

Massification of Higher Education and its Impact on Public Administration Education: A Neo-Institutional Perspective

***Author: Iulian-Costin Matache, SNSPA, Romania, E-mail:
iulian.matache@administratiepublica.eu¹***

Abstract

The massification of higher education has become a defining feature of contemporary academia, transforming both the student demographic and institutional practices. This paper explores the impact of massification on public administration education in Romania, using a neo-institutional lens to examine how programs have adapted to these changes. Specifically, the study analyzes a sample of public administration programs across multiple Romanian universities, assessing their responsiveness to increased enrollment and shifting workforce demands.

The analysis focuses on three key areas of adaptation: curriculum development, integration of educational technology, and quality assurance. Through qualitative case studies and faculty interviews, this study reveals that while there is pressure to modernize curricula and introduce essential digital competencies, public administration programs in Romania often exhibit a degree of rigidity, showing limited openness to significant curricular changes. This conservative approach can constrain the capacity of these programs to integrate new and innovative content promptly, which is increasingly vital for the formation of a digitally competent public sector workforce. I plan to analyze 8 of the 21 public universities offering public administration programs, to ensure a representative sample of the field in Romania.

In addition, the study examines the role of educational technology and e-learning tools in providing accessible, flexible learning experiences for a larger and more diverse student population. However, this adaptation also presents challenges for quality assurance, particularly in terms of meeting international accreditation standards and ensuring effective program management.

This research underscores the necessity for curricular reforms and a more flexible, technology-driven approach to public administration education, allowing institutions to better meet the evolving needs of the public sector. By examining these dynamics, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the impact of massification on public administration education and highlights the potential for more adaptive and responsive program structures.

Keywords: Administration, Curriculum, Education, Institutions, Quality.

¹ Iulian-Costin Matache is an Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Public Administration, SNSPA, Bucharest, Romania

Introduction

Over the past decades, higher education systems around the world have undergone profound transformations, transitioning from elite systems accessible to a small fraction of the population to mass systems characterized by widespread participation. This process of massification has brought about not only a significant increase in enrollment numbers, but also new pressures and expectations for universities to adapt to a more diverse student body and a rapidly evolving labor market. Public administration (PA) education, as a key component of the higher education landscape, has been deeply affected by these developments, particularly in countries undergoing political, social, and economic transition. In Europe, the shift toward mass higher education has coincided with broader reforms in public administration, often framed by trends such as New Public Management, digital transformation and increased demands for transparency and accountability. These developments have reshaped the competencies expected from public servants and, by extension, the educational programs designed to prepare them. International scholarship has extensively explored the challenges of aligning public administration curricula with modern governance demands, integrating educational technologies and implementing robust quality assurance mechanisms to safeguard educational standards in the face of growing student populations. However, most of this research has focused on Western European or North American contexts, leaving important gaps in our understanding of how countries in Central and Eastern Europe, including Romania, have navigated these challenges.

Thus, Romania provides a particularly compelling case for exploring the effects of massification on public administration education. Since the fall of communism in 1989, Romania has seen a rapid expansion of its higher education sector, both in terms of the number of institutions and the volume of students enrolled. Public administration programs, many of which were created or restructured in the post-communist period, have played a vital role in training the human resources needed to modernize public institutions, comply with European Union standards, and respond to societal needs. Yet despite this expansion, questions remain about the extent to which Romanian PA programs have adapted their curricula, teaching methods and institutional practices to meet the demands of a mass higher education system and a transforming public sector. This paper aims to explore the impact of massification on public administration education in Romania, using a neo-institutional theoretical framework to examine how programs have adapted to these changes. Specifically, the study focuses on three key dimensions: curriculum development, integration of educational technology and quality assurance. By analyzing a sample of 8 public administration programs across multiple Romanian universities, the paper assesses their responsiveness to increased enrollment and shifting workforce demands.

The central question of this paper is as follows: To what extent and in what ways have Romanian public administration programs adapted to the pressures of massification, particularly in the areas of curriculum development, educational technology integration, and quality assurance? However, drawing on neo-institutional theory, the paper suggests that this adaptation may be limited and can be understood as a product of institutional inertia, characterized by mechanisms such as path dependency and institutional isomorphism. In other words, rather than proactively transforming in

response to external pressures, Romanian PA programs have largely reproduced established practices and conformed to prevailing models, often making only incremental or symbolic changes.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section provides a review of the international and regional literature on massification and the main insights of neo-institutional theory. This section situates the Romanian case within the broader scholarly debate, highlighting why understanding institutional responsiveness is critical in the context of mass higher education. The second section introduces the Romanian context, describing the historical evolution of higher education and public administration programs since 1989 and outlining the main challenges posed by rapid expansion. The third, fourth, and fifth sections form the analytical core of the paper, each addressing one of the three key areas of adaptation: curriculum development, integration of educational technology, and quality assurance. These sections examine to what extent Romanian PA programs have updated their content, incorporated new technologies, and embraced robust quality assurance mechanisms in response to massification pressures. The final section of the paper discusses the findings, connects them to the neo-institutional framework, and reflects on their implications for policy and future research.

By combining a theoretically informed analysis with empirical insights from the Romanian higher education system, this paper seeks to contribute to ongoing debates on the adaptability and resilience of educational institutions in the face of large-scale social and organizational change. Understanding the factors that enable or constrain reform in public administration education is not only of academic importance but also of practical significance, given the critical role of PA programs in preparing the next generation of public servants capable of navigating complex governance challenges.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design with an interpretive orientation to explore how Romanian public administration education has evolved under the pressures of massification. The research is structured as a multiple case study encompassing eight Romanian universities, each offering public administration programs. An interpretive approach is appropriate because the aim is to understand how institutional actors perceive and respond to changes, rather than to measure variables or test hypotheses. The qualitative design allows for in-depth insight into institutional adaptation and inertia, how programs changed or resisted change within the specific historical and cultural context of Romania's higher education system.

In alignment with a policy-oriented inquiry, the study prioritizes context and meaning. It acknowledges that the expansion of higher education (often termed *massification*) and shifting workforce expectations constitute complex, context-dependent phenomena. While only eight universities are examined (a limited sample), this scope is intentional: it enables detailed analysis of curriculum changes and internal perspectives at each institution. Depth is favored over breadth, providing nuanced qualitative evidence of how massification has been navigated in Romanian public administration education.

The analysis is framed by two complementary theoretical perspectives: neo-institutional theory and the theory of higher education massification. Neo-institutional theory offers insight into how organizations (here, university departments and programs) conform to or resist institutional pressures and norms. It emphasizes concepts such as institutional isomorphism (the tendency of organizations to become similar under common pressures), legitimacy-seeking behaviors, and the potential decoupling between formal structures and actual practices. Applying this lens, the study examines whether public administration programs adapted their curricula and practices in response to external pressures (like increased enrollment and new professional norms), or whether they exhibited inertia by retaining older patterns despite a changing environment.

Massification theory provides the contextual backdrop for these institutional processes. Massification refers to the transition of higher education from an elite system to a mass system, characterized by a dramatic increase in student enrollment and a broadening of access to diverse social groups. In the Romanian context, post-1989 reforms led to rapid expansion of universities and enrollment, meaning public administration programs had to educate far more students than before and prepare graduates for new roles in a democratic, market-oriented public sector. Massification theory sensitizes the study to key shifts associated with this expansion—such as changes in curriculum to accommodate larger classes or more generalized training, and the tension between maintaining academic quality and meeting workforce demands. By combining these theories, the methodology links system-level changes (massification and evolving labor market expectations) with institutional-level responses, guiding the interpretation of both documentary and interview data.

To complement the document analysis, the study integrates qualitative data from in-depth interviews with faculty members. A total of 21 semi-structured interviews with public administration faculty were conducted (originally as part of the doctoral research) across several Romanian universities. These interviews provide an internal, human perspective on institutional change, focusing on how massification was experienced and managed within public administration departments. Faculty participants, many of whom witnessed the transition around 1989 and the subsequent expansion, were asked to reflect on how the influx of students and changing societal expectations impacted their programs and teaching practices. They discussed a range of topics related to massification and program responses, such as:

- **Student preparedness and quality:** Perceptions of the academic preparation and capabilities of incoming student cohorts as enrollments increased.
- **Teaching adaptations:** Adjustments in teaching methods or course content to accommodate larger and more diverse classes.
- **Resource and administrative challenges:** Strains on resources, faculty workloads, and institutional capacity during periods of rapid expansion.
- **Curriculum reform impetus:** Whether and how university leadership or external stakeholders encouraged curriculum reforms to meet new public sector skill demands.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to extract key themes. Using a thematic analysis approach, the interview transcripts were coded for recurrent ideas and narratives relating to institutional adaptation and inertia. Major themes included faculty views on the necessity of curriculum change, instances of resistance or slow change (for example, reluctance to drop outdated courses or adopt new pedagogies), and interpretations of external influences (such as government policies, accreditation requirements, or labor market signals) on the program. Incorporating interview data is crucial for an interpretive study because it captures the subjective meanings and rationales behind institutional actions. While the curriculum documents show *what* changed, the faculty narratives help explain *why* and *how* those changes occurred (or why they might not have occurred). The use of interviews is thus justified to uncover institutional perceptions, sense-making, and decision processes that are not visible in official documents. Together, the interviews illuminate the lived experience of massification within universities, providing insight into internal dynamics and values that shaped each institution's response to expanding higher education access.

This qualitative methodology, with its focus on eight universities and a specific set of documents and interviews, entails certain limitations that are acknowledged. The sample of eight institutions, while not large, was selected to cover a range of Romanian public administration programs (for example, including both long-established universities and newer regional institutions). Because the study does not encompass all universities in Romania, its findings are not statistically generalizable to the entire higher education system. However, the limited scope is a deliberate trade-off to allow depth of inquiry. Examining fewer cases in greater detail provides a richer, more nuanced picture of institutional behavior in the face of massification. The insights gained are thus analytical and contextual rather than broad quantitative generalizations. They shed light on how and why particular universities navigated the challenges of expanding enrollment and changing professional demands, offering detailed examples that may resonate with similar institutions.

Moreover, each data source has inherent constraints. Curriculum documents may not capture informal practices or the quality of implementation, and interview responses are subjective, reflecting each faculty member's experiences and recall. To enhance trustworthiness, the study uses multiple sources of evidence (documents and interviews) to triangulate key findings, and it provides thick description of each case so that readers can judge the transferability of insights to other contexts. In sum, despite its bounded scope, the methodology is designed to yield in-depth insights into institutional adaptation (and instances of inertia) in Romanian public administration education under massification, balancing the breadth of coverage with the depth of analysis required for meaningful qualitative understanding.

1. Literature review

1.1.The new institutionalism

Through this subchapter I intend to start the main theoretical discussion that underlies this paper, namely that of the new institutionalism. I will thus try to discuss the usefulness of this theoretical perspective, but also the way in which the new institutionalism discusses how and why institutional changes occur in a society. Given the assumption that

individuals will modify or revise their behavior according to the surrounding institutional framework, the norms and rules imposed on them can provide us with substantial information on the directions they will follow both in society and in academia.

"Education has varied infinitely in time and space. In the cities of Greece and Rome, education has formed the individual to blindly subordinate himself to the collectivity [...] Today, education tries to make the individual an autonomous personality. In Athens, an attempt was made to form cultivated souls, informed [...] In Rome, they wanted all children to become men of action, devoted to military glory. In the Middle Ages, education was, above all, Christian; in the Renaissance it assumes a literary character; Today's science tends to occupy in education the role that the arts occupied in the past (Durkheim, 1956). I have chosen to introduce this section by referring to this characterization of Durkheim because his view of educational institutions in society still applies today. Even if the paradigm has changed compared to previous centuries, both old and new institutional thinking assume that social institutions can take on ample forms and structures, depending on the actors to whom they are addressed. Taking the school institution as an example, it can represent a small group of children listening to a story outdoors, a group of students passing the ball in the gym or a group of high school students doing experiments in the physics laboratory, in a controlled environment (H.-D. Meyer & Rowan, 2006).

In this sense, the purpose of an institutional analysis is to help us understand why, given several available alternatives, one of them is the one preferred by the individual or organization and which are the parties that have the most to gain in a given issue. According to this perspective, institutionalists try to identify which are the options that society and political actors have, which of the groups have to gain or lose and, with regard to the educational factor, on the basis of which constraints and arrangements this process takes place (Ibidem, p.4). Classical institutionalism envisages an analysis of long-term legal structures and a view of institutions according to which the existence of these social arrangements is distinct from the action of individuals. On the other hand, the new institutionalism has as its central idea the fact that people and the actions provoked by them are the basis for the construction and consolidation of social institutions. More specifically, institutions are the creations of individuals in order to provide clarity and meaning to the interactions they trigger with other members of society. This results in values, behaviors and patterns that are reproduced in various situations, because other alternatives cannot be taken into account at the time. We are thus discussing here compliance with rules and norms, i.e. the routines that are triggered in the relationships between people and organizations so that interactions are effective and lead to progress (H.-D. Meyer & Rowan, 2006).

Another aspect targeted by the new institutionalism is that between the policies of a state, its economy and civil society there are close links that are constantly changing. In other words, the perspective of the new institutionalism gives economic markets an institutional load, the structure of which fluctuates according to aspects such as institutionalized forms of property or contracts developed by states and applied to individuals, in civil society. We are thus discussing here about "institutional arrangements", i.e. those forms of organization of rules and norms in a society that can have significant consequences on the behaviors of economic actors. The parties involved in economic transactions are, as in the case of neoclassical rationality, motivated by potential gains in relation to estimated costs. The difference, in this case, is that the new institutionalism does not assume that individuals are the autonomous authors of their own

preferences, but rather their preferences are shaped by the constraints of a well-defined institutional framework (Immersed, 1998). From this perspective, the behavior of individuals cannot be one of indifference regarding the institutional arrangements in society, so they will try to "negotiate" as best as possible the institutional framework in which they carry out their activity. For this reason, institutional change becomes an attempt by each individual actor to be part of institutional arrangements that are as favorable as possible to his own interest (H.-D. Meyer & Rowan, 2006).

Regarding the implication that institutionalism has in the context of the expansion of higher education, the perspective proposed by sociological institutionalism is one of the starting points. I am discussing here the perspective according to which the analysis of higher education is done in concise terms, in the form of a set of local and specific organizations, social roles and interactions, but also economic institutional arrangements. Specifically, whether we are talking about universities, teachers, students, or disciplines such as mathematics, literature, law, etc., all of these may have superficial local forms, but they really have their roots in the historical and global system (J. W. Meyer et al., 2007). In other words, social development over the last centuries has led to the institutionalization of supra-national norms that constitute and structure the higher education system. From this point of view, local higher education organizations (i.e. universities) are inevitably dependent on external institutions, this being a consequence of the culture of university "centrality" (J. W. Meyer et al., 2007). The argument here is that a supra-national framework encompasses both organizational and cultural templates, with a view to rules that establish what higher education provider organizations are, what their nature is, and what a student represents. This creates a universal organizational model that complements and improves local organizations.

In modern society, life and career are intensely influenced by different external models and norms to which states adhere. By law, individuals are required to attend primary education all over the world (Ramirez & Ventresca, 1992), and obtaining educational qualifications and diplomas is a widespread requirement for individuals to access desirable jobs (Brown, 2001). The close relationship between educational path and occupational status on the labor market makes individuals' abilities largely useless in contemporary society if they cannot prove through a diploma that they are qualified in this regard. On the other hand, obtaining a university degree will cause his or her abilities to be frequently treated as secondary attributes (Collins, 1971). These widespread models of university practices lead to the idea that higher education institutions reflect models of functioning taken from the international level and thus end up developing as many similarities as possible over time and also developing in a similar way. Historically speaking, the global spread of higher education has occurred with a considerable degree of isomorphism in terms of the purpose, aspirations, and content of the university environment (Riddle, 1993). In other words, the way in which higher education has spread worldwide has led to the creation of models and templates in recent decades, so that a process such as the expansion of higher education is carried out transnationally in a similar way (Thorndike, 1975).

1.2. Massification of higher education – theoretical delimitations

In a first phase, I bring up Martin Trow's publications that offer a perspective on American society at the beginning of the twentieth century, a period in which the number of students began to increase gradually, starting from only a

quarter of a million registered in the first few years, which amounts to 4% of the total age group specific to college admissions (18-21 years old). By 1920, the number of students had increased to 600,000, which meant about 8% of the population of the aforementioned age group. The year 1940 marked a figure of one and a half million students, so about 16% of young people between the ages of 18 and 21, and in 1960 a total of about 3 million students were registered. Therefore, the pattern observed here is that of approximately doubling the number of students once every twenty years (Trow, 1972). The pressure of the expansion of tertiary education is reflected, he mentions, in increases in the number of students registered in each industrialized state, but there are differences between the development of the American system and other economically wealthy states. While the United States started this movement by moving from mass education to universal education, other wealthy European countries are moving towards the transformation of "Elite" in educational systems of "table". The examples given here are Sweden, France, Denmark and the United Kingdom, each of which recorded increases throughout the decades of the twentieth century with approximately the same pattern of doubling the number of students once every 10-15 years (Ibid., p. 63).

What these figures indicate, says Trow, is that there was both an expansion of elite universities (thus an increase in the traditional functions of universities) and the transformation of elite university systems into mainstream educational systems, which performed a variety of new functions for as many young people in the university age group as possible (Ibid.). Therefore, according to what Trow exposed, I will initially refer to the definition also offered by him, namely that by "massification" we mean "mass registrations in a national system; [...] A 'mass system' is one in which the prevailing attitude is that access to higher education is a right for those with certain qualifications. The function of higher education in a 'mass' system is to transmit skills and prepare the population for a wide range of economic and technical elite roles" (Trow, 2007). However, a clear distinction must be made on what exactly the terms "mass", "elite" or even "universality" mean when we talk about the expansion of tertiary education. In this regard, I consider useful the clarifications made by John Brennan, according to which the three forms of higher education are: (1) "elite"—preparing for elite roles, shaping the minds and characters of a ruling class; (2) "mass education"—perpetuation skills and preparation for a wider range of elite technical and economic roles, and (3) "universal"—adapting the whole of society to rapid technological and social change. (Brennan, 2004)

Shortly after Brennan's classification, Trow provides a similar, but more detailed, explanation of the characteristics of each of the three forms listed above. According to it, elite higher education would mean that the number of registered students would be between 0-15% of the age group specific to access to universities, 16-50% for mainstream education and over 50% in the case of universal higher education (Trow, 2007). Thus, elite education is a privilege from birth or a talent, mainstream education is a right for those with certain qualifications, and universal education is an obligation for the middle and upper classes. Also, in terms of the functions of tertiary education, the elite one aims to prepare a leading class, the mass one to prepare students for the widest possible range of technical and economic roles, while the universal one requires the entire population to adapt to social changes. Access in the case of elite education is meritocratic, based on school performance, while in mainstream education it is also meritocratic, but it also contains compensatory programs so that equal opportunities are obtained (Ibidem). I thus notice that the main difference between the types of higher education is the candidates' access to the respective universities, followed by the functions

that the educational institutions must perform, their curriculum and forms of training, the institutional characteristics, as well as the level of standards they propose.

In the case of the latter, they are raised in the situation of elite education, they are diverse and variable in the case of mainstream education, and for universal education they lose their character per se and become rather "Added value" (Trow, 2007). As for the transition between the phases of modern higher education development, as we have listed them before, it requires changes in all aspects of the system's functions and structures. Thus, relevant dimensions of change include the size of the system, governance and administration, the curriculum, as well as academic standards (Ibid., p. 252), aspects that I will discuss below, given how each of these manifests itself in the case of mainstream education. Firstly, as far as the curriculum in mainstream higher education systems is concerned, it is rather modular, characterized by a semi-structured sequence of courses, with an emphasis on obtaining university credits (which function as an exchange unit). This allows for flexibility in the selection of courses, as well as facilitating access and mobilization between main areas as well as between institutions (Trow, 2007).

In terms of institutional characteristics and limits, mainstream education tends to be somewhat more comprehensive and with as diverse standards as possible, the institutional segments being interconnected so that both student and administrative staff mobility is possible. Also, academic standards in a mainstream tertiary education are variable and differ in character and severity in different parts of the system or institution. Access and selection in a mass system are generally meritocratic and with limited access, but the existence of compensatory programs and criteria for reducing inequities balances the balance when we talk about the participation of disadvantaged social groups in education. Last but not least, the administrative aspect of universities undergoes changes in the process of massification, more precisely the institutions change and acquire new functions, especially due to the numerical expansion of the administrative staff. This time, staff previously strictly involved in the academic process take on new roles and transition to full-time administrative activities, an expansion that generates new educational costs and additional pressures on financial responsibilities (Ibid., p. 260). As can be seen, the transition from an "elite" to a "mass" higher education system has implications on all institutional levels of university functioning. Starting from this dimension, to curriculum, standards and administrative capacity, all these elements are directly affected and influenced by the expansion of tertiary education. Thus, with the enrollment of as many students as possible, institutions must change and evolve so that they can keep up with the pressure exerted by the new cohorts that want to acquire knowledge within universities.

2. Main findings

2.1. Faculty perspectives

To complement the theoretical perspectives discussed in the literature review, this section presents insights from faculty members who have directly experienced the transformation of Romanian higher education since 1989. Drawing on qualitative interviews conducted with 21 academics involved in public administration and related fields, the following narratives shed light on how massification was perceived and managed at the institutional level. These

first-hand accounts illustrate not only the structural changes that accompanied the expansion of higher education but also the deeper cultural and professional dynamics that shaped how new programs—particularly in public administration and political science—emerged and evolved.

However, in order to fully contextualize the events of this transitional period, it is necessary to highlight the key institutional changes that took place. According to Respondent 2, a series of legal provisions and control mechanisms were significantly reformed, most notably regarding university autonomy, which gained substantial ground after 1989. Specifically, both faculty members, academic communities, and students acquired the capacity to make decisions about the strategic directions of universities and the development of curricula. They also gained influence over internal policies, recruitment processes, and the establishment of new study programs. Several factors thus contributed to institutional change, and importantly, many of these came from within the universities themselves, as the Ministry of Education's control levers were relatively limited at the time. Essentially, what universities proposed was generally implemented, while national policies mainly focused on expanding student numbers by increasing enrollment quotas (Respondent 2).

Another key development was the formation of student organizations in the early 1990s, with important groups emerging at institutions such as the University of Bucharest and Politehnica University. Although this development was not immediately reflected in the legal structure of higher education, it played a crucial role in reshaping university dynamics (Respondent 13). This view is reinforced by Respondent 5, who noted that student associations, such as the League of Students of the University of Bucharest and other student-led groups, were instrumental in pressuring universities to improve academic programs. Moreover, these organizations actively advocated for the removal or marginalization of underperforming faculty members and pushed for the recruitment of younger, more capable teaching staff: "They pushed for those faculty members who did not meet the required standards to be removed from the professional body, or at least marginalized, and advocated for the recruitment of younger academics to teach in the universities" (Respondent 5).

One key perspective shared by faculty members is that the surge in demand for higher education after 1989 was deeply rooted in longstanding unmet social needs. During the 1970s and 1980s, access to higher education was extremely limited, with fierce competition for a small number of available spots—often between 15 and 20 candidates per place. Many respondents emphasized that people were acutely aware that obtaining a university degree was a pathway to better employment opportunities. The well-known saying "ai carte, ai parte" ("education brings opportunities") encapsulated this societal aspiration, which became even more pronounced after the fall of communism (Respondent 9).

Another recurring theme was the institutional shift in qualification requirements across various professional fields. For instance, traditionally, primary school teachers (învățători) only needed to graduate from a pedagogical high school. However, starting in the early 1990s, new policies institutionalized higher qualification standards: under the 1995 Education Law, primary teachers were now required to complete at least short-cycle higher education through university colleges (Respondent 5). Similar trends were observed in the healthcare sector and, crucially, in public administration, where the situation became more complex. As university degrees became mandatory for civil servants,

there was a concerted effort to establish public administration specializations in the early 1990s. These new programs were developed by expanding the existing administrative law specialization, which had existed before 1989 but focused predominantly on legal disciplines. According to one respondent, meetings with public administration stakeholders resulted in the design of a new public administration specialization combining law, management, governance studies, and political science. This newly created program quickly attracted many students, particularly through part-time and distance learning formats (Respondent 5).

Respondents also highlighted the significant transformation of political science education in Romania. Under the communist regime, political science was tightly controlled and ideologically driven, rooted in the framework of scientific socialism and Marxist-Leninist doctrine. The discipline served primarily to reinforce the party's ideology, leaving little room for critical inquiry. The transition to democracy after 1989 sparked a growing public interest in Romania's political system, broader political theories, party systems, and forms of government. This surge in interest laid the groundwork for the establishment of political science faculties and related programs in administrative sciences (Respondent 13). However, several respondents noted that these newly created disciplines lacked historical tradition and a solid academic foundation, given that they had been suppressed during communism. As one faculty member observed, these fields were initially built by academics who had graduated two or even three decades earlier, many of whom carried forward educational practices reminiscent of the socialist period. While later generations had the chance to develop and refine these programs over time, the early years were marked by significant transitional challenges: "My generation was lucky because, after about 10 years, we had time to gain experience. I don't even want to think about how the first cohorts looked... it was a period of transition" (Respondent 7).

2.2. Review of Eight Public Administration Programs

This section presents a comparative analysis of eight undergraduate public administration programs offered by leading Romanian universities. The selected institutions provide a diverse and representative sample of the national landscape, encompassing both large, well-established universities and smaller regional centers. The aim is to assess how these programs have responded to the dual pressures of massification and evolving public sector demands, particularly in terms of curriculum development and modernization.

The universities included in this analysis are the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE), the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, the University of Craiova, Ștefan cel Mare University of Suceava, 1 Decembrie 1918 University of Alba Iulia, and West University of Timișoara.

These institutions were selected based on several criteria: their long-standing involvement in public administration education, their geographical distribution across Romania's main historical regions, and their institutional diversity in terms of size, resources, and academic profiles. Together, they illustrate the range of approaches adopted by Romanian universities in designing and delivering public administration curricula.

The analysis focuses on identifying both common patterns and distinctive features across these programs. Special attention is paid to the extent to which curricula have evolved over time, introducing new courses or modules that reflect contemporary governance challenges, such as digital transformation, European integration, and public sector innovation. Additionally, the review examines how these programs balance traditional disciplinary foundations (notably law and political science) with practical and interdisciplinary components aimed at preparing students for a complex and dynamic labor market.

By comparing these eight cases, this section seeks to highlight areas of curricular convergence, instances of innovation, and potential gaps or inertia in program development. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of how public administration education in Romania has navigated the pressures of massification and modernization, and will offer insights into institutional strategies and limitations within the broader neo-institutional framework of the study.

2.2.1. Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE)

The Public Administration undergraduate program at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE) is a 3-year, 180-ECTS degree designed to provide students with a strong interdisciplinary foundation in law, economics, management, and governance. The curriculum begins with fundamental courses in constitutional and administrative law, public finance, economics, and the basics of public administration, ensuring students acquire a clear understanding of the legal and institutional framework of public service (ASE, 2025).

The program offers a comprehensive and interdisciplinary curriculum designed to prepare students for careers in the public sector. The program integrates key areas such as administrative law, public finance, public management, sociology, and informatics, providing a solid foundation in both legal and managerial aspects of governance. Students are trained to understand the organization and functioning of public institutions, administrative procedures, human resources management, and the principles of public finance and accounting. The curriculum places strong emphasis on ethics and integrity in public service, strategic planning, public procurement, quality management, and the growing role of digitalization in public administration. Additionally, courses in research methodology and organizational communication are included to enhance analytical and practical skills. Throughout the program, students benefit from a consistent focus on modern languages, reflecting the importance of international and European dimensions in public administration. The final stage of the degree includes a mandatory internship, ensuring that graduates gain valuable hands-on experience and are well-prepared to meet the complex challenges of contemporary governance (Ibid.)

Changes Since 1990: The public administration specialization at ASE was re-established post-1990, reviving ASE's pre-1989 tradition of training public administration officials with economic expertise. The program was converted to the 3-year Bologna format in the mid-2000s and has since obtained international accreditation (EAPAA), reflecting updated curriculum quality. ASE Offers this as a full-time, on-campus program (ASE's regulations allow programs in all formats, but the Public Administration bachelor is primarily with frequency). There is no indication of a distance (ID) or part-time variant (IFR) for this program on ASE's website (other ASE programs have ID/IFR, but Public Administration is listed only as full-time). Also, the program includes practical training. Students must complete professional practice modules in Year II (112 hours) and Year III (56 hours). These internships are usually done in

the second semester and are evaluated via a colloquium. The practice is graded pass/fail and is required for graduation (ASE, 2024).

Graduates of the program are prepared for a wide range of public sector roles, with learning outcomes aligned to the Romanian Occupations Classification for Administrative Sciences. They are qualified to work as public project managers, legislative harmonization experts, public administration advisers, diplomatic consultants, public inspectors, city managers (public administrators), public procurement specialists, and European affairs advisers, among others. The curriculum develops key competencies in understanding administrative concepts and laws, public policy formulation, public budgeting, and human resource management within the public sector. ASE emphasizes both a solid foundation of knowledge and managerial skills necessary for modernizing public services in accordance with European standards. The university provides a dedicated online learning portal to support students' academic progress. The platform (online.ase.ro) is used for tasks such as uploading internship reports and accessing course materials. In addition, ASE's digital infrastructure, including the SIMUR platform (planinvatamant.ase.ro), facilitates e-learning components and administrative processes, although the main mode of instruction for the program remains in-person.

2.2.2. National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA)

The Public Administration undergraduate program is the flagship offering of SNSPA's Faculty of Public Administration. Launched in 1995, the program is nationally accredited and holds the distinction of being the first Romanian public administration program to receive European accreditation (EAPAA) in 2008, underscoring its commitment to quality and alignment with European standards. Structured over 3 years (6 semesters, totaling 180 ECTS), the program is available both as a full-time (on-campus) and a distance learning (e-Learning) option. The curriculum blends legal, managerial, economic, IT, and policy components to ensure a comprehensive education in public administration. Students begin with foundational courses covering constitutional law, economics, civil law, political systems, modern governance, and foreign languages. As they progress, they study public finance and budget administration, administrative law, public management, labor and social security law, and research methodology in administrative sciences. In the final year, the program focuses on advanced topics such as administrative litigation, public policy formulation, ethics and transparency, urban development and planning, comparative administrative systems, strategic management, and preparation for the bachelor's thesis project. Both the full-time and distance learning formats share the same curriculum and confer the same diploma (SNSPA, 2025).

Since its establishment, the program has undergone significant updates, particularly with the adoption of the Bologna Process in 2005, transitioning from a 4-year to a 3-year structure. The curriculum has been continuously modernized to reflect the evolving needs of public administration, incorporating content on EU governance, e-Administration, and related fields to maintain relevance. Practical training is embedded in the curriculum, with students completing internships during the second semester of both the first and second years. These internships, typically carried out within public institutions or NGOs, provide students with essential hands-on experience and are a graduation requirement. SNSPA actively collaborates with various public authorities to ensure meaningful placements, and students' performance during internships is formally evaluated (Faculty of Public Administration, 2025).

The program is designed to develop a new generation of leaders, managers, and innovators in public service. Students acquire leadership skills that foster a deep understanding of the public mission, ethics, and diversity management, along with managerial competencies in institutional analysis, budgeting, and legal compliance. The curriculum also strengthens abilities in teamwork, organizational change, policy research, and community engagement. Graduates are well-equipped for careers in national and local government bodies such as ministries, city halls, prefectures, and Parliament, as well as in European institutions, international organizations, NGOs, and academia. Alumni pursue roles including public affairs consultant, policy analyst, public manager, and civil servant, reflecting the program's emphasis on multi-level governance and the demands of the modern public sector. SNSPA supports students with a dedicated e-learning platform, APCampus (apcampus.ro), which plays a critical role, particularly for the distance learning cohort. This online campus provides access to course materials, schedules, and interactive learning resources, complementing face-to-face teaching and ensuring that all students, regardless of study format, benefit from a robust digital learning environment (APCAMPUS, 2025).

2.2.3. Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca (UBB)

Babeş-Bolyai University (Cluj-Napoca) offers a Bachelor's program in Public Administration through its Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, an interdisciplinary program established in the mid-1990s as one of Romania's first modern public administration degrees. The program is structured according to the Bologna model as a three-year (six-semester), 180 ECTS undergraduate specialization within the Administrative Sciences field, delivered full-time in Romanian and Hungarian, with a distance-learning option supported by online platforms for Romanian-language students. Its curriculum blends courses in law, economics and public management with social and IT components – for example, students study constitutional and administrative law, public sector economics, organizational management, environmental policy, urban planning, and e-governance, reflecting a broad interdisciplinary approach modelled on American and European best practices. Emphasis is placed not on rote memorization but on understanding core concepts, engaging in debate, teamwork, and developing analytical and synthetic skills, with practical training stages integrated via internships in local, regional or national institutions to reinforce applied skills (UBB, 2025b). Since the 1990s the program has continually evolved – initially a four-year program, it was reformed to the current three-year European-standard format, expanding its quality of education and aligning with Bologna's credit transfer system and international rankings. Graduates acquire competencies in public sector governance, policy analysis, project management and EU institutional processes, and typically pursue careers across central and local government, public agencies, city halls and prefectures, European Union institutions, as well as in NGOs and private sector roles interfacing with the public domain. The breadth of training enables alumni to serve as civil servants, policy advisors or managers in public administration, with the program consistently ranked among the country's top public administration degrees, demonstrating a stable connection between its academic curriculum and the requirements of the labor market (UBB, 2025a).

2.2.4. Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași (UAIC)

Alexandru Ioan Cuza University (Iași) provides a Public Administration undergraduate program housed in the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration (FEAA), drawing on over two decades of academic experience in training public sector professionals. This accredited program spans three years (180 ECTS across six semesters) and is offered both in full-time format and via distance education, reflecting a commitment to accessibility and modern pedagogies. The curriculum is strongly interdisciplinary, combining public law, administrative science, economics and public finance, management of public services, political science, and information technology for administration – for instance, students take courses in constitutional and administrative law, public economics and budgeting, human resource management, IT applications for public administration, and foreign languages – thereby equipping them with a broad skill set relevant to governance and public policy. Founded in the 1990s in the post-communist reform of higher education, the program was redesigned in the mid-2000s under the Bologna Process into its current three-year structure with a competency-based and credit-transfer system, emphasizing European perspectives and quality standards. The teaching philosophy stresses both theoretical knowledge and applied skills: students are required to complete supervised internships in both the second and third year, often in local or central government institutions (city halls, county councils, prefectures, etc.), which helps them integrate theory with administrative practice. The program's core values of integrity, responsibility and transparency are instilled throughout the coursework and practical training, aiming to form ethically aware administrators capable of innovation in public service. As a result, graduates emerge with competencies in legal interpretation, public sector decision-making, policy implementation and organizational management, prepared for a range of public service careers. Alumni commonly hold positions such as inspector or specialist in public institutions, legislative affairs consultant, European affairs advisor, city manager, public sector auditor, or local development agent, and the comprehensive training also enables some to become public policy consultants or pursue advanced research in administrative sciences. The availability of a distance-learning track, supported by the university's e-learning platforms, further demonstrates the program's adaptability to diverse learning needs and its alignment with contemporary educational trends in public administration (UAIC, 2025).

2.2.5. University of Craiova

University of Craiova – through its Faculty of Law (which, as the first post-1990 law faculty in Romania, was accredited in 1995) offers an undergraduate program in Public Administration that integrates legal education with administrative science training. This bachelor's program, part of the Administrative Sciences domain, is structured over three years (180 ECTS) of full-time study and shares the faculty's modern infrastructure and academic resources developed since the 1990s. The curriculum provides students with a solid grounding in juridical and administrative concepts alongside management and policy skills: for example, it includes fundamental courses in constitutional and administrative law, general theory of law, civil law, public economics, and public management, as well as applied subjects like strategic planning, e-administration and public project management, and even elements of urban planning and information technology as they pertain to governance. The program has transitioned from the older four-year model to the Bologna-compatible three-year format, adopting the European credit system and continuously updating its content to reflect changes in public sector needs and European administrative standards (UCV, 2025). Practical

training is an important component: students often engage with local government bodies (the university maintains an extension of the program in Drobeta-Turnu Severin to serve regional administrative training needs), and the law faculty environment ensures that public administration students gain hands-on experience in understanding legal procedures and administrative decision-making. By graduation, students have developed competencies in public law application, public budgeting and procurement, organizational leadership in the public sector, and policy analysis, all of which prepare them for entry into a variety of administrative careers. Typical graduate pathways include roles as public sector consultants or advisors, city or county hall officials, public managers (such as city managers or departmental heads in local government), legislative harmonization experts, development agents, and other specialist positions in both central and local administration. The program's strong legal-administrative foundation also allows alumni to function effectively in related domains - some graduates become civil servants in ministries or agencies, executive staff in municipal governments, or liaisons for public-private partnerships, thereby fulfilling the program's aim to develop versatile professionals for the modern Romanian public service (Gazeta de Sud, 2024).

2.2.6. Ștefan cel Mare University of Suceava (USV)

“Ștefan cel Mare” University of Suceava delivers a Public Administration bachelor's program via its Faculty of Law and Administrative Sciences, fully aligned with national and European higher education. Conceived in the early 1990s and now structured as a three-year, 180 ECTS licență specialization, the program is accredited under Romanian law and the Bologna Declaration commitments, with a curriculum designed from a European perspective and organized over six semesters. Its mission is to prepare highly qualified specialists for both central and local public administration as well as for research in the administrative sciences field, ensuring that graduates obtain the theoretical knowledge and practical abilities required for a career in the public service. The coursework emphasizes fundamental administrative concepts and multi-disciplinary methods: students learn to understand and use key administrative theories and principles, interpret public-sector processes and socio-economic phenomena, and apply quantitative and legal analytical tools to real-world governance problems. In particular, the program trains students to draft and implement public policies, prepare budgets and development projects, and navigate the legal framework of public institutions, including the initiation and formulation of normative or administrative acts, thereby bridging theory with the practical tasks of governance. The study plan incorporates both classroom learning and practical components (including case studies and project-based work, and typically at least one field internship), developing skills in public management, legal compliance, and administrative IT systems, and the university officially recognizes and encourages student practical activities such as internships or volunteering in public institutions, which are recorded in Diploma Supplements as part of the learning outcomes (USV, 2024). Graduates acquire a wide palette of competencies that enable them to integrate successfully into various public-sector roles or to continue with doctoral studies and academic careers. The breadth of training is reflected in the diverse career opportunities: alumni can occupy positions in central or local government and in deconcentrated public services (ranging from civil servants in government agencies and city halls to public sector consultants and policy advisers), or they may become public administrators (city/county managers), specialized inspectors, legislative counselors, experts in public affairs, or research and teaching staff in higher education. Notably, the program is offered in both the regular (full-time) format and as a distance-learning

program (ID) for working students, utilizing digital platforms to deliver course materials, which underlines its adaptability and commitment to expanding access to public administration education (USV, 2025).

2.2.7. 1 Decembrie 1918 University of Alba Iulia (UAB)

“1 Decembrie 1918” University of Alba Iulia features an accredited Public Administration undergraduate program under the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences, conforming to the Bologna three-year (180 ECTS) model. The program provides a comprehensive foundation in the organization and functioning of administrative institutions, the legal framework governing public authorities, and the managerial and communicative skills needed in public service. Its curriculum ensures that students can utilize fundamental concepts and principles of public administration in professional contexts, identify and apply administrative law provisions (including the drafting of legislative or administrative acts), and communicate effectively both in Romanian and in an international language on topics in the field. Training also covers strategic institutional development and ethical governance: students learn to apply strategic management tools for institutional growth, to administer public sector activities in accordance with professional ethics and deontology, and to identify, analyze and cooperatively solve problems arising in public administration settings. Throughout the program there is an emphasis on professional responsibility, teamwork, and continuous self-development, which are cultivated as transversal competences to complement the specialized knowledge. Established in the post-1990 period of public administration reform, this specialization has continually updated its content to stay aligned with contemporary public sector demands and European administrative standards. Graduates are conferred a qualification in Administrație Publică and are prepared to assume a variety of roles in the public sector. In particular, the program explicitly qualifies its alumni for positions such as public administration advisor (consilier în administrația publică), town hall secretary (secretar de primărie), civil status registrar or other local government officials, among other civil service roles that require a higher education in administrative sciences. Furthermore, the skill set acquired – including legal drafting, policy implementation, institutional communication, and ethical decision-making – enables graduates to function effectively as career civil servants or consultants in government agencies, public authorities, and NGOs, or to engage in further studies in administrative law and governance. The program thus aims to produce adaptable public-sector professionals who can meet the evolving administrative needs at local and national levels, upholding principles of good governance and public accountability (UAB, 2025).

2.2.8. West University of Timișoara (UVT)

West University of Timișoara offers a Public Administration bachelor’s program via its Faculty of Governance and Communication Sciences, within the field of Administrative Sciences. This three-year, full-time program (180 ECTS) is fully accredited and has a modern curricular design focused on developing the next generation of public sector leaders and administrators. The program’s content and objectives reflect the post-2000 transformation of public administration education in Romania, emphasizing intelligent and sustainable governance training. It seeks to impart the competencies required for effective governance at all levels and is geared both towards students aspiring to enter public service and towards those already employed in the administrative apparatus who seek formal training. The curriculum integrates public administration theory with public management practice, covering subjects such as

administrative law and procedures, public policy formulation and analysis, multi-level governance, public financial management, and the use of IT in administration, alongside soft skills like administrative communication and project management. A defining feature of the program is its orientation toward contemporary governance challenges: it explicitly aims to shape civil servants who are adapted to present-day requirements, capable of understanding the European Union's multi-level governance system and keeping pace with the complexities of a globalized world, including advances in e-government services and digital. Thus, students are encouraged to engage with concepts of EU law and institutions, comparative public administration, and innovative public service delivery, ensuring they graduate with both a national and international perspective on governance. Practical experience is also emphasized; while the program is delivered in a traditional on-campus format, it fosters experiential learning through case studies, simulations, and opportunities for volunteering or internships which are formally recognized as part of the educational process. By the end of their studies, graduates have developed a suite of professional competencies – from classifying and understanding the functions of various public authorities and the normative acts they issue, to explaining policy-making stages and mastering administrative decision processes – as well as transferable analytical and communication skills. These competencies enable alumni to enter a range of public administration careers. In particular, the program prepares students for occupations such as public administration adviser, public administration expert, or specialized inspector in public administration, among others, as officially identified in the Romanian occupational framework. Graduates typically take up roles in local or central government institutions, EU institutions, and related organizations, where their training in effective governance, policy implementation, and ethical public management allows them to contribute to modernizing the public sector at multiple levels (UVT, 2025).

Conclusions

The comparative analysis of eight Romanian public administration undergraduate programs reveals both convergence and divergence in how institutions have responded to the pressures of massification and modern governance requirements. All programs are structured in accordance with the Bologna Process, offering 3-year cycles (180 ECTS) and integrating key pillars of public administration education: administrative law, public management, public policy, economics, and IT. A clear point of convergence is the mandatory inclusion of internships and practical components across all institutions, reflecting national accreditation standards and a common understanding of the importance of experiential learning.

Several programs, notably those at ASE, SNSPA, and UBB, stand out for their continuous efforts to modernize curricula by integrating European governance modules, digital governance, and interdisciplinary approaches. These programs have also pursued international accreditation (e.g., EAPAA), signaling a stronger alignment with global best practices and a proactive stance in curricular innovation. Others, while maintaining accreditation and compliance, show more incremental changes, focusing predominantly on legal-administrative fundamentals, with limited diversification or modularity. This reflects a tendency toward institutional isomorphism, where universities adopt similar structures but vary in depth and quality of reform.

The presence of distance learning options at several institutions (SNSPA, UBB, UAIC, USV) illustrates an adaptive response to massification, expanding access to students unable to attend full-time courses. However, the core content of these programs generally mirrors that of full-time offerings, indicating adaptation in format rather than substantial curricular redesign.

A common challenge across the board is the balancing act between preserving traditional disciplinary foundations, rooted in law and administrative theory, and innovating to meet evolving public sector needs, particularly in digital transformation and multi-level governance. While some programs have incorporated new topics such as e-government and EU public policy, the depth of integration varies, and certain curricula still appear relatively rigid, echoing path dependency in institutional behavior.

Another shared feature is the establishment of online learning platforms (e.g., APCampus at SNSPA, Moodle at UBB and UVT), a sign that digital infrastructure is recognized as essential, particularly post-pandemic. Nevertheless, these platforms often serve as support tools rather than transformative instruments of curriculum delivery, and the extent of digital integration into teaching and learning processes remains uneven.

In sum, while all eight programs demonstrate formal compliance with national and European standards, the level of substantive curricular innovation differs. The analysis confirms that Romanian public administration education has made important strides in expanding access and aligning structurally with European norms, yet faces ongoing challenges in deep curricular modernization and in fully internalizing the shift toward digital and competency-based governance education. This reflects broader neo-institutional dynamics: although external pressures (e.g., EU integration, massification) have driven visible reforms, deeper change is moderated by institutional inertia and isomorphic tendencies, leading to a pattern of gradual rather than transformative adaptation.

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