

CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE PRIORITIES IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN EUROPE IN THE CURRENT ECONOMIC CONTEXT

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Abstract

European education has witnessed major transformations in the last decades, influenced by the international and national changes strongly marked by the manifestation of the global economic crisis. Education and training play a key role in the economic activity in that it represents an important objective in the context of the implementation of the Bologna process in Romania. The aim of this study is to provide a profound understanding on the role that education plays on the knowledge society through educational and training policies expressed both at the European Union level and at that of Member States.

Key words: education, training, priorities, indicators, economic crisis

JEL classification: I21, I25, E60, P46

1. Introduction

Education plays a vital role within the European society being the creator of the applicable knowledge in society and economics, and also by generating economic and social development process. Educational

institutions in Europe tend to modernize both on regarding the courses provided and on operating mode while the European states and private agents involved seek to resort to new ways of co-ordination and funding that are more efficient.

A solid cooperation in the field of education and training will have a special contribution to ensure the success of the European Union enlargement and to achieve the objectives identified by the European Council in Lisbon. Thus, the principles on which the cooperation in the field of education and training will be based have been defined as follows: the cooperation will be based on the objectives that had to be achieved by 2010 as settled by the European Council in Lisbon; the measures will be voluntary and determined mainly by the cooperation from the lower to the upper levels, vertically; initiatives will focus on the needs of the citizens and of the beneficiary organizations; the integrative cooperation entails the involvement of the Member States, of the European Commission and of the candidate countries. It will also include the states of the Free Trade European Association, the states of the European Economic Area and its social partners, however, the basic principle of education and vocational training policy is that of respect towards cultural and linguistic diversity.

The European Union competences in the field of education, vocational training and youth fall into the category of *supporting, co-ordinating or complementing the actions of the Member States*, according to the modifications brought about by the Treaty in Lisbon in the case of legal instruments. The Member States retain a significant deal of freedom of action and remain primarily responsible towards citizens. In these areas, *it is not necessary to harmonize national legislation with the community acquis, more precisely, it does not aim at achieving a common policy in the field of education and vocational training*, but at saving the diversity and specificity of each country. One of the 31 chapters of *the community acquis* is the one related to *”Education, vocational training and youth”*, chapter negotiated by the countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007.

One of the priorities of action to modernize the European social model, settled upon in Lisbon, referred also to *”stimulating education and vocational training in order to live and work in the knowledge society”*.

2. Modernizing education and vocational training

The modernization of education and vocational training has a vital contribution to ensuring the prosperity and social cohesion in Europe.

European-level assessments reveal the following: *”Although national*

reforms are heading to the right direction, their pace has to be hastened. Investments in preuniversity education have great importance in preventing school abandonment and social exclusion, and also in building the foundation for later learning¹”.

Also at an European level, the contribution of education and training to social cohesion is emphasized as well. *All citizens need to acquire and continually update their knowledge, skills and competences using lifelong learning (Lifelong Learning)*. The needs of those who may be exposed to social exclusion should be taken into consideration. This will lead to economic growth and labour force participation while ensuring social cohesion.

A greater investment in the development of human capital is to be noticed at an European level. Public expenditure on education, as percent of GDP, have been rising in almost all West European States, on average 5.41% in 2009 as compared to 4.9% in 2000².

3. Permanent priorities in education and vocational training

Learning Foreign Languages

The European Commission outlined the importance of foreign languages learning in two documents:

- *White Paper (1995) on education and training "Learning and Teaching: Towards a Learning Society"*;
- *Green Paper (1996): "Education, Training, Research. Obstacles to Transnational Mobility"*.

Thus, it is shown that the learning of at least two official languages of the Community is necessary to all citizens in order for them to fully benefit from the opportunities granted by the single market. Encouraging Union citizens to learn foreign languages was also supported by declaring year 2001 as *"The European Year of Languages"*.

Moreover, to promote understanding and better communication between the European citizens of the twenty-seven member states of the European Union, the following have been achieved:

- An action plan: *"Promoting foreign language learning and*

¹ *** - <http://europa.eu/scadplus/leg/en/cha/c/091.htm> *Joint Interim Report of the Council and the Commission on the progress of the work program „Education and Training 2010”* [Official Journal C 79 of 01.04.2006]

² *** - <http://europa.eu/scadplus/Aleglenichalcl1091.htm>

linguistic diversity: action plan 2004 -2006". This has identified *four action areas*:

- ✓ Extending the benefits of foreign languages lifelong learning to all categories of citizens;
- ✓ Improving the methods of foreign languages learning;
- ✓ Creating an environment favorable to foreign languages learning;
- ✓ Developing a framework for progress evaluation;
 - An European indicator to linguistic competencies (Directive 356/2006);
 - A new framework strategy for multilingualism (Directive 596/2006);
 - A "framework for the European survey on linguistic competences" (Directive 184/2007). This survey should allow the identification of the youth's language competences, deterioration and identification of the best practices and performances, as well as the assessment of the progress made in order to achieve the aimed objective, namely to improve foreign language learning;
 - A framework *regarding the implementation of the action plan "Promoting foreign languages learning and linguistic diversity"*. This report concludes that Member States have made efforts towards carrying out a significant number of objectives settled in the action plan and that they should currently focus on foreign languages learning by adults, on extending the circle of interested parties in companies, on permanent vocational training and on informal languages learning through media and cultural activities.

Access to Education

The access to education represents the first step in achieving the goals of vocational training and educational policies. Ever since 1976, the question of access to education was raised, thus raising awareness on the problems related to *the integration of immigrants' children* in the educational systems.

Later on, the issue of access to education for children of Roma origin and of disabled children became a priority for the European Union: "special

attention is given to *the access to education of children of Roma origin¹, as well as to the integration of people with disabilities² in education and training³*".

As a contribution to the Lisbon Strategy, the Ministries of Education adopted *common objectives for improving training and educational systems* and a work programme to achieve these objectives, a programme known as "Education and Training 2010⁴". The programme is implemented through the application of the open method of co-ordination, and the indicators and benchmarks techniques play an important role in monitoring and they provide support for exchanges of experience and good practices as well. The *three objectives* of the educational and training systems, as set out by the European Council in Stockholm (2001), with the same term of completion, took into consideration the following:

- The improvement of the quality and efficiency of the training and educational systems in the European Union;
- The facilitation of the access to education and training;
- The opening of the educational systems and vocational training to all persons.

The Member States established a total of 13 specific objectives, covering different types and levels of education and training (formal, non-formal, informal), promoting lifelong learning. Systems had to ensure improvement of all aspects: the teachers' training, the development of basic skills, the integration of ICT, efficiency of investments, promotion of foreign languages learning, systems' flexibility to ensure accessibility to learning for everyone, mobility, civic education, etc.

A press release of the Commission in 2007 proposed a *framework of indicators and best practices to monitor Lisbon objectives in education and vocational training*, a coherent framework to totally reflect – for the very first time – the most detailed objectives of the programme

¹ *** - Resolution of the Council and of the Ministers responsible for education adopted at the meeting of the Council in May 22nd, 1989 regarding the access to education of Roma children and nomads.

² *** - Resolution of the Council and of the Ministers responsible for education adopted at the meeting of the Council in May 31st, 1990 regarding the integration of children and young people with disabilities in the educational system.

³ Pascal, I., Vlad, M., Deaconu, S., Vrabie, C., „*Educatia, formarea profesionala si tineretul*”, CRJ Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004, p. 17.

⁴ *** - Joint Interim Report of the Council and the Commission: "Education & Training 2010: the success of the Lisbon strategy hinges on urgent reforms (2004) www.europa.eu.

entitled "Education and Training 2010".¹ The communication also covered the objectives referring to the convergence of Higher Education structures, in accordance with the Bologna Process and Stockholm Process regarding vocational training.

Indicators and best practices represent key-elements for decision makers in monitoring the important achievements of Bologna Process. These provide tools for:

- The analysis of the progress in achieving the Lisbon objectives, both at EU level and national level;
- The identification of the examples of good performance that could re-examine or modify old practices;
- The comparison of the results of the Union with those of third countries (USA, Japan).

It is necessary to identify a new *framework of indicators*, different from the one that helped monitoring the progress of the thirteen objectives during the period of 2003-2006. 20 core indicators and zonal indicators that come as completions to contextual indicators and whose use does not register any significant loss of details in the assessment of progress support this new framework.

In the future, indicators and good practices will be structured on eight key areas of the strategy. They are the following:

➤ *Turning the concept of "lifelong learning" into reality.* Lifelong learning has a vital role not only in ensuring competitiveness, employability and prosperity, *but also in ensuring social inclusion, an active participation of the citizens and an improvement of the way of living and working* within the knowledge-based economy. The Council has adopted several specific indicators that will suggest:

✓ By 2010, at least 85% of young people will have completed secondary education since graduation of at least high school is considered indispensable to having a career and to fully participating in lifelong learning.

✓ By 2010, 12.5% of adult people will have taken part in lifelong learning programme;

➤ Improving equity in education and vocational training. To invest

¹ *** - Communication From The Commission - "A coherent framework of indicators and benchmarks for monitoring progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training" Brussels, 21.2.2007, COM (2007) 61 final, www.europa.eu.

equity in education and training means to analyze the extent to which "individuals can obtain full benefits in the area of education and training in terms of opportunity, access, treatment and outcomes¹". In order to monitor progress in this area, the following indicators will be used: the degree of participation in preschool education and school abandonment.

➤ *Promoting efficiency in education and vocational training.* The same communication showed that "improving efficiency does not have to compromise the equity of educational systems, on the contrary, efficiency and equity should support each other²". The global indicator used is *investment in education and training*;

➤ *Core competences of young people.* The European framework defines the latest core competences as an important measure regarding the way Europe responds to the globalization challenges and to the transition to the knowledge-based economy, and it is made up of eight competences among which: native tongue, foreign languages, mathematical competences and those related to science and technology, "digital" ones, skills on how to learn (learning to learn), intercultural, social and civic competences, cultural and entrepreneurship expression. A specific indicator is the one regarding the reduction of the number of children up to 15 years in the EU, children with low reading skills, with at least 20% as compared with the year 2000, and the core/ basic indicators used will consider the following: *knowledge in reading, Mathematics and Sciences*, foreign languages skills, ICT and civic skills;

➤ *Modernizing education in schools.* The following indicators are used: school management, the school – as a centre of learning in diverse fields of knowledge, professional development of teachers;

➤ *Modernizing education and vocational training.* The indicator used for monitoring progress is the degree of graduation of a secondary form of education. Contextual indicators regarding the continuous participation in vocational training will allow the analysis of the role of enterprises in terms of employees' participation in vocational training;

¹ *** - Communication from the Commission to the Council and to the European Parliament. Efficiency and Equity in European education and training systems Com (2006) 481, quoted in Communication From The Commission - "A coherent framework of indicators and benchmarks for monitoring progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training" Brussels, 2007, COM(2007), www.europa.eu

² Dima, I.C., Man, M., Vladutescu, St. (2012). Globalization – Education and management. Agendas. Chapter 11, The Company's Logistic Activity in the Conditions of Current Globalisation, Publisher Intech- Open Science/Open Minds, Rieka, Croatia

➤ *Modernizing Higher Education.* Considering the important role of universities in European research, the target of the European Union to invest *3% of GDP in research and development by 2010*, will include a greater investment in research performed by universities.

The proposal advanced by the Commission consists of:

- ✓ Increasing the percentage of graduates who spend at least one semester abroad or in industry;
- ✓ Increasing with 15% the number of graduates in Mathematics, Sciences and Technology by 2010;
- ✓ Structuring the academic programmes in such a way that they will equally increase the graduates' chances to employment;
- ✓ Creating incentives for structured partnerships with the business community;
- ✓ Facilitating and accelerating the procedures for the recognition of higher education qualifications and adapting them to the ones applicable in the case of professional qualifications, facilitating the recognition of European diplomas outside the EU;
- ✓ Assigning a percentage of at least 2% of GNP (public and private funding) to a modernized higher education system by 2015
- ✓ Creating new funding systems for universities focused more on results that would assign a greater responsibility to institutions as compared to their long-term financial viability, especially in the research area.

4. Education and training in the context of Europe 2020 strategy

In the year 2009, the European Council drew up the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ("ET 2020"). Because of the changing of economic and political context, the European Union had to take additional measures to cope with the worst financial and economic crisis in its history and, as a reaction to it, adopted a strategy for an intelligent growth, sustainable and favorable to inclusion: Europe 2020 strategy.

Annual analysis of growth (AAG) for 2012 pointed out that Europe 2020 strategy had to lay emphasis both on reforming measures with short-term effects on growth, and on establishing a pattern for medium-term growth. Educational and training systems have to be upgraded to consolidate their quality and effectiveness, and to equip people with the necessary qualifications and skills to succeed in the labour market. This will

enhance people's confidence in their ability to cope with present and future challenges, will contribute to Europe's improvement in competitiveness and will also generate growth and jobs. AAG for 2012 requested a special attention on young people who are among the groups most affected by the crisis.

Since it represents a key-tool in the modernization of education and training, ET 2020 can have a significant contribution to achieving the objectives of Europe 2020 strategy, and, for this, ET 2020 has to be adjusted by updating the working priorities, the tools and its structure of governance and the proposal of priorities for 2012-2014, that are designed to mobilize the sector of education and training in order to support Europe 2020 strategy. In this respect, progress must be achieved in the following primary areas:

➤ **Investments and reforms in education and training.** At present, all public budgets, including education and training, are subject to a thorough examination. Most of the Member States face difficulties in maintaining present levels of expenditure, without mentioning their increase. Nevertheless, research suggests that the improvement of the level of studies could lead to significant benefits on the long term and could generate growth and jobs within the European Union.¹ For example, fulfilling the criteria of the European reference, which consists in reducing the percentage of the persons with a low level of basic skills to a level below 15% by 2010, could generate huge economic benefits on the long-term for the European Union. This contradicts the fact that, even before the crisis, the expenses in some member states were relatively small, around 4% of GDP or even less, while the average in the European Union would rise up to 5% of GDP, below the level of 5.3% in the USA. Budget reduction for education risks undermining the growth potential of the economy and competitiveness.

➤ **Early abandonment of school.** Crisis seriously affects young people's perspectives. Unemployment amongst the young increased from 15.5% in 2008 to 20,9% in 2010, while the ratio of people between the ages of 15 and 24 years old who are not included in any form of education, do not work or do not take part in any training course increased by two percent. Among the persons who had abandoned school early, 53% of them were unemployed. In this context, the objective of Europe 2020 strategy to reduce by 2020 the proportion of the persons with ages between 18 and 24 years old who have prematurely abandoned education and training to a level below 10%, becomes vital. In 2010, despite a certain progress, the rate of

¹ Pirvu G. (2010), „Politici ale Uniunii Europene”, Universitaria Publishing House, Craiova

early abandonment of school was still under 14.1% on average in the European Union, with considerable differences from one country to another. It was proved that boys are more exposed to the risk of early school abandonment (16%) than girls (12.6%).

➤ **Graduation from tertiary education or the equivalent.** In order to leave the crisis stronger, Europe needs to generate an economic growth based on knowledge and innovation. Tertiary education or the equivalent can be a strong driving force in this respect by creating a highly qualified labour force that Europe needs to make progress in the area of research and of development, and by equipping people with the necessary skills and qualification in a knowledge-based economy. Europe 2020 strategy has set as its main objective a growth of up to 40%, by 2020, of the percentage of persons aged between 30 and 34 years old who hold either a diploma in the tertiary education or the equivalent qualifications. In 2010, 33.6% of the people belonging to this age category would have a diploma in the tertiary education or the equivalent. Graduation rates, national goals and ambition levels vary considerably from one country to another.

➤ **Longlife learning strategies.** For most Europeans, longlife learning does not represent a reality. Although the participation in education and training in the early years of life has increased, recent data about adults aged between 25 and 64 years old who continuously learn all their lives indicate a slight tendency to decline. The current level of 9.1% (2010) is far below the reference level of 15% set in ET 2020 and which has to be reached by 2020. This poor result is particularly serious in the context of the current crisis. Young unemployed people and poorly qualified adults should be able to rely on education and training to stand better chances in the labour market.¹ The fact that no investment is made in their skills diminishes both their chances of returning to the labour market and Europe's potential to generate growth and jobs.

➤ **Mobility in educational purpose.** Mobility consolidates the foundations of Europe for a future growth based on knowledge and the capacity to innovate and compete internationally, and it also consolidates the ability of professional insertion and personal development which is appreciated by employers. Educational institutions, educational and training systems and enterprises as well benefit from the learning experience, the

¹ Pert S., „Educatia si invatarea pe tot parcursul vietii mai mult decât FPC/EP”. *Clasificari conceptuale*, Economic Library Collection, Economic problems series, vol.188-189, CIDE, Bucharest

personal contacts and the networking resulting from mobility. Promoting transnational mobility for educational purposes is an excellent example of European added value.

➤ **New competences and jobs.** The crisis has brought about changes in terms of skills' application. The demand for jobs requiring poor qualifications is decreasing, and future industries based on knowledge impose higher levels of qualification. According to recent forecasts, the number of highly qualified jobs will increase by around 16 million, from 29% (2010) to 35% of total jobs in 2020. However, it is expected that the number of jobs requiring a poor level of competences decrease by 12 million, from 20% to less than 15%. Some countries already face difficulties when it comes to highly qualified jobs. These will be aggravated by the effects of aging population when labour force starts diminishing after 2012.

On the basis of the European Commission's evaluation and consultation with the Member States and the interested European organizations, the Council and the Commission confirm the fact that the four strategic objectives of ET 2020 established in 2009 remain valid, and they are the following: the implementation of lifelong learning and of mobility; the improvement of education and training quality and efficiency; the promotion of equity, social cohesion and active citizenship; the improvement of creativity and innovation, entrepreneurship spirit included, at all levels of education and training. In order to achieve these objectives, there will be identified the priority areas leading to an improved efficiency of the European co-operation in education and training to favor economic growth and employment.

5. Conclusions

Education and vocational training help gaining a better understanding of values, such as solidarity, equality of chances and social participation. There is also a direct relationship between *education and vocational training* and health, environment, life quality and criminality rate. Education represents also one of the possibilities to reduce unemployment, especially among young people. Increasing labour force participation will determine an accelerating economic growth, and at the same time will ensure social cohesion. European politics in education was promoted by the Lisbon strategy in 2000, an EU's programme on economic growth and employment. Knowledge and innovation are the most precious values of the EU, and of society on the whole, especially when global competition tends to continually increase.

Although it is the national governments that are responsible with national individual politics in education, there are also elements and challenges common to all Member States, such: as the process of aging society, the shortage of labour force skills, and the need of common answers and solutions to the problem of global competition and collaboration. The economic and social success of the European model largely depends on the high quality of education, on the whole, and of the academic training in particular. Continuous training must become an essential condition of the European education and, at the same time, it is a key element of economic growth and employment, and a requirement of participation in social and economic life.

To conclude, there is a need of transformations in educational and training systems, of promoting co-operation at European level, as well as of best practices exchanges so that various education and training systems should share the same goals.

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