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THE EVOLUTION OF SUPPORT SCHEMES FOR DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF STUDENTS

A b s t r a c t

During the Communist regime, Romania implemented support schemes for various student groups under Law No. 11/1968 and Law nr. 28/1978. Like other socialist countries, Romania altered its policies on higher education access in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This led to a move from "redistributive egalitarianism" to "meritocratic egalitarianism" (White 1981, 2) in order to align with the goals of "democratization in higher education" (Pașca and Cazan 2013, 252).

A significant landmark was reached in the academic year of 1961/1962 when tuition fees were abolished (Sadlak 1990, 32). Subsequently, the Council of Ministers' Decision (HCM) no. 1054/1962 established scholarships for full-time students based on academic performance, attendance, and discipline—these scholarships provided for food allowances, especially at student restaurants and accommodation in university dormitories. Additionally, scholarships theoretically covered some personal expenses, with various categories available.

As of the start of 1990, the infrastructure for student facilities in dormitories and canteens had undergone expansion and remains integral to the current infrastructure. Additionally, the support system for students continued to have equally important components, which may be categorized as follows:

- *Allocation of free study places in public universities.*
- *Scholarships for full-time students from public universities.*
- *Subsidization of student housing and restaurants in public universities.*
- *Deduction for national rail transportation.*
- *Deduction for local transportation for students enrolled in public universities.*

Additionally, students have received further facilities such as a significant discount at cultural facilities or seasonal designated camps (mainly in summer).

The legislation was fluent across the years. For instance, let us take the example of deductions for rail transport. The first version of Education Law no. 84/1995 initially provided only one round-trip journey home per year per student (and could also be used on motor or naval transport). After protests, students received a 50% deduction for motor, rail, or naval transport all year, as orphan students or those institutionalised in foster care received 100%. Government Decision (GD) no. 309/1996 provided that all students benefited from this right regardless of study cycle or age.

However, Ministerial Order (MO) no. 4055/1996 provided rail transport facilities only for full-time students from public universities, excluding those from private accredited education, imposing the first restriction on this right of students. By Emergency Ordinance (OUG) no. 32/2001, travel tickets were introduced for every pupil and student in Romania, making the administrative procedure for exercising the student's right to a 50% discount on rail and metro transport more difficult. By GD no. 1367/2003, restrictions were introduced on the students who can benefit from this right (only those in state education, full-time courses), as well as on the number of trips (only 24/calendar year) and the types of the trains for which they can be used (only *tren personal* and *tren accelerat type*, not *tren rapid*). OMECT no. 5572/2003 introduced new age restrictions, limiting the right to benefit from the discount only to students up to 26 years of age.

National Education Law No 1/2011 changed the policies on subsidising domestic rail transport, stipulating that all students, regardless of age or educational background, should benefit from a minimum 50% discount on all rail transport, regardless of category. By OUG no. 117/2013, restrictions were again introduced by limiting the right to a 50% discount for travel by rail to students enrolled in full-time education aged up to 26 years.

A significant change was made by OUG no. 2/2017, which granted free of charge, regardless of age, to all students enrolled in full-time education in accredited higher education institutions for domestic rail transport on all categories of trains (second class). The change was revised through OUG no. 8/2021, as it was limited to 50%, only until 26 years. The last significant change occurred through Law on Higher Education no. 199/2023, as all full-time students benefit from a 90% discount for rail transportation until they are 30.

An important aspect concerning support schemes for various student categories encompassed the provision of scholarships. A retrospective analysis, conducted in the context of several domestic economic indicators, aimed to gauge their effectiveness. However, limitations in data availability, particularly for the initial years following the enactment of the National Education Law No. 1/2011, resulted in only a partial overview being obtained.

Over the years, the number of social-based scholarships demonstrated variability, with a notable peak occurring around the 2016-2017 academic year. Initially, the number of merit-based scholarships decreased, but an increase was observed in more recent years. Similarly, performance-based scholarships fluctuated, with a significant peak around the 2019-2020 academic year.

Data sourced from the Ministry of Education and UEFISCDI, spanning the academic years 2015/2016 to 2021/2022, revealed that the average number of social-based scholarships was approximately 26,384, ranging from a minimum of 18,940 to a maximum of 36,324. On average, around 60,661 performance-based scholarships were granted annually, fluctuating between 48,608 and 93,941. The annual average of the total number of scholarships stood at around 90,330. The Ministry of Education allocated an average total of approximately 588.2 million lei for scholarships, while the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) contribution averaged around 684.5 million lei.

The total funds allocated for scholarships by the Ministry of Education generally increased over the years, with minor fluctuations noted. Similarly, the total amount allocated by HEIs also saw an upward trend, particularly after the 2015-2016 academic year. The total student population, encompassing Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral

studies, remained relatively stable until around the 2018-2019 academic year, after which a noticeable increase was observed.

A strong positive correlation (0.8944) was found between the total number of social-based and merit-based scholarships, indicating that as one increased, so did the other. Conversely, the total number of performance-based scholarships displayed a robust negative correlation with both social-based scholarships (-0.6035) and merit-based scholarships (-0.8509), suggesting a potential trade-off between these types of scholarships.

Preliminary conclusions indicated that, despite the increasing funds earmarked for scholarship budgets primarily from the Ministry of Education (MoE), the proportion of social-based scholarships in the total number of students (bachelor's and master's degrees) declined after a period of increase, reaching a maximum of 8.4% in 2019/2020 and subsequently falling below 6%. A significant factor was the reduced contribution of HEIs to the scholarship fund, dropping from 34.4% in 2015/2016 to 6.7% in 2021/2022, failing to keep pace with the growth rate of MoE scholarship funds.

The increase in performance-based scholarships, at the expense of social-based ones, highlighted a potential 'trade-off'. Although the MoE promoted social-based scholarships post-2017 through legislation, this was not actualized due to financial constraints or rationale. Economically, the percentage of the minimum social scholarship proposed by CNFIS (not compulsory until 2023) relative to the net minimum wage in the economy decreased annually, from 62.49% in 2016 to just over 50% in 2022. The new Law on Higher Education No. 199/2023 established a link between allocating MoE funds for scholarship funding and the minimum wage.