A gendered perspective on the higher management positions in the Romanian universities

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Abstract:

Despite Romania's commitments in international treaties that require statistical data aggregated by gender, very few universities provide information about the number of women and men employed in different positions. As a consequence, except for the data regarding the rector positions and the total number of researchers presented in the She Figures reports every three years, there is no clear analysis of women and men in universities. Furthermore, discrimination against women in academia is considered to be less present, despite previous results indicating negative effects for women of gender-blind policies.

This study analyses the current management structures in the top 30 Romanian universities included in the national metaranking. The positions of rector, vice-rector, dean, and vice-deans, as well as university senates, are included in order to have a clear picture of the men and women employed in these roles and identify the areas where vertical and horizontal gender segregation are most present. Additionally, through structured interviews with women working in positions where their gender is in a large minority, the study identifies strategies used by them to cope and succeed in a highly masculinized environment.

Keywords: university management, gender discrimination, vertical and horizontal segregation, gender statistics

1. Introduction

The She Figures reports at European level look at the extent to which gender equality has been achieved in the field of research. Overall, Romania has a score of 74.2%, being in the middle of the European ranking. In the calculation of this index, six major important areas in research are taken into account, namely: segregation in grade, areas of research, career progression, management positions, involvement in research, as well as the integration of the gender dimension in research (European Commission, 2025).

Based on a previous systematic review of the literature, one can see the small number of scientific articles focused on the gender dimension in the field of research and academia (Gâscă & Macarie, 2024). This is the dimension where Romania obtains the lowest scores at European level, demonstrating the low interest in gender equality until

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recently. A second area in which our country does not excel, on which this paper will focus, refers to the number of women in senior management positions in academia and research institutions. Although the total number of women in academia exceeds that of men, they continue to be underrepresented in management roles (European Commission, 2021; European Commission, 2025).

2. Research Methodology

The purpose of the paper is to analyse the situation of the current management positions from Romania academia. In order to attain this scope, first it was necessary to create a statistical analysis of these positions, aggregated by gender. Such a record is important, because the European reports present information strictly for the management positions of the institutions, more precisely the position of rector, without having up-to-date information for the rest of the positions, more precisely, vice-rector, dean and vice-dean. In addition, in Romania, the university senate is the forum with the greatest decision-making and deliberation power at the level of the institution and represents the university community. Thus, the statistical analysis also focused on this component to identify to what extent women and men are represented in the Senate, both among the members and in the position of president.

In order to understand how the phenomenon has progressed over time, a comparison will also be made with the statistical studies existing so far at national level. Although the literature is not extremely extensive in this regard, two studies have been identified that analyse university management positions, one from 2012 (Macarie & Moldovan, 2012), and another from 2020, the data being collected in 2019 (Drumea, et al., 2020). Taking into account that the university elections (for the position of rector and the composition of the senate) took place once every four years (Law 1/2011, 2011), practically, the data from the two studies cover the periods 2012-2015 and 2015-2019. Currently, through (Law 199/2023), the mandates are valid for a period of five years, and the vast majority of universities had their last elections in 2024, for the 2024-2029 term. Therefore, the analysis will compare gender differences over three terms, even if they are not consecutive terms.

The second objective focuses on identifying the strategies used by women to succeed in the role of rector or vice-rector, two of the highest positions in academic management. Although international reports show that we have achieved parity between women and men in terms of the professor grade, this parity does not continue in management positions. Romania is well above the European average in terms of the percentage of women professors (51.4% vs. 29.2%), but it ranks last if we talk about the number of women rectors (European Commission, 2025). In order to identify models of good practices, the study analyses the path of women who have reached these higher positions, with a focus on the obstacles encountered, the impact of mentors, motivational elements, but also the internal and external resources that helped them in their careers.

2.1 Statistical analysis

The statistical analysis began by identifying the universities to be included in the study. According to the Ministry of Education and Research, for 2025 Romania has a total of 45 state universities (except military universities), 35 accredited private universities and one private institution authorized only temporarily (Ministerul Educației și

Cercetării, 2025). As there are no central public data on the number of women and men in each of the senior management positions (rector, vice-rector, dean, vice-dean) and in the composition of the university senates, the process of collecting information was manual, from the webpages of each university. This required a longer time to select the necessary information. Thus, an analysis of all 80 permanent universities would have been too long.

In addition, the same reasoning was applied in the previous two studies from which data will be taken to analyse the statistical evolution of the phenomenon. The study conducted by Macarie and Moldovan (2012), because it analyses to what extent universities can act as models of equality for the communities they belong to, contains relevant data only for the top 12 universities in the country, according to the national ranking at the time. In the second study, conducted in 2019, the analysis focuses on state universities, including all 47 public institutions from that period (Drumea, et al., 2020).

For the current study, the selection of only 12 universities is not enough to understand to what extent our country is approaching gender parity and which are the positions where significant discrepancies still exist. In addition, the way state universities operate is not very different from private universities. In both types of institutions there is the same electoral process for the positions of rector and head of department and direct appointments for the rest. The members of the Senate are also elected by vote, a fixed percentage from each faculty. Precisely for this reason, current research should also include private universities.

The way in which the selection of the analysed universities was made was based on the national metaranking for 2023, the last one published on the ministry's website. It works on the basis of scores given to each university, based on its position in eight international rankings. Thus, a total of 30 universities are included in this national top, 28 state and two private ones. These 30 universities are also the ones that are included in the statistical analysis in this paper, being the most representative in the country.

For each university, based on the public information found on their web pages, the rector, the vice-rectors, as well as the faculties related to each university were identified in the first phase. The gender of the people was determined according to their photo and first name. The same process was then applied for the positions of dean and vice-dean, this time looking for the information on the pages of each faculty.

Information regarding the members of the university senate was also found on the main pages of the universities. The Senate must be made up of both professors from each faculty in the university and students, the minimum percentages differing depending on the university's charter. Since each member of the Senate has the right to vote on decisions, student members were included in its statistical analysis, not just teachers. To facilitate the data collection process, the gender identification of the members of the Senate was done using a computer-based name classification program with an international library. It sorts a predetermined list of names into three separate lists, one for female names, one for male names, and a final list of names that could not be ranked. Each list is then manually checked and thus the number of women and men in the senate of each university is determined.

In order to identify to what extent the staff in leadership positions, as well as the members of the senate, represent the community from a gender perspective, it is also necessary to have the total number of teaching staff in

each university, divided by the two genders analysed. Although information about employees, positions and academic degrees can be found in the rector's reports, they do not contain data aggregated by gender. Thus, the only way to have the number of women and men employed as current teaching and research staff would be to analyse the situation on each department, in each faculty. This would have consumed too much time, so the decision was made to use the data collected in 2019 for the total number of employees, by Drumea, et al. (2020). Although the data may change in five years, this is an assumed risk of the research. As a rule, the teaching staff who are public on the faculties' websites are hired on indefinite contracts and the staff hired does not change as often as the mandates for leadership positions and members of the senate. The only exception is the two private universities included in this study, for which there are no previous data. For the two universities, the counting of employees was done manually, on the page of each faculty in the two institutions.

2.2 Structured interviews

In the second part of the study, the interviews were based on a structured interview guide that was sent over email to all women who occupied the position of rector and vice-rector in the universities analysed. The interview guide contains a set of nine questions, focusing on the obstacles encountered along the career path and the strategies adopted to overcome them. Three of these questions identified the most important resources for the respondents' careers, including both material resources, such as benefits or resources related to the work environment, as well as access to support, mentoring and help in achieving a balance between personal and professional life. These questions not only help to identify the main obstacles that these women have encountered throughout their careers, but also help to identify elements that can turn into models of good practice. In addition, in order to identify new models of good practices, it is important to understand the motivation behind the decision to occupy a position in senior management. Identifying recurring themes in the responses received may indicate certain elements that over time will attract more women to such roles.

Two questions specifically referred to the internal qualities and resources that a person must demonstrate in a management position. The university environment is competitive (Bădoi, 2019) and corroborated with the fact that women are evaluated on harsher criteria than men (Babic & Hansez, 2021), it is important to understand how women manage to navigate such an environment. For the same reason, the questions focused on understanding the qualities necessary for a person to reach the management position, and then the qualities needed to perform in such a role. The two questions will help us identify the differences in qualities needed before and after ascending to the leadership role.

The last two questions refer to strategies and measures, whether formal or informal, that have had the role of creating more inclusive environments and have helped them throughout their careers. These questions help to identify local strategies applied in universities, which can then be considered models of good practice and replicated in other institutions.

Only women who currently hold the position of rector or vice-rector were chosen to participate in this study. The statistical analysis highlighted that these are the positions with the largest discrepancy between the number of

men and women. At the national level, only two universities have been identified that are led by a woman[3], one of the institutions being in the top 30 universities used in statistical analysis. At the level of vice-rector positions, excluding the management of doctoral schools, a total of 63 women were identified, 62 of whom have their address on the website of the university or faculty where they practice. The interview guide was sent by email to the 62 women vice-rectors and the 2 women rectors in July 2025. Five of them accepted the invitation to participate in the study and answered the questions in the interview guide.

The universities to which the participants belong can be classified in the general profile (they offer a wide range of specializations), from which there are three participants, medical profile, one participant and technical profile, also one participant. Two of them are in their first term as vice-rector, one participant holds the position for the second time, and the rest of the participants have gathered three mandates in this role. But they all have previous experience in smaller management roles, whether as dean, vice-dean or department director. Also, all of them have extensive research experience, three of them being university professors, and the other two being associate professors. Based on the information in their CVs, they have all taken part in numerous research projects as well as international mobilities.

From the point of view of gender balance in the positions of vice-rector, only in one of the universities are women in greater numbers than men in the roles of vice-rector, while in three of the institutions they are in the minority. As the roles of vice-rector in Romania are divided into several specific areas for each university, we also analysed the extent to which the fields in which the participants work are considered to be feminine fields according to gender stereotypes. Thus, three of them deal with the relationship with the socio-economic environment, being responsible for forming and strengthening partnerships with universities and national and international institutions. The other two participants are in the area of research and institutional development. Therefore, at least for the five participants in the study, their gender does not seem to have an influence on the field in which they work.

3. Statistical situation on senior management positions

In order to be able to analyse gender differences both vertically, in senior management positions, and horizontally, depending on the field, the 30 universities were grouped into five categories. The categories were chosen according to the profile of the faculties of each university and align with other classifications made in the two previous studies, used later in the comparison of the data. Thus, the five categories are:

1. General profile: universities that offer a wide range of specializations and cannot be grouped into a single field – 14 universities

[3] This study does not analyze the situation in all universities in Romania, only those in the top 30, published by the Ministry of Education and Research. The search for female rectors was carried out based on data from previous years, plus additional searches on the google search platform. This was not an exhaustive search, so the final number of female rectors in 2025 is likely to differ.

2. Humanities profile: the specializations offered fall under social sciences, law or business administration – 2 universities
3. Technical profile – 6 universities
4. Medicine and Pharmacy – 6 universities
5. Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine – 2 universities

Of these universities, only one has a woman as rector, as can be seen in the Figure 1. On the other hand, the situation for the positions of vice-rector and dean is more favourable to women, compared to that for the position of rector. At the level of vice-rector, there are currently 71 women out of a total of 188 people, including the heads of doctoral schools. This number represents a percentage of 37.77% women vice-rectors. Even if gender parity in this position has not yet been achieved, there is progress compared to the 2012 mandate, when there were only 23.19% women (at the level of the analysed groups). The increase is even more pronounced for the positions of dean, where there are currently 36.55% women, compared to 17.83% in 2012. However, the upward trend is not a continuous one. If we compare the current situation with the past two mandates, a stagnation in these positions can be observed, the percentages remaining similar (38.3% women vice-rectors and 32.28% women deans in 2019). The only position in the structure of senior management in universities where gender parity has been achieved is that of vice-dean, where women currently hold 51.95% of roles.

	Rector		Vice-Rector		Dean		Pro-Dean	
University	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Babeș-Bolyai University	1	0	7	2	14	3	21	28
Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași	1	0	5	2	9	4	19	8
University of Bucharest	1	0	4	4	10	6	18	29
Gheorghe Asachi Technical University of Iași	1	0	6	3	10	1	20	14
Technical University of Cluj-Napoca	1	0	6	1	8	1	14	4
Polytechnic University of Bucharest	1	0	7	0	10	5	35	28
Stefan cel Mare University of Suceava	1	0	3	2	7	4	12	11
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu	1	0	3	1	6	2	10	12
Polytechnic University of Timisoara	1	0	3	2	9	0	9	7
University of Craiova	1	0	5	1	8	3	14	11
University of Oradea	1	0	3	3	6	8	11	9
Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies	1	0	5	3	6	7	15	22
Carol Davila University of Medicine and Pharmacy	1	0	3	4	2	2	11	12
Iuliu Hațieganu University of Medicine and Pharmacy Cluj-Napoca	0	1	4	2	2	2	5	9
University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Craiova	1	0	4	0	3	1	2	4
USAMV Cluj-Napoca	1	0	4	4	5	1	10	9
George Emil Palade University of Târgu Mureș - UMF	1	0	2	7	3	4	5	6

Grigore T. Popa University of Medicine and Pharmacy	1	0	2	5	0	4	3	5
Ovidius University of Constanta	1	0	3	4	5	10	6	22
Technical University of Construction Bucharest	1	0	2	3	3	4	6	9
University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest	1	0	5	2	4	3	8	9
"Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad	1	0	2	2	4	4	3	7
"Dunărea de Jos" University of Galati	1	0	6	2	9	5	12	14
"Valahia" University of Târgoviște	1	0	4	0	5	5	8	7
West University of Timișoara	1	0	4	3	7	4	13	14
"Victor Babeș" University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Timisoara	1	0	5	2	1	3	8	4
Transilvania University of Brașov	1	0	2	4	14	4	23	28
Titu Maiorescu University Bucharest	1	0	3	3	5	5	3	6
University of Pitesti	1	0	2	0	5	1	4	11
Sapientia University of Cluj-Napoca	1	0	3	0	4	0	5	1
Total	29	1	117	71	184	106	333	360

Figure 1 – University management positions, by gender[4]

Each of the three studies looks at a different number of universities and, as can be seen in Figure 1, there are differences from one university to another, some of them having no female vice-rector, while others have two or even three times more women than men in these positions. Thus, for a correct assessment of the progress over time, the data was also analysed strictly on the 12 universities that are included in all three studies and are considered the top universities in Romania.

	Rector		Vice-Rector		Dean	
Year/Gen	M	F	M	F	M	F
2012	100%	0%	76.81%	23.19%	82.17%	17,83%
2019	100%	0%	70.27%	29.73%	75.57%	24.43%
2025	91.67%	8.33%	63.34%	36.36%	70.25%	29.75%

Figure 2 - Leadership positions in the top 12 universities, in three mandates

As can be seen, the universities in the top 12 at national level are currently slightly below the national average in terms of the number of women in the position of vice-rector and almost 7% less for deans. However, there is a clear upward trend for all three functions analysed. Top universities still have problems reaching the national averages, not even reaching the 2019 thresholds. This may indicate that large universities have more rigid and time-consuming

[4] For the position of vice-rector, the director of the doctoral schools was also considered; For the positions of dean and vice-dean, the faculties of theology were excluded from the analysis.

mechanisms to change. An explanation could be the glass rock theory, which says that women being promoted in smaller institutions that struggle to gain popularity.

From the point of view of the six categories mentioned at the beginning of this section, most universities fall under the general profile, followed by the technical profile. If we look at the gender differences in terms of the university's profile, the fewest women in management positions are found in technical universities, where at the level of all senior management roles there are only 36.29% women. The number of female deans in technical faculties is the lowest, at 20.63%, well below the national average. This indicates a horizontal segregation, with STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields being characterized as male fields (Ertl, et al., 2017). Surprising is the medical field where parity has been achieved (the position of vice-rector) or even where men are in a slight minority, in the positions of dean and vice-dean. The medical field is also the only one where there is currently a female rector. This pattern is outside of those indicated by the specialized literature, which shows that in medicine the number of women promoted in academic management is lower compared to that of men (Richter, et al., 2020).

	Rector		Vice-Rector		Dean		Pro-Dean	
Categories/ Gen	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Agricultural	2 (100%)	0 (0%)	9 (60%)	6 (40%)	9 (69.23%)	4 (30.77%)	18 (50%)	18 (50%)
General	14 (100%)	0 (0%)	54 (62.07%)	33 (37.93%)	109 (61.93%)	67 (38.07%)	173 (45.65%)	206 (54.35%)
Medicine	5 (83.33%)	1 (16.67%)	20 (50%)	20 (50.00%)	11 (40.74%)	16 (59.26%)	34 (45.95%)	40 (54.05%)
Technical	6 (100%)	0 (0%)	26 (74.29%)	9 (25.71%)	45 (78.95%)	12 (21.05%)	88 (54.66%)	73 (45.34%)
Humanist	2 (100%)	0 (0%)	8 (72.73%)	3 (27.27%)	10 (58.82%)	7 (41.18%)	20 (46.51%)	23 (53.49%)
Total	29 (96.67%)	1 (3.33%)	117 (62.23%)	71 (37.77%)	184 (63.45%)	106 (36.55%)	333 (48.05%)	360 (51.95%)

Figure 3 - Management positions by university profile

The university senate is the legislative and control forum of the university, and the president of the senate has the role of acting as a connection between the deliberative body and the executive management, represented by the rector of the university (Law 1/2011). As for the composition of university senates, although they are close to having gender parity, do not fully reflect the existing distribution at the level of university employees. In addition, the people at the head of the Senate are largely men, with only four women in these roles at the level of the universities analysed. Even if women are in the minority at the Senate leadership, at the level of members there is progress compared to previous years. At the national level, 49.89% of teaching and research staff in the academic environment are women, and 42.96% of women work in the university senates during this mandate. Comparatively, in 2012, the percentage of women was almost half of the current one, only 26.57% of the positions in the top 12 universities were occupied by women. In 2019, the percentage was 37.22%. Thus, we can see a steady progress over the years at this level, getting closer to parity today.

	President of the Senate		Members of the Senate		Total employees	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
Babeș-Bolyai University	1	0	61	46	715	729
Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași	1	0	41	30	468	316
University of Bucharest	1	0	65	54	614	781
Gheorghe Asachi Technical University of Iași	1	0	41	18	442	240
Technical University of Cluj-Napoca	1	0	56	52	540	335
Polytechnic University of Bucharest	1	0	107	57	849	494
Stefan cel Mare University of Suceava	1	0	27	17	174	167
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu	1	0	48	36	314	314
Polytechnic University of Timisoara	1	0	48	20	429	215
University of Craiova	1	0	53	23	459	388
University of Oradea	1	0	30	34	365	335
Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies	1	0	51	43	328	442
Carol Davila University of Medicine and Pharmacy	1	0	64	54	626	884
Iuliu Haţieganu University of Medicine and Pharmacy Cluj-Napoca	1	0	24	19	261	459
University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Craiova	1	0	25	15	183	232
USAMV Cluj-Napoca	1	0	31	18	152	159
George Emil Palade University of Târgu Mureș - UMF	1	0	46	34	222	289
Grigore T. Popa University of Medicine and Pharmacy	0	1	25	30	363	364
Ovidius University of Constanta	0	1	36	41	209	272
Technical University of Construction Bucharest	1	0	22	8	195	130
University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest	1	0	29	20	152	227
"Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad	0	1	17	23	104	105
"Dunărea de Jos" University of Galati	1	0	39	50	288	368
"Valahia" University of Târgoviște	0	1	26	17	132	134
West University of Timișoara	1	0	29	27	302	335
"Victor Babeș" University of Medicine and Pharmacy of Timisoara	1	0	28	27	285	384
Transilvania University of Brașov	1	0	51	37	332	336
Titu Maiorescu University Bucharest	1	0	20	17	243	253
University of Pitesti	-	-	-	-	189	239
Sapientia University of Cluj-Napoca	1	0	23	9	180	135
Total	25	4	1163	876	10115	10061

Figure 4 - University Senates by Gender[5]

[5] The University of Pitesti belongs to the Polytechnic University of Bucharest and does not have a separate senate.

The same progress can be observed if we analyse the data only at the level of the 12 universities included in all three studies. The number of women in university senates has been steadily increasing, starting from 26.57% women in 2012 and approaching the national average in 2025. As for the leadership of the senates, there are no data for 2019, but if we compare the situation in 2012 with the current one, there are no changes. Within the 12 best performing universities in our country, the percentage of female Senate presidents remains the same, 8.33%, in both years there is only one woman in this role.

	Members of the Senate	
Year/Gen	M	F
2012	73.43%	26.57%
2019	68.52%	31.48%
2025	58.20%	41.80%

Figure 5 - Gender distribution in university senates in the top 12 universities

If we analyse the gender distribution by fields, the most balanced in terms of the number of women and men employed is the general field, where there is parity. Also, in this category we have an almost equal representation in the Senate, with 45.43% women. On the other hand, no sector achieves parity in the position of president of the senate, although the general field, statistically, is the closest, with 21.43% women in such positions. Specifically, in this field we meet three of the four women as Senate presidents from the top 30 Romanian universities.

The field with the most women employed is the medical field, with 57.38% women among teaching and researching staff, closely followed by the agricultural field, with 55.94% women. However, this dynamic is not reflected in the university senate, where, in the agricultural field there are only 38.78% women, the second lowest percentage of women in the five categories. The university senates with the fewest women are found in technical fields (36.19%), but in this sector the number of female employees is also lower (39.32%), indicating the presence of horizontal segregation.

	President of the Senate		Members of the Senate		Total employees	
Category/Gender	M	F	M	F	M	F
Agricultural	2 (100%)	0 (0%)	60 (61.22%)	38 (38.78%)	304 (44.06%)	386 (55.94%)
General	11 (78.57%)	3 (21.43%)	543 (54.57%)	452 (45.43%)	4719 (49.40%)	4833 (50.60%)
Medicine	5 (83.33%)	1 (16.67%)	212 (54.22%)	179 (45.78%)	1940 (42.62%)	2612 (57.38%)
Technical	5 (100%)	0 (0%)	274 (63.87%)	155 (36.13%)	2644 (61.53%)	1653 (38.47%)
Humanist	2 (100%)	0 (0%)	74 (58.73%)	52 (41.27%)	508 (46.82%)	577 (53.18%)
Total	25 (86.21%)	4 (13.79%)	1163 (57.04%)	876 (42.96%)	10115 (50.13%)	10061 (49.87%)

Figure 6 - Composition of university senates, by categories

Therefore, the statistical data at the level of senior management positions, as well as those regarding the composition of the senates, show that Romanian universities have made progress in achieving a gender balance, but we continue to face both horizontal and vertical segregation. Especially in the positions of vice-rector and rector, there is stagnation in the last mandates, this indicating that phenomena such as the glass ceiling and the glass rock are still present.

4. Professional career paths of women vice-rectors

This section identifies elements that have contributed to the success of women in the role of Vice-Rector or, on the contrary, have made their academic career more difficult. The elements identified refer both to intrinsic motivational factors, which can explain the desire to perform even in a strongly masculinized field, as well as to formal and informal strategies implemented in the institutions to which these women belong. These variables can contribute to the identification of models of good practices, adapted to the needs of women in these positions, and can facilitate the career path of other women to such roles.

A recurring theme in the analysed answers is the importance of trust and communication between colleagues and with other partners. It takes a *"a framework in which ideas, proposals, solutions, perspectives are critically analysed and we decide together the best option to concretize that proposal/idea/vision"*. All of the women in the study indicated that these elements help create more feasible action plans, thanks to the involvement of all decision-makers. Some of them encountered such a framework once they reached the position of vice-rector, others instead helped to create one. The literature indicates that the transformational leadership style is more common among women, compared to the transactional style (Paustian-Underdahl, et al., 2024). The first involves a style based on motivation and employee involvement, while the second consists of delegating tasks and offering rewards (Abbas & Ali, 2023). A higher level of communication and empathy in an organization, especially in academia, can prove useful in crisis situations and create a higher level of safety among employees (Angelakis, et al., 2024).

Except for the idea of fair pay, material benefits seem to be the least important from the perspective of the participants. *"From my point of view, the benefits are the last aspect"* says one of them and *"The most important thing is the work environment, the benefits come later"* is another woman's answer. On the other hand, the important thing is the support provided for professional development and the implementation of *"institutional and, implicitly, ideological constructions".* Management positions come with challenges for which a person has to step out of their comfort zone. But precisely because of this, says one of the participants, she came to discover qualities that she didn't think she had. Material resources, on the other hand, seem to be more attractive among men.

The management position came as a result of the desire to improve the situation of the universities to which they belong. Even if for some it was a natural ascent, starting from the role of head of department, then dean, and then vice-rector, they are all motivated in their work by the desire to create a more ethical environment, to help young researchers and other women in academia. *"It is a context from which academic ideals, after all, can be materialized."* These ideas align again with transformational leadership style (Abbas & Ali, 2023), and over time, they can prove to have an impact in achieving gender parity. As the literature identifies, women are more isolated in departments and

face more difficulties in accessing resources and mentors. Women in leadership positions can not only act as role models for others, but can directly contribute to inclusion strategies for minority groups in institutions.

The mentors played a key role in the participants' professional career, influencing both their academic training and the development of a value system that guides their activity even today. Mentors are those people who throughout their careers have supported them in building a strategy for professional development and encouraged the desire for improvement. Even in the faculties where the interviewee was the first woman in a leadership position (head of department, dean, vice-rector), there was support from male colleagues and there was a collective where everyone was included. However, the existence of mentors may be an explanation for the low number of women in such positions. Women receive less formal or informal support compared to men (Sunny, et al., 2011), and this seems to be a key element in a person's success in academia. In the absence of models that encourage the person, provide support and information, academic evolution can be slower (Apostoaie, et al., 2019).

Trust and cooperation were pointed out as important elements to exist in the academic environment. Therefore, the main obstacles that hindered the path of these women towards the position of vice-rector were *"Interactions with non-cooperative people"*, as well as *"lack of involvement from colleagues or even departments"*. The academic environment is a competitive one, where time and resources are limited, but responsibilities, both academic and administrative, are multiple. Some of the respondents mentioned that throughout their careers they had multiple tasks delegated by others, even during motherhood and that there was an *"unbalanced institutional rhythm"*.

This may also be one of the reasons why work-life balance is difficult to achieve, with study participants mentioning that success in their careers is due to the understanding they receive from their family. A large part of their time is allocated to tasks specific to the position in which they are, to the detriment of the scientific career itself. Depending on the importance of the career in the personal value scale, some respondents believe that through their professional activity they can act as role models for their children and other women. On the other hand, there were also participants who regret not being able to spend enough time with their family and that is why they try to better organize their activity and impose a specific number of hours to spend with their loved ones. One university in particular has a department for inclusion, which through sessions and meetings helps to form strategies for achieving work-life balance. Achieving a balance is important in the life of any person, regardless of gender, but especially in that of mothers, who face social pressure to dedicate themselves to their children. The same pressure is not encountered among men, however, this is possible as a result of gender stereotypes, which say that women are responsible for family life, while men are responsible for the financial part (Pokorski, et al., 2024).

When we talk about the success that a person has in a management position, the main characteristic that the women interviewed found was *"work without rest"*. As mentioned earlier, universities are competitive environments, where the workload is high and achieving a balance between personal and professional life is difficult. Thus, in order to succeed and be appreciated in this field, it takes dedication and *"putting the needs of the institution first"*. To achieve this, the women interviewed developed their own system for planning and managing the resources available to them and created mechanisms based on good institutional practices. Their communication skills, perseverance, and passion for what they do have helped them earn the respect of their colleagues.

These findings correlate with transformational leadership style, indicating once again that women leaders earn appreciation through empathy and collaboration, rather than an authoritarian style. One of the respondents points out that *"Women are not as proud and it is easier for them to make decisions"*, this contributing to communication with students, colleagues, but also the partner companies with which the institutions collaborate. It facilitates decision-making, by involving all key actors.

Also, the transformational style is useful in crisis situations (Angelakis, et al., 2024). As a result of the changes that occurred in the university environment during the Covid-19 pandemic, more and more institutions have switched to such a leadership style, leading to increased employee satisfaction and a higher level of inclusion (Menon, 2021). One of the respondents to our study said that success came as a result of *"the ability to act in difficult situations (crisis), from which many flee or choose not to expose themselves publicly"*, as well as taking the risks that come with such situations. However, the fact that these women approach such leadership styles and perform even in crisis situations can be a result of the constraints and pressures they face. Because, as I said earlier, women are evaluated based on harsher standards compared to other male colleagues (Macarie & Moldovan, 2013; Apostoaie, et al., 2019) and are more likely to be promoted in times of instability (Ryan & Haslam, 2008; Ryan, et al., 2016).

Perfectionism emerged as another trait that contributed to the success of these women in the leadership role held. The fact that *"They seek to take their achievements higher, to perfect what they can already do well"* have brought them recognition in the institutions to which they belong. However, according to the literature, perfectionism can be an obstacle in a person's career, in combination with imposter syndrome. A person may end up avoiding certain responsibilities, for fear of failing or not achieving the task perfectly (Yosopov, et al., 2024). Combine this with the fact that women are evaluated based on higher standards than men, there is greater pressure on them to succeed in the activities carried out (Albulescu & Herrera-Saldana, 2016). On the other hand, as long as the desire for perfectionism is not imposed by those around you, and is adapted to the work environment and current responsibilities, it can lead to greater involvement in the workplace and an increased sense of belonging and satisfaction (Reilly, et al., 2018; Rodríguez-Naveiras, et al., 2025).

From the perspective of strategies for inclusion, only one of the interviewees mentioned that the university had a plan for gender equality, but did not feel a major impact of it. All of them specified that they did not feel treated differently from their male colleagues and that there was inclusion from the beginning in the institutions to which they belong. One person in particular believes that plans for gender equality would instead create inequality *"absolutely deserving persons can be excluded from the "scheme"".* Thus, the reluctance to affirmative measures is demonstrated once again, even if they are basically meant to rectify systemic and systematic problems of discrimination. Direct affirmative actions will reduce the statistical gap, but can have a negative impact on both the majority and minority groups. Those selected following these strategies experience a higher level of stress and doubt their own abilities, while those in the majority group end up performing worse (Autin, et al., 2014).

However, despite the fact that they personally did not face discrimination issues, they believe that universities could implement a set of formal and informal measures to guarantee a more inclusive environment. There are institutions where gender parity has not been achieved among teachers, especially in technical fields, and success in

management positions has followed *"personal neutralization"* and adaptation to existing values. For this to change over time, there should be clearer communication, both horizontally and vertically, so that collaboration between generations is stronger. This would help women at the beginning of their journey, through easier access to resources and support.

In addition, management roles do not only come with administrative tasks, the decisions made from such positions having an impact on a large number of employees and students in the university. That is why a person in such a position must not only be a good manager, but a good leader, who understands the needs of the people with whom they collaborate and distribute resources fairly. But we have already seen how women and men have different needs and encounter different obstacles in their careers. In this regard, *"Leadership Training Sessions"* would help develop a set of skills focused on empathy and inclusion, beneficial for all employees, regardless of their gender.

5. Conclusions and limitations

Statistically, Romania has made progress in recent years in terms of the number of women in academia. At the level of all employees and even among management positions such as vice-dean, the number of women is equal to that of men. However, there are differences between fields, the technical fields still being strongly masculinized fields, with only 36.3% of women working here as teachers and only 20.6% in the positions of dean. On the other side of the ranking is the medical field, where parity has been achieved in all positions, except for the highest position in the university, that of rector.

Overall, however, the higher we climb in management positions, the more the number of women decreases. At the level of vice-rectors, there are only 37.8% women, the percentage remaining similar to that of the 2015-2019 mandate. This indicates stagnation and that strategies to guarantee gender equality are still needed. Interviews conducted with women in vice-rector positions show that in order to reach and succeed in these roles, mentors play a key role.

The leadership style approached by these women is transformational, based on collaboration and empathy. The women interviewed are motivated in their work by the desire to bring positive changes in the institutions where they work, with an impact on young researchers, but also on other women. The literature indicates that there is a link between the gender of the person and the leadership style, the transformational style being more common among women (Paustian-Underdahl, et al., 2024). However, the style approached may be the result of social constraints placed on the shoulders of female leaders, who face greater pressure to excel both at work and in the family.

Success in such a position comes as a result of dedication and continuous effort, the collaborative environment helping to make decisions faster, but also to more transparent evaluations, reducing the impact of gender stereotypes. The main problem that remains is finding a balance between work and personal life, with people in senior management roles having to dedicate more effort and time to the workplace, to the detriment of other activities.

Therefore, universities could create support programs for parents so that there does not have to be a choice between the two. In addition, leadership training sessions can lead to the creation of more empathetic leaders, who, in

turn, create mechanisms of inclusion for all employees. Mentoring and access to resources is important for both women and men, and this can also lead to an increase in the number of women in senior positions over time.

Next, the study can be extended to all universities in Romania, not just those in the top 30, in order to have a statistical situation at national level and to be able to compare the situation of smaller universities with those in the top. Thus, it can be verified whether in less prestigious universities, women are more easily chosen in management positions, as indicated in the literature (Ryan, et al., 2016). In addition, another important limitation of the current study is the lack of current data for the total number of employees, using data from 2019. However, taking into account that parity has been around since then and looking at the more recent She Figures reports (European Commission, 2025), there do not seem to be any major percentage differences between the number of women and men.

In terms of the qualities needed to lead, as well as the strategies to create a more inclusive environment, they were analysed from the perspective of women in the positions of Vice-Rector. A comparative perspective, which also includes the male experience, can reveal whether there are differences in the obstacles that women and men encounter in leadership roles, but also the impact that different approaches and leadership styles can have on employees.

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