

Trends in higher education: stakeholder perspectives on quality assurance

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Abstract: This paper explores the key trends shaping the Romanian higher education system, focusing on the perceptions of employers, academic staff, students, and graduates regarding quality assurance. The study is based on a large-scale national survey with over 6,000 participants and highlights priority areas such as university–industry cooperation, learning outcomes-based approaches, digitalization, and lifelong learning. Findings reveal convergences and divergences among stakeholders, offering valuable insights for aligning higher education reforms with labour market demands and global standards.

Keywords: higher education, quality assurance, university–industry cooperation, digitalization, learning outcomes.

How to cite: Armășelu, Ștefania. TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES ON QUALITY ASSURANCE. *International Conference of Management and Industrial Engineering*, 12. <https://doi.org/10.56177/12icmie2025.173>

Introduction

In recent decades, higher education systems worldwide have been undergoing profound transformation, driven by rapid technological progress, globalization, and shifts in labour market demands. Globally, higher education institutions (HEIs) are under pressure to adapt their curricula, teaching methodologies, and governance structures to remain competitive and relevant in a rapidly changing world. Several studies have highlighted the growing emphasis on flexible learning pathways, competency-based education, and stronger university–industry collaboration as key levers for institutional modernization and societal impact. In Europe, the modernization of higher education has been accelerated by initiatives such as the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the Bologna Process, which have promoted transparency, mobility, and quality assurance frameworks.

Within this broader context, Romania faces both similar and specific challenges. Although significant progress has been made in aligning national policies with European standards, structural gaps persist in areas such as curriculum flexibility, digital integration, and responsiveness to labour market needs. Stakeholder expectations are evolving rapidly, but institutional adaptation remains uneven across the sector.

This study addresses this gap by exploring and comparing the perspectives of key stakeholder groups: employers, faculty, students, and graduates. By capturing and analysing these viewpoints, the research aims to identify common trends and divergences that can inform evidence-based institutional and policy reforms. The novelty of the study lies in its integrated approach, which not only reflects the diversity of stakeholder expectations but also provides actionable insights for strategic development in Romanian higher education.

Key concepts addressed

Quality assurance (QA) in higher education refers to systematic processes aimed at monitoring, evaluating, and improving the quality of educational programs and institutions. QA mechanisms can be internal (within the institution) or external (led by national or international agencies), ensuring that educational outcomes meet established standards [3].

Learning outcomes-based approach is an educational model that focuses on what students are expected to know, understand, and be able to do after completing a learning process. This approach emphasizes knowledge, skills, responsibility, and autonomy as core dimensions of graduate competency.

University–industry cooperation denotes partnerships between HEIs and socio-economic actors, including companies and other organizations. Such cooperation facilitates internships, joint projects, curriculum co-design, and research collaborations that align educational content with labour market needs [4].

Digitalization in higher education involves integrating information and communication technologies (ICT) into teaching, learning, and administration [6]. This includes online learning platforms, digital libraries, virtual labs, and tools that support hybrid and remote education [7].

Lifelong learning encompasses formal, non-formal, and informal education that extends beyond initial qualifications [10], enabling individuals to upskill or reskill throughout their professional and personal lives [1].

The aim of this paper is to present the findings of a comprehensive national study that identifies and analyses stakeholder perceptions regarding these trends, with a view to informing educational policy and institutional reforms.

Methodology

To carry out the proposed study, the author employed a multi-layered research methodology designed to capture a comprehensive view of trends and perceptions related to quality assurance (QA) in Romanian higher education. The process began with the identification and clear articulation of the research topic, motivated by the author's professional experience in educational quality evaluation and institutional development. The choice of topic was driven by the need to critically analyse the mechanisms through which higher education institutions (HEIs) ensure academic quality, while also aligning their programmes with evolving labour market demands and global educational standards.

The research involved four key stakeholder groups: employers, faculty members, students, and graduates. Employers were included for their perspective on skills needs and labour market expectations, faculty members as the main actors implementing QA mechanisms, students as primary beneficiaries of educational processes, and graduates as sources of retrospective evaluations of their study experience. The data used for this research were collected through a national-level survey conducted in 2024, with institutional permission and participant consent, ensuring compliance with ethical and data protection standards.

An initial phase of the study consisted of a thorough review of literature and policy documents from recognized institutions, including national bodies such as ARACIS (Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) [2], and international frameworks like the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) [5]. This analysis allowed the author to define key concepts such as quality assurance, learning outcomes, university–industry cooperation, and digitalization, and to map the current landscape of QA practices both in Romania and across Europe. Building on this foundation, an empirical investigation was undertaken using a quantitative survey-based approach. The structured questionnaire was developed according to a conceptual framework linking QA practices with modernization trends and consisted of three main sections.

To complement the theoretical and contextual foundation, an empirical investigation was undertaken using a quantitative survey-based approach. The primary objective of this phase was to gather data on how major stakeholder groups, employers, academic staff, students, and graduates, perceive the trends that could positively influence the future development of higher education in Romania. A structured questionnaire was designed for this purpose, containing both closed-ended questions (to enable statistical analysis and comparison) and sections for comments (to capture qualitative nuances).

The survey was distributed nationally, both through online platforms such as Google Forms and through direct administration during institutional meetings and conferences. The final sample included 1,524 employers, 1,452 faculty members, 1,709 students, and 1,535 graduates, with attention to diversity in terms of academic disciplines, institutional types (public and private), geographical distribution (urban and rural), and industry sectors represented by employers. Data analysis was performed using descriptive statistics, focusing on frequencies and percentage distributions to identify general patterns and highlight areas of convergence or divergence between stakeholder groups. No advanced statistical techniques such as cross-tabulation or inferential testing were applied, as the primary aim of this research was exploratory rather than confirmatory. The use of descriptive analysis was therefore considered appropriate to provide a clear, structured overview of stakeholders' perceptions and to establish a solid empirical basis for future, more in-depth investigations. This approach ensured that the findings accurately reflect stakeholder perceptions regarding QA and modernization trends in Romanian higher education.

Results and discussions

The analysis of the survey data provides a rich and multifaceted view of the trends considered most relevant for enhancing the quality of Romanian higher education. These results reflect the priorities of the main stakeholders involved in or impacted by quality assurance mechanisms: employers, academic staff, students, and graduates.

Employers' perceptions

Employers assigned the highest priority to closer cooperation between universities and the socio-economic environment (63.8%), emphasizing the need for curricula and learning experiences that are closely aligned with labour market requirements. In their view, quality assurance should focus on ensuring that educational programs provide graduates with practical skills, problem-solving abilities, and adaptability, attributes essential in a competitive, technology-driven economy, to be seen in Figure 1.

Closely following this trend are the implementation of a learning outcomes-based approach (54.8%) and the diversification and increase of continuous training program offerings in line with labour market needs (54.5%). These findings highlight employers' preference for flexible educational pathways that develop transversal competencies, responsibility, and autonomy, beyond the simple transfer of knowledge. Furthermore, the relatively high share of respondents emphasizing increased competition among higher education institutions (46.4%) and performance-based funding (45.1%) suggest a demand for more efficient and transparent mechanisms of resource allocation, oriented toward results and quality rather than inputs alone.

A significant proportion of employers (40.7%) also pointed to the increased use of ICT in academic activities as a key trend with potential to improve quality and innovation. This reflects an awareness of digital transformation processes and their impact on teaching, learning, and QA systems. Additionally, 36% of employers highlighted the importance of developing financial support schemes for first-year students and those from disadvantaged groups, indicating an understanding that equitable access and student support mechanisms are integral to sustaining quality.

In contrast, lower percentages were recorded for trends such as internationalization, increased autonomy and responsibility of universities, and involvement in research activities (around 29%). While still important, these areas appear to be less central in employers' immediate expectations compared to more pragmatic, labour market-oriented measures. Similarly, aspects such as recognition of informal or non-formal learning outcomes (17.7%), student/faculty mobility (17%), and increasing student autonomy in learning (16.3%) were perceived as lower priorities. This distribution suggests that, from the employers' perspective, the modernization of Romanian higher education should be driven first and foremost by strengthening links to the economy, aligning learning outcomes with job market demands, and improving institutional performance and funding mechanisms.

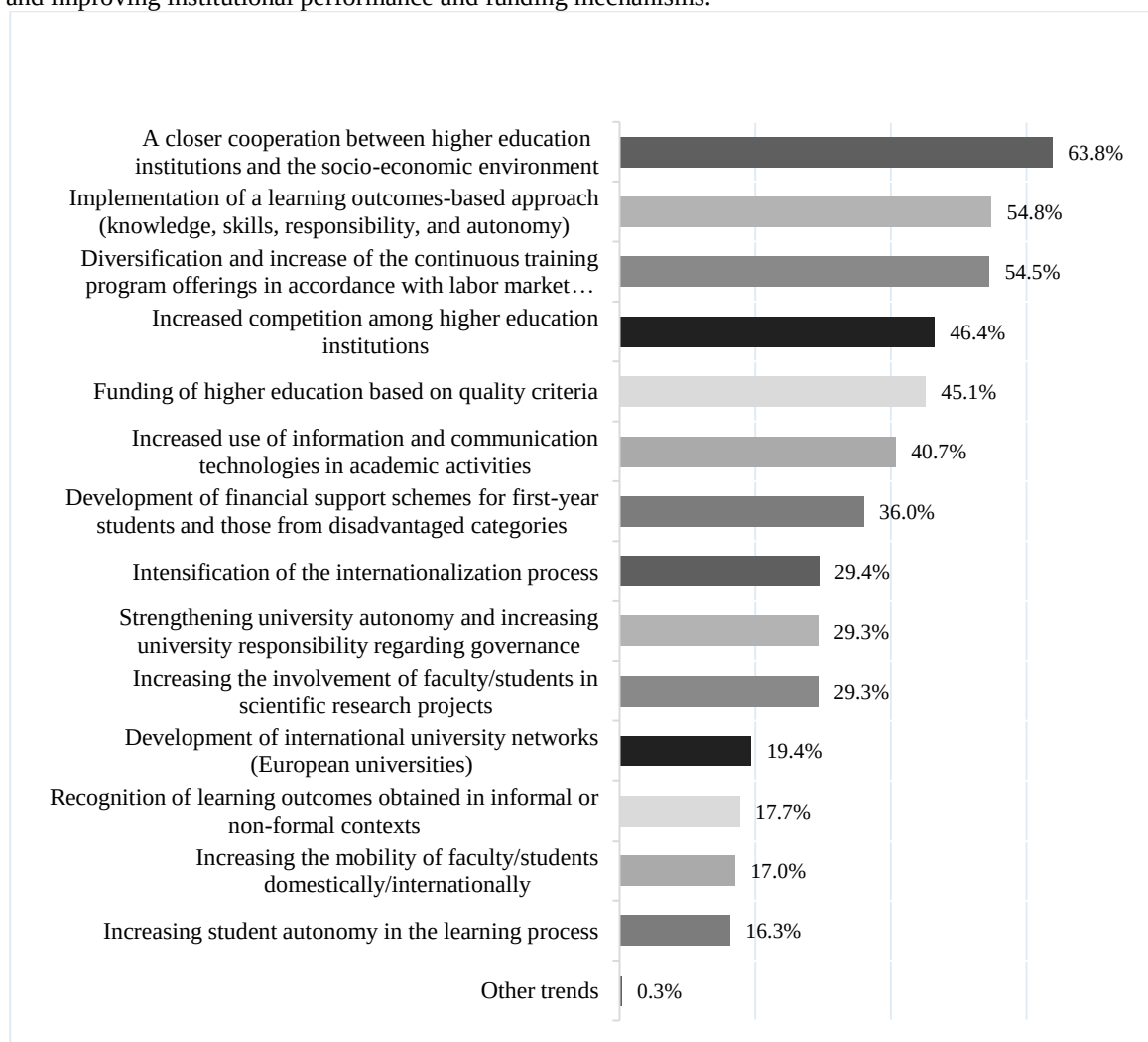


Figure 1: Employers' perspective on the hierarchy of trends that will positively influence higher education in Romania in the coming years

Source: Authors' own research

Academic staff perceptions

Academic staff largely echoed employers' views regarding the centrality of closer cooperation between universities and the socio-economic environment (64%), confirming a shared understanding that meaningful partnerships with external stakeholders are essential for ensuring educational relevance and quality. Faculty members perceive such cooperation not only as a mechanism for aligning curricula with labour market demands but also to enhance research collaboration, improve practical training opportunities, and strengthen institutional visibility. In this context, quality assurance

frameworks are expected to function as enablers of dialogue and structured collaboration between universities and the economic environment.

Another major trend emphasized by faculty is the increased use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in teaching and learning activities, which was prioritized by 52% of respondents. This reflects a strong recognition of the role that digital transformation can play in improving access to education, diversifying learning methods, and supporting more flexible QA mechanisms. The implementation of learning outcomes-based education (51%) and the diversification and expansion of continuing education programs (45%) were also considered important, indicating a growing awareness among academic staff of the need to move toward competency-oriented education and lifelong learning strategies.

Meanwhile, funding based on quality criteria (42%) and internationalization processes (38%) were identified as additional drivers of change, though with lower intensity compared to the top trends. This distribution suggests that while faculty value these areas, their perceived urgency remains slightly lower than for partnerships and digitalization. Moderate support was also expressed for increased involvement in research activities (35%) and financial support schemes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (31%), which highlights a dual orientation toward both institutional performance and equity considerations.

On the other hand, recognition of informal or non-formal learning (20%) and increased student autonomy in the learning process (20%) were assigned relatively low importance. This may indicate a continuing reliance on structured, formal educational pathways in QA processes, as well as a more traditional perspective on curriculum design and student engagement. Notably, respondents with fewer years of academic experience expressed greater interest in strengthening research involvement and mobility, suggesting generational differences in how modernization trends are perceived.

All these priorities and their relative weight can be observed in Figure 2, which illustrates the hierarchy of trends identified by academic staff.

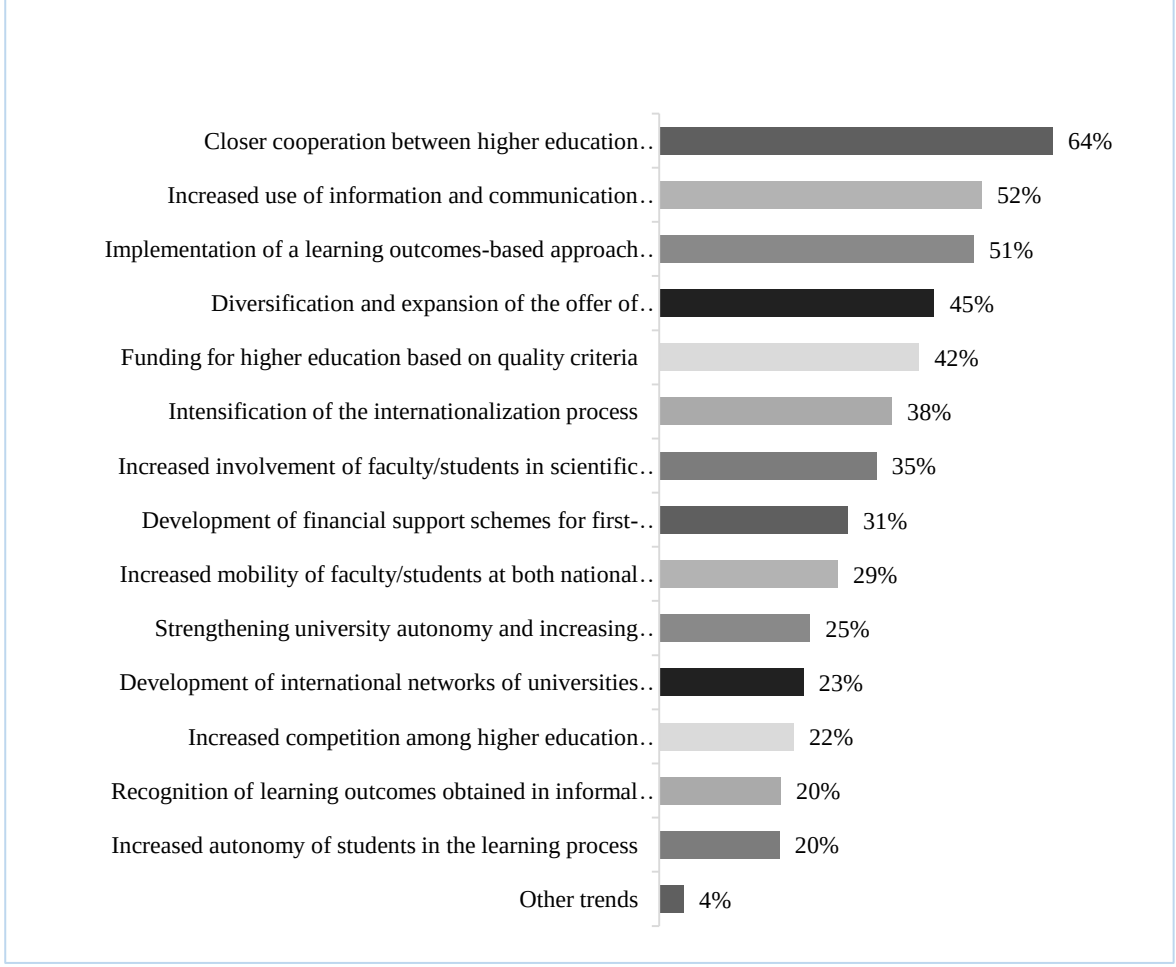


Figure 2: Academic staff's perspective on the hierarchy of trends that will positively influence higher education in Romania in the coming years
Source: Authors' own research

Students' perceptions

Students placed significant emphasis on learning outcomes-based approaches, which ranked first with 60%, demonstrating their strong desire for an educational experience that equips them with competencies directly relevant to employment, professional growth, and personal development. This finding underlines the importance of ensuring that quality assurance mechanisms are closely aligned with clearly defined learning outcomes that reflect real-world skills and transversal competences. Nearly as important for students was closer cooperation between universities and the socio-economic environment (57%), indicating their expectation that academic programmes should not remain purely theoretical but actively connect to practical contexts and employment opportunities.

A substantial proportion of students also prioritized increased use of ICT in academic activities and diversification of training programs (48% each), reflecting their interest in modern, flexible, and technology-supported learning environments. Additionally, financial support schemes for students (46%) emerged as a key concern, suggesting that access and retention, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, remain critical issues. These preferences point toward a student body that values both the quality and accessibility of education.

In contrast, students assigned lower importance to trends such as internationalization and performance-based funding (33% each), as well as recognition of informal and non-formal learning (25%), mobility (24%), and student autonomy (21%). This distribution may reflect a limited awareness of the benefits associated with these areas or perceived structural barriers such as financial constraints, insufficient institutional support, or lack of information. Notably, participation in international university networks (20%) received the lowest level of prioritization among the major trends.

These results suggest that, while students are strongly oriented toward employability, digital transformation, and financial accessibility, they may require more targeted institutional communication and support strategies to better understand and engage with internationalization initiatives, mobility programs, and alternative learning pathways. This highlights an opportunity for quality assurance processes to become more inclusive and transparent, ensuring that students not only benefit from but also actively participate in shaping educational modernization. All these priorities and their relative weight are illustrated in Figure 3, which presents students' perspective on trends influencing the future of Romanian higher education.

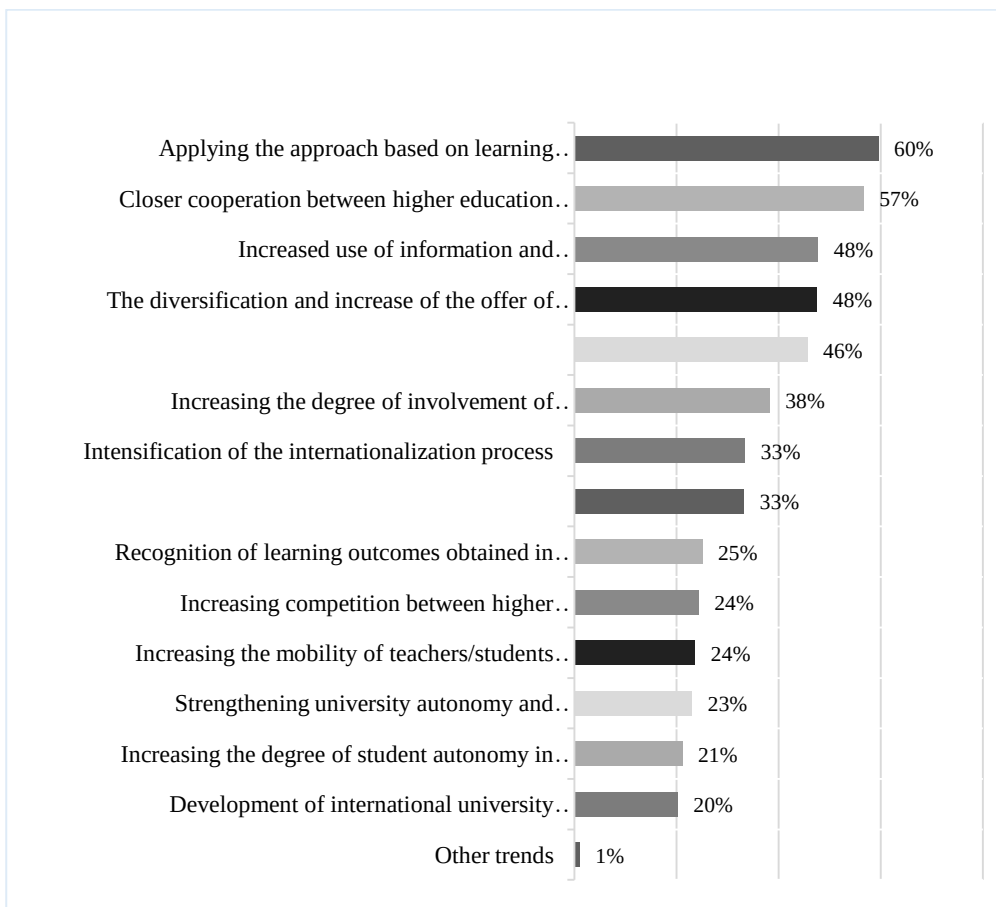


Figure 3: Students' perspective the hierarchy of trends that will positively influence higher education in Romania in the coming years

Source: Authors' own research

Graduates' perceptions

Graduates' responses closely mirrored those of employers, placing the implementation of learning outcomes-based education at the top of their priorities (55.4%). This strong preference reflects their expectation that higher education should equip them with practical, transferable skills, such as problem-solving, adaptability, and responsibility, that are directly applicable in professional settings. A similarly high percentage emphasized the importance of closer cooperation between universities and the socio-economic environment (52.8%), underlining the crucial role of partnerships with employers in supporting graduates' smooth transition into the labour market.

Another key priority for graduates was the diversification and expansion of training programs in line with labour market demands (46.4%), followed closely by financial support schemes (45.1%) and ICT integration in academic activities (44.9%). These trends highlight graduates' recognition that both accessibility and flexibility in education, along with digital skills, are essential for ensuring employability and resilience in a rapidly evolving economy.

Mid-level priorities included involvement in scientific research projects (39.9%) and strengthening university autonomy and leadership responsibilities (35.9%). These suggest that, while research engagement and governance are valued, they are perceived as less immediately relevant to post-graduation employment outcomes compared to practical training and financial support.

Lower levels of importance were assigned to trends such as internationalization (33.6%), increased competition between institutions (32.4%), and performance-based funding (31.7%). Even lower still were mobility programs (26.3%), student autonomy (21.0%), and recognition of informal or non-formal learning (16.9%), with international university networks receiving the lowest prioritization (16.7%). This pattern may reflect a combination of limited opportunities, structural barriers, or a perceived disconnect between these initiatives and immediate employment prospects.

Overall, graduates' perspectives reinforce the importance of quality assurance systems that not only ensure academic excellence but also address socio-economic realities and facilitate employability. Their emphasis on learning outcomes, labour market alignment, and financial support points to the need for institutional strategies that strengthen the link between education and work, while also making higher education more inclusive and adaptable. These priorities and their relative importance are presented in Figure 4, which summarizes graduates' perceptions of the main trends shaping the future of higher education in Romania.

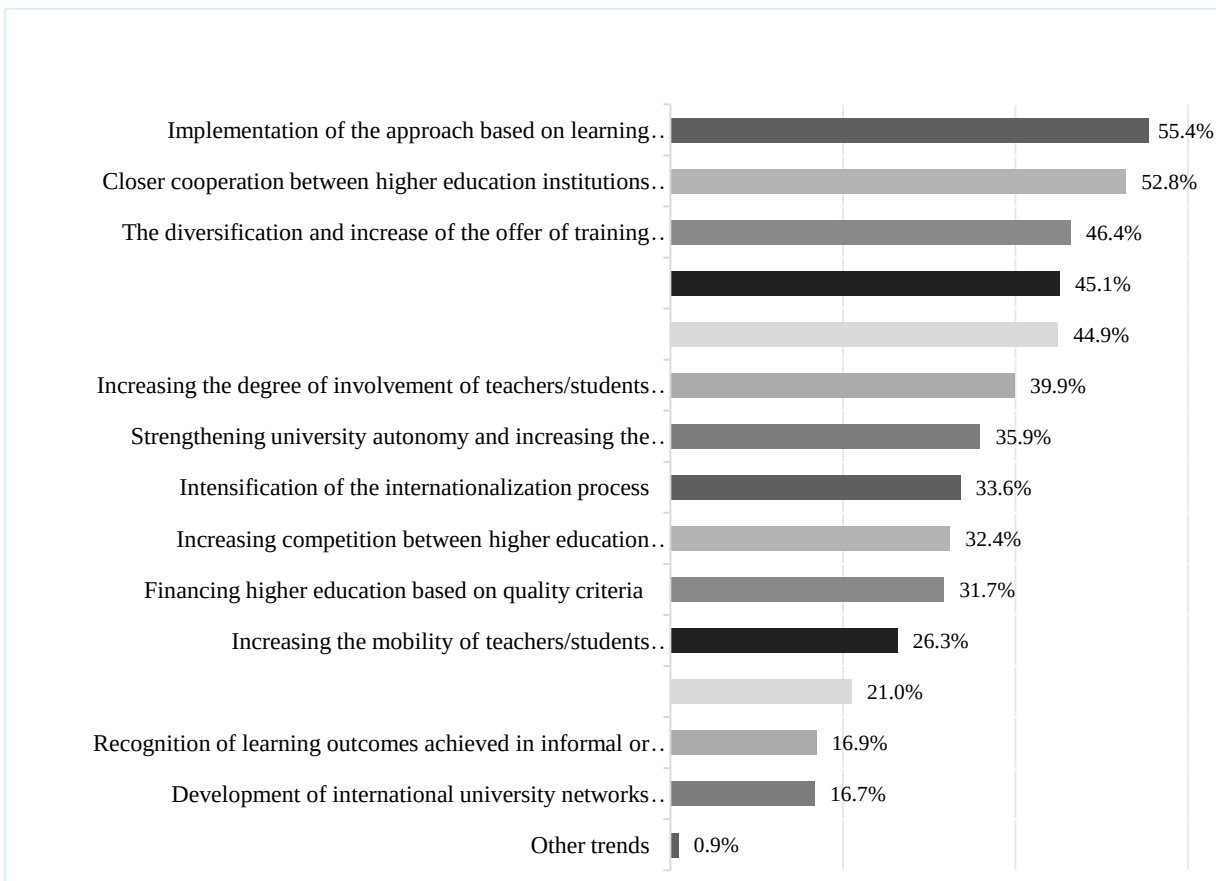


Figure 4: Graduates' perspective on the hierarchy of trends that will positively influence higher education in Romania in the coming years

Source: Authors' own research

Conclusions

The study presented in this paper highlights the critical role of stakeholder perceptions in shaping future strategies for quality assurance (QA) in higher education. The findings reveal a remarkable consensus across all examined groups, employers, academic staff, students, and graduates, on the pressing necessity to align educational processes not only with the rapidly evolving demands of the labour market but also with broader societal expectations. This shared understanding emphasizes that effective quality assurance cannot exist in isolation from the real-world context in which higher education operates.

Several key strategic directions have emerged from the study, providing clear guidance for both policy formulation and institutional practice.

Firstly, university–industry cooperation emerges as a fundamental pillar for enhancing educational quality. By forging strong, mutually beneficial partnerships with the socio-economic environment, higher education institutions (HEIs) can design curricula that are both relevant and adaptable, thereby equipping graduates with not only specialized knowledge but also practical skills and transversal competencies that are increasingly valued in professional settings. QA systems should therefore actively promote such collaborations and rigorously evaluate their depth, sustainability, and tangible impact on educational outcomes and graduate employability.

Secondly, the adoption of learning outcomes-based approaches is seen as indispensable for ensuring that educational programs deliver a balanced combination of theoretical knowledge, practical skills, personal responsibility, and autonomy. QA frameworks should support institutions in the systematic design, implementation, and evaluation of learning outcomes that are closely aligned with the needs of contemporary professional environments. This alignment will also foster lifelong learning by equipping graduates with the adaptability and critical thinking required for continuous personal and professional development.

Thirdly, digitalization represents both a significant challenge and a unique opportunity for higher education quality. The integration of information and communication technologies into teaching, learning, and assessment processes has the potential to modernize education, enhance accessibility, and tailor learning experiences to individual needs. In response, QA policies must establish clear standards for the effective, ethical, and innovative use of digital tools, while simultaneously promoting the development of digital competencies among both students and academic staff, ensuring that technology serves as a driver of inclusion and educational excellence rather than a barrier.

Fourthly, the study highlights the strategic importance of lifelong learning programs. Such initiatives enable graduates and professionals to continuously update their knowledge and skills in response to changing economic and technological conditions. HEIs are encouraged to create flexible, modular, and market-responsive educational offerings that are underpinned by QA mechanisms capable of verifying their relevance, rigor, and measurable impact. By doing so, institutions can contribute to a workforce that remains competent, agile, and prepared for emerging challenges.

Finally, the findings draw attention to the critical role of financial support schemes, particularly those aimed at students from vulnerable or underrepresented groups. These mechanisms are essential not only for enhancing access to higher education but also for reducing dropout rates, promoting social mobility, and fostering equity. As a result, QA systems should extend beyond traditional academic performance indicators and integrate principles of inclusiveness, accessibility, and social responsibility as core components of institutional quality.

In conclusion, the insights gathered from this wide spectrum of stakeholders provide robust evidence for improving QA frameworks and institutional strategies. The future of quality assurance in Romanian higher education, and more broadly, lies in adopting an integrated, stakeholder-informed, and forward-looking approach, one that harmoniously combines academic excellence with employability, digital readiness, inclusiveness, and strong societal engagement. By embedding these principles into QA practices, higher education institutions can ensure that they remain not only responsive, innovative, and socially responsible but also resilient and adaptable in the face of ongoing economic, technological, and societal transformations. Such a holistic approach enables HEIs to continuously anticipate emerging trends, address evolving stakeholder needs, and contribute meaningfully to the sustainable development of both local and global communities.

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