

ANALYSIS OF THE STUDENT DEFICIT IN TOURISM SPECIALIZATIONS IN ROMANIA

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Abstract:

The pandemic was a turning point in changing many consumer habits. Many activities that were prosperous until 2019-2020 declined after this period. From this perspective, it can also be said that online educational services, synchronous or asynchronous, have also changed the consumption habits of young people. Digitalization, new technologies, and artificial intelligence have generated major changes in the mentality of young people. Attention deficit, lack of motivation, patience, or concentration are just a few consequences of using digital communication means. Added to all of this were, on one hand, the attractive educational offers of European universities, but also the low salaries in certain fields. In this context, Romanian universities are facing a student deficit. Year after year, the number of students decreases, not only in specializations that are no longer found in labor market demands but also in programs dedicated to fields with an acute need for workforce. The causes are multiple, including the lack of desire among high school graduates to continue their studies and the choice of other countries to pursue university studies, among others. Starting from these premises, the present study aims to identify, through a quantitative and qualitative analysis, the causes of the student deficit in faculties specializing in tourism in Romania.

Keywords: Higher Education, Economics Education Research, Tourism, Technological Change, Digitalization of education

JEL Classification: A290, J490, I210, I230, Z310, Z320, I25, O39, O00.

1. Market Analysis of Higher Education in Tourism in Romania

The declining student enrollment trend observed across European higher education institutions—a phenomenon not restricted to the Romanian context—has been well-documented over the past several years and continues to escalate. The etiology of this deficit is multifaceted, requiring universities to undergo strategic realignment and institutional reinvention. To remain competitive, institutions must transition toward proactive recruitment frameworks targeting secondary education graduates. Notably, educational

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models in jurisdictions such as the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Germany prioritize continuous curricular updates, holistic student development, and the integration of state-of-the-art technologies as primary mechanisms for institutional adaptation.

According to data provided by the Ministry of Education, the number of high school graduates in 2025 experienced a 20% decline compared to 2024. Furthermore, over 62,500 students who enrolled in the primary education system in 2012 were no longer accounted for by the time of the 2025 baccalaureate examination; consequently, over the course of 13 years of schooling, nearly four out of ten students either dropped out or failed to sit for the final examination.

In addition to these systemic leaks, a significant proportion of youth opt for immediate entry into the labor market following secondary education [5]. Others, supported by parental resources, defer their higher education by taking a 'gap year' for travel or to undergo intensive preparation for admission into vocational and specialized institutions.

Eurostat data further confirm that Romania records the lowest rate of tertiary education attainment within the European Union. In 2022, only 17.4% of the Romanian population aged 25 to 74 held a higher education degree, significantly below the European average of 32%. The majority of the population - exceeding 60% - possesses only secondary education, while approximately 22% have not completed high school studies.

Furthermore, according to 'The Situation of Young People in the European Union' report, Romania faces a critical challenge regarding the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) population. In 2023, Romania registered the highest NEET rate in the EU at 19%, reflecting an upward trend from 16.8% in 2019. Romania stands as the only EU member state where this indicator has deteriorated rather than improved. Consequently, despite the thousands of positions made available by Romanian universities during the autumn admission sessions, youth interest in pursuing higher education is visibly declining[4].

Comparative analysis shows that even countries such as Italy and Hungary, which rank near the bottom of the European scale alongside Romania, maintain a tertiary education attainment rate approximately 10 percentage points higher. Additionally, Bulgaria has reached a rate of 50%, while the overall European average stands at 44.1% (ec.europa.eu)[1].

Within this broader context, to provide a more precise diagnostic of the enrollment deficit in tourism-related specializations, an analysis of Romania's educational offering in this field was conducted.

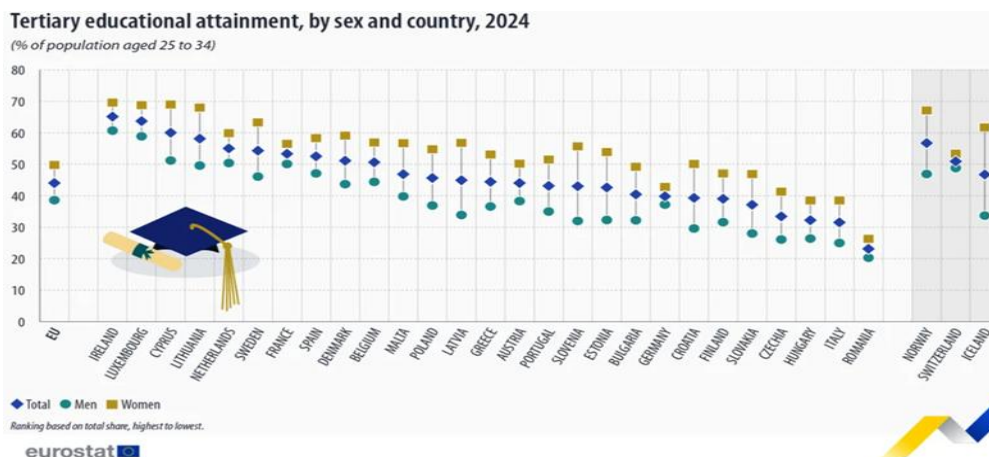


Figure 1. Tertiary educational attainment, by sex and country, 2024³

Consequently, theoretical higher education programs in Tourism and Hospitality are available at both undergraduate (Bachelor's) and graduate (Master's) levels across several public and private universities, including:

- The Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE) – The Faculty of Business and Tourism, which offers undergraduate degrees in Business Administration in Tourism and Services, alongside Master's and Doctoral programs;
- The University of Bucharest – Which provides 'Tourism Geography' programs, including distance learning and part-time attendance options;
- The Universities of Oradea, Târgoviște, and Constanța – Offering undergraduate programs in Tourism and Hospitality or the Geography of Tourism;
- Transilvania University of Brașov (UNITBV) – Through the Faculty of Food and Tourism, which offers specialized curricula in tourism education and hospitality management;
- The Romanian-American University – The Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, featuring Bachelor's and Master's specializations focused on tourism and management, with an emphasis on practical collaborations with the business environment."

The orientation of these programs varies significantly: while some are predominantly vocationally-oriented, focusing on hospitality management, others emphasize the geographical and sustainable analysis of tourism or the strategic management of tourism resources.

At the European level, hundreds of specialized programs in Tourism & Hospitality Management are offered by universities and business schools. These Bachelor's and Master's programs—available in countries such as Austria, Spain, Poland, Greece, Germany, and Sweden—encompass curricula in hospitality management, international

³ Source: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20250904-1>

tourism, and destination development [6]. Prestigious institutions, most notably École Hôtelière de Lausanne (Switzerland), continue to lead international rankings in the hospitality sector. Furthermore, specialized schools and international programs offer degrees characterized by a strong emphasis on experiential learning, mandatory internships, and global mobility [7].

A 2023 study conducted by World Vision Romania, in partnership with Babeş-Bolyai University, highlighted a significant disparity between Romania and the European Union average regarding higher education attainment rates. The findings revealed that only 23.3% of Romanian youth enrolled in higher education successfully completed their degrees, a figure substantially lower than the EU average of 41.2% [3]. Furthermore, over 65% of high school graduates from rural areas do not pursue university studies, despite 80% expressing an initial intention to continue their education. Economic constraints remain a decisive factor, as one in three young people identifies the lack of financial resources as the primary barrier to accessing tertiary education.

In a separate study conducted by George Pop (alumnus of the MSc in Tourism Marketing at the University of Surrey and coordinator of the professional tourism blog oradeturism.wordpress.com), an inventory of the public theoretical higher education offering revealed 35 tourism programs across Romania [2]. The analysis of these public institutions indicates a lack of dedicated, standalone faculties of tourism. Instead, tourism education is integrated into multidisciplinary frameworks: coupled with 'Business' at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies; with Geography and Sports at the University of Oradea; with Public Catering at the Transilvania University of Braşov; or alongside Economic Sciences, Business, and Geography at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca.

Furthermore, while every National Tourism Development Master Plan over the last 30 years has identified spa, cultural, and rural tourism as the primary strategic pillars for development, the national educational offering remains insufficiently aligned. Specifically, there are only a limited number of agritourism programs, such as those at the University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine, within the Faculty of Horticulture, titled 'Engineering and Management in Public Catering and Agritourism' and 'Engineering and Management in the Tourism Industry.' Similar multidisciplinary specializations are found at the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine in Timișoara, the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences in Constanța (offering a BA in the Geography of Tourism), and the University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science and Technology of Târgu Mureș. Consequently, the study identified 15 programs specialized in the 'Economy of Trade, Tourism, and Services' and 9 programs focused on 'Tourism Geography'.

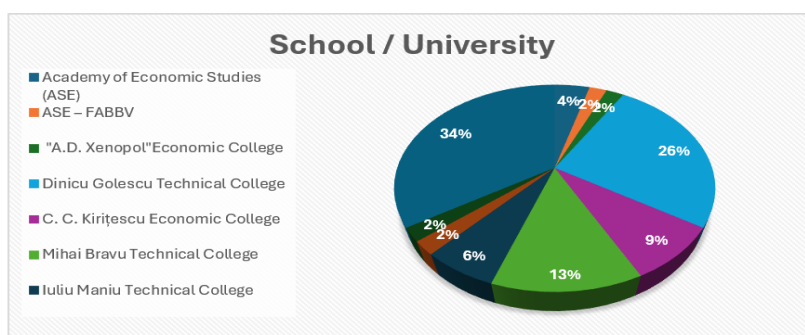
2. Analyzing the lack of interest in higher tourism education among high school students. A quantitative study

Building upon these findings, this study was conceived to investigate the lack of educational continuity between secondary and tertiary levels within the tourism sector. Specifically, the research aims to analyze the factors preventing students from pursuing higher education degrees in the same field of study following their graduation from specialized vocational or theoretical high schools

The study employed a quantitative research design, utilizing a digital questionnaire as the primary instrument for data collection. The survey was disseminated via social media platforms, email, and instant messaging applications to a sample of 64 high school students and recent graduates from vocational and technological tracks specializing in tourism. The primary objective of the questionnaire was to identify the underlying factors that deter graduates with specializations such as 'Tourism Technician' or 'Hotel Management Technician' from pursuing higher education degrees within the same field.

The sample predominantly consisted of young adults (83%) within the 18 to 24 age cohort. Furthermore, the demographic distribution achieved gender parity, covering both sexes in similar proportions.

Regarding the current field of study of the participants, the research objectives were successfully met, as the sample comprised 12th-grade students from five technological and economic high schools (56%), all of which were specialized in tourism. Furthermore, 12% of the respondents are graduates of secondary tourism education currently enrolled at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, the Romanian-American University, and the University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine; notably, these individuals are pursuing degrees in specializations unrelated to the tourism sector

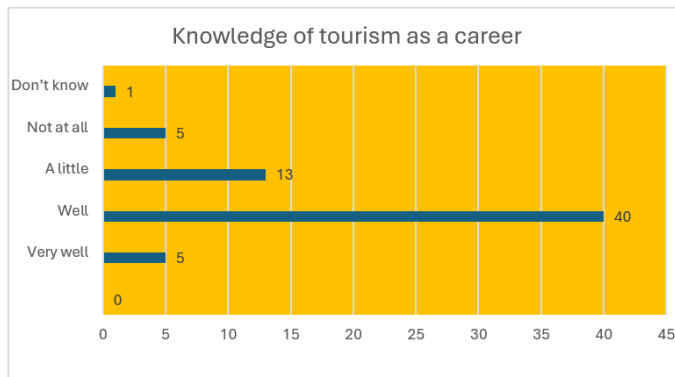


Source: the survey

Figure 2. Educational background of respondents

When queried about their familiarity with tourism as a career path, 62.5% of respondents claimed to know the field 'well,' while a combined 28.12% indicated 'limited knowledge,' 'none at all,' or 'uncertainty.' Within this context, a mere 7.81% reported being 'very well' acquainted with specific career prospects in tourism.

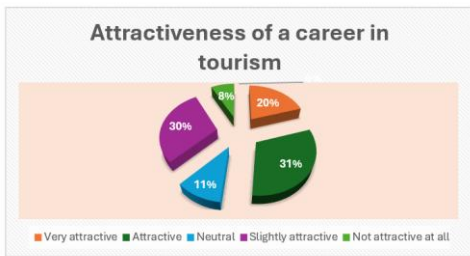
A major discrepancy exists between general awareness of the field and a profound understanding of specific career opportunities. Although a significant majority (62.5%) claim familiarity with tourism as a professional option, the narrow segment of 7.81% possessing 'very good' knowledge suggests a superficial understanding of the labor market. This indicates that while respondents can identify generic roles (e.g., receptionist, tour guide), they lack familiarity with hierarchical career progression or niche specializations within tourism management.



Source: the survey

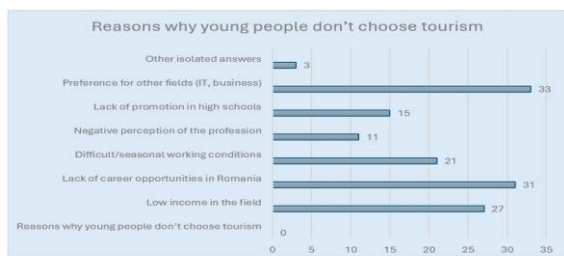
Figure 3. Knowledge of tourism as a career

Despite the fact that approximately 51% of respondents perceive tourism careers in Romania as 'attractive' or 'highly attractive,' with only 18.7% considering them 'low' or 'not at all attractive,' there remains a significant paradox regarding educational continuity. Despite this positive perception of the sector's professional appeal, most respondents do not consider pursuing higher education in tourism to be a viable or preferred career path.



Source: by author (from survey)

Figure 4. Attractiveness of a career in tourism



Source: by author (from survey)

Figure 5. Tourism non-selection reasons

The primary obstacle in attracting youth to the tourism sector is a deficit in cross-sectoral competitiveness. Specifically, the preference for alternative fields (n=33) and the perceived lack of career opportunities (n=31) prevail over operational difficulties. This trend indicates a crisis of prestige within the industry and an unfavorable cost-benefit analysis regarding projected income and professional stability.

The most significant inhibitor identified is the competition with alternative industries (such as IT or Medicine), cited by 33 respondents, which underscores a crisis of competitive attractiveness for the tourism sector within the labor market. Furthermore, the perceived lack of career advancement opportunities (n=31) and low income levels (n=27) are identified as major structural obstacles, outweighing the impact of seasonality or the physical/operational difficulty of the work.

The limited impact of institutional promotion within secondary education (n=15) and a general negative perception of the industry (n=11) suggest a systemic deficiency in strategically communicating the sector's benefits to younger generations. The results reveal a striking contrast: while there is a strong collective belief in the capacity of tourism to drive Romania's economic development (62%), youth avoid active engagement in the field due to financial instability and a lack of professional prestige. Paradoxically, while tourism is perceived as a vital pillar for the national economy, it is simultaneously viewed as 'unfriendly' or unattractive from the perspective of individual employment.

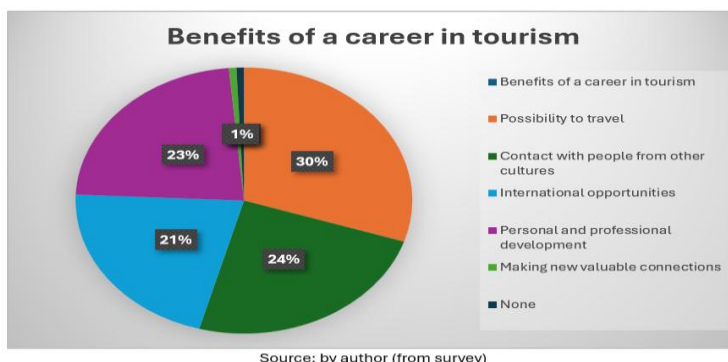


Figure 6. Benefits of a career in tourism

The data regarding the perceived benefits of a career in tourism provide a clear overview of intrinsic motivations: the opportunity to travel represents the primary attractor, cited by 30% of respondents. The intercultural and social dimensions are also strongly represented, with contact with diverse cultures (24%) and international opportunities (21%) being highly valued. Furthermore, 23% of subjects recognize the potential for personal and professional growth, demonstrating that tourism is perceived as a fertile environment for the accumulation of practical experience and 'soft skills.'

However, these findings reveal a structural paradox: although respondents acknowledge the economic significance of tourism (62%) and value its experiential benefits (travel, interculturality), they tend to avoid the sector due to pragmatic deficiencies, such as low wages and career instability. There is a manifest discrepancy between the *ideal value* of tourism—characterized by personal development and national impact—and its *actual market value*, where competition from sectors such as IT is increasingly dominant. To attract younger generations, the industry must translate these intangible benefits (cultural

experiences) into tangible advantages, such as transparent career trajectories and competitive compensation packages.

In conclusion, tourism is perceived predominantly as a domain of life experiences rather than a sector providing long-term financial security or professional stability.

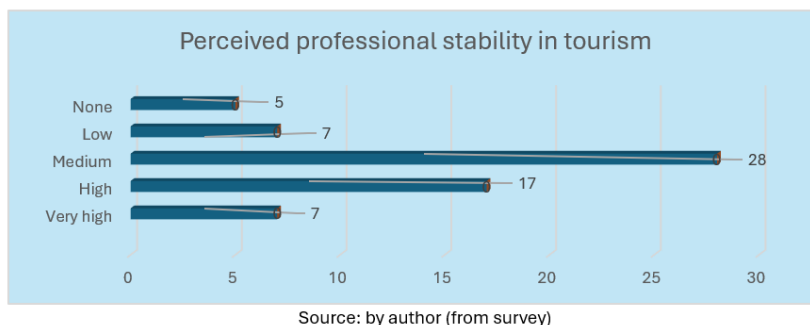


Figure 7. Perceived professional stability in tourism

The findings indicate considerable macroeconomic optimism among respondents. A significant majority (62%) believe that tourism can contribute decisively to the country's economic development, while an additional 28% recognize this potential partially. This positive outlook suggests that tourism is perceived as a strategic national asset, even if its benefits are not yet fully leveraged.

Regarding perceived job stability, the data reflect a trend toward neutrality, albeit with visible reservations:

- The largest proportion of respondents (n=28) assess professional stability at a medium level.
- While a segment perceives stability as high (n=17) or very high (n=7), a cumulative total of 12 respondents place the sector in the low or non-existent stability category.

This distribution suggests that tourism is still perceived as a fluctuating field, where long-term career security remains uncertain for a significant portion of the workforce.

The analysis reveals a persistent paradox: although tourism is validated as an economic engine (62%) and offers attractive lifestyle benefits (travel, culture), it fails to provide high perceived stability and competitive income. The gap between *idealized attractiveness* (travel) and *pragmatic reality* (low wages, insufficient promotion) explains why youth migrate toward more secure and better-remunerated sectors.

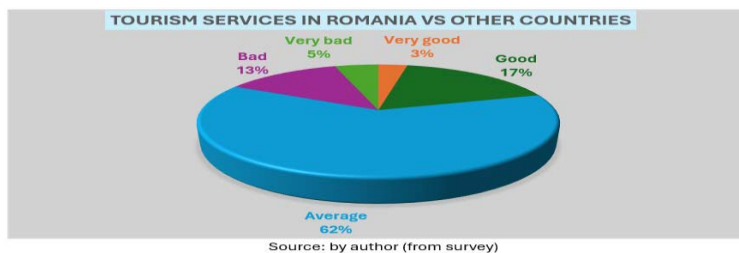


Figure 8. Tourism Services in Romania vs Other Countries

An overwhelming majority of 62% of respondents perceive Romanian tourism services as being of 'average' quality compared to international standards. Only 20% evaluate these services as 'good' or 'very good,' while a nearly equivalent proportion (18%) classify them as 'poor' or 'very poor.' Despite this perception of mediocrity in service delivery, 62% of subjects maintain a strong belief in the sector's capacity to contribute significantly to the country's economic development.

The data concerning the youth demographic elucidate why this aforementioned economic potential remains only partially realized. The analysis reveals a fragile developmental model: Romanian tourism is currently stagnating in a 'median zone' regarding both service quality (62%) and professional stability. Although the public identifies clear benefits related to mobility and interculturality, these factors prove insufficient to offset low wages and the lack of clear advancement prospects.

To transform tourism into a genuine economic engine, a strategic shift is required: transitioning from an attractiveness based on travel perks to an attractiveness rooted in professionalism. This necessitates elevating service quality beyond the current level of mediocrity and restructuring compensation frameworks for young specialists.

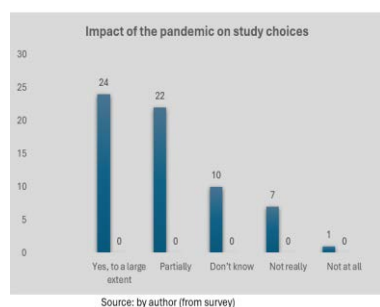


Figure 9. The pandemic impact

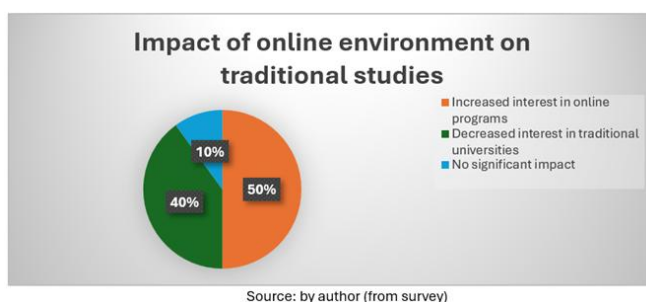


Figure 10. The online environment's impact

The global health crisis exerted a major disruptive influence on the sector; 24 respondents stated that the pandemic influenced their educational choices 'to a great extent,' while 22 reported a 'partial' impact. The inherent instability of the industry, which was brutally exposed by the pandemic, has solidified the perception of tourism as a high-risk career path. Furthermore, the lack of institutional promotion within secondary education (n=15) leaves

these apprehensions unaddressed, steering youth toward sectors perceived as 'crisis-proof.' Collectively, the data explain the refusal of young people to enter the system through the lens of external competition and the lingering trauma caused by the health crisis.

The digital environment has radically transformed traditional education: 50% of the subjects report an increased interest in online programs, while 40% experience a diminishing interest in classical universities. These findings reflect a massive shift in educational behavior under the dual pressures of digitalization and the global health crisis.

The analysis reveals a fragile developmental model: Romanian tourism suffers from a discrepancy between its image as an economic engine and the pragmatic reality of the labor market. Services remain stagnant in a 'median zone' of quality, stability is perceived as uncertain, and the pandemic has functioned as a catalyst for the migration of educational interest toward online platforms and alternative professional fields.

To revitalize the sector, a transition is required from attractiveness based on experiential factors (travel) to an attractiveness rooted in professionalism. This objective must be pursued by elevating service quality and restructuring academic offerings to regain the trust of the post-pandemic generation.

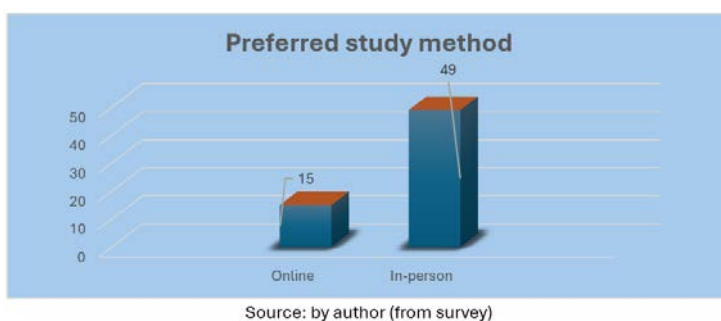


Figure 11. Preferred study method

The survey results highlight a major paradox between the theoretical interest in digitalization and the practical preference for human interaction:

While 50% of respondents express an increased interest in online programs, 40% experience a diminishing interest in traditional universities. This suggests an erosion of the classical academic model in favor of digital flexibility. Only a minor segment (10%) believes that digitalization has had no significant impact on their perception.

Despite this theoretical openness toward the digital medium, when selecting an actual learning modality, an overwhelming majority of 49 respondents prefer the 'face-to-face' method. In contrast, only 15 respondents opted for exclusively online study.

Consequently, while respondents value the online environment for its accessibility and convenience, they continue to associate 'face-to-face' learning with educational quality and the intrinsic value of human interaction. In tourism—a field fundamentally based on

interpersonal relationships—the significant preference for physical attendance (49 out of 64 participants) reflects an understanding that practical skills cannot be fully acquired in a virtual environment.

Although the pandemic forced a migration toward online platforms, influencing the educational choices of most subjects, it has not succeeded in replacing the desire for direct contact. The loss of interest in traditional universities (40%) may not stem from the physical format itself, but rather from a lack of curricular adaptation, given that students still express a desire for in-person learning.

Furthermore, since salary is 'very important' for 39 of the respondents, the preference for 'face-to-face' study can be interpreted as an investment in a form of education perceived as more rigorous and better equipped to ensure the high income they seek.

In conclusion, the Romanian tourism student emerges as a 'hybrid' profile: they demand the flexibility of online resources but base their actual professional development on physical presence, viewing it as the only method capable of providing the competencies necessary for a stable career.

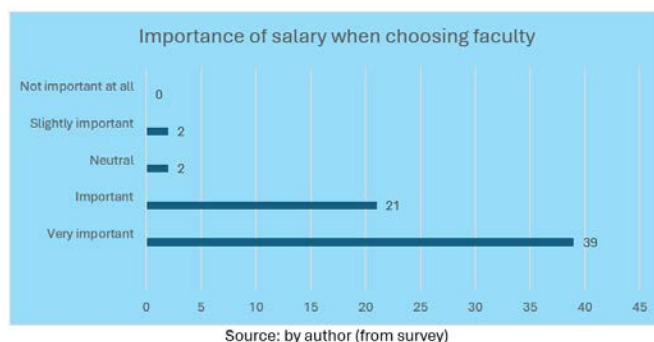


Figure 12. Salary as a choice factor

This data indicates an extremely pronounced pragmatic orientation among respondents, reflecting a direct correlation between financial expectations and educational investment. A majority of 39 respondents consider salary to be a 'very important' factor in the university selection process. An additional 21 respondents classify salary as 'important,' meaning that for 60 out of the 64 participants (over 93%), the financial outlook represents either a decisive or a qualifying criterion.

It is noteworthy that no respondent (0) considered salary to be 'not at all important,' while the 'neutral' and 'slightly important' segments remain marginal (2 respondents each). This distribution elucidates why the tourism sector faces recruitment challenges despite being perceived as attractive. Although youth are drawn to the 'opportunity to travel' (30%), this desire comes into direct conflict with an acute need for financial security. Since salary is 'very important' for the majority, and 'low income' is identified as a primary reason for avoiding the sector, an insurmountable selection barrier emerges.

Respondents 'do not believe in the continuity of higher education in tourism' precisely because their perception is that this field cannot satisfy their primary requirement: a motivating post-graduation salary.

In conclusion, the contemporary student no longer selects a faculty based on passion or curiosity alone, but rather on a Return on Investment (ROI) calculation. If tourism is perceived as a low-income sector, no promotional campaign highlighting the 'beauty of the profession' will be able to offset the need for financial stability expressed by the 39 respondents in the final dataset.

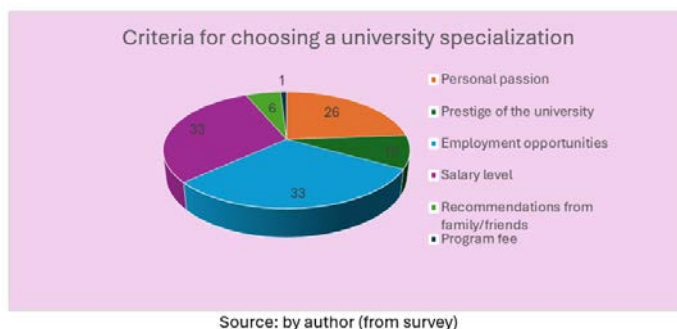


Figure 13. Specialization choice criteria

According to the recorded responses, the two most critical criteria are employment opportunities and salary levels, each accounting for 33% of the total. This equal weighting suggests that respondents adopt an instrumental perspective on higher education, perceiving it primarily as a vehicle for labor market integration and financial stability. This finding is consonant with Human Capital Theory, which emphasizes the role of education in maximizing individual economic returns.

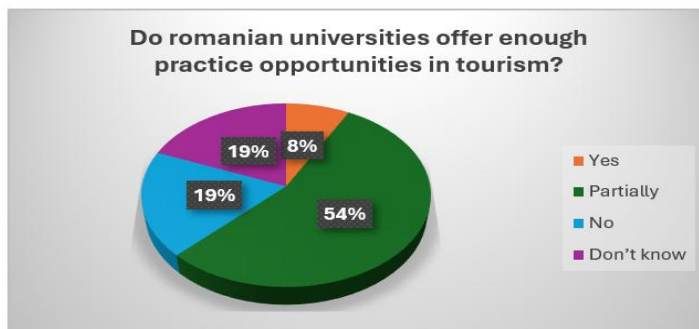
Personal passion accounts for 26%, ranking third in the hierarchy of criteria. While significant, this value indicates that intrinsic motivation is subordinate to economic considerations. From a pedagogical perspective, this aspect raises questions regarding the long-term sustainability of academic motivation, particularly in fields perceived as demanding or characterized by uncertain financial returns.

The prestige of the university (10%) exerts a moderate influence, suggesting that institutional reputation is relevant but not decisive. In contrast, recommendations from family or friends (6%) hold a minimal weight, indicating a high degree of individual decision-making autonomy among respondents—a hallmark of modern, individualistic societies.

Tuition fees, at only 1%, have a marginal influence. This value may be interpreted in several ways: either costs do not represent a major constraint for the analyzed sample, or they are perceived as an acceptable compromise in relation to the anticipated future benefits.

Overall, the results suggest a predominantly utilitarian orientation in the selection of university specializations, with significant implications for educational policies and vocational guidance strategies.

In conclusion, the study highlights that the decision regarding the choice of a university specialization is dominated by economic and professional considerations, while vocational and social factors play a secondary role. This trend reflects the adaptation of education to labor market dynamics, but it also underscores the necessity of achieving a balance between economic utility and personal fulfillment within the academic and professional trajectory.



Source: by author (from survey)

Figure 14. Internship opportunities offered

The high prevalence of the 'Partial' response (54%) suggests the existence of internship initiatives; however, these are perceived as insufficient in terms of duration, quality, or relevance to the labor market requirements in the tourism sector. This result reflects a gap between the academic curriculum and the industry's actual needs.

The 'No' response (19%) indicates a significant proportion of respondents who believe that universities do not offer adequate internship opportunities, a factor that may lead to professional integration challenges for graduates. Furthermore, the 'I don't know' category (19%) reveals either a lack of student awareness regarding existing opportunities or a low visibility of partnerships between universities and tourism industry stakeholders.

In contrast, only 8% of respondents believe that universities provide sufficient internship opportunities, highlighting the marginal nature of positive perceptions. These results suggest a critical need for: strengthening partnerships with tourism operators (hotels, travel agencies, destination management organizations); extending the duration and diversifying the forms of practical training (internships, work placements, applied projects); and improving institutional communication regarding available opportunities.

Overall, the data indicate that romanian universities are perceived as offering insufficient or incomplete tourism internship opportunities, which may adversely affect the practical preparedness of graduates. To enhance the quality of academic training, a stronger

orientation toward experiential learning and a closer alignment with labor market demands are essential.

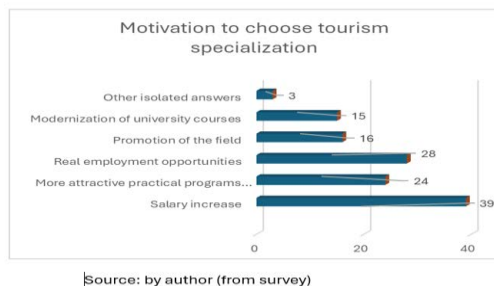


Figure 15. Motivation

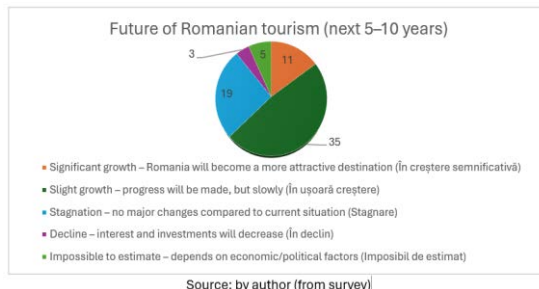


Figure 16. Future of Romanian tourism

The largest share of responses corresponds to the 'slight increase' option (35%), suggesting that respondents perceive Romania's tourism potential as real but insufficiently leveraged. This perception points toward the existence of persistent barriers, such as deficient infrastructure, limited international promotion, or a lack of coherent investment strategies.

Responses indicating stagnation (19%) reflect a significant lack of confidence in the sector's capacity to generate relevant structural changes. This segment of the sample perceives Romanian tourism as relatively inert, dependent on external factors rather than proactive public policies.

Only 11% of respondents anticipate a significant growth, suggesting that strong optimism remains limited. This relatively low value may indicate a perceived absence of clear reform signals or long-term strategic investments. Conversely, the 'decline' option (3%) represents a marginal share, indicating that profoundly negative perceptions are isolated and do not define the general consensus.

The 'impossible to estimate' category (5%) underscores the influence of exogenous factors (economic, political, and geopolitical) and the degree of uncertainty associated with planning within the tourism industry. Overall, 46% of respondents (slight increase + significant increase) anticipate a positive evolution, while 22% (stagnation + decline) express a negative or neutral perception. This balance indicates a state of moderate optimism, yet one that lacks firm conviction.

Consequently, these findings necessitate several strategic actions, such as: the implementation of coherent national strategies for tourism development, increased investment in infrastructure, digitalization, and vocational training and the consolidation of Romania's image as a competitive tourism destination on the international stage.

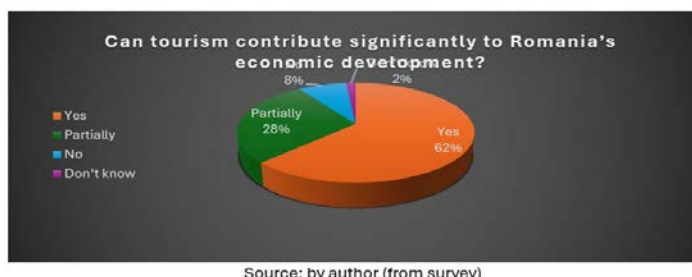


Figure 17. Tourism's capacity to develop Romania's economy

The findings indicate high macroeconomic optimism, as the target audience associates tourism with national prosperity. However, correlating this vision with previous data reveals a strategic contradiction: although respondents believe in tourism as an economic force (62%) and consider it attractive (51%), they reject academic professionalization in the field. This discrepancy suggests that respondents perceive tourism as a natural resource or a context that 'develops on its own,' failing to understand that achieving a major economic contribution requires highly qualified specialists, not just enthusiasm.

3. Digitalization of Educational Services in Tourism

Following quantitative and qualitative research regarding the deficit of students in faculties specializing in tourism in Romania, the digitalization of academic programs can revitalize institutional activity. In this context, marked by heightened economic volatility and a paradigm shift in the preferences of Generation Z, digitalization does not merely represent a modernization of pedagogical tools, but rather an institutional survival strategy.

Digitalization of educational services operates on three critical levels that can reverse the downward trend in enrollments:

Flexibility and Accessibility (The Phygital Model): The implementation of Hybrid Learning systems allows students to combine their studies with early practical experience. Accessibility is ensured by the digitalization of administrative processes (online enrollment, 24/7 e-learning platforms), which eliminates geographical barriers and facilitates the recruitment of international students or those from rural areas, thereby reducing the numerical deficit.

Alignment with Industry 4.0 (Smart Tourism): Faculties that integrate Property Management Systems (PMS), Global Distribution Systems (GDS), and Big Data analysis tools into their curricula become magnets for students. Consequently, students will no longer perceive the faculty as a purely theoretical space, but as a training hub for high-tech competencies, increasing the attractiveness of the study program.

Gamification and Immersive Experience: The use of Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) to simulate the management of a tourist destination or the operation of a resort transforms the learning process into an interactive experience.

The mechanism for mitigating the deficit through digitalization can be a process by which technology transforms enrollment volume, and it can be synthesized through the following correlation:

Digitalization Factors	Effect on the student	Result in indicators
Learning Personalization	Academic path adapted to individual pace (AI tutoring)	Decreased dropout rate (retention)
Digital Micro-certifications	Acquisition of competencies rapidly recognized in the market	Increased attractiveness for admission
Digital Networking	Access to mentors and global companies through dedicated platforms	Increased professional insertion rate

Table 1. The mechanism for mitigating the deficit through digitalization⁴

Thus, for tourism faculties, the digitalization of educational services is not a finite process, but an ecosystem. By transforming the student experience from a passive one into an active and technologically advanced one, higher education institutions can correct the current deficit.

4. Conclusions

There is a clear recognition of Romania's latent potential as a destination; however, the mediocrity of services is identified as the primary barrier to transforming this potential into real economic performance.

In addition to Romanian university programs in tourism, there is a vast offer across Europe, emphasizing modern competencies, internationalization, and practical relevance. The main challenges remain linked to the attractiveness of Romanian higher education and its adaptation to the labor market.

Integration with the actual economic environment, internships, and partnerships with the tourism sector can increase the relevance and demand for these programs.

The data reveal a prestige crisis in academic education within the tourism sector. Respondents value the field as promising (attractiveness over 50%) but perceive it as accessible without in-depth academic training. In the long term, this mindset may lead to a

⁴ Compiled by the authors (UN Tourism, European Comision)

decline in the quality of tourism services in Romania, as the majority of those interested avoid higher specialization.

The lack of correlation between the industry's attractiveness and the desire to pursue higher education generates three strategic directions for intervention in the educational market:

- **The Necessity of Academic Rebranding:** Higher education institutions must demonstrate the added value of a university degree. Since respondents do not perceive the utility of continuing their studies, academic programs must focus on management and leadership competencies that basic practical experience alone cannot provide.

- **Combating 'Competency Plateauing':** Given that a segment of less than 8% possesses an in-depth understanding of career paths, there is a risk that the labor market will be flooded with personnel occupying entry-level positions who are unable to progress to executive roles due to a lack of strategic vision.

- **Retention Strategies through Information:** Tourism companies and universities must collaborate to transform the perception of a 'temporary job' into one of a 'sustainable career.' The fact that the field is attractive to 51% of youth represents a significant opportunity; however, this is squandered if it is not supported by a clear educational pathway that eliminates the uncertainty and lack of knowledge reported by the subjects.

- **Digitalization of educational services –** faculties that offer competencies in Smart Tourism Management through advanced digital platforms will always be prioritized over those using traditional methods, as these guarantee the relevance of the graduate on a globalized labor market.

In conclusion, the responses indicate that the future of Romanian tourism is perceived as generally favorable, yet characterized by caution and moderate expectations. To transform the existing potential into significant growth, consistent and predictable strategic interventions are required. Among these interventions, digitalization can serve as a key competitive advantage

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