

Competitive Funding for Institutional Development. The Romanian Experience Between 2016–2020



Remus Nica and Gabriela Jitaru

Abstract The Institutional Development Fund (FDI) is a newly introduced component of Romanian institutional funding with the purpose of supporting public higher education institutions (HEIs) in their pursuit of the national strategic objectives for higher education. This policy aims to encourage universities to formulate their own answers (through institutional projects) to current higher education challenges such as equity and access for students, internationalisation, regional development, improving the quality of teaching, supporting the entrepreneurial and practical activities developed for the benefit of students, etc. Given its current form as a simple combination between objective-based funding and competitive funding, and its recent implementation at a national level, we propose an in-depth exploration of the policy's results focusing on institutional activities and targeted objectives. To this aim, the paper presents the relevant results obtained by universities in the last five years of FDI implementation, the trends of HEIs institutional development (measured at the university level), as well as the direct and indirect influence these might have over the overall quality of the Romanian higher education system. At the same time, we look to identify new institutional measures in response to the actual needs of universities (in accordance with university autonomy) in order to underline new implementation directions in accordance with national policies and strategies, both in relation to funding and in relation to national goals, as well as to explore the potential of FDI funding for quality enhancement in higher education.

Keywords Romanian higher education · Competitive funding · Institutional development · Strategic objectives · Funding mechanism

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1 Framework Setting and Methodological Considerations

1.1 Introduction

The Institutional Development Fund (*FDI*) is a recently introduced component of Romanian higher education institutional state funding with the declared and assumed purpose of “supporting institutional development projects at public university level (...) in order to increase institutional capacity and improve the quality of the national higher education system”.¹ As such, the policy was designed to subsidise public Higher Education Institutions (*HEI*) in their endeavour of implementing the national strategic objectives defined by the Ministry of Education (MEd). It therefore aims to encourage universities to identify their answers (through institutional projects) to current higher education challenges, such as equity and access for students, internationalisation and regional development, improving the quality of teaching, supporting the entrepreneurial and practical activities developed for the benefit of students, etc.

What makes this particular component of public funding stand out is its design as a project-based competition for the distribution of funds, which is a combination between two traditionally established models: objective oriented financing (the so-called “targeted funding for specific objectives”), in this particular case represented by the strategic financing guidelines established on a yearly basis by the Ministry of Education, and competitive financing (Estermann et al. 2013). This last model is increasingly common and utilised at the national level in various forms (*OECD*, 2020²). Even though, usually, the project-based financing comes as an addition to the basic funding (block grant), according to the OECD 2020 report, the Romanian *FDI* is an integral part of institutional funding (the so-called “block grant”), and its implementation must accommodate some financial restrictions (e.g. the limitation imposed to some types of spending).

Because the *FDI* is a newly implemented policy mechanism, and given its particularities, the aim of the current paper is to assess the relevant results attained by universities through the projects funded using this instrument, to identify the tendencies and the main institutional development trends that can be connected to its implementation, as well as to explore its potential for quality enhancement in higher education. The article presents the preliminary conclusions of an impact analysis of the first five years of *FDI* implementation, using data obtained during an ongoing study conducted through the POCU126766 “Quality in higher education: internationalization and databases for the development of Romanian education” project. Based on these insights, we aim to identify and propose new institutional measures that could improve funding policy, taking into account the real needs of the universities while respecting their institutional autonomy. This undertaking should also offer

¹In accordance with the Information Dataset for *FDI*-2021, p. 1, http://www.cnfis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Pachet-informatii-FDI-2021_15032021.pdf, accessed at 08.05.2021.

²Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

useful information regarding the way in which HEIs adapt to national policies and strategies and the extent to which the FDI improves their ability to do so.

1.2 Historical Overview

Although the current structure of Romanian higher education public institutional funding (core funding) was adopted and calibrated beginning with 2012 in accordance with the general principles promoted by the National Education Law (*LEN nr.1/2011*), the specific competition-based model of distributing the Institutional Development Fund (*FDI*) was only adopted beginning with 2016 in accordance with the Ministerial Order nr.3632 (*OM nr.36320*).

Percentage-wise, in 2016 and 2017, the Institutional Development Fund covered 1% of the total yearly institutional funding³ (in line with Appendix 1 of *OM nr.3530/2016*) and starting with 2018, the percentage has been increased to 1.5%. This value is still in use at the time in which this article was written (in line with Appendix 1 of *OM nr.3116/2020*). While the 50% increase in value is not to be neglected, the significance of the measure is more important than the actual financial sum: it highlights a progressive openness to resource distribution on a competitive basis, with a stated purpose of increasing the quality of the higher education system. In absolute terms, a significant increase of funds allocated to FDI competitions can be easily observed, beginning with 2018 (see Table 1).

Regarding the national strategic priorities and their reflection through the FDI mechanism, in the first year of implementation, the competition featured four main funding areas for project applications. In 2017, the number of funded areas expanded to eight, but in the following years, the number stabilised following a process of elim-

Table 1 FDI Progress for the 2016–2020 period

FDI progress for the period 2016–2020

Year	Assigned amount	No. submitted projects	No. financed projects
2016	19,459,872	127	107
2017	24,186,700	305	150
2018	45,360,600	239	181
2019	58,293,600	253	230
2020	68,922,000	263	243
Total	216,222,772	1,187	911

³After the subtraction of the amounts allocated to the special situation fund and of the doctoral grants, in line with the specific annual MO (<http://www.cnfis.ro/finantare/finantarea-de-baza/>).

ination and/or mutual consolidation. Currently, the format is considered adequate⁴ for the needs of this stage of development, according to the existent strategic priorities at the national level stated through The National Strategy for Tertiary Education 2015–2020 (TER2020) and, annually, through National Reform Program (PNR).

2018 is the reference year when the current financing areas were formalised in six strategic directions, which are still used in 2021. These areas include:

- Area 1: equity in higher education, for raising social inclusion and increasing the access to higher education, linking the educational offer with the labour market demand (including those related to career counselling and career guidance);
- Area 2: internationalisation of higher education;
- Area 3: supporting the maintenance of university botanical gardens, educational resorts, practice facilities and other infrastructures designated to support teaching activities;
- Area 4: ensuring the activities of the student entrepreneurial societies (SAS), operating within universities;
- Area 5: improving the quality of pedagogical activities, including compliance to deontological requirements and academic ethical standards;
- Area 6: the development of the institutional research capacity at the university level.

The six areas seek to include as much of the academic, social and economic life of any given university, with the only existing limitations being those imposed by the national legislation on the types of eligible expenditure, as well as the guidelines/priorities set at the level of university Senate and executive management of each higher education institution. Based on these arguments, we can infer that, while complying with the above-mentioned requirements, universities could apply for funding that can be used in almost any direction established internally and in line with the national strategic directions. The following figures highlight the scope of governmental financial and administrative involvement for the last six years:

- 9 financing areas;
- 47 participating universities;
- 1,187 submitted projects;
- 911 financed projects;
- 216,222,772 RON as the total funds allocated.

The initial main enquiry, which constituted the basis for this analysis, concerned the relationship between the amount of funding provided by the Government and the results achieved by universities that participated in the competitions.

⁴As specified in the ministerial order, where the general funding areas are listed and, among them, the annual ones are mentioned separately.

1.3 Methodological Framework

In order to analyse the implications and results of implementing the novel FDI distribution model in Romania, the participating experts employed a variety of research methods. In the first stage of the analysis, an examination of the projects' outputs was carried out. This examination proceeded on two separate fronts: a financial-administrative assessment and a project content assessment. This article focuses mainly on the second perspective.

The financial-administrative assessment focused on HEI's level of participation and subsequent access to funds. To this aim, the experts involved examined the trends regarding the number of submitted projects, the number of funded projects, the categories of expenditures and their prevalence (staff, material, other expenses), the amount of co-funding provided by universities and the efficiency of spending.

The content analysis focused on the general and specific objectives and on the results the HEIs committed to in their applications (as presented by HEIs in the preliminary reports submitted in the competition management system for each project). In order to better quantify and compare the project objectives and results, a classification system was devised, with specific entries for categories of general and specific objectives, as well as the type of results and quantitative results. These were based on the examples provided by CNFIS in the FDI implementation information package. This standardised and predefined structure has been used individually for each analysed project since the first competition in 2016. The data was aggregated following the domain and competition year level, depending on the stage of analysis.

In order to improve the methodological instruments, it was decided to divide the analysis period into two stages: 2016–2018 and 2019–2020. The conclusions obtained were comparatively presented and correlated within the analysis, by types of objectives and results, but also by competition years, and then aggregated at the funding area level.

In this paper, we present the results of the afore-mentioned content analysis (correlated with some financial-administrative insights), focusing on the 2016–2018 period and outlining a series of observations concerning the current and future directions of FDI management and implementation.

These observations permit us to assess, in an integrated manner, the contribution that adopting the FDI funding mechanism⁵ has had to increase the quality of the Romanian higher education system. At the same time, we use the results obtained from the interpretative analysis of the data to recommend new modalities and/or directions of allocation for the FDI.

⁵Based on project competitions between universities, on certain predefined priority directions.

2 A Concise Presentation and Analysis of the Finalised FDI Competitions

In order to provide an integrated overview of the results achieved by universities through the FDI funding mechanism, we start by providing the administrative-financial context.

We have chosen to highlight the results of our analysis for three funding areas, namely Equity & Labour Market, Internationalisation and Botanical Gardens & Didactic Research Parks and Facilities, for the 2016–2018 period. This choice was motivated by the fact that these are the only areas funded in each of the three FDI project competitions, cumulating 242 projects, to which a total amount of 55,296,500 RON was allocated. The relative stability of the three funding areas and the strategic objectives they respond to make them suited for the stated purposes of our research.

The legitimacy of the selection of case study areas is also given by the percentage of total funding received, which represents almost 2/3 (62.12%) of the FDI value for the three competitive years presented. This is important because the three competitions are different in terms of financial allocations and in terms of the period of the competition.

Thus, for the Equity and Labour Market area, the amount of 20,488,500 RON allocated for 103 projects, represents 23.02% (89,019,068 RON) of the total amount spent on all FDI funding directions over the 2016–2018 (the average budget per project was 198 thousand RON). For the Internationalisation area, the amount of 18,496,000 RON was allocated for 85 projects (20.78% of FDI funding allotted and 217 thousand RON as the average budget per project), and for the Botanical Gardens & Didactic Research Parks and Facilities area, the allocated amount reaches 16,312,000 RON (54 projects, representing 18.32% of the total amount spent for the three FDI competitions and 302,000 RON as the average budget per project).

The following subsections will comprise a presentation of the main objectives and results assumed at the HEI institutional level for each of the three financing areas presented as case studies.

2.1 Case Study: Equity and Labour Market Area

The stated aims of the Equity & Labour Market funding area were to increase social equity in order to achieve social inclusion, as well as access to higher education, and to match educational provision with labour market demand (including career counselling and guidance). This section concerns the main results achieved in terms of the objectives pursued and the results obtained, as revealed by the detailed analysis carried out within the project.

For the 103 analysed projects (three FDI competitions, 2016–2018), we established seven possible general objectives (GOs) pursued at the national level, objectives that are in line with the examples given by CNFIS in the annex to the competition information package, as follows:

- Promoting the universities' educational offer (GO1);
- Improving the counselling and career guidance services (GO2);
- Providing support to students coming from disadvantaged social backgrounds (GO3);
- Creating an online platform suited for providing information to and communicating with the general public (GO4);
- Analysing the insertion of graduates in the labour market (GO5);
- Analysing and correlating the curricula with labour market requirements (GO6);
- Strengthening the partnerships between the universities and the public economic organisations (GO7).

Among these, the most important general objectives that universities have taken into account for the project implementation were: promoting their educational offer (GO1), which appears in 29.28% of projects; counselling and career guidance (GO2), in 27.26% of projects; support for students from disadvantaged social backgrounds (GO3), in 21.21% of projects, and the correlation of curricula with labour market requirements (GO6), in 21.20% of projects (see Fig. 1).

In terms of specific objectives (SOs), what is noteworthy is the way in which universities have defined their interest for certain specific objectives within the general ones, which reflects their orientation towards a certain type of development measure, in line with various programmatic documents established by their management.⁶

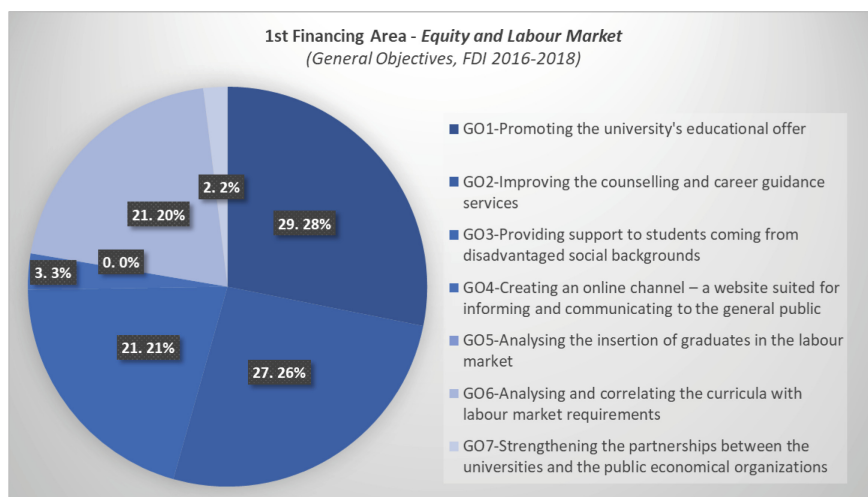


Fig. 1 The general objectives pursued in FDI competitions during 2016–2018 (Equity and Labour Market)

⁶It should be mentioned that it was agreed, as a working rule of analysis, in the case of projects that could be interpreted as pursuing more than one of the seven general objectives, to focus on the specific objectives correlated with the most prevalent general objective.

From the detailed analysis of the 35 potential specific objectives (SOs) established for the Equity Area, seven objectives emerge as preferred by universities in their FDI applications in the 2016–2018 timeframe (see Table 2 in the Appendix):

- SO1.1 Organising marketing campaigns in socially disadvantaged areas, 7.73%;
- SO1.6 Supporting a number of students with disadvantaged social backgrounds, 7.18%;
- SO1.5 Organising guidance and career counselling seminars, 6.91%;
- SO2.1 Increasing the level of social inclusion, 6.35%;
- SO2.4 Organising counselling programs, 6.08%;
- SO6.4 Adapting the educational offer to the labour market requirements, 5.80%;
- SO1.4 Facilitating the college enrolment procedure, 5.80%.

The emerging priorities outlined in the two groups of objectives (general and specific) is confirmed by studying the results achieved by universities after they implemented the project. Thus, out of a total of 412 quantified cumulative⁷ results (116—FDI2016, 148—FDI2017, 148—FDI2018), of the 15 categories of results defined in the main study, it is noticeable (see Fig. 2) that six of them are significantly better represented (with a minimum 10% of projects mentioning them). Specifically, these are the ones that reflect the choices pursued within the specific objectives:

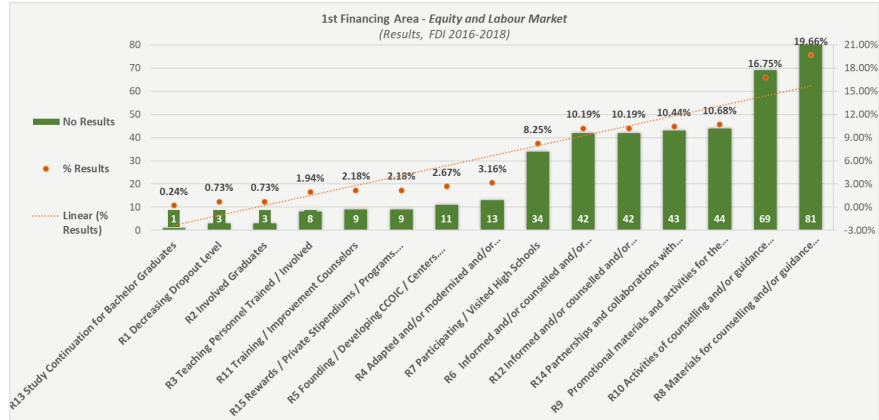


Fig. 2 Results achieved from FDI competitions during 2016–2018 (Equity and Labour Market)

⁷The term “Cumulative results” refers to the total number of results for all projects funded, as each project can outline several prospective results, and every type of result can appear once for a unique project.

- R8 Materials for counselling and/or guidance and/or tutoring or tools (questionnaires, guidebooks, treaties, strategies, studies), 19.66% of options;
- R10 Activities of counselling and/or guidance and/or tutoring (sessions, camps, training meetings, workshops), 16.75% of options;
- R9 Promotional materials and activities for the university, 10.68% of options;
- R14 Partnerships and collaborations with institutions (including from the economic environment), 10.44% of options;
- R12 Informed and/or counselled and/or participating students, 10.19% of options;
- R6 Informed and/or counselled and/or participating pupils, 10.19% of options.

The conclusions drawn from the Equity and Labour Market Area case study must take into account, in addition to the presented data, the administrative and organisational setting in which these competitions took place, as well as other funding and income sources belonging to the university. These additional factors influence in a direct and objective manner the degree of interest shown to certain segments of FDI competitions.

For example, in the case of the area of financing, the merging of the “labour market” priorities with the “equity” area had perceivable influences on how universities chose to establish and present their objectives. In this regard, it is easily noticeable how the 6th general objective is highly represented in 2017 and insignificantly represented for other years.

Consequently, it becomes easy to demonstrate that the main interest areas of higher education institutions have focused on **issues related to providing the necessary framework for counselling and guidance of pupils and students** (both in terms of equipment and didactical tools employed, but also by organising specific activities, including collaborations, partnerships, and adjustments or updates of university spaces). In some cases, career guidance and counselling centres (CCOCs) have been effectively established or developed (the FDI has proved to be a reliable funding source for supporting measures to implement national-level strategic directions—the part belonging to CCOCs to be further sought in the strategy).

2.2 Case Study: Internationalisation Area

For the Internationalisation area, which has as a stated goal the improvement of internationalisation of the Romanian higher education system, the main outcomes derived from the pursued objectives and the obtained results, as they emerged from the detailed analysis performed within the project, were as follows:

Within the 85 analysed projects (three FDI competitions, in the 2016–2018 time-frame), four possible general objectives (GOs) were closely monitored, as they were established in line with the examples given by CNFIS in the annex to the competition information package, as we already mentioned above:

- Promoting the educational offer in widespread international languages (GO1);
- Encouraging the international mobility of professors and teaching staff, researchers and students (GO2);

- Improving services aimed at international students and/or teaching staff (GO3);
- Adapting and synchronising institutional policies and activities with the institutional strategic plan (GO4).

Of these, the most common options selected by the universities are: synchronising institutional policies and activities with the institutional strategic plan (GO4)—44% of projects, promoting the educational offer (GO1)—29% of projects, encouraging the international mobility of the teaching staff (GO2)—19% of projects, and the general objective of improving services aimed at international students and/or teaching staff (GO3)—only 8% of projects (Fig. 3).

Furthermore, the trend is reflected in the distribution of specific objectives (SOs), as was the case for the Equity and Labour Market area. What emerges from analysing the pursuit of specific objectives is that universities have a better grasp of defining priorities for this specific funding area.

From the detailed analysis of the 12 possible specific objectives established for the Internationalisation area, six stood out as prioritised by a significant number of universities through the FDI projects. In the order of the drafted options (see Table 3 in the Appendix), we have:

- SO4.3 Supporting university promotional activities, 17.82%;
- SO4.1 Adapting the curricula, 17.33%;
- SO1.2 Ensuring visibility for university study programs, 12.38%;
- SO1.1 Participating in educational fairs, 10.40%;
- SO4.2 Carrying out studies and analyses and implementing their results, 9.41%;
- SO2.1 Participating in international conferences and workshops, 7.92%;

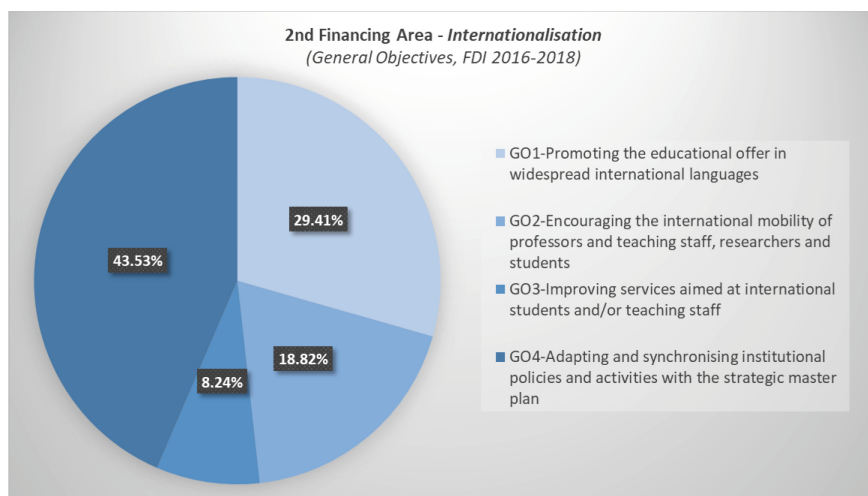


Fig. 3 General objectives pursued in FDI competitions during 2016–2018 (Internationalisation)

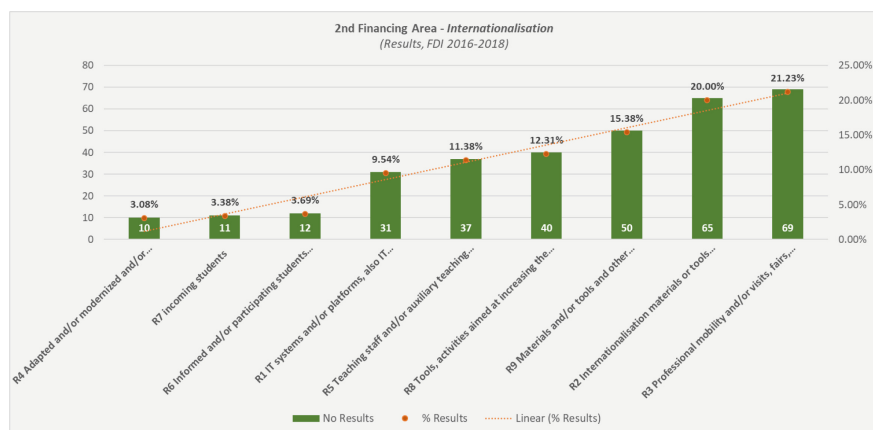


Fig. 4 Results achieved from FDI competitions during 2016–2018 (Internationalisation)

The expected results of project implementation outlined by universities confirm the trend arising from the analysis of the two groups of objectives. Thus, out of a total of 325 quantified cumulative⁸ results (100—FDI2016, 78—FDI2017, 147—FDI2018) for the nine types of results established within the working group, it is easily observable (see Fig. 4) that six of them are significantly more popular in the selections made by universities:

- R3 Professional mobility and/or visits, fairs, partnerships, educational projects, 21.23% of options;
- R2 Internationalisation materials or tools (questionnaires, guidebooks, course treatise/syllabus, summer schools, strategies, analysis), 20% of options;
- R9 Materials and/or tools and other activities aimed at promoting the university, 15.38% of options;
- R8 Tools, activities aimed at increasing the academic quality and exposure, 12.31% of options;
- R5 Teaching staff and/or auxiliary teaching personnel trained and/or specialised and/or evaluated, 11.38% of options;
- R1 IT systems and/or platforms, also IT support, 9.54% of options.

The emerging findings highlight the fact that **the main areas of the higher education institutions have interest in concern issues related to promoting their educational offer through various methods** (innovative or traditional) at the international level. To this end, higher education institutions have made use of specific tools, activities and materials, as well as participation in educational fairs, meetings, seminars or other forms of interaction with an international component.

At the same time, in order to facilitate and calibrate the promotion through the afore-mentioned means, as well as to ensure an increased attractiveness for students,

⁸Ibidem note 7.

professors and researchers coming from abroad, a significant percentage of universities undertook the endeavour of adapting the curriculum to the high standards and the fast-paced development of the labour market (as can be shown by the popularity of objective SO4.1).

In the detailed analysis of results specific to the R3 category, particularly when compiling the quantitative prospective results assumed by universities, we could also observe that the following aspects of internationalisation were targeted: the international participation of students, professors and researchers in educational projects (including their design and development); the creation of joint research teams on various topics; participation in exceedingly specific scientific conferences - highly rated in terms of academic impact, as well as in other endeavours, favouring an increase in the quality and visibility of academia. This can be considered as exceeding the scope of the straightforward promotion of their universities.

2.3 Case Study: Botanical Gardens and Didactic Research Parks and Facilities

The main aim of the Botanical Gardens & Didactic Research Parks and Facilities⁹ funding area is to “ensure the proper functioning of university botanical gardens, teaching stations, practice bases and other infrastructures supporting teaching activities in universities”. The main insights of the analysis in terms of the objectives pursued and the results obtained were as follows:

Within the 54 analysed projects (three FDI competitions, during 2016–2018), three possible general objectives (GOs) were pursued, as they were established in line with the examples given by CNFIS:

- Improving the quality of activities and services provided (GO1);
- Promoting the activities and services offered (GO2);
- Professional training of students (GO3).

From these, the most recurring ones are: professional training of students (GO3), in 54% of projects, and improving the quality of activities and services provided (GO1), in 41% of projects, the general objective of promoting activities and services offered (GO2) being employed in only 5% of projects (see Fig. 5).

From the detailed analysis of the 19 possible outlined specific objectives, a number of seven objectives stand out. Among the most mentioned specific objectives by universities accessing the FDI (see Table 4 in the Appendix), we find:

- OS3.2 Ensuring the scientific, biological and technological base, 15.30%;
- OS3.3 Assuring the optimal conditions for carrying out student practical activities, 14.75%;

⁹The projects eligible for this funding area concern only parks and facilities dedicated to student training.

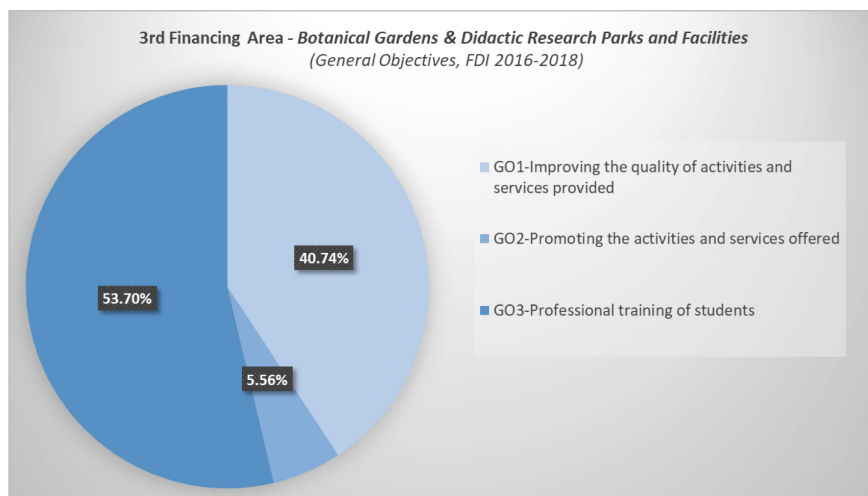


Fig. 5 General Objectives pursued in FDI competitions during 2016–2018 (Botanical Gardens & Didactic Research Parks and Facilities)

- OS3.1 Development of practical skills, 14.75%;
- OS1.1 Improving technologies, landscaping elements, 7.65%;
- OS1.5 Maintaining and modernising the existing material base, 7.10%;
- OS3.6 Creating modern experimental themes, 6.56%;
- OS1.3 Maintaining equipment, machinery and other specific infrastructure, 6.56%.

The results achieved by universities show the interest areas outlined by the two most popular types of objectives. Thus, from a total of 231 quantified results (32—FDI2016, 79—FDI2017, 120—FDI2018) for the eight types of results defined within the working group (see Fig. 6), four of them are significantly better represented, clearly indicating the interest areas targeted by Romanian higher education institutions:

- R2 Materials or tools for ensuring the scientific, didactic and technological base, 18.61% of options;
- R7 Tools and/or activities to increase quality and academic exposure, 18.18% of options;
- R4 Adapted and/or modernised and/or renovated university spaces, 16.45% of options;
- R6 Informed and/or participating students and/or learners (in practice and/or research activities, and/or active involvement in such activities), 14.29% of options.

Lastly, it can be concluded that the main areas of interest of higher education institutions have been connected to **ensuring the framework necessary for the professional training of students in the best possible learning environment**, as well as a constant concern for the quality of the activities and the services being provided.

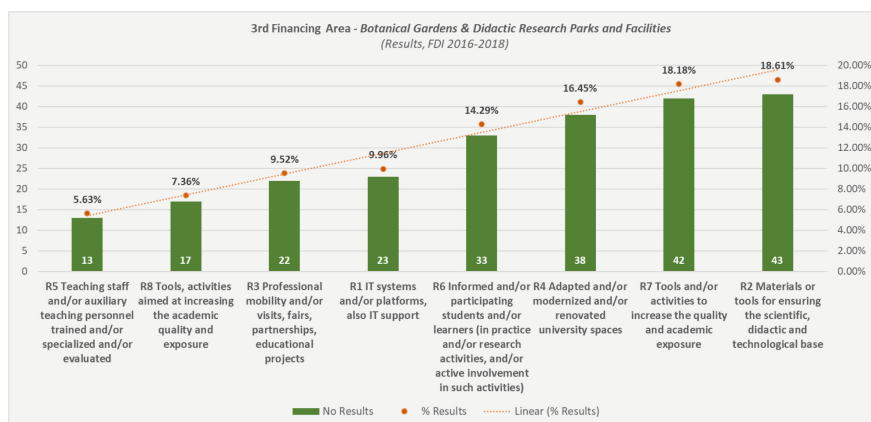


Fig. 6 Results achieved from FDI competitions during 2016–2018 (Botanical Gardens & Didactic Research Parks and Facilities)

What stood out from each individual project, and implicitly, from each university involved, was the way they considered it appropriate to reach the results (in accordance with the individual needs at the institutional level). In some particular situations, it was necessary to focus on measures that would improve the scientific, biological and technological base or to maintain and/or modernise certain equipment, machinery and other technical infrastructure specific for the activity as a whole. In other cases, the preparation and dissemination of informative materials were pursued, or developments of modern experimental themes were considered.

Also, in this particular setting, university spaces were targeted, in which various modernisation, adaptation or renovation activities took place, especially of the spaces that hosted activities related to the field. It is also worth mentioning the fact that IT-specific solutions were employed by means of developing or implementing applications and/or other software tools to facilitate and streamline, and in some cases to optimise, certain processes.

2.4 Some Preliminary Conclusions from the Case Studies

Analysing the case studies of the three funding areas, we notice the emergence of two types of projects that the universities chose to submit for funding and then decided to implement: individual projects, requesting very specific funding, and which are designed to solve a particular type of problem with the obtained funds, and future-oriented projects, that treated each competitive year as a single phase in implementing a broader strategy, often developed in the first FDI project of the area.

Another way of understanding the projects is from the viewpoint of the applicant, that in some cases chose to implement a project not necessarily for the purpose of

institutional development, in the true meaning of the term, but only to manage some financial issues, either for salary or material expenditures.

Undoubtedly, most of the projects have had as a stated objective the attainment of measurable results, which would benefit at the institutional level, but another element being highlighted is the apparent distinctive way in which each university pursues its priorities and development paths. Although it would be expected for each university to have an original strategy or foresight, in reality the data shows that there is only a low percentage of innovative projects and original strategic approaches, which can form the basis for another segment focused on best practice in a future study.

3 Conclusions

Before drawing any general conclusions, when considering the results of the preliminary analysis, one must take into account both the yearly nature of the FDI competitions and the fact that each project (and, implicitly, each university) employed a distinct approach for achieving the chosen objectives (in line with the needs and capabilities present at the institutional level). Some initiatives were consolidated upon, while others were abandoned or thoroughly transformed. At the comparative level, many important details might be overlooked in order to present an integrated, meaningful account of the policy as a whole and its evolution in the last three years. But, while acknowledging these limitations, there are some relevant comments to be made regarding the consequences of its implementation.

In the authors' opinion, this funding mechanism (including its competitive allocation component) encourages higher education institutions to modify their perception of the correlation between funding and the quality of education activities, in general, including the practical ones, regarding student support for career counselling and professional insertion, for international challenges and practical experiences. This change in outlook is already noticeable and can be, in our opinion, quite positive, given the fact that education is a particular public good with significant externalities.

Project-based competitions can stimulate universities to develop strategies and act proactively, moving away from a more reactive, mercantile approach centred on "the price paid for the services offered", which cannot be the foundation for a proper functioning of the educational system. However, as becomes apparent after the analysis presented in this paper, public institutions should focus on allocating resources in line with clearly formulated objectives, precisely planned activities and foreseeable expected results. This remains a progress driver in terms of developing the capacity of institutions to successfully ensure the quality of higher education, and steps should be taken at the national level to encourage this type of approach.

A more efficient monitoring of project implementation and especially the express orientation towards measurable and sustainable results, together with the progressive accommodation of a strategic vision that is in line with the European path of Romanian higher education, are all vectors that can foster the success of policies like the Institutional Development Fund.

4 Several Proposals for Possible Implementation Measures

Considering the experience of the competitions carried out until now and the various discussions with the members of the CNFIS - who also ensure the evaluation process of the projects—we will formulate, in the following, some proposals for possible implementation measures. These measures could strengthen the evolution of the application of this competitive funding model and, at the same time, provide the framework for the necessary adaptations towards achieving the best results in order to increase quality in higher education.

Thus, we outline two types of measures: ones regarding monitoring, a kind of constructive, collegial monitoring, where there is support and shared interests for the academic community involved, and others referring to general measures of adjustment for the main directions on which FDI implementation is based, to maintain the funding principles in a context prepared for technological and other perspective changes.

With regard to the measures that can improve the monitoring process, we underline the importance of the online application for the FDI competition implementation that needs to be further adapted to respond to the functionalities required for this stage. Thus, to monitor and measure the proposed indicators through objectives and those achieved through results, we recommend the adaptation or the development of some specific tools of the FDI competition, with the purpose to facilitate the structuring of both objectives and results into classes and/or groups of indicators. Also, for the outcomes monitoring, it can be used another set of national indicators that can be measured at least one year after the end of the project implementation (e.g.: for SAS domain: a possible outcome indicator can be the number of students that started a business after their involvement, of any kind, in the FDI project; for Quality domain: the increasing percentage for anti-plagiarism checks after the implementation of the project or the decreasing percentage of plagiarised works or the significant decrease of the similarity index after the implementation of a project, or, for Research domain: the number of scientific articles that have been written and published after the implementation of a project, etc.).

Also, in the context in which the FDI competition funding model aims to support universities in their institutional strategic plan implementation, the components corresponding to the FDI national priorities, the importance of the project's sustainability is also evident. Therefore, in the same topic of proposals related to the FDI online application, we propose that each project application should contain a segment dedicated to the presentation of sustainability aspect, the follow-up of the results from the previous project (if the project is part of a multi-year concept).

Another significant measure is the one concerning the continuation of the transparency process for the concluding project implementation reports by monitoring their publication on the institutional sites, so that they can be taken into account when evaluating the next project. As well, to increase the transparency and the exchange of institutional experiences and best practices, it could be very useful an electronic register or platform of the (measurable) results achieved by universities. A national

platform with the main FDI project objectives and results will facilitate the selective monitoring of certain results indicators established or of interest at a national level, and not particularly the financial ones, targeting instead the aspects related to the inherent results proposed by the project and those achieved.

In terms of general adjustment measures for the main directions on which FDI implementation is based, we propose, as main measures, to continue the efforts to transform the Institutional Development Fund into a multi-annual fund (not only on the methodological framework, but also regarding the effective financial implementation) and to increase the percentage given to FDI from the institutional funding (with a possible co-financing from the Special Situations Fund, when the national priority of the minister is known before launching the FDI competition, or other co-funds).

Furthermore, in order for the university to benefit from the financial support necessary for the implementation of a project, we propose that the evaluation principles should take into account both the complete funding of the best performing projects (i.e. at least 50% of the funded projects should receive 100% of the requested amount) and the partial funding of the following successful projects, within the limit of the total fund, by limiting the funding percentage to a minimum 85% of the amount requested by the project. This proposal aims to ensure the proper project implementation by limiting the effects of the budget cuts from state funds via university's own funds.

In the same framework of discussion, regarding the role of competitive funding as an instrument for supporting the correlation of the institutional strategy with the national one and in light of the need for increasing the institutional capacity on certain strategic directions declared at a national level, one or two priority areas can be defined out of the six existing funding areas (e.g. for each competitive year, or recommendable for a period of minimum 3–5 years). The allocation of resources could be allocated as a priority to them, with a minimum 50% of the FDI amount.

Appendix

See (Tables 2, 3 and 4).

Table 2 Nomenclature for equity & labour market—specific objectives

ID_OS	Specific objective
1.1	Marketing campaigns in socially disadvantaged areas
1.2	Involvement of volunteer students
1.3	Creation of promotional materials for the university
1.4	Facilitating the college enrolment procedure
1.5	Organising guidance and career counselling seminars
1.6	Backing a number of students from disadvantaged social backgrounds
2.1	Increasing the level of social inclusion
2.2	Increasing the load of the career counsellors
2.3	Increasing the number of counselled students
2.4	Organising counselling programs
2.5	Developing strategies and plans aimed at improving equity in education
2.6	Developing individualised means of action and report regarding the dropout rate in education
3.1	Reducing the university dropout rate
3.2	Organising tutoring programs
3.3	Increasing the passing rate of the study completion exams
3.4	Internalising the importance of the practice sessions and internships
3.5	Increasing employability
3.6	Organising awareness campaigns
3.7	Adapting the acquired skills and competences to the labour market requirements
3.8	Organising specific courses pertaining to lifelong professional training
3.9	Adapting to the economic and social environment dynamics
4.1	Developing online tools
4.2	Developing a database with pupils, students, teaching staff
5.1	Analysing the professional trajectory of graduates
5.2	Writing and creating studies and analysis
6.1	Implementing studies at the level of the employers
6.2	Implementing studies regarding the technological development tendencies
6.3	Organising workshops and/or meetings
6.4	Adapting the educational offer to the labour market requirements
6.5	Adapting the curricula in order to ensure the acquirement and development of skills and competences
7.1	Organising sectoral (departmental) and intersectoral (interdepartmental) forums
7.2	Involving the socio-economic environment in lifelong training programs
7.3	Supporting the activities of the Career Guidance and Counselling Centres
7.4	Initiating and developing innovative projects
7.5	Ensuring and putting into practice the technological transfer from the academic community to the business environment

Table 3 Nomenclature for internationalisation—specific objectives

ID_OS	Specific objective
1.1	Participating in educational fairs
1.2	Ensuring a better exposure for the programs provided by the university
1.3	Improving the content and translating the university's website
1.4	Updating the study programs in the platform "studyinromania.ro"
2.1	Participating in international conferences and workshops
2.2	Establishing mixt teams
2.3	Organising foreign languages courses
3.1	Developing an informational kit
3.2	Developing mobile apps, containing relevant information pertaining to the university
4.1	Adapting the curricula
4.2	Carrying out studies and analyses and implementing their results
4.3	Endorsing promotional activities for the universities

Table 4 Nomenclature for botanical gardens & didactic research parks and facilities—specific objectives

ID_OS	Specific objective
1.1	Improving technologies, landscaping elements
1.2	Establishing and maintaining micro-nurseries and/or didactic and experimental cultures
1.3	Maintaining equipment, machinery and other specific infrastructures
1.4	Developing the database and images
1.5	Maintaining and modernising the existing material base
1.6	Preparing the informative materials and communicating the information
1.7	Establishing collaborations and partnerships
1.8	Professional training for the staff
2.1	Raising the educational, scientific and cultural influence
2.2	Organising educational, scientific and cultural events
2.3	Participating in fairs and expos
2.4	Organising instructive-educational activities
2.5	Organising applied research activities
3.1	Development of practical skills
3.2	Ensuring the scientific, biological and technological base
3.3	Creating the optimal conditions for carrying out activities
3.4	Connecting the spaces to the IT communications network
3.5	Employing the facilities provided by the research-innovation platforms
3.6	Creating modern experimental themes

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