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The Impact of the ROSE Summer School Program in Supporting Students' Transition to Higher Education

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Abstract: This study investigates the effectiveness of the ROSE (Romanian Secondary Education) Summer School program in supporting the transition of vulnerable high school students to higher education. The 2024 edition of the Varadinum Summer School, organized by the University of Oradea, was analyzed using a quantitative research design. A structured questionnaire with 20 items was completed by all 56 participants at the end of the program. Items addressed motivations for participation, perceived usefulness of activities, overall satisfaction, and socio-demographic characteristics. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations) and inferential tests (independent samples t-tests, one-way ANOVA, Pearson correlations). Findings show that 82.5% of students attended a summer school for the first time, and all expressed willingness to recommend the experience. Physical Education and Sports courses received the highest scores (M=8.9, SD=1.2), followed by career counseling (M=8.3, SD=1.8) and Geography courses (M=8.2, SD=1.8). A significant difference was found between Sports and Geography courses ($t(54)=2.36$, $p=0.02$), while study visits showed no differences. A positive correlation was observed between career counseling and Sports courses ($r=0.28$, $p=0.03$). Socio-demographic analysis revealed that most participants came from rural or low-income families, with notable proportions having parents working abroad or special educational needs. In conclusion, the ROSE Summer School – Varadinum 2024 had a positive influence on students' academic motivation, self-confidence, and perception of university life, confirming its value as an inclusive and effective intervention.

Keywords: summer school, ROSE program, educational inclusion, high school-to-university transition, participant feedback

Introduction

Reducing school dropout and facilitating the transition from secondary to higher education represent central objectives of contemporary educational policies, both nationally and internationally. Students from vulnerable backgrounds frequently face structural, economic, and psychosocial barriers that limit their access to higher education and increase the risk of educational exclusion (OECD, 2025; National Academies, 2019). In this context, targeted interventions become essential to ensure equity and inclusion.

The ROSE Program (Romanian Secondary Education Project), implemented with the support of the World Bank and the Ministry of Education, aligns with this objective. Through the Summer Schools organized annually in various Romanian universities, final-year high school students are offered the opportunity to experience university life, consolidate their academic knowledge, and strengthen their motivation to pursue higher education.

These programs combine academic courses, educational counseling, and extracurricular activities, creating an inclusive and motivating learning environment. International literature confirms the effectiveness of such initiatives, highlighting their role in reducing the phenomenon of summer melt and supporting students' adaptation to university life (Castleman & Page, 2014; Kitchen et al., 2021; Estrada et al., 2020; Kuhfeld, 2023; Brumfield, Mohammadi-Aragh, & Winkler, 2024; Lynch, 2025). Programs such as Upward Bound and GEAR UP in the United States provide further evidence that integrated interventions of this type increase access to and success in higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Perna & Swail, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Moreover, theoretical models of experiential learning emphasize the role of interactive and practice-based activities in enhancing students' engagement and persistence (Kolb, 2015).

In recent years, the specialized literature has increasingly emphasized the importance of non-formal educational interventions carried out during the summer break, particularly for students from vulnerable groups. Such interventions contribute to preventing school dropout, maintaining motivation for learning, and developing socio-emotional and professional skills (Borodi, 2022; Câmpeanu, 2022; Por, 2022; Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020; Youth Endowment Fund, 2024; Palid, 2023). International research has shown that summer programs can significantly reduce educational inequalities and improve students' transition to higher education (Perna & Swail, 2002; Castleman & Page, 2014; OECD, 2025). At the same time, experiential learning theories (Kolb, 2015) provide a conceptual framework that highlights the role of practical and dynamic activities in enhancing motivation and academic persistence.

The ROSE Project (Romanian Secondary Education Project), implemented with the support of the World Bank, fits into this paradigm by offering students the opportunity to experience the transition to higher education through an inclusive and participatory approach. According to Eurydice (2025), the ROSE Project explicitly provides funding for bridge summer programs targeting disadvantaged students, thus confirming its systematic support at the national level. These initiatives reflect a broader European trend in which non-formal learning environments are increasingly recognized as critical mechanisms for inclusion and educational equity (European Commission, 2023).

Several examples of good practice reflect the diversity and effectiveness of summer schools organized in Romania. In Dobrogea, the program coordinated by Drăguța Hogaș combined educational activities with the rediscovery of local heritage and intergenerational cohesion. In Satu Mare, the Education – the Path to Changing the World summer school focused on personal development and inclusion, with the active involvement of teachers, parents, and volunteers. In Dej, the Holiday School

project included ecological, cultural, and sports activities in partnership with the local community, highlighting the role of collaboration between school, family, and local institutions (Papp et al., 2019; Giurgiu et al., 2023). Other notable initiatives included summer kindergartens for children with special educational needs (Câmpeanu, 2022) and thematic activities in Alba Iulia, where the idea of a balanced holiday through family education was promoted. At the academic level, the summer school Centenary + 1 / 1918–2019, organized in Sibiu and Avrig, brought together experts from multiple fields and provided an interdisciplinary framework for educational, cultural, and philosophical reflection (Bulz, 2019).

Analyzing recent initiatives and the results obtained within the ROSE Project, the significant impact of summer schools on facilitating the transition to higher education becomes evident. The active involvement of universities in fields such as Physical Education and Sports or Geography highlights a practical and student-centered approach tailored to the needs of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (Papp et al., 2019; Herman et al., 2020). The diversity of themes and the variety of good practices demonstrate the commitment of higher education institutions to creating an inclusive and motivating learning environment.

In this respect, the implementation of ROSE summer schools in several universities across Romania confirms the active role of institutions such as Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University in Iaşi, West University of Timişoara, and the University of Oradea. These universities have developed programs in areas including Physical Education and Sports as well as Geography.

Romanian universities have developed a wide range of summer schools and remedial programs in the field of Physical Education and Sports. The emphasis is placed on stimulating motivation for performance, career orientation, and combating university dropout. Centers such as Craiova, Galaţi, and Timişoara strongly emphasize counseling and integration through sports, while UNEFS Bucharest and other universities focus more on remedial programs.

Figure 1 details the involvement of each university, differentiated by field. The results highlight the major academic centers that implement multidisciplinary programs (e.g., Babeş-Bolyai University, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, West University of Timişoara, University of Oradea), in contrast with institutions focusing on a single domain.

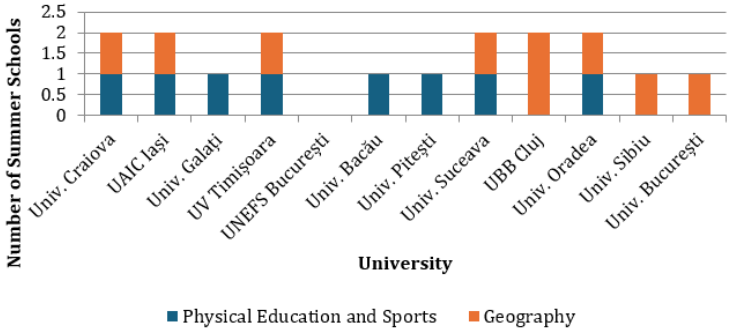

Figure 1. Distribution of summer schools by universities and fields

The data presented confirm the trend of consolidating non-formal educational programs within Romanian universities, with a stronger concentration in major academic centers and a clear openness toward multidisciplinary approaches. Against this backdrop, the present study investigates how the Varadinum 2024 Summer School integrates both national good practices and international recommendations in order to foster inclusion and academic motivation among disadvantaged students.

Previous research on the Varadinum Summer School edition of 2023 highlighted that, although students' perception of the program was predominantly positive, their motivation to pursue higher education remained relatively weak, underscoring the importance of refining program strategies (Herman et al., 2024a and b). This continuity provides a valuable framework for analyzing the 2024 edition. Recent research on the Varadinum Summer School, edition 2023, conducted at the University of Oradea highlighted that while participants' perceptions were predominantly positive, their academic motivation remained fragile. These findings reinforce the importance of continuously improving the structure and content of summer schools to ensure both satisfaction and long-term educational engagement (Herman et al., 2024a).

The present article aims to assess the impact of the ROSE Summer School – Varadinum 2024, organized by the University of Oradea, from the perspective of students' perceptions. Beyond describing satisfaction levels and socio-demographic profiles, the study also employs comparative and correlational analyses to provide deeper insights into the program's effectiveness.

Materials and Methods

To evaluate the impact of the educational program ROSE Summer School – Varadinum 2024, organized by the University of Oradea, a quantitative research design with a descriptive and inferential component was employed. The main data collection instrument was a standardized questionnaire administered to all participants at the end of the program. The questionnaire was completed anonymously, with the informed consent of respondents, and included 20 items structured into four categories: motivation for participation, perceived usefulness of activities, overall satisfaction, and socio-demographic information. Most items were closed-ended, with pre-defined response options and evaluation scales ranging from 1 to 10, allowing for the quantification of students' perceptions.

A total of 56 students from the 11th and 12th grades participated in the Varadinum 2024 edition, representing several counties across Romania. Participants were selected according to the vulnerability criteria established by the ROSE project, such as rural background, low-income families, parents working abroad, or belonging to disadvantaged groups.

The collected data were aggregated and analyzed using both descriptive statistical methods (frequencies, percentages, arithmetic means, standard deviations) and inferential statistical tests. Comparative analyses were conducted using independent samples t-tests (e.g., between Geography and Sports courses), and differences across activities were tested through one-way ANOVA. In addition, Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to explore the relationships between

career counseling and other evaluated activities. Statistical analyses were carried out using Python (pandas, scipy, matplotlib), which provided both tabular results and graphical outputs.

This methodological approach allowed not only the description of participants' perceptions but also the testing of differences and associations across variables, thereby strengthening the validity of the findings and offering a more rigorous assessment of the educational intervention.

Results

The analysis of responses collected through the questionnaire administered at the end of the Varadinum 2024 Summer School highlights several significant trends regarding participants' perceptions of the activities carried out.

Figure 2 shows that 82.5% of students attended a summer school for the first time, confirming both the attractiveness of the program for its target group and its ability to open new educational opportunities. Only a small minority (17.5%) had previously participated in similar initiatives, which indicates a strong potential for both expansion and long-term participant engagement.

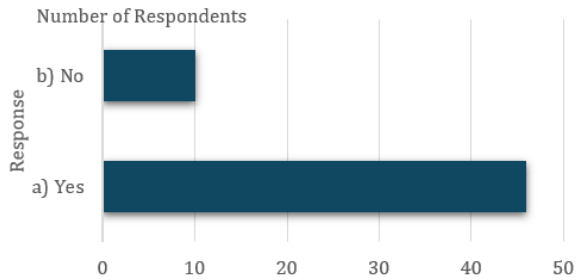

Figure 2. Participants' responses regarding first-time attendance at the summer school

With regard to the level of engagement and awareness, the results presented in Figure 3 are remarkable: 100% of respondents reported understanding the role of the activities, indicating a clear structuring of the program and effective communication between organizers and students. Moreover, the uniformly positive feedback reflects a high level of satisfaction, suggesting that participants are likely to recommend the Summer School experience to their peers, which further validates the quality of the educational intervention.

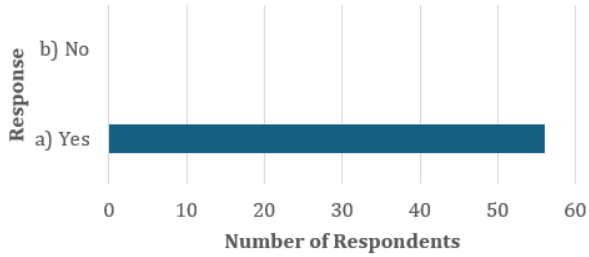

Figure 3. Participants' awareness of the role of activities

Another important element is the students' motivation for participation. According to Figure 4, the most frequent reasons were the desire to spend leisure time in a pleasant way (75.4%) and curiosity (68.4%). These were complemented by free access to the program (40%), opportunities for personal development (35%), and cultural interest (28%). Taken together, they suggest a diverse motivational profile, yet dominated by intrinsic factors (pleasure, curiosity). This diversity confirms that the summer school succeeds in attracting participants with different expectations and in responding to varied educational and social needs.

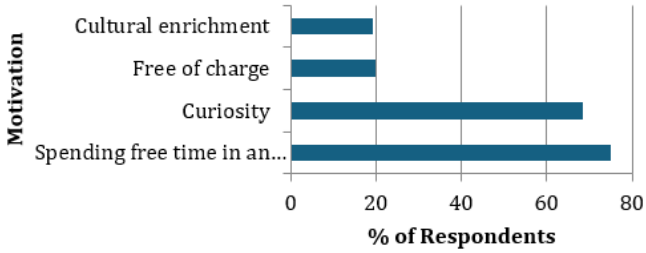

Figure 4. Motivations for participation in the summer school

The evaluation of the activities, carried out on a 1-to-10 scale, revealed very positive feedback. To facilitate interpretation, the results were synthesized in a single comparative figure (Figure 5). Career counseling sessions were perceived as extremely useful (M=8.3, SD=1.8), while Physical Education and Sports courses received the highest evaluation (M=8.9, SD=1.2). Geography courses were slightly lower (M=8.2, SD=1.8). Study visits (M=8.7) and workshops (M=8.3) in Geography were consistently rated lower than their counterparts in Sports (M=9.0 and M=8.7, respectively).

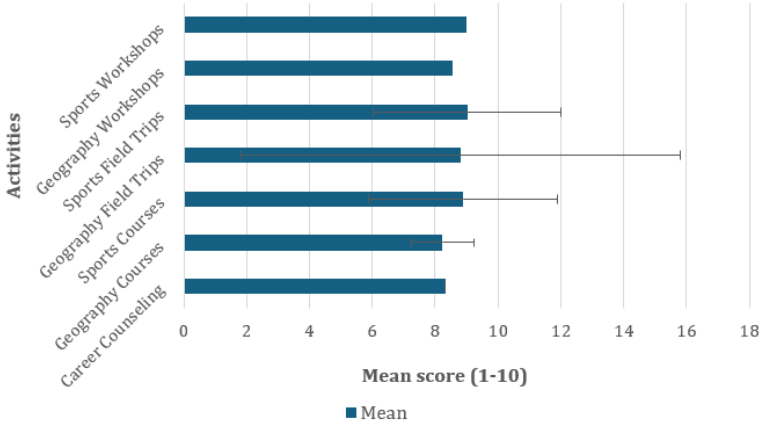

Figure 5. Perceived usefulness of summer school activities (mean ± SD)

As shown in Table 1, all activities were evaluated very positively, with mean scores ranging between 8.2 and 9.0. Sports-related activities (courses, visits, and workshops) systematically obtained higher means than Geography, while Career

Counseling also received strong evaluations (M=8.3). These descriptive results indicate that participants perceived the Summer School program as highly useful across all its components.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics (N, mean, SD) for the evaluation of summer school activities

Unnamed: 0	N	Mean	SD
Career Counseling	57.0	8.33	1.79
Geography Courses	57.0	8.23	1.79
Sports Courses	57.0	8.89	1.16
Geography Visits	57.0	8.81	1.37
Sports Visits	57.0	9.02	0.9
Geography Workshops	57.0	8.54	1.44
Sports Workshops	57.0	9.0	1.12

Building on these descriptive findings, inferential analyses confirmed some significant differences, as reported in Table 2. A t-test indicated that Sports courses were significantly better evaluated than Geography courses ($t(54)=2.36$, $p=0.02$), while the differences between Sports and Geography visits were not statistically significant ($t(54)=0.97$, $p=0.33$). ANOVA results highlighted significant overall differences across all activities ($F(3,220)=3.86$, $p=0.01$). Furthermore, a positive correlation was observed between the evaluation of Career Counseling sessions and Sports courses ($r=0.28$, $p=0.03$), suggesting a potential complementarity between professional guidance and practical, interactive experiences.

Table 2. Comparative statistical tests for activity evaluations

Test	Statistics	p-value
t-test Courses (Sports vs. Geography)	2.36	0.02
t-test Visits (Sports vs. Geography)	0.97	0.33
ANOVA (all activities)	3.86	0.01
Correlation Counseling – Sports Courses	0.28	0.03

From a socio-demographic perspective, Figure 6 shows that a significant proportion of students came from disadvantaged backgrounds. Among the 46 respondents who answered the relevant items, 67.4% reported coming from rural or isolated areas, 47.8% from low-income families, 19.6% had parents working abroad, 8.7% faced special educational needs, and 4.3% belonged to vulnerable ethnic groups. These findings highlight the inclusiveness of the program and its focus on target groups at risk of educational exclusion.

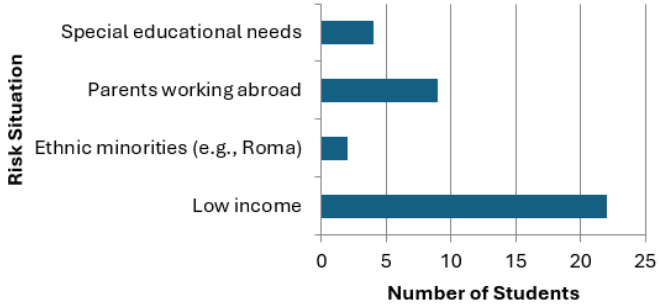

Figure 6. Risk situations identified among participants

The results show that the Varadinum 2024 Summer School succeeded not only in providing an attractive educational experience but also in effectively reaching the target audience of the ROSE project. The high level of satisfaction, the diversity of motivations, and the active participation of students from disadvantaged backgrounds confirm the program's effectiveness and its relevance for supporting the transition to higher education.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Varadinum 2024 Summer School achieved its primary objectives of enhancing academic motivation, broadening access to higher education, and fostering inclusion among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The fact that 82.5% of participants attended a summer school for the first time confirms the program's accessibility and attractiveness for its target audience, which is consistent with the goals of the ROSE project. This outcome aligns with international evidence showing that preparatory summer programs can significantly reduce barriers to university entry for vulnerable students (Perna & Swail, 2002; Castleman & Page, 2014).

The high levels of satisfaction and the unanimous willingness of participants to recommend the experience suggest that the program succeeded not only in meeting but also in exceeding students' expectations. Activities perceived as most valuable—such as career counseling, Physical Education and Sports, and Geography courses—reflect the importance of combining academic preparation with personal development and experiential learning. Similar results have been reported in studies evaluating U.S. initiatives like Upward Bound and GEAR UP, which emphasize the role of integrated interventions in promoting both academic success and socio-emotional growth (U.S. Department of Education, 2023; Estrada et al., 2020).

Regarding the evaluation of activities, all scored highly (above 8 on a 1–10 scale), but statistical analysis revealed significant differences. Physical Education and Sports courses were significantly better evaluated than Geography courses ($t(54)=2.36$, $p=0.02$), while study visits showed no significant differences between the two domains. This pattern indicates that activities with a strong practical and dynamic component are more attractive to high-school students, which confirms previous literature highlighting the impact of experiential learning (Kolb, 2015). ANOVA results ($F(3,220)=3.86$, $p=0.01$) also confirmed significant differences among

activities. Furthermore, a positive correlation was observed between the evaluation of career counseling and the assessment of Sports courses ($r=0.28$, $p=0.03$), suggesting a complementarity between guidance activities and applied learning.

The diversity of motivations for participation, ranging from curiosity to personal development and leisure, highlights the heterogeneous nature of the student population targeted by the program. This confirms findings from previous research that students from vulnerable backgrounds are not a homogeneous group but have varied expectations and needs (Kitchen et al., 2021). By responding to this diversity, the ROSE Summer School contributes to reducing educational inequalities and strengthening the sense of belonging among participants, two key factors in supporting long-term academic persistence.

The socio-demographic profile of the participants further underscores the relevance of the program for vulnerable groups: students from rural areas, low-income families, or with parents working abroad represented a significant proportion of the cohort. These findings confirm the importance of tailored interventions to mitigate systemic barriers to higher education access, particularly in contexts marked by socio-economic disparities (OECD, 2025; National Academies, 2019).

Nevertheless, the study also has limitations. The relatively small sample size (56 students) and the descriptive design do not allow for generalization of the results to the entire population of ROSE participants. Future research should employ longitudinal and comparative approaches to examine the long-term effects of summer schools on academic trajectories and retention in higher education. In addition, qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, could provide deeper insights into students' subjective experiences and perceived challenges.

In conclusion, this study confirms the effectiveness of the ROSE Summer School model in supporting at-risk students and reducing educational inequalities. By aligning with international evidence and adapting to the specific needs of Romanian students, the program represents a promising framework for educational policy and practice, with strong potential for replication and scaling at the national level.

Conclusions

This study confirms the effectiveness of the ROSE Summer School – Varadinum 2024 as a relevant educational intervention designed to support students from vulnerable backgrounds in their transition to higher education. The results highlight a high level of satisfaction, a clear understanding of the role of the activities, and an increased motivation to pursue university studies.

The significant participation of students at educational risk—such as those from rural areas, low-income families, with parents working abroad, or with special educational needs—demonstrates the program's capacity to meet its objectives of inclusion and equity. Thematic activities, career counseling, practical workshops, and the stimulating university environment contributed to participants' personal and academic development, strengthening their confidence in their own abilities.

Moreover, the integration of components from different fields (Sports, Geography, counseling) underscored the value of an interdisciplinary approach, reflecting European and international trends in remedial and non-formal education

(European Commission, 2023; OECD, 2025). This model can be successfully expanded to other university centers and integrated into national strategies to reduce school dropout and to promote equitable access to higher education.

In the long term, it is recommended to monitor participants after program completion, conduct longitudinal evaluations, and extend research to other ROSE summer schools. Such steps would provide more robust evidence regarding the long-term impact of summer programs on academic persistence and social inclusion. The findings of this study thus provide a solid foundation for formulating educational policies oriented toward inclusion, prevention, and active support for students in educational transition.

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