

HIGH EDUCATION MANAGEMENT THROUGH THE VISION OF CANDIDATES FOR RECTOR POSITION IN ROMANIAN UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

The strategic direction of an organization is powerfully influenced by the vision of the top management. The managerial plan represents a tool used by the university management to communicate the vision, mission and strategy to members of the organization. The authors analysed the managerial plans of Rector positions candidates in main universities of Romania to identify the approach and the direction the future rectors propose in their strategic plan for universities. The paper assesses the content of strategic plans against the strategic planning rigors to identify the chosen strategic directions, the diagnosis made and existence of alignment between the components of the plan. The results provide an image of the alternative futures for universities, the main areas where the intentions of candidates are concentrated and patterns of strategies for universities.

KEYWORDS: *Academic management, rector, high education, vision, strategy*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: *P41*

1. INTRODUCTION

The strategic planning became a concern for the universities as the educational offer, in terms of programs and number of places, increased over the demand, calculated as number of potential students (Yorke, 2004). This change places the universities in a new global, complex and competitive environment which makes necessary a strategic approach. The process of internationalization, first seen as a response to externally driven change, now adds complexity to the internal and external environment of universities and needs to be considered in the strategic planning process. Internationalization is more than attracting students from abroad. It is about creating a new capability for the university to respond to a variety of challenges at international level and placing the university in a global network where enhancing quality and research can be done in a synergistic manner (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Seeber et al., 2016). The stakeholders' expectations grew in terms of demand for quality and : better return on education investment, increased employability (Mainardes et al., 2012), wages for professors, creation of new knowledge, increasing internationalization, variety of programme structure and mode of study, increasing quality of student experience, new forms of social contract (Hrubos, 2011). Also, those demands are often competing.

In this global environment, where the number of players in the domain of higher education increases, the need for structure and differentiation appeared and, with it, the university rankings at national and international level. During time, various rankings managed to become publicly credible and visible, although they have methodological flaws (Kehm, 2014) and are influencing the

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decisions of various groups of university stakeholders (Marginson et al., 2007; Wilkins & Huisman, 2012), not having all the time beneficial effects. Hoping that a higher place will transform qualities in quantities (Labi, 2010) a large number of universities are struggling to climb positions in the international rankings. This puts pressure onto organizations and their leaders to dedicate time and resources to forge a strategy for this type of goal.

Considering the realities presented above the universities have to meet the government/national interest, national and international rankings criteria and align to international practices. Therefore, a strategy at the institutional level is needed to create the necessary changes in universities to better adapt to the environment.

The situation is no different in Romania. The state universities, which are prevalent, are competing for students and are making increasing efforts for recruiting the candidates for all three levels of studies: bachelor, master and PhD. The motivation for these efforts was generated by the options universities have to attract funds and ultimately survive. The current mechanism of funding the universities by the government introduced in 1999, functions on a per student basis and it was further improved to reflect the quality of the educational process. The universities had to understand the idea that more students and more quality mean more money and becoming attractive for the potential students either at national level and international level became a strategic objective.

The government, the main funding body for the Romanian universities, wants to maintain a high level of quality in higher education through standardization and accreditation through the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) and steer the strategic orientation towards 'national interest'. For the time period 2015-2020 there is to be implemented a national strategy for the tertiary education aligned with the Europa 2020 strategy. This is opposite to opinions of authors affirming that the national strategy for HE could be a sum of individual strategies of high education institutions (Cowburn, 2005). Since there are objectives to be achieved at the European Union level, aligning a national strategy and then the universities' strategies seem the logical way to approach planning.

The complex and accelerated change makes necessary for the universities the existence of a clear direction and focus. Planning, if properly implemented, could have a positive effect on colleges and universities (Dooris et al., 2004) and is often seen as a tool to adopt a rational and systematic approach in creating the necessary changes for better organizational adaptation to environment.

Another question addressed by the authors (Agnew, 2013; Mueller, 2015) is whether strategic planning is fit with the culture and tradition of universities having in mind that it was imported from the business domain and it needs to be adapted to the realities in the universities in order to work. There are differences between universities and businesses as value systems. Traditionally the universities have been oriented on the long-term investment in educating people, while businesses are short-term oriented and are pursuing the financial results. Recently universities are required by their stakeholders to secure income sources and prove the sustainability of their activities, the difference mentioned above is less evident. A second difference is related to the approach to be taken in steering the organization and decision making. While businesses may opt for a direct top-down approach, the universities have to use shared governance to get the commitment and the involvement of the whole organizational structure, faculties, schools and departments. The role of the institutional head is to propose a direction and create a desired future and to invest time and effort to bring the academic community together into implementing the plan. This role is to be exerted having in mind the different levels of autonomy the universities enjoy at country level. The university institutional autonomy, which varies from country to country (OECD, 2003), can limit the development and the implementation of such a plan.

In Romania, the state (public) universities have a medium level of autonomy (Estermann & Nokkala, 2009). At organizational autonomy level the universities have to follow the guidelines in the law when it comes to deciding over the academic structures. In setting the framework for decision-making bodies there are no specifications in the law and the universities have a unitary governance structure without external stakeholders. The election of the rector is made by a large

election body and has to be confirmed by the Ministry of National Education. The rector's qualifications and term in the office are stipulated by law. The rector is having a primus inter pares position relative to the governing body (senate) responsible for the long-term strategic decisions. The universities have the freedom to allocate the financial resources as they like, the public funding being offered as a block-grant. The universities are allowed to decide on the number of posts in every category and to recruit staff following the requirements of the law. The appointment of staff has to be confirmed by the Ministry of Education. With regard to salaries the universities may decide within the limits of salary bands. Also, the universities can develop a structure of educational programs, add new programs or end existing ones and can change the structure of a program. Doing this needs to be in line with the accreditation procedure supervised by National Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) at the ministry level. The framework described above provides the universities with the ability to define their mission for research and teaching and the actions to be taken to achieve this mission. Of course, there are restrictions ranging from compliance with the law and the Ministry of National Education regulations but these are not discouraging the idea of an institutional strategy.

All those characteristics of the universities' autonomy allow them the possibility to create and implement a strategy. The complex environment of the universities brings new requirements for institutional leadership and the need that leaders should be more than outstanding academics. There are trends in certain Western European countries where universities are adopting a CEO-type of rector with a greater autonomy, but the Romanian universities have a different orientation. The election of the rector in the Romanian universities based upon a managerial plan and the primus inter pares position creates the possibility for the elected rector to develop and further implement the strategic plan with the support (at least) of the ones who voted for him/her.

Research objective: Considering the two components, national and international, our study is directed to identify the main strategic orientation in the managerial plans of candidates for Rector's office in main universities from Romania. The objective of the research is to identify the existence of strategic directions and measures which can be associated with performance measurement indicators included in Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) and the Methodology for external evaluation of universities and programs used by ARACIS, in the managerial plans developed by the candidates for the Rector's office position of the main universities from Romania.

2. STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR ROMANIAN UNIVERSITIES PERFORMANCE

Traditionally, the Romanian universities are looking in two directions in order to find references for their managerial practices and for comparing their performance. The first direction is international, thus, international rankings are considered relevant frameworks for analysing the performance of a university. The international rankings are well-known by the Romanian higher education community and there are numerous public signs of their impact on the universities management. In 2016, a national Meta-ranking was published by a High-Level Expert Group appointed the Ministry of Education. (Romanian Ministry of Education and Scientific Research, 2016) This ranking used 9 rankings, selected based on the analysis of **IREG - Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence** (IREG Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence, n. d.) and **UNESCO** (UNESCO, 2016).

The 9 rankings used are the following:

- (1) Academic Ranking of World Universities/ARWU (**education and research**);
- (2) Center for World University Rankings/CWUR (**education and research**);
- (3) Leiden Ranking/CWTS (**research**);
- (4) Performance Ranking of Scientific Papers of World Universities/PRSPWU (**research**);

Since all rankings were using 'Criteria' and not 'KPIs' to describe the scoring, it was not possible to use directly this kind of information in our analysis. The most important reference for our analysis was found in the clarity and transparency of the ARWU methodology. Here, a detailed list

of 40 KPIs is published, compared with the less detailed 3 others methodologies, presenting the calculation method for the score on each criteria (ShanghaiRanking Consultancy, 2016).

- (5) QS-Top Universities Ranking/QS(**education and research**);
- (6) Scimago Institutions Ranking/Scimago (**mostly research**);
- (7) Times Higher Education - World University Rankings/THE (**education and research**);
- (8) University Ranking by Academic Performance/URAP (**research**);
- (9) World's Best Universities Rankings/US-News (**research**).

Despite the increasing number of alternative Rankings, based on different methodologies, and the recognized limitations, ARWU - Academic Ranking of World Universities (also known as the Shanghai Ranking) remains the primary reference for measuring the overall performance of a university in the Romanian academic community.

The second direction is national. The reference is provided in this case by the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) in the Methodology for external evaluation of universities and programs (The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2017).

For analysing the main strategic orientation of the candidates for the Rector office managerial plans we considered that both directions should be taken into consideration, since the universities should adapt to both national and international evolutionary pressures.

Analysing the international references, in order to find the strategic orientation embedded in their conception, we considered two arguments: the recognition of the ranking as a relevant strategic reference and the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) used to measure the performance of universities. From the point of view of the recognition, ARWU was by far the first choice, due to the international recognition and major impact, and due to the national recognition. From the point of view of the KPIs, we compared the 4 rankings selected in the cited Meta-ranking which cover both the field of education and research: ARWU, CWUR, QS and THE. (Table 1)

Table 1. Strategic references for Romanian Universities performance

1. ARWU		2. CWUR (Center for World University Rankings, n.d.)	
CRITERIA	Weight	CRITERIA	Weight
Quality of Education	10%	Quality of Education	25%
Quality of Faculty	40%	Alumni Employment	25%
Research Output	40%	Quality of Faculty	25%
Per Capita Performance	10%	Publications	5%
		Influence	5%
		Citations	5%
		Broad Impact	5%
		Patents	5%
3. QS(QS Quacquarelli Symonds Limited, n. d.)		4. THE(Times Higher Education, n. d.)	
CRITERIA	Weight	CRITERIA	Weight
Academic Reputation	40%	Teaching (the learning environment)	30%
Employer Reputation	20%	Research (volume, income and reputation)	20%
Faculty/Student Ratio	10%	Citations (research influence)	30%
Citations per faculty	20%	International outlook (staff, students and research)	7,50%
International Faculty Ratio	5%	Industry income (knowledge transfer)	2,50%
International Student Ratio	5%		

Source: processed data from the ARWU, CWUR, QS and THE methodologies

The national reference, the ARACIS methodology, proved to be very useful in our analysis since it presents evaluation standards and a list of performance indicators, linked to each standard. Thus, identifying the KPIs determining the strategic orientation was simple and clear (The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2017).

The next step was to merge the strategic directions found in the two references, ARWU and ARACIS, into one singular strategic framework. An important difference between the two references was considered during this process. The ARACIS methodology sets minimal quality and performance standards, relevant in a national context, while ARWU methodology sets the highest international benchmarking standards for universities. This complementary focus was useful in creating a strategic framework relevant for the strategic thinking of the candidates for the Rector office.

The Strategic framework for Romanian universities, presented in Table 2, is supported with explanations about the correspondence with ARWU and ARACIS KPIs. Please take note that one indicator in the methodologies might not be considered relevant for this analysis or be considered relevant for more than one of the strategic focuses proposed by the new framework, hence the sum of indicators in the table, for ARWU and ARACIS, is different from the total number of indicators in each methodology.

The sets of criteria used by the four rankings (presented in Table 1) where used to create a taxonomy of 5 categories – Students, Personnel, Resources, Research and Others – regrouping strategic areas homogenous from the point of view the acknowledgeable focus for a university manager.

Table 2. Strategic framework for Romanian universities performance

No.	Strategic focus	Correspondence (number of indicators)	
		Shanghai Ranking methodology	ARACIS external assessment methodology
1.	Students		
1.1.	Increasing the number of students	10	
1.2.	Increasing the number of international students	3	
1.3.	Increasing the employment of graduate students ratio	6	5
1.4.	Improving the learning and teaching process		4
2.	Personnel		
2.1.	Increasing the percentage of staff with PhD (teaching + research)	2	
2.2.	Increasing the percentage of international staff (teaching + research)	2	
2.3.	Increasing the ratio of teachers per students	2	1
2.4.	Increasing the personnel engagement (by motivation and involvement)		1
3.	Resources		
3.1.	Increasing university revenue	13	1
3.2.	Increasing university revenue per student	3	
3.3.	Increasing the revenue from economic activities of the university	1	1
3.1.	Increasing the revenue from scientific research	5	
3.2.	Increasing the revenue from scientific research from public sources	2	

No.	Strategic focus	Correspondence (number of indicators)	
3.3.	Increasing the revenue from scientific research for industry	1	
3.1.	Increasing the revenue from social responsibility (donations, partnerships)	1	
3.2.	Improving the teaching facilities (spaces + equipment)		2
3.3.	Improving the research facilities (spaces + equipment)		2
3.1.	Improving the social services facilities (spaces + equipment)		2
4.	Research		
4.1.	Increasing the value and visibility of scientific production	5	
4.2.	Supporting the publishing of scientific results		1
4.3.	Supporting access to scientific news		1
4.4.	Improving the research processes		2
5.	Other indicators		
5.1.	Increasing the social responsibility		2
5.2.	Increasing the administrative efficiency		6

Source: processed data from the ARWU and ARACIS methodologies

3. METHODOLOGY

The aim of the research is to identify the existence of strategic directions and measures which can be associated with performance measurement indicators included in Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) and the Methodology for external evaluation of universities and programs used by ARACIS, in the managerial plans developed by the candidates for the Rector's office position of the following Romanian public universities: *Alexandru Ioan Cuza* University of Iași (UAIC), Academy of Economics Studies Bucharest (ASE), *Babes Bolyai* University ClujNapoca (UBB), Bucharest University, West University of Timișoara (UVT), Oradea University, Craiova University, University of Agriculture Science and Veterinary Medicine Iași (USAMV), University of Medicine and Pharmacy Iasi, (UMF), *Gheorghe Asachi* Technical University Iași, and *Dunărea de Jos* University of Galați. The universities were selected based on the results of the National Universities Meta-ranking Exercise from 2016. (Romanian Ministry of Education and Scientific Research, 2016)

As research method, we collected and studied information from 21 managerial plans which were public on the web sites of universities mentioned above. Most of them were developed by the winners of rector position of all universities mentioned above, but, for the UAIC, ASE, UBB and Bucharest University, we analysed the documents for all candidates entering the competition for the top position in the university. We delimited and numbered all strategic measures that could be evaluated through the system of indicators proposed in Table 2, with key strategic directions like: students, human resources, financial and material resources, scientific research and social responsibility and administrative efficiency.

In synthesis, the methodological approach had the following steps:

- Analysis of national and international strategic references creating adaptative needs for the universities;
- Creation of a comprehensive strategic framework for Romanian universities performance, based on the ARWU and ARACIS methodologies;

- Selection of the universities
- Collection and analysis of the managerial plans of the candidates for the Rector's office in these universities
- Calculation of relative intensity of the strategic focus for each university, in relation to the proposed framework.

The research may have as a limitation the fact that content from the managerial plans belonging to some of the candidates for the rector's position is not accurate and is not reflecting the indicators proposed by our approach.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS FOR ROMANIAN UNIVERSITIES STRATEGIC ORIENTATION

The first step in the analysis of data assesses the intensity of the strategic orientation for each category and we can observe that the main direction in strategic planning are measures which may be associated with: *Other indicators* (research, social responsibility and administrative efficiency)-for 21 candidates we have identified 554 measures representing 33.37%, *Students*- 455 measures representing 27.41%, *Resources* 405 measures who in percent represent 24.4% and for *Personnel*-246 measures, representing 14.82%.

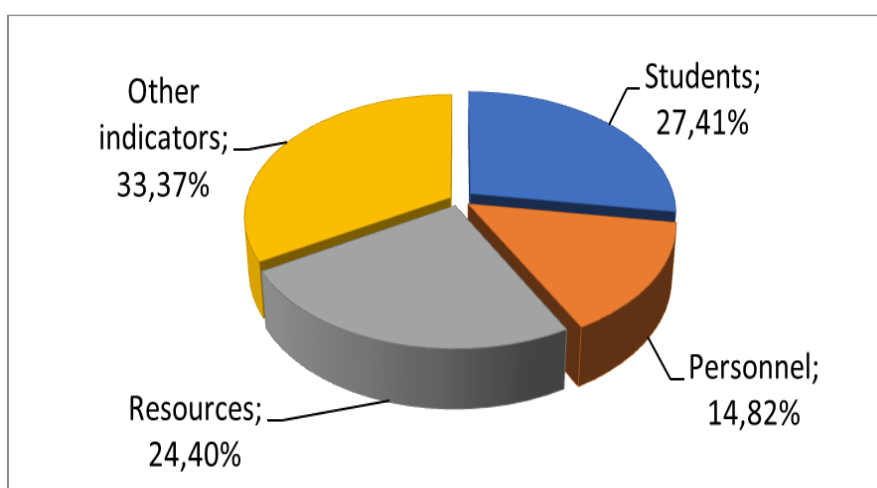


Figure 1. Intensity of strategic focus categories

Source: authors

For analysing the main strategic direction, we evaluated 1660 strategic measures and the opinions of the 21 candidates are represented in Figure 2. In managerial programs the most frequent measures are oriented to: *administrative efficiency* with a total of 197 measures (11.87%), *employees' commitment* (11.33%), *improving learning processes* (10.36%), *increasing social responsibility* (7.29%) etc. From the results presented in Figure 1, we understand that the future rector's actions will be to improve the efficiency of university administration, to develop new study programs, to attract high quality human resources, keeping and motivated them, and increasing the number of students, both Romanian and international, developing teaching materials and services. Other important decisions are needed to increase the performance of scientific research and the connections with the business environment, to increase the employment rate of graduates.

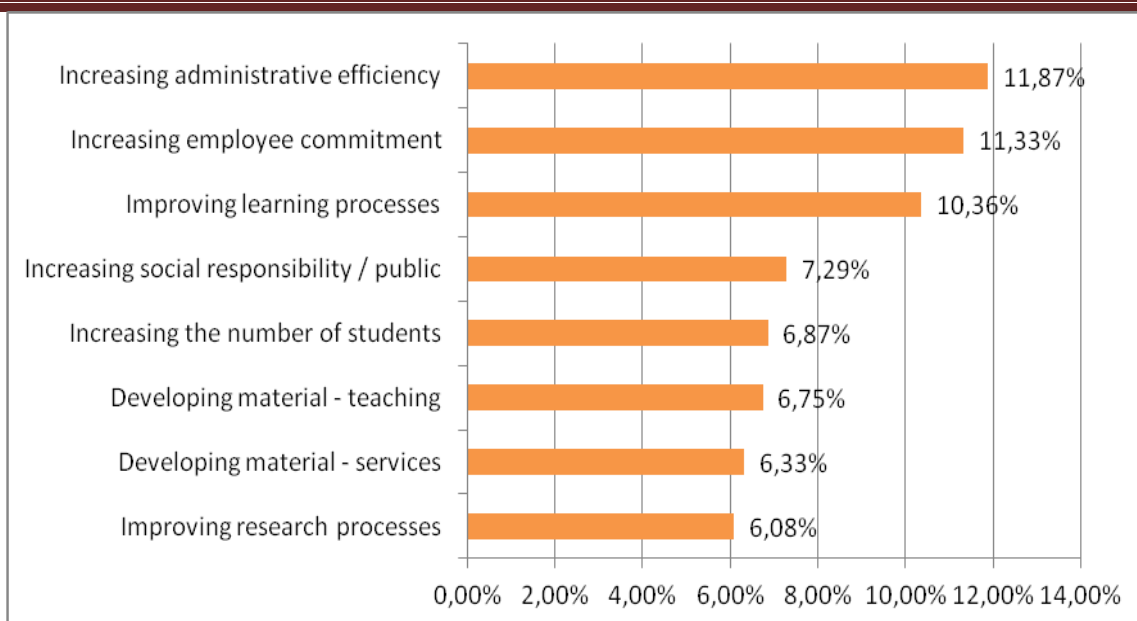


Figure 2. Relative intensity of strategic orientation – highest intensity

Source: authors

The strategic measures with the lowest frequency are to be found in the area of revenues obtained by the university from other sources, such as: economic activities, scientific researches for public institutions and private companies, social responsibility (donations, partnerships) (Figure 3).

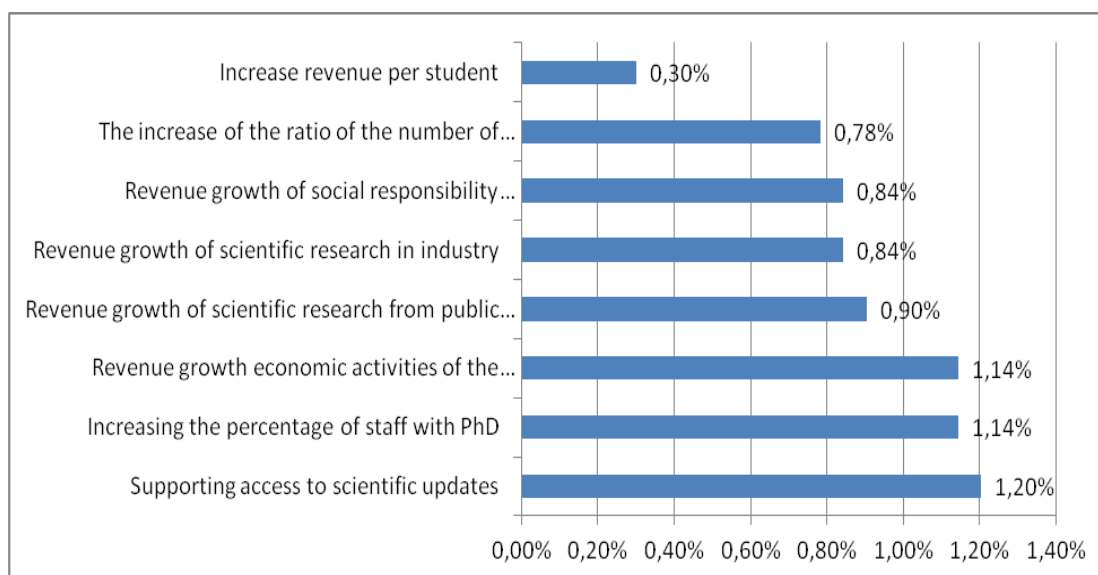


Figure 3. Relative intensity of strategic orientation – lowest intensity

Source: authors

All the measures having influence on increasing revenue per student and the *revenue per student* category have the lowest intensity. From the total of 1660 measures analysed there are only 5 oriented to increase revenue per student: 1 in the managerial program of UAIC elected rector, 1 in another candidate's managerial plan for UAIC, 1 in the plan of ASE's elected rector, 2 in the plan of elected rector of USAMV Iasi. That means the universities don't have a strategic objective to attract resources from other sources than government.

The intensity of strategic direction it was calculated for each Rector's office winner (elected candidate) as a percentage resulted from the number of measures included in the managerial plan, for each strategic focus category (Table 2) (students, personnel, resources, other), divided by the

maxim number on each strategic focus, amongst all the candidates included in this study. This gives us a competitiveness measure in respect to the proposed strategic framework. The closer to 100% is the percentage, the better the alignment of the strategic plan, compared with the top competitor on each strategic direction.

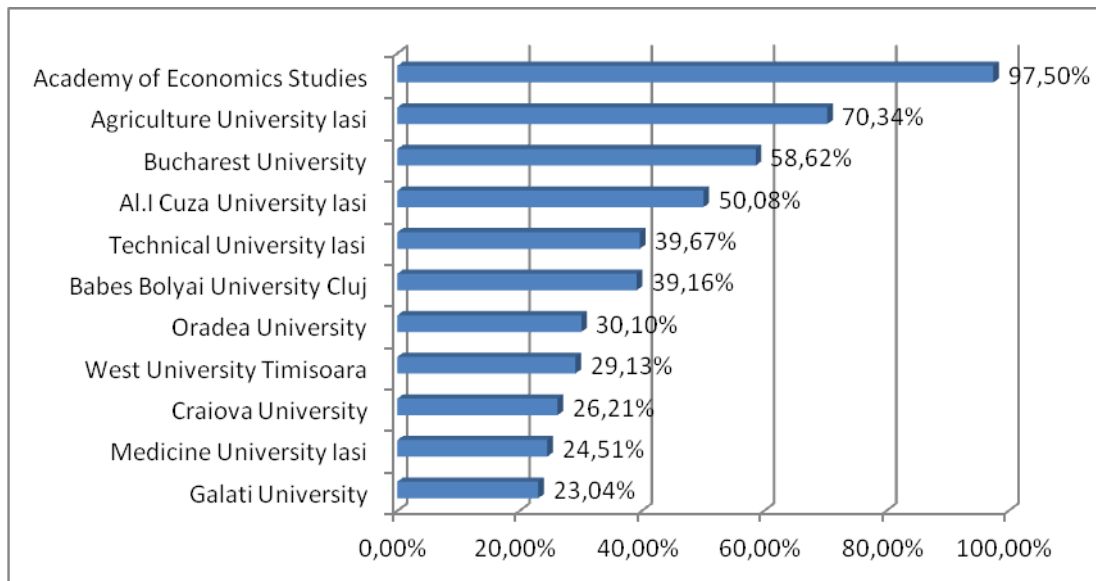


Figure 4. Intensity of strategic direction per university (Rector office Winners)

Source: authors

From figure 4 we can observe that the strategic measures from the managerial plan of Academy of Economics Studies winner, with 97.50%, is the best correlated plan with the international and national performance evaluation indicators proposed. The next is the plan of the winner from the USAMV Iași, with 70.34%, Bucharest University with 58.62% and UAIC with 50.08%. The lowest compatibility is in the strategic plan of Dunărea de Jos Galați University with 23.04%.

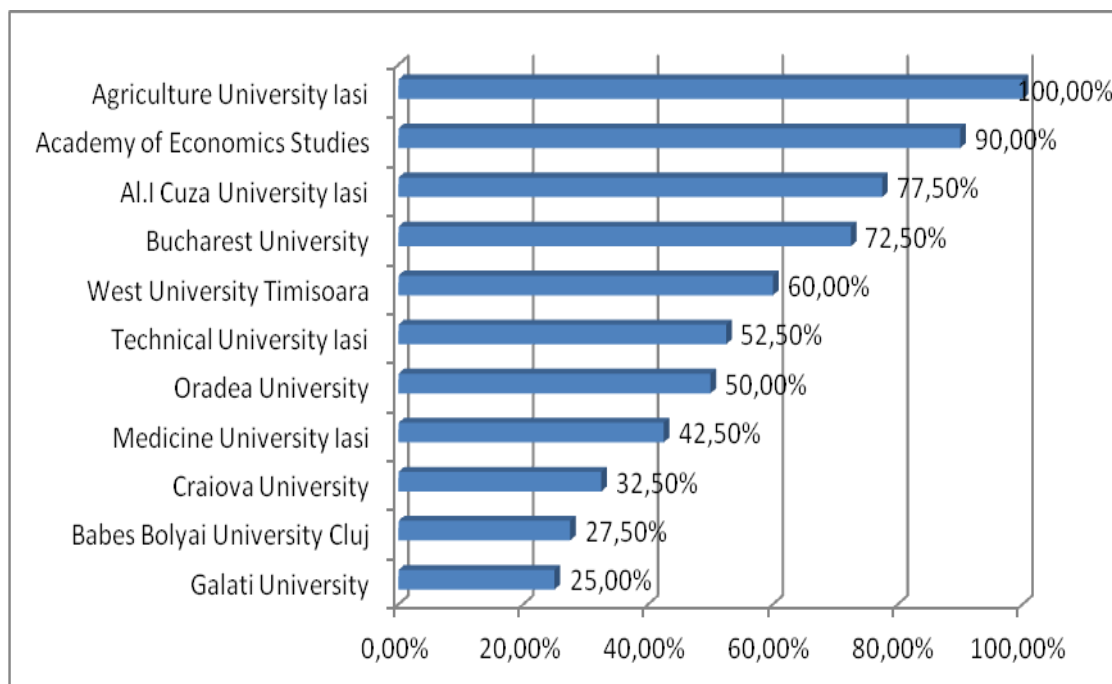


Figure 5. Intensity of Students strategic focus per university (Rector's office winners)

Source: authors

The highest intensity of strategic focus *Student* has the plan of the elected rector of USAMV Iași, with 40 strategic measures, followed by ASE Bucharest with 36 measures, representing 90% of the previous. The lowest is Galați University, with 10 measures, representing 25% compared with the leader (Figure 5).

The analysis of *Personnel* strategic focus reveals that the winner of ASE Bucharest has 36 measure for personnel development, attracting and motivation, followed, at equality, by three universities - USAMV Iași, Oradea University and UBB - with 18 measure, representing 50% percent from the leader, followed by Bucharest University with 41.67% and another group of 3 universities, with 36.11% . UMF Iași has lowest alignment, with only 3 measures for personnel activities (Figure 6).

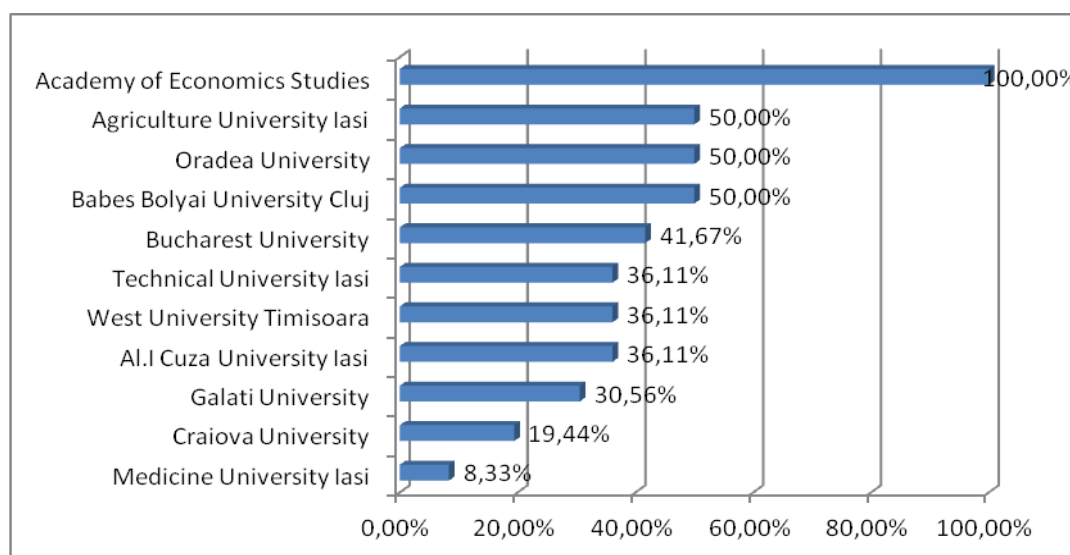


Figure 6. Intensity of *Personnel* strategic focus per university (Rector's office winners)
 Source: authors

The strategic direction evaluated with indicators for *Resources* is about improving teaching, scientific research or services facilities. Most managerial plans include a low number of measures for increasing revenues from public or private sources. The maximum intensity with 46 measures is ASE Bucharest. Second in place came USAMV Iași, then Bucharest University, Technical University of Iasi and UAIC Iași (Figure 7)

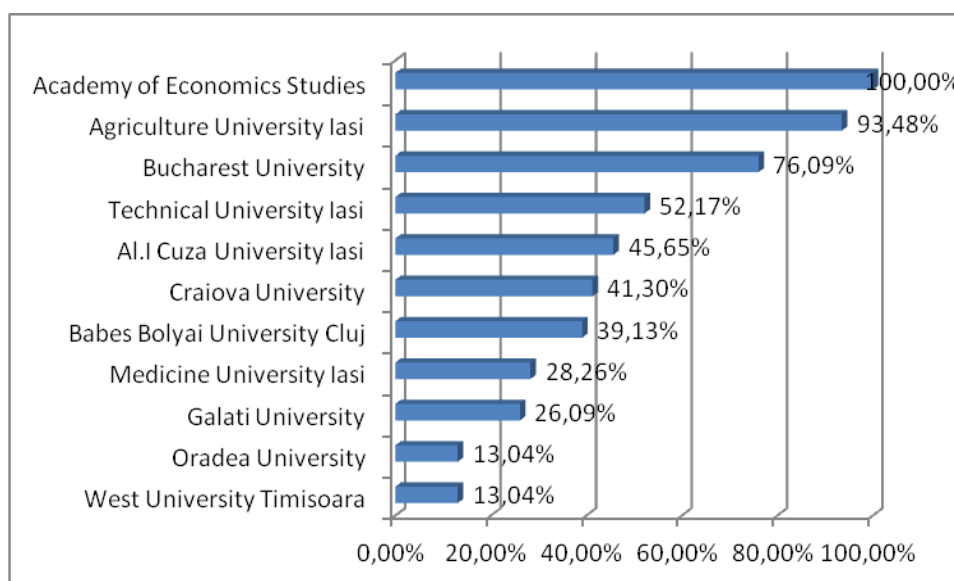


Figure 7. Intensity of *Resources* strategic focus per university (Rector's office winners)
 Source: authors

We also evaluated the intensity of strategic measures about scientific research, visibility of scientific research, social responsibility and administrative efficiency. The highest number of measures has ASE Bucharest, with 95 measures, followed by Bucharest University, with 42 measures, representing 44.21%, UAIC - 39 measures – 41.05%, UBB - 38 measures – 40.00% and USAMV University Iasi, with 36 measures – 37.89%. The lowest number has Oradea University and UVT, with only 7 measures (Figure 8).

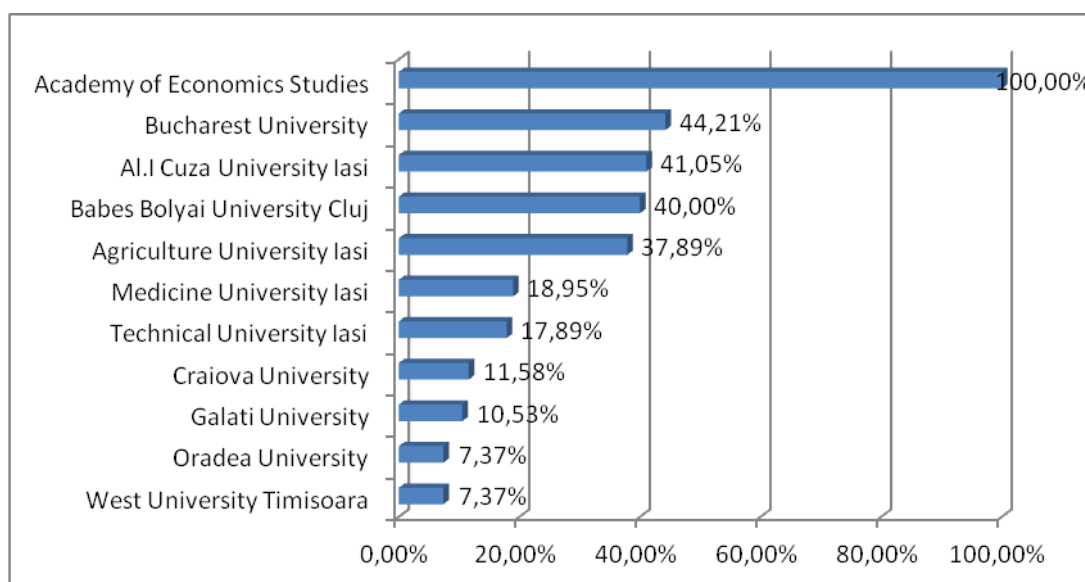


Figure 8. Intensity of *Other*(research and social responsibility) strategic focus per university (Rector's office winners)

Source: authors

The leading university, when it comes to powerful strategic orientation, is the Academy of Economic Studies from Bucharest. There are to be noted the high differences between the universities although the reference system of indicators is known by the candidates for the Rector's office and the universities included in the study are among the most known in Romania.

The analysed content is part of the managerial plans of the candidates and elected rectors and there is no guarantee that they will manage to implement the specified measures. For this to happen an effort to motivate and to create commitment from all employees and partners of the university has to be made.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The present research analyses the strategic directions and measures in the managerial plans developed by the candidates for the Rector's office position of 11 Romanian public universities. The analysis has used, as methodological reference, a strategic framework developed from the main indicators included in Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) and the Methodology for external evaluation of universities and programs used by ARACIS. The framework is designed to cover both the national and the international evolutionary pressures on Romanian universities, and is structured in 4 main strategic categories: Students, Personnel, Resources and Other indicators (including here the ones about Research and Social responsibility).

The alignment of the strategic plans with the framework was measured by the relative intensity of the strategic focus, calculated as a report to the university with the highest intensity on each of the four strategic categories.

Results show that there is a strategic orientation of the universities in Romania with a main focus on administrative efficiency, employee commitment and improvement of the learning processes. At least a part of the universities are aware of the international challenges and are taking the right steps into planning the actions to face them. The preoccupation for the internal efficiency is still dominant, and, at the same time, the building of relationships with the external partners, which could help the university attract resources, receives little attention: the smallest intensity last six strategic focus are about attracting resources.

The strategic directions included in the managerial plans of the rectors cover the indicators used in the international university rankings and national quality requirements, but, there are big differences between the universities in the intensity of each strategic focus. The ratio between the university on the first position and the one in the last position on a certain category is ranging from 100/7,37 to 100/25, meaning the top scoring university shows a 13 to 4 times bigger intensity in her focus to respond at the relevant strategic pressures on Romanian universities, compared with the lowest scoring university. The ASE Rector's plan shows the highest intensity in using references aligned with the proposed strategic framework. In a single dimension, *Students*, ASE does not have the highest intensity of strategic focus, being overrun by USAMV Iasi, with a small margin.

The results of this research provide useful information to improve the strategic plans of the universities and can serve as a foundation to better align the strategic plans with the complexities and requirements from the environment, at national and international level.

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