

THE RELEVANCE OF PARTNERSHIPS IN ROMANIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: THEORETICAL APPROACHES

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ABSTRACT: *This paper analyses the relevance of partnerships in the context of the Romanian higher education system, highlighting how inter-institutional collaboration has become a fundamental pillar for academic modernization. In the first stage, the research explores the specific legal framework for partnerships in this field, theoretical perspectives, which examines the university-socio-economic environment interaction models, emphasizing the shift towards the "third mission" of the university - the commitment to regional development and innovation. The specific typologies of partnerships identified in the Romanian space are analysed, including collaborations with the business environment for technology transfer, partnerships for internships and research and development projects financed through European funds or national programs. Although the legislative framework provides the necessary tools for the integration of universities into the economic ecosystem, the success of these initiatives depends on the capacity of institutions to develop flexible governance mechanisms. The conclusions of the paper emphasize that partnership is not just a formal requirement, but an essential condition for increasing the quality of education and the rate of insertion of graduates into the labour market in accordance with the current dynamics of Romanian society.*

KEY WORDS: *institutional partnerships, Romanian higher education, educational strategies, legal regulation, university alliances.*

JEL CLASSIFICATIONS: *A29, I21, I29, K10.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In Romania, with the accession to the European Union structures, the development of partnerships between non-governmental organizations and private companies became necessary at the national level, and at the international level, the affiliation and development of intra-sectoral partnerships, between Romanian non-governmental organizations and between them and European ones.

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Some studies have analysed the content and essential characteristics of the partnership, identifying its basic principles and their role in the internal system of ensuring the quality of education in a higher education institution, while also indicating significant barriers in the implementation process, as well as methods of cooperation between enterprises, organizations and higher education institutions, groups of partnership forms and partnership models of business structures and universities (Chovriy, et.al., 2024; Ciurea, 2019).

Over time, some researchers have also focused on the role of universities in local innovation ecosystems, through whose involvement they contribute to promoting social, economic and technological development in the cities that host them (Hințea, et.al., 2022; Cristea, 2013).

In this sense, partnership in Romanian higher education represents a strategic pillar for academic modernization and economic development, being regulated by the Higher Education Law no. 199/2023. These collaborations are structured in three main *directions*:

✓ *the university-business environment relationship*: higher education institutions collaborate with the private sector through advisory boards to adapt study programs to the demands of the labour market. An important example is dual higher education, which allows students to combine theoretical studies with paid practice within partner companies.

✓ *university alliances and consortia*: to increase competitiveness, Romanian universities form national consortia (Universitaria Consortium) and are part of European university alliances (financed through various programs. EURECA-PRO, EC2U, EUt+ EU, CONEXUS PLUS, etc. and through the Erasmus+ program). These facilitate academic mobility, joint degrees and shared use of research resources.

✓ *digitalization and research*: through the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), partnerships aim to create the center of excellence and digitalize educational processes, interconnecting universities with research institutes and European technological hubs (Ciurea, 2019).

The goal of this collaborative ecosystem is to ensure a smooth transition of graduates to relevant careers and to support innovation through technology transfer from university to society (Cristian, 2025).

Partnerships are monitored through central mechanisms managed by UEFISCDI and ARACIS, which assess the relevance of study programs in relation to the insertion of graduates into the market labour. A digital reporting system, mandatory from 2026, will ensure transparency of funding and academic results.

2. PRESENTATION THE SPECIFIC LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR PARTNERSHIPS

From the documentation carried out on the legal regulations regarding partnerships in higher education, we have extracted a series of aspects found in the following documents:

➔ *National Education Law no. 199/2023*, which regulates higher education, introduces and consolidates strategic partnerships for the development of studies (including doctoral), quality assurance, research and transition to the labor

market, through collaborations with employers, foreign universities, state institutions (ARACIS, UEFISCDI), European agencies and NGOs, aiming for relevant, modern and flexible higher education, adapted to the needs of society and the economy. In essence, this law places partnerships as a central pillar for the modernization of Romanian higher education, transforming it into a priority public interest service at national level.

→ *The Vocational Education and Training Strategy 2024-2030*, developed by the Ministry of Education, aligns Romania with European objectives, aiming at modernizing the system, increasing the relevance of qualifications, digitalization and inclusion, with a focus on correlating labor market requirements with educational offer, including vocational, technical education and adult training, in order to support the country's green and digital transition. Within the pillar: sectoral collaboration, the objective is to strengthen partnerships between schools, universities, companies and local authorities.

→ *The National Lifelong Learning Strategy 2024-2030*, aims to create a culture of lifelong learning, adapting to the needs of the labor market and developing digital and transversal skills, having as central pillars equitable access to education, system flexibility and supporting various vulnerable groups, in accordance with European objectives. One of the objectives concerns partnerships consisting of collaborations between the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labor, the business environment, NGOs and research institutions.

→ *Based on the provisions of Law no. 258/2007 on the practice of pupils and students*, the partner parties agree to collaborate in order to ensure the practice base for verifying the applicability of the professional skills acquired by the student/master's student, within the training program. All these aspects are provided for in the framework agreements concluded between universities and economic or public entities where the internship is to be carried out.

3. CONTENT AND CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTNERSHIPS IN ROMANIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Partnership in higher education represents a complex ecosystem of collaboration, moving from simple protocols of intent to integrated governance and innovation structures. ***The content*** of the partnership considers the following:

- ✓ economic partners not only provide feedback, but also actively participate in the design of study programs through faculty advisory boards. This includes the development of optional courses supported by industry specialists;
- ✓ the extension of the dual model allows students to be employees or scholarship holders of a company while completing their studies, the partnership covering logistics, tutoring and joint assessment;
- ✓ partnerships include specific clauses for the use of university laboratories by companies for research and development (R&D), resulting in joint patents and academic spin-offs;
- ✓ access for students to state-of-the-art equipment owned by companies, in exchange for the partners' access to academic expertise and the university's research databases.

For a partnership to be considered efficient and modern, it must meet the following ***features***:

- *strategic symbiosis*: it is not a simple sponsorship, but a relationship in which the university obtains practical relevance and funding, and the partner obtains qualified human capital and solutions to complex technical problems;
- *interdisciplinarity*: partnerships are no longer limited to a single field. For example, a Faculty of Medicine collaborates with an IT company and a Faculty of Ethics to develop Artificial Intelligence solutions in health;
- *monitoring through performance indicators*: where the success of the collaboration is measured by graduate employability rates, the number of joint research projects funded and the volume of income attracted from outside the state budget;
- *digitalization of processes*: all partnership flows (contracts, internships, reporting) are managed through integrated digital platforms, facilitating transparency and reducing bureaucracy;
 - *social responsibility*: universities and their partners focus on sustainable development objectives, aiming at social inclusion and reducing the carbon footprint through community projects (Dura, et.al., 2025).

In Romania, the implementation of these partnerships is supported by updated financial and legislative mechanisms, such as:

- *regional consortia for dual education*: Funded through the PNRR, they bring together universities, technical high schools and economic operators to create complete professional routes;
- *digital innovation hubs*: partnership structures that facilitate SMEs' access to university expertise for digital transformation;
- *European university alliances*: transnational partnerships (e.g. CIVIS, UNITA, E3UDRES2) that allow Romanian students to access resources from across Europe, according to the European Universities Initiative strategy.

Partnerships between universities, the socio-economic environment and the non-governmental sector are strengthened by developing lifelong learning programs. This is achieved both by empowering the actors involved and by introducing new concepts and institutions, such as supporting student entrepreneurial societies (Nită, 2019; Șerbănică, 2011). Also, collaboration between universities and the economic environment is favored by maintaining a quality indicator in the financing methodology for undergraduate practice. Other important factors include the implementation of projects financed from the Development and Investment Fund for internships and trainings at successful companies, organizing conferences and workshops with entrepreneurs, as well as facilitating contact with potential investors.

Strengthening links between higher education and research institutions can be done by:

- ✓ *concluding active partnerships for joint study programs and research projects;*
- ✓ *supporting exchanges of experience and good practices between universities;*
- ✓ *financially supporting institutional projects to improve teaching quality and respect for academic ethics.*

To strengthen the internship system during university studies, strategies have been designed to support students, institutions and employers in career planning and in disseminating specific norms regarding internships and volunteering. In this regard, partnerships have been established to organize these internships. At the same time, the quality indicator regarding the practice was introduced in the funding methodology. By an order of the Minister of Education, the functioning of student entrepreneurial societies, structures without legal personality in accredited universities, was regulated.

They represent a mechanism for supporting the entrepreneurial spirit, addressing both students of the institution of origin and its graduates in the first three years after completing their studies.

Strategies regarding partnerships in education, training and youth aim to support the transfer of innovative practices, promote cooperation and exchange of experience at European level. These partnerships can be for supporting innovation or for the exchange of good practices, being open to all relevant fields (Măcriș & Ciurea, 2013; Niță & Isac, 2016).

Strategic partnerships for the exchange of good practices have as their main purpose to allow organizations to develop their networks and transnational capacity, as well as to share ideas and methods. They are open to any organization active in the fields of education, training, youth or socio-economic activities, including local authorities, chambers of commerce or cultural organizations (Profiroiu & Briscariu, 2021; Ghițulescu, 2017). In order to produce high-quality results, such partnerships should involve a diverse range of partners, benefiting from their specific expertise and profiles.

In the field of higher education, priority is given to actions that strengthen internationalization, mobility and links between teaching, research and innovation, in line with the EU Agenda for Higher Education and other strategic documents (Fit, et.al., 2022; Dindire, et.al., 2011). ***The objectives*** include:

- ✓ *promoting internationalization*: through the automatic recognition of qualifications and the implementation of the principles of the European Higher Education Area;
- ✓ *correcting skills gaps*: through innovative pedagogies, market labour - relevant programmes, open and digital learning, improving career guidance;
- ✓ *rewarding excellence*: by stimulating teaching staff, training in new pedagogies and developing diversified programmes, including online, linked to research and innovation;
- ✓ *supporting inclusion*: by promoting equitable access and increasing participation rates for disadvantaged groups, implementing flexible course models and encouraging civic responsibility;
- ✓ *improving data collection*: by monitoring performance, anticipating skills needed by the economy and monitoring graduates, for comparable data at European level;
- ✓ *optimized funding and governance*: by adopting efficient models that reward teaching quality and social relevance;
- ✓ *supporting the European Student Card*: to simplify mobility, reduce administrative burden and ensure secure data transfer between institutions.

In conclusion, a series of *benefits* derive from the approach of these partnerships, such as: improving the quality of education and the academic and social-behavioral skills of students, developing new technologies and practices through collaboration with the business environment, aligning the educational offer with the requirements of employers, but also *challenges* related to: the existence of differences between formal study plans and the real learning strategies of students, the need for a rigorous external evaluation of the quality of programs developed in partnership and difficulties in coordination between the various stakeholders, from teachers to company representatives.

4. SPECIFICITY OF TYPES OF PARTNERSHIPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

From the analysis carried out on the specifics of partnerships in higher education, we found that a multitude of partnerships are established at its level, based on collaboration agreements, conventions, partnership agreements or other forms of collaboration, targeting one or more of the following *directions of action*:

- partnerships for carrying out student practice;
- institutional partnerships;
- partnerships for carrying out applied research;
- partnerships for carrying out Erasmus+ mobilities;
- partnerships for the periodic review of the strategic development directions of universities;
- partnerships for organizing internships;
- partnerships for innovative learning methods (short modules, study visits, internships, summer courses, etc.);
- partnerships for the periodic review of study programs;
- partnerships for the periodic investigation of employer demand and the labor market.

The following are the main directions of action and their specifics in university education.

➲ ***Specifics of partnerships for student internships.*** A key factor in ensuring a structured framework for the implementation of internships is the creation of long-term partnerships between University and local economic entities. In addition, through dissemination sessions and focus groups that are organized, other companies that wish to offer internships for students in future collaborations will be identified. The activity of expanding the database of internship partners must be an ongoing activity for any University. Consequently, professional internships have become a necessity in the academic environment, the biggest challenge for the university these days is to ensure that the study offer meets the requirements of an increasingly competitive professional environment. The internship is carried out in order to acquire the professional skills mentioned in the internship portfolio, which is an integral part of the General Convention on the implementation of internships within bachelor's/master's programs.

➲ ***The specifics of developing institutional partnerships between upper secondary education institutions and universities*** to provide educational services adapted to categories of students at risk (including school and professional counseling and guidance of students), as well as between universities alone. This solution is a support measure for the successful implementation of other approaches proposed to reduce differences in access to higher education for young people from vulnerable categories. The aim is to provide a joint, structured and coordinated intervention between secondary schools and universities targeting vulnerable categories of young people who traditionally face barriers in accessing higher education (Măcriș & Măcriș, 2010). Therefore, ***the objectives*** of such a partnership are the following:

- developing the institutional capacity of colleges and universities to analyze equity needs, plan, design, evaluate and monitor access to education for vulnerable youth;
- creating learning spaces and exchanging challenges, resources and good practices for employees of upper secondary education institutions and universities,

companies and non-governmental organizations regarding access to education for young people belonging to vulnerable categories;

- creating a unified vision and institutional strategies for equality in education, which would ensure a smoother transition of vulnerable categories of young people from high school to university.

⇒ ***Specifics of partnerships for the periodic review of the strategic development directions of universities.*** The vision of the higher education system is to assume the role of a complex regional educational pole and advanced scientific research in economic, administrative, socio-humanitarian and technical sciences at the level of Central and South-Eastern Europe in order to provide innovative and efficient solutions for the sustainable development of society in the context of the requirements of the global economy (Niță & Fleșer, 2011). A strategic approach to the education and research process also includes the development of internationalization mechanisms, so that students and university professors are associated with the style of prestigious universities, modernity and the level of professional development. The most important initiatives in consolidating and developing international relations are the following (Măcriș & Măcriș, 2011):

- continuing and consolidating partnerships with foreign universities, intensifying the mobility of students and teaching and scientific staff, for the exchange of experience and the promotion of joint scientific research programs, as well as for participation in international scientific events;
- connecting universities with international university networks to ensure greater international recognition and intensify international cooperation;
- supporting, consolidating and developing partnerships with universities in countries surrounding Romania, for example: Serbia, Turkey, Croatia, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania, Hungary, Ukraine, Greece;
- through the ERASMUS+ program, within the internationalization process, the participation of students and teachers in education and internships abroad will be supported;
- consolidating and developing strategic partnerships with prestigious universities in Europe (especially from Germany, Great Britain and France), the USA, Russia, China, Australia and others;
- expanding the presence of representatives of the academic community in the scientific world and in international organizations to promote the image of universities;
- developing jointly managed doctoral programs for doctoral students with scientific coordinators from prestigious foreign universities. In this sense, it is significant that at the national level, since 2009, the university consortium was established, which brings together nine universities from all regions of the country and represents the most important partnership of the Romanian higher education elite, which has a significant contribution to the development of this field.

⇒ ***Specificity of partnerships in the field of applied research.*** Their purpose is to increase the competitiveness of research and development by developing solutions to socio-economic problems contained in innovative technologies, products and services implemented in partnership with research organizations, universities and economic entities. The main **objectives** of their research and development activities are (Ciurea, 2020):

- ✓ *fundamental and applied research* on economic and social development, competitiveness and innovations, the social impact of economic and social

development and the environment and resources, research focused mainly on the study and modeling of the development of phenomena characteristic of these areas over time;

✓ *modeling of economic and social phenomena* in order to predict their development in the short, medium and long term, as well as their possible economic, social and environmental consequences;

✓ *analyses and studies on information systems* and the effectiveness of information systems in companies, administration, education and research, as calculation models and means of control;

✓ *campaigns on the use of information systems* in management, control and forecasting in sustainable development.

⇒ **Specifcies of partnerships in the field of doctoral studies.** Institutions that organize doctoral studies at the university, called I.O.S.U.D.s, can be established in one of the following ways: from a higher education institution; from a university consortium; from a legally established partnership between a higher education institution and research and development units; from a legally established partnership between a university consortium and research and development units. In the case of the last two ways, partnerships are legally established through partnership contracts, which do not lead to the creation of a new institution with legal personality. The co-supervision doctorate is the main form of academic partnership (national or international) that involves dual leadership, where the doctoral student is guided by two doctoral supervisors; for international doctorates, this ensures the recognition of the title in both countries. Through public-private partnerships, companies propose applied research topics, providing access to technical resources, while the university provides the academic framework. In contrast, the professional doctorate emphasizes innovation in professional fields (arts, sports, engineering), often being organized in collaboration with specialized institutions.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The paper demonstrated that partnership in higher education is not just an administrative tool, but a strategic necessity imposed by the dynamics of the knowledge society. The analysis of the legal framework highlights the fact that the current legislation (national and European) provides the necessary levers for universities to overcome traditional models, facilitating openness to the socio-economic environment. The analysis of the legal framework, marked by the implementation of the Higher Education Law, demonstrates a clear desire to reform the Romanian system. It can be concluded that the current legislation in Romania encourages university autonomy and provides the legal foundation for the creation of consortia (including those for dual education), facilitating a deeper integration of educational institutions into the national economic ecosystem.

From a theoretical and practical point of view, the research indicates that partnership with the business environment represents the main solution to the historical problem of the inadequacy of the skills of Romanian graduates to the requirements of employers. In Romania, the relevance of these collaborations has increased with the need to attract funds through programs such as PNRR, which condition funding on the existence of solid partnerships between universities and the private sector and reside in their capacity to harmonize labor market demand with educational supply. The specific

university partnership transforms the learning process from a purely theoretical one into an applied one, where students benefit from practical expertise, and universities from new resources and perspectives.

The paper highlighted that there are outlined ***priority areas of collaboration***, such as:

- ✓ *university consortia*: represent a strategic novelty that allows Romanian universities to collaborate with local authorities and companies to train specialists in scarce fields;
- ✓ *research partnerships*: essential for increasing the visibility of Romanian universities in international rankings;
- ✓ *collaboration with the public sector and the community*: which reflects the role of the university as a "local anchor", contributing to the regional development of Romania through social responsibility projects.

Finally, the paper emphasizes that the success of a partnership in higher education depends on the transition from a formal collaboration to one based on added value for all the actors involved. A major conclusion of the paper is that, although the theoretical and legal framework is well defined, the practical application in Romania still encounters bureaucratic barriers and a culture of collaboration that is still maturing. However, the digitalization of educational processes and access to European university networks offer unprecedented opportunities for partnerships to become the engine of quality in Romanian higher education. Therefore, digitalization and sustainability will remain the main axes around which future partnership structures will develop, requiring a continuous adaptation of the existing theoretical and legislative frameworks.

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