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Trends in Adult and Continuing Education in Romania, a Country in Transformation

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1. Looking back at the last two decades

Romania is one of the largest countries to have joined the European Union recently, with about 22 million inhabitants. Since 1989, the year of the revolution that ended communist domination, the country is undergoing a transformation from a centralized state communist society and ideology to a democratic pluralist one and market economy. This transition required the enablement of adults to cope with these changes, on the one hand. On the other hand, this transition meant the restructuring of the labour market since large industrial enterprises were closed down and many small and medium enterprises (SME) were set up. The closing down of the large, formerly state owned enterprises forced them to lay off large numbers of people. This resulted in unemployment – a phenomenon new to us, as in the over-planned communist economy everyone had a job guaranteed. A large number of dismissed workers received benefits that were often designed as “labour market exit benefits” (policies focused on assuring social security, hence creating a kind of dependency trap), rather than “transition into new employment”. Thus the policies focusing on stimulating flexibility in the labour market have developed, one can say, consecutively, rather than complementarily to the social ones, at least in the first part of the transition period (until about 1999 when the National Agency for Labour Force and Occupation, the public body implementing the action plan for employment and handling government

1 From a theoretical point of view there is no one official definition and acceptance on Adult Education as a term, those using the term normally creating their own delimitations. There is no clear distinction between *Adult Education* (AE) and *Continuing Education* (CE) and sometimes there is an overlapping with Permanent Education and Lifelong Learning. The notions AE and CE are used synonymously and reunite in the comprehensive term *Adult and Continuing education* (ACE), even though we should mention that AE has more obvious connotations with general cultural and personal development, while CE is focused mainly on the vocational aspects of Adult Education.

money for unemployed people, was set up). This can be also explained by the rather slow economic development, with a limited capacity of the Romanian market to offer attractive jobs, and thus difficult perspectives for those returning to the labour market. Many people have had recourse to the informal economy or have chosen cross-border labour movement.

To reduce the high unemployment rate, an early retirement scheme was adopted as social policy, which meant that many people could already opt for retirement at the age of 55 or even earlier. Because of this possibility, over the years the retired population has become almost as high as the active population, with negative effects from the economic, social and individual points of view.

Apart from the economic changes, there were professional ones regarding new job profiles. The rapid increase in the use of computers in job settings determined the need for further training, a need adults were more or less aware of. This was a new challenge for adults who had to cope with a kind of functional literacy, especially for those over 35 years old, who had been working within the stable communist regime for more than ten years, accustomed to the slow dynamics of job tasks, and who had not hitherto participated in further training. For this sector, being unemployed or retired was a life crisis most could not handle, not used as they were to taking initiatives or responsibility for learning paths. "Learned helplessness" was a major barrier for those in the situation of looking for a new job they were not sure to get.

Furthermore, the education system is experiencing ongoing reform since 1989. The structural, curriculum and managerial changes, the amendments and improvements of the changes, have also had their "successes", as the school drop-out rate of 19 percent in 2006 fell below 20 percent for the first time in many years, although still remaining higher than the EU average of 15.3 percent. This phenomenon goes hand in hand with the need for adult basic education and a second chance to education. Thus a new challenge for ACE has arisen, as existing provisions were not equipped to address this issue at a qualitative level, as it also involved new know-how. The solution of a second chance for education for young people between 15 and 24 was implemented by the Ministry of Education in a pilot phase since 1999 (but at the beginning only for marginalized groups, like Roma), and was extended at national level about two years ago.

A positive fact of school reform was the extension of the education period, due to increased offers for higher education. The percentage of 22-year-olds having achieved at least upper secondary education level (2006: 77.2 percent) is about EU average. These figures need to be seen in the context that at the end of the 1980s Romania's labour force had one of the lowest qualification levels in Europe (European Commission 2007, p. 53).

Taking into account only the most important traits of the transformations mentioned above, it is obvious that there is increasing demand for ACE and that new developments

need to be put in place. ACE status, as a dynamic component of the education system, is determined both by the fundamental changes taking place in domestic socio-economic and political spheres, and by the dynamics of the changes occurring at European and global levels. At the same time, however, many of the present-day dimensions of the Romanian AE system are a projection of traditions already existing.

2. Recent history

Until 1989, adult education was seen mostly as a mass centralized phenomenon mainly with cultural connotations aimed at spreading the (artificial) popular movement of the communist system, yet in the last seventeen years the main trait of AE has been its changing status due to new decentralized and flexible offers. The changes were explosive, diverse and in the first half of this period, rather anarchic, because of the lack of a coherent governmental strategy in this field. But in the last decade, the framework of development set up by the Romanian government (that is the Ministry of Labour, Social Solidarity and Family, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Research and Youth) has been more coherent. The efforts in this area have mainly been focused on developing professional education in order to solve the phenomenon of unemployment, and address the major changes in the labour market and job profile.

At the same time, offers in general liberal adult education decreased dramatically because of the reduction in demand and financing, in spite of the well-developed institutional system all over the country before 1989. The state did not use its forming power in shaping the system of general AE (e.g. education for personal development, civic and political education etc.), neither by building up a coherent concept on the role of general AE, nor by supporting the activation of AE (e.g. for social inclusion). The changes that took place at a legislative level, due to EU requirements, were not internalized entirely in day-to-day life (e.g. gender issues or defence of civic rights), partly because the resources to implement politic and legislative stipulations were not foreseen accordingly. General AE was carried out mainly by the civic actions of the non-governmental sector that have developed rather slowly and were not strong enough to bring about a powerful change of mentality and attitude, or dynamic change in public opinion. Sociologists tend to argue that in a society with fundamental transformation (as from a communist ideology to a pluralistic democratic society), about 40 years are needed in order to build up a strong civic society and public opinion. So, a great deal of effort as well as practical experiences is still needed in order for the Romanian democracy to develop.

Another important player with strong impact on the education of adults is to be mentioned: the media. This has known an explosive development due to the opening up of society while embracing democracy. One of the main achievements of democratic society was freedom of expression and information. Adults increasingly make use of the media, especially television, and this phenomenon influences their decision to participate or not in educational programmes.

To sum up, analyzing the evolution of ACE since 1989, developments can be divided into three phases, reflecting the main traits and levels of evolution. However, this distinction is mostly a didactic one, because the evolution has a continuum logic, with interference of all the traits mentioned below (Sava 2002, p. 380):

(1) A period of strong decrease in preoccupation with AE (1989–1993)

This was due to general confusion and the search for a coherent policy, focused mainly on an economic and political level. In this period most of the necessary corrections from an ideological point of view were made, but no major action took place. On the contrary, this field of education seemed to be forgotten, and only a few rational changes were made, most things continuing as in the past, or even worse. Because of this lack of interest for AE, almost half of the related institutions belonging to the Ministry of Culture were closed down.

(2) A period of step-by-step rebuilding and looking for a strategy for development (1993–1997)

The state created the framework for decentralization and a more flexible offer, but did not allocate enough financial support. Since the state accepts and encourages plurality, the whole structure of adult education has been allowed to develop freely, and has become widely differentiated. In many fields, state regulations or subventions affect it only indirectly. At the beginning of this period, international cooperation and support for developing AE began, mostly on the German part: the International Institute for AE and the German Association of People's Universities (IIZDVV) opened a branch in Bucharest to coordinate their investments and to support AE in Romania.

During this period, intensive training seminars for adult educators were run, the staff working in institutions belonging to the Ministry of Culture, with German and Danish support. Thus, a slow shift from traditional up-front teaching to an interactive approach could be observed. A shift to a more professional way of running an adult education institution in a competing market could also be noticed. Looking at the situation of these institutions nowadays, one can say that the developments are disappointing, if we take into consideration the number of adults they manage to attract, the range and types of offers, their dynamic, or impact on community development.

Due to changes in the labour market, the Ministry of Labour and Social Care (MMPS) spent a significant amount of money on programmes for training the unemployed. In this respect, many institutions providing further education were created. In 1996, MMPS established 14 regional centres for continuing professional development all over the country. In addition, there is also a number of non-governmental institutions providing further education.

(3) A period of development, starting in 1998, and gaining momentum since 2000, once the "Europe 2010 process" and pre-accession negotiations had begun

Following up on the Hamburg Conference for AE (CONFINTEA 1997), the Ministry of

National Education (MEN) started to show much greater interest for AE as part of lifelong education. In 1998, the National Council for Continuing Education was established. MEN elaborated a strategy for AE where mainly universities were asked to develop programmes and offers for continuing education. In this respect, many departments for continuing education have been set up inside universities, with World Bank support as well. Unfortunately, this council has meanwhile disappeared. The developments of this period will be described in more detail in the following sections. Generally, there are positive changes and thus hope for clearly defined sustainable development, mainly due to the openness of educational politicians and practitioners to influences and trends at the European level.

3. The current situation in Romania, national strategies, and the EU-framework

The Romanian society is still experiencing ongoing reform and transformation, which is in turn affecting the whole of society as well, from the economic, cultural, social, and political point of view. The magnitude of these changes is producing many personal, social, and economic crises; the system of values is changing in a confusing way, and attitudes and mentalities have had to change, too. It is well-known that in all processes of change – even where transformations are for the better – in the first phase the results and performances tend to be lower. The changes create confusion and frustration, especially if the direction is not clear or followed in a systematic way, with a strong and focused effort.

The effort for setting up and implementing effective policies as well as for harmonizing the legislative framework and developments with the *aquis communautaire* during the last five years was more coherent, but the results achieved so far show that much more effort is needed. Not only for Romania, but for the whole Europe, the so-called “Lisbon process 2010” meant intensive changes in all sectors of society, aiming at the nations’ ability to meet the ambitious goals of turning Europe into the world’s most competitive economy and inclusive society. Thus, the political objectives of the Romanian government, which focused mainly on developing professional training policies, are more related to labour market restructuring. In the national strategy for human resource development for 2007–2013 as well as in the related National Programme of Reforms (April 2007) for the same period, the main aims stipulated (with direct impact on ACE) concern the following:

- improving access to the labour market with special focus on the participation of young people, facilitating the transition from school to work, and stimulating re-entry into the labour market
- more flexible labour market – e.g. more personalized support and counselling for the unemployed and other vulnerable groups, as well as improvements in the system for accrediting and validating prior experiential learning
- national framework of qualifications
- improving active life/active ageing, with a special focus on stimulating older people to re-enter the labour market and community life

- broadening access to education for all and promoting social inclusion
- better rural ACE
- improving quality (of higher education, for example) and quality assurance
- developing education and professional training – improving the capacity of related institutions, setting up “community centres of (educational) resources”, extending the use of ICT
- promoting CE – to establish better awareness of employers and employees about the importance of ACE and better links between work and ACE

A noticeable factor is that the current liberal government is focused more on active participation in the labour market and on quality assurance, than on equal access and inclusion. The issue of equal access was more the focus of the social-democrat government (2000–2004); in 2002, it set up the National Plan against Poverty and a programme to promote social inclusion, drawn up for ten years. During this period, Law 116/2002 regarding the prevention and combating of social marginalization was passed.

Nevertheless, it should also be stressed that in all these policy papers and in the priorities set, there is still no clearly defined policy for general adult education. Romania still does not have a national strategy for LLL, in spite of EU recommendations that all countries should have one by the end of 2006.

The benchmarking system put in place to monitor the progress towards the goals to be achieved is a clear mirror for comparing and showing the evidence of the data gathered.

The main benchmarking indicators

Benchmark	EU average in 2007	EU target for 2010	Ro in 2007 (in 2000)
Early school leaving	15,4 %	10 %	19 % (22 %)
Completion of upper secondary education	77,4 %	85 %	77,2 % (76,1 %)
Participation of adults in learning	9,7 %	12,5 %	1,3 % (0,9 %)
Low achievers in reading literacy (see also PISA results)	19,8 %	15,5 %	40,3 % (Place 47)
Total public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP	(in 2000/2004) 4,68 %/5,09 %	–	(in 2000/2004) 2,88 %/3,29 %

Beside the first three main benchmark indicators set for education at European level, other figures were added to the table that can better explain the efficiency and effectiveness of

the education system. The figures for Romania do not look very good, but it is noteworthy that the ongoing under-financing of the education system has produced these low results, all of them somehow interdependent. It is known that in periods of reform, the budget for education should be even higher than usual, due to the additional costs that changes incur. So, too little money put into education means that the results are accordingly low. Coming last in Europe in the results of the PISA evaluation in 2006 should really be a matter of serious concern for Romania, as even pupils that are in schooling do not perform well with regard to basic competencies for life. The same situation regards teaching staff, because low salaries, irrespective of education level, resulted in a decrease in the attractiveness of the teaching profession. Of course, of all public expenditure on education, the percentage allocated to Adult Education is even lower, with similar results.

4. Current trends in Adult Education

School reform processes

The objective of recent revisions was to emphasize the relevance of initial and vocational education and training, and to increase the quality of school outcomes. The curriculum has been revised with focus on assuring basic competencies. The system of higher education as well as specializations offered at technical universities has been revised, too. The process of decentralization now provides increased autonomy to schools in defining their curriculum and enables them to strengthen their links with local companies and institutions.

Low participation of adults in education and learning

From an ACE perspective, it is interesting to examine the reasons for such low participation – one of the lowest in Europe, in fact. It is obvious that, if in seven years the increase in the participation rate is so low (1.6 percent in 2005, and 1.3 percent in 2006), the European objective will not be reached by 2010, and neither will the national one of 7 percent. Some possible explanations might be:

- Heavy media consumption – Informal education that is not counted in the participation rate, which only covers participation in organized educational settings.
- About half of the population lives in rural areas, with poor education offers and infrastructure for training provision. Village cultural houses still represent the majority of the educational infrastructure, but they are not an attractive option for adults.
- Dramatic decrease of the institutional infrastructure and offers for general adult education (e.g. cultural houses) – Until 1989, in Romania there were more than 200 cultural houses and almost 3000 popular universities, among a national network of libraries, museums, popular art schools, and centres for popular art coordinated by the Ministry of Culture and Cults. Popular universities have decreased to 152. What is more, these institutions did not manage to profile an attractive education provision for non-formal education (Sava/Matache 2003, p. 24).

- Lack of state/regional/local support for non-formal education – As a result of the public administration decentralization process, the institutions mentioned above are subordinate to the local authorities and financed by town halls. Adults are not encouraged to participate in civic and political, or personal development education, as the state did not put any stimulating measures or resources in place with respect to these areas. Even in the National Programme of Reforms (2007), the same narrow approach in national policy could be noticed. The main and almost exclusive focus was on “skills for work” rather than on “skills for life”, on professional rather than personal development in a wider sense, and strategies for social inclusion and community regeneration were less than convincing.
- Public efforts mostly for vocational ACE – Up to 1.2 percent of the overall 1.3 percent participation rate is in professional adult education. This is due to, on the one hand, adults being interested in relevant certificates that allow them to find a (better) job, and, on the other hand, to the state having developed stimulating mechanisms for the unemployed to participate and public policies related to employment being well-defined.
- Lack of investment of employers in continuing professional development – CPD of their staff (about 6 times less than the EU average). The reasons might be that, on the one hand, employers rely on the qualified work force already available on the market, and on the other hand, that a high percentage of employers are SMEs, with limited capacity (and interest) for human resource development and organizing workplace learning.
- Low income, extra jobs – The need for a better life and income force many adults to go for a second or even third job, limiting their free time and leaving even less time for learning. Low income does not allow for a large personal investment in learning.
- A still weak civic society – With NGOs not strong and vocal enough to attract people to other kinds of education, or to make them aware of the need for ongoing learning, not solely related to their jobs. Trade unions are also still not very focused in arguing for opportunities in workplace learning.
- Migration – There are, unofficially, about 4 million Romanians working abroad, being excluded from participation in education in Romania.
- Home-oriented mentality of South-(eastern) Europe – For example, in Greece the participation rate of adults in education is even lower; in most Mediterranean and Latin countries the participation rate is quite low, one possible explanation being socio-cultural patterns.

Of course, other reasons may be listed, all of them lead to the conclusion that there is a need and challenge to build up a culture for lifelong learning.

Diversified range of institutions

Many institutions were set up with the help and know-how of member states of the EU, and were comparable in concept with existing institutions in the EU. The new institutions that have been set up to foster professional training of adults can be seen as an

example of good practice. The government put its largest effort into developing facilities for vocational training in career, mostly for those at risk of (long term) unemployment, due to low qualifications. On 31 Dec 2007, the unemployment rate was 4.1 percent.

Two institutions have to be mentioned as main public bodies that are promoting and implementing the national strategy for dealing with professional training of adults:

The National Agency for Labour Force and Occupation that handles government funds for training the unemployed and also implements the National Plan for Employment within its institutional county and regional network. Since 2000, special stipulations, affirmative measures and facilities for employing individuals from groups at risk of marginalization and unemployment were implemented (e.g. for young adults newly-graduated, single parents, adults over 45, the Roma population etc).

The National Council for Adults' Professional Training (CNFPA, in RO) that recently also incorporated the Council for Occupational Standards and Accreditation and became the National Authority for Qualifications, responsible for setting the National Qualifications Framework (there is, at present, a great deal of effort in this respect).

The CNFPA accredits professional training providers, based on the national system of quality criteria. Romania is the first Eastern European country to develop and implement (since 2004) a system and guidelines for the recognition and accreditation of competencies acquired in a non-formal and informal way, and also designed the framework for setting up evaluation centres and professional evaluators in this respect. 31 evaluation centres have already been set up. But if vocational training is a dimension of adult education which has known significant positive developments – due to the pressure of the economy and labour market –, the same cannot be said for developments of other dimensions of adult education.

AE does not only refer to professional training, but rather is oriented towards personal development, active citizenship, and social inclusion. The Ministry of Culture and Cults with its institutional network as well as cultural houses and homes (which now belong to local authorities, due to the process of decentralization) play an important role in promoting general AE. The figures previously shown speak of the dramatic decrease in this dimension of AE as well as of low state involvement in supporting this aspect, in spite of its importance for accompanying political and social transformations and for enabling adults to cope with these. The private initiative of adults to participate in liberal education, in all dimensions, is low, objective factors being limited financial resources and professional pressures.

Institutions dealing with the education of adults include those within the Ministry of Education and Research network, the main features of which are the initial training of young people. In the last years, the average age of individuals graduating from these has increased continuously, due to the greater participation of adults in formal (higher) education.

In spite of existing research institutes with a direct focus on ACE (the National Scientific Research Institute for Labour and Social Protection, the National Institute for Educational Sciences, the Romanian Institute for Adult Education etc.) as well as research interest at university level, research on Adult Education needs consistent development, from data collection to the development of the theory of AE. This is especially so as one of the reasons for inconsistent concepts at the political level is the level of provision from research.

The number of NGOs has also been increasing consistently. The range of NGOs acting for adults' learning, empowerment and participation is very broad, from those very specialized, focusing on distinct target groups (e.g. women as victims of domestic violence, the elderly, Roma in the context of social inclusion, adults with various special needs etc.) to those that are content-oriented (e.g. promoting intercultural education, human rights education, gender equality, ecological education etc., either through courses or national campaigns aimed at raising awareness of the issues, or through RD projects including international cooperation). Unfortunately, the power of impact of these NGOs on a large scale is rather restricted, because of the limited financial and human resources of the target group.

Day by day, the number of private suppliers offering continuous training is increasing, especially in ITC, foreign languages and management, but also in other vocational fields such as building, tourism, cookery etc. All these offers are advertised during "Adult Learner's Week", a yearly national event initiated in 2000, under the slogan "Festival of Your Chances".

However, market offers have self-regulatory mechanisms. Beside the national mechanism for quality assurance with respect to the accreditation of the offers, adults themselves, paying for their own education, have become critical clients, more aware of their own rights, needs, and quality criteria. The institutions themselves have been able to improve their services and offers through the experience they have acquired. Collaboration between institutions is also improving and increasing (irrespective of whether they are public or private), the offers for courses tend to be tailored more in accordance with adults' needs with more module-based courses, and the focus for quality assurance is more systematic.

Increased awareness of ACE and increased know-how in the field of ACE

Several factors point to an increased awareness of ACE and increased know-how in the field of ACE. At the end of 2006, the first national official diagnosis on the state of the art of Adult Education from an LLL perspective was carried out (by the Institute of Educational Sciences). Since 2005, there is a special chapter on ACE in the yearly report regarding the state of the national system of education. Recently, a competition for setting up the national strategy for LLL was launched. Also, in the last two years the budget for education has been considerably increased (i.e. in 2008, for the first time,

more than 6 percent were allocated to education), with positive consequences for ACE, too. The ESF are also supporting more investment in ACE, with possibilities for covering the “less economically attractive” areas of ACE. Last, but not least, there is a strong tendency towards internationalization of ACE, due to EU programmes in which Romania is a partner, and because of the Romanian government’s preoccupations with developing ACE in accordance with international tendencies.

All these trends are signals for positive developments, but much effort is still needed in order to improve the status of ACE and ACE professionals, and to increase adult participation in education.

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