

LIFELONG LEARNING ESSENTIAL CONDITION FOR INCLUSION IN A KNOWLEDGE-BASED ECONOMY

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Abstract

Lifelong learning is essential to support competitiveness and social inclusion. In the article, aspects of the organization of the lifelong learning process are studied, such as: strategies, forms of learning and directions for inclusion in the concept of the European Education Area.

Keywords: *lifelong learning, formal education, non-formal education, informal education, key competences, educational policies.*

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

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary economic and societal challenges determine the need to develop a new paradigm of education - that of lifelong learning (LLL) and the awareness that education does not end with obtaining a degree or a job, permanent learning is a prerequisite for adapting to the ever-changing professional, economic, social, informational and technological demands.

Lifelong learning is a continuous process of flexible learning opportunities, linking learning and skills acquired in formal institutions with the development of skills in non-formal and informal contexts, especially in the workplace. This means uninterrupted learning, anytime and anywhere.

Appearing in the 70s of the twentieth century, the concept of lifelong learning has developed and changed over time, advancing in the European Community to the level of policies. Currently, the lifelong learning strategy has become a priority in European and national educational policies. Raising the level of skills, promoting transversal skills and finding ways to better anticipate labor market needs, including based on dialogue with industry, are essential to multiply the chances of success in life, to support equitable, sustainable and favorable growth to inclusion and to guarantee social cohesion.

2. PAPER BODY

Lifelong learning is considered an essential feature of the information 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; lack of skills; early leaving of studies; functional illiteracy are just some of the challenging causes for supporting long-term economic growth, which led to the need to reformulate the concepts of educational systems.

In this context, 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 labor market.

Lifelong learning is a continuous process of flexible learning opportunities, linking learning and competences acquired in formal institutions with the development of competences in non-formal and informal contexts, especially in the workplace. It reflects a concept of continuous learning, anytime and anywhere.

Lifelong learning is based on 3 concepts:

- formal education is official and takes place in a state institution according to a well-defined program;
- informal education represents spontaneous or unorganized influences from the environment, family, group of friends, mass media, etc. on the individual;
- informal education takes place outside the official curriculum, allowing the formation of skills, abilities, knowledge that everyone feels closer to the soul and thus personalizing education.

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 labor market constantly requires the improvement/renewal/updating of professional knowledge, skills and competences.

In the memorandum ”European Communities: A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning” [7], the concept of Lifelong Learning is presented, a definition taken from the European Employment Strategy:

Lifelong learning is all learning activities, intentionally undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences.

The memorandum contains **six key messages** [7] that formed lifelong learning strategies for Europe aimed at ensuring:

- the guarantee of universal and continuous access to learning in order to acquire and renew the necessary capacities for a sustained participation in a cognitive society;
- the essential increase of investments in human resources, to give priority to the most important value of Europe - its citizens;
- the improvement of teaching-learning methods and the encouragement of situations that ensure the continuum of learning throughout life;
- the significant improvement of the ways in which participation and learning outcomes are understood and valued, especially non-formal and informal education;
- that anyone can easily access good quality information and advices about learning opportunities across Europe and throughout life;
- the provision of lifelong learning opportunities for those who wish to learn in their own communities, supported by ICT facilities, wherever needed.

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* [9].

European educational policies propose 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. [8]

Lifelong learning encompasses early childhood education, pre-university education, higher education, adult education and continuing vocational training At the level of the European Union, lifelong learning is intended for adults aged between 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.

According to the European concept of classification of learning activities, the **International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED-2011)**, the definition and particularities of *formal, non-formal and informal education* are as follows. [3]

Formal education (formal education and training, according to the Eurostat notion) is defined as an education that is institutionalised, intentional and planned through public organizations and recognised private bodies, and, in their totality, constitute the formal education system of a country. The specific characteristics of this form are summarized as follows:

- formal education programs are recognized by education authorities;
- formal education consists mostly of initial education;
- qualifications from formal education fall within the ISCED fields of application;
- formal education typically takes place in educational institutions that are designed to provide full-time education;
- formal education also includes education for all age groups with programme content and qualifications that are equivalent to those of initial education;
- programmes that take place partly in the workplace (dual education) may also be considered formal education if they lead to a qualification that is recognised by national education authorities (or equivalent).

Access to formal education in the Republic of Moldova [1]:

The enrollment rate in formal education is 99.6%, another 0.4% of the population being uneducated or having completed only primary education (up to 4 classes). About 58% of the general population and 50% of people with disabilities have formal studies, which certify obtaining a profession. **About 22% of the population do not have access to formal specialized education.** Here we are talking about that share of the population that currently does not have formal professional studies, but would like to have them. In a great measure, this category includes the population aged between 30-49 years, with average incomes, who did not have the opportunity to study due to certain circumstances.

Non-formal education (non-formal education and training) represents any learning activities organized and supported outside the formal education system and can include people of all ages. Non-formal education is education that is institutionalised, intentional and planned by an education provider. The defining characteristics of non-formal education:

- represents an additional, alternative and/or complementary component to formal education in the lifelong learning process;
- it caters to people of all ages, it may be short in duration and/or low-intensity;
- it takes place both within and outside educational institutions and can meet the needs of people of all ages;
- it mostly leads to qualifications that are not recognised as formal or equivalent to formal qualifications by the relevant national or sub-national education authorities or to no qualifications at all;

- can cover programmes contributing to adult and youth literacy and education for out-of-school children, as well as programmes on life skills, work skills, and social or cultural development etc.

According to some studies carried out in 2020, in the case of non-formal education in the Republic of Moldova, the employer is the main initiator of the non-formal studies of employees. Every third person (37.0%) who participated in various forms of non-formal education states that they took place right at the workplace, another 20% attended training courses organized by the company. At the same time, 27% of the population of the Republic of Moldova who participated in such courses, followed them outside the workplace, but they were organized by the employer. Thus, we observe a clear trend regarding non-formal education in the Republic of Moldova: it is directly related to the professional activity and is dictated, for the most part, by the professional requirements of the employer.

The main barriers that prevent non-formal education at all ages in the Republic of Moldova are: family responsibilities (51.7% of respondents) and the cost of courses (24.5%), found in the highest percentages among the population aged 30-44 years. [1]

Informal learning is the result of daily activities related to work, the family environment, free time, in the community, in social networks, through voluntary, sports, cultural activities, etc., it is not organized or structured in terms of objectives, duration or support for learning and can lead to the formation of competences and qualifications. Likewise, it does not automatically lead to the certification of acquired knowledge and skills.

Informal learning is defined as forms of learning that are intentional or deliberate, but are not institutionalised. The following characteristics are specific to informal learning:

- it is consequently less organized and not structured (by learning objectives, study time and learning support) and usually does not end with certification;
- it includes learning activities that occur in the family, workplace, local community and daily life;
- it includes self-learning, in which the person does not test his accumulated knowledge, is not institutionally coordinated and, as a rule, this learning is not systematic.

The approach to lifelong learning in the EU is specified by the following stages of lifelong learning [8]:

- early childhood education (ISCED 0);
- compulsory education (ISCED 1-3);
- vocational education and training (ISCED 4-5);
- tertiary education (ISCED 6-8);
- adult education.

The Education and Training 2020 strategic framework considers that Europe's success depends on pre-school, primary, secondary, higher and vocational and technical education and aims to promote the *principle of lifelong learning by combining support with formal, non-formal and informal learning in the fields of education, training and the youth*. The Europe 2020 strategy proposes to achieve the following objectives:

- *increasing intelligence*, by reforming education and vocational training;
- *inclusive growth*, to reduce unemployment, poverty and social exclusion;
- *sustainable growth*, through the efficient use of resources and competitiveness. [6]

According to the research carried out by the Development Partnership Center (2020) [1] in the Republic of Moldova:

The low employment rate of the population in the Republic of Moldova is determined by the low level of qualification and the mismatch between the level of education and market requirements.

Only 60% of people have studies that offer a specialty on the labor market, be they secondary professional studies or higher studies.

Women have a more advanced educational profile, with 25.2% of them having completed higher education, compared to 16.5% among men.

Vocational secondary education is the highest educational level for a good part of people aged 45-59 (50.2%) and over 60 (39.8%).

Higher education is more characteristic of people from urban areas (33.6% versus 10.6% in rural areas).

About 40% of the population practice specialties for which they did not study, and in the case of people of Roma ethnicity, this is valid for 79.8% of the population.

Women, in a higher proportion, have higher education for the specialty they practice (26%), while more men have a diploma of vocational education - 24.5%.

Depending on age:

the 18-44 year old population obtained the specialty in higher education,

the population over 45 years old – after vocational education (vocational school, in the case of people aged 45-59 years – 27.9% and college, in the case of the elderly over 60 years old – 17.4%).

At least one specialty is held by 90.5% of the general population, and 32.5% hold two or more specialties. 32.0% of the Roma population do not have any formal or informal specialty and only 17.2% respondents have more than one specialty. [1]

Lifelong learning takes place within, but also outside, traditional education and training systems and focuses on the training and development of key and domain-specific skills, qualifications or specialties during compulsory education, which, in turn them, serve as a foundation for lifelong learning. Lifelong learning *places individual responsibility at the heart of the learning process*. [13]

The term competences refers to a combination of skills, knowledge, abilities and attitudes and includes willingness to learn in addition to „knowing how”

Thus the key competences comprise three aspects of life [12]:

a. **personal fulfillment and lifelong development (cultural capital)**: key competences must enable people to pursue their individual goals in life, driven by personal interests, aspirations and the desire to continue learning throughout life;

b. **active citizenship and inclusion (social capital)**: key competences must enable individuals to participate in society as active citizens;

c. **employment (human capital)**: the ability of each person to obtain a decent job on the labor market.

The European Parliament and the Council of the EU recommend that Member States develop „the provision of key competences for all as part of their lifelong learning strategies”. [10]

The recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning established the European framework of reference for key competences and defined the competences that every citizen needs for personal development, employment, social inclusion and active citizenship.

Key competences represent a multifunctional, transferable package of knowledge, skills and attitudes that all individuals need for personal fulfillment and development, social inclusion and finding a job. These must have developed at the end of compulsory education and must act as a foundation for learning as part of lifelong education. [10]

The eight areas of key competences that must be adapted to the social, linguistic and cultural framework of individuals are:

1. Communication in the mother tongue;
2. Communication in foreign languages;
3. Competences in mathematics and elementary skills in science and technology;
4. Competences for the use of new information and communication technologies;
5. Competences for learning to learn;
6. Interpersonal relationship competences and civic competences;
7. Spirit of initiative and entrepreneurship;
8. Cultural awareness and artistic expression.

As competences requirements are constantly changing, more and more jobs are becoming highly technological, competences development is increasingly relevant to ensure resilience and adaptability to change. This called for the revision of the 2006 Recommendation and the adoption in May 2018 of the new Recommendations on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning. [11]

Any public policy intervention in the subject of competencies development must simultaneously ensure compliance with two elements: **motivation to learn and access to learning**. These two elements are the indispensable pillars of any policy and consistent effort in the field of lifelong education. From the perspective of public policies, an integrated approach to labor market activation programs, social services, counseling and learning services, material support, etc. will be necessary, taking into account these elements.

What we mean by the **Motivation** and **Access** dimensions:

Person **motivated** to learn:

- Considers that skills development is directly linked to labor market benefits;
- Is encouraged to develop their competencies continuously;
- The learning process is relatively simple;
- Is not discouraged by potential costs, investment of time and effort, distance and other potential obstacles related to skills development;
- Believes in the quality of the learning process.

Access to learning:

- Relevant information is available;
- Services, programs and learning tools are available;
- Learning is associated with few preconditions, direct costs, and hidden costs;
- Learning is accessible from a geographic, time and effort perspective;
- The learning process is corruption-free.

The motivation to study in the Republic of Moldova is relatively low. Only 13.2% of the employed population would be interested in benefiting from new learning and skills development opportunities, the share of those interested among the inactive population being lower - 8.4%.

Access to learning, especially at informal education, is insufficient. Approximately 60% of the population followed at least one form of education throughout their life, which resulted in a professional specialty (regardless of its form). [1]

As instruments for the implementation of European policies in the field of lifelong learning they can be highlighted:

- The European Framework of key competences;
- The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS);
- The Europass;
- The European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning;
- The European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET);
- The European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) etc.

The Strategic framework for European cooperation in vocational education and training (ET 2020) helped to build trust and mutual understanding that supported the first initiatives on the European education area and national reforms. [5]

In the Resolution of the Council of Europe on a strategic framework for European cooperation in the field of education and training in the perspective of the realization and further development of the European education space (2021-2030) it is mentioned that, ”societal, technological, digital, economic and environmental challenges affect increasingly the way we live and work, including the distribution of jobs and the demand for skills and competences”. [4]

The establishment of the European Education Area proposes the consolidation of ongoing efforts and further development in **six main directions** (fig.no.1):



Figure 1. Main directions for the development of the European Education Area

Source: Adapted by the authors after: Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the achievement of the European Education Area by 2025 [4]

- *Quality.* A quality education provides young people with the knowledge, skills and attitudes they need to thrive in life and meet the many challenges they will face.
- *Inclusion and gender equality.* Education has failed to reduce inequalities related to socio-economic status, despite the fact that the best performing education systems are those that value equity. Across Europe, individuals' educational experiences follow social patterns. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are over-represented among those with insufficient results.
- *Green and digital transition.* Education and training policies and investments geared towards a green and inclusive digital transition hold the key to Europe's future resilience and prosperity. The transition to an environmentally sustainable, circular and climate neutral economy has a major impact on employment and society.
- *Teachers.* Teachers, trainers and educational staff are at the heart of education. They play the most important role in making education a fruitful experience for all learners. The vision for the education profession within the European Education Area includes highly competent and motivated teachers who can benefit from a range of support and professional development opportunities throughout their varied careers.
- *Higher education.* Student and staff mobility has progressively opened up higher education and strengthened the foundations of structured cooperation. The Bologna Process had a stimulating

role for internationalization and mobility. The added value of mobility is clear: data shows that a study abroad experience significantly helps career prospects.

- *Geopolitical dimension.* High-quality international cooperation in education and training is also vital to addressing existing and emerging global challenges. It is essential for achieving the Union's geopolitical priorities and sustainable development goals for 2030. [2]

The European Education Area provides a perspective on the future of education and training in the European Union. It identifies the key issues and sets the way forward, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity and with full respect for member states' competences on education and training at national, regional and local level. The initiatives describe the means and steps needed to create the European Education Area by 2025.

Efforts to create the European Education Area will go hand in hand with the European Skills Agenda, the renewed education and training policy and the European Research Area.

CONCLUSIONS

Not only the biographical path of each citizen depends on the degree of education development, but also the historical path of the country.

One of the causes, frequently discussed, of the low impact of education on development is related to the quality of education. Here, one of the limits of rethinking education becomes felt, both at the level of the system and at the level of a social-economic phenomenon.

Education systems at all levels need ambitious transformations based on continuous learning; the flexibility of educational trajectories; modularity of educational courses. At the same time, it is necessary to focus on the use of modern training methods, formats and new didactic tools, including digital educational tools. The European Education Area and the Digital Education Action Plan are essential for future economic recovery and growth at European level. They establish a common vision of the future of education, which is linked to commitments on green and digital transitions.

A new paradigm to stimulate lifelong learning will be more effective and equitable if it addresses the dimension of *Motivation to learn* and *Access to learning*. An effective capability development ecosystem is one that identifies specific aspects of *Motivation* and *Access* for each individual.

It is obvious that LLL reduces the effects of the phenomena of "professional aging" of the population, labor migration, and the lack of qualifications on the labor market; contributes to ensuring equity and social cohesion, promotes active citizenship; it stimulates creativity, entrepreneurial spirit, personal responsibility, increases income and self-confidence.

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