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## Quality and Leadership for Romanian Higher Education

EFP Brief No. 242

<b>Authors:</b>	Liviu Andreescu	<a href="mailto:andreescul@gmail.com">andreescul@gmail.com</a>
	Adrian Curaj	<a href="mailto:adrian.curaj@uefiscdi.ro">adrian.curaj@uefiscdi.ro</a>
	Radu Gheorghiu	<a href="mailto:gheorghiu.radu.cristian@gmail.com">gheorghiu.radu.cristian@gmail.com</a>
	Iulia Maries	<a href="mailto:iulia.maries@uefiscdi.ro">iulia.maries@uefiscdi.ro</a>
	Alexandra Roman	<a href="mailto:alexandra.roman@uefiscdi.ro">alexandra.roman@uefiscdi.ro</a>
	Marian Zulean	<a href="mailto:marian.zulean@uefiscdi.ro">marian.zulean@uefiscdi.ro</a>
<b>Sponsors:</b>	European Social Fund, Operational Programme for Human Resource Development	
<b>Type:</b>	Thematic foresight on higher education	
<b>Geographic coverage:</b>	Romania	
<b>Organizer:</b>	Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding	
<b>Duration:</b>	2008-2011	<b>Budget:</b> 5,000,000 €
		<b>Time Horizon:</b> 2025
		<b>Date of Brief:</b> Aug 2012

### Purpose

The project “Quality and Leadership for Romanian Higher Education” (QLHE) aimed to elaborate a vision of Romanian higher education in 2025 and a strategy consisting of specific policy guidelines to achieve it. Based on a large participatory foresight exercise, the project sought to contribute to improving the strategic management of universities and achieving a wide national consensus on the development of the Romanian higher education system.

### Transforming the Higher Education System

The project was to help transform the framework of Romanian higher education, as it has been repeatedly stated that the system lacks a vision and long-term strategy. The Presidential Commission on Education issued a report claiming that “education in Romania is ineffective, irrelevant, and low in quality”. The whole reform process has been incoherent, ineffective and has lacked a long-term, shared vision of the future. Therefore, the education system was in urgent need of change. The transformation had to be endorsed by the academic community, policymakers, stakeholders and public opinion. In order to achieve broad consensus, the project carried out a foresight exercise – a large participatory exercise involving a substantial number of people from various target groups and a wide range of ideas, possible future scenarios, solutions, policy options etc.

The higher education system has been repeatedly evaluated as homogeneous, lacking diversity, outdated and out of tune with the realities of the dynamic and

interconnected world around it. Prior to developing and achieving the final results, the project carried out activities to analyse the context and identify the major challenges and drivers of change in order to generate a clear and encompassing view of the environment, its needs, the existing obstacles and the potential opportunities. Panels of experts elaborated a series of studies concerning the analysis of the current state of Romania’s universities in relation to various aspects of society, the existing challenges, and the drivers of change in light of the main features of the Romanian social system. The resulting documents served as a point of reference for the subsequent activities.

### Creating a Shared Vision

The goals of the project were to create a shared vision and a set of strategic recommendations for Romanian higher education and, in doing so, to develop the prospective analysis and leadership capacities of key actors through a series of workshops and training sessions on various topics of interest.



Another challenging objective was to develop and sustain a foresight community by creating an environment that would enable the emerging community to interact and exchange opinions. Thus, the project designed a web-based collaborative platform, *The Foresight Wiki*. The name indicates that the platform uses the wiki technology for developing collaborative websites and Web 2.0 technologies. This allows members of the future studies and foresight communities to write articles that any other member can edit. The platform represents an innovative tool providing a user-friendly interactive setting.

### Bucharest Dialogues

The platform was not the only step to advance the development of the foresight community; a series of ten international debates, the Bucharest Dialogues, provided the platform with information and knowledge and gave the participants the opportunity to gain experience in the foresight process. These mutual learning workshops were designed as variations on the Bohm dialogues where experts can get together and discuss fundamental aspects of foresight. The Bucharest Dialogues invited foresight practitioners, managers and policymakers in a setup following David Bohm's princi-

ples of dialogue. During a Bucharest Dialogue, key speakers would represent distinct voices within the foresight community, speaking on a broad, pre-established topic.

### Mutual Learning Workshops

Both the Mutual Learning Workshops and the Bucharest Dialogues offered a great opportunity for knowledge, skills transfer and learning by allowing the Romanian experts to closely collaborate with more than one hundred international experts. Among the international experts that participated in the Romanian foresight exercise were representatives of institutions such as Fraunhofer ISI, The Institute for Prospective Technological Studies (IPTS), European Universities Association or UNESCO-CEPES (the European Centre for Higher Education), which acted as partner institutions, different international institutions, such as SAMI Consulting, UNIDO, and well-known individual experts, such as Murray Turoff, Roxanne Hiltz, Riel Miller, Peter Bishop, Ozcan Saritas, Denis Loveridge, Ziauddin Sardar, Wendy Schulz and others (for a full list of participants, see the ForWiki platform).

### Large-scale Participative Approach

The context and the challenges addressed by this project and the objectives pursued were suited for a large-scale, participative, systemic foresight exercise. As mentioned above, such an approach was necessary since the lack of a systemic approach to change in higher education has not only generated a mélange of reforms but, more importantly, has also resulted in the absence of a clear vision of the future bearings of Romanian higher education.

The exercise started with a nomination/co-nomination process to identify the key stakeholders. It went on to combine panel work, workshops and online interaction. All these activities involved hundreds of participants who provided knowledge, feedback and recommendations during every step of the project.

A series of workshops and trainings were organised for the stakeholders. They focused on various topics of interest, such as foresight and strategic planning, public policy elaboration in higher education, public policy analysis, introduction to the Delphi method or critical thinking and helped to develop skills and abilities so that the whole transformation would actually occur from within the system and would represent a sustainable process, accepted and widely supported by the stakeholders. All these events were chaired by outstanding international experts.

The whole process highlighted interactivity and focused on sharing experience and new knowledge in an international context. One of the key features of the process

was empowering stakeholders to contribute to a shared vision. There were two International Advisory Board meetings, international surveys, and various workshops and trainings facilitated by foresight experts.

All the outputs were widely disseminated and constantly tested beyond the initial groups with the help of focus groups and a number of online surveys. At the same time, all results were presented to all participants and stakeholders in an appealing way, using films, attractive websites and platforms.

Following a bottom-up approach, the process started with expert panel analyses, which served as a starting point for the creation of four success scenarios on Romanian higher education in 2025. They were used as frameworks for the transformation of the system and expressed the most relevant and desired changes: *University of Life and Jobs*, *Knowledge Constellation*, *Athe-neum* and *Blue Ocean*.

The scenario building was a vast process that combined three renowned and thoroughly tested methods: World Café, Cards and Integral Matrix Analysis. The scenario workshop was designed as a collaborative process in which the members of the expert panels and the invited stakeholders worked in a World Café setting with more than 70 participants. The participants and stakeholders "played" with the main concepts provided by the previously elaborated documents. They used cards and extracted the most creative ideas. The goal was to outline a final vision for the higher education system, which was tested and altered in order to meet the requirements and desires of the community.

## Elphi Platform

The project was innovative not only in carrying out the first foresight exercise on higher education in Romania but also in creating an adapted version of a Delphi questionnaire tailored to the needs of the Romanian higher education context. The questionnaire was provided on the online platform Elphi, which gave the stakeholders the opportunity to actively participate and in the shaping of the Romanian higher education strategy. A large number of respondents from academic, business, social and policymaking environments participated. They analysed a series of policy proposals that had previously been drafted by nine different panels of experts in relevant areas. Experts were invited to provide arguments and dynamic rankings; their feedback was essential to improving the initial proposals in order to yield the most desirable policy proposals, adapted to the realities of Romanian higher education, while at the same time being future-oriented and bold enough to spur transformation. The online platform was innovative in introducing a system of dynamically ranking arguments, providing respondents with an opportunity to refine their views and reach a final consensus. The involvement of a large number of experts also legitimised the recommended policies. Later on, these policies formed the core of the *White Paper on Romanian Higher Education in 2015*, the strategy document whose recommendations charted the first steps to be made towards the 2025 vision.

## Measures of Change

The White Paper was to support the vision by suggesting concrete measures and policy proposals for change, designed for the medium term (2011-2015) and for immediate implementation.

The first step in formulating the White Paper was to elaborate a series of policies that were tested and initially integrated into a Green Paper on Romanian Higher Education in 2015 by a group of experts – an intermediate step in developing the White Paper. The Green Paper proposed an approach in waves, in which the interest expressed by individual universities constituted the premise of transformations. According to this proposal, the process of transformation should be supported by financial assistance throughout a transition phase and strongly oriented towards autonomy, leadership and responsibility. Romanian higher education is currently perceived as an administrative service, with the state having the right to intervene in the universities' internal affairs. Thus, university autonomy is weak and subject to administrative, fiscal and financial restrictions. As a potentially significant opportunity, participating universities should be offered the option to change their legal status. Universities must maintain their public interest status, but, at the same time, enjoy economic and fiscal freedoms specific to educational and research services.

The Green Paper was a consultative document; a large online consultation was opened around the key statements, and several university rectors and vice-rectors were interviewed. The integration of the opinions and comments expressed during this process by over 300 respondents supported the development of the White Paper.

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## Personalisation, Diversification, and Transparency as New Values

The vision and the White Paper were the products of a broad and complex process whose first stages were described in the sections above.

Reflecting the success scenario elaborated by stakeholders, the 2025 vision document describes a future of Romanian higher education based on the values of personalisation, diversification and transparency. In short, the three principles describe the desired changes the system should undergo. **Personalisation** means more options for students in terms of flexible educational pathways that can be fit to their individual plans for the future. **Diversity** means institutional structures and a systemic configuration that allow for distinct trajectories for institutions with different missions and goals. **Transparency** highlights the importance of comprehensive, relevant and easily accessible information about the education system while working towards a reputation system for universities.

## Innovative Aspects

In Romania, using the foresight methodology to build a vision of the higher education system and develop strategic recommendations (White Paper) represented an innovative approach. The Romanian higher education foresight exercise was the second national foresight process in this country. Such a toolkit had never been used in higher education before and, as such, it represented a major challenge to the team implementing it.

The foresight exercise was the preferred methodology because the project strove to go beyond the limits of common expertise and the traditional policymaking process in Romania, which had led to inconsistent higher education strategies. Moreover, the need for a systemic approach was implicit in the complexity of an education system that engages a variety of actors and their relationships and eventually influences the life of every citizen.

Another innovative aspect was the use and adaptation of the online roundless Delphi, which was adjusted to the specific needs of the project and led to the creation of the Elphi platform.

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## Reform Approaches Find Society's Consent

The process and the results were designed to raise awareness about the fact that the Romanian higher education system needs to be changed and that Romanian society supports this transformation. By participating in the process, a variety of actors and stakeholders legitimized the vision document and the strategy-setting White Paper. These two documents, together with the workshops, training sessions, dialogues and debates organised throughout the three years of the project, set out an appropriate framework for the transformation of higher education. They supported a long-term vision designed to draw the picture of a desirable future, gen-

erate and stimulate forward-looking thinking about future challenges, provide the basis for decision-making in the present, and mobilise individual and collective action.

Although these ideas, solutions and policies were embraced by the key actors and stakeholders in the education system, the actual transformation of course requires more than visionary documents or the will of the actors involved. While, to date, there has been no official commitment to carry through with the proposed changes in law, a number of follow-up projects are currently empowering the universities in accordance with the principles set out in the vision (improving the system's transparency, encouraging the collaboration of universities, and capacity-building for differentiation).

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