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Ec. Monica Claudia Grigoroiu

**Title of thesis: Conceptual and operational aspects regarding the impact of European funding on the Romanian education system**

## SUMMARY

Scientific supervisor

Prof.dr. Bianca Tescaşiu

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS.....	3
INTRODUCTION.....	5
SYNTHETIC PRESENTATION OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS CHAPTERS.....	8
Chapter 1. EUROPEAN UNION EDUCATION POLICY. FINANCING EDUCATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION .....	8
Chapter 2. PROGRAMMES AND PROJECTS FINANCED BY THE EUROPEAN UNION IN ROMANIA. A QUALITATIVE APPROACH.....	9
2.1. Analysis of qualitative data on the education funding programmes for pre-primary/pre-school and compulsory education implemented in Romania in the period 2014-2021 with EU funds.....	9
2.2. Case study on the impact of an EU-funded education programme in Romania .....	11
Chapter 3. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON IDENTIFYING THE MAIN BENEFITS OF EU-FUNDED EDUCATION PROJECTS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF TEACHERS AND MANAGERS WHO HAVE PARTICIPATED IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EU-FUNDED PROJECTS.....	13
Chapter 4. QUANTITATIVE MARKETING RESEARCH ON TEACHERS' VIEWS ON THE IMPACT OF EU-FUNDED PROJECTS IN ROMANIA IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATION.....	15
Chapter 5. INDICATORS AND ACTIVITIES FOR INCREASING THE IMPACT OF EU-FUNDED EDUCATION PROJECTS.....	21
GENERAL CONCLUSIONS.....	22
PERSONAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS .....	25
FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS.....	27
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	29

## TABLE OF CONTENTS OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	5
LIST OF NOTATIONS.....	7
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	8
LIST OF FIGURES.....	9
LIST OF TABLES.....	11
SUMMARY.....	13
ABSTRACT.....	15
INTRODUCTION.....	17
Chapter 1. EUROPEAN UNION EDUCATION POLICY. FINANCING EDUCATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION .....	21
1.1. Premises of funding – the context of European education policy.....	21
1.2. Strengthening education through European policies.....	23
1.2.1. European Union education policies and strategies.....	23
1.2.2. Present and perspectives of education in the European Union.....	29
1.3. Education funding mechanisms in the European Union. Financing education through European projects.....	33
1.3.1. Education funding mechanisms in the European Union.....	34
1.3.2. Education funding programmes in Romania.....	38
1.4. Education and the impact of Romania's integration into the European Union.....	42
1.5. Conclusions and final remarks.....	47
Chapter 2. PROGRAMMES AND PROJECTS FINANCED BY THE EUROPEAN UNION IN ROMANIA. A QUALITATIVE APPROACH.....	48
2.1. Qualitative data analysis of the education funding programmes for pre-primary/pre-school and compulsory education implemented in Romania in the period 2014-2021 with European Union funds.....	48
2.2. Case study on the impact of an EU funded education programme in Romania.....	53
2.2.1. Presentation of the project "I learn, I play, I am happy at school!".....	53
2.2.2. Research methodology.....	56
2.2.3. Research results and discussion.....	66
2.2.4. Conclusions and final remarks.....	66
Chapter 3. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON IDENTIFYING THE MAIN BENEFITS OF EU-FUNDED EDUCATION PROJECTS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF TEACHERS AND MANAGERS WHO HAVE PARTICIPATED IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EU-FUNDED PROJECTS .....	69

3.1. Research aim, objectives and methodology.....	69
3.2. Results and discussion.....	71
3.3. Conclusions and recommendations.....	74
Chapter 4. QUANTITATIVE MARKETING RESEARCH ON TEACHERS' VIEWS ON THE IMPACT OF EU-FUNDED PROJECTS IN ROMANIA IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATION.....	75
4.1. Aim and objectives of the research .....	75
4.2. Research hypotheses.....	77
4.3. Considerations on research methodology.....	80
4.4. Research results and discussion.....	84
4.5. Conclusions.....	113
Chapter 5. INDICATORS AND ACTIVITIES FOR INCREASING THE IMPACT OF EU-FUNDED EDUCATION PROJECTS.....	118
GENERAL CONCLUSIONS.....	151
PERSONAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS.....	155
FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS.....	158
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	159
Annex 1. Main features of the funding programmes implemented in Romania in the field of education for pre-primary/preschool and compulsory education in the period 2014–2021.....	178
Annex 2. Comparative analysis of the main funding programmes.....	187
Annex 3. Model individual evaluation form.....	189
Annex 4. Focus Group Guide.....	191
Annex 5. Questionnaire – financing education through European Union funds.....	194
Annex 6. Relationship between objectives, hypotheses and research variables.....	202
Annex 7. Tables obtained from data processing with IBM SPSS.....	203

## INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) considers the right to education to be of paramount importance, places education at the top of its agenda, and bases its decisions on highly scientifically relevant research showing that the level of skills acquired through education is directly correlated with the overall well-being of individuals and sustainable economic growth. Recognising that the right to free education is not enough to motivate people to take advantage of these educational opportunities, the EU has funded a comprehensive system of programmes and projects to improve access to education and to raise awareness and motivation to improve educational attainment. The EU has begun to pay more attention to impact assessments, understanding the importance of quantifying the results of the impact of financial interventions, and has imposed rules and regulations to monitor progress and evaluate their effect.

This thesis provides a comprehensive perspective on the impact of EU education funding on the Romanian education system, contributing to the advancement of knowledge in the field under investigation. The thesis also explores ways to improve future programmes to support the achievement of the 2030 horizon targets.

The wide and varied range of published work in this area demonstrates the importance of understanding both the conceptual and operational aspects of the impact of European funding on the education system. However, looking at the research addressing results in Romania, there is a focus on issues related to implementation, achievement of objectives and alignment of activities with overall programme objectives, and a lack of research addressing the qualitative side of results and impact across different components.

In this context, fully understanding the impact of European funding on the education system has become a challenge for this thesis. Generating results on the impact of financial intervention on education systems and society as a whole is essential for the development of effective education policies as the allocation of financial resources directly influences the quality, accessibility and efficiency of education systems.

The field in which the thesis falls is the fundamental domain of Social Sciences, the branch of Economic Sciences, Marketing field, being addressed conceptual and operational aspects of the impact of European funding on the Romanian educational system.

The paper is structured in five chapters and explores educational policy and financing of education in the European Union, with a focus on the situation in Romania.

Chapter 1 focuses on the conceptual and operational aspects of education policy and funding in the European Union, exploring a wide range of secondary sources to identify the main issues addressed by EU legislation and researchers in the field of education marketing. It also provides a brief analysis of the Romanian education system in the context of EU accession.

Chapter 2 analyses EU-funded educational programmes and studies a project implemented in disadvantaged schools in Brasov County. Using marketing research methods, the impact of these complementary programmes on pupils' educational outcomes and other aspects such as health, social skills, civic skills, initiative, entrepreneurship and cultural level is examined.

Chapter 3 presents the results of qualitative marketing research conducted using the focus group interview method. The research aims to identify the main benefits of EU-funded educational projects for disadvantaged schools in Romania in the opinion of teaching, administrative and managerial staff in schools where such projects have been implemented.

Chapter 4 analyses the impact of EU funding on primary, secondary and high school education in Romania using a survey method. The analysis presents a perspective on the evolution of key issues in education, focusing on comparing the views of teachers in schools where EU-funded projects have been implemented with those of teachers in schools without funding.

In Chapter 5, based on the results of the research, a system of guidelines of indicators that can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of EU-funded education projects has been developed. Activities to maximise the impact of education projects to be implemented in the future are also proposed.

The paper concludes by presenting general conclusions, limitations, personal contributions, and future research directions. Also in this section, ways to disseminate the results are presented.

Through the research carried out, the thesis has succeeded in achieving its aim, bringing new information to fill some of the gaps in the literature on the impact of EU funding on education. Also, by proposing directions of indicators and activities that could be implemented, it brings improvements to future programs so that they contribute to the achievement of the targets assumed by the Europe 2020 agenda concerning the education system in Romania.

This PhD thesis is not only the result of my academic work but also a reflection of my personal and professional growth and development. I started this journey with an idea and a desire to contribute to knowledge in this field. Along the way, I have encountered obstacles and challenges, but I have learned and grown, had satisfactions and joys that have kept me going, and met wonderful people who have helped me, encouraged me and filled my heart with gratitude. I have found the research process to be full of surprises, discoveries and rewards.

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I hope that my work will contribute to knowledge in my field and inspire others to follow this path. Thank you all!

## **SYNTHETIC PRESENTATION OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS CHAPTERS**

### **Chapter 1. EUROPEAN UNION EDUCATION POLICY. FINANCING EDUCATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION**

In the European Union, education is considered a fundamental right and is based on principles and values such as equal opportunities and free access to education, quality of education and academic excellence, inclusion and diversity in education, mobility and exchange of educational experience. The European Union promotes and supports lifelong learning and the development of skills and competencies needed for the labour market and has a significant role in developing and supporting the education systems of the Member States. European education policy and the financing of education from common funds contribute to shaping education systems. Adequate allocation of financial resources and implementation of effective policies in this area is essential for the development and improvement of Member States' education systems, with the need to achieve educational objectives in an efficient way increasingly coming to the fore (Munda & Agasisti, 2017).

The education system in the European Union is diverse and complex, with each Member State having its approach and structure for education in general, education being an area where the main responsibility lies with each state. However, there are several objectives and policies at the EU level that guide national education systems and encourage collaboration and harmonisation in this area. Promoting cooperation and exchange of experience in the field of education, harmonisation and recognition of qualifications, and joint programmes and initiatives are essential pillars in promoting quality education and mobility within the EU. Thus, supporting the education system at the EU level is a key aspect in developing and promoting the common values and objectives of the Member States.

Understanding the impact that funding has on education systems and society as a whole is important to develop effective education policies, as the allocation of financial resources directly influences the quality, accessibility and efficiency of education systems. Current trends, implemented policies and the impact of education funding are particularly relevant research topics for the development and improvement of education systems.

Understanding the increasing attention paid by the European Union to regional policy and the resulting increase in financial allocations through structural and investment funds, more and more researchers have analysed and tried to quantify the impact of these instruments. In the literature, there are various approaches, ranging from state-of-knowledge approaches and economic theories to mixed approaches and empirical analyses. The literature is divided on the impact generated by funds allocated through regional development policies. Some authors argue for positive effects (Wostner, 2008; Palevičienė & Dumčiuvienė, 2015; Becker, Egger, & Ehrlich, 2018), claiming that the size of earmarked funds contributes to catching up the development gap (Arclean, Glomm, & Schiopu, 2012) agreeing that EU regional policy brings economic growth (Pellegrini, Terrible, Tarola, Muccigrosso, & Busillo, 2013). Other authors are reserved, identifying conditional positive effects (Martin, 2003), stating that the impact of EU financial support is positive but the magnitude is small (Aiello & Pupo, 2012), from other points of view there are potential benefits of structural funds (Varga & Veld, 2011; Varga & Veld, 2009) and impact assessments are needed on all levels (Dumčiuvienė & Adomynienė, 2014). At the same time, another category of authors does not identify specific effects, considering that the system of financial support should be reconsidered (Bachtler & Taylor, 2003).

The wide range of papers published in this area highlights the importance of understanding the conceptual and operational aspects of the impact of European funding on the education system. In terms of research addressing outcomes in Romania, most evaluations have focused on process, looking at issues of implementation, achievement of objectives and alignment of activities with overall programme objectives.

Given the importance of quantification and understanding of results in European policymaking, which can provide clear evidence of the impact of financial interventions, the EU is paying increasing attention to impact assessments (Potluka, Bruha, Spacek, & Vrbova, 2016), with regulations in place (European Commission, 2023b). Thus, for the period 2014–2020, rules for conducting evaluations have been foreseen for the first time to improve the design and implementation of financial interventions (European Commission, 2023c), monitoring progress and assessing their effect. For subsequent periods, each state is at liberty but required to set its own rules. Most evaluations have been process-oriented, focusing on implementation issues, assessing the achievement of objectives and linking activities to the overall objectives of the programmes. As more programme series has been rolled out the issue of impact evaluations has arisen (Henriques, et al., 2022), with these evaluations playing an important role in VET policy analysis (Scheuch, Bohlinger, Bieß, & Nguyen, 2021; Dumitrescu, Costică, Simionescu, & Gherghina, 2022), as well as in promoting sustainable VET development (Tun & Juchelková, 2022), with some authors considering that these evaluations should be done to a much greater extent (Elia, Santangelo, & Schnepf, 2016).

The need for impact assessments has now become clear and plays an essential role in guiding policies in this field and in funding those programmes that ensure the sustainable development of vocational education and training. In this context, the thesis, through its research, reaches new heights by providing information that complements that presented in the literature.

## **Chapter 2. PROGRAMMES AND PROJECTS FINANCED BY THE EUROPEAN UNION IN ROMANIA. A QUALITATIVE APPROACH**

Complementary education programmes are seen as effective ways in the effort to narrow the achievement gap between students who face socioeconomic challenges and those who do not (Soria, 2011). Thus, supporting education has been the focus of numerous European funding programmes that aim to increase the quality of the education system and ensure equitable access to education (Ministry of Investments and European Projects, 2020).

The research in the thesis starts with an analysis of the main features of the funding programmes in the field of pre-primary/preschool and compulsory education implemented in Romania in the period 2014–2021 with European Union funds. To provide concrete evidence of the qualitative results of the educational projects implemented in Romania, the research continues with a case study.

### **2.1. Analysis of qualitative data on the education funding programmes for pre-primary/preschool and compulsory education implemented in Romania in the period 2014–2021 with EU funds**

To identify the main features of the funding programmes implemented in Romania in the field of education for pre-primary/preschool and compulsory education in the period 2014–2021, an analysis of the main programmes implemented in Romania in the period under review was carried out.

The research objectives are:

- O1. To identify the main aims and specific objectives of the education funding programmes for pre-primary/preschool and compulsory education.
- O2. To identify the actions supported by the funding programmes.
- O3. Identify the main expected results.
- O4. Identification of main output and result indicators.
- O5. Identification of the target group and type of education targeted by the funding programmes.
- O6. Identification of financial aspects related to the financial allocation of the call for projects, funding sources, European Union co-financing rate, and minimum and maximum eligible amounts.
- O7. Identification of regions where funding could be requested.
- O8. Identification of the communication and promotion of the programmes.

The research method used was secondary data analysis. More than 30 statistical situations and specialized works concerning Romanian education in the context of Romania's integration into the European Union were studied.

In the field of education, for preschool/pre-primary and compulsory education, several programmes financed by Union funds were implemented in the period 2014-2021. From these, seven of the main education funding programmes relevant to pre-primary/preschool and compulsory education have been selected for analysis. The information was taken from the funding guidelines published on the official websites of each programme and processed using the content analysis method.

The results of the research led to the conclusion that supporting the development of education in Romania is addressed by numerous European funding programmes that aim to ensure the improvement of the quality of education and equitable access to education. Support interventions for pre-primary, pre-school and compulsory education are focused on pupils and their needs, aiming to remove barriers that prevent them from attending school and to make school a pleasant and quality environment.

The main aims of the funding programmes, in order of frequency of occurrence, were: increasing school participation, lifelong learning/vocational training, preventing/reducing early school leaving, and improving the quality of education. The most frequent 'principles' and 'sub-themes' addressed were: non-discrimination, improvement of information and communication technologies, and social innovation. The specific objectives most often addressed are to improve participation in education, especially of preschool and preschool children with a focus on children from groups at risk of dropping out, especially children from rural and Roma communities and to improve the competencies of teachers teaching in pre-university education (O1).

The actions supported by the funding programmes have had a uniform approach taking into account: construction/ rehabilitation/ modernisation/ extension/ equipment of educational infrastructures, intending to have a direct impact on the quality of education offered, to allow easy access to education, to contribute to the prevention/ reduction of school drop-out, to ensure the improvement and diversification of the services offered, to develop staff and auxiliary skills, to attract and/or maintain competent staff in schools; developing the institutional capacity of school management teams; improving children's participation in education from an early age; implementing measures to prevent early school leaving; providing, supporting and promoting ADS programmes;

counselling and career guidance; encouraging and facilitating professional mobility of teaching staff. (02)

Among the most important expected results are: the provision of quality educational services/creation of appropriate conditions for the provision of quality education; increased participation of the population in education; the reduction and prevention of early school leaving; reintegration of young people and adults into the education system. (03)

The most frequent indicators of achievement are the number of teachers and support staff, the number of people supported in preschool education, and number of people supported in school education. The most frequent outcome indicators are the number of teachers and support staff who have increased their skills/certificates; the number of children/youth/adults who have completed an ADS programme; the total number of participants in the educational process. (04)

The target groups most targeted by the funding programmes are primary and secondary school pupils, young people and adults, teaching and support staff, and parents, followed by preschool and preschool children, parents/guardians or carers of children whose parents are abroad, and upper secondary school pupils. Most funding programmes are aimed at preschool, primary and secondary education, followed by pre-primary and upper secondary education. (05)

The regions where funding has been requested are the least developed and Bucharest-Ilfov. (06)

The financial allocation of the call for projects is between €75 million (EU+BS, of which €63 million EU) and €25 million (EU+BS of which €21 million EU). Most frequently, the source of funding is provided by EDF+BS funds. Only two programmes are funded by ERDF+BS. The minimum and maximum eligible amounts are between €200 000 and €50 million. The EU co-financing rate is a maximum of 85% in the less developed regions and a maximum of 80% in the Bucharest-Ilfov region. (07)

Communication and promotion of the programmes are done primarily through the official websites of the institutions. Detailed information about the programmes, application guides, forms and other relevant resources are provided through dedicated websites. The responsible institutions have also organised launch events and presentations, and carried out awareness-raising campaigns through the media, including radio and TV spots, press advertisements and promotional materials. Another way of communication and promotion was through direct communication support channels for applicants, such as helplines, dedicated e-mail addresses or online chat services. At the same time, grantees were required to promote the funding programmes through their actions. (08)

The main limitation of the research arises from the analysis of a selection of programmes and projects implemented in Romania, addressed to pre-school/preschool and compulsory education, implemented in Romania, in the period 2014-2021, from the Structural and Investment Funds of the European Union, without targeting all programmes and projects through which education was financed in Romania.

## 2.2. Case study on the impact of an EU-funded education programme in Romania

The second research started with the question: What is the real impact of funded complementary school programmes on the performance of primary and secondary school pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds?

This study aimed to contribute to the improvement of knowledge about the impact of funded educational programmes, starting from a case study, namely the project implemented in Voila municipality "I learn, I play, I am happy at school!".

The specific objectives of the research are:

O1: Determine the degree to which students participated in the "I learn, I play, I'm happy at school!" project activities. showed a favourable development in the following aspects: health and personal hygiene, communication in the mother tongue, mathematical skills and basic skills in science and technology, digital skills, learning skills, social and civic skills, entrepreneurship and initiative, cultural sensitivity and expression.

O2: Identify the variables on which the project had the greatest impact.

O3: Determine the degree to which the project under analysis affects the reduction of absenteeism.

The case study brought forward was based on a single case method (Yin, 2009). After a thorough documentation of education funding programmes in disadvantaged backgrounds, the programme "I learn, I play, I'm happy at school!" was selected. implemented in schools in Voila and Lisa commune, as it addresses the problems faced by most schools in disadvantaged environments in Romania and has implemented specific activities to reduce and prevent dropout, ensure equal access to education, and facilitate the reintegration into the education of people who have not completed compulsory education. In addition, the project designed various actions to promote values such as non-discrimination, social inclusion, social, religious and ethnic responsibility and tolerance, and to combat prejudice.

The research population consisted of primary and secondary school students from Voila commune and students participating in the "Second Chance" program at Lisa School. The sample consisted of 161 pupils participating in the project activities.

For the research, a series of samples and observation sheets were applied to measure the analyzed variables before the beginning of the project activities and after at least two semesters of the project implementation, and the results were recorded in evaluation sheets for each student. Data on absences were taken from the Catalogue. Data from two semesters before the start of the project and two semesters after its implementation were analysed. The data collection from the evaluation sheets for the analysis was carried out between November 2021 and January 2022. The analysis was performed in IBM SPSS using the paired samples t-test.

The validation of the results was carried out by triangulation method, using alternative data sources, such as those collected through the evaluation plan of the interventions of the POCU 2014-2020, in the sphere of education (Aachidata SRL, Civitta Strategy & Consulting SA, NTSN Connect SRL and the Development Consulting Group (DCG) SRL, 2021) and an analysis of relevant literature on the financing of education through European funds in Romania.

Within the sample, the means obtained for the 8 main groups showed significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) between the two moments of the evaluation. It can be seen that all variables showed increases in the means after the implementation of the project compared to the previous period. (O1)

Taking into account the sample means at the two different points in time, the largest difference between the means was 1.44 points and was recorded for the variable measuring mathematical skills and basic skills in science and technology. The next variable, the development of students' learning to

learn skills, had a difference of 1.39 points and the variable communication in mother tongue had a difference of 1.36 points. (O2)

At the same time, the total number of absences decreased substantially after two semesters of the project activities, from 849 absences, the number recorded for two semesters before the start of the funded activities, to 427, which represents a significant decrease (by 49%). (O3)

The results analysed led to the conclusion that all the variables studied showed significant improvements in the means after the implementation of the project activities compared to the previous period. These data reflect a positive impact of the project on the students within the variables analysed, thus confirming the general hypothesis of the research. The results obtained can contribute to informed and informed decision-making in the process of establishing educational policies and strategies as well as in the funding of educational programmes.

The research undertaken has several limitations, most of which are drawn from the limitations of the research method. The main limitation is the impossibility of extrapolating the results to the whole educational system in a disadvantaged environment. Another limitation arises from the fact that only one project was analysed.

The paper contributes to the improvement of knowledge in the field of research, highlighting the effects that the implementation of a school after-school programme can have on the improvement of education in disadvantaged areas. Implementing complementary education programmes on a large scale could be an effective strategy to reduce the achievement gap between pupils with socio-economic difficulties and those without.

### **Chapter 3. QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON IDENTIFYING THE MAIN BENEFITS OF EU-FUNDED EDUCATION PROJECTS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF TEACHERS AND MANAGERS WHO HAVE PARTICIPATED IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EU-FUNDED PROJECTS**

This research aims to identify the main benefits brought by EU-funded education projects in some disadvantaged schools in Romania from the perspective of the specialists who participated in their implementation and to find out what are the recommendations for future projects.

The main objectives of the research are:

- O1. To identify the main benefits that the implemented educational projects have brought to the educational system.
- O2. To generate ideas for future projects so that they can further contribute to improving access to education for disadvantaged pupils.

To achieve the objectives, qualitative research was carried out consisting of two focus group interviews with managers and teachers from schools in Romania who participated in the implementation of EU-funded projects. The research was conducted between June and July 2022. For the data analysis, specific steps of qualitative research were followed.

To achieve the first objective (O1) the research started with the identification of the positive and negative parts of the schools that the research participants represent.

The participants' views on the positives focused on two aspects: 1) teachers - with particular emphasis on the good teacher-student relationship and the teachers' good knowledge of the students. Research participants appreciated teachers as qualified, experienced, and tenured. 2) Infrastructure - considered adequate, welcoming, friendly and good access to technology.

These results outline an image of schools in the areas under study, schools classified as disadvantaged, different from the general image of schools in disadvantaged environments, known for problems related to poorly developed school infrastructure, and insufficient material resources (Tomuletiu & Moraru, 2010; Toma, 2021; Zambrano, Díaz, & Montes, 2020) and the human resources situation characterized by an increased share of unqualified teachers. Given that the research participants came from schools where various EU-funded educational projects have been implemented, it can be concluded that these projects have had positive effects on these two levels.

On the negative side, the most frequently mentioned problems were related to the lack of parental involvement and problems within the families of most of the children. A significant proportion of the children come from families with a poor socio-economic situation that cannot provide a learning environment for their children at home. Moreover, a proportion of pupils are involved in household and other activities from a very early age, with education taking second place in their concerns. Research participants believe that a large part of the problems related to education are generated by the culture of Roma families, which are also very poorly educated. Especially for the female population, the age of marriage is very low, leading to a very high drop-out rate. Migration is also common in this category of families, which often leads to the interruption of schooling for children. The precarious school-family-community relationship was also brought up several times during the interviews, as it does not provide a framework that protects children from exposure to a large number of vulnerabilities. Also in the category of frequently mentioned problems were: underfunding of schools, lack of school transport, pupils' performance in national tests and lower pass rates in final exams.

Concerning the results achieved as a result of the implementation of EU-funded education projects in the schools from which the research participants were selected, data analysis led to the conclusion that they acted on three levels (socio-economic aspects directly affecting the pupil, aspects related to improving education, aspects related to improving infrastructure and educational provision) with different results on each of these levels.

In terms of improving the infrastructure and the skills of teaching staff, the results have been good, and as a result of the implementation of the projects, the educational offerings of the schools have been greatly improved. Socio-economic issues directly affecting the pupil have been addressed partially and only during the period of the projects. For example, the issue of ensuring healthy nutrition was raised and partially solved during the implementation of the projects where pupils were offered one hot meal per day at school. However, research participants expressed concern about the period after the end of the projects providing hot meals to pupils, when they would revert to their former eating habits. On issues related to improving education (increasing learning outcomes, increasing enrolment, reducing absenteeism, reducing drop-out, increasing pupil satisfaction, increasing pupil engagement, etc.), research participants felt that little progress had been made, indicating the need to step up efforts in this area.

Concerning generating ideas for future projects so that they can further contribute to improving access to education for disadvantaged pupils (O2), research participants believe that future educational projects should provide: social support programmes, hot meals and psychological counselling aimed at improving self-esteem; new technologies and educational support materials such as interactive games, software platforms; differentiated curriculum adapted to local needs.

To adapt learning styles to the changes brought about by information technology, modern styles with increased attractiveness for pupils, activities have been proposed to continue equipping

schools with IT equipment (laptops, video projectors, interactive whiteboards, audio-video systems, educational software, digital kits) and high-speed Wi-Fi internet network as well as adapting the curriculum to the digital context. Participants also raised the need for digital teaching materials with content that can be easily adapted by teachers according to the specific needs of different categories of pupils.

To stimulate the return of school drop-outs, research participants believe that it is essential to carry out awareness-raising activities emphasising the relevance of education and social integration and to further implement "second chance" programmes.

Participants also paid particular attention to activities aimed at improving the parent-school relationship. They believe that future projects should provide training and counselling programmes for parents so that they can support and help their children in the educational process. At the same time, research participants consider it particularly important for schools from disadvantaged backgrounds to strengthen the relationship with the local media so that it becomes a promoter of the interests of their disadvantaged pupils and to develop relationships with the business community to collaborate with them in the practical training of pupils and to facilitate the transition of high school pupils to the labour market.

Although the main limitation of the research method is that it does not allow to obtain statistically representative data, the results obtained in this research are scientifically valuable, relevant for the population studied and for policymakers. The results of the research may be valuable recommendations for public entities at both local and national levels (Ministry of Education, Local Public Administration, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development), which can provide support to improve educational services in disadvantaged schools by implementing projects that include the activities identified in this research.

#### **Chapter 4. QUANTITATIVE MARKETING RESEARCH ON TEACHERS' VIEWS ON THE IMPACT OF EU-FUNDED PROJECTS IN ROMANIA IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATION**

The research aims to find out the opinions of teachers in Romanian education on the impact of EU-funded projects in Romania in the period 2014-2022 in the field of education and their proposals on appropriate activities and expected results in future projects. The research results complement the information in the literature on this topic, comparing the perspective of teachers in schools where EU-funded projects have been implemented with those in schools where such projects have not been funded. The data analysed led to the identification of the premises and factors that have positively or negatively influenced the extent of the funding programmes' contribution to education and may influence it in future funding periods. The management of funded programmes in the future phase will have more data and will be better informed, so that they can remove constraints and factors affecting a smooth implementation of projects, thus increasing the degree of control over the effectiveness of financial investments in education and increasing the chances to contribute significantly to the achievement of strategic objectives in the field of education.

The period chosen for the evaluation was 2014-2022, an important stage in the evolution of Romanian education that has undergone a series of changes initiated under the reform proposed by Law 1/2011, but whose implementation is considered to have been inconsistent until 2013, with several measures being implemented partially or not at all. Optimism about achieving the targets set by the Europe 2020 agenda has not been confirmed. Experts believe that to increase the impact of

funding on education, it is not enough to improve the strategic framework alone, but it is also necessary to ensure an impact-friendly context and to regulate the system at all levels, as the existence of gaps in the regulatory framework for the mechanisms of the education system negatively affects the implementation of projects and the expected effects.

The research approach was guided by the question: what has been the impact of EU funding on education?

Given the research question and the main purpose of this study, the research objectives were set:

O1. To outline the image that EU-funded education programmes in Romania in the period 2014–2022 have among teachers and to identify links between the image of EU-funded education programmes and various independent research variables, such as experience in project implementation and the development region in which schools are located. (Q1,Q7,Q17)

O2. Determine the extent to which, in the opinion of teachers, EU-funded projects in Romania have had an impact on elements of the educational marketing environment (economic, technological, legislative, cultural, demographic environment). (Q2)

O3. To measure the degree of access to EU-funded educational projects and establish links between the degree of access to funding projects and various independent research variables such as the environment of residence and the development region in which schools are located. (Q7, Q16, Q17)

O4. Identify the target groups targeted by projects implemented in schools. (Q8)

O5. Determine the extent to which, in the opinion of teachers with more than 3 years seniority in the school evaluated, improvements have been made over the period 2014–2022 in:

- the socio-economic situation of pupils; (Q4)
- the educational process; (Q5)
- infrastructure and educational offers. (Q6)

O6. Determine the extent to which different developments in aspects characterising progress in education can be attributed to the intervention of funding programmes.

O6.1. Determine the extent to which there are significant differences between the means obtained for aspects illustrating the socio-economic situation of pupils in the assessments made by teachers in schools where EU-funded projects have been implemented and those where no such projects have been implemented. (Q4, Q7)

O6.2. Determine the extent to which there are significant differences between the mean scores for aspects illustrating the educational process in the assessments made by teachers in schools where EU-funded projects have been implemented and those where such projects have not been implemented. (Q5, Q7)

O6.3. Determine the extent to which there are significant differences between the averages obtained for aspects illustrating the educational infrastructure and provision in the evaluations made by teachers in schools where EU-funded projects have been implemented and those where no such projects have been implemented. (Q6, Q7)

O7. Identify the most obvious effects of the implementation of EU-funded projects on education from the perspective of teachers. (Q11)

O8. Identify teachers' views on how to distribute the impact of the implementation of EU-funded projects on three components targeted by the funding programmes: pupils' educational performance, teachers' skills and motivation, and schools' infrastructure and facilities. (Q12)

O9. Identify the activities/outcomes that teachers consider necessary for future EU-funded education projects. (Q13, Q14)

O10. Identify the determinants (urban/rural school environment, development region, school's location according to the economic situation of the families from which pupils come) of differences of opinion on the appropriateness of activities/outcomes in future projects. (Q13, Q16, Q17, Q18)

O10.1 Identify the link between teachers' views on the appropriateness of future project activities/outcomes and the urban/rural environment in which the school is located. (Q13, Q16)

O10.2. Identify the link between teachers' views on the desirability of future project activities/outcomes and the degree of deprivation of the school. (Q13, Q18)

O10.3. Identify the differences between teachers' views on the appropriateness of activities/outcomes in future projects according to the region of development. (Q13, Q17)

O11. Identify mechanisms that facilitate or hinder access to EU funding programmes for the implementation of educational projects. (Q15)

The most appropriate research method to achieve the objectives of the thesis was considered to be quantitative, descriptive marketing research, carried out using a survey method among teachers who teach primary, secondary and high school classes in Romania.

The research population was teachers, who teach in pre-university education in Romania, excluding pre-school education. The sample size was 1220 persons which resulted in a maximum error of 2.8%.

Two random sampling methods were used to determine the schools from which teachers were selected, namely the proportionate stratified sampling method and simple random sampling. As it was desired to juxtapose as closely as possible the situation of the population under investigation, the sample structure was set to be close to that of the population in terms of the location of the school in which the interviewed teacher teaches in rural or urban areas and in terms of the level of education that the school offers (primary/gymnasium schools and high schools/colleges/technical schools). Next, the simple random method was used to randomly select the schools to which invitations to participate in the research and the link to the questionnaire was sent. After the invitation was sent, schools that did not respond to the invitation were contacted by telephone. As it was not possible to implement a random sampling method to select the responding teachers from the selected schools, a non-random sampling method, i.e. the volunteer-based method, was used at this stage.

Validation of the sample in terms of its representativeness, in terms of the characteristics of the education levels, taught and residence backgrounds, was carried out using the Student's t-test for comparing differences between percentages applied with the IBM SPSS system. No sample adjustment was required.

The research questionnaire was written so that it could be self-administered by the subjects. A total of 21 questions were formulated and measured with different types of scales to ensure that the hypotheses were tested and that the analysis of the answers obtained could lead to the achievement of the proposed aim of the research.

Data collection was carried out from 31 March to 1 May 2023, using the computer-assisted interviewing (CAWI) method (idSurvey, 2023), which is frequently used in current research due to the multiple advantages it offers (Tomaselli, et al., 2022; Marques, 2022; Kagerbauer, Manz, & Zumkeller, 2013). The questionnaire was designed in Google Forms, this being the economical data collection modality recommended to build large databases so that research hypotheses can be tested.

The data thus obtained were exported to Excel and then to IBM SPSS - Statistical Package for Social Sciences, version 28.0.1.0 (15), the software used for advanced analysis.

As a result of the analysis carried out on the collected data, it can be concluded that relevant information was obtained which led to the fulfilment of the purpose of this research, which was to find out the opinions of Romanian education teachers on the impact of the projects funded by the European Union in Romania, in the period 2014-2022, in the field of education and their proposals regarding the appropriate activities and expected results in future projects. All the research objectives were met and the results largely confirm the hypotheses formulated.

The image of EU-funded education programmes among teachers in terms of the aspects analysed is satisfactory to good. Most importantly from the perspective of teachers, the funding programmes have led to investments that local administrations could not afford. Respondents also agree that the funding programmes have facilitated access to educational resources and will bring long-term benefits to the education system, but have been less successful in solving problems in the Romanian education system, which indicates a constant need for support and investment in the education system. By comparing the results obtained from teachers coming from schools where such projects have been implemented with those obtained from teachers from schools where no EU-funded education projects have been implemented, it can be stated that the image of EU-funded education projects is better among teachers belonging to the first category. (O1)

Linking the results obtained with the elements of the marketing environment, it can be stated that EU-funded projects have brought most improvements to the elements of the technological environment through investments in innovation and the socio-cultural environment through actions that have led to reduced discrimination, increased civic engagement and social cohesion. At the same time, EU-funded education programmes have contributed to strengthening the economic environment by improving infrastructure, facilitating economic development and increasing the competitiveness of the labour force, the demographic environment through objectives that have led to sustainable development and sustainability, and the legislative environment by improving legislation and education policies. (O2)

The analysis shows that 75.7% of the respondents come from schools where grant projects have been implemented. It was also shown that there is a link between the degree of access to funding projects and the area of residence of the school and between the degree of access to funding projects and the development region of the school. (O3)

Most of the projects were addressed to all categories of pupils which shows a non-discriminatory position in terms of the target groups targeted by the projects. The lowest percentage was achieved by the target group of high achievers. (O4)

The main elements on which education programmes have acted have been grouped into three categories: improvements in the socio-economic situation of pupils, the educational process and the educational infrastructure and provision. Respondents' ratings indicate that the greatest progress was made in the area of educational infrastructure and provision, which scored 3,822 points on a scale of 1

(the situation got very much worse) to 5 (the situation improved a lot), followed by the educational process with 3,398 points and then the category of improvements in the socio-economic situation of pupils with 3,219 points.

Although the evolution of the aspects analysed for the category "improvements in the socio-economic situation of pupils" was not spectacular, the results nevertheless indicate a slight positive evolution. The only aspect that remained constant was the juvenile crime rate. The results for the aspects under the category 'educational process' also show a slightly positive development, with the best development for school enrolment. As regards the aspects included in the category "educational infrastructure and provision" respondents consider that for the most part, the situation has improved, with the best score being obtained for the competencies of teaching staff. (O5)

Comparative analysis of the opinions of teachers from schools where EU-funded projects have been implemented with those from schools where such projects have not been implemented shows that, for all the variables analysed that illustrate the socio-economic situation of pupils, there have been improvements as a result of the implementation of the projects, with nutrition and quality of life of pupils showing the greatest differences, the only exception being the juvenile crime rate.

Also in terms of improving the educational process, improvements were felt to a greater extent in schools where EU-funded projects were implemented than in schools where such projects were not implemented, especially in terms of pupil satisfaction and pupil engagement.

Also, all the aspects analysed concerning the situation of schools in terms of infrastructure and educational offers, showed increases that were higher in schools where EU-funded projects were implemented, highlighting aspects related to infrastructure (construction, renovations), facilities (equipment, working materials, etc.) and educational offer (curricula, curriculum, etc.). (O6)

Through an open question, respondents were asked to name the three most important effects of the implementation of EU-funded projects on education. The most mentioned were: the development of the material base, improved access to education, better training and motivation of teaching staff, innovation, exchange of experience and school-parent relations. (O7)

To find out the teachers' opinions on how the impact of the implementation of EU-funded projects on these three components was distributed, a question was asked using a constant sum proportional scale, with respondents scoring 100 points on the three aspects of the impact of EU-funded educational projects in the school represented. The means obtained indicate a relatively even distribution of the impact of the implementation of EU-funded projects on these components. The highest score was obtained by pupils' educational performance with an average of 34.77 points, closely followed by teachers' skills and motivation with 33.29 points. In the last position, but with a score very close to the former, was the school's infrastructure and facilities with 31.89 points. (O8)

Another objective of the research was to obtain information to help guide decision-makers on the activities/outputs that future projects should support. To achieve this objective, research participants indicated the extent to which they consider a range of activities and outputs to be necessary for future projects. Among the most appreciated proposals were motivation programmes for outstanding performers, psychological counselling, provision of workshops for practical activities and organisation of study trips. Unexpectedly, contrary to expectations, the proposals that were considered least necessary were the provision of snacks (fruit, dairy, etc.) and hot meals. (O9)

However, a detailed analysis of the results showed that those who ranked activities such as providing hot meals or snacks last were respondents representing urban schools, while the situation was different for rural teachers who ranked such programmes as a priority.

The analysis shows that the economic situation of the families from which pupils come has a significant influence on teachers' opinions on the appropriateness of accessing activities/outcomes in future projects for the following variables: Providing hot meals, Providing snacks (fruit, dairy, etc.), Psychological counselling programmes, Hygiene and health education programmes, Training activities in the use of modern technologies, Programmes aimed at reducing discrimination, Programmes aimed at environmental education, Establishment/endowment of libraries, Educational programmes such as "School after school", Joint parent-child activities, Financial incentives, scholarships, Renovations, Provision of workshops for practical activities, Sports hall, Dining hall, Better provision of the school with ICT, Teacher training activities. All of these are to a greater extent considered appropriate by teachers representing schools where pupils from economically disadvantaged families study.

It has also been shown that there is a link between the area of development and views on the importance of funding activities in schools, with teachers in different regions having different views on this issue. There is only one activity which is at the top of the preferences in all eight regions, namely the implementation of motivation programmes for high achievers. Another activity considered important for teachers in several regions is the provision of workshops for practical activities. Other activities valued were psychological counselling programmes, study trips, better equipping of schools with information and communication technology, financial incentives/bursaries and motivation programmes for teachers based on performance. (O10)

Another objective of the research was to examine the mechanisms that can facilitate or hinder access to EU funding programmes. The results of the research show that teachers believe that the conditions for implementing educational projects are favourable. School management structures are willing to take responsibility for starting such projects and staff have the necessary skills to implement educational projects. The only issue where the research participants remain undecided concerns support from the government. (O11)

The results obtained in this research complement the information in the literature on this topic, through a comparative analysis from the perspective of teachers in schools where EU-funded projects have been implemented with those in schools where no such projects have been funded. The analysis led to the identification of the premises and factors that positively or negatively influenced the extent of the contribution of funding programmes to education. The analysis also provides the management of the funded programmes with new data and information that can lead to the removal of constraints and factors affecting the smooth implementation of projects and increase the chances that funded projects will make a significant contribution to the achievement of strategic objectives in the field of education.

The main limitation of the research presented is generated by the sample structure, which, although it has been validated in terms of independent variables such as the location of schools in urban/rural environments and the level of education they offer, validation has not been sought in terms of more explanatory variables such as location in different development regions. Also, although the sampling methods applied were random for the selection of schools, the actual selection of respondents from each school was carried out through a non-random sampling method. Also, due to

the large number of non-responses, the results are likely to be affected. Because of these issues, extrapolation of the results to the research population should be viewed with caution.

Although there are some limitations, the paper makes valuable empirical contributions to the study of measuring the impact of funding on the development of the education system in Romania. These contributions lead to a deeper understanding and provide valuable information on the effects of funding projects and programmes on different aspects of the education system, add new information to the existing body of knowledge and provide a basis for further research development in this field.

## **Chapter 5. INDICATORS AND ACTIVITIES FOR INCREASING THE IMPACT OF EU-FUNDED EDUCATION PROJECTS**

Evaluating the impact of education funding through EU-supported projects can be carried out using several methods and tools, but the evaluation process itself involves costs and resources. For this reason, interested subjects must have at their disposal appropriate tools that can be easily used.

Evaluations can be differentiated according to their final purpose. To provide feedback and information for adjustments during the course of the project, monitoring should be a continuous process that includes tracking the implementation of activities and resource allocation, reporting regularly on progress, identifying potential problems and obstacles, etc. For an evaluation focused on the effectiveness of each project, evaluation should be carried out by collecting and analysing relevant data at least two distinct points in time, i.e. before and after project implementation by monitoring specific indicators. To improve subsequent interventions and policies, evaluation should include comparative studies (between projects, funding programmes, regions, countries, etc.) and with benchmarks and indicators.

The present research focused on identifying, outlining and structuring guidelines of indicators that can provide an evaluation framework to measure the effectiveness of each project, this evaluation system being one of the contributions of the thesis to the state of knowledge. Based on the results of the research carried out in this thesis, three directions of the impact of funding at the school level have been identified in which indicators that can measure the impact of funding on the education system in Romania can be established and calculated. These directions are:

(1) A first strand focuses on improvements in the socio-economic situation of pupils, in terms of the following aspects: poverty level of pupils' families, social inequalities, juvenile crime rate, pupils' nutrition, degree of discrimination, pupils' ability to find a job, where appropriate, pupils' quality of life, pupils' health status, with the research confirming the reliability of the internal consistency of these aspects. This can be an important way of characterising the impact of funding at the micro-economic/personal level, as well as assessing the quality of an education system.

(2) Another strand of impact focuses on improvements in the educational process in terms of the following aspects of educational improvement: learning achievement, school enrolment, absenteeism, dropout, student satisfaction, student engagement, results in national assessments and examinations, and the reliability of the internal consistency of these aspects has been confirmed.

(3) The third impact strand focuses on improvements to infrastructure and educational provision in terms of infrastructure (construction, renovation), facilities (equipment, materials, etc.), educational provision (curricula, curriculum, etc.), procedures and working methods, family-school relations, teaching staff skills, school management performance. Again, the reliability of the internal consistency of these aspects is confirmed.

For each aspect to be evaluated within the indicator strands, evaluation methods and tools have been proposed, a series of activities that can be implemented in such a way as to lead to improvement of the indicators and a system of impact evaluation by comparing the results at two different points in time, i.e. before and after the implementation of the proposed activities.

## **GENERAL CONCLUSIONS**

This thesis provides a comprehensive understanding of the impact of EU-funded education funding on education in Romania, highlighting the impact that the implementation of EU-funded programmes can have on education as well as how improvements can be made to future programmes so that they represent real support for the achievement of the Europe 2020 targets for the Romanian education system, thus contributing to the improvement of knowledge in the field.

The research methods and tools planned and applied during the doctoral studies included: desk research, statistical analysis, case study, qualitative research using the focus group interview method, quantitative research using the survey method and analysis of impact factors in the mechanism of achieving the results. Finally, the research results are exploited, providing education management structures and other stakeholders with a complex system of indicator guidelines that can be used for self-diagnosis (before the implementation of projects, so that the most appropriate activities can be funded) and for evaluating the impact of the intervention after the implementation of projects. The paper also provides a comprehensive list of activities, linked to the 22 proposed indicators for measuring results, that could be implemented to increase the impact of funding.

The literature review revealed that education plays a key role in the European Union in achieving common goals, contributing to the individual and personal development of citizens, economic growth, social cohesion and overall progress. By nurturing competencies, developing socio-emotional skills and promoting democratic values and diversity, education can become a key tool in building the 'European Education Area' (Consiliul Uniunii Europene, 2018). With the enlargement of the European Union, reducing disparities between member countries has been a permanent concern at the EU level. As early as the 1970s, the need for assistance to less developed regions was emphasized (Becker, Egger, & Ehrlich, 2018) to ensure the functioning of the EU single market. Thus, European regional policies as well as structural and investment funds have steadily developed, with the intensity of financial aid varying according to regional needs (Aivazidou, Cunico, & Mollona, 2020; Santamarta, et al., 2021).

In today's context where many challenges (such as globalisation, demographic decline, labour mobility, population migration, increasing importance of renewable energy, climate change) cross-national, institutional and political boundaries and society and individuals are faced with new and demanding realities. Globally, competition between countries is focused on human capital and knowledge advantage. Thus, the focus at the country level shifts from providing basic education to providing knowledge education.

The importance of evaluating the impact of EU-funded education programmes is twofold. On the one hand, the funder wants to know the effectiveness of the investment made, on the other hand, knowing the impact is essential for improving future programmes so that they represent real support for the achievement of the targets concerning the education system in Romania assumed by the Europe 2020 agenda.

For the 2014-2020 programmes, the EU has consistently stressed the need for impact assessments. Research methods have been proposed and rules stipulated on how to carry out formal evaluations.

Interest in evaluating the impact of future funding programmes is also clearly expressed. In this regard, an agreement exists between the Ministry of European Investment and Projects and the International Bank for improving monitoring and evaluation capacity for repayable technical assistance services in the context of EU-funded programmes in Romania (2021- 2027), under which a guide for the preparation of evaluation plans related to operational programmes funded by the Cohesion Policy 2021-2027 in Romania has been developed. The EU Cohesion Policy regulations on the conduct of evaluations suggest some general guidelines but do not provide details on the type of evaluations that should be carried out. Member States are encouraged to implement their evaluation policies, with a high degree of freedom regarding evaluation.

The marketing research in this thesis started with an analysis of secondary data aimed at identifying the features of the most important EU-funded education programmes in Romania at various levels of education, from early education to compulsory education. The results showed that they had a consistent budget and focused on improving educational infrastructure and services, equitable access, reducing school drop-out, combating school segregation and promoting social inclusion.

The next research carried out within the thesis aimed to understand the real effects of complementary school programmes on pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds in primary and secondary education through a case study, represented by the project implemented in the Voila commune under the name "I learn, I play, I am happy at school!". The analysis of the results revealed statistically significant differences between the averages obtained in the two measurement moments, before the start of the project and after at least two semesters of its implementation, for all the 8 main groups of variables analysed: health and personal hygiene, communication in the mother tongue, mathematical and basic science and technology skills, digital skills, ability to learn, social and civic skills, initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and expression, and reduction of school absenteeism. In all the key areas investigated, including absenteeism, pupils showed significant increases in performance after project implementation, confirming the positive impact of the financial intervention.

The investigations in this thesis continued with qualitative research carried out through focus group interviews among managers and teachers in several Romanian schools involved in the implementation of EU-funded projects. The results largely confirmed the conclusions presented in the literature. The modernisation of the Romanian education system is a complex process, involving cultural, social and economic aspects and requiring the involvement of policymakers, specialists and the general public. Research results have shown that the impact of funding is concentrated in three areas: socio-economic aspects directly affecting students, the educational process and the development of educational infrastructure and provision. At the same time, research participants proposed specific activities for future funded education projects that would increase the impact of funding and aim to remove barriers that prevent disadvantaged pupils from accessing education.

The next study carried out in the framework of the thesis captured the opinions of Romanian teachers on the impact of EU-funded projects in Romania in the field of education in a survey based on a sample of 1220 respondents. In general, they were satisfactory or good, confirming the research

hypotheses. An important aspect highlighted by respondents was that these funding programmes have enabled investments that local governments could not otherwise have made. Teachers also agreed that the funding programmes have facilitated access to educational resources and will bring long-term benefits to the education system, but the results also indicate that the funding programmes have not completely solved the problems in the Romanian education system, and there is a constant need for support and investment in this area. By comparing the results obtained from teachers in schools where EU-funded projects were implemented with those obtained from teachers in schools where such projects were not implemented, it was found that the image of EU-funded education projects is better among teachers belonging to the first category. One of the objectives of the research was to identify the mechanisms that can facilitate or hinder access to EU funding programmes. According to the results of the research, teachers believe that there are favourable conditions for the implementation of educational projects. School management structures are willing to take responsibility for initiating such projects and staff have the necessary skills to implement them. The only uncertainty expressed by the research participants concerns support from the government. The results of the research also provide information to guide decision-makers on the activities and results they should support in future projects. Among the proposals appreciated are motivation programmes for outstanding students, psychological counselling, equipping schools with workshops for practical activities and organising field trips. The analysis shows that there is a significant relationship between certain independent, explanatory variables such as geographical area, urban/rural environment where the school is located, degree of deprivation by the economic status of the families from which the pupils come and opinions on the importance of funding certain activities in schools. For example, respondents who rank activities such as providing hot meals or snacks last represent schools in urban areas where there are few or no disadvantaged children, while the situation is different for teachers in rural areas or in schools with a large number of pupils from low socio-economic backgrounds, who consider such programmes a priority. These results indicate that the allocation of resources for the implementation of education programmes should be differentiated, taking into account the needs of the target group, so as not to waste resources on implementing programmes for a target group for which support is not needed and to concentrate efforts on narrower segments of beneficiaries who need help. There is only one activity that is in the top preferences in all eight regions and that is the implementation of motivation programmes for high achievers. Other popular activities include psychological counselling programmes, field trips, equipping schools with information and communication technology, financial incentives/grants and performance-based motivation programmes for teachers. At the same time, a large number of proposals for activities and results needed in the schools represented by the research participants were obtained, which could be funded by future programmes to increase the impact of financial interventions.

The research carried out in this paper has several limitations imposed by various causes such as the ratio between the amount of information available and that needed to measure the phenomena analysed, the specificity of the research methods, and the resources available to carry out the research. The impact analysis was limited to the effects produced and observable at the time of the research, but in the case of education projects, the likelihood of producing effects on the beneficiaries is long-term and therefore greater than the effects observed and analysed at the time of the research. At the same time, the research was limited to capturing issues related to primary, secondary and high school education.

## PERSONAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND DISSEMINATION OF RESULTS

The literature generously addresses the issue of education from the perspective of funding, costs and effectiveness of funded programmes and projects, but there are still unexplored facets, and the research carried out in this paper has provided additional information to complement the state of knowledge in the field.

In the first stage of the research, the current level of knowledge in the field was examined and, building on the main achievements of published researchers, the key theoretical aspects from a marketing perspective applicable to the field of education funding were highlighted in their way. This phase involved a systematic literature review by consulting approximately 220 bibliographic sources, including scientific publications from international databases such as Science Direct, Scopus, Elsevier, Web of Science, Springer, and ProQuest, as well as papers presented at international conferences (Edulearn, ISEG, etc.), articles and books relevant to the field researched. Drawing from numerous studies that have focused on the same range of issues, concepts from the field of education have been adapted to fit the specificity of the education system influenced by EU-funded programmes. In addition, limitations of the reviewed research have been identified to build on them in the research conducted in the paper.

An analysis of the Romanian education funding programmes for preschool and compulsory education implemented in Romania in the period 2014-2021 was carried out and concluded with a summary presentation of the main features.

The case of a project funded by the European Union, implemented in two disadvantaged schools in Brasov county, was studied and the extent to which the complementary programmes funded by the European Union had a positive impact on the educational path of the pupils was evaluated. The extent of the impact of the implemented complementary programmes on the pupils' school results as well as on other aspects such as health and personal hygiene, social and civic competencies, initiative, entrepreneurship and culture was measured using an experimental scheme approached originally. Recommendations were also made on the best practices for reducing the achievement gap between students with socioeconomic difficulties and those from families with high socio-economic resources.

The main benefits of EU-funded education projects for Romanian schools were identified using focus group interviews with teaching, administrative and managerial staff in the schools where they were implemented and project proposals for future education funding schemes in Romania were summarised.

Through a survey of teaching staff, an analysis of Romanian primary, secondary and high school education in the context of the impact of EU financial intervention was carried out. Differences of opinion were identified between teachers in schools that benefited from EU-funded projects and those teaching in schools that did not have EU financial support, regarding the evolution of some defining aspects of education. In detail, the following personal contributions have been made through this research:

- The image of EU-funded education programmes in Romania in the period 2014-2022 among teachers was outlined and several links between the image of EU-funded education programmes and various independent research variables, such as project

implementation experience and the development region in which schools are located, were identified.

- It has been shown that to improve the overall picture of financial intervention, authorities need to focus their efforts on promoting how EU-funded education projects solve general problems in the education system and bring long-term benefits, and less on issues such as meeting targets or supporting investments that local governments could not afford.
- The extent to which, in the opinion of teachers, EU-funded projects in Romania had an impact on elements of the educational marketing environment (economic, technological, legislative, cultural, demographic environment) was determined.
- The degree of access to EU-funded educational projects was measured and the links between the degree of access to funding projects and various independent research variables were established.
- The extent to which projects implemented in schools targeted specific target groups was identified.
- It was shown that in the opinion of teachers with more than 3 years of seniority in the evaluated school, improvements were made in the period 2014-2022 regarding the socio-economic situation of pupils, the educational process, infrastructure and educational offer.
- It has been demonstrated that there are significant differences between the means obtained for aspects illustrating the socio-economic status of students, the educational process, infrastructure, and educational offerings from evaluations conducted by teachers in schools where EU-funded projects have been implemented and those where such projects have not been implemented.
- The most obvious effects of implementing EU-funded projects on education from the perspective of teaching staff have been identified and presented.
- Teachers' opinions on the distribution of the impact of implementing EU-funded projects on three components targeted by funding programs: students' educational performance, teachers' skills and motivation, and school infrastructure and facilities, have been highlighted.
- The activities/results that teachers believe are necessary for future EU-funded educational projects have been presented.
- The determining factors (the environment of origin, the development region, the school's classification according to the economic situation of the families from which the students come) of the differences of opinion regarding the opportunity of activities/results in future projects have been identified.
- The differences in appreciation regarding the opportunity of activities/results in future projects depending on the environment of origin, depending on the degree of disadvantage of the school based on the socio-economic situation of the students in classes, and depending on the development region, have been identified.
- The mechanisms that facilitate or impede access to EU funding programs for the implementation of educational projects have been identified.

The survey-based investigation, conducted after reviewing the specialized literature, case study, and qualitative research conducted using the focus group method, allowed the assessment of the degree of data convergence and increased the level of complementarity of the work. This also facilitated the extension of findings at the level of an expanded sample and the identification of divergences between the results obtained through different research methods.

In the end, the research results were exploited by proposing to the educational management structures a complex system of indicator directions that can be used for self-diagnosis to choose the most suitable activities for achieving objectives and for evaluating the impact of funding, post-implementation.

At the same time, the paper proposes a complex list of possible activities correlated with the 22 indicators for measuring results in the educational system. These activities can be used in the drafting stage of funding applications for educational projects or can be implemented as such in schools when unsatisfactory results are found for certain indicators..

### *Dissemination of results*

The results obtained from the conducted research led to the formulation of relevant conclusions, which were brought to the attention of the academic community through the publication of five articles in specialized journals (one in an ISI-indexed journal, four in international databases) and four participations in international conferences. The publication of the obtained results can enrich the specialized literature and can contribute to guiding decision-makers towards measures that can reduce gaps in the sustainable development of education and can increase the impact of financial interventions from the European Union on the Romanian educational system.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

The author has identified the following future research directions that could help overcome some limitations of existing research and could explore in-depth the topic addressed:

Expansion of the analysis on how educational projects are influenced by elements of the marketing environment and how, in turn, these have an impact on the marketing environment.

In-depth analysis of how EU financial interventions through educational projects impact elements of the educational marketing mix.

Expansion of the analysis on programs and projects implemented within the European Union and comparing the situation in Romania with other member states. This approach would allow a broader understanding of the impact and effectiveness of these programs, as well as the identification of best practices and possible directions of development in the field of education funding in Romania.

Longitudinal or chronological studies that target the impact of EU funding on school performance over extended periods. This type of analysis could provide a complex perspective on the programs and projects through which the European Union financially supports education.

Research targeting the impact of EU financial interventions on higher education in Romania.

Analysis of the sustainability and transferability of EU-funded projects, by evaluating the extent to which the projects have had a lasting impact and have been efficiently transferred into current educational practice after the cessation of EU financial intervention.

Detailed analysis of the factors that contributed to the success or failure of project implementation.

Expanding the analysis from the perspective of principal traits at the level of all educational funding programs implemented in Romania.

Extending studies on target groups formed by the end beneficiaries of funding (preschoolers/students/undergraduates) and parents.

Analysis of the transferability of projects considered "examples of good practices" or "successful" from certain EU countries to Romania, considering the cultural and socio-economic particularities.

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