

## PROFESSIONAL AND TRANSVERSAL SKILLS AND LIFELONG LEARNING SYSTEMS IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL CHALLENGES

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### **Abstract**

*Contemporary economic and social challenges determine the need to develop a new paradigm of education - that of lifelong learning. In this regard, investment in education and training for skills development is essential to boost growth and competitiveness: skills drive Europe's ability to increase productivity. In the long run, skills can stimulate innovation and economic growth, add value to production in the value chain, stimulate the concentration of higher-level skills and shape the future labour market.*

**Keywords:** *professional skills, transversal skills, lifelong learning, formal education, non-formal education, informal education.*

**JEL Classification:** *I2, I24, I26, I28*

### **1. Introduction and context of the study**

Technological development in recent decades and the phenomenon of globalization have led institutions and specialists around the world to seek the skills needed by any citizen of the planet to successfully integrate into social life in a "knowledge-based economy to ensure economic development, better jobs and greater social cohesion". The cementing of society and social activism continue to be an important goal of current educational policies around the world.

In this context, an increasingly important concern for the competitiveness of the European economy is the mismatch of skills with employability and business needs, a phenomenon observed by several researchers in the field. [1, 6, 7, 9, 14] The quality of education and the supply of skills have increased all over the world, and Europe has to face up to this.

This article aims to identify the orientations of strategic European educational policies by developing educational concepts based on learning outcomes and the development of the lifelong learning system. The objectives of the research are: to identify the need to reorient European education systems to the concept of the learning outcomes approach; to determine methods to combat unemployment and labour market inclusion of young people and the adult population through skills development; to identify the contribution of the lifelong learning system in developing the skills needed for the European economy.

Education and training can only contribute to economic and jobs growth if learning is focused on the knowledge, skills and competences to be acquired (learning outcomes) through the learning process, rather than on completion of a certain stage or time spent in school. Lifelong learning is considered an essential feature of the information society.

## 2. Learning outcomes and lifelong learning systems

The learning outcomes approach is already the basis of the European Qualifications Framework [2] and national qualifications frameworks, this fundamental reorientation is not yet fully reflected in the teaching and assessment process. Institutions at all levels of education and training still need to adapt in order to increase the relevance and quality of their contribution to education and the labour market in terms of education, to expand access and to facilitate the transition between different educational pathways.

Learning outcomes represent the set of knowledge, skills and competences that a person has acquired and is able to demonstrate after completing the learning process in a given schooling cycle.

**Knowledge** are the result of assimilating information through learning.

**Skill** means the ability to apply and use knowledge to accomplish tasks and solve problems. Skills are described as cognitive or practical.

**Competence** is the proven ability to select, combine and use knowledge, skills and other acquisitions (values and attitudes) appropriately, in order to successfully solve a certain category of work or learning situations, as well as for professional or personal development in conditions effectiveness and efficiency.

Between these three types of learning outcomes, there is a relationship of interdependence and, at the same time, a hierarchy in the process of achieving these results, namely: certain types of knowledge underpin abilities, and a certain set of knowledge and abilities leads to the development of a skill. (fig. no. 1)

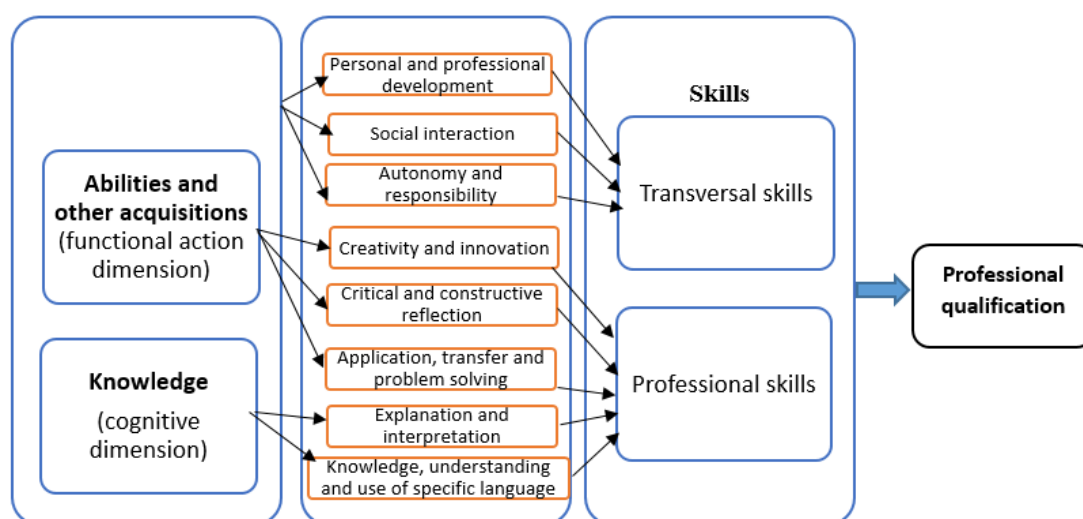


Figure 1. Learning outcomes

Source: Methodology for achieving the National Qualifications Framework in Higher Education Application guide [8]

Skills can be classified into two categories:

a) **professional skills** that are proven abilities to select, combine and use appropriately knowledge, abilities and other acquisitions (values and attitudes), in order to successfully solve a certain category of work or learning situations, limited to the respective profession, in conditions of effectiveness and efficiency.

b) **transversal skills**, which are those capacities that transcend a certain field, respectively study program, having a transdisciplinary nature. Transversal skills refer to the competences that people have and that are relevant for other activities and occupations than those that they currently carry out or that they have recently carried out. These skills may also have been acquired through

extra-professional activities or through participation in education or training. More generally, these are skills that have been learned in one context or for mastering a particular situation/problem and that can be transferred to another context. [13]

These consist of teamwork skills, oral and written communication skills in the mother tongue/foreign language, use of information and communication technology - ICT, problem solving and decision making, recognition and respect for diversity and multiculturalism, learning autonomy, initiative and entrepreneurship, openness to lifelong learning, respect and development of professional values and ethics, etc.

The term "transversal skills" is increasingly used in the context of European education systems, not only in large-scale approaches, such as educational strategies and policies, but also in specific, problem-oriented documents (curricula of schools, high schools and universities, analytical programs, reports, etc.). Their importance is increasingly recognized at various levels: educational decision-makers (Ministries of Education, specialized authorities, boards and directorates, school and university management staff), teachers and students. In this multi-party context, transversal skills are subject to a bidirectional flow; they are included in the educational requirements, so the teaching staff must ensure their development among the students (descending direction), but they are also more and more demanded by the students, who are more and more aware of what competencies they need to become competitive in the labour market (ascending direction).

In the long run, skills can stimulate innovation and growth, add value to production in the value chain, stimulate the concentration of higher-level skills in the EU and shape the future labour market. [3, 4]

The massive increase in the world's supply of highly qualified people over the last decade is putting Europe to the test. Gone are the days when competition came mainly from countries that could only provide a low-skilled workforce. The quality of education and the supply of skills have increased all over the world, and Europe needs to deal with this.

Regardless of the progress made in recent years in the higher education graduation rate, sustained efforts will be needed to reach the main target of 40% of young people who have completed a higher education cycle.

Despite a significant improvement, early school leaving remains at unacceptable levels in too many member states, such as Spain with 26.5% and Portugal with 23.2%. Specific actions are still needed to reduce early school leaving through comprehensive strategies. [12]

There are poor results in other areas as well: 73 million adults have only a low level of education; almost 20% of 15-year-olds do not have sufficient reading skills; and participation in lifelong learning programs is only 8.9%. By 2020, 20% of new jobs will require higher-level skills.

Education must raise both the standards and levels of achievement to meet this requirement, as well as encourage the transversal skills needed to ensure that young people are able to become free entrepreneurs and adapt to the inevitable and increasing changes from the labour market during their career. [12]

The extended mission of education and training includes objectives such as active citizenship, personal development and well-being. All this goes hand in hand with the need to improve the skills needed for employability, in the context of weak economic growth and a reduction in the workforce due to a population ageing.

Particular attention is paid to combating youth unemployment. In this regard, efforts should be stepped up in the following four areas:

- Developing world-class vocational and technical education in order to increase the quality of professional skills;
- Promoting on-the-job training, including internships, apprenticeships and quality work-study models to support the transition from learning to work experience;
- Promoting partnerships between public and private institutions (to ensure that appropriate curricula and skills are provided);

- Promoting mobility through the Erasmus+ program for all.

Educational reforms to combat **youth** unemployment must stimulate the supply of skills through the following actions [4]:

1. Promoting excellence in technical and vocational education and training. Key actions include the development of high-quality alternating VET (vocational education and training) systems, depending on national circumstances, the alignment of VET policies with regional/local economic development strategies, namely smart specialization, the introduction of permeability with other educational offerings, the introduction of short-term tertiary level qualification (2 years) covering areas identified as lacking qualified and potential growth staff, such as ICT, healthcare, green sectors, and strengthening local, national and international partnerships and networks between businesses, especially SMEs and VET providers.
2. Improving the results of groups of students at high risk of dropping out of school early and with a low level of basic skills. Key actions include the introduction of high-quality and accessible pre-school education and care services, strengthening the learning of basic skills such as reading and writing skills, numerical skills, basic math and science skills, early detection of people with lack of basic skills at all stages of the schooling period and the provision of personalized assistance, as well as the implementation of strategies based on concrete elements to reduce the level of early school leaving.
3. Strengthen the range of transversal skills that increase employment opportunities, such as entrepreneurship, digital skills and languages. Key actions include taking measures to introduce transversal skills in all curricula from the first years of schooling to higher education, using innovative and student-centered pedagogical approaches, and developing assessment tools through which skill levels can be estimated and effectively evaluated. All young people should have at least practical entrepreneurial experience before completing compulsory education.
4. Reducing the number of low-skilled adults. Key actions include setting national goals and strategies, increasing incentives for adult education by enterprises, validating skills and competences acquired outside the formal education system, and creating access points, encompassing various learning services throughout the country, such as validation and career guidance, providing students with tailored individual learning services.
5. Intensify the use of ICT-based learning and access to high-quality OER (open educational resources). Key actions include modernizing the ICT infrastructure of schools, supporting ICT-based teaching and assessment practices, promoting transparency regarding the rights and obligations of users of digital content, establishing mechanisms for validating and recognizing skills and competences acquired through OER, and supporting education and training institutions in the process of adapting their business models to the emergence of OER.
6. Reviewing and consolidating the professional profile of all teaching professions (teachers at all levels, school principals, teacher trainers). The key actions are to analyze the efficiency as well as the academic and pedagogical quality of teachers' initial education, to introduce coherent systems and to have adequate resources for the recruitment, selection, integration and professional development of teachers based on the clearly defined skills for each stage of the teaching career, as well as to increase teachers' digital skills.

EU member states can no longer exist without an effective **adult education** system, integrated into a lifelong learning strategy, offering participants various opportunities to enter the labour market, facilitating social integration and training for „an active old age” in the future. Education of adults, as well as primary, secondary and technical-vocational education, is a social good. [5]

The European Commission has published the Action Plan entitled „It is never too late to learn”. Adult education as an integral part of lifelong learning is taking up increasingly strong positions at European Union level.

The European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) notes trends that accentuate the existing differences in the field of adult education in European societies: excellent learning opportunities for people with a high level of education and increased material opportunities, on the one hand, and low level and the reduced material possibilities of people with a lower degree of training, as well as of the marginalized people, on the other.

It is also worrying that policies on adult education in Europe are focused exclusively on employment, not taking into account the diverse needs of the adult population, including aspects of personal development and the cultivation of socio-political activism. The legislative framework in the field of adult education must be stable, define the role of different educational service providers, financial obligations, clearly set out citizens' rights to lifelong learning, set and monitor standards.

Adult education should not be limited to the training of employment skills. Every citizen should be able to meet his needs for economic, social and personal development.

It is necessary to have implemented a mechanism for recognizing the results obtained in non-formal and informal learning, similar to the one for validating the results of the formal education system. More attention should be paid to creating opportunities for the training and education of andragogues both at academic level and in the non-formal sector. Research and publications in the field of adult education must be supported in all aspects.

EU Member States should include adult education in current international cooperation policies. Several bilateral and regional programs need to be launched to link adult training in the EU with that in neighboring regions. Dialogue between both sides of the border is an important tool for bridging the gap between EU member states and its neighbors.

Contemporary economic and societal challenges determine the need to develop a new paradigm of education - Lifelong Learning (LLL) and the awareness that education does not end with a degree or a job, lifelong learning being a necessary condition for adapting to the ever-changing professional, economic, social, informational and technological requirements.

The need to introduce a **lifelong learning** strategy is dictated by several realities of society:

- population ageing;
- massive emigration of adults in search of better job opportunities;
- low employment rate;
- low level of competitiveness;
- shortcomings in the education system;
- skills shortage;
- early leaving of studies;
- functional illiteracy.

Lifelong learning involves studying within, but also outside, traditional education and training systems.

At European level, education is a *fundamental pillar of success*. In this context, education policies have the following long-term strategic objectives:

- putting lifelong learning and mobility into practice;
- increasing the quality and efficiency of education and learning processes;
- promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship;
- stimulating creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of the education system. [3]

In 2000 **the European Union** at the Lisbon Summit announced the entry of Europe into **the age of knowledge**. At this summit, the memorandum of lifelong learning (*lifelong learning – LLL*) was adopted, which found that the labour market constantly requires the improvement/renewal/updating of professional knowledge, skills and competences. According to the European Commission, the central priority of the **Lifelong Learning** Program is to transform the European Union *into the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth accompanied by a quantitative and qualitative increase in the number of jobs and greater social cohesion* [11].

Lifelong learning is for adults between the ages of 25 and 64 and includes all forms of learning:

- *Formal education* takes place in the education system which includes schools, colleges, universities and other educational institutions for children and young people, starting with 5-7 years and continuing until 20-25 years;
- *Non-formal education* is provided outside public educational institutions, but is based on educational objectives, study time and support for learning. This form of education does not aim to achieve a certain level of education and is aimed at people of all ages;
- *Informal learning* is not structured, is not systematic and does not end with certification. It includes self-education and the knowledge gained is not tested.

The **lifelong learning** strategy aims to achieve the following objectives:

- increasing participation in lifelong learning;
- improving the relevance of education systems;
- vocational training for the labour market.

Lifelong learning is becoming more and more important, and people who periodically raise their level of qualification through lifelong learning are more likely to be employed, successful in their careers and to participate fully in social life.

*Lifelong learning* takes place within, but also outside, traditional education and training systems. It focuses on the training and development of key competences and skills specific to a particular field, qualification or specialty during compulsory education, which in turn serve as a basis for lifelong learning.

Lifelong learning *places the responsibility of the individual at the center of the learning process*.

In the social aspect, lifelong learning is a condition for increasing the quality and efficiency of education and training processes, promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship. The impact of LLL on a personal level lies in stimulating creativity and inventiveness, entrepreneurship, increasing people's responsibility. LLL offers vast opportunities to better meet the skills need of the economy and the individual.

However, according to surveys, 40% of European employers say they cannot find people with the right skills to generate development and innovation. Attributing major importance to this issue, the European Commission adopted in 2016 the New European Skills Agenda [9], which launched 10 key actions to improve the quality and relevance of vocational training, develop skills acquisition, offer more choice good careers, finding jobs and improving life chances.

The agenda is a package of measures to bring about improvements in three areas: basic skills; visibility and comparability of skills; labour market and smart skills to facilitate effective career decisions. All this aims to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness.

A particularly important role in the context of lifelong learning belongs to adult education. According to EU policies, adult learning includes a wide range of formal, non-formal and informal learning activities, both general and vocational, which adults follow as soon as they have completed cycle of their initial vocational education and training. It is in this category of people that there is a low level of basic skills and high unemployment rates.

The Reflection Paper *Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030* [3], also focuses on developing key competences for lifelong learning and skills upgrading pathways, on new opportunities for adults.

It also opts for the creation of a European area of education by 2025, the aim of which is to improve inclusiveness, based on lifelong learning and innovation in education and training systems.

### 3. Conclusions

European education and training systems still fail to provide the appropriate skills needed for vocational integration and do not work properly with the business environment or employers to bring the learning process closer to the reality of the work environment. This inadequacy of skills is an increasingly important concern for the competitiveness of European industry. [12]

It is necessary to pay special attention to the needs of marginalized groups of the population. These include disadvantaged groups, ethnic minorities, refugees, the elderly and detainees. Equitable access to education must be a recognized value throughout Europe, which would ensure economic well-being.

A mechanism for the recognition of the results obtained in the framework of non-formal and informal learning, similar to the validation of the results from the formal education system, it's necessary to be implemented.

In the long run, the education system at all levels needs a more ambitious transformation [10] based on principles such as lifelong learning; flexibility of educational trajectories; modularity of educational courses. At the same time, attention should be focused on developing personal, social and interdisciplinary problem-solving skills, and on practice. At the same time, it is necessary to focus on the use of modern training methods, new teaching formats and tools, including digital educational tools and distance learning formats.

Well-educated citizens are the basic premise of sustainable development, an important component in the economic and democratic development of society. In this context, the concept of lifelong learning (LLL) is proving to be a cornerstone, and adult education must become an integral part of lifelong learning policy.

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