

DIGITALIZATION IMPACT ON RIGHT TO EDUCATION IN ROMANIA. OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS

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Abstract:

The world has transformed significantly in recent years, especially during the 2020 pandemic, and concepts such as 'digital transformation,' 'the workforce of the future,' 'alternative channels,' 'virtual consulting,' 'online onboarding,' etc., are now part of our daily discussions. Evidently, the question arises: How prepared are organizations for this new era of remote interactions? How digitalized are companies? Can they survive in the current context?

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the challenges, advantages, and wide-ranging impact of digitalization on the Romanian educational sector, highlighting the need for a professional approach focused on innovation and adaptable to the real needs of society and students. By understanding the complexity and implications of digitalization on education, we will be able to develop and promote effective educational policies and strategies that fully leverage the advantages offered by technology and ensure an appropriate educational framework in the digital era, where access to information and quality educational resources is a fundamental right of every young Romanian citizen.

Acknowledging that digitalization has a significant impact on the right to education in Romania, with evident benefits such as increased accessibility to information and administrative efficiency, but also constraints related to the socio-economic disparities in the country, we conclude that, for the future, promoting digital inclusion in the public education system is crucial, through continuous investments in digital infrastructure, ongoing training of teaching staff, and strong collaboration between the public and private sector.

Keywords: *digitalization, public service, public educational system, 4th industrial revolution*

Introduction. General aspect regarding digitalization

Digitalization is considered the fourth industrial revolution. If we recall the major changes the previous ones brought to social life at the time of their emergence, we understand that it is a one-way path and that all involved actors are compelled to act. And if we also consider (and we cannot do otherwise!) the element that differentiates this revolution from the previous ones – the speed at which it propagates! – the constraint of time immediately arises. Therefore, *action must be taken Now!*

As with any major change, inertia is significant. New concepts such as Technology of Things (ToT) or the Internet of Things refer to the connection between devices and

objects; a combination of several technologies through which various objects can utilize and multiply their "force." [1]

Although digitalization is a relatively new process in the context of education and is based on advanced and continuously evolving technologies, it is essential to understand and objectively evaluate its consequences in order to identify and implement the most effective solutions and educational policies for the benefit of all students in Romania.

By understanding the complexity and implications of digitalization on education, we will be able to develop and promote effective educational policies and strategies that fully leverage the advantages offered by technology and ensure an appropriate educational framework in the digital era, where access to information and quality educational resources is a fundamental right of every young Romanian citizen[2].

The world has transformed significantly in recent years, especially during the 2020 pandemic, and concepts such as "digital transformation," "the workforce of the future," "alternative channels," "virtual consulting," "online onboarding," etc., are now part of our daily discussions. Evidently, the question arises: How prepared are organizations for this new era of remote interactions? How digitalized are companies? Can they survive in the current context?

In a study conducted by one of the world's leading consulting and audit firms [3], digital capabilities were analyzed and grouped into a set of 23 competencies, thus creating the framework of what we call "being digital." There is a very valid reason when we say that "being digital" represents the highest level of maturity a company can achieve.

The process begins with "digital exploration," where traditional technologies are used to automate existing capabilities.

It continues with the "build the digital ecosystem" stage, where traditional technologies are employed to extend existing capabilities, in an endless illusory loop of doing digital things but without significant real changes – this is the step where most companies get stuck.

The next step is "becoming digital," where changes are visible within business, operational, and customer interaction models.

And it culminates with "being digital" as the ultimate goal, where the aforementioned models are optimized for the digital world and are profoundly different from the previous way of working.

Moreover, digital skills are compared to chromosomes deeply embedded in an institution's DNA, defining the company, containing specific instructions that make it a living, unique entity.

The Industrial Revolution and the Necessity of Digitalization in the Educational Process

The Necessity of Education as a Fundamental Right

Education is widely recognized as an absolutely essential fundamental right, which must be unquestionably and categorically ensured for all citizens, regardless of origin, social status, or available financial resources. As a member country of the international community, Romania has the duty and responsibility to strictly adhere to and implement an accessible, completely free education system characterized by exceptional quality, fully complying with the rigorous standards of relevant global organizations. Education, without any doubt, constitutes the absolutely necessary and vital foundation for the individual development of each person [4], facilitating social inclusion and significantly contributing to the overall improvement of quality of life in our ever-evolving contemporary society [5]. Therefore, it is fundamentally important that, in the current context of rapid technological advancements, digitalization is implemented with optimal rigor and increased efficiency so that this process actively and justly contributes to ensuring equal and equitable access to exceptional and high-quality education for all the delightful and talented students of our beloved and proud Romania [6].

The fourth industrial revolution – or Industry 4.0 – is transforming economies, jobs, and even the society we live in today. Technologies of all kinds, especially digital ones, are merging using data analytics, artificial intelligence, cognitive technologies, and the Internet of Things (IoT) to create digital enterprises that are not only interconnected but perfectly capable of making informed decisions. In short, this revolution incorporates intelligent technologies, connected to each other, surpassing the organizational framework and interfering with our daily lives.

We have all been thrown into a new global paradigm and have the possibility of turning everything into a story of great magnitude or a lethal one. The way we choose to respond to such a change requires knowing our strengths and improving them while at the same time being aware of our weaknesses and overcoming them. Being unprepared while trying to navigate a storm at sea is not the recipe for success.

Already at the European level, many countries have good practices in operating and developing distance learning programs [1], which have become an integral part of learning processes, and in the era of the new economy, the educational space is rapidly growing and expanding due to the development of the digital environment: electronic models of universities are being formed, electronic textbooks are being created, and educational platforms are being created and developed [7].

Advantages, Benefits, and Opportunities

Digitalization in education brings numerous benefits, including increased accessibility to information. Through digital technologies, students can access various resources and educational materials from anywhere, regardless of location or available resources. This eliminates geographical and economic barriers, making access to education much more democratic and inclusive. Additionally, through online platforms and digital libraries, students have the opportunity to study anytime and find updated and diverse information, contributing to the diversification and enrichment of the educational process. With the help of digitalization, the teaching and learning process can be significantly improved. Students can have access to interactive multimedia content, which helps them better understand subjects and consolidate their knowledge. Specialized applications and software can also be used, offering personalized exercises and immediate feedback, thus contributing to the development of students' skills and competencies. Besides these aspects, digitalization in education opens new opportunities for collaboration and communication between students, teachers, and specialists from different fields. Through online learning platforms, students can work in teams and collaborate on joint projects, thus developing teamwork skills and the ability to communicate effectively. Moreover, by using digital technologies, the assessment process can be improved and diversified. Online assessment systems offer the possibility

to monitor and evaluate students' progress in real time, facilitating interventions and improving results. Additionally, technology can be used to create and administer online tests and exams, thus reducing the costs and resources required for their organization. In conclusion, digitalization in education brings numerous advantages and possibilities, improving access to information, the learning process, collaboration, and assessment. However, it is important that these technologies are implemented responsibly and in accordance with educational objectives and values, to ensure a quality and equitable educational experience for all students.

In summary, we can say that digital learning is "an education with technology that offers a series of advantages. In the educational process, there is an element of control over time, location, direction, and/or speed. Learning is no longer limited to a fixed schedule. The internet and the multitude of internet-connected computers have given students the freedom to learn at any time. On the other hand, learning is no longer restricted to a certain space – it can take place from any space with internet access; and it is no longer limited to the teacher's pedagogy. Software programs, most of them interactive and adaptive, can come to aid and complement, allowing for versatility, adaptation, and personalization of learning.

Digitalization is a tool for collaborative and creative learning (an advantage but also a weak point – a danger, even if digital education providers are not properly prepared!).

Constraints

One of the main impediments, at least initially, is the technical resources that are mandatory for conducting the digital educational process [8]. This is because technology is a tool for delivering content. Digital learning requires a combination of technology, digital content, and training.

In this context, technology facilitates students' access to content. It provides access to the Internet and equipment that can be used by any internet-connected computer – from a desktop to a laptop to an iPad to a smartphone. Therefore, technology is a tool, not an instruction. The question rightly arises: 'How prepared are leaders in both the public and private sectors to harness the full potential of Industry 4.0 and bring benefits to customers, people, organizations, communities, and society in general?' A

recent study [3] analyzes four important areas for organizations and the impact of digitalization on them:

- **Social Impact: Stability versus capacity to influence.** While CEOs expect a stable future with fewer social inequalities, they are increasingly less convinced of their or their organizations' influence on today's society.
- **Strategy: Passivity versus action.** CEOs recognize that they are not prepared to capitalize on the transformations associated with Industry 4.0. However, company leaders have not adjusted their current strategies to be more prepared for the future.
- **Workforce: Evolution versus revolution.** CEOs believe they do not have the right people to succeed in Industry 4.0. Although they say they are doing their best to build the appropriate workforce, their responses show the exact opposite, namely that the talent issue is not a priority for them.
- **Technology: problem-solving versus prevention.** Executives know they need to invest in technology to transition to new business models. However, necessary investments are delayed due to a lack of strategic alignment and short-term vision.
- **Type of tools influencing the exclusion of certain categories of people due to lack of resources.**

European Regulation

According to the European Commission, digital technology, when used skillfully, equitably, and effectively by educators, can fully support the goal of high-quality and inclusive education and training for all learners [9].

In recent decades, many initiatives and investments have been made in educational technology and the development of digital skills. Despite progress and excellent examples of innovation, these initiatives have often been short-lived or limited in scale, having a marginal impact on the system. This could be partly due to the fact that the potential of digitalizing education was not widely visible and understood. The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic put us in a situation where there were not many options available to provide education and training outside of digital technology [10]. We learned a lot, and many teachers, students, and parents faced a steep learning curve. At

the same time, the pandemic exposed deficiencies that need to be addressed to successfully integrate digital technologies into education and training systems.

At the European Commission level, the approach to digital education was first made in 2018 within the first Digital Education Action Plan, when the EU addressed digitalization in education through a series of measures [11]. As the digital transition continues, and the public health crisis brings new challenges to the forefront, the new Action Plan focuses on longer-term digital change in education and training.

Recent events related to the emergence and persistence of the pandemic worldwide have increased the speed of action for leaders and administrations in all systems. Thus, at the EU level, the Digital Education Action Plan for 2021-2027 was adopted – a document titled "Resetting Education and Training for the Digital Age" – a European Commission document adopted in Brussels in September 2020 and communicated to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions.

Based on the work of the European Parliament [12], the Council [13], and the Commission, the Action Plan aims at measures for high-quality and inclusive digital education and training, which will require a combination of actions and policies to be effective. It sets out priorities and corresponding actions where the EU can add value.

At the European level, two action directions have been identified:

- Increasing the range of digital technological products – educational platforms, educational software – including online, distance, and blended learning.
- Acquiring digital skills (knowledge, attitudes, and aptitudes) among users to conduct social activities in a world increasingly influenced by technology.

The public consultation conducted by the EU found that 95% of respondents consider the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic a turning point for how technology is used in education and training. This highlighted the need for high-quality digital content to be available and accessible to learners and educators. It also increased the need to involve all individuals and all parts of the education and training system in a joint effort to ensure that technology is used effectively, thus becoming a driver of high-quality and inclusive education, rather than an obstacle.

National Regulation

- National Education Laws 198/2023 and 199/2023 – who replaces the old Education Law no. 1/2011 [14];
- Law 55/2020 on some measures for the prevention and combating of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, with subsequent amendments and completions;
- Government Decision 394/2020 regarding the declaration of the state of alert and the measures that apply during it to prevent and combat the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- Government Emergency Ordinance no. 70/2020, regarding the regulation of some measures, starting with May 15, 2020, in the context of the epidemiological situation caused by the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, for the extension of certain deadlines, for the amendment and completion of Law no. 227/2015 on the Fiscal Code, the National Education Law no. 1/2011, as well as other normative acts.
- OMEC 5767/15.10.2020 regarding the accreditation, organization, and conduct of continuous training programs intended for teaching staff in pre-university education in the 2020-2021 school year – OMEC no. 4135/21.04.2020 approving the Instruction regarding ensuring the continuity of the learning process at the pre-university education system level. OMEC 5767 prohibits face-to-face activities of training programs, as well as the activities of completing these programs previously accredited face-to-face. It also regulates the transformation of direct activities into online activities with "synchronous audio-video" [15] online evaluation, with the specification that schools already accredited until the date of the order will need to obtain the CSA (Specialized Accreditation Commission) approval, with the obligation of the training provider to reorganize the curriculum. In all regulatory activity, a commendable primary concern is noted, namely: activities must continue. However, the real and effective focus on how this actually happens has not been demonstrated. There were many proposed variants, we might even say a confusion of the institutions with responsibilities in the field.

But let's follow the conditions set for training providers to ensure the quality of training and the real acquisition of competencies:

- At least 50% of the time budget allocated to activities included in the curricula should be conducted in an online meeting system;

- Reorganization of curricula;
- Groups of a maximum of 35 trainees;
- Scheduling of groups in an online meeting system without overlapping activities (!);
- Ensuring the archiving of documents related to the implementation of programs.

The methodology for accrediting and periodically evaluating continuous training providers and the programs offered by them, approved by OMEC 5564/2011 [16]. The program evaluation will consider measuring the impact of the program on the quality of teaching and other specific activities of the education system, in line with the thematic area.

- Order of the Minister of Education and Research no. 4649/2020 regarding the establishment of measures related to the accreditation, organization, and conduct of continuous training programs intended for teaching staff in pre-university education, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was appreciated that the order by which the Ministry of Education regulated online courses (an extremely necessary step), appeared very late and did not include a plan of concrete, long-term measures [17]. Furthermore, the order disadvantages vulnerable communities, particularly those in rural areas, by violating all children's right to education through its regulations. The figures clearly show that the gap between rural and urban schools remains profound, with poverty and social exclusion being twice as high in rural areas compared to cities.

According to a 2018 study [18], 62% of rural households lacked internet connectivity, and 58% had neither a computer nor a laptop. Moreover, about 96% of respondents said they had a mobile phone, but not necessarily smartphones. Digitalizing education is one of the major priorities, and these times, especially how this year has unfolded, clearly show that it must be a national priority. Existing digital equipment in schools is insufficient, and Romania ranks among the lowest in Europe regarding digitalization.

Most parents and teachers still show a rather dismissive attitude towards using technology in classrooms and for homework. On Wednesday, the Ministry of Education issued a ministerial order with instructions for conducting online classes in pre-university

education, while the university environment organized itself according to the principle of university autonomy.

MEN's Attempt

We will further present an attempt by the National Ministry of Education in the field of educational digitalization. The goal was for students in digital classes to interact with professionals from fields such as social media, personal branding, personal development, technology, artificial intelligence, or financial education. Thus, the Ministry of Education and Research launched a module of digital classes in collaboration with the NGO Narada as part of the "Reaction for Education" initiative.

In the Naradix digital class module [19], students from across the country have an hour online to learn about topics such as social media, personal branding, personal development, technology, artificial intelligence, or financial education. Students will have the opportunity to interact with top professionals from these fields. The NaradiX digital classes will feature famous vloggers, business people, or well-known trainers.

In Romania, due to the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face courses were suspended starting November 9, 2020, and all schools moved their classes online. A survey conducted between November 18-23, 2020, on a sample of 9,401 students, 3,265 teachers, and 4,965 parents, shows that although the pandemic forced the digitalization of education, and teachers improved their digital skills while students became accustomed to using various online platforms, only 23% of students and 36% of parents believe that digital elements will continue to be used in face-to-face education. The only optimists are the teachers, 60% of whom consider that face-to-face education will integrate digital elements after returning physically to school.

Although there are premises for participation in online education, with most teachers organizing classes, the quality of these classes becomes questionable from the perspective of the three targeted groups – students, teachers, and parents," the survey "Perceptions of the Quality of Online Education" shows.

Thus, 26% of teachers and 26% of students, and these are only those who have internet access, say that classes are partially conducted through video platforms and individual work materials are transmitted. "Thus, one of the students' and parents'

complaints is that teaching methods have not been adapted to the specifics of online education, and teachers often dictate information or students have to summarize/copy lessons from textbooks," the survey shows.

Students consider that teachers only partially manage to adapt educational content and teaching to students' needs, with the most appreciated category of teachers being those who use innovative teaching methods (games, quizzes, projects).

"Some teachers have adapted very well to online education and strive to facilitate the educational process for students, also becoming an emotional support for them. On the other hand, in the view of students and parents, some teachers are rigid in conducting online activities: marking students absent if they do not have their cameras on or if they get disconnected from the internet, giving low grades if students have technical problems, not going over information that was not understood or noted by students, etc.," the survey also reveals.

Constraints. Educational Content Is Not Adapted

On the other hand, the survey results show that teachers face their own difficulties in organizing and conducting online classes, which require digital skills and adaptation of educational content, more preparation time, innovative testing and evaluation methods, and administrative activities that have arisen suddenly.

Thus, the ability to adapt educational content to students' needs requires time and emotional well-being, which is often lacking for teachers as well.

Due to the difficulties encountered by teachers in conducting online classes, they are perceived by students as boring by 29% and useless by 17% of students.

A proportion of 27% of students consider online classes interactive, most likely due to teachers' involvement and interest, while for another 17% of students, online school is relaxing, as it takes place at home, in their own comfort.

The remaining 10% of student respondents gave other answers than the preset ones, one of the most frequent being that online school is "tiring"; other characteristics attributed to online school were: "stressful," "difficult," "exhausting," or that its efficiency depends on the subject and the teacher.

In this context, the majority of students (54%), teachers (57%), and parents (62%) consider that the quality of education provided in the 2020-2021 school year to date is lower compared to the quality level in the 2019-2020 school year.

According to the survey, teachers consider that the lack of educational content adapted to the online education system constitutes a difficulty in effectively conducting online classes.

"Teachers are making efforts to improve their digital skills and adapt educational content, some of them are looking for materials on the internet on their own, others have enrolled in various free courses, but there is no unified approach regarding the materials that should be used. Additionally, teachers had to allocate much more time, perhaps even double, to preparing online classes," the survey "Perceptions of the Quality of Online Education" shows.

Data collection was carried out between November 18-23, 2020, through an online questionnaire distributed via the communication channels and networks of the two organizations that initiated the survey. The analyzed sample consists of 9401 students, 3265 teachers, and 4965 parents from all counties in Romania and is non-random and non-probabilistic. Although the number of respondents is quite large, the results of this survey are not representative at the national level; respondents completed the questionnaire based on availability and access to technological means and the internet. Moreover, one of the limitations of this survey is that the majority of respondents are from urban areas: 85% students, 68% teachers, 68% parents, so the presented results should be interpreted within the methodological limits mentioned here.

In conclusion, we observe that interactive methods contribute to the development of skills, prioritize personality development, capacity, and aptitude development, are action-centered, encourage independent work, initiative, creativity, critical thinking, and the teacher's main task is to create the opportunity for the student to "find themselves," to affirm, be original, ingenious, and different [20].

Implementing digitalization in Romania's public education system faces various constraints, such as internet availability and the necessary equipment for accessing online education. There are also difficulties in providing technological resources in schools located in rural or disadvantaged areas. These issues can lead to a significant

discrepancy between students who have access to technology and those who do not. The difference in access to technological resources can negatively impact the academic performance and personal development of the involved students. Additionally, there is a need to invest more in infrastructure and teacher training in digitalization to ensure quality education. Allocating adequate funds and partnerships with the private sector can play a crucial role in improving access to technology and developing educational infrastructure [21]. It is important to promote an equal and inclusive approach in the digitalization process of the public education system so that every student has the opportunity to fully develop and reach their maximum potential.

Conclusions. Proposals

Digital education is largely an innovation of recent decades, although it already existed in various forms a little earlier. In other words, the educational system's environments are anticipated as a mitigation of unforeseen natural and artificial pandemics [22]. Digital transformation in education identifies an advantage in the progress made in the field, specifically in the use (and multiplication) of IT devices and applications on an increasingly large scale.

The difficult experience we are going through, the coronavirus pandemic, the suspension of courses for over a month, the state of emergency, and social distancing measures lead to the conclusion that, for a while, our lives have inevitably moved online – communication, learning, informational support, a solution to avoid intellectual stagnation.

In this context, digitalization becomes an essential condition, an irreversible process that involves clarification, a succession of stages, the transition from digitizing information to its digital use, the necessary preparation, regardless of age, profession, work environment. The concept of digital life is an integral part of the modern world, and the current epidemiological crisis has accelerated the awareness of this reality and the need for expertise and preparation to have a relatively functional society in difficult times. From arguments, explanations, explorations, digitalization becomes an essential component of society, fields of activity, our lives; therefore, logically, education and schools must integrate the concept with all necessary implications and measures [23].

We need to outline legislative support, a coherent strategy with stages, measures, and consistent steps to generalize digital skills, thoroughly preparing the educational system for substantial changes in mentality, organization, content, equipment, methods, and teaching procedures. Integrating digital approaches in the educational process currently implies at least two aspects.

We must conceive a didactic approach where applications, the internet, computers, educational films, interactive didactic games and exercises, and the simulation of abstract scientific processes and modeling complex phenomena are teaching/learning forms that complement theoretical presentation, textbooks, books, workbooks, worksheets, activities, and interactions in the classroom. Thus, information is translated into digital format, a difficult process, often undertaken with great effort. Achieving a coherent approach to the digitalization process involves a conceptual basis in this direction, a curriculum for digitalizing courses, and teaching-learning-evaluation methods. We must not neglect the teachers' specialized training, which currently benefits from various, often improvised, support, and even less in an organized, systematic, institutionalized, generalized manner.

Digitalization in education, as it has been conceived and put into practice for years in developed countries, involves the complex, integrated, and unitary integration of technology in teaching activities, evaluation, communication, school administrative activities, extracurricular activities, homework, and the relationship with students and their families.

Taking into account the realities of the public education system in Romania, the general introduction of digitalization in this field requires planning, both in terms of infrastructure development and the preparation of teachers and students. There is a need to identify available resources and plan necessary investments to ensure an equal opportunity for all students to benefit from quality digital education.

The following proposals could help improve the digitalization process in the public education system in Romania:

- Developing a national strategy for the digitalization of the public education system that includes clear objectives, measurable indicators, and timelines for achieving them.

- Investing in infrastructure, especially in rural or disadvantaged areas, to ensure internet access and necessary equipment for students and teachers.
- Providing specialized training for teachers in using digital tools and developing digital educational content.
- Developing and promoting the use of digital teaching methods and resources, such as educational platforms, interactive applications, digital textbooks, and online libraries.
- Encouraging partnerships with the private sector to provide technological resources and expertise in developing educational infrastructure.
- Ensuring the involvement of all stakeholders (students, teachers, parents, and local communities) in developing and implementing the digitalization strategy.
- Promoting an inclusive and equal approach in the digitalization process to ensure that every student has access to quality education, regardless of their social or economic background.

Finally, we can say that digitalization in the public education system in Romania is an essential step towards modernizing education and adapting to the requirements of the 21st century. However, the process requires coherent planning, adequate investments, and the involvement of all stakeholders to ensure equal access to quality education and to develop the necessary digital skills for the future.

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