

## THE ROLE OF LIFELONG LEARNING IN DEVELOPING AND PROMOTING PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCES

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**Abstract:** In a dynamic and competitive world, lifelong learning is an essential necessity for adults. Developing new skills and personal growth, adapting to new technologies and diverse cultures, improving skills and qualifications leading to new career opportunities, increasing the quality of professional and personal life, balance - all these and many other reasons can lead and motivate an adult to opt for continuing learning, which results in "improving knowledge, innovations, skills, competences and/or qualifications for personal, social or professional reasons". The shortcomings faced by adults in the education system can be overcome through micro-skills as an alternative for developing and promoting professional skills, and rapid adaptation to new situations and challenges on the labour market from an intercultural perspective can ensure a civilized intercultural dialogue in which the stakeholders concerned would have the opportunity to build socio-economic and cultural partnerships based on high-quality values and indicators.

**Keywords:** Lifelong learning, adult education, skills, qualification, micro-skilling, intercultural dialogue.

**JEL Classification:** A2, I2, M12

### 1 Introduction

**Motto:** *"If the country (...) is to have a place in the concert of Europe (...), then it will not be able to reach it through industry, nor through commerce, but only through education."* (Mihail Kogălniceanu)

To begin with, let us distinguish between *lifelong learning* and *adult education*.

*Lifelong learning*, according to the publication "English-Romance Glossary of Terms in Adult Learning and Education (ALE) and Lifelong Learning (LLL)", means "all learning activity undertaken throughout life which results in the improvement of knowledge, innovations, skills, competences and/or qualifications for personal, social or professional reasons".

***Lifelong learning***, according to Pedro Moreno da Fonseca, Cedefop's lifelong guidance manager, is "all learning activities undertaken, individually or collectively, whether in educational, occupational, family or other social contexts, with the aim of enhancing understanding, knowledge and skills, thus responding to individual or group aspirations and needs, whether leading to formal certificates or qualifications."

The Education Code of the Republic of Moldova stipulates the following: "(1) ***Lifelong learning*** includes learning activities realized by a person throughout his/her life, with the aim of training or developing competences from a personal, civic, social and professional perspective; (2) (...) general, vocational-technical and higher education, as well as general adult education, initial and continuing vocational training."

Adult education is defined in the Education Code of the Republic of Moldova as: "a) general education, which ensures the general development of adults in cultural, socioeconomic, technological, ecological aspects; b) initial vocational training, which means any training process in which an adult who does not have a qualification receives the appropriate training to acquire the minimum professional skills necessary to obtain a job; (c) continuing vocational training, which means any training process whereby an employee, already having a qualification or a profession, supplements his vocational skills by acquiring further knowledge in the field of his basic specialization or by acquiring new methods or processes applied in that specialization. "

### **Content and methods**

The research methods that allowed us to prepare this article are: theoretical sources in the field of Lifelong Learning (LLL), the opinions of experts in the field of lifelong learning, adult education, certain normative acts, as well as the knowledge gained through participation in workshops on specialized topics, the opinions and experiences shared by international experts on the issue at hand, own experience in the field of continuing vocational training, the role of a trainer, etc. The methods used in the research of the issue are specific to the tools of social sciences, humanities, psychology, economics. They were used: documentation, method of analysis and synthesis, description.

### ***What can drive and motivate us today to be lifelong learners?***

There are a lot of reasons and factors that can motivate and motivate us to learn lifelong learning. For example: the need to adapt to changes in the economy and technology in order to remain competitive in the labour market; the development of critical thinking, digital skills and effective communication, which are fundamental for social and professional integration (especially in a multicultural environment); the recognition and validation of competences acquired as a result of transversal lifelong learning; institutional support for the implementation of professional development and counselling initiatives; the promotion of the culture of continuous learning so essential for adapting to changes in the socio-professional environment." etc.

In this article, however, we aim to address two, in our view, key reasons for developing and promoting professional *skills*:

### ***The first reason is to learn to self-improve, to improve our skills and performance in various fields.***

In support of this approach we bring to your attention the study "Evaluation of the system of initial and in-service teacher training in the Republic of Moldova"<sup>1</sup> , carried out by the international

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<sup>1</sup>The purpose of this study (carried out within the project "Strengthening the system of training and professional development of human resources in education" and implemented by the Institute for European Policy and Reform,

consultants Dr. George Pataki and Dr. Ciprian Fartușnic, who, while recognizing the progress made in the system of in-service training in the Republic of Moldova in the last ten years, nevertheless, in discussions with various specialists in the field, providers and decision-makers, note certain shortcomings faced by the education system in general:

- "The mechanisms/methodology of accreditation of continuing education programs are rigid, administrative, quantitative. But in fact they should be less formalized (...) The market must remain open to any provider with experience in education. Lifelong learning is not a direct right of higher education institutions (...)";
- "The costs for accreditation of programs exceed the financial possibilities of small providers or providers that are just starting out (over 15,000 MDL)";
- "If, for private providers, the law stipulates that their trainers must have certificates attesting their competence in adult education, in the case of higher education institutions, university teachers do not need this specialization to be active in continuing education";
- 'The credit map (ECTS system) provides for an exaggerated number of credits for attestation, and providers propose incredibly long programs for continuing training (...) This system is the European standard for initial training and it is unusual for it to be adopted for continuing training, precisely because it involves a very large number of hours' etc.' etc.

In the field of lifelong learning, the international consultants mentioned also highlighted *some critical issues for stakeholders to reflect on*, namely: "The needs of the employer and the employee in terms of lifelong learning must coincide. The employer can only invest in employee training if the employee improves his or her skills for the benefit of the company. If, for example, a company implements a new technology, it is normal to want to train employees to work optimally with it. If the employee wants a new skill, which is not in the company's scope of activity, it is absurd to ask the employer for support (financial or leniency related to absences for attending courses). Moreover, after obtaining the new qualification, the employee may leave the company and in so doing may harm the employer. Then, the law<sup>2</sup> does not specify what happens if the employer does not allocate at least two percent of the payroll fund for employee training or if he is forced by circumstances to spend these resources on something else."

***The recommendations of the international consultants Dr. George Pataki and Dr. Ciprian Fartușnic are largely aimed at the employer***, namely: "The employer may be obliged to create the necessary conditions and to promote the professional training of employees, including bearing all the costs related to it, only if the training (initiation, refresher, qualification) is strictly related to the activity profile of the institution. The minimum 2% of the payroll fund for staff training may be transferred at the beginning of the year to a separate special account. The manager does not have the right to change the use of the money for other budget categories until the following year even if it remains unspent. Employees' personal or professional development (including through continuing training), which is not directly related to the company's business profile, be encouraged to take place outside working hours and be funded from employees' own sources, sponsorship or grants."

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with the financial support of the Open Society Foundations) was to assess the initial training system at ISCED 5-6-7 level and the system of in-service teacher training, at a time when education in the Republic of Moldova is once again at a crossroads. The opinions expressed in this study represent solely the views of the authors and not necessarily the official position of IPRE or the Presidency of the Republic of Moldova.

<sup>2</sup> International consultants referred to the Labor Code of the Republic of Moldova, Art.213, (1), (2), (3), (4).

***In order to overcome other challenges in the system of continuing vocational training***, it is appropriate to mention the recommendations of the EU-Republic of Moldova Association Council and the European Commission (also discussed at the Workshop of the Platform on Adult Learning and Education (ALE) entitled "Updates to the Education Code and outlining perspectives in policy development" on 11.07.2024, which was attended by the authors of this article)<sup>3</sup>.

Thus, as an alternative for the development and promotion of professional competences would be micro-qualification (MC), i.e. the application and recognition of micro-certificates across institutions, enterprises, sectors and countries.

Micro-certificates attest the results of short-term learning experiences such as a short course or training. They offer a flexible and targeted way to help adults develop the knowledge, skills and competences they need for personal and professional development. To this end, according to the Director of DVV International Moldova, Adela Scutaru-Guțu, some amendments have been made to the Education Code, the GD on the approval of the National Qualifications Framework and the Regulation on Continuing Adult Training.

***Micro-qualification***, according to qualifications and accreditation expert Anastasia Pouliou, is "a growing phenomenon - it addresses the limitations of the formal Qualifications System (QS) in order to respond in a timely manner to the needs of the labor market". The expert emphasizes that *micro-qualifications* include "a number of overlapping functions with modern ones: 1- they promote lifelong learning; 2- they allow for alternative learning pathways; 3- they are jointly defined with stakeholders." In addition, the expert points out that "in the labor market, but also for further learning" *micro-skills will become valuable* both as a means of access and progression in employment and as a social value.

It is also worth noting that ***micro-qualifications, as a tool for prior learning (RPL)***, according to expert Anastasia Pouliou, can be used to: 1- *obtain a partial qualification*; 2- *obtain a full qualification*; 3- *benefit from access to educational programs, including transition from VET to higher education*; 4- *benefit from exemptions from part of the educational programs and/or to shorten their duration*; 5- *benefit from exemptions from part of the vocational qualifications*. In this vein, the expert in the field of qualifications and accreditation also exemplifies ***good practices***: "New Zealand - micro-qualifications system as part of the regulated education and training system; Sweden - increased stakeholder involvement; Catalonia - pilot program for accreditation of micro-qualifications; Finland - closer cooperation between academia and the labor market - hygiene passport; Slovakia - legislative conditions for the introduction of micro-qualifications in practice".

***What would be the benefits of micro-qualifications as a tool not only for prior learning but also for developing and promoting professional skills?***

*Micro-qualifications can offer numerous benefits:*

- 1) opportunities/entry routes into the labor market;
- 2) provision of professional IT/AI solutions, especially if we aim to technologize the most important areas of socio-professional life (such as: public services in health, agriculture, education, justice, etc.);
- 3) shaping industrial ecosystems.

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<sup>3</sup> Workshop of the Platform on Adult Learning and Education (ALE) on "Updates of the Education Code and mapping perspectives in policy making" on 11.07.2023, SUMMIT EVENTS & CONFERENCE CENTRE, Barcelona Hall. Moderator: Adela Scutaru-Gutu, Director DVV International Moldova.

To these benefits could be added others (based on good practices in Estonia), namely:

- 1) curriculum development in cooperation with business;
- 2) quality assurance, evaluation and recognition of achieved results.

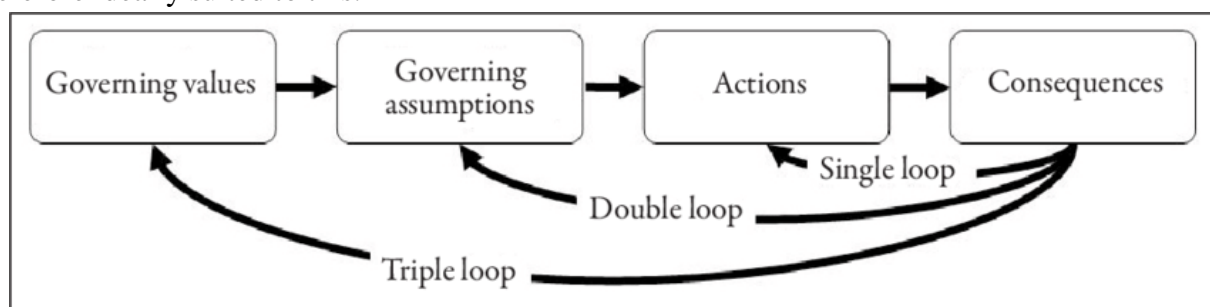
According to Anastasia POULIOU, expert in VET, qualifications and credentials, although micro-qualifications would also entail certain **barriers to adoption** (such as: "lack of appropriate and transparent accreditation standards; uncertainties about the nature of micro-qualifications; the way learning outcomes are assessed and documented; lack of formal recognition by national authorities; incompatibility of some micro-qualifications with NC systems; limited opportunities for accumulating and combining micro-qualifications"), nevertheless, **micro-qualifications are a good opportunity for adults aspiring to train and/or develop acquired, verified and recognized knowledge and skills through further education**, in line with the needs of the labour market in particular and society in general.

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***The second essential reason, in our opinion, for developing and promoting professional competences is to learn quickly to adapt to new situations and challenges in an intercultural setting.***

In other words, lifelong learning (including the opportunity to pursue a micro-skilling) can give an adult not only a sense of security in his/her own performance, certain incentives to improve work-life balance, career guidance, skills to use socio-professional support platforms, but also **proactive integration in an intercultural context as an essential desideratum in awareness preventing and remedying barriers in the process of social cohesion, reflecting on various intercultural issues as a continuous learning process, which highlights the individual's value system, beliefs, feelings and emotions that guide adults in making decisions on lifelong learning, adopting a certain attitude and socio-professional behavior.**

Lifelong learning is currently a pressing need, especially in the context of the integration of European standards in **intercultural dialog**. Schön's triple learning loop model (Argyris and Schön, 1996) is therefore ideally suited to this.



**Figure 1 Single-, double-, triple-loop learning**

Source: Adapted from Argyris and Schön (1996)

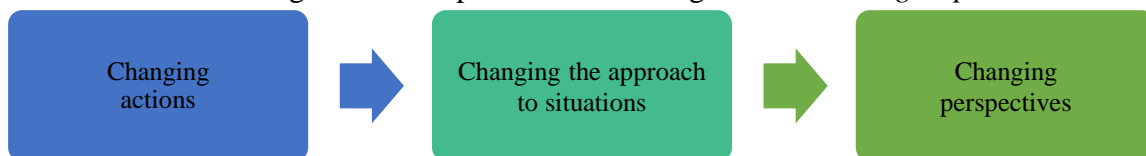
Under this model **learning** and **reflection** can be harnessed within teams and individuals. Understanding these ways helps teams to reflect on day-to-day activities and beyond. All the more so the questions underlying the three loops in the model, namely ***Can I be differently? Can I think differently? Can I act differently?*** could guide the adults involved in organizing and carrying out the lifelong learning process (implicitly the learners) in valuing intercultural dialogue.

An *eloquent argument* in this respect is represented by refugees who, under the influence of external factors, realize that in order to integrate in a social and cultural environment different from the usual one, it is necessary to learn not only the language of the host country (Romanian), a language different from their mother tongue, but also English, a language of international circulation as a bridge between different cultures and an opportunity to increase their chances of employment.

Undeniably, integration into a social and multicultural environment often involves linguistic and psychological barriers. This is why the stakeholders involved in this process of cultivating intercultural dialogue, including trainers of Romanian, English, etc., also have an important role to play in this intercultural dialogue: creating a learning climate conducive to refugee resilience through employment opportunities, skills development and social cohesion.

**Lifelong Learning** is first and foremost about **Attitude**, and Attitude in turn means **Change!** According to the publication "English-Romanian Glossary of Terms in Adult Learning and Education (ALE) and Lifelong Learning (LLL)", funded by BMZ (German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development), attitude to learning is "motivation to learn, learning preferences, self-confidence in learning, enjoyment of learning". Source: European Glossary for Adult Learning, Level 2.

*Stakeholders* (investors, educational institutions, lifelong learning centers, beneficiaries of educational and vocational services, employers, etc.) directly or indirectly interested in promoting assertive intercultural dialogue could implement this through *three learning steps*:



**Figure 2 The three learning steps in promoting intercultural dialogue**

Source: Prepared by the author

It is well known that adults involved in intercultural dialog (including refugees, migrants, national minorities) have certain interests, which they try to protect. But do these interests not contradict the law of civilized dialogue? Are the rights of others respected?

***In order to prevent such divergences, it is essential that several key principles are taken into account when promoting skills to support intercultural dialogue:***

- Say "No" to bullying, "No" to judgment;
- Avoiding feedback perceived as criticism! Yet, this blocks lifelong learning and in no way leads to resilience of a refugee/migrant/national minority;
- To correct actions and behaviors (with a focus on solving problems and getting results), but without neglecting the fundamental assumptions or beliefs underlying those actions;
- To encourage adults to learn to integrate in a multicultural environment through the laws of civilized intercultural dialogue, and if their behaviour is not correct, to motivate them to revise their social cohesion strategy;
- To encourage adults learning to conduct intercultural dialogue to reflect on the correctness of their actions, taking into account the patterns of behavior displayed and the role they themselves play in this context;
- To motivate adults to practice continuous reflection on the process and context of lifelong learning, the assumptions and values that motivate lifelong learning. However, individuals from different

backgrounds and cultures, with different learning systems, but who at the same time support lifelong learning, can generate new alternatives for resolving intercultural differences and new prospects for socio-professional cohesion.

## Conclusions

In this context, it is essential to realize that, in order to develop and promote professional competences, stakeholders must first identify and remedy the deficiencies in the lifelong learning system. Significant learning deficiencies include, on the one hand, ***economic, geographical and social barriers*** and, on the other hand, ***educational resources that are not suited to the objectives and purposes of training, insufficient and/or lack of qualified teachers in terms of social, digital and entrepreneurial skills, and in the field of continuing adult education***. Once these shortcomings have been overcome, it will also be possible to analyze the training needs of stakeholders interested in personal and professional development. Training needs analysis is usually carried out by educational service providers and clients, employers, employee representatives working together to identify the training needs of employees and then design them into a learning program.

According to lifelong learning specialist Pedro Moreno da Fonseca, there is a need to increase the value of ***micro-skills*** through a complex ecosystem: policies, governance and funding, smart skills needs, innovative and flexible learning pathways and programs, inclusive skills programs - all in line with the value standards or what is meant by fair certification. In conclusion, a community is truly proactive only if it promotes a "learning culture" by developing effective local partnerships between community sectors, supporting, motivating individuals and organizations to learn, broadening their horizons (IQ, EQ, SQ, LQ, DQ, etc.), using their knowledge and skills to solve social-economic, cultural problems and thus contributing to their personal and professional development as well as to that of the community they are part of.

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