

COMPETENCES AND SKILLS FOR STIMULATING PERFORMANCE PROFESSIONAL INSERTION OF YOUTHS

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Abstract

It is unanimously agreed on that technological progress exceeds as rate the possibilities of the economy and society to generate new employment opportunities for the labour force. If, in this equation we include also the rate at which education and in particular institutions dedicated to vocational/professional training can adjust their educational supply, it turns out that in the absence of some measures and policies dedicated not only to (re)skilling the working age labour force on all segments the highest difficulties are faced by the youths. Initiatives, programmes, and actions launched at European Union level or at national level have the aim of training youths in new competences, based on a new educational and vocational training model, a new model of lifelong learning, as they are all elements required for maintaining them on the labour market in the knowledge-based economy. The change speed of the knowledge-based economy has as effect the much swifter depreciation of skills. In order to meet efficiently these changes, the youths must be able to update permanently their competences.

The paper presents a brief analysis of some elements that characterise students' educational guidance and mobility, but also some competences and skills required for increasing the insertion degree of youths on the labour market and for social inclusion.

Key words: *youths, youths' insertion on labour market, competences, skills*

JEL Classification: *E24, J6, J13, J21, J23, J24*

Introduction

The issue of youths' professional insertion and social inclusion was present always on the political agendas but only in the last two decades it underwent a particular significance increase. Within the European context, from 1988 up to date specific programmes were operational such as "Youths for Europe"¹. However, the first strategic document dedicated to youths, "The White Paper on Youths" was launched only in 2001. This document proposes the collaboration between member-states of the European Union regarding the prioritisation of some sectors, respectively participation, information, voluntary action, understanding, and learning about the youths.

For the period 2008-2018 the European action guidelines in the field of youths were reunited in the strategic document "EU Strategy for Youths – Investment and Empowering. A renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities"² aiming at the policies related to youths within the European Community in sectors such as education, labour force market insertion, social inclusion, participation to social life, entrepreneurship, etc.

The European Strategy for Youth has as essential objectives: i) access of youths to education, continuing training and labour market; ii) civic participation, social inclusion and solidarity.

The low participation of youths and vulnerable groups on the labour market was seen as one of the main challenges on short- and medium term also by the National Strategy regarding Social Protection and Social Inclusion 2015-2020.

At Romania's level, the "National Development Plan 2007-2013" (NDP) proposed by the Romanian Government ascertained the issue of youth integration on the labour market as one of the action priorities due to the alarming increase of the unemployment rate among them. The governmental document considers youth's integration on the labour market in close correlation with the capacity of the educational system to provide for relevant competences and skills adjusted to the market demands.

The impact of a generation suffering from the effects of exclusion will be felt in the political development of the society that will influence Europe in the following years.

¹ European Commission White Paper, *A New Impetus for European Youth*, Brussels, 21.11.2001, COM(2001) 681 final, www.eur-lex.europa.eu

² An EU Strategy for Youth: *Investing and Empowering - A renewed open method of coordination to address youth challenges and opportunities*, COM(2009)200

1. Educational Guidance

The share of youths preparing to enter the labour market at this level is very high, more than 70% in the Czech Republic, Austria, and Slovakia. To a lesser extent, in Belgium, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovenia, and Finland the highest share of total students in upper secondary education opts for vocational guidance. At the opposite pole, in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ireland, Greece, Hungary, and Portugal more than 60% of the students plan to pursue general programmes with the purpose of furthering their education. In Cyprus, more than 80% of the students are in this situation.

Youths, men and women alike, who graduated higher education training programmes, are mainly prepared to work in business and industry. At European level, 62% of the higher education graduates have studied social sciences, business and law, or technical curricula, respectively engineering, production or constructions.

The option of youths for pursuing a certain type of higher education differs from one country to the other. Thus, if at EU-27 level in 2013 most young individuals went towards social sciences, law or business, in Romania they opted mostly for higher education forms in social sciences, engineering, constructions, health, education, mathematics and computer sciences.

1.1. Students' mobility

The forum of experts regarding mobility¹, appointed by the European Commission stated: "*mobility for educational purposes should become a natural characteristic of being European and an opportunity provided to all youths in Europe*". Mobility for educational purposes is important for strengthening Europe's competitiveness, for creating a knowledge-based society and for deepening the sense of citizenship for the young generation.

The mobility among youths refers to young students in upper secondary and higher education, interns, apprentices, voluntary individuals, and participants to the vocational training programmes in or outside Europe. Statistical information regarding mobility in Europe are only partially harmonised and very often, these are provided only for tertiary education.

Thus, in 2012, the highest share of foreign students in the student population of a host country had Luxembourg, Cyprus, Austria, and Great Britain.

¹ *Employment and Social Developments in Europe 2011*, The Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL), Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2012, http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/

The weight of foreign students in total number of students for Romania is of 2.24 pp, and is one of the smallest shares from the EU member-states for which data are available.

Various programmes of the European Union support mobility for educational purposes within Europe. “Youth in Action” the successor of the “YOUTH” programme supports EU mobility and the education of young individuals, in particular of youths with low opportunities: each year, 100000 young individuals are involved in more than 6000 projects. 1.5 million youths and young workers have already participated to this programme. In the field of formal education, the Erasmus programme supported over 2 million students up to date.

For Romania, the new programme “Erasmus+” provides for scholarships for 120000 individuals, by 50% more than in the preceding programmes of the EU. In the year 2014, Romania received almost 52 million Euros within this programme, representing an increase by 11 pp. against the financing received in 2013 through the programmes “Youths in Action” and lifelong learning, the value of financing increasing annually up to the year 2020.

In the timeframe 2007-2013, the programme Erasmus+ , which replaced the programmes “Youth in Action” and lifelong learning, provided for scholarships for a number of about 80000 students, teachers, trainers and youth mentors in Romania.

2. Competences and skills for increasing the insertion degree of youths on the labour market and social inclusion

In the information society (based on knowledge), an important role in the life of each individual is played by key-competences, skills, knowledge or attitudes adequate, as the case may be, for each context. By acknowledging the value of these competences, valid for any individual, in 2006, the European Parliament and the European Council elaborated a defining instrument for integrating important competences in the infrastructure and strategy of each country within the European Union. This instrument is of particular importance in the process of lifelong learning¹, because on the labour market competences contribute both value added and satisfaction, labour motivation, adaptability and flexibility.

In the framework of the lifelong learning process, we define key-competences as the sum of knowledge, skills and attitudes adequate to the context, required in the personal development of labour force employment, but also for social inclusion. Key-competences prove to be an important

¹ EC Recommendation 2006/962/CE of the European Parliament and European Council from 18.12.2006 regarding key-competences for lifelong learning.

factor in labour productivity and quality, competitiveness, and employees' satisfaction and motivation.

Key-competences are required for all individuals, irrespective of age, that is:

- *youths concluding the period of compulsory education*: key-competences represent the backbone for the next life state, respectively adult life and entering on the labour market, and are also the basis for continuing education;
- *adults*: the process of developing and updating skills must continue during the entire life.

Obtaining key-competences is possible for all members of the society to an equal extent, but aims in particular disadvantaged groups from the viewpoint of the educational potential which includes individuals who are early school-leavers, disabled, long-term unemployed, migrants, etc., that is all individuals with diminished abilities. In 2008, the European Commission elaborated the report¹ that defines eight key-competences and in which are shown the skills, knowledge, and attitudes specific to each of them. The key-competences are:

- *Communication in the mother-tongue*, representing the skill of expressing and interpreting feelings, thoughts, deeds and opinions both orally and in written (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and natural linguistic communication adequate and creative in various social and cultural contexts;

- *Communication in foreign languages*, including also the skill of intercultural understanding, next to the communication skills, respectively the skill of listening, speaking, reading and writing;

- *Mathematical competence and basic competences regarding science and technology*: the mathematical competence is the capacity of using mathematical thinking for solving various actual problems of life, the emphasis being laid on activity and knowledge. The basic competences regarding science and technology refer to mastering, using, and applying knowledge and methodologies for explaining the surrounding world. These involve understanding the changes triggered by human activity and the responsibility of each individual as citizen;

- *Digital competence* triggered by the technological level of the information society and which involves obtaining basic skills regarding information and communication technology (ITC);

- *The learning to learn skill* is related to learning, to the individual's ability to pursue and organise his/her own learning processes either

¹ *Future skill needs in Europe*, Synthesis report, Cedefop, Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2008, www.cedefop.europa.eu

individually or in groups, according to own needs, as well as the ability to be aware about methods and opportunities;

- *Social and civic competences*: represent the competences allowing to each individual to participate efficiently and constructively at the civic life (socially and professionally), respectively the individual, inter-individual, intercultural competences, and the specific behavioural ways. The participation of individuals to social and political life involves civic competences, especially knowledge about social and political concepts and structures (democracy, justice, equality, citizenship and civil rights), but also understanding codes of conduct and habits of the environments in which individuals live.

- *Initiative and entrepreneurship spirit* is the capacity of putting into practice ideas. This capacity denotes creativity, openness towards novelty, assuming risks, as well as the capacity of planning and managing ideas for achieving objectives. The individual aware of the context of his/her activity is apt to put to good use emerging opportunities. This is the background for obtaining more specialised skills for developing social or commercial activities.

- *Cultural awareness and expression* involves the cultural expression of ideas, emotions or experiences by channels such as music, theatre, literature or visual arts.

The key-competences are dependent on one another, the defining elements being creativity, initiative, critical thinking, problem solving, risk evaluation, and decision-making.

The reference framework for the education or training policies in Europe provided for by the key-competences is addressed to all decision factors providing educational and training services, to political decision makers, or to employers who must pursue that:

- basic education and training provide young individuals with key-competences at the minimum required level for the transition to adult life but also to the professional life, being at the same time also the backbone for future training;

- young disadvantaged individuals have support in the learning process so as to be able to achieve a reasonable educational potential for future insertion on the labour market;

- adults can complete their key-competences during their entire professional life, especially with respect to priority groups including individuals that require new competences;

- the specific infrastructure for continuing education and training of adults provides for measures to ensure access to education and training on the labour market and support depending on own needs and competences;

▪ links exist between policies in the field that ensure the coherence of the education and training supply for adults.

The adjustment and training skill¹ for future jobs are both essential for the European citizens so that enterprises can speed up their activity for the economic turnaround. To an equal extent, the adequate skills of the labour force are required for meeting the challenges on long-term, for competing on the world market and supporting innovation in ageing societies. Europe tends towards an economy where services and occupations in which knowledge and intensive skills are predominant. Yet, even for occupations much less demanded on the labour market, substantial work opportunities will be given when the elderly generations leave the labour market and need to be replaced. It is obvious that Europe needs to speed up investments in education and vocational training, and to encourage employers to make better use of the skills and talents of their personnel.

The need of different abilities, non-matching jobs and skills interact in complex ways.

Even though the European Union generates relatively more graduates in mathematics, sciences and technology (about 550000/year), as compared with the USA (370000) and Japan (240000), too few of them are involved in research careers. Efforts should be made by all educational system to motivate in particular young women to opt for scientific/technological disciplines in primary, secondary and higher education.

The outcomes of the recent international surveys PISA and PIAAC², underpin that there is a structural issue at the origins of the educational system's performance in Europe, with negative consequences both for economy, and for the entire society. An increasingly higher number of youths study within the higher education system, partially as result of national policies, and partially because they have chosen to continue studying because of the economic crisis. Nevertheless, there are too many graduates unemployed, or who are employed under their competence level, while the employers maintain they cannot identify individuals with the competences they need. Approaching these deficiencies requires corresponding policy measures and sustained and efficient investment in education and training at national level.

¹ Skills supply and demand in Europe: medium-term forecast up to 2020, www.cedefop.europa.eu

² PISA 2012: EU performance and first inferences regarding education and training policies in Europe, www.ec.europa.eu/education/policy/.../pisa2012, and The Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC): Implications for education and training policies in Europe, European Commission- Education and Training, 2013, <http://ec.europa.eu/education/>

Still, ensuring such investment is difficult under the conditions in which public resources are limited because in many member states diminishment take place currently with respect to the budgets allotted to education.

Another issue highlighted by the PIAAC survey refers to quality inconsistencies of education throughout the European Union territory. For instance, it was noticed that graduates of upper secondary education from certain member-states obtain the same outcomes, and even sometimes better than higher education graduates from other countries. In addition, nowadays, Europe faces a serious issue regarding the lacking correlation of competences, an issue that in several ways was aggravated by the economic crisis. The current situation of young individuals on the labour market and their difficulties in making the transition from school to professional life originate, especially, from the fact that formal education did not provide them with enough relevant competences. Several young individuals graduating school have low competence levels, and begin their professional life in the same way, that is a considerable handicap; this, in turn, makes it more difficult for them to recover later in life the probable existing gaps.

As compared with educational programmes that are developed entirely by teaching staff and applied in school, learning on the job helps young individuals in developing technical competences regarding modern methods of production and some non-technical competences, as well, such as teamwork, communication and negotiating by experiences in the real life. This enhances professional insertion capacity and applies both to young individuals pursuing vocational training, and to those that pursue a more markedly academic path.

For working young individuals, insufficient competences are those limiting them the capacity of professional insertion and, thus, contribute to structural and long-term unemployment. To these deficiencies is added also the fact that some of the member-states are faced with the issue of brain drain and that the most performing graduates and best skilled individuals make use of their competences elsewhere, the investments in these young people being thus inefficient.

The OECD programme for the international evaluation of students (PISA) is used in analysing the achievement stage of one of the reference objectives of the European cooperation programme in the field of education and vocational training (ET2020). This programme provides that by the year 2020 the weight of individuals aged 15 years with a low level of alphabetisation in reading, mathematics and sciences should be less than 15%. PISA 2012, the fifth round of the survey, with special emphasis on mathematic performance and PISA 2010 with emphasis on reading have highlighted progresses obtained in these fields but, because of the slow pace

of improvements, it is necessary that member-states continue their efforts in view of eliminating poor outcomes in education.

Conclusions

Starting with the programme “Youth for Europe” up to “Youth in Action” or “Youth on the Move” at EU level were launched and financed a series of programmes with the purpose of combining concrete actions of the member-states with the ones of the European Union pursuing to improve the situation of young labour force employment. To this context is circumscribed also the programme “Youth Guarantee” financed by the European Social Fund and which should be a component of employment policies in the member-states.

The mobility of youths on the labour market is another issue that is found on the agendas of the European Commission and of the enabled bodies of the member-states. Mobility with educational purposes is supported by the European Union through various programmes and initiatives so that youths can strengthen their future capacity of professional insertion and accumulate new professional competences. One of the most known programmes launched with this end is the *Erasmus programme*. The efficiency of this programme had as outcome, by the end of 2013 the launching of its new version: Erasmus Plus with a total budget of 14.7 billion euro for the period 2014-2020.

In Romania, only by the end of 2001 was made the first attempt of strategic planning in the field of youth as the “National Action Plan for Youth – Romania (PNAT-R) was elaborated.

The national strategy in the youth policy field for 2015-2020 adopted in January 2015 has as general objective the professional insertion of youth. The strategy is built around the following pillars: employment and entrepreneurship, formal, non-formal education and culture, transition from education to employment and correlations between systems, youths and ITC use, culture, health, sports and recreation.

Increasing the responsibility of youths by creating favourable conditions in which they can develop their skills, work and participate actively to the development of the society are all essential for sustainable economic and social development. Nevertheless, youth insertion on the labour market represents a huge challenge for the governments of many countries.

The increase in the insertion degree of youths on the labour market in the information society can be achieved by endowing them with the so-called key-competences (skills, knowledge, or adequate attitudes, as the case may be, for each context). Another complementary way is, as well, by adopting additional measures that would be efficient on short term and sustainable on long-term (measures for stimulating employment on labour market of the

youths; social protection measures required by the youths, and measures for improving youths' opportunities on the labour market).

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