct in several respects. One notable feature relates to the criteria that determine eligibility for tertiary access. Like many countries, a core criterion is success on the national exam at the end of upper secondary education, which all students have to pass to apply for university. As noted in Chapter 4, the Romanian baccalaureate has traditionally differed from upper secondary education exams in many other OECD countries, both in terms of setting a very high bar to entry and in terms of assessing only a narrow range of academic subjects and competences. However, plans are underway to review the baccalaureate to better align it to different upper secondary pathways and support smoother transitions from upper secondary to tertiary education (see Chapter 4).

Another distinctive aspect is the absence of a transparent national admissions system. A centralised online application facility, commonplace in many OECD countries, does not exist in Romania (Santa and Fierăscu, 2022[11]). While the Ministry of Education sets the number of total places available and subsidised places, institutions have discretion in selecting students, and may add additional selection criteria such as upper secondary results, placement in national competitions or entrance exams devised by the institutions.

The admissions process also has implications for equity and inclusion in tertiary education. Students need to make separate applications to each faculty and may also need to travel to institutions to sit entrance examinations, placing additional burden on those of limited financial means, or those located far from the relevant campus (UEFISCDI, 2022[24]). While the Ministry sets general requirements on the timeframe and the information that must be published annually by TEIs on their admissions processes, the institutions themselves specify the criteria for the application and admissions process. Thus, there are inconsistencies in the way that Romanian TEIs publish their regulations for admission, the supporting documents applicants must provide, the extent to which TEIs promote equal opportunities and accessibility in the application process, the timing of publication of criteria for admission decisions and the specifics of appeals processes (ANOSR, 2020[25]). This inconsistency limits students' ability to understand what is expected of them, and may be especially tough for disadvantaged students to navigate (Haj, Geanta and Orr, 2018[26]).

In addition, information on student financial supports is not always readily available, which may discourage some students from applying to tertiary education in the first place. In Romania, responsibility for providing accessible information for underrepresented groups on their entitlements for financial aid seems to largely be left to individual counties, municipalities, schools or TEIs. The review team heard about promising local projects aimed at raising awareness of available supports. However, such efforts depend on local initiatives and likely vary in quality and effectiveness due to differences in regional and local capacities (OECD,

2023[27]). The limited clarity and consistency in communication about student supports disproportionately affects rural students who must relocate and rely on additional social supports and reserved places. To address this, national initiatives like 'The First Student in the Family' programme, support upper secondary students from families with no prior university experience by informing them about the benefits of tertiary education and providing guidance throughout the application process (see Main reforms below).

*Academic staff are subject to performance evaluation but are also increasingly likely to have fixed-term contracts*

There are approximately 50 000 staff employed in the Romanian tertiary education system, of which around half are academic staff. The number of academic staff has increased in recent years, from around 22 000 in 2016/17 to 24 000 in 2022/23 (CNFIS, 2022[9]). Teaching and research-only career pathways exist, but all academic staff are required to have a doctoral degree, and the CNATDCU sets additional minimum standards for certain academic staff categories. Appointment to an academic position can be on a permanent or fixed-term basis, and the vast majority have full-time contracts.

Similar to measures introduced for pre-tertiary teachers, Romania is taking steps to create a competitive, performance-based academic career. Recruitment into permanent positions is carried out through public competition, with an internal promotion route for academics also available, based on a promotion exam. Institutions must evaluate the performance of teaching and research staff at intervals of no more than five years, following a methodology approved and applied by the university senate. Students in Romania have the legal right to assess the performance of teaching staff, although institutions have autonomy to decide how to implement such assessments and how to use and share the results. However, concerns remain, both in terms of institutions' internal capacity to support staff's professional development, and the legacy system of merit pay. This gradation rewards 16% of teaching staff in tertiary education with a monetary bonus of 25% of their basic salary, for a period of five years. Providing monetary rewards as a significant percentage of teacher's base salary is not common practice in the OECD.

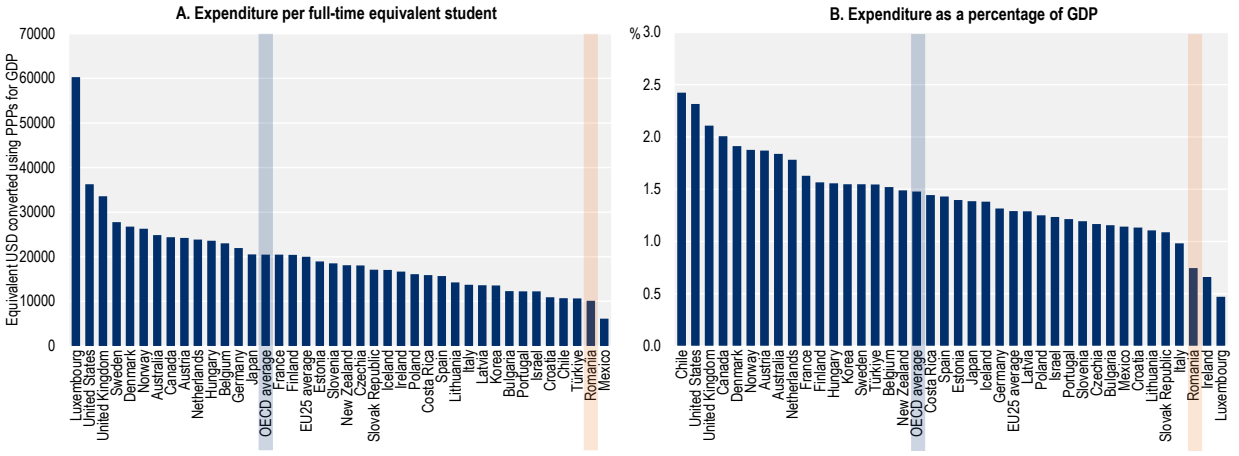
### *Funding of tertiary education*

*Romania's investment in tertiary education is low by OECD standards, though public funding has risen in recent years*

Between 2016 and 2022, in nominal terms, Romania more than doubled the total value of institutional funding allocated to tertiary education institutions, from approximately USD 1 467 million to USD 2 969 million $PPP^2$ (CNFIS, 2022[9]). However, expenditure on tertiary education remains low compared to most OECD countries. In 2021, Romania spent USD 10 137 PPP per student enrolled in tertiary education, close to half of the OECD average (USD 20 499 USD PPP) and significantly less than most OECD and EU countries. Romania also spends one of the lowest shares of its GDP on tertiary education (0.7% in 2021, compared to the OECD average of 1.5%) (see Figure 5.5).

## Figure 5.5. Romania's investment in tertiary education is lower than most OECD countries

Total expenditure on tertiary institutions, 2021




Note: *Panel A ranked in descending order of expenditure per full-time equivalent student. Panel B ranked in descending order by expenditure as a percentage of GDP.*

Source: OECD (2024[28]), Education at a Glance 2024, https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en.

### *The tertiary education system largely relies on public funds, with limited private investment*

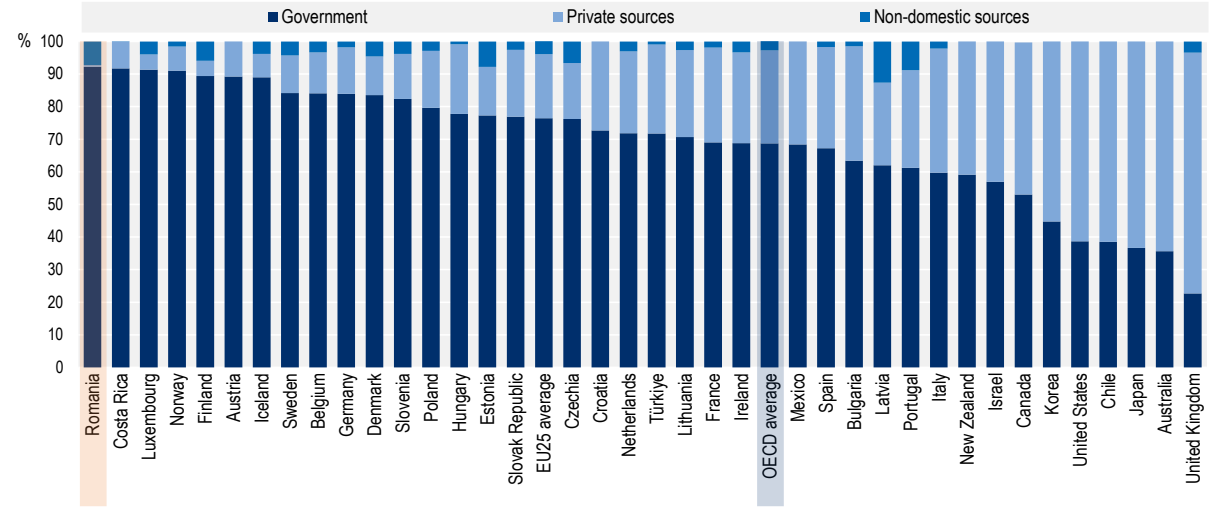
Public tertiary education institutions receive allocations mainly from the budget of the Ministry of Education but may also receive funds from other sources, including from tuition fees, loans and external funding. Compared to other OECD and EU countries, Romania's tertiary education system attracts little private investment. In total 92% of the tertiary education budget comes from the government (compared to 69% OECD average and 76% OECD-EU average) with the majority of the remaining 8% coming from international sources, notably the European Union (see Figure 5.6).

The main source of private income for Romanian TEIs is through tuition fees charged to students. In addition to the quota of tuition-free places provided by the government to each institution, TEIs are allowed to provide additional places to students on a fee-paying basis and have autonomy to determine the amount of fees. However, as noted, institutions are bound by overall maximum student quotas set by government decision on an annual basis, for each study field. Both public and private TEIs may charge a registration fee to students intended to cover the cost of admission. In addition, private TEIs charge tuition fees to all enrolled students, while public TEIs may only charge tuition fees to students admitted on a fee-paying basis. For most TEIs the fees of fee-paying students do not provide a stable revenue stream.

Private investment can also be raised through university-business collaboration, which can increase innovative activity, stimulate private investment, and improve the relevance and impact of both research and education (Guimón, 2013[29]). However, Romanian private sector investment and engagement with the tertiary education sector is currently extremely limited, particularly among domestic firms, which are less productive than multinationals (OECD, 2023[27]). Stakeholders reported that currently few incentives are provided at the policy level to stimulate collaboration between business and TEIs. Plans to introduce "dual" tertiary programmes, as mentioned above, aim to foster stronger partnerships between TEIs and the private sector.

## Figure 5.6. Romanian tertiary education provision is almost completely reliant on public funding

Relative share of government, private and non-domestic expenditure on tertiary education institutions, 2021




Note: *Ranked in descending order of relative share of government expenditure on tertiary education.*
Source: OECD (2021[30]), Distribution of government, private and non-domestic expenditure on educational institutions, http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/hc.

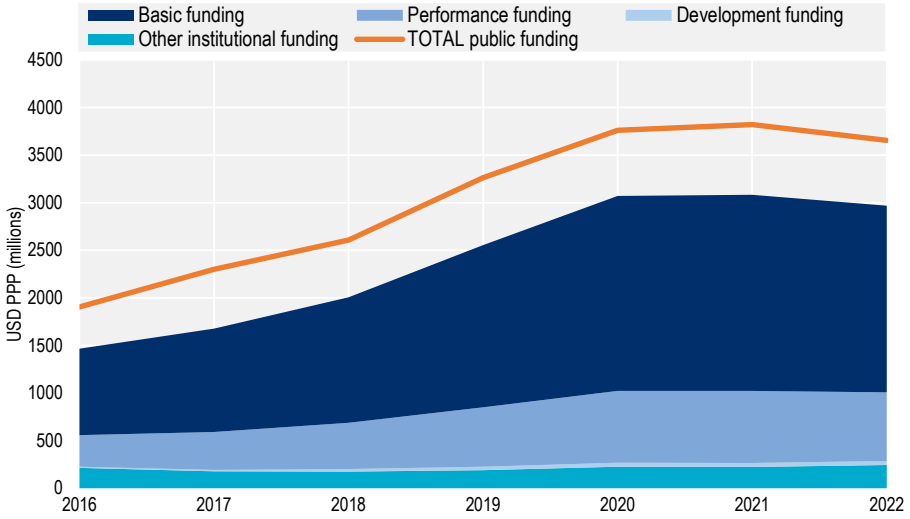
### *Public funding for tertiary education institutions is largely determined by weighted student numbers and performance indicators*

Public funding is mainly allocated to public TEIs through institutional funding contracts, following a methodology developed by the CNFIS and approved by the Ministry of Education. Institutional funding contract amounts are calculated and allocated separately for different purposes, including but not limited to basic funding, performance-based funds, and development funds (see Figure 5.7). As is the case in many other OECD countries, basic funding is largely determined based on student units, weighted by study field, study cycle and tuition language. It represents approximately 66% of total institutional funding, and is intended to cover the salaries of staff, student assessments, material and operational expenses and to support educational and staff development (CNFIS, 2022[9]). An allocation for student scholarships and social protection is also included in the institutional funding.

The Ministry of Education allocates a substantial additional tranche of funding, equivalent to about 25% of the entire budget envelope based on institutions' performance across four categories, using indicators proposed by the CNFIS. In total, 15 indicators are used, with some indicators also incorporating field-specific sub calculations. Indicator-based public funding is used in several OECD countries as an important means for the government to steer the development of tertiary education and stimulate institutions to improve outcomes in education, research and engagement (OECD, 2022[31]). However, the approach to indicator-based funding in Romania differs from common practice in OECD countries and raises several concerns. Firstly, the disproportionate share of funds awarded based on performance rather than activity leads to inequalities and unpredictability in resource distribution. In 2022, performance-based funding varied widely, constituting anywhere from 11% to 30% of the total allocated funds for different institutions (CNFIS, 2022[32]). Moreover, national studies show significant annual fluctuations in the share of performance funding awarded to many institutions (UEFISCDI, 2022[33]). Alongside basic funding allocations that are also variable because of declining student enrolments and government-set quotas, this creates significant unpredictability in funding levels, undermining the long-term planning efforts of TEIs.

## Figure 5.7. Public funding for TEIs is largely determined by student numbers and performance, with relatively small allocations for institutional development

Total public funding for TEIs, with institutional funding disaggregated by category (basic, performance, development and other) in millions of USD PPP, 2022




Note: Institutional funding is disaggregated by basic funding, performance funding, development funding and other. Other institutional funding includes special situations funding, doctoral grants and supplementary budget. National currency values have been converted using purchasing power parity (PPP) rates. Total public funding not counted as institutional funding includes financial support to students (scholarships, transport, dormitories, canteens), investments and capital expenditures.
Source: CNFIS (2022[9]), Raportul public anual 2022. Starea finanțării învățământului superior [The state of higher education financing], http://www.cnfis.ro/rapoarte-cnfis/

Secondly, performance funding is allocated according to a one-size-fits-all process, in which all public institutions of different types and capacities are assessed based on the same indicators. National analysis indicates that a small handful of institutions repeatedly emerge as "winners," while most institutions get a correspondingly lower share (UEFISCDI, 2022[33]). This mechanism likely leads to progressively strengthening capacity of a small number of institutions while depriving lower-performing institutions of essential resources for improvement. A third concern is the perceived fairness, rationality, and inclusivity of the chosen performance indicators and their weightings. Although CNFIS details the calculation methodology, it does not clearly explain the rationale for selecting specific indicators and their weightings, or their link to system-level objectives. For example, one third of the allocation is determined based on research outputs while education outputs and outcomes commonly used in other OECD funding models (e.g. degrees awarded or graduation rates) are not considered at all.

In addition to basic and performance-based funding, institutions may receive development funding on a competitive basis to support institution-level projects linked to nationally set strategic goals. However, this type of funding is not supporting institutional development as well as it might. The allocation for institutional development represents only 1.5% of the overall funding pot, substantially less than performance-based funding. It is also awarded only on a competitive basis and requires institution co-financing, which may again privilege those institutions with greater capacity and financial resources.

### *Research activity is underdeveloped and underfunded, but there are some signs of progress*

Beyond directly supporting research, the availability of research funding provides other benefits, attracting talented academics, raising teaching quality and boosting TEIs' national and international reputation. It

also enables infrastructure investment, making institutions viable partners in regional and local innovation initiatives. As well as the institutional funding contracts described above, Romanian TEIs may receive complementary allocations of research funding from UEFISCDI linked to initiatives developed under Romania's National Research, Development and Innovation Plan and based on competitive grants and performance-based criteria. Despite efforts to increase investment in recent years, spending on tertiary education research and development is extremely low, amounting to less than USD 100 PPP per enrolled tertiary student in 2021, far below the OECD average of almost USD 7 000 PPP (OECD, 2024[28]).

The extremely limited expenditure reflects the well-documented weakness and low effectiveness of the public research and innovation system in Romania, which has been characterised as fragmented, underfunded, misfunded and requiring comprehensive reform (European Commission, 2022[34]; OECD/European Union, 2019[20]). Romania remained one of the most modest performers in attracting funding from EU Research and Innovation framework programmes, in terms of number and share of applications and success rates (European Commission, 2024[35]).

Small amounts of core funding for research were provided to TEIs by the Ministry of Education for the first time in 2021, partially based on the metaranking exercise. More recently, in 2023, the Ministry of Education established a dedicated fund for financing scientific research in public TEIs, endowed with 100 million lei (approximately USD 58 million PPP) from the public budget. UEFISCDI is also aiming to improve Romania's access to EU research funds through its National Contact Point (NCP) unit, which assists researchers and institutions in securing EU funding, provides strategic advice, and facilitates participation in European research framework programmes, such as Horizon.

### *Public spending on student financial aid is low by international standards and is mostly awarded based on academic achievement rather than on social need*

In 2021 the share of public expenditure on tertiary education allocated to student aid amounted to 9%, significantly less than the 12% average share spent by EU countries (Eurostat, 2022[36]). Financial supports are funnelled through Romanian TEIs. The Ministry provides, for each TEI, a quota of tuition-free places and a block funding allocation for student scholarships. Within general guidelines specified by the Ministry of Education, TEIs may develop their own criteria for allocating each category of scholarship among students, although minimum scholarship amounts are proposed by CNFIS annually and are intended to cover at least the cost of food and accommodation (Government of Romania, 2023[37]). TEIs may also elect to supplement their scholarship fund from their own funds, and the extent to which they do so is one of the indicators used to calculate their performance funding allocation.

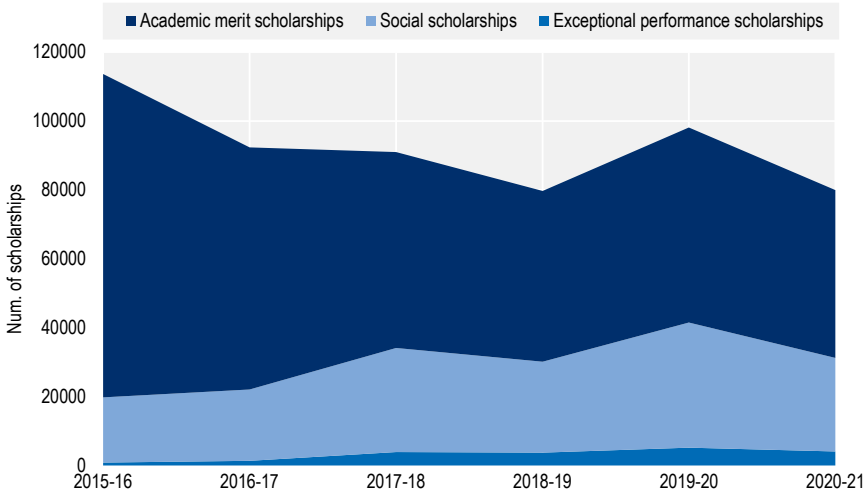
A portion of available tuition-free places are reserved for priority student groups, including rural, and Roma students, as well as students with special educational needs (SEN) (see Section 2 below). Aside from these priority places, the allocation of tuition-free places is based on merit, using the baccalaureate exam results, without any adjustment for socio-economic disadvantage (e.g. family income). Similarly, while the number of social scholarships has increased significantly since 2015 (see Figure 5.8) merit and performance scholarships – awarded based on exam results, or exceptional academic, scientific or sports performance – remain the dominant scholarship type and have higher average individual value than social scholarships. Experience in OECD countries shows merit-based scholarships tend to disproportionately benefit students from wealthier backgrounds who might be able to afford the costs of their education without financial aid (OECD, 2020[38]).

Granting TEIs flexibility in the allocation process has some theoretical benefits, allowing amounts to be adapted in accordance with local costs and allowing individual institutions to better align allocations with specific student needs. However, the current system lacks clarity and consistency across institutions and creates considerable uncertainty for prospective students about the financial supports they may expect to receive when enrolling in tertiary education. National studies indicate that in some universities around 3-in-10 applicants may be eventually offered a scholarship, while in others everyone who applied received

one (Cismaru and Corbu, 2019[39]). In addition, scholarships are awarded only for one academic year – students may have to apply and compete again for scholarships for their subsequent years of study. Time series data from the CNFIS shows significant variability in the volume of scholarships of different types awarded year-on-year (see Figure 5.8). This decentralised system also increases administrative burden on institutions who must devise and operate a process for managing applications, assessing eligibility and deciding on award amounts.

### Figure 5.8. Most scholarships are still merit-based, while the volume and mix of scholarship types awarded varies from year to year

Scholarships awarded to Romanian tertiary education students, by type, 2015-2021




Source: CNFIS (2022[9]), *Raportul public anual 2022. Starea finanțării învățământului superior [The state of higher education financing]*, http://www.cnfis.ro/rapoarte-cnfis/

The net effect of Romania's current decentralised allocation process for scholarships is that students do not have any advance guarantee of the extent of financial supports available to them. This, combined with the lack of consistent information about student financial supports, can deter prospective students from enrolling in tertiary education (JRC, 2019[40]).

## *System information and quality assurance*

*Quality assurance processes were traditionally perceived by TEIs as legalistic and compliance-oriented*

External quality evaluation of TEIs is performed by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS), an autonomous national institution and a member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) since 2009. ARACIS is responsible for the provision of provisional authorisation, accreditation and periodic reaccreditation of institutions, study programmes and study domains, including doctoral studies.

The attitude of Romanian TEIs to quality assurance has historically been perceived as ritualistic, compliance-oriented and disconnected from internal management processes. While standards for external quality assurance have long been aligned with European norms (including the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance), studies have previously documented a tendency within institutions to focus primarily on technical compliance with the indicators and metrics used in external quality assurance,

while having an underdeveloped internal quality culture (Geven et al., 2015[41]). There are, however, signs of evolution in attitudes towards quality improvement within TEIs. An ARACIS study based on analysis of institutional evaluation reports between 2008 and 2015 noted that internal institutional quality assurance processes improved considerably over the period, although ARACIS also noted that institutions frequently requested simplification of the quantitative indicators used in external quality assurance processes and clarification of their rationale in some cases (ARACIS, 2019[42]). Romania has recently moved to reduce the number of indicators used in institution and programme level evaluation (Government of Romania, 2024[43]).

*System-level capacity for external quality evaluation has been strengthened in recent years and methods updated, laying the ground for a more differentiated approach*

Recognising the need for change, ARACIS has updated its approach and strengthened its capacity in recent years. In 2018, ARACIS extensively reviewed and updated its external evaluation methodology, standards, and performance indicators (QAFIN, 2020[44]). This revision aimed to shift the focus from input indicators to processes and outcomes, placing greater responsibility on TEIs for their own quality assurance. For instance, as part of these changes, bachelor programmes are required to provide demonstrably positive employment outcomes, and labour market representatives and students are involved in both the design and periodic review of programmes (QAFIN, 2020[44]). A new model was also implemented for doctoral education, culminating in a complete accreditation of all doctoral programmes by the end of 2021 based on a simplified set of evaluation indicators (Government of Romania, 2024[43]).

In addition, ARACIS carried out an internal reorganisation between 2021 and 2022, which created clearer roles and responsibilities for each of its mandated functions and established new organisation units within the Agency, including an internal Research Office. ARACIS has also secured an increase in the number of permanent staff from 33 to 58 between 2018 and 2022, helping to strengthen its organisational capacity (ENQA, 2023[45]).

The maturation of the quality assurance framework in, Romania is providing a basis for a more differentiated and enhancement-oriented approach. The Ministry of Education reports that a new framework methodology coming on stream in 2024 will allow institutions to avail of streamlined external evaluation in some cases (Government of Romania, 2024[43]). As discussed in Section III, a clearer formal differentiation of TEI profiles and missions could help to support the objectives of ARACIS in this regard.

*Romania has strengthened its data infrastructure, supporting the development of new evidence on the quality and performance of tertiary education*

To fully understand the quality of tertiary education, qualitative evidence generated by typical quality assurance processes needs to be complemented by quantitative information on outputs and outcomes (Staring et al., 2022[46]). The Ministry of Education and UEFISCDI have taken important steps to develop the information base for tertiary education. A National Platform for Statistical Data Collection for Higher Education (ANS) has been introduced, standardising and streamlining data collection from TEIs needed for policy analysis and performance assessment. Data collection on student characteristics and enrolments have been integrated to a central register (REI/RMU). The REI allows tracking of students' educational progress, including calculating dropout rates. In addition, Romania has also participated in several waves of the Eurostudent survey covering a range of topics related to students' social and economic conditions in European tertiary education (Eurostudent, n.d.[47]).

Romania is also collecting new data to understand the outcomes of tertiary education and student experience. The first National Student Survey took place in 2019-2020, showing 51% of respondents had a positive perception of teaching activity and of the academic support they received in their programme (Deaconu and Hâj, 2022[48]). A National Survey of Employability of Higher Education Graduates has also

been recently carried out and may be repeated in the future (UEFISCDI, n.d.[49]). UEFISCDI has also carried out one-off data matching projects to gain a deeper understanding of access and dropout patterns (Hâj and Ţucă, 2022[50]). For the moment, however, these data-driven research efforts exist mainly at the project level and are not yet systematised.

### *Use of digital education technologies*

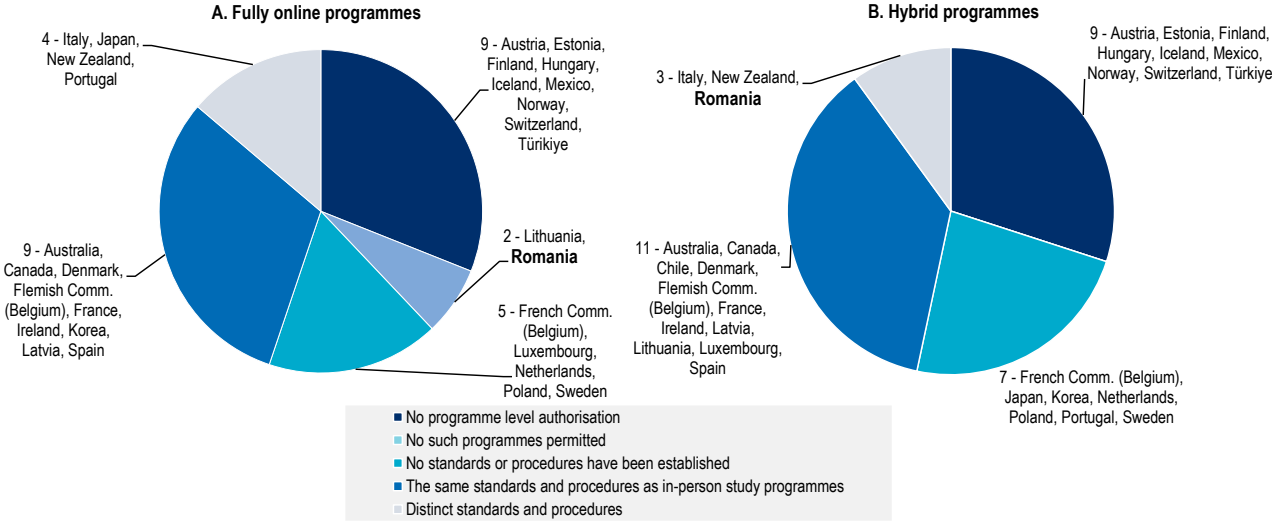
*Romania is building capacity for digitally enhanced teaching and learning through targeted investments but online and hybrid learning is limited and heavily regulated*

As in many countries, the COVID-19 pandemic spurred a leap forward in digitalisation in Romanian tertiary education, with an ex-post study showing that overall digital competence among learners increased (Deaconu and Hâj, 2022[48]). Romania is also using its National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) to substantially invest in the digitalisation of universities (Ministry of Investments and European Projects of Romania, 2023[51]), with 61 projects valued in total value at EUR 244 million, aiming to improve digital infrastructure, enhance the digital skills of students and staff, digitalise administrative processes, and better prepare students for emerging professions in digitalised industries (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[7]).

Despite this progress, online and hybrid learning appears underdeveloped. In 2023, 28% of individuals aged 20 to 24 in Romania were using online learning material or participating in an online course, the lowest percentage in the EU, and below the EU average (51%) (Eurostat, 2023[52]). This may be driven by relatively heavy regulation of online and hybrid learning in Romania, compared to many other OECD countries – fully online education programmes up to recently were not permitted, while Romania was also one of only three responding countries in the 2022 OECD Higher Education Policy Survey reporting distinct regulations in place for hybrid programmes (see Figure 5.9).

## Figure 5.9. Online and hybrid tertiary education programmes are heavily regulated in Romania

Programme authorisation standards for online and hybrid tertiary education programmes, 2020




Source: Broberg, N. and G. Golden (2023[53]), "How are OECD governments navigating the digital higher education landscape?: Evidence from a comparative policy survey", *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 303, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/93468ccb-en.

### *Main reform priorities*

As is the case with other levels of education, the 2023 update to higher education legislation (Law no.199 of July 4, 2023 on higher education) together with EU funding through Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) and the European Social Fund (ESF+) is lending new momentum to reform efforts in the tertiary sector (Ministry of Investments and European Projects of Romania, 2023[51]). In summary, key reform objectives include:

- **Increasing the labour market relevance of tertiary education**: As noted, a key reform objective is the development of a new stream of professional tertiary education, which will be aligned with the dual education planned at upper secondary education. In its NRRP, Romania sets the goal to enrol 3 000 students in the full dual route by 2026 (Ministry of Investments and European Projects of Romania, 2023[51]). The main vehicle for achieving this objective is the establishment of dual education clusters which are intended to co-locate vocational secondary, post-secondary, and tertiary education within the same physical campus.

  The NRRP has also allocated funding to upgrade the digital infrastructure of universities and develop new training programmes for tertiary students and the broader adult population. These programmes will focus on digital skills, entrepreneurial skills for the digital sector, and advanced digital skills for emerging technologies such as Quantum Computing, Artificial Intelligence, Blockchain, and the Internet of Things (Ministry of Investments and European Projects of Romania, 2023[51]).
- **Improving participation and inclusion in tertiary education:** By 2030, Romania aims to increase the share of tertiary graduates among individuals aged 30-34 from 23% in 2023 to 40% (President of Romania, 2021[54]). Developing a new dual stream of tertiary education will be important to increase participation, particularly for students from vocational high schools. Additional measures are also being pursued to improve inclusion. The law continues to reserve a number of university places for students from rural high schools and Roma background, and adds two new categories: students with disabilities, and students under the social protection system. The law also introduces a National Programme for the Reduction of University Dropouts (PNRAU), funded by the national budget and the European Social Fund (ESF+). The programme includes measures to support transitions to tertiary education, strengthen university career counselling and guidance, and introduce an early warning system for university dropout (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[2]). Special support is also offered to students from families where parents have not completed tertiary education through the "First Student in the Family" initiative. Finally, the NRRP allocates funding to develop university infrastructure, including the construction of over 3 700 student dorms, and the extension or upgrade of over 11 500 existing dorms, with the goal to allocate at least 40% of places to students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (Ministry of Investments and European Projects of Romania, 2023[51]).

## Section II: Performance in tertiary education

### *Access and participation*

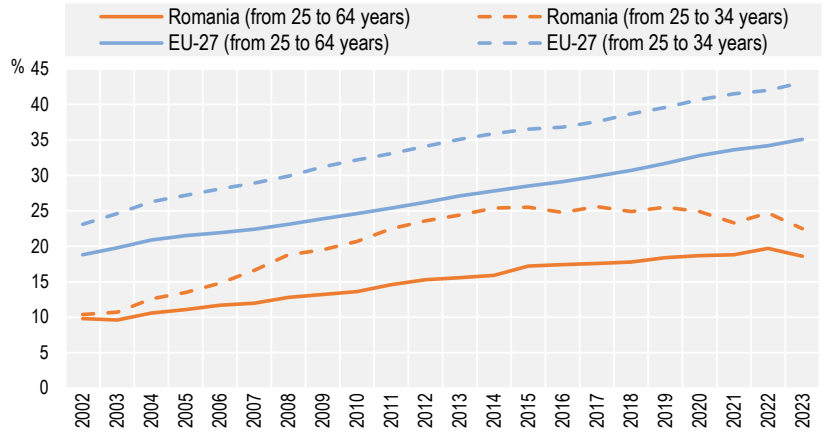
*The share of adults that have completed tertiary education in Romania is far below the OECD and EU averages and making little progress*

Relatively few adults in Romania have achieved a tertiary education. Approximately 1-in-5 of the adult population aged 25-64 have a tertiary degree - one of the lowest rates in Europe and substantially lower than the OECD average (41%) and the EU-27 average (35%) (Eurostat, 2023[55]; OECD, 2023[56]). Romania's attainment rate in 2023 stood at roughly the same level as the average attainment rate of EU-27

countries in 2002 (see Figure 5.10). Given this much lower base, the slow progress in advancing tertiary education attainment among younger adults is a particular concern. In 2023, the share of 25-34 year-olds with tertiary education stood at 23%, almost half the OECD and EU-27 averages (48% and 43% respectively) (Eurostat, 2023[55]; OECD, 2023[56]).

### Figure 5.10. Romania has made relatively limited progress on tertiary education attainment

Percentage of 25-64 year-olds and 25-34 year-olds with tertiary education




Source: Eurostat (2023[55]), Population by educational attainment level, sex and age (%) - main indicators, https://doi.org/10.2908/EDAT_LFSE_03

Romania's low attainment rate is partially driven by a notable over-reliance on the traditional entry cohort from upper secondary education to drive enrolments. In the Eurostudent VII comparative survey, for example, 81% of surveyed Romanian students in tertiary education reported transferring into tertiary education within 12 months of completing secondary education, compared to an average of 66% across the surveyed countries (Hauschildt et al., 2021[57]). Enrolment rates of adults in education are also below the OECD average in Romania – 10% of adults aged 25-29 were enrolled in formal education in 2022, compared to the OECD average of 16% for the same cohort (OECD, 2022[58]).

Other factors also contribute to low participation in tertiary education. As discussed in Chapter 4, Romania has been less successful than most other OECD and EU countries in supporting students to complete upper secondary and access tertiary education, and many tertiary students drop out (see below) (Hâj and Ţucă, 2022[50]). Furthermore, enrolment in part-time tertiary education appears to be more limited in Romania than in many European and OECD countries. The proportion of part-time students in tertiary education has remained stable over the last decade at around 8-9% of the total students enrolled, lower than the EU-27 average (14%) and considerably lower than neighbouring Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries (Eurostat, 2022[59]). For instance, at least 28% of students in Latvia, Hungary and Poland study part-time. The number of students enrolled in distance education is also low and decreasing, with only 2 400 students enrolled in 2022/23 academic year (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[7]).

#### *Romania is a net exporter of students for both degree and credit mobility*

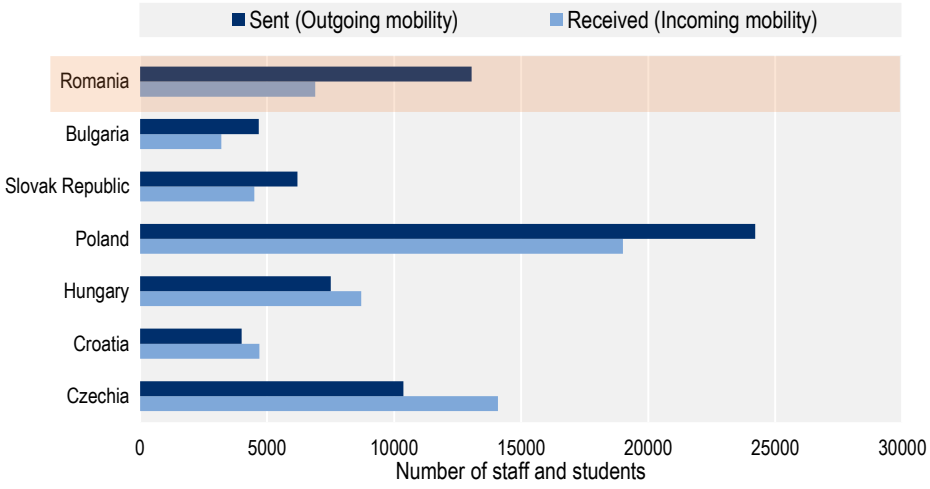
One of the key pathways that OECD countries have pursued to address demographic change is policies that encourage inward migration, including through internationalisation of tertiary education. Romania is also seeking to increase internationalisation across its tertiary education system, enhancing the marketing of Romanian tertiary education abroad, and providing scholarships for Romanians and other prospective students living abroad to study in Romania. Romanian TEIs are also proactively seeking partnerships

across Europe through participation in the European Universities Alliances initiative, which should in time help to increase their international recognition.

However, Romania is not yet a preferred destination for international students. The share of international first-time entrants is lower in Romania than the OECD average share (6% compared to 10%) (OECD, 2022[60]). Internationalisation is also more limited in Romania than in most OECD-EU countries for both degree and credit mobility. In 2022, Romania's share of foreign students in tertiary degree programmes stood at 6%, lower than most countries in the CEE region, including neighbouring Hungary (14%), Slovenia (9%), Czechia (16%) and similar to Poland (7%) (OECD, 2024[28]). In terms of credit mobility, Romania is a net sending country of students and staff on ERASMUS mobility experiences, with one of the highest ratios of outgoing to incoming students in Europe, and in neighbouring/peer countries (see Figure 5.11). The 2023 law on higher education sets out measures to promote Romanian tertiary education internationally and attract foreign students.

### Figure 5.11. Romania is a net exporter of students for credit mobility

Staff and student mobility through ERASMUS+ in selected countries, 2022




Note: *Ranked in descending order of outgoing for each incoming.*
Source: European Commission (2023[61]), *Erasmus+ annual report 2022 : annex*, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/090374

### *Quality of programmes and outcomes*

*Romanian TEIs have a higher-than-average student-staff ratio, and research activity of academic staff is extremely limited*

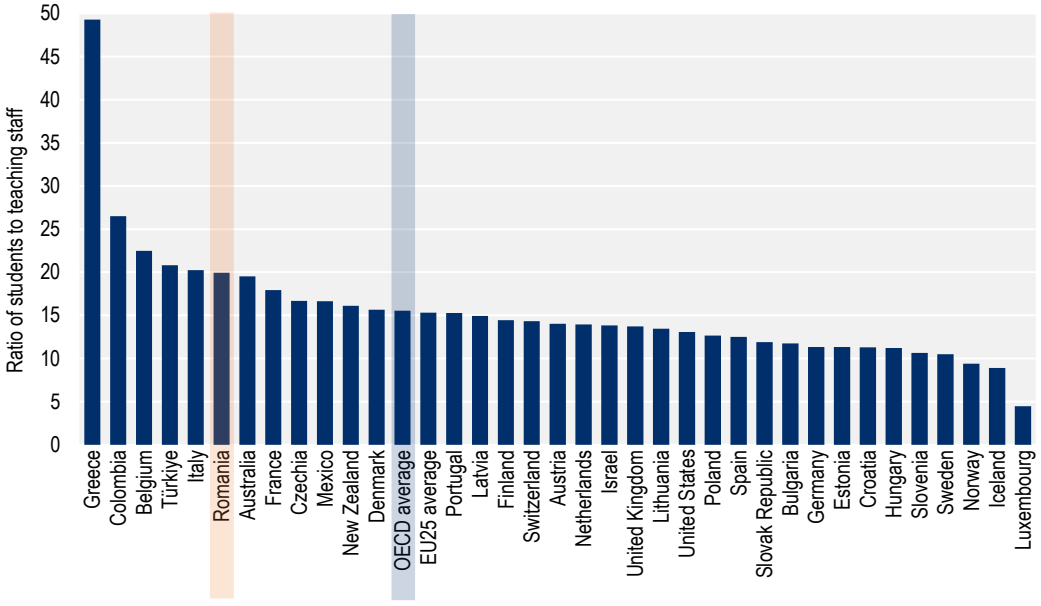
The ratio of students to each full-time-equivalent teaching staff in tertiary institutions in Romania is 20, higher than in most OECD countries (16 on average) and significantly higher than other CEE countries such as Estonia (11) and Poland (13) (see Figure 5.12). Although there are challenges to interpreting this indicator, it implies that Romania may have relatively lower levels of academic support available to its tertiary education students, despite the decline in enrolments in recent years (OECD, 2019[62]).

As noted, research activity of Romanian TEIs has significant room for development and up until recently had not been earmarked specifically as a target for public funding. Increasing research activity in Romanian tertiary education can help to increase students' exposure to practical research and cutting-edge developments in their fields of study and promote the development of important transversal competencies (Mägi and Beerkens, 2015[63]). However, as the experience of OECD countries shows, an increased

emphasis on research activity in Romania would need to be managed carefully so that available academic support for students does not dwindle further.

### Figure 5.12. Romania has fewer staff per student than most OECD tertiary education systems

Ratio of students to teaching staff in tertiary educational institutions, 2022




Note: At the tertiary level, the ratio of students to teaching staff is obtained by dividing the number of full-time equivalent tertiary students by the number of full-time equivalent academic staff. *Ranked by descending order of ratio of students to teaching staff.*
Source: OECD (2024[28]), Education at a Glance 2024, https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en.

#### *Tertiary education dropout is widespread*

Despite the relatively low share of the population entering tertiary education, Romania's tertiary education system suffers substantial loss of talent through its elevated rate of dropout, particularly in the early years of bachelor education. According to a recent national entry cohort study, approximately 52% of the students who enrolled in the first year of a bachelor programme in 2015/16 had graduated with a degree two years after the end of the theoretical duration of their programme (Herteliu et al., 2022[64]; UEFISCDI, 2022[65]).

While directly comparable data for other countries is not available, a 2022 entry cohort analysis of 23 OECD countries found that on average 68% of entrants to a bachelor's programme had graduated with a qualification by three years after the theoretical duration (OECD, 2022[66]). This implies that Romania's dropout challenge is overall likely to be more severe than in most OECD countries, and that Romanian TEIs may struggle to provide sufficient levels of academic and social supports for students, particularly those who do not manage to complete their degree programme within the theoretical duration.

While multiple factors contribute to university dropout, two are notable in Romania. The first are financial barriers, as scholarships and tuition-free places are primarily awarded based on merit, rather than social need. National data shows that students who pay tuition fees at public institutions have higher dropout rates—53% compared to 38% for those with tuition-free places in the 2015 cohort, while the dropout rates for private institutions was above 62% (Herteliu et al., 2022[64]). The second factor relates to the lack of coherence between upper secondary pathways and programmes available at tertiary level. Tertiary dropout rates are particularly high for graduates of vocational upper secondary schools, suggesting issues both with the relevance of existing tertiary options for these students, and with the quality of vocational

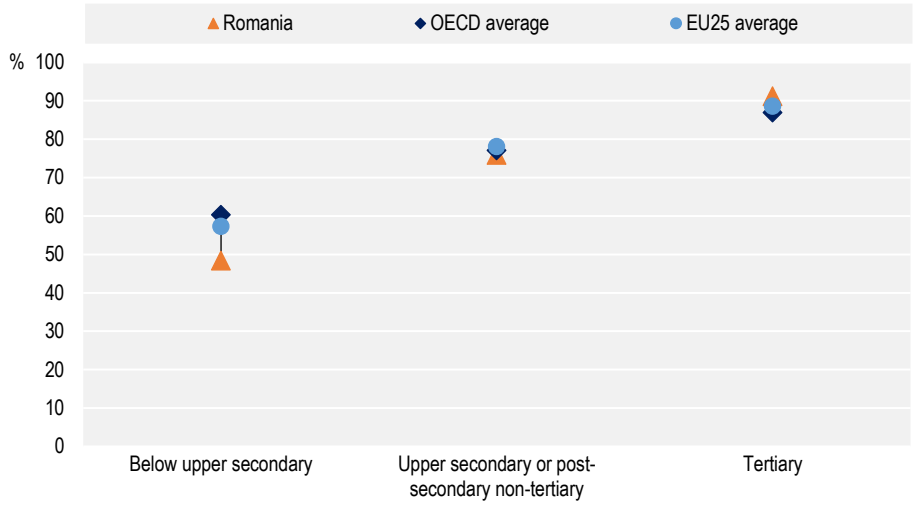
high schools in terms of preparing young people for success in further education (see Chapter 4). At the same time, dropout rates among enrolled older adults, many of whom presumably have work experience as well as the baccalaureate, are even higher than for younger age cohorts, which may indicated a lack of flexibility in tertiary education programmes to accommodate working students (Curaj, Salmi and Hâj, 2022[67]).

### *Labour market outcomes for tertiary education graduates are relatively positive, and Romania produces a higher-than-average share of STEM graduates*

In Romania, attaining a tertiary education qualification comes with substantial labour market rewards. Employment rates among tertiary-educated young adults (91%) are almost double those of their peers with below upper secondary education (48%), reflecting the relative scarcity of such adults in the labour market (OECD, 2024[28]). Thus, while those with lower levels of education are less likely to be employed, those with tertiary education in Romania have better employment prospects than their counterparts in OECD and OECD-EU countries on average (see Figure 5.13).

## Figure 5.13. Romania's employment premium for tertiary education attainment is above average

Percentage of employed 25-64 year-olds among all 25-64 year-olds, by level of educational attainment, 2023




Source: OECD (2024[28]), Education at a Glance 2024, https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en.

Although lower than the OECD and OECD-EU averages, Romanian tertiary education graduates also enjoy substantial earnings premiums over those with lower levels of education. Compared to upper secondary education, workers with tertiary attainment (25-64 year-olds) earn on average 43% more in Romania, compared to a premium of 52% on average in the EU and 56% in OECD countries (OECD, 2024[28]). The highest proportion of tertiary students graduate from STEM programmes (28%), where Romania has a larger share of graduates than most countries in the OECD and EU countries (OECD, 2022[68]). As in other OECD countries, employment rates are higher for graduates from the most in-demand fields of study, such as ICT, engineering, manufacturing and construction (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[5]).

### *Equity*

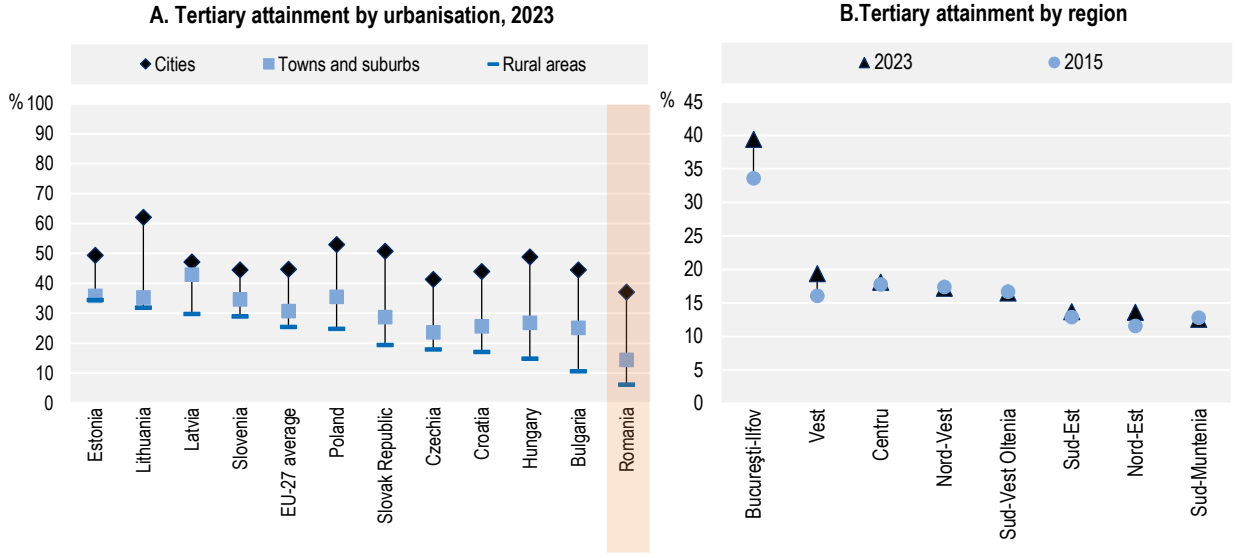
*There are substantial gaps in participation in tertiary education between the urban and rural population*

Across OECD countries, prospective students in rural areas face specific obstacles to accessing tertiary education, such as lack of physical accessibility or reliable transport, inability to financially support a move to an urban area to access tertiary education, or local family or caring commitments which make travelling to enrol infeasible (OECD, 2022[31]). These challenges are particularly pronounced in Romania. Estimates suggest that while 45% of Romanian school children are living in rural areas, just 24% of tertiary education enrolments come from rural students (World Bank, 2019[69]).

The resulting differences between tertiary attainment in Romanian cities and rural areas are stark. Romania had the lowest share of the rural population aged 25-64 having achieved tertiary education in 2023 in the EU (see Figure 5.14), and rural attainment has barely increased in the past decade even as many other countries made significant progress (Eurostat, 2023[70]). The tertiary attainment rate of 25-64 year-olds in rural areas amounted to just 6.2% in 2023, compared to the EU-27 average of 25.5%. The differences between areas containing large cities and less urbanised and populated regions further highlight the extent of attainment gaps across the country. For example, 39.4% of 25-64 year-olds attained tertiary education in the Bucureşti-Ilfov region, compared to just 12.6% in the largely rural Sud-Muntenia region (see Figure 5.14).

## Figure 5.14. Tertiary education remains low in rural areas

Tertiary attainment (25–64 year-olds)




Note: *Panel A ranked in descending order of percentage of tertiary attainment in rural areas. Panel B ranked in descending order of percentage of tertiary attainment in 2023.*
Source: Eurostat (2023[70]), Population by educational attainment level, sex, age and degree of urbanisation (%), https://doi.org/10.2908/EDAT_LFS_9913; Eurostat (2023[71]), Population by educational attainment level, sex, age, citizenship and NUTS 2 regions (%), https://doi.org/10.2908/EDAT_LFS_9918.

The Romanian state has been taking measures to close access gaps and improve academic performance for rural students. In the 2022/23 academic year, for example, specific tuition-free state-funded places were made available to graduates of high schools situated in rural areas. However, of the 2 000 places made available, just 1 207 places were eventually occupied (Eurydice, 2023[72]).

*Roma students also face substantial barriers to enrolment*

One of the most marginalised groups in Romania is the Roma Community. Roma are severely underrepresented in tertiary education – a 2015 study, the most recent analysis available, estimated that while about 2.25%[3] of 18–24 year-olds in Romania were Roma, they made up only 0.23% of enrolled students (Dervis, Trifan and Jitaru, 2022[73]). This low participation rate reflects the high dropout rate of Roma from secondary education. It also reflects the wider situation across Europe, where best estimates indicate that between 1% and 4% of the Roma population have achieved a tertiary education qualification (Rutigliano and Cerna, 2020[74]).

Priority reserved places are made available annually for Roma students, but, as with the rural priority places, stakeholders reported that not all of them are filled. This is likely to be partly attributable to poor diffusion of information about the availability of the places. National studies indicate that students often only find out about potential supports during or after the enrolment process, and in other cases students did not apply for places reserved for rural or Roma students because they mistakenly believed that competition would be higher than for regular places (Dervis, Trifan and Jitaru, 2022[73]).

## Section III: Analysis and policy recommendations

### *Equality of opportunity and access: Making greater progress on equity and accessibility of tertiary education*

As noted, Romania's tertiary education system faces several challenges relating to accessibility and equity of access. Access to tertiary education requires the baccalaureate diploma, cutting off a large share of the population. Even those achieving the baccalaureate must navigate complex decentralised admission processes and face financial uncertainty in a system where scholarships and tuition-free places tend to prioritise merit with limited consideration of socio-economic disadvantage. Rural students are particularly underserved, resulting in persistently low tertiary attainment in rural areas, while many regional TEIs face dwindling enrolments due to demographic change, jeopardising their continued operation.

Policies to tackle equity issues in school education in Romania, successfully implemented, should help to support greater participation in tertiary education in years to come (see Chapter 4). As noted, the Romanian government has also expanded tuition-free places and social scholarships for students enrolled in tertiary education and introduced targeted quotas for some underrepresented groups. In recent years, between 60% and 65% of students enrolled in public TEIs were benefiting from state-funded places, while social scholarships have been demonstrably effective in reducing dropout (Cismaru and Corbu, 2019[39]). Take-up of reserved priority places for Roma and rural students, currently lower than desired, should improve over time as successive cohorts become aware of their availability. Evidence from other countries shows that reserved places, combined with academic support, can improve equity of access over time.

Building on these achievements, Romania should take additional steps to orient the system towards greater equity of access. The section below proposes several actions that Romania could consider, including centralising admissions and social scholarship allocations, expanding the current system of quota places to improve access among low-income students and mature learners, and taking steps to fortify tertiary education in rural areas. Centralised admissions may require some upfront investment in the Ministry of Education's administrative capacity but should deliver greater efficiency and transparency in the long term.

## Figure 5.15. Recommendations and actions on equality of opportunities and access in tertiary education

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Equality | 5.1 Prioritise need, clarity and consistency in the allocation of public financial support for students, including funded study places | • Striking a better balance between merit and need in tuition fee policy while working to introduce a public grant system for tuition.<br>• Developing a nationally consistent, transparent approach to the allocation of scholarships. |
| | 5.2 Simplify and expand admission routes into tertiary education | • Improving information resources for students about study programmes.<br>• Centralising the application and admission system.<br>• Creating a specific entry mechanism for mature students. |
| | 5.3. Expand efforts to support tertiary provision outside of the main cities | • Introducing targeted financial incentives for students to enrol in regional institutions.<br>• Enhancing rural and regional access through the use of digitalisation. |

### *Recommendation 5.1. Prioritise need, clarity and consistency in the allocation of public financial supports for students, including funded study places*

In systems where financial resources are severely constrained, as in Romania, reviewing tuition fees policy to balance ability to pay with academic ability can support more equitable distribution of public funds. Without careful management of eligibility criteria, free and subsidised tertiary education combined with restricted access may lead to wealthier families appropriating most of the benefit (de Gayardon, 2019[75]). Research shows that the most effective policies to improve access and increase equity are those that combine adequate financial aid with targeted assistance to overcome non-financial impediments, such as information barriers (OECD, 2008[76]; OECD, 2020[38]). With this in mind, Romania could take measures to rebalance the allocation of tuition-free places and scholarships towards students with the greatest financial need, while ensuring that all students have access to clear and transparent information resources about the offer of tertiary education and their entitlements to state support.

#### Striking a better balance between merit and need in tuition fee policy while working to introduce a public grant system for tuition

Across OECD countries, tuition-free places on tertiary education programmes are more often prioritised based on need rather than academic performance. A 2020 OECD survey showed that out of 23 jurisdictions with at least one form of tuition fee waiver, 20 had waivers based either on membership of a disadvantaged population group or according to household income, while just 11 supported waivers based on merit. As a first step to nudge the system towards a more equitable balance between performance-based and need-based allocation, Romania could consider reserving a reasonable share of the existing state-funded tuition places for students with income below a designated limit, allowing the remainder to be allocated based on the existing merit system.

An advantage of this approach is that it would be relatively easy for the government to implement – the share of places per institution to be reserved for lower-income students could be allocated in the annual Government Decision on specialisations, fields and places in TEIs. The disadvantage is that institutions would be tasked with administering yet another quota system, on top of those that already exist, and all the other decentralised administrative decision processes (e.g., admissions and allocation of scholarships). A longer-term goal could be to design a more comprehensive reform, introducing a public grant system to cover tuition fees. A common approach within the OECD involves TEIs universally charging tuition fees in principle, with governments subsidising these fees for certain students through grants. Allocation of tuition-fee grants is most often determined by means-testing (Golden, Troy and Weko, 2021[77]). This would lead to a fairer and more transparent system than the current ‘all or nothing’ approach, while still ensuring that TEIs can access a source of private fee income from households.

Many countries use public grant systems to cover both tuition fees and living expenses, aiming for transparent and efficiency that comes with a centralised system. Romania could work to align more closely with international best practice by introducing a similar model combining the introduction of a grant system for tuition fees with an overhaul of its complex scholarship allocation process, as detailed below.

**Developing a nationally consistent, transparent approach to the allocation of scholarships**

Romania should consider replacing the current merit-oriented, decentralised approach with a centralised allocation mechanism that sets objective qualification criteria based on both merit and need. This would shift the allocation of scholarships away from TEIs, as the current decentralised system, while offering some flexibility, can lead to a lack of transparency and uncertainty for prospective students regarding the financial support they can expect when enrolling in tertiary education. In considering a unified approach, Romania has many examples to draw from, not least its own centralised allocation system for student scholarships at secondary level. Many OECD tertiary education systems provide a fixed or sliding scale of guaranteed public student financial support, the amounts of which are specified in advance, where the conditions for qualification are clearly set out, and, in many cases, accompanied by a centralised online application process (see Box 5.1).

### Box 5.1. Examples of centralised, transparent student support systems in OECD countries

The DSU (*Diritto allo Studio Universitario*) scholarship in **Italy** is a need-based grant available to both domestic and international students enrolled in Italian universities. The scholarship considers family income and assets to determine financial need and eligibility, based on a standardised Equivalent Economic Situation Indicator (ISEE). The application process is managed regionally, however, comprehensive information on eligibility conditions and application procedures for each region is provided centrally on a government website.

In **Lithuania**, need-based grants are administered centrally by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Sport to support domestic students in tertiary education. Grants are provided based on financial need, assessed through family income and other socio-economic factors. The full criteria for eligibility are provided on the State Study Fund website. Students may also apply for merit-based scholarships which are administered by individual institutions.

The Executive Education Agency of **the Netherlands** (*Dienst Uitvoering Onderwijs* - DUO) provides a clear set of rules for eligibility to basic and supplementary student finance, the amounts involved and a specification of the eligibility period for grants for each category of student and programme on its website, with an associated digital application service linked to citizens' digital identification profile for accessing public services.

Source: Ministry of Education, University and Research of Italy (n.d.[78]), Diritto allo studio [Right to education], http://www.dsu.miur.gov.it/#fourth (accessed on 16 July 2024); Ministries and institutions (n.d.[79]), VALSTYBINIS STUDIJŲ FONDAS [State Study Fund], https://vsf.lrv.lt/lt/ (accessed on 16 July 2024); DUO (n.d.[80]), Funding for school and studies, https://duo.nl/particulier/student-finance/ (accessed on 16 July 2024)

*Recommendation 5.2. Simplify and expand admissions routes into tertiary education*

Despite a decrease in student numbers in traditional upper secondary entry cohorts and one of the lowest tertiary attainment rates in the OECD, Romania has made little progress on increasing access for adults who are not making a direct transfer from upper secondary education but may wish to return to education later. The firm requirement for the baccalaureate for entrants of all ages closes off opportunity for a large share of adults to access tertiary education. At the same time, the decentralised application and admissions

process, combined with limited accessible comparative information on study choices, is difficult to navigate even for upper secondary applicants.

Romania should consider streamlining the current admissions process to make it easier for all applicants to navigate, while at the same time opening new admissions routes that serve a wider share of the adult population. Across OECD countries, carefully designed centralised application and admissions systems provide a rational, streamlined, equitable and transparent method for making admission decisions based on student's preferences and performance, and for reducing the administrative burden of individualised application and admission decisions (OECD, 2020[81]).

#### Improving information resources for students about study programmes

Currently, information on study programmes, admission criteria and available financial support is not always easily accessible. Notably, there appear to be more well-developed information products for foreign students wishing to study in Romania than domestic students. The Study in Romania website and mobile application provides a "one-stop" source of information on education programmes and supports for international students (Study In Romania, n.d.[82]). A similarly user-friendly information resource for domestic upper secondary students would help them navigate Romania's complex system of admissions and support their choice among available education options. Such systems are available in many OECD countries. For example, the Studykeuze123 platform in the Netherlands promotes transparency and supports student choice by providing comprehensive, objective information to prospective students about Dutch tertiary education, including study programmes, institutions, and student experiences.

#### Centralising the application and admission system

Romania is already deliberating the potential introduction of centralised admissions. A recent national ex-ante evaluation highlighted the importance of a fair, transparent system that recognises both achievements and potential of applicants. It noted the benefits such a system could bring to Romania and how the centralised admissions process at the upper secondary level and online admissions during the Covid pandemic laid the groundwork for further unification (UEFISCDI, 2022[24]) Given these benefits, Romania should progress the centralisation of the system as soon as possible. Potentially, such a system could be rolled out in stages, starting with institutions currently making decisions only based on the baccalaureate results and subsequently extending to include institution-specific requirements.

Some stakeholders in Romania have suggested that admissions should only be unified alongside a redesign of the baccalaureate exam, while others raised concerns about the potential negative impact of centralised admissions on universities' autonomy in student selection (UEFISCDI, 2022[24]). However, as shown in other OECD countries, progress on centralisation of admissions does not have to be tied to reform of upper secondary assessment - it is possible to make beneficial progress on both independently. As an example, the United Kingdom designed and introduced the "T-level" high school education tracks by creating an equivalent points system that aligned with the existing tertiary education admissions procedure. Conversely, Finland has recently simplified its admissions system by providing for most admissions to henceforth be based on national matriculation exam results, without making simultaneous reforms to its upper secondary assessment procedures.

Centralised admission processes can also still provide for flexibility and institutional autonomy by allowing positive weightings on baccalaureate subjects relevant to specific study domains or by considering other factors in the decision process. For example, Croatia's central admissions process allows TEIs to set individualised criteria for ranking applications to undergraduate programmes within a nationally set framework. The publication of decision criteria, applications and submission of supporting documents submitted through an online portal managed by the Croatian Agency for Science and Higher Education (Agency for Science and Higher Education, n.d.[83]). While the Croatian system is undoubtedly still complex, the centralised system promotes transparency and comparability of criteria for admissions across

education programmes. It also provides a basis for systemic analysis of how well applicant preferences match available educational opportunities, in turn providing evidence to support adjustment of educational offerings.

### Creating a specific entry mechanism for mature students

Even in countries with centralised admissions, supplementary admissions tracks are often organised alongside the centralised system to support equity or representativeness goals (Salmi and Sursock, 2020[84]). There are many options for designing such programmes and ensuring that they are integrated with wider policy objectives and initiatives.

As a first step that is aligned with its current policy framework, Romania could introduce a quota of state-funded places in tertiary education programmes specifically for adults, following the examples of Ireland and Spain, both of which require TEIs to reserve a share of state-funded places on undergraduate programmes for so-called "mature students" (OECD, 2022[85]). Romania could also go further and pilot the allocation of these places based on a wider set of admission requirements, relaxing the hard requirement for the baccalaureate in all cases. This is commonplace in many other OECD countries (see Box 5.2).

#### Box 5.2. Measures to improve adults' access to tertiary education in Ireland and Spain

In **Ireland,** each tertiary education institution is required to reserve a share of fee-free places for mature students (those aged over 23). The application process and entry requirements for mature students can differ from those of traditional students, based on the principle that life experience, work history, and other educational achievements can serve to prepare students for success in tertiary education as well as upper secondary results.

Unemployed adults in Ireland can maintain welfare payments if they enrol in tertiary education to obtain a first qualification through the mature student entry route. In addition, adults may apply for state-funded places in undergraduate and postgraduate programmes which lead to qualifications in areas of high labour market demand, through the Springboard+ programme. Springboard+ programmes may be offered on a full-time or part-time basis and are provided in-person, online or in hybrid form. They typically lead to the equivalent of ISCED 5, 6, or 7 qualifications, and are free for unemployed adults, with employed adults paying a small contribution to the cost (typically 10% of the fee).

**Spain's** policy for mature student access to tertiary education involves allowing adults aged 25 and over, who do not have the traditional secondary education qualifications, to enter university through specific entry exams designed to assess the knowledge gained from varied educational and professional experiences of mature students, providing a pathway for them to pursue tertiary education. TEIs in Spain are required to reserve 2% of their undergraduate places for students entering through this stream.

Source: Government of Ireland (2024[86]), Back to Education Allowance, https://www.gov.ie/en/service/418e3f-back-to-education-allowance/ (accessed on 17 July 2024); HEA (n.d.[87]), Springboard+, https://hea.ie/springboard/ (accessed on 17 July 2024); Government of Spain, (2024[88]), *Real Decreto 534/2024, de 11 de junio, por el que se regulan los requisitos de acceso a las enseñanzas universitarias oficiales de Grado, las características básicas de la prueba de acceso y la normativa básica de los procedimientos de admisión* [Royal Decree 534/2024, of 11 June, regulating the admission requirements for official Bachelor's degree university studies, the basic characteristics of the entrance exam, and the fundamental regulations of the admission procedures], https://www.boe.es/diario_boe/txt.php?id=BOE-A-2024-11858

An alternative to reserving a share of places across all TEIs is to develop specific education programmes for adults as part of active labour market measures, which are notably underdeveloped and under resourced in Romania (see Chapter 6) (OECD, 2025[89]; OECD, 2022[90]). For example, in Ireland, the

SpringBoard+ programme provides free or subsidised-tuition places to adults on tertiary education programmes in areas of designated skills shortage, promoting both adult participation in tertiary education and labour market relevance of tertiary education programmes (see Box 5.2).

### *Recommendation 5.3. Expand efforts to support tertiary provision outside of the main cities*

As discussed, universities located outside of Romania's largest cities, are likely to be more severely impacted by falling enrolments, which, without intervention, is likely to exacerbate already substantial attainment gaps between urban and rural areas. The stark rural-urban divide in attainment in Romania adds urgency to the need to create more opportunities for its rural population to access tertiary education in their local areas, or to attract more students from across the country to enrol in regional TEIs.

Many OECD countries are grappling with this challenge of regional imbalance. Their experience shows that TEIs in less urbanised locations need tailored strategies that can counteract dwindling local populations, concentrate expertise and create the dynamism needed to attract talent from major cities (OECD, 2007[91]). The government's plans to develop 29 regional campuses that will co-locate vocational dual education at secondary, post-secondary, and tertiary level indicate a step in this direction (see Chapter 4). However, these campuses alone may not build the critical mass needed to address the regional disparities Romania faces. The following outlines two additional actions that Romania could take to achieve greater accessibility and spatial balance in its tertiary education system – incentivising students to enrol in rural areas and making more comprehensive use of digitalisation to support rural provision.

#### Introducing targeted financial incentives for students to enrol in regional institutions

Some OECD countries have attempted to expand initiatives in remote and regional locations using incentive schemes for students or TEIs that aim to counterweight the "magnet" effect of urban areas. Romania could similarly design a financial incentive scheme specifically targeted towards increasing enrolment in designated TEIs in regional and small urban areas. Financial incentives targeting students, such as the provision of special grants for those electing to move to rural areas to study, have been successfully introduced in some other OECD countries. For example, the *Mais Superior* (+Superior) grant in Portugal aims to improve territorial cohesion in the tertiary education system by awarding grants to eligible students who enrol in designated TEIs in regional locations, and who are not resident in the local area. The grant is integrated with the wider public grant system and prioritised towards low-income students. While the impact of the grant has not been independently evaluated, national statistics show that the grant programme was oversubscribed in every region and that almost 80% of students who obtained a grant when the programme started in 2014/15, renewed the grant in the following year (DGES, 2024[92]; OECD, 2022[31]). Romania could consider introducing a similar scholarship scheme for students, either integrated into a newly centralised scholarship system (as discussed in the previous section), or as a separate scheme in a similar style to the scholarship system operated by the Romanian government for foreign students.

#### Enhancing rural and regional access through the use of digitalisation

Across OECD countries, there is a growing recognition of the new opportunities provided by digitalisation to engage students in rural and remote areas. Romania should explore possibilities to use the increased digital capacity developed through its NRRP projects to develop innovative ways to provide supported remote access to tertiary education programmes. This could be progressed through students enrolling on fully online programmes, or through hybrid means where students first complete a period of remote study and then progress to in-person study at a TEI campus.

Several OECD countries have successfully rolled out initiatives that combine online access with on-site academic support in specialised learning centres, located in regional locations with traditionally lower

participation in tertiary education. For example, the "*Campus Connectés*" programme in France has established learning centres in various remote and rural locations, providing students in these areas with remote access to tertiary education, digital resources and academic support services (Ministry of National Education and Youth of France, n.d.[93]). These centres help to overcome many of the key challenges faced by learners in areas with limited physical access to education, including the need for technical assistance, support in developing digital skills, and lack of a sense of community and social interaction that often characterises fully online settings.

### *Quality of programmes and outcomes: Developing an enhancement-oriented approach to quality assurance, based on clear differentiation of institutions*

Romania faces relatively pressing quality challenges within its tertiary education system, as evidenced by high dropout rates, its limited appeal to international students and education programmes that are neither research-informed nor greatly aligned to labour market needs. Efforts to improve quality are ongoing, evidenced in particular by continuous improvement of the capacity for external quality assurance system, and the methods applied. The most recent updates to the methodology in 2024, although not yet implemented in practice, appear clearly targeted towards supporting a more differentiated approach to external quality assurance processes.

Looking forward, Romania's efforts to improve the quality and outcomes of education programmes could be further supported by setting a clearer national vision for the system that distinguishes TEIs horizontally (by mission and orientation) and vertically (by performance across different domains). These distinctions would create the basis for a more strategic approach to quality assurance and enhancement, one that is more focused on development and that allows more of ARACIS's resources to be channelled towards capacity-building and supporting innovative practices in TEIs.

**Figure 5.16. Recommendations and actions on quality of programmes and outcomes in tertiary education**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Quality | 5.4 Establish clear national frameworks for the horizontal and vertical differentiation of Romanian TEIs | • More clearly classifying TEIs by type and function, based on a national vision.<br>• Adopting a national framework to define institutional quality and prestige. |
| | 5.5 Develop a more flexible and targeted strategy for external quality assurance in tertiary education | • Reallocating quality assurance resources to better support quality enhancement and capacity building.<br>• Rewarding the highest performing institutions with flexibility to innovate on programme design and structure. |

*Recommendation 5.4. Establish clear national frameworks for the horizontal and vertical differentiation of Romanian TEIs*

Despite existing variation by field of specialisation and public/private status, there is currently no formal framework to differentiate institutions by type, function, or quality. The government has taken steps in this direction by proposing a typology of three institutional categories and by piloting a methodology to classify institutions by their specialisation and level of activity across various domains. However, this framework has not yet been formally adopted or used to guide processes such as external quality assurance, funding, or statistical reporting. Similarly, attempts to establish a clearer vertical differentiation based on institutional quality and prestige have yet to produce a clear outcome. A well-defined and widely endorsed framework to differentiate tertiary education institutions—both horizontally, by institutional type, and vertically, by quality and prestige—could help simplify and strengthen key policy processes, including funding allocation

quality assurance, and access policies. It could also support more informed choices by students and academic staff.

### More clearly classifying TEIs by type and function, based on a national vision

As noted, Romania's efforts to horizontally classify institutions based on existing activities have resulted in complex categorisations that do not serve national needs. The reverse of this process is the more common approach in OECD countries – the government, in consultation with stakeholders, sets a vision for the institutional landscape and profiles that will best serve the country's current and future needs, and seeks, using policy instruments, to steer the TEIs activities to support that vision.

Based on a wide consultation of stakeholders (including representatives from business and society students and academic staff as well as TEI leaders), the Romanian Ministry should prepare a vision for the horizontal classification of institutions that will best serve national aims, taking account of international best practice. The resulting classification should meet the criterion of being a useful means to differentiate and simplify key policy processes related to tertiary education, including but not limited to quality assurance, funding and access policies.

Most OECD systems have designated horizontal subgroupings to support profiling and differentiation of their TEIs. Classification may be based on the ISCED level of degree programmes offered, as the case for the Carnegie Classification used in the United States. It may also be based on the extent to which the institution offers professional or vocational education, which is used, for example to distinguish universities from professionally oriented TEIs in countries such as Netherlands, Austria, Czechia and Poland. A widely endorsed horizontal classification could also promote the formation of TEI representative bodies organised along sectoral lines (as for example, Universities Austria and the Austrian Association of Universities of Applied Sciences) potentially streamlining Romania's fragmented university consortia and increasing their influence on policy.

### Adopting a national framework to define institutional quality and prestige

Romanian authorities could consolidate the fragmented and complex information on TEI quality and performance generated from, for example, performance indicators used in funding calculations, the results of quality assurance assessments, and national metaranking. This could be achieved by establishing a framework for understanding quality and publish it in a way that enhances visibility, accessibility, and clarity – for example, in a user-friendly digital portal. Providing accessible means to differentiate institutions on different dimensions of performance and quality would offer numerous benefits. For example, it could inform the decisions of national or international prospective students and academic staff, inspire research on the system, help boost the reputation of institutions, and justify more targeted approaches to quality assurance (as discussed in the next section).

The Bulgarian University Ranking System (BURS) provides an illustrative example of what can be achieved in terms of accessible and transparent presentation of comparative institution data. Comparative performance indicators, and their evolution over time, are presented together with information on the institutions' education offer and the performance rating of institutions from external quality evaluations, providing a rich and detailed view of performance across different dimensions (Ministry of Education and Science of Bulgaria, n.d.[94]). Romania could work towards providing a similarly accessible view of institution performance that is clearly endorsed by policymakers and demonstrably aligned with systemic priorities, that can effectively enhance capacity for comparative evaluation, peer learning and public trust.

*Recommendation 5.5. Develop a more flexible and targeted strategy for external quality assurance in tertiary education*

In the light of recent high-profile quality concerns, it is important that ARACIS is rigorous and visible in its external quality assurance activities and that ARACIS' activities support confidence-building in the system. The introduction of a new model for the reaccreditation of doctoral training providers was an important step in this regard, given the recent public focus on ethical lapses which had substantially discredited doctoral education in the country. The new model, based on a simplified set of indicators, appears to have received a positive reception within the system and was also praised in a recent external review of ARACIS by ENQA. The ENQA review of ARACIS also noted that internal quality assurance mechanisms in Romania are progressing, which provides some scope for ARACIS to streamline quality assurance processes, including reducing the number of indicators used in accreditation processes and continuously reviewing their fitness for purpose (ENQA, 2023[45]). Accordingly, Romania has recently moved to reduce the number of indicators used in institution and programme level evaluation (Government of Romania, 2024[43]).

**Reallocating quality assurance resources to better support quality enhancement and capacity building**

Moving towards a more enhancement-oriented model should enable ARACIS to devote more resources to research and meta-level synthesis of evidence on different aspects of quality. This approach should also allow greater attention by ARACIS to capacity-building activities within TEIs, such as enhancing strategic leadership, renewing curricula, and promoting staff development—areas where support is critically needed in many Romanian institutions.

Transitioning to an enhancement-oriented approach requires a fundamental shift in the current quality assurance framework. It would require ARACIS to develop a methodology for concentrating external evaluation and accreditation activities in institutions, programmes or study domains judged most in need of improvements, freeing up resources for enhancement-based activities. A clear and accessible national framework of institution classifications and performance assessments would help provide a legitimate basis for a differentiated, risk-based approach. However, it is also possible to achieve the pivot towards enhancement in other ways. Norway's approach to quality assurance provides an inspiring model built on quality improvement principles rather than compliance-based quality assurance (see Box 5.3).

### Box 5.3. An adaptive and targeted model of external quality assurance in Norway

The Norwegian model of external quality assurance provides an example of an approach that is designed to be flexible and adaptive to different institution contexts, while maintaining robustness and providing unparalleled transparency. External Quality Assurance is managed by the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT). NOKUT's procedures and practices indicate many of the hallmarks of an agency that has transitioned its focus on enhancement and improvement rather than a rigid standards-based approach.

- Both institution and programme accreditation exist – however responsibility for accrediting programmes is differentiated according to the nationally recognised categories of institutions. Comprehensive universities have the right to self-accredit all types of programmes, while specialised institutions have the right to self-accredit programmes within their discipline of specialisation. University colleges may have authorisation to self-accredit, or not (in the latter case NOKUT accredits their programmes).

- The right to self-accreditation of programmes is not granted for a fixed period – instead it is granted unless there is a specific revocation of the right by NOKUT, following an audit of an institutions' internal quality assurance system.
- NOKUT and the external experts focus their efforts on advising institutions on how to further develop their quality assurance practices.
- The regulations governing NOKUT's supervisory activities have recently been updated, based on the principle that supervisory processes should inspire the institutions to re-think existing practices and to try out new ideas, so that quality assurance activities can stimulate quality enhancement.

The most recent round of institutional audits, carried out between 2018 and 2024 have used a concept of "audit heats". In a typical audit heat, institutions with similar contexts or circumstances are grouped together (for example, institutions offering education within the same disciplines, institutions that have recently merged, or institutions with regional campuses). Institutions involved in the same audit heat are encourages to share and discuss internal quality assurance practices before and after their audits take place. The intention is for the grouped institutions to be encouraged to develop more long-standing contacts and collaborative activities.

NOKUT is also notable for its publication of thematic and discipline-specific educational quality reports which provide research-informed views on the extent of development of different aspects of quality (for example, improving work placements, or the experiences of first-year students) and recommendations for further development of disciplines (for example, teacher education or economics). These research reports often integrate insights from the annual Student Survey (*Studiebarometer*) and the periodic higher education Teacher Survey.

Source: ENQA (2019[95]), A brief description of the quality assurance system in Norway, https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/NOKUT.pdf; NOKUT (n.d[96]), Quality assurance and enhancement, https://www.nokut.no/en/quality-enhancement/ (accessed on 26 July 2024).

**Rewarding the highest performing institutions with flexibility to innovate on programme design and structure**

Across countries, the length and complexity of accreditation processes for tertiary education programmes is often cited as a contributor to the inflexibility of curricula and a barrier to innovation in tertiary education programme design (Duarte and Vascarda, 2023[97]; Phillips and Kinser, 2018[98]). If a clear framework for identifying high-performing institutions were established (as discussed in the previous section), the Ministry of Education and ARACIS could consider adapting or relaxing some accreditation processes for top-performing TEIs to support innovation of curricula and programme design. This would enable high-performing institutions to design and pilot education offerings that are not yet referenced in current qualification frameworks or where external quality assurance standards are not yet defined or lie outside of government-designated enrolment quotas (e.g. micro-credentials, or programmes in an emerging or frontier discipline that may not yet be recognised within the national system of disciplinary quotas). Such flexibility could stimulate the diversification of Romania's tertiary education system, which, as noted, remains heavily reliant on traditional full-time, theoretical, campus-based degree programmes.

### *Good governance: Strengthening governance to progress all three missions of tertiary education*

In a well-functioning tertiary education system, institutions have clear and differentiated missions encompassing education, research, and societal engagement, while strong governance ensures their

accountability and supports continuous improvement of their capacities. Romania's tertiary education system has traditionally been heavily oriented towards education, with comparatively low research activity and limited engagement with business and society. Efforts to strengthen research and engagement as well as improve the labour market relevance of education are hampered by lack of investment, but also by weak institutional governance and a complex, fragmented, overly procedural approach to strategy and policy development.

As discussed in the previous section, reforms to quality assurance and greater differentiation of TEIs can provide a stronger basis for identifying and addressing weaknesses in internal institutional capacity. However, the Ministry should also seek to build its own capacity for governance, making better use of the policy levers at its disposal to steer TEIs towards system priorities. This section offers recommendations for Romania to consider that can support better governance and steering at policy level. They include rethinking the existing funding mechanism for TEIs, which is overengineered and not supporting institutional improvement as well as it might. Romania would also benefit from greater leadership and clarity from the Ministry on the development of professionally oriented post-secondary education, which is a top strategic priority but where implementation to date has been fragmented, with different reforms and initiatives lacking cohesion. Finally, the Ministry should take additional action to identify and act against risks to integrity.

## Figure 5.17. Recommendations and actions on good governance in tertiary education

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Governance | 5.6 Rebalance funding to better support TEI development | • Revising the current performance funding algorithm to promote greater stability.<br>• Reallocating a greater share of funding to institutional development. |
| | 5.7 Clarify Romania's vision for professional tertiary education | • Establishing a national framework to secure employer engagement in dual education.<br>• Clarifying Romania's vision for the development of mid-level postsecondary qualifications. |
| | 5.8 Take action to promote trust and confidence in the tertiary education system | • Prioritising an integrity review of the tertiary education system.<br>• Promoting the renewal of leadership in TEIs. |

### *Recommendation 5.6. Rebalance funding to better support TEI development*

Considering the funding gaps in lower education levels, prioritising substantial public spending for tertiary education is politically challenging. The most realistic short-term approach is to incrementally increase public funding for education and research as the budget allows, while raising income and stimulating investment from other sources. The changes proposed above to tuition fees and scholarships represent an important part of this strategy. Recent public funding through the Ministry of Education specifically for research and its efforts to build institutional capacity for accessing EU funds are likewise positive steps towards a more strategic approach to funding. However, as we examine below, Romania could also benefit from reflecting on the efficiency and effectiveness of its main funding model for TEIs, particularly the balance of emphasis between rewarding performance and supporting institution development.

#### Revising the current performance funding algorithm to promote greater stability

As discussed, a substantial share of Romanian TEIs' budgets depends on performance-related funding, yet the indicators and weightings used for its calculation are complex, not clearly substantiated and can lead to year-on-year instability in funding allocations. International research indicates that on balance there is limited positive benefit to allocating a minority share of funding using a wide set of complicated parameters – the practice limits widespread understanding of the model, increases administrative burden on TEIs and its effectiveness over a simpler model in terms of improving performance is questionable (OECD, 2022[31]).

The Ministry and CNFIS should seek to revise the current performance funding model for TEIs, with a view to simplifying the calculation methodology, better promoting stability of funding and providing clearer articulation of how the indicators and weightings used align with current reform efforts. The revision could also consider current and emerging best practice in other countries in relation to performance indicators used to allocate funding. Some countries, for example Denmark, have recently adjusted the share of variable formula funding downwards to ensure greater stability, while others build in contingency measures so that funding reductions remain with a fixed range compared to previous years (OECD, 2022[31]).

### Reallocating a greater share of funding to institutional development

In Romania, the government's stated priority of strengthening internal institution governance and effectiveness should be reflected in funding policy levers that prioritise building capacity in all TEIs over consistently and substantially rewarding a small share of high performers. The 1.5% of the funding pool allocated to the institutional development fund appears to be the primary mechanism for advancing numerous strategic objectives. Moreover, since this fund is awarded competitively, TEIs are not guaranteed to receive any financial support for improvement, limiting their ability to address and enhance specific areas of performance.

Providing consistent opportunities for lower-capacity institutions to strengthen their governance is likely to lead to systemic improvement over time. Romania could reallocate a sizeable share of its current performance-based fund towards institution development and prioritise the allocation of the newly increased fund in ways that can support all institutions. Countries across the OECD do this in two distinct ways, both of which Romania could consider. One approach is to "top slice" a share of the funding pot to promote knowledge building and sharing across the system on the highest strategic priorities, such as improving teaching and learning. For example, Ireland funds a National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, which provides a focal point for TEIs to collaborate on developing knowledge and learning material on best teaching practices for the benefit of the entire sector (HEA, n.d.[99]).

A second common approach is to allocate strategic funding to all institutions, negotiated between the Ministry and individual TEIs based on institutional development plans. OECD research indicates that providing institutions with a budget envelope of around 5% of core funding for their strategic development can have positive effects, although variations may be required depending on institution context. An emerging practice in some European systems is to integrate development funding into sectoral or (more relevant in Romania's case) institution funding contracts containing individualised objectives for improvement (see Box 5.4).

### Box 5.4. Supporting TEIs' improvement through individualised institution contracts

OECD countries are increasingly using institution-based performance agreements to strategically allocate funding, targeting specific objectives established between the government and individual institution, based on the institution's context, profile and needs for performance improvements. The following table shows key design features of the performance contracts used in Finland, the Netherlands and Ireland.

| | Finland | Ireland | The Netherlands |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Name** | "Performance Agreements" | Mission-based performance compacts | "Quality agreements" |
| **Duration of agreements** | 4 years<br>2021-24 | 3 years<br>September 2018 to September 2021* | 6 years<br>2019-24 |
| **Coverage of institutional activities** | All missions | All missions | Specific to the education mission (6 education quality themes) |
| **Self-assessment, profile and specialisation** | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| **Targets and indicators** | Institution-specific - Agreed in negotiation with government | Institution-specific – Validated when compact initially approved | Institution-specific – Validated when agreement initially approved |
| **Initial evaluation and approval of agreements** | By Ministry of Education and Culture | By Higher Education Authority with input from international experts | By the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) |
| **Annual monitoring** | Yes – report and dialogue with Ministry of Education and Culture | Yes – report and dialogue with Higher Education Authority | Annual reports submitted by institutions to Ministry |
| **Evaluation of final results** | Through institutional reports and dialogue with Ministry of Education and Culture | Through institutional reports, performance case studies and evaluation by Higher Education Authority and international experts | By the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) |
| **Link to funding** | Funding allocations from formula and specific allocations are included in the agreement, but there are no direct financial consequences of non-achievement of goals in the agreements | Between 3% and 5% of institutional core funding can theoretically be withheld in cases of (very) poor performance<br>Modest additional payments for good performance case studies | An additional EUR 2.37 billion for the six financial years 2019-24 for the university and university of applied science sectors (= around 3% of HE education budget).<br>Possibility for Minister to withhold payment if progress considered (very) unsatisfactory |

Source: OECD (2022[31]), *Resourcing Higher Education in Portugal*, Higher Education, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/a91a175e-en.

*Recommendation 5.7. Clarify Romania's vision for professional tertiary education*

The most ambitious reform currently planned in Romania regarding work-based learning in tertiary education is dual education, which would see employers and TEIs collaborating on the development of degree-length programmes. The dual education model, properly designed and implemented, has been shown to be highly effective, for example, leading to accelerated career advancement in Germany and enhancing productivity and increasing social mobility in the United Kingdom (Kocsis and Pusztai, 2021[100]) (Nawaz et al., 2022[101]). Romania's drive to introduce dual education is, therefore, a positive development and OECD reviewers noted enthusiasm and willingness to engage in dual education among institution representatives.

However, as international research shows, securing employer engagement even on a shorter-term basis to collaborate on work-based learning can be a challenge. Developing degree-length dual education will require concerted effort on the part of the government to properly incentivise the long-term engagement of employers in the process. The rollout of dual education also coincides with Romania making provision for the rollout of short-cycle tertiary education programmes at ISCED 5 and with the relatively recent introduction of mid-level vocational education located on university campuses. In light of these developments, Romania would benefit from developing a more coherent and integrated strategy for professional education, with a clear delineation of provider profiles and a robust framework for the employer engagement crucial to the system's success.

### Establishing a national framework to secure employer engagement in dual education

The Ministerial Order on the functioning of dual education outlines some incentives for participating employers, such as tax incentives (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2024[102]). Local and regional partnerships, which Romania pursues, are also recognised in other countries as an effective way to engage employers in developing education that meets community requirements. Individual TEIs, particularly those leading the development of tertiary dual programmes, can also establish cooperative structures to engage employers in the design and funding of these programmes.

However, while individual TEIs can make significant progress in coordinating employer engagement, this approach is particularly relevant for larger TEIs that have more resources and established networks. Furthermore, given Romania's existing challenges with employer engagement in tertiary education provision and the greater commitment required for dual education, a more comprehensive national policy framework may be needed to secure sustained employer engagement in the development of individual education programmes. A national framework would help to ensure coherent engagement industry partners across the country and benefit the full range of providers. This could involve creating regional and/or sectoral platforms where industry partners can engage with the development of training and skills across the provider landscape, including VET high schools, tertiary institutions, colleges, and other non-tertiary providers.

Other OECD countries have progressed a systemic framework for employer engagement through the establishment of nationally recognised cooperative structures with a clear and distinguishable identity, along with a well-defined mandate, supporting a nationally cohesive approach. The South Korean government, for example, has taken a distinctive approach to stimulating private investment and collaboration with tertiary education, through the creation of Industry-Academia Cooperation Foundations (OECD, 2023[103]; OECD, 2023[104]). These are dedicated entities within universities that facilitate and manage collaboration with industries. Foundations play a key coordinating role in facilitating research collaboration in universities, but also play a role in curriculum development, ensuring that university programmes remain relevant to current industry needs, and facilitating internship and training opportunities for students in partner industries.

### Clarifying Romania's vision for the development of mid-level post-secondary qualifications

Romania's plans to introduce short-cycle tertiary education (ISCED 5) are a positive development. Across the OECD, more than 20 countries have introduced some form of ISCED 5 education, with the average share of entrants to short-cycle education in 2022 reaching 19% (OECD, 2022[15]). Short-cycle tertiary education has been shown to provide realistic and aligned education opportunities for students coming from vocational and technical upper secondary education and potential alternative pathways to graduation for students who might otherwise drop out. Meanwhile, other mid-level qualifications have also been recently introduced in Romania to support vocational upper secondary students seeking applied programmes for the labour market. These come in the form of non-university tertiary education (ISCED 4)

provided by colleges located within accredited TEIs, in addition to the already existing post-secondary non-tertiary providers.

However, limited clarity among stakeholders was encountered as to the intended future development of programmes at ISCED 4 and 5, and their linkage with other forms of provision and policy objectives. The absence of an integrated national strategy might lead to an increasingly fragmented landscape of provision and providers of mid-level qualifications. The Romanian government should develop a clearer vision and operational plan for the development of programmes leading to mid-level qualifications in consultation with relevant stakeholders. Recent OECD research highlights the key considerations to be taken into account when developing a strategy for higher vocational and professional tertiary education programmes. These include: providing a diverse offer of programmes (which can include programmes offered at different levels or fulfilling different functions); making programmes relevant by building in strong linkages with employers and work-based learning; ensuring post-secondary VET teachers have the right skills and training, and taking steps to ensure smooth transitions in and out of the programmes (OECD, 2023[105]).

### *Recommendation 5.8. Take action to promote trust and confidence in the tertiary education system*

As noted, various high-profile integrity violations and concerns continue to affect the Romanian tertiary education system, generating negative public and international attention and eroding trust in the system. While ethical issues arise in all tertiary education systems, what sets systems apart is the extent and visibility of their commitment to proactively identifying risks, addressing breaches and ensuring accountability. Although steps have been taken to improve the ethical climate in Romanian TEIs, without further action the reputational damage to Romanian tertiary education will likely persist, stifling progress, and penalising TEIs that have reformed and modernised their practices. Additional actions for Romanian authorities to consider in the short term are provided below.

#### Prioritising an integrity review of the tertiary education system

A recent OECD public governance review of integrity in Romania highlighted that despite progress, many concerns remain about potential risks for integrity violations in the tertiary education system, though, for example, academic inbreeding, influence trading, and lack of transparency in admissions (OECD, 2023[106]). The report recommends carrying out robust diagnosis of integrity risk in the education sector, covering risks of corruption, clientelism and conflicts of interest. Such a review would enable a thorough comparison of current national policymaking and stakeholder engagement norms in Romania's tertiary education system, along with internal governance in TEIs, against best practice across peer countries. It would highlight areas and institutions that have progressed (of which there are many examples) and provide a foundation for an action plan to address remaining integrity risks, helping to build trust and confidence in the system. Considering the continued concerns highlighted in this review about integrity, limited institutional capacity and concentration of leadership within some TEIs, Romania should take forward this recommendation as soon as possible.

#### Promoting the renewal of leadership in TEIs

Romania should also move quickly to address the issue of rectors serving more than two terms of office. While technically legal, this practice goes against the spirit and intention of setting term limits in the law, and, as long as it continues, will continue to carry with it the perception of unchecked power and resistance to change in the institutions concerned. Public authorities should prioritise policies that promote the renewal and wider distribution of academic leadership within TEIs. Ideally this could be achieved through finding a legislative solution to the term limit loophole. Alternatively, or additionally, Romania could find ways to recognise and reward institutions that exemplify best practice in this regard – for example by

prioritising institutions with more dynamic approaches to leadership and management for project-based public funding or collecting and publicising comparative data on TEI leadership renewal.

### Figure 5.18. Summary of recommendations and actions on tertiary education

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Equality | 5.1 Prioritise need, clarity and consistency in the allocation of public financial support for students, including funded study places | • Striking a better balance between merit and need in tuition fee policy while working to introduce a public grant system for tuition.<br>• Developing a nationally consistent, transparent approach to the allocation of scholarships. |
| | 5.2 Simplify and expand admission routes into tertiary education | • Improving information resources for students about study programmes.<br>• Centralising the application and admission system.<br>• Creating a specific entry mechanism for mature students. |
| | 5.3. Expand efforts to support tertiary provision outside of the main cities | • Introducing targeted financial incentives for students to enrol in regional institutions.<br>• Enhancing rural and regional access through the use of digitalisation. |
| Quality | 5.4 Establish clear national frameworks for the horizontal and vertical differentiation of Romanian TEIs | • More clearly classifying TEIs by type and function, based on a national vision.<br>• Adopting a national framework to define institutional quality and prestige. |
| | 5.5 Develop a more flexible and targeted strategy for external quality assurance in tertiary education | • Reallocating quality assurance resources to better support quality enhancement and capacity building.<br>• Rewarding the highest performing institutions with flexibility to innovate on programme design and structure. |
| Governance | 5.6 Rebalance funding to better support TEI development | • Revising the current performance funding algorithm to promote greater stability.<br>• Reallocating a greater share of funding to institutional development. |
| | 5.7 Clarify Romania's vision for professional tertiary education | • Establishing a national framework to secure employer engagement in dual education.<br>• Clarifying Romania's vision for the development of mid-level postsecondary qualifications. |
| | 5.8 Take action to promote trust and confidence in the tertiary education system | • Prioritising an integrity review of the tertiary education system.<br>• Promoting the renewal of leadership in TEIs. |

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## Notes

[1] A collapse in enrolments between 2009 and 2013 can be mainly explained by the demographic transition (Usher and Williams, 2022[13]). However, quality assurance difficulties in the private higher education sector also contributed to the decline.

[2] National currency values have been converted using purchasing power parity (PPP) rates.

[3] Estimates of the size and relative proportion of the Roma population in European countries are subject to substantial variability, due to the difficulties of accurately enumerating the group (Rutigliano and Cerna, 2020[74]).

# 6 Skills: Building the workforce for a modernising economy

Romania's strong economic performance offers a timely opportunity to build a more inclusive and relevant skills system. As the country faces demographic decline and evolving labour market demands, expanding access to quality reskilling and upskilling initiatives will be critical to sustaining productivity and long-term growth. This chapter focuses primarily on skills developed outside the formal education system or beyond upper secondary education. It proposes measures to help more adults acquire the basic and technical skills needed to integrate into the labour market and advance in their careers. It underscores how stronger employer engagement, wider validation services, and improved outreach can make adult learning more accessible and appealing for disadvantaged groups. The chapter also emphasises the need for stronger whole-of government coordination and evidence-based policymaking to guide coherent and effective adult learning policies.

Romania has achieved remarkable economic growth and is rapidly transitioning towards a more sophisticated, service-based economy. However, Romania's labour market is facing twin pressures that will need to be addressed if this progress is to be sustained. While demographic decline and an ageing population are common across OECD countries, Romania has experienced a particularly sharp decline in its working-age population over the past decades, largely driven by high emigration. Meanwhile, working-age individuals often lack relevant skills, and adult participation in education and training is low, especially among adults with lower levels of education and living in the country's economically lagging rural regions.

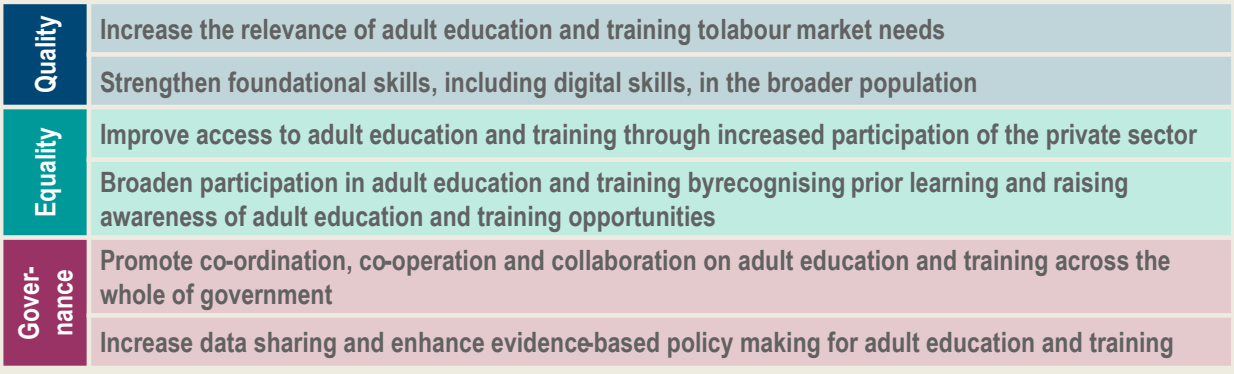
To address these challenges, Romania is taking steps to expand coverage and demand for upskilling and reskilling programmes. The government has set goals to double participation in adult education and training by 2027, and has introduced measures, supported by substantial EU funding, to personalise activation services, raise awareness and expand adult learning opportunities, including on foundational, entrepreneurial, and digital skills. Romania has also streamlined skills anticipation data collection, analysis, and reporting, to better anticipate and meet evolving skills needs.

This chapter examines how Romania can build on its ongoing efforts to enhance the quality and reach of adult learning programmes. It focuses primarily on skills developed outside the formal education system or after upper secondary education, while Chapters 3-5 cover skills outcomes and policies earlier in life.

## Chapter 6 at a Glance

- **Section I:** Provides an overview of Romania's skills sector, focusing on how policies compare internationally.
- **Section II:** Compares the sector's performance with OECD benchmarks on international indicators.
- **Section III:** Provides recommendations on how Romania can learn from OECD evidence and experience to further improve the upskilling and reskilling of its adult population.

### Figure 6.1. Recommendations on skills



## Section I: Overview of the skills system in Romania

### *Governance and structure of the skills system*

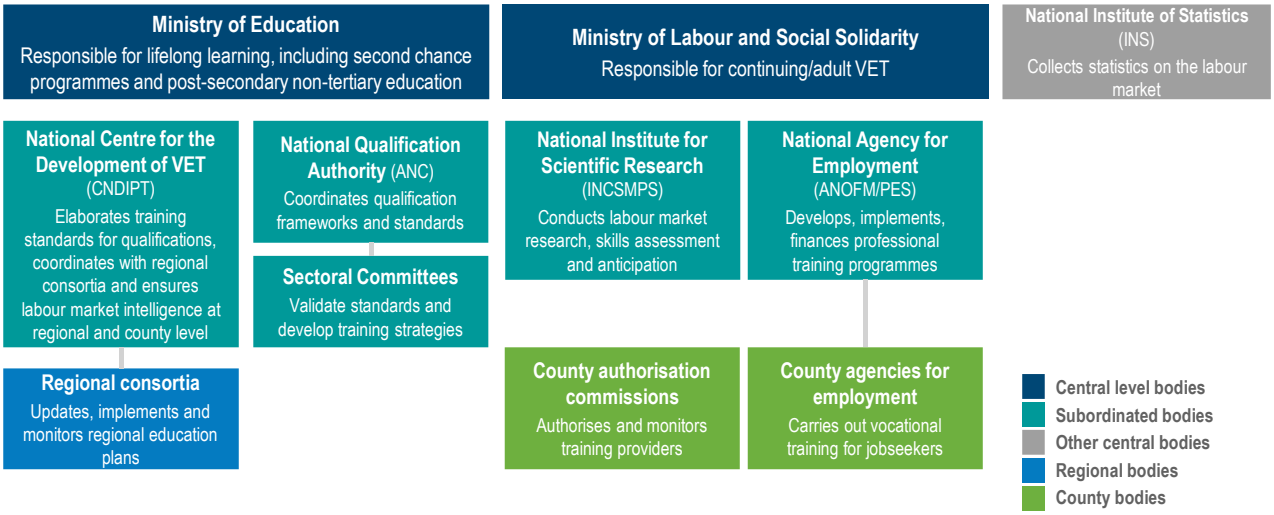
*Responsibilities for skills development are split between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity and several subsidiary bodies*

In Romania, like in many OECD countries, responsibilities for skills development are primarily divided between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity (hereafter Ministry of Labour), with the support of several specialised bodies (see Figure 6.2).

The Ministry of Education has the main responsibility for second chance education (ISCED 1-3), post-secondary non-tertiary education (ISCED 4) provided in colleges and technological upper secondary schools, and adult learning delivered in tertiary education institutions. Its subsidiary bodies play important roles in developing qualification frameworks and recognising non-formal and informal learning. They help coordinate the quality assurance system, validate occupational and professional training standards, and participate in developing national and sectoral strategies for professional training.

The Ministry of Labour focuses on adult vocational training, work-based and apprenticeship training. It authorises and monitors adult vocational training providers outside of the education system. It also oversees two specialised bodies that deliver labour market measures (e.g. employment subsidies, training, job-search assistance) and produce research on the labour market.

**Figure 6.2. Responsibilities for adult learning are primarily split between the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity**




Source: Ministry of Education of Romania (2023[1]), *Accession candidate country's self-assessment of policies and practices in the area of education and skills: Guidelines and questionnaire Romania.*

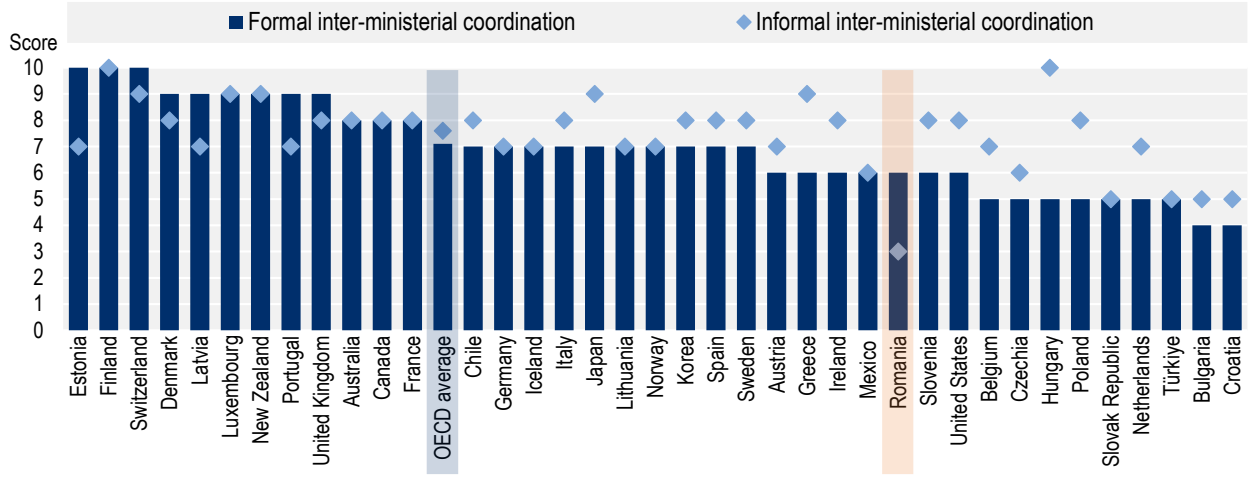
*Inter-ministerial coordination has been weak, but efforts to strengthen governance are underway*

Most OECD countries have governance arrangements similar to Romania, in that ministries of education and labour (or their equivalents) share responsibilities for skills policy. However, in Romania, coordination between ministries appears to be relatively weak, leading in some instances to duplication of work and fragmented policy interventions (see Figure 6.3). For instance, the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of

Education have developed separate strategies, regarding adult training and adult education respectively. These strategies are presented as complementary, but they lay out similar objectives, such as improving adults' digital skills, and enhancing the flexibility of qualification routes, and each set different timeframes. The Ministry of Education's strategy covers 2024-2030, whereas the Ministry of Labour's strategy spans 2024-2027. These discrepancies and overlap may lead to confusion and prevent stakeholders from focusing on priority goals.

### Figure 6.3. Inter-ministerial coordination in Romania could be strengthened

Formal and informal inter-ministerial coordination, 2022




Note: Formal coordination refers to scores that countries are assigned on the question, "How effectively do ministry officials/civil servants coordinate policy proposals?" Informal coordination refers to scores that countries are assigned on the question, "How effectively do informal coordination mechanisms complement formal mechanisms of inter-ministerial coordination?" Scores range from 1 to 10. The higher the score, the better the country's performance. Scores are assigned by country and sector experts and reviewed and approved by scholars and practitioners. *Ranked in descending order by formal inter-ministerial coordination.*
Source: OECD (2023[2]), *OECD Skills Strategy Ireland: Assessment and Recommendations*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/d7b8b40b-en.

In light of these challenges, Romania has been taking steps to improve inter-ministerial collaboration, especially in data collection, analysis, and use. The EU-funded ReCONECT project is developing an integrated data platform to help anticipate skills needs, monitor graduate transitions, and evaluate vocational education and training policies. Romania has also adopted a National Implementation Plan for Initial and Continuous Vocational Education and Training (2021-2027). This outlines detailed measures and assigns clear responsibilities for implementing change, including establishing a technical group to coordinate implementation comprised of representatives from the different ministries and bodies involved in vocational education and training (VET). These measures are important for Romania to develop a more unified and strategic vision for adult learning and address skills shortages and mismatches in a context of rapid demographic decline (see Box 6.1).

### Box 6.1. Despite strong economic growth, rapid population decline, and high emigration have led to a shrinking labour force and skills shortages

Romania has experienced remarkable economic growth over the last decades. The country's GDP per capita has increased rapidly, converging towards the OECD average. While the economy is still characterised by relatively large agriculture and manufacturing sectors, services are growing quickly (see Chapter 2). However, Romania has a small labour force and is experiencing skills shortages, two significant challenges for its productivity and economic growth. Workers in Romania have on average, working lives that are nearly five years shorter than the EU average (32 years in Romania in 2023, compared to 37 in the EU). This is reflected in the relatively low share of employed youth (19% of 15–24-year-olds) and older adults (51% of 55-6- year-olds), around 20 and 10 percentage points below the OECD average, respectively. Combined with an ageing population and one of the highest rates of brain drain globally, this has led to a tightening labour market (see Chapter 2). Employers are now reporting skills shortages in high growing sectors such as transportation and storage, information and communications technology (ICT), and manufacturing, as well as in slower growing sectors like education, human health and social work activities. Recent legislative changes aim to extend working lives and address labour shortages through measures such as raising the retirement age for women from 63 to 65 by 2035 and allowing pensioners to continue working beyond the standard retirement age with their employer's approval.

Sources: OECD (2024[3]), *OECD Economic Surveys: Romania 2024*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/106b32c4-en; OECD, (2022[4]) *OECD Economic Surveys: Romania 2022,* OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/e2174606-en; Ministry of Labour and Social Justice of Romania (2019[5]), Măsuri pentru sprijinirea îmbunătățirii calității și relevanței formării competențelor [Measures to support quality improvement and relevance of skills training], https://www.mmuncii.ro/j33/images/Documente/MMPS/Rapoarte_si_studii_MMPS/DPOCM/2019_-_Agenda_pentru_competene_ROMNIA_2020_2025_Raport_4.pdf; Parliament of Romania (2023[6]), LEGE nr. 360 din 29 noiembrie 2023 privind sistemul public de pensii [LAW no. 360 of November 29, 2023 on the public pension system], https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocumentAfis/276927

*Romania is taking step to streamline social partner engagement in adult education and training policy*

Romania has formal consultative bodies to discuss skills policies and legislation. For instance, the Economic and Social Council brings together trade unions, employers and civil society to advise the Romanian parliament and government on legal measures prior to their adoption. In addition, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour each have a Social Dialogue Commission that gathers social and economic partners to discuss relevant legislative and policy initiatives. Although these bodies facilitate engagement with social partners, they operate independently from each other, which can lead to fragmented discussions and dilute their collective influence on skills policies.

To streamline consultation on skills policy, in 2020 the Ministry of Labour established the National Coordination Group bringing together 50 representatives from various ministries, the education and training sector—including vocational training providers— NGOs, and industry and social partners. The group meets regularly to discuss policies on labour market skills demand, quality assurance, and funding in adult education.

## *Financial resources for skills*

### *Public spending on adult education and training is low*

Like most OECD countries, Romania relies on a mix of financing by government, employers, and individuals to provide education and training opportunities for adults (OECD, 2019[7]). The central government allocates funds for adult learning primarily by providing free tuition in formal education institutions, subsidies and tax deductions for companies offering continuing VET (CVET), and through its active labour market policies (ALMPs) for the unemployed (e.g. training, job-search assistance, and entrepreneurship support) (see Table 6.1).

**Table 6.1. In Romania, public funds support a range of adult education and training programmes**

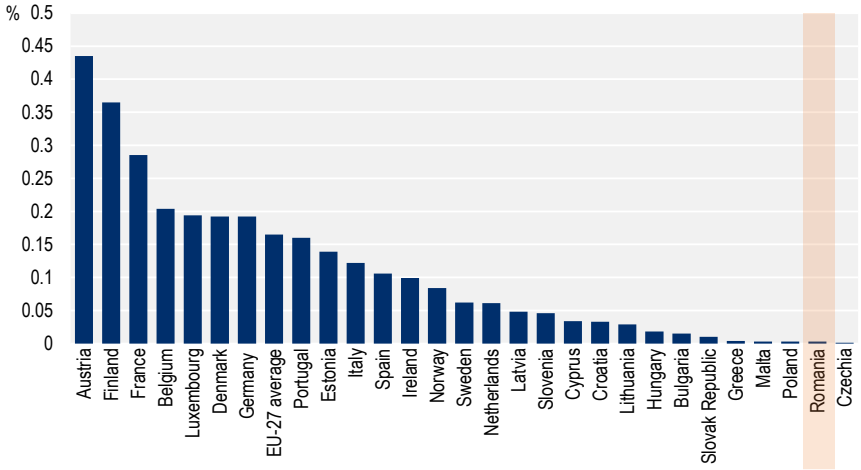
| Type | Responsible agency | Public funding source |
|---|---|---|
| Free tuition in second chance programmes | Ministry of Education | Public budget allocated to the Ministry of education |
| Subsidies for companies offering apprenticeships | The National Agency for Employment | Unemployment insurance budget |
| Subsidised adult education and training (as part of ALMP) | | |
| Tax deductions for companies offering CVET | | Exemptions from paying VAT for professional training operations |

Source: Authors based on Ministry of Education of Romania (2023[1]), *Accession candidate country's self-assessment of policies and practices in the area of education and skills: Guidelines and questionnaire Romania.*

Data on aggregated public spending on adult education and training, covering all types of provision, are not available in Romania. However, the latest available data on labour market training programmes shows Romania's public spending is low by international standards (see Figure 6.4).

**Figure 6.4. Romania's public expenditure on labour market training programmes is among the lowest in the EU**

Public expenditure on labour market measures (training), % of GDP, 2020




Note: *Countries ranked in descending order by total labour market expenditure on training.*
Source: Eurostat (2020[8]), LMP expenditure by type of action – summary tables
https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/empl/redisstat/databrowser/view/LMP_EXPSUMM/default/table?lang=en&category=lmp_expend.

*Relatively few companies invest in adult training and education*

Companies in Romania that reported investing in training for their employees spent 8% of their total expenditure on training in 2023, which is similar to the EU average of 10% (EIB, 2023[9]). However, the overall share of companies investing in training is low: In 2020, only one in five Romanian companies provided any form of CVET (see below).

Romania offers limited financial incentives for companies to provide training. For instance, companies can apply for a subsidy of approximately EUR 470 to offer apprenticeships and deduct training costs from their taxable income. However, the apprenticeship subsidy is small and involves a complex and bureaucratic application process. Even after applying, eligible companies face uncertainty about receiving the subsidy, as its disbursement depends on the availability of funds (CEDEFOP, 2021[10]).

*EU funding plays a significant role in expanding adult education and training opportunities*

In Romania, EU funding for education and training is substantial and increasing (see Chapter 2). For instance, the ESF+ Education and Employment programme (2021-2027) provided EUR 3 484 million to support a range of training and employment measures. The programme funds increased access to training and personalised activation services to help jobseekers find employment, the development of apprenticeships and work-based learning, and the expansion of training on key competencies, including foundational, entrepreneurial and digital skills (Ministry of European Investment and Projects of Romania, 2024[11]). The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (2021-2026) complements these investments with funds to develop adult training in specific areas, such as construction and digital skills.

## *Education and training offer*

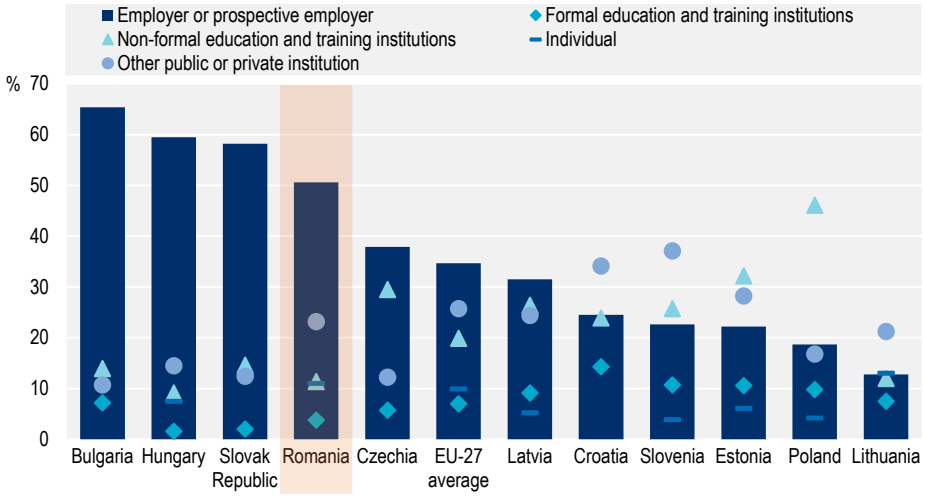
*Non-formal adult education and training opportunities are more common than programmes that lead to formal qualifications*

In Romania, adult learning includes second chance education (ISCED 1-3), CVET, including apprenticeships organised by employers, and training programmes for the unemployed (Eurydice, 2023[12]).

Non-formal adult learning opportunities attract more participants than formal programmes leading to a qualification. In 2022, 25% of Romanian adults reported participating in non-formal education and training over the last year, compared to only 1% who participated in formal education (Eurostat, 2022[13]). As in most countries in the region, employers were major providers of non-formal adult education and training programmes (see Figure 6.5).

## Figure 6.5. Employers play an important role in the provision of non-formal adult learning

Share of non-formal education and training activities of adults aged 25–64 by provider, 2022




Note: *Ranked in descending order of percentage of non-formal education and training provided by employers or prospective employers.*
Source: Eurostat (2022[14]), Distribution of non-formal education and training activities by provider, https://doi.org/10.2908/TRNG_AES_170

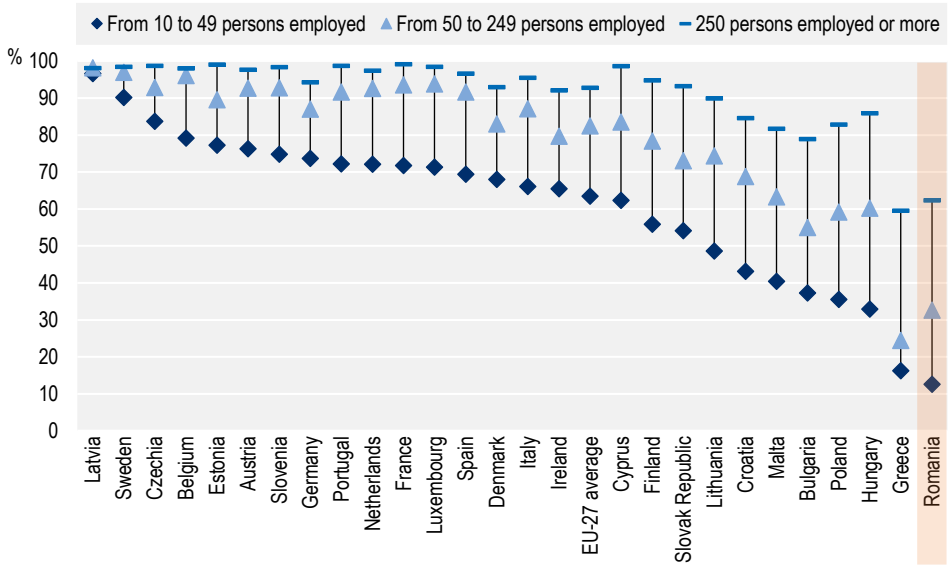
### *Companies, especially smaller ones, face barriers in offering continuing vocational education and training*

Despite being viewed as key providers, few companies offer continuing VET courses (CVET) (OECD, 2025[15]). In 2020, 18% of all enterprises in Romania provided some form of CVET compared to an EU average of 67% (Eurostat, 2020[16]). As is the case in all EU countries, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are less likely to offer training than larger companies. In 2020, 13% of small enterprises in Romania (with less than 50 employees) provided CVET, compared to 62% of large enterprises with 250 or more employees (see Figure 6.6). Given that SMEs are the biggest group of active companies in the country, representing around 68% of total private sector employment, increasing training provision in this sector presents a significant opportunity for workforce development (Eurostat, 2022[17]).

Besides limited financial incentives, a limited flexibility in programme and curriculum design may further detract companies from engaging in CVET (CEDEFOP, 2022[18]). Occupational or professional training standards, validated by Sectoral Committees, dictate the curricula used in apprenticeships. However, the process of updating these standards is complex, leading to curricula that are not always up-to-date or aligned with the specific needs of companies. This can turn apprenticeships into a generic form of vocational education and training rather than company-oriented initiatives (CEDEFOP, 2021[10]).

## Figure 6.6. In Romania, very few enterprises provide continuing vocational training (CVET), compared to other countries in the EU

Percentage of all enterprises providing continuing vocational training by size class, 2020




Note: *Ranked in descending order of percentage of SMEs (10 to 49 workers) providing continuing vocational training.*
Source: Eurostat (2020[16]) Enterprises providing training by type of training and size class - % of all enterprises, https://doi.org/10.2908/TRNG_CVT_01S

### *The offer of training programmes for the unemployed is limited*

The National Agency for Employment (*Agentia Nationala pentru Ocuparea fortei de Munca, ANOFM/PES*), is mandated to provide adult training opportunities for registered jobseekers in its authorised training centres or other authorised private training providers. It is also responsible for validating competencies gained in non-formal or informal contexts, either through its own assessment centres or other private accredited assessment centres. These services are free of charge for registered jobseekers, with costs covered by the unemployment insurance fund (CEDEFOP, 2017[19]).

Previous OECD analysis has highlighted Romania could place greater emphasis on providing training, information, and guidance services for jobseekers (OECD, 2022[4]). International data shows in 2020, around 8% of registered jobseekers engaged in activation measures such as job-search assistance, training, or subsidised employment to help them find jobs (Eurostat, 2020[20]). There have been some positive recent initiatives to strengthen active labour market policies. For instance, the national project INTESPO (Registration of Young People in the Public Employment Service Records), conducted community outreach to inform young people who were not in employment, education or training (NEET) about unemployment benefits and services and encourage them to register with ANOFM/PES between 2017 and 2022. After an initial assessment, over 180 000 registered youth received an individual activation plan, and benefitted from integrated education, employment, and social services (Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity of Romania, n.d.[21]; European Commission, 2020[22]). For the moment, however, these more tailored support measures exist mainly at the project level and are not yet systematised. While ANOFM/PES has profiling tools to assess the characteristics, skills, and needs of job seekers, it provides little personalised guidance and support (OECD, 2022[4]; Kinstellar, 2023[23]).

*Participation in second chance programmes is growing, with ongoing efforts to make these programmes more individualised and relevant to students' interests and needs*

Romania has been progressively expanding provision of second chance programmes for individuals who have not attended or completed primary or secondary education. Between 2015 and 2023, the total number of students in second chance programmes nearly doubled, increasing from around 12 000 students in 2015 to close to 22 000 in 2023. Most of these are enrolled in programmes at the secondary level (68% of the total enrolment) (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[1]). Although participation has grown, stakeholders reported that funding for second chance programmes at the upper secondary level remains insufficient, despite some efforts to cover these costs through ESF+ funding.

Romania's second chance programmes demonstrate many of the features shown by research to be effective in reaching those who did not complete school (CEDEFOP, n.d.[24]). Second chance programmes in Romania provide students with formal qualifications, enabling them to return to mainstream education, pursue higher levels of education or transition to employment upon completion. They also offer flexible timetables, including various schedule options during weekdays and weekends. Flexibility is important to help students balance their studies with employment or other family responsibilities. Importantly, a recent ministry review of second chance programmes increased the emphasis on individualised teaching methods. Teaching is organised in small groups (i.e. 10 to 16 students per class), and is guided by individualised learning plans based on an initial assessment of student competences (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2022[25]). These measures aim to address previously identified concerns, notably the need for these programmes to deliver more individualised, student-centred learning (European Commission, 2015[26]; S2CENE, 2022[27]; OECD, 2020[28]).

### *Information on the skills system and its use*

*Romania conducts multiple skills assessment and anticipation analyses, but there is scope to increase their impact on adult learning policy and provision*

Skills assessment and anticipation (SAA) analyses are tools to generate information about current and future skills needs in the labour market. Multiple government agencies conduct such exercises in Romania. Key players include the ANOFM/PES, the National Scientific Research Institute for Labour and Social Protection (INCSMPS), the National Centre for the Development of VET (CNDIPT), the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI), and Sectoral Committees under the National Qualifications Authority (ANC) (CEDEFOP, 2023[29]). These agencies use a range of information to conduct SAA analyses, including graduates' access to employment, skills shortages reported by employers, skills forecasts, and economic and demographic trends at the national, regional and county levels.

The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour use SAA findings to allocate subsidised places in vocational schools (ISCED 3-4) and design labour market training programmes. Sectoral committees also use these findings to define occupational standards. However, SAA analyses generally have a limited impact on adult education and training policies and provision (OECD, 2022[4]; European Commission, 2019[30]). There are three reasons that help explain this. SAA exercises are conducted on a project basis, with no predefined frequency or consistent methodology, and often focusing narrowly on specific sectors or regions. This inconsistency and fragmentation limit government agencies' ability to plan and adjust policies based on current labour market needs. The existence of many parallel SAA exercises also makes it difficult to systematically involve relevant government agencies and social partners in their design and development. This means that the way SAAs define and measure skills and report results (e.g. disaggregated by sector, demographic group or geographical area) may not always meet user needs, limiting their usability. Furthermore, the publication of SAA reports is not always accompanied by an official

launch or other dissemination activities (CEDEFOP, 2023[29]). Insufficient communication leads to little discussion of their main findings amongst government agencies, and by social and economic partners. As noted above, ongoing efforts by the ReCONECT project to streamline skills anticipation data collection, analysis, and reporting are a positive step, but more could be done to align these exercises with end-users' needs and communicate results.

*Romania is working to expand access to information on adult education and training opportunities to help individuals and employers make informed decisions*

OECD countries use a range of strategies to raise awareness about adult learning opportunities (OECD, 2019[7]). For example, many countries publish easily accessible data on providers and their programme offer, as well as on user satisfaction and outcomes, covering the full landscape of adult learning providers. While such consolidated information is currently missing in Romania, plans are underway to address this. Currently, the Ministry of Education collects administrative data on second chance education programmes through its SIIIR database but does not publish these data to raise awareness about the options and opportunities available to young people and adults to earn certification. Similarly, the Ministry of Labour publishes the list of professional training providers in various national registers. Through an ESF+ project, Romania aims to unify the different provider registers into a single platform and expand the information to include individual providers' training offers. Plans outlined in the 2023 higher education law also foresee expanding this unified registry to encompass the full range of providers and programmes, including all adult education and training opportunities available in the country (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[31]).

Romania has also launched national awareness campaigns to promote adult education and training. For instance, with EU funding, the Ministry of Labour carried out a large-scale media campaign featuring video and radio spots, along with informative brochures and materials. These efforts to improve the availability of accessible data and conduct outreach through multiple channels are important to help individuals and employers make informed decisions about their education and training investments.

### *Quality assurance for adult learning and recognition of prior learning*

*Romania has well-established accreditation and evaluation processes for adult learning providers, but could do more to emphasise building capacity for improvement*

In Romania, the authorisation of adult training providers offering nationally recognised certificates follows a structured process overseen primarily by the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Education. Authorisation is overseen by County Authorisation Commissions, which involve representatives from these ministries and social partners. Providers must seek authorisation for each training programme, and programme authorisation is renewed every four years. The process involves a preliminary review of documentation, which includes detailed plans for training programmes, financial sustainability, and adherence to occupational standards or professional training standards. This initial phase serves as a foundation for the subsequent on-site inspection, where specialised evaluators assess providers' compliance with established quality standards covering the physical infrastructure, instructional materials and the qualifications and competence of teaching staff. This procedure is standard practice in many other European and OECD countries to ensure the quality of CVET (Espinoza and Martinez-Yarza, 2023[32]).

The Ministry of Labour's National Adult Education and Training strategy 2024-2027 aims to enhance the quality of training providers by developing their internal quality assurance processes and strengthening their capacity to monitor and report data on adult vocational training. These measures aim to address some of the challenges in the quality assurance system. Currently, quality assurance processes for CVET providers in Romania have a large focus on compliance with national standards, with much less emphasis on building providers' capacity for quality enhancement (World Bank, 2022[33]; World Bank, 2017[34]; OECD,

2024[35]). Training providers can receive methodological assistance to prepare their accreditation or re-accreditation process from the County Authorisation Commissions. These commissions also periodically monitor authorised providers, employing two external specialists selected for each field of activity. However, sustained support for quality enhancement appears to be limited (World Bank, 2017[34]). In addition, contrary to initial vocational education and training (IVET) providers, who are required to conduct annual self-evaluations and develop a school development plan, CVET providers are not required to have internal quality assurance processes in place (European Commission, 2019[36]).

*Notable steps have been taken to strengthen the validation of formal, non-formal and informal learning, but take-up remains low*

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) allows adults to receive credit for their skills, knowledge, and experiences acquired through informal or non-traditional learning pathways. For adults who have already gained skills through work, life experiences, or previous education, RPL can save time and reduce the cost of education. Being exempt from redundant learning allows adults to focus on acquiring new, relevant knowledge and skills. In Romania, RPL processes are conducted by County Employment Agencies (for jobseekers), and by assessment centres authorised by the National Authority for Qualifications for the general population. These centres evaluate and certify vocational competences against established occupational standards (UNESCO, 2023[37]).

However, Romania's current RPL system differs from those in many OECD countries because it covers only vocational qualifications up to level 3 in the national qualifications framework, which excludes post-secondary and tertiary education (ISCED 4+) (UNESCO, 2023[37]; Stanciu and Banciu, 2012[38]). This means that at the end of this process, individuals receive a certificate of professional competences but cannot obtain more advanced qualifications. These limitations, combined with low awareness of RPL services amongst individuals and employers, and sparce geographical coverage of assessment centres, results in low take-up for some of these services (see Section II, Equity below). Since 2017, Community Lifelong Learning Centres established by local authorities in collaboration with training providers, have sought to address some of these challenges. These centres bring RPL services along with other adult learning activities (e.g. second chance programmes, and counselling services) closer to local communities (UNESCO, 2023[37]).

### *Use of digital education technology*

Romania has limited data on the availability and use of digital education technologies in youth and adult education programmes. Available data shows that online and hybrid learning are underdeveloped. In 2023, only 4% of 25–54 year-olds in Romania reported using the internet for an online course in the last three months, compared to an average of 25% in OECD countries (OECD, 2023[39]). However national data shows promising signs of progress. Following legislative changes in 2020 that authorised online and hybrid vocational training programmes, participation in these programmes has steadily grown, from approximately 260 000 individuals registered in 2020 to 300 000 in 2022.

Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) further supports a range of measures to develop adults' digital competencies. These include investing in schemes to upskill and reskill employees in digital skills within firms, developing digital skills training programmes for civil servants, and providing accessible digital skills training services in public libraries (Ministry of Investments and European Projects of Romania, 2021[40]). Second chance programmes also cover digital skills and provide 25% of the learning activities online.

### *Main reform priorities*

Romania's current adult education and training reforms focus on expanding coverage and demand for upskilling and reskilling programmes. They aim to reduce labour shortages and meet future skills needs, particularly in the context of rapid demographic decline and the digital and green transitions. The EU funds many of these reforms. Notable measures include:

- ***Addressing financial and informational barriers to increase demand for adult learning:*** The Ministry of Labour's National Adult Education and Training strategy aims to double participation in adult learning by 2027, with the goal of reaching 12% of adults participating in training within the past four weeks, up from 5.4% in 2022. The strategy introduces measures to expand demand for adult learning, notably by offering more flexible pathways through micro-certifications and modular training programmes. Romania also aims to pilot the introduction of individual learning accounts, deploy information and awareness campaigns, and enhance the competencies and tools used by ANOFM/PES' caseworkers to provide more personalised counselling and career guidance to jobseekers (Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity of Romania, 2024[41]). Together, these measures aim to remove financial and information barriers to participation in adult learning.
- ***Enhancing the quality and labour market relevance of adult learning***. There are plans to identify the training needs and priorities of SMEs, which will be central to addressing structural challenges in the Romanian economy and labour market. Additionally, Romania is investing in training programmes specifically aimed at developing digital skills. For example, Romania's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) allocates almost EUR 6 billion (20.5% of Romania's total allocation) to measures to advance digitalisation, which include digital skills training in SMEs, tertiary education institutions, and public libraries (European Commission, 2024[42]). By 2023, Romania had implemented 12% of the measures aimed at advancing digital transformation, including initiatives to enhance digital skills (European Commission, 2024[42]).

## Section II: Overall performance of Romania in skills development

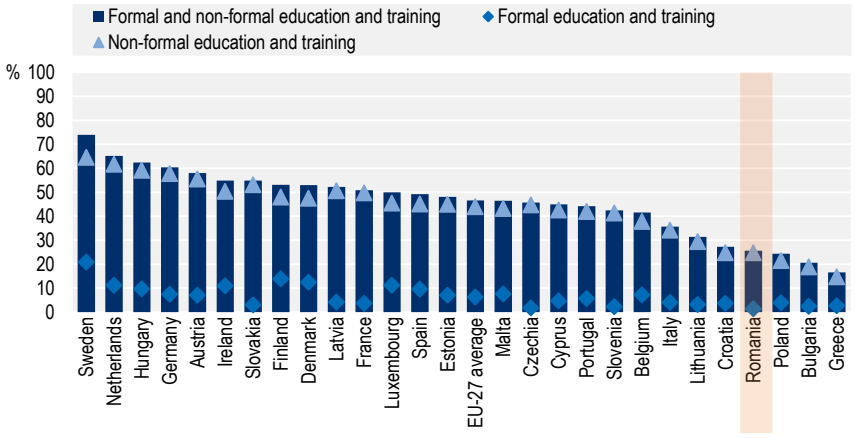
### *Access and participation*

*Adult participation in education and training has increased significantly but remains low*

In 2022, 26% of Romanians aged 25 to 64 participated in formal and non-formal education and training in the last 12 months. While this represents a significant increase since 2016, when only 7% of adults participated in education and training, it still remains below most EU countries, and the EU target for 2030 (60%) (see Figure 6.7).

## Figure 6.7. In Romania, participation in adult education and training is low

Percentage of the population aged 25 to 64 participating in formal and non-formal education and training in the last 12 months, 2022

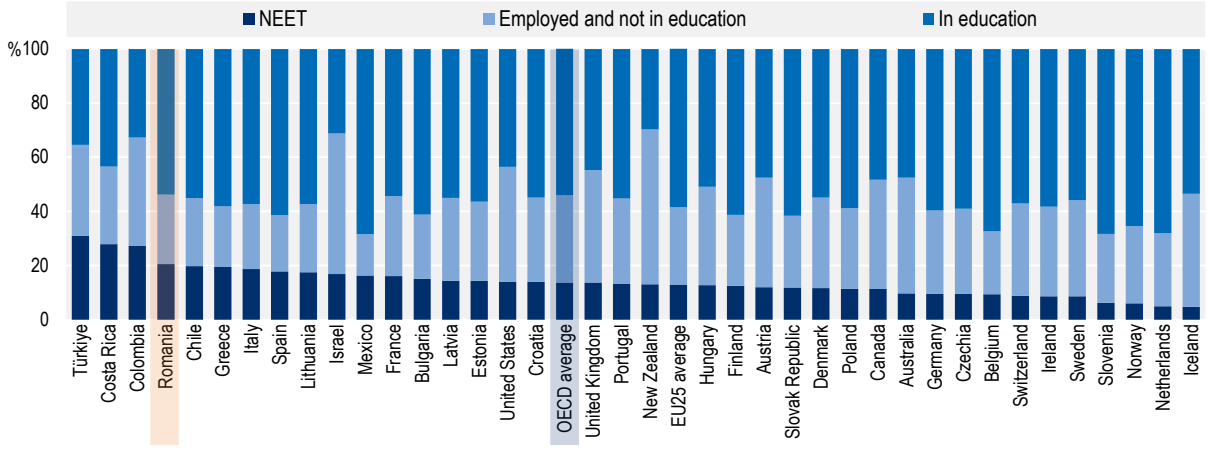



Note: *Ranked in descending order of participation rate in formal and non-formal education and training.*
Source: Eurostat (2022[13]), Participation rate in education and training by sex, https://doi.org/10.2908/TRNG_AES_100

Similar to many EU countries, young adults are more likely to participate in education and training than the general adult population: 63% of 18–24 year-olds participated in formal and non-formal education and training in 2022 (Eurostat, 2022[13]). However, young adult Romanians are less likely to participate in employment, education or training compared to their peers in the OECD. This contributes to Romania having one of the highest shares of youth not in education, employment or training (NEET) in the EU and higher than in most OECD countries (see Figure 6.8). A growing body of research highlights the importance of supporting NEET's transition to further education or the labour market, as the longer they remain NEET, the less promising their job prospects, making them more likely to become inactive or long-term unemployed (OECD, 2016[43]).The INTESPO project, which sought to increase participation of NEET youth in activation measures, was a welcome development in this respect.

## Figure 6.8. Romania has a high share of youth not in education, employment or training

Percentage of 18-24 year-olds in education/not in education, by work status, 2023




Note: *Countries are ranked in descending order of the share of 18-24 year-old NEETs*
Source: OECD (2024[44]), *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en.

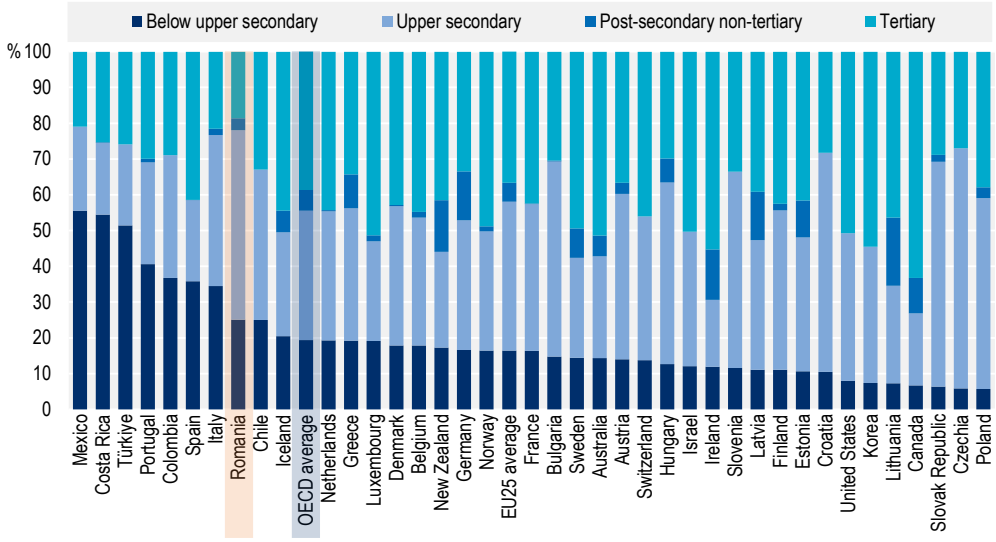
### *Quality and outcomes*

#### *Most Romanian adults have attained upper secondary education as their highest qualification*

In 2023, most Romanian adults had attained upper secondary education as their highest qualification (see Figure 6.9). This distribution is similar to that of most CEE countries. Relatively few adults in Romania have achieved tertiary education. Approximately one in five adults aged 25-64 have a tertiary degree - the lowest rate in Europe and below the OECD average (41%) and the OECD EU average (37%) (OECD, 2024[44]).

## Figure 6.9. Most Romanians have attained mid-level qualifications

Percentage of adults (aged 25-64) with a given level of education as the highest level attained, 2023



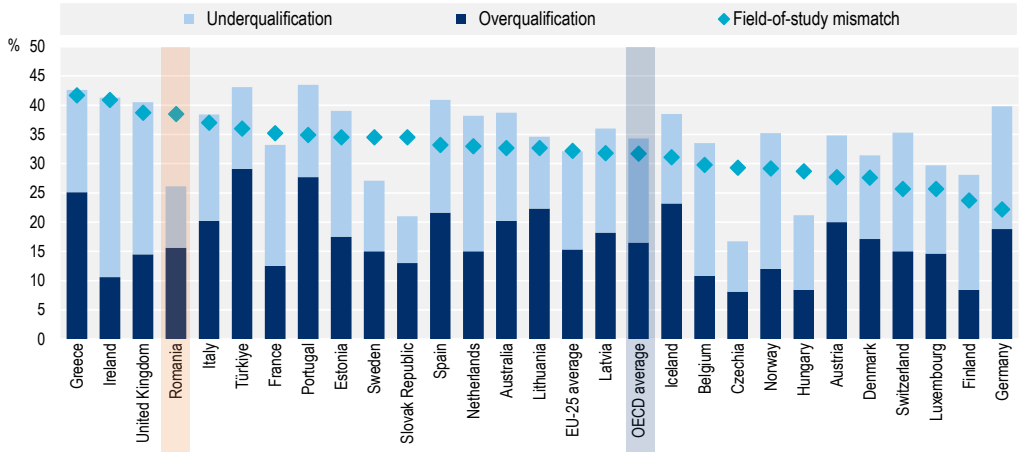

Note: *Ranked in descending order of percentage of the population aged 25-64 with below upper secondary.*
Source: OECD (2024[44]), *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en.

#### *Skills mismatches pose a challenge for workforce productivity and economic growth*

Romania faces both horizontal mismatches, where employees have the right level of qualification, but their qualification type or field of study does not match their job, and vertical mismatches, where employees are underqualified or overqualified for their job (IFC, 2023[45]; OECD, 2025[15]). In 2019, 39% of individuals experienced a field-of-study (horizontal) mismatch, compared to 32% in the OECD on average (see Figure 6.10). Estimates also suggest that while in Romania the share of underqualified or overqualified workers (26%) is below the OECD average (34%), it exceeds that of other CEE countries such as Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland (OECD, 2022[46]). A recent national study on the employability of tertiary education graduates also found some degree of skills mismatches. Nearly 47% of tertiary graduates perceived their area of study matched their current job, while another 24% perceived it was somewhat related. However, 28% perceived their field of study did not match their job or that the job did not require tertiary qualifications (UEFISCDI, 2022[47]).

## Figure 6.10. In Romania, a high share of individuals work in fields different to their field of study

Percentage of workers (age 15 to 64) that have a qualification or field of study that does not match their job's requirements, 2019




Note: Field-of-study mismatch arises when workers are employed in a different field from what they have specialised in. *Ranked in descending order of field-of-study mismatch.*
Source: OECD (2022[46]), OECD Skills for Jobs Database, https://www.oecdskillsforjobsdatabase.org.

Skills mismatches suggest that Romania's education and training offerings are not always aligned with the labour market. In a survey of almost 1 000 companies, around 29% of respondents identified an inadequately educated workforce as a major constraint for doing business in Romania (World Bank, 2024[48]). Employers report that university graduates possess sufficient but overly theoretical academic skills, while VET students or graduates have outdated skills because until recently, initial vocational education and training (IVET) programmes offered limited work-based learning opportunities, and typically used old-fashioned equipment and teaching methods (Chapter 4 analyses planned measures to increase the relevance of IVET through stronger work-based learning). Soft skills are also in short supply (World Bank Group, 2023[49]).

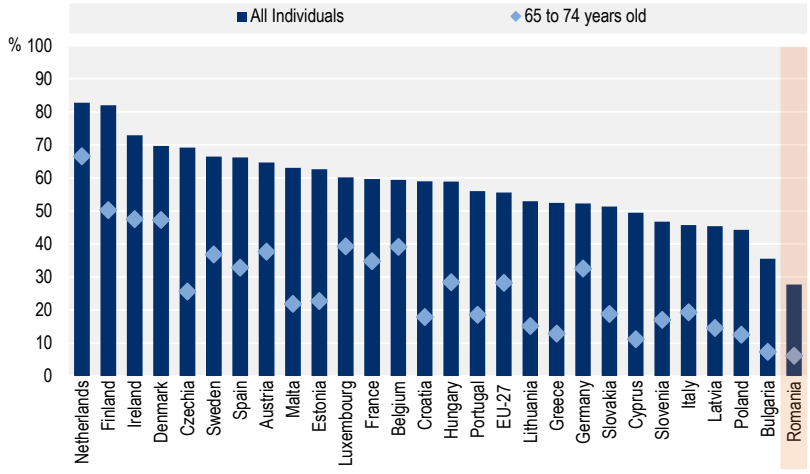
High economic growth has also increased the demand for skilled workers. However, Romania's low share of tertiary graduates and high rates of emigration for the best educated means employers often have to hire workers who are not fully qualified for the job. Current skills forecasts suggest vertical mismatches are expected to persist. While there will likely be enough workers with medium-level qualifications (ISCED 3 and 4), shortages are anticipated at both the high and low ends of the education spectrum. This means it may be difficult to find properly qualified workers for high-skilled jobs in fields such as business administration, as well as for jobs in sales, mining, construction, manufacturing and transport (Cedefop, 2023[50]).

### *Many adults, and particularly seniors, have no or only basic digital skills*

Basic digital skills in the adult population are very low. In Romania in 2023, only 28% of youth and adults aged 16 to 74 had basic or above basic digital skills, the lowest level in the EU (see Figure 6.11). An estimated 10% of Romanians had no digital skills at all, more than three times the EU average of 3% (Eurostat, 2023[51]). Digital literacy in Romania is especially low among seniors aged 65-74 – a growing segment of the population. In 2023, 6% of seniors had at least basic digital skills compared to the EU average of 28% (see Figure 6.11).

## Figure 6.11. In Romania, very few young people and adults have at least basic digital skills

Percentage of people with basic or above basic overall digital skills, 2023




Note: Overall digital skills refer to five areas: information and data literacy skills, communication and collaboration skills, digital content creation skills, safety skills and problem-solving skills. To have at least basic overall digital skills, people must know how to do at least one activity related to each area. *Ranked in descending order of percentage of all individuals with basic or above basic overall digital skills.*
Source: Eurostat (2023[51]), Individuals' level of digital skills (from 2021 onwards), https://doi.org/10.2908/ISOC_SK_DSKL_I21.

The low level of digital skills among adults in Romania and in particular seniors, has implications for their access to online services, including education and training opportunities. For instance, despite relatively extensive network coverage, use of internet services remains among the lowest in the EU, with 18% of individuals aged 16 to 74 never having used the internet (World Bank Group, 2023[49]). Furthermore, those who do use the internet mainly do so for communication and entertainment, rather than for activities such as education and training (World Bank Group, 2023[49]).

Despite Romania's relatively low levels of basic digital skills compared to the EU average, the country has a high and growing share of ICT graduates. In 2021, 6.3% of all Romanian graduates were in an ICT field, surpassing the EU average of 3.9%, placing Romania fourth in the EU (European Commission, 2021[52]).

*Despite not always leading to salary or career progression, adult learning is generally valued by Romanians*

Low participation in lifelong learning may be partly explained by adult education and training not usually leading to salary or career progression, and not always being valued on a personal level, especially among those aged over 40 (IFC, 2023[45]). A 2020 survey covering EU member states showed that in Romania there are preconceived notions regarding age and learning, with 37% of Romanians indicating that they do not participate in CVET because they feel too old (Cedefop, 2020[53]). However, the same survey revealed that 74% of respondents in Romania believe learning through life is important, and a similar share (75%) thinks the government should prioritise investment in the sector.

### *Equity*

*Adults living in Romania's rural areas have limited access to education and training and validation of prior learning*

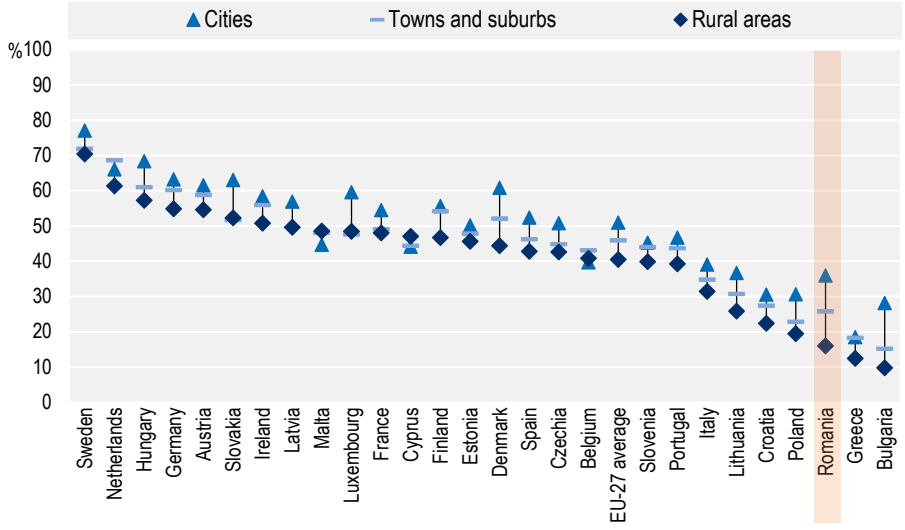
Romania is facing widening regional disparities between the Bucureşti-Ilfov region, and other more rural parts of the country. More than 45% of Romanians live in rural areas, which have higher poverty, informality

and inactivity rates, and struggle with depopulation (see Chapter 2) (European Commission, 2024[54]). Adults in rural areas also have lower levels of educational attainment. As of 2023, 32% of those aged 25 to 64 in rural areas had less than upper secondary education, compared to 5% in cities (Eurostat, 2023[55]).

Despite having lower levels of education, adults in rural areas have limited opportunities to develop their basic competencies and acquire applied skills for the labour market. For instance, in 2017, 78% of participants in second chance courses lived in urban areas, compared to only 22% in rural areas (OECD, 2020[28]). Similarly, in 2022, only 16% of adults in rural areas had participated in training in the past year, compared to 36% of adults in cities (see Figure 6.12). This disparity is linked to geographical differences in provision, with most companies offering CVET being concentrated in the Bucureşti-Ilfov region and other large urban areas (Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity of Romania, 2019[5]). Similarly, while the validation of competences acquired in informal and non-formal contexts is gaining momentum and there has been a notable increase of certified validation centres, the geographic coverage of the assessment centres remains sparce in rural regions. This limits access to upskilling and reskilling programmes for rural, low-educated and Roma populations (UNESCO, 2023[37]).

## Figure 6.12. In Romania, very few adults living in rural areas participate in education and training

Percentage of 25-64 year-olds that have participated in education and training in the last 12 months by degree of urbanisation, 2022



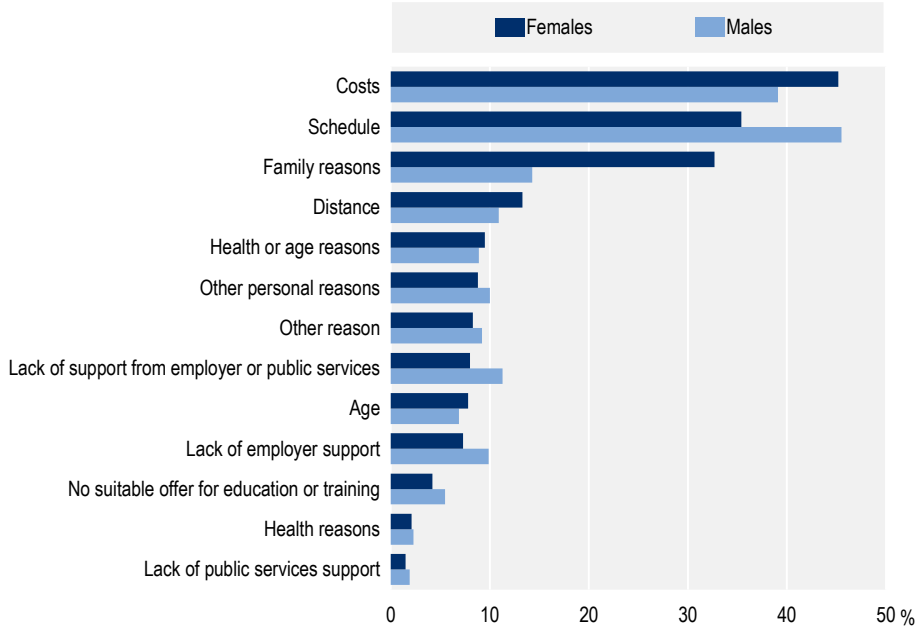

Note: *Countries ranked by descending order of rural participation rate in education and training.*
Source: Eurostat (2022[56]), Participation rate in education and training by degree of urbanisation, https://doi.org/10.2908/TRNG_AES_105

### *Women face specific barriers to participating in adult education and training*

In Romania, participation in adult education and training is similar for both men and women (26% in 2022) (Eurostat, 2022[13]). However, the participation of women in the labour market is low: in 2023, only 62% of Romanian women aged 20-64 were active, compared to 83% of men, and below the EU female participation average of 75% (Eurostat, 2023[57]). While a long parental leave, with a significantly larger portion reserved for mothers compared to fathers may contribute to this low participation (see Chapter 3), costs and family responsibilities are commonly cited as barriers preventing women from engaging in training to acquire labour market skills (see Figure 6.13).

### Figure 6.13. In Romania, women are more likely than men to cite costs and family responsibilities as reasons for not participating in training

Population (25 to 64 years old) wanting to participate in education and training, by reason for not participating and sex, 2022




Note: *Ranked by decreasing percentage wanting to participate by reason for not participating of female respondents.*
Source: Eurostat (2022[58]), Population wanting to participate in education and training, by reason for not participating and sex, https://doi.org/10.2908/TRNG_AES_176.

*While Roma youth have low educational attainment, their participation in reskilling and upskilling programmes is very limited*

In 2021, only around one in five Roma aged 20-24 reported completing at least upper secondary education, and just 1% of those aged 30-34 had completed tertiary education (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023[59]). This contributes to very low labour market participation, with only around 41% of Roma declared being in paid work (see Chapter 2). Despite the higher need for reskilling and upskilling, participation in education and training is particularly low amongst Roma youth. According to the 2021 Roma survey, 59% of Roma respondents aged 16 to 24 were not in employment, education or training, close to four times the share of NEET in the general population of the same age group (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023[59]). The most commonly cited barriers preventing Roma youth with lower secondary education or less from continuing education were financial constraints (23%) and lack of interest (21%) (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023[59]).

## Section III: Analysis and recommendations

### *Quality of programmes and outcomes: Tailoring adult learning to better meet individual and labour market needs*

Romania's labour market is facing twin pressures. Its workforce is small and shrinking, largely as a result of demographic decline, emigration, and high inactivity. Meanwhile, working-age individuals often lack the

relevant skills to meet future labour market needs. Roughly one out of four 15-year-old students in Romania is expected to work in an occupation projected to decline between 2019 and 2029 (OECD, 2021[60]), and demand for skills such as entrepreneurship, digital, and interpersonal skills which are not always covered in current VET programmes, is expected to rise (Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity of Romania, 2024[41]; Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[61]).

In light of the changing world of work, Romania will need to increase the relevance of its adult education and training programmes. (Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity of Romania, 2024[41]; Ministry of Education of Romania, 2023[61]). Adults will require more support to acquire advanced technical skills, along with job-specific knowledge and expertise, to help them integrate into the labour market and advance in their careers (OECD, 2021[60]). High-quality adult education and training focusing on basic skills, will also be important to give the least educated, most marginalised adults a chance to participate in further learning and access better-quality jobs. This section provides potential avenues for increasing the relevance of adult education training for individuals and the economy.

### Figure 6.14. Recommendations and actions on quality of programmes and outcomes in skills

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Quality | 6.1 Increase the relevance of adult education and training to labour market needs | • Promoting the involvement of stakeholders in the design of adult education and training.<br>• Improving the quality of public employment services by providing more tailored assistance. |
| | 6.2 Strengthen foundational skills, including digital skills, in the broader population | • Tailoring second chance programmes to the needs of adult learners.<br>• Strengthening the digital skills of seniors. |

*Recommendation 6.1. Increase the relevance of adult education and training to labour market needs*

An important aspect of making adult learning more impactful and attractive in Romania will be making it more relevant to Romania's current and future labour market. There are two important avenues to achieve this. First, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour would benefit from strengthening mechanisms to engage with social and economic partners, potentially by granting greater decision-making authority to the main National Coordination Group for adult education and training. This would help ensure that input collected through consultations on skills policy design is integrated into policy, and ultimately helps increase the relevance of interventions, in particular for employers and employees. Second, Romania would need to provide more tailored adult education and training opportunities to ensure the learning experience is relevant to the diverse skills and life circumstances of individuals.

**Promoting the involvement of stakeholders in the design of adult education and training**

Romania is taking steps to increase stakeholder engagement in policy design for adult education and training. In 2016, the government launched an online consultation platform, called E-Consultare, which replaced and combined previous websites for policy consultation and debate (OECD, 2023[62]). This platform has the potential to facilitate more interactions with stakeholders and simplify access to participatory opportunities (OECD, 2023[62]). More recently, the National Adult Education and Training strategy 2024-2027 set out plans to ensure a legal framework for the development of partnership and cooperation structures in adult education and training.

Romania made further progress by establishing the National Coordination Group under the Ministry of Labour, which includes representatives from various ministries, industry, NGOs, and vocational training providers. This group meets regularly to discuss key issues in adult education, such as skills demand in the labour market, quality assurance, and funding. To maximise the impact of such efforts, Romania could consider ensuring that the National Coordination Group operates with clear objectives and decision-making

authority, rather than serving solely as a forum for discussion. Additionally, it could be empowered to influence policy throughout the entire cycle, from design to implementation and evaluation.

In Poland, for example, sectoral skills councils (SSCs) help implement Poland's national skills policy (OECD, 2023[63]). SSCs are collaborations between the Polish Agency for Enterprise Development and business representatives in various sectors. They identify skills needs within the sector and facilitate dialogue between sectoral entities, such as employers' organisations, trade unions, and training providers. SSCs also develop strategies and plans to upskill workers and improve relevant adult education and training, determine funding priorities for sectoral training; and inform employers and employees on sector-level changes. While SSCs are responsible for coordination within their respective sectors, the national Programme Council on Competences helps to coordinate work across the SSCs. The Council on Competences comprises 19 members, incorporating representatives from key ministries involved in Poland's skills ecosystem.

#### Improving the quality of public employment services by providing more tailored assistance

Greater investment in activation programmes—such as training, job-search counselling, and entrepreneurship support—is an important means to offer unemployed individuals more comprehensive assistance to improve their chances of re-entering the labour market. To rebalance its support for the unemployed, ANOFM/PES would need to both expand training and better tailor it to the needs of unemployed adults, especially those from vulnerable groups (youth, Roma and low-educated/low-skilled adults). This would require an increased frequency and intensity of caseworker interactions with unemployed adults (including to conduct in-depth assessments of clients' skills and training needs) in order to provide more adapted assistance. To make this possible, caseworkers' time will need to be allocated more efficiently and targeted to vulnerable groups.

The Ministry of Labour's National Adult Education and Training strategy 2024-2027 already plans to enhance the competencies and tools used by PES caseworkers to provide more personalised counselling and career guidance to jobseekers. In taking this forward, Romania could develop an updated statistical profiling tool, with the ability to predict clients' unemployment duration. Allocating more funding to PES when developing the unemployment insurance budget should also be considered, as this might be necessary to provide more personalised services and a broader range of training (OECD, 2022[4]).

As an example, in France, close coordination between employment and social services takes place to deliver a personalised follow-up to job seekers from vulnerable groups and help them overcome barriers to employment. Upon entering the programme, job seekers undergo a comprehensive assessment of their professional background (by the PES counsellor) and an assessment of their social situation (by the district social worker). Then, both parties establish a joint action plan to facilitate the job seeker's return to the labour market. This plan defines concrete actions to find a new job, as well as advice and referrals to relevant social services such as healthcare, housing, education, mobility, etc. (OECD, 2023[63]; ILO, 2018[64]).

### *Recommendation 6.2. Strengthen foundational skills, including digital skills, in the broader population*

In Romania, high and increasing early school leaving (16.6% in 2023) means that many young people leave school without mastering foundational competencies (Eurostat, 2023[65]). In most OECD countries, upper secondary attainment is considered the minimum level of education necessary to participate fully in the labour market – without this, individuals are at risk of marginalisation and unemployment (OECD, 2024[44]). Community Lifelong Learning Centres and instruction methods more adapted to youth, two recent measures in Romania, can help those who have not completed upper secondary education re-enter education and obtain a basic qualification (OECD, 2021[66]; Savelsberg, Pignata and Weckert, 2017[67]).

Experience in OECD provides insights on how Romania might further strengthen its second chance education provision.

Romania would strongly benefit from programmes to improve the digital skills of the population as a whole, and especially of seniors (individuals aged 65 and above). The low level of digital skills among adults in Romania and in particular seniors, has important implications for their access to online services, including education and training opportunities. Moreover, as more services move online, there is risk of a growing digital divide, with older individuals not having the skills to access these services. This issue was highlighted during the pandemic when many seniors faced difficulties accessing essential services online (OECD, 2019[68]; UNECE, 2021[69]).

### Tailoring second chance programmes to the needs of adult learners

Romania's second chance programmes have many positive features. They provide students with formal qualifications, offer flexible timetables, and have increased emphasis on individualised teaching methods. To further strengthen second chance education Romania can consider:

- *Developing guidance and resources for flexible, differentiated teaching in second chance programmes:* Second chance classrooms typically involve young and adult learners with more heterogeneous levels of learning. Of particular importance is guidance and tools to help teachers recognise a broader range of previous learning and work experience so that students avoid repeating their previous learning, deliver lessons in smaller, manageable blocks, and monitor individual learning progress to accommodate for learners who participate irregularly or struggle to achieve. Mentoring and support to help teachers adopt more hands-on pedagogies will also be important to helping them capture the interests of learners (OECD, 2020[28]).
- *Strengthening connections with multidisciplinary teams that provide integrated social and healthcare services for second chance students*. Second chance students are likely to face multiple and inter-related challenges that led to them leaving mainstream education in the first place (such as academic, socio-economic, and motivational issues) (Adams and Hakonarson, 2024[70]). Romania's second chance programmes have introduced some additional support to students through school mediators and counsellors, but more could be done. In Spain for example, second chance schools work with community social services and health institutions (Escuelas de Segunda Oportunidad España, 2015[71]).
- *Developing strong connections between second chance programmes and employers:* In 2021, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour signed a partnership agreement to direct unemployed adults with low levels of education to second chance programmes and provide those students with job-search counselling and support from the employment services (Ministry of Education of Romania, 2021[72]). This positive initiative is expected to primarily benefit adult learners registered with the ANOFM/PES. Romania can consider additional measures to expand opportunities for work-based learning to the broader pool of second chance students following a vocational track. In France, Spain and Portugal, for example, the national networks of second chance schools facilitate partnerships with employers (Réseau E2C France, n.d.[73]; Escuelas de Segunda Oportunidad España, n.d.[74]; E2O Portugal, n.d.[75]). By centralising employer engagement within a larger association or network, these countries have been able to provide students with a broader range of work-based learning opportunities.

### Strengthening the digital skills of seniors

Romania has introduced policies to facilitate the digital transition. For example, it is taking action to advance digitalisation across education levels and expand digital skills training programmes for civil servants and communities through a network of public libraries. Some of the planned measures are intended to benefit senior citizens.

To build on these efforts, the Government of Romania might benefit from developing a national strategy for enhancing the digital skills of seniors, with a specific focus on developing a National Digital Literacy Programme for Seniors. Such a strategy would not only streamline and standardise the quality of digital literacy programmes across the country, but would also ensure equitable access for all seniors, regardless of their geographical location or socio-economic status. Developing a comprehensive national plan to implement the proposed strategy could enable Romania to tackle the digital literacy gap more effectively, ensuring that its elderly population is not left behind. This could include a programme to provide free or subsidised training courses on basic computer use, internet navigation, online safety, and the use of digital tools for everyday tasks. In addition, this training could be integrated in existing senior programmes by, for example, holding digital training sessions in senior community centres, retirement homes, and during health check-ups. Such integration ensures that digital education becomes a routine part of seniors' activities, increasing the likelihood of participation and learning retention. Australia provides an example on how such programmes can be effectively delivered through community-based organisations (see Box 6.2).

### Box 6.2. Enhancing adult digital skills

**Australia's Be Connected Network**

Be Connected is an Australian government initiative intended to help older citizens improve their digital skills, confidence and online safety. The initiative responds to the Digital Literacy for Older Australians strategy, which makes bridging the digital divide affecting older people a priority. Managed by Good Things Foundation Australia and funded by the government, the programme is based on the creation of a collaborative network of community organisations and individuals dedicated to providing digital skills training to people over 50 years of age.

The initiative connects over 3 500 community organisations, libraries, and local councils across the country, facilitating the sharing of effective teaching methods and resources. Be Connected offers an online learning portal where adults can access a wide range of resources for free, including games, podcasts, or instructional videos. In addition to online resources, Be Connected also offers digital mentoring opportunities. For instance, Young Mentors is an initiative that brings together secondary school students and older Australians to share digital skills and knowledge.

The initiative was launched in 2017, with a four-year budget of approximately USD PPP 31.9 million. A pre-post survey of programme participants conducted from 2017 to 2020 showed Be Connected reportedly improved participants' foundational digital skills and knowledge, digital confidence, social connectedness and loneliness, and online safety. Australia's commitment to digital inclusion goes beyond Be Connected, the government recently approved the "Aged Care Data and Digital Strategy 2024-2029" promoting digital literacy of older Australians, as well as the use of data and technology to improve age care services.

Source: Australian Government (2024[76]), Be Connected, https://beconnected.esafety.gov.au/index.php?redirect=0 (accessed on 8 July 2024); McCosker et al. (2020[77]), *Improving the digital inclusion of older Australians: The social impact of Be Connected*., https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/03_2021/improving-digital-inclusion-older-australians-social-impact-be-connected-16-june-2020.pdf; Australian Government (2024[78]), Aged Care Data and Digital Strategy. Driving better care and leading a sustainable and productive care and support economy. 2024-2029., https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-07/aged-care-data-and-digital-strategy-2024-2029_0_0.pdf

### *Equality of opportunity and access: Making adult learning accessible and appealing to the most disadvantaged Romanians*

Many of Romania's adult learning opportunities are provided free of charge. However, there is considerable scope to increase participation in adult education and training amongst the most marginalised groups, such as rural populations, NEET and Roma. Raising awareness about available training programmes and skills certification services (recognition of prior learning, RPL) would make existing adult learning opportunities seem more accessible and attractive, especially for those who have lower educational attainment and/or are in low-skilled jobs. Meanwhile, expanding provision of adult learning in the most disadvantaged, rural parts of the country will also be important to reach those most in need of upskilling and reskilling. These efforts can be advanced through policies that encourage private sector participation in delivering adult learning in under-served areas or sectors.

**Figure 6.15. Recommendations and actions on equality of opportunities and access in skills**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Equality | 6.3 Improve access to adult education and training through increased participation of the private sector | • Improving financial mechanisms to increase employer motivation to provide adult education and training.<br>• Facilitating employer involvement in apprenticeship programmes. |
| | 6.4 Broaden participation in adult education and training by recognising prior learning and raising awareness of adult education and training opportunities | • Improving the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning.<br>• Improving outreach and information sharing to promote broader participation in adult education and training. |

*Recommendation 6.3. Improve access to adult education and training through increased participation of the private sector*

Currently the private sector in Romania offers and invests very little in adult education and training. Only one in five enterprises in Romania offered continuing vocational education and training (CVET) in 2020, and the majority of these active providers were large companies, typically located in urban areas. At the same time, there are few efforts underway to encourage the private sector to invest in adult education and training. In this context, it is important to incentivise the private sector to engage through financial means and by lowering the barriers of entry.

#### Improving financial mechanisms to increase employer motivation to provide adult education and training

Romania provides training subsidies and tax breaks to companies that engage in CVET. However, these incentives currently offer the same level of support to companies regardless of size. International evidence shows targeted and well-designed financial incentives can be more effective than universal ones to encourage employers to provide training opportunities (OECD, 2018[79]). Given the lower engagement of SMEs in adult learning and their importance to the national economy, Romania would benefit from targeting funding and support to increase their participation in skills development initiatives. Many OECD countries use a range of financial incentives, including tax breaks, training or wage subsidies, and levy schemes. These are often targeted or scaled progressively to provide greater support to smaller firms (see Box 6.3).

### Box 6.3. Financial incentives for SMEs to provide adult education and training

Many OECD countries run programmes to support adult learning targeted exclusively at SMEs. Some are designed to help SMEs overcome cost barriers, while others aim to enhance growth and competitiveness through skills investments. For instance, in **Flanders (Belgium)** the SME Wallet (*KMO-portefeuille*) is a subsidy targeted exclusively at SMEs seeking to invest in training or consultancy services in priority areas, such as digitalisation and financial literacy. Small enterprises receive a 30% subsidy on costs, while medium-sized enterprises receive 20%. A recent study indicates that approximately 55 000 SMEs benefit annually from the SME Wallet. The study also points out the programme has had a positive effect on competitiveness and productivity of small companies.

Other financial incentives are open to firms of all sizes but provide a larger support to SMEs. For example, in **Lithuania** enterprises can benefit from a competence voucher which must be used within 12 months to purchase training services for company employees. Reimbursement covers 80% of the training costs for the micro, small and medium enterprises and 70% for large enterprises. Similarly, in **Croatia**, the Croatian State Subsidy for Education and Training Act allows for a deduction from the tax base of up to 50% (70% in the case of SMEs) of the cost of general adult education and training, and 25% (35% for SMEs) of the cost of specific employee education and training.

Source: Agency for Innovation and Entrepreneurship (n.d.[80]), Kmo-portefeuille [SME Wallet], https://www.vlaio.be/nl/subsidies-financiering/kmo-portefeuille (accessed on 11 July 2024); OECD (2020[81]), OECD Skills Strategy Slovak Republic: Assessment and Recommendations, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/bb688e68-en; CEDEFOP (2018[82]), Lithuania: The competence voucher – a ticket to training for employees in SMEs and large enterprises, https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news/lithuania-competence-voucher-ticket-training-employees-smes-and-large-enterprises; CEDEFOP (2020[83]), Financing adult learning database, https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/financing-adult-learning-db/overview (accessed on 12 June 2024).

Among the different financial mechanisms, the Ministry of Labour could consider introducing a training levy scheme to collect funds from employers specifically for adult education and training. However, levy schemes must be designed carefully to ensure training focuses on developing important skills for the labour market and is accessible to smaller companies. For instance, in Italy, much of the funds collected through training levies are used for mandatory health and safety training, which would have likely taken place in the absence of such schemes (OECD, 2019[7]).

One way to avoid this pitfall is by using the levy to finance the creation of regional or sectoral training funds that would distribute training grants to firms in the sector and/or region in line with the fund's strategic priorities. Experience in OECD countries shows that employer commitment to sectoral levies is generally strong, particularly when they target sectors where the labour market is tight and it is difficult to find skilled workers (OECD, 2018[79]). The resulting funds could also be targeted to the types of employers that are currently less likely to offer training opportunities (e.g. SMEs, rural companies). The advantage of such targeted levy scheme would be twofold: it could help increase the funds available for adult education and training and allow for the redistribution of funding in line with national priorities. For instance, Australia has a levy scheme in the construction sector covering all regions, as well as in the electro-metallic industry in one specific province. In Switzerland, professional organisations can request that the Federal Council establishes a sectoral fund for the provision of VET. All companies in the sector are required to contribute to the fund, with the amount of their contributions depending on the company payroll (OECD, 2018[79]).

#### Facilitating employer involvement in apprenticeship programmes

A more flexible curriculum framework could help ensure that apprenticeships are better aligned with the specific technological processes, working conditions, and customer demands of companies, making them

more adaptable and appealing. Enterprises in Romania should have a greater say in designing apprenticeship curricula and in deciding how apprenticeship programmes are run. This approach would acknowledge that the practical and theoretical knowledge requirements for each occupation are best identified at the enterprise level.

For example, although the German apprenticeship system is based on a series of occupational skills profiles that are determined at the national level, employers have a strong influence on the development of curricula and examination. This is achieved through collaboration at the federal level with the Federal Employment Agency, and ongoing discussions with regional chambers of commerce, regional employment agencies and social services (OECD, 2017[84]). The Federal Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs develops regulations on training content, with advice from the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training. Employers, through their associations and industry chambers, actively contribute to updating these regulations. They ensure the training content aligns with current industry needs and technological advancements by proposing changes to training profiles or introducing new occupations.

### *Recommendation 6.4. Broaden participation in adult education and training by recognising prior learning and raising awareness of adult education and training opportunities*

Valuing and recognising prior learning and experience promotes participation in adult learning by acknowledging existing skills, reducing training time and costs to engage in training, and allowing adults to focus on acquiring new, relevant knowledge and skills. While the last two decades have seen an increase in the number of validation centres, work still needs to be done to improve the reach and effectiveness of validation services. Currently, the system only allows for the validation of vocational qualifications up to level 3 in the national qualifications framework, making skills certification services (RPL) unattractive for those aspiring to obtain higher qualification levels. Furthermore, validation centres are unevenly distributed across the country, and services are often inaccessible in remote and rural regions.

Raising awareness of opportunities and benefits of adult education and training is also important to support more equal participation. Many adults face barriers such as lack of information, societal stigma, or perceived challenges associated with returning to education. Raising awareness helps break down these barriers, making education seem more attainable and approachable. In Romania there have been some campaigns to increase awareness of adult education and training opportunities, such as the INTESPO project, which demonstrated that young individuals that are NEET do not always take up services that are provided for them, in part because of lack of knowledge about programmes available. However, more needs to be done to increase public awareness, including developing a platform with all available training options.

#### Improving the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is pivotal for adult upskilling and reskilling in Romania, enabling personalised learning pathways that address individual needs and reduce training time. Despite existing mechanisms, RPL take-up in Romania remains low for the reasons outlined above. To promote greater participation in RPL, Romania might consider:

- **Expanding the RPL framework to include higher levels of education**, providing opportunities for more advanced qualifications. This expansion would make RPL a more attractive and valuable option for individuals.
- **Raising awareness, to increase the visibility and understanding of RPL benefits among both individuals and employers**. Adult learning providers should serve as the primary contact points for individuals seeking RPL, offering comprehensive information about the process, guiding applicants through each step, and providing support in documenting their prior learning

experiences. At the same time, national campaigns would help raise awareness amongst the broader adult population who might benefit from RPL but are not yet aware of these services.

- **Involving stakeholders such as trade unions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and the private sector in the RPL system.** Trade unions and NGOs can help raise awareness about RPL opportunities and advocate for the interests of their constituencies, while the private sector can contribute by recognising RPL certifications and incorporating RPL into their training and recruitment practices. The AFEST (*Action de formation en situation de travail*) programme in France provides a compelling example and a model that Romania could consider. The programme, which aims to promote continuing training, especially in small enterprises and among low-skilled workers, was introduced in 2018 (Duclos, 2018[85]). It recognises informal on-the-job learning and allows employers to access public funding, usually available only for formal education and training. To be recognised, informal learning must meet four conditions: the on-the-job training is adjusted to match the specific purpose of the training; the training provider is appointed before the training begins; the training includes reflection outside of the workplace to reinforce the lessons learned; and an assessment of training outcomes is carried out after the training. The assessment involves an evaluation by both the learner and the trainer. OPCOs (*Opérateurs de compétences*) or "skills operators", which are organised by different sectors, validate the informal learning through the AFEST programme and cover part or all of the learning costs or connect employers with other financial support (OECD, 2023[2]; OECD/European Union, 2019[86]).

#### Improving outreach and information sharing to promote broader participation in adult education and training

Outreach mechanisms are needed to engage those detached from the labour market in job search or training (OECD, 2022[4]). Romania has implemented a number of outreach initiatives, such as the national project INTESPO and large-scale media campaigns. Efforts are also underway to consolidate information on adult education and training providers into a single national register. To further enhance access to comprehensive information for both individuals and employers, Romania, would benefit from collecting and sharing more detailed data on providers and their training programmes such as evaluations, learning outcomes, and user satisfaction. Making this information available through a single, open, and user-friendly platform would make it easier to access and use.

In Sweden, for example, a portal provides up-to-date information to foreign workers on skills needs and job offers by region, online language training, regulated occupations and recognition of foreign qualifications, as well as the possibility to apply for work permits online. All of this is available in numerous languages (Swedish Institute, 2024[87]). In Scotland, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) enhances educational access by defining qualification levels and offering a database with over 10 000 courses, enabling users to filter by topic, title, or key words. Meanwhile, Finland's Studyinfo platform serves as a comprehensive resource for over 5 600 degree and non-degree courses, allowing applications and tracking of course completion, with filters for topic, language, and more.

### *Good governance: Steering coherent adult learning policies through stronger coordination and evidence use*

Working at the intersection of education and the labour market, adult learning policies require strong cross-sectoral coordination, and evidence to adapt provision to employers' needs. Romania is making commendable efforts to improve inter-ministerial collaboration, especially in data collection, analysis, and use. However, challenges remain. By international comparison, coordination between ministries appears to be relatively weak, leading in some instances to duplication of work and fragmented policy interventions, as illustrated by the existence of two separate adult education strategies. While Romania produces valuable analysis on the skills needed by the labour market, there is room to enhance its use to inform

adult education and training policies and provision. This section makes recommendations for how Romania might strengthen the governance of its skills sector, through stronger coordination and better use of evidence on skills needs to inform policies and provision.

## Figure 6.16. Recommendations and actions on good governance in skills

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Governance | 6.5 Promote co-ordination, co-operation and collaboration on adult education and training across the whole of government | • Developing a cross-sectoral and cross-ministerial approach to implementing the National Adult Education and Training strategy.<br>• Establishing a single body responsible for vocational education, adult learning, occupational standards, vocational qualifications, and skills anticipation assessments. |
| | 6.6 Increase data sharing and enhance evidence-based policy making for adult education and training | • Enhancing data collection mechanisms on skills supply and demand.<br>• Using skills assessment findings in the development of public policies. |

### *Recommendation 6.5. Promote coordination, cooperation and collaboration on adult education and training across the whole of government*

Adequately investing in skills and ensuring that skills policies are consistent, coherent, and effectively implemented can only happen with a stronger whole-of-government approach. There are a number of mechanisms currently in place in Romania to foster cooperation between ministries. For example, ministries proposing policies can seek to establish inter-ministerial committees and proposed laws are sent for inter-ministerial review to the ministries affected by them. However, issues arise with these current coordination mechanisms. For instance, the onus is on the line ministry to seek out coordination and to put together inter-ministerial committees, which means that there is no systematic process of consulting all ministries involved. Greater clarity on roles and responsibilities, along with more active coordination, would ensure that the various government agencies involved in skills policies work towards shared objectives.

#### Developing a cross-sectoral and cross-ministerial approach to implementing the National Adult Education and Training strategy

The Ministry of Labour's National Adult Education and Training strategy includes a plan that assigns responsibilities for meeting its objectives. Recent OECD analysis of skills strategies across EU countries offers insights on how to strengthen cross-sectoral strategies for skills (OECD, 2024[88]). These include setting clear targets and performance indicators for all forms and levels of adult education and training, ensuring accountability, and clarifying the roles of stakeholders. Indicators should be based on a comprehensive assessment of the country's current skills system to effectively address key gaps. Timing is also crucial. Romania could enhance the strategy's impact by aligning its implementation with moments of strong political will and available funding opportunities.

To ensure coherence, the strategy should align with other national policies, such as labour market and education strategies, creating synergies across sectors. Drawing on OECD country examples, Romania could also formalise a binding agreement among key partners—government, employers, trade unions, and civil society—to ensure collective ownership of the strategy and cooperation in its implementation. Identifying influential champions within government and industry would help maintain momentum and secure long-term support. Finally, robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are essential to track progress, make necessary adjustments, and ensure the strategy remains effective over time.

Several OECD countries have developed comprehensive and cross-sectoral strategies that help coordinate the efforts of different actors and set the direction for adult learning and skills. The Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy 2017-2021, for example, established a binding agreement among Strategy Partners, namely the government, employer associations, trade unions, the voluntary sector and the Sámi

Parliament (the representative body for people of Sámi heritage in Norway). The strategy delineated the roles and responsibilities of each partner. The government (ministries), in cooperation with social partners, were responsible for the development and implementation of the skills policy, and for ensuring coordination across policy sectors and levels of government. Municipalities, including local and regional authorities, provided numerous adult learning services to the end user. Employers provided training at the workplace, often in collaboration with other partners. The Sámi Parliament ensured that measures supported the linguistic and cultural expertise needed to develop Sámi society and businesses. The voluntary sector contributed to skills development both within and outside the labour market. The strategy emphasised the importance of partners working together to develop and implement measures (OECD, 2018[89]).

**Establishing a single body responsible for vocational education, adult learning, occupational standards, vocational qualifications, and skills anticipation assessments**

Like in many countries, Romania's skills landscape is complex with many ministries and government agencies working on adult learning and education (OECD, 2019[90]). However, in Romania, there appears to be a blurred division of labour between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour. To mitigate this issue, the Romanian government could consider establishing a coordinating committee responsible for vocational education, adult learning, occupational standards, vocational qualifications, and skills anticipation assessments, that aligns efforts and streamlines processes across existing agencies and ministries. This measure would help streamline decision-making, while simultaneously keeping accountability with both ministries.

For example, the National Agency for Qualification and Vocational Education and Training (ANQEP) in Portugal, operating under the supervision of several ministries, focuses on coordinating and managing vocational education and training for adults and young people. Key responsibilities include updating the National Catalogue of Qualifications, promoting double certification programs, ensuring quality and flexibility in training systems, and supporting the professional development of educators. ANQEP also works on enhancing the international comparability of qualifications to facilitate mobility in vocational education across borders. Similarly, in Estonia, the Ministry of Education and Research delegates responsibility for occupational standards, qualifications and assessment to the National Agency for Vocational Education (Kutsekoda). This body is managed by a collaboration of employer and employee organisations, including trade unions, and other government departments. Kutsekoda also assesses the future needs for skills in Estonia.

### *Recommendation 6.6. Increase data sharing and enhance evidence-based policy making for adult education and training*

Relevant skills policies and provision can help address skills mismatches and shortages, but doing so successfully relies on having up-to-date high-quality data and information on the changing demand for skills (OECD, 2020[91]). Romania is taking positive steps to strengthen its skills data infrastructure. Law No 242, adopted on 20 July 2022, aims to foster interconnectivity between the IT systems of different government agencies and facilitate data exchange according to the objectives of the European Interoperability Framework (European Commission, 2023[92]). Moreover, as part of the ReCONECT programme an electronic platform will be designed to connect existing skills databases. In doing so, it will be the first interconnected platform in Romania to offer a systemic approach by linking databases on graduates from initial VET, higher education and continuing VET and tracing their transition to the labour market (OECD, 2022[4]). However, to further improve data sharing and enhance the use of labour market intelligence to inform policies, more efforts are needed to strengthen data collection and use.

### Enhancing data collection mechanisms on skills supply and demand

The existence of many parallel skills assessments and anticipation (SAA) exercises makes it difficult to systematically involve relevant government agencies and social partners in their design and use. This means that the way SAAs define and measure skills and report results may not always meet user needs.

The ReCONECT programme is a step towards having a single skills data platform and enabling better and more regular anticipation of skills. To make the most of this programme, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour, ANOFM/PES, other relevant ministries and agencies, subnational authorities and social partners might benefit from collaborating in order to define the data they need from SAA initiatives. Based on this assessment, these actors could commission experts to improve and consolidate Romania's SAA methods. For example, this could include expanding existing quantitative tools to provide short-, medium- and long-term analysis on the needs of specific sectors, occupations, educational levels, demographics and regions. This would make these exercises more useful to end users responsible for policy decisions across these areas. It could also involve drawing on qualitative insights from consultation with employers and potentially from foresight techniques.

Ultimately, designating a single subsidiary body with experts from relevant ministries and key stakeholders to produce SAAs would have several benefits, including a more focused, consistent and efficient approach to collecting data for skills analysis, enhancing the relevance and quality of the data, as well as providing a central repository making data easier to access to support policy decisions. Estonia's System of Labour Market Monitoring and Future Skills Forecasting (OSKA) provides an example of how a single body centralises key responsibilities for SAA analysis and recommendations (see Box 6.4 below).

### Using skills assessment findings in the development of public policies

Evidence-based policy making could also be enhanced in Romania by using skills assessment and anticipation (SAA) findings more consistently for policy making and programme design. Ongoing efforts to streamline SAA analysis and reporting are positive to provide consistent visibility, making it easier for government agencies to plan and adjust policies and provision based on up-to-date information of labour market needs. However, ensuring that information on skills needs is more consistent and regularly reported will not always guarantee that it is used to inform policies.

Some OECD countries have established mechanisms to ensure that skills anticipation exercises support the development of skills policies (see Box 6.4). These include:

- **Connecting SAA to specific policy uses:** Designing SAA exercises to address specific policy-related issues makes it easier to involve relevant stakeholders and ensure the measurement and reporting of skills align with their needs. This contributes to a greater ownership and use of results (OECD, 2016[93]). Establishing a standard procedure to translate SAA findings into policy recommendations can also ensure that SAA findings are taken into account. This could involve designating a specific body – or bodies – responsible for formulating concrete recommendations, and a process for government agencies to report whether and how they are acting on those recommendations.
- **Establishing platforms to discuss SAA findings with relevant users:** Improving how SAA findings are disseminated and discussed would also help end users to interpret and make greater use of results data to inform policy and provision. Some OECD countries have established platforms to discuss SAA findings with relevant ministries, subnational authorities, and social and economic partners. These discussions are not only important to communicate findings, but to help build consensus on skill needs. An overarching Skills Policy Council or a broader Social Dialogue Commission (see Recommendation 6.1 above) would be well placed to facilitate these discussions at the national level.

### Box 6.4. Promoting the use of skills assessment and anticipation to inform policy and provision

There are different ways in which countries ensure the use of skills assessment and anticipation (SAA) exercises to inform policy and provision. Examples include:

In **Estonia**, the Estonian Qualification Authority launched the System of Labour Market Monitoring and Future Skills Forecasting (OSKA) project to map out skills provision based on labour market needs. OSKA uses both quantitative and qualitative methods to determine the skills that will be most relevant to Estonia's future labour market. In addition to using available administrative data and quantitative forecasts to determine these skills, OSKA collects qualitative insights through sector-level surveys and expert panels to understand skills needs across five sectors. OSKA publishes annual reports on labour market trends and skills needs based on its quantitative and qualitative analyses. Beyond identifying future in-demand skills, OSKA is also involved in developing policy recommendations about how to meet the demand for these skills. OSKA is cofunded by the Estonian Qualification Authority and ESF. Non-governmental stakeholders, including education providers and business associations, are involved in the OSKA project through involvement on sectoral expert panels and/or on the OSKA Panel of Advisors, which is active in determining the methodological approach of OSKA to SAA. Between 2015 and 2020, OSKA received EUR 4.4 million, with 85% financed by the European Social Fund and the remaining 15% covered by the Estonian government.

In **Austria**, the Standing Committee on New Skills, operating under the Public Employment Service (PES) identifies changing skills and qualification needs with the explicit goal of informing training provision for the unemployed. Based on SAA exercises conducted by expert working groups, the Committee formulates concrete proposals to develop or expand continuing education and training programmes. These proposals are then used by the Austrian PES to develop call for tenders for certain active labour market programmes and guide investments in continuing training for companies in specific occupations.

In **Norway**, the Committee on Skill Needs (*Kompetansebehovsutvalget*, KBU) composed by social partners, researchers and representatives from the county councils facilitates and stimulates open dialogue and discussion about society's skill needs with different stakeholders and society more generally. For instance, the Committee organises events with business representatives and education providers to disseminate SAA findings, focusing on specific sectors or themes, such as skills for the green transition.

Source: Cedefop (2020[94]) Strengthening Skills Anticipation and Matching in Estonia. Capitalising on OSKA's potential to realise national ambitions, https://skytte.ut.ee/sites/default/files/2022-05/governance_of_EU_skills_report_en.pdf; OECD (2023[63]) *OECD Skills Strategy Bulgaria: Assessment and Recommendations*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/c2eb2f34-en.; OECD (2020[91]), *Strengthening the Governance of Skills Systems: Lessons from Six OECD Countries*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/3a4bb6ea-en.; OECD (2023[95]), *Assessing and Anticipating Skills for the Green Transition: Unlocking Talent for a Sustainable Future*, Getting Skills Right, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/28fa0bb5-en; CEDEFOP (2022[96]), AMS Standing Committee on New Skills, https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/matching-skills/all-instruments/ams-standing-committee-new-skills (accessed 17 July 2024); Kompetansebehovsutvalget (2021[97]), Norwegian Committee on Skill Needs, https://kompetansebehovsutvalget.no/ (accessed on 17 July 2024).

### Figure 6.17. Summary of recommendations and actions on skills

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Quality | 6.1 Increase the relevance of adult education and training to labour market needs | • Promoting the involvement of stakeholders in the design of adult education and training.<br>• Improving the quality of public employment services by providing more tailored assistance. |
| | 6.2 Strengthen foundational skills, including digital skills, in the broader population | • Tailoring second chance programmes to the needs of adult learners.<br>• Strengthening the digital skills of seniors. |
| Equality | 6.3 Improve access to adult education and training through increased participation of the private sector | • Improving financial mechanisms to increase employer motivation to provide adult education and training.<br>• Facilitating employer involvement in apprenticeship programmes. |
| | 6.4 Broaden participation in adult education and training by recognising prior learning and raising awareness of adult education and training opportunities | • Improving the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning.<br>• Improving outreach and information sharing to promote broader participation in adult education and training. |
| Governance | 6.5 Promote co-ordination, co-operation and collaboration on adult education and training across the whole of government | • Developing a cross-sectoral and cross-ministerial approach to implementing the National Adult Education and Training strategy.<br>• Establishing a single body responsible for vocational education, adult learning, occupational standards, vocational qualifications, and skills anticipation assessments. |
| | 6.6 Increase data sharing and enhance evidence-based policy making for adult education and training | • Enhancing data collection mechanisms on skills supply and demand.<br>• Using skills assessment findings in the development of public policies. |

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Reviews of National Policies for Education

# Education and Skills in Romania

Romania's current education reform agenda marks the country's most ambitious effort to modernise its education and skills system since the post-democratic transition. Backed by significant investments, the reforms aim to raise quality, expand access, and equip learners with the skills needed to thrive in a changing economy. This push for change comes at a critical juncture. Despite strong economic performance, urban-rural disparities in living standards are widening, labour force participation remains low among youth, women and Roma, and informal employment is high. Improving educational outcomes through more effective policies and practices will be essential to placing Romania on a more sustainable and inclusive growth path.

This report assesses Romania's policies and practices against those of OECD and reference countries in Central and Eastern Europe, covering the full learning lifecycle—from early childhood education and care to lifelong learning. It identifies the system's major strengths and challenges and explores how Romania can draw on OECD evidence and international experience to advance its education reform agenda. The report will be of interest in Romania, as well as in other countries looking to raise the quality, equity and efficiency of their education systems.

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