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Challenges facing adult education in contemporary Europe

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present the challenges facing adult education in contemporary Europe. The purpose of this article is to present the challenges facing adult education in contemporary Europe. The research data shows that participation in lifelong learning is determined by level of education, employment status, occupational category, skills and age. Interestingly, it are less likely to participate in education and training people with low qualification levels, the unemployed and the inactive, the least skilled, older people and immigrants or ethnic minorities. This indicates the challenge for European education and training systems in that the adults who most need to participate in education and training seem to have least access to lifelong learning opportunities. It's generating new challenges before all Europe too.

Keywords: adult education, learning, contemporary Europe, challenges, task in hand.

1. Introduction

We are living in a dynamic world of continuous changes that leave a mark on the economic and social spheres, that determine the functioning of the labor market, of businesses and on our living conditions. The times when an individual was employed in a single company, performing their single, taught profession, when the skills one has learned in early adolescence sufficed for their entire professional activity, are long gone. Technological progress, automation and digitization have changed the lives of every contemporary individual. Today's reality forces us to rethink our knowledge and qualifications, and to determine whether they'll suffice or not. Chasing these changes, the contemporary man is forced to take permanent action intended to raise their qualifications, to retrain, learn new skills. At this point, there are many people who are realizing that education must be lifelong, or otherwise one will drop off the professional circulation and never come back. Many people are also realizing that the economic conditions in the country are more increasingly tied with the capacities of the society in terms of building technological progress and with the reaction on the ageing of knowledge reserves. Experts have already predicted that technological changes resulting in the automation and digitization of many mental and physical activities would contribute to the demise of many professions. In 2014, a CBRE report anticipated that, by 2025, technological innovation would make 50% of all positions redundant. Such trends as artificial intelligence, robotization and offshoring entail ongoing transformations of the character of work we perform. Moving around a constantly changing landscape will require lifelong education and personal development.

In the light of the above, continual education should be regarded as a necessity. In 2000, the Lisbon Strategy and its supplementary *2010 Education and trainings* program included a specification of tasks in the area of adult education, and thus initiated reforms, thanks to which building the potential of knowledge and learning new skills became one of the priorities for the development of European Union Member States. Therefore, the importance of

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continuing education began to grow, and its idea began to evolve. Lifelong education became a marker of the contemporary world, taking on an important role in the economic and social strategies of the European Union (E. Roszko-Wójtowicz, 2015, p.65).

Although a multitude of measures were taken, the data concerning the level of education of the European society is not optimistic. About 70 million adult Europeans do not have full secondary education. Available statistics indicate that one in ten adults in the age of 25-64 in the European Union – i.e. about 70 million people – did not complete their formal secondary education (*Edukacja i szkolenia dorosłych w Europie*, p.2). This means that adults with poorer educative accomplishments comprise approximately 1/3 of the EU population. This indicator reflects the formal education level for adults. Secondary education is currently recognized in Europe to be the minimum level for effective entry on the labor market and permanent employment. According to data published by Eurostat, among those who graduated from a secondary school, employment rates are clearly higher than for those who graduated from a pre-secondary school only (G. Maniak, 2015, p.131). These studies further show that the skills learned throughout the formal education period are obsolete, and that the ability to read, write and count or solve problems in technologically-advance environments is very low. According to the authors of the report, these values can be so low because of the inclusion of immigrants whose reading, writing and counting skills are at a much lower level, compared to natives (the results can be also affected by the language barriers experienced by the immigrants) (*Adult Education and Training in Europe*, p.20; *Skills Matter further results from the survey and adult skills*, 2016, p.20). Computer skills are also at a shockingly low level with adult Europeans. According to the results, approximately 27% of EU adults display very low skills in this aspect. In this group, 14% of the respondents could complete very simple technological tasks only, while 13% did not display any computer skills at all, or their skills were at such a low level that they were found unsuitable for a computer service survey. According to the survey, for all EU Member States, an average of 30% of adults (in the age of 25-64) either have never used a computer at all or were not able to complete basic operations using a computer (*Adult Education and Training in Europe*, p.21-22)*.

This data poses a significant challenge for adult education. As such, it should provide for continuing and supplementing one's education in order to best adapt to the changes that take place in the world (A. Frackowiak, J. Pólturzycki, 2010, p.19)[†]. It is the tasks of the social and administrative system of adult education to organize the forms of education and places to deliver it, to motivate and promote the need for education, to cater for all educative needs and to stimulate the development of interests as per the needs of adults in question, as well as to follow the needs of social and economic life, the cultural and educational tradition and the education policy of the country. Various social campaigns should be further launched, as to reach the highest percentage of adults and convey to them that if they do not keep learning, all of their previously learned skills will go out of date. In result, all educationally passive people will be gradually pushed out to the margins of the active and progressive society of knowledge.

2. The state of adult education in Europe

Council conclusions titled *Education and training and the Europe 2020 strategy – the role of teaching and training in economic repair, in economic growth and stimulation of employment* were published in 2012 and stated that the needs of the economy and the labor market change, and the competences and skills of both young and adult citizens

* The respondents did not know how to use a mouse to start such computer programs as an internet browser or a text processor. They did not know how to copy or transfer a file or folder, use the copy or cut and paste tool to copy or transfer information on the screen; further operations where difficulties were displayed included: use of basic arithmetic formulas to add, deduct, multiply or divide numerals in a spreadsheet; compressing files, writing software using a specialized programming language; connecting and installing new devices, such as a printer or a modem; connecting the computer to a local network; detecting and solving problems with the computer.

† Adult education is currently understood as a popularized form of educative activity of the entire adult society, one that, according to the lifelong education principle, supplements one's education and continues education in schools, academic centers, and out-of-school institutions, as well as through self-teaching. It is a social system bearing educative features, organizing various education processes, supporting self-teaching and other forms of activity that lead to learning new knowledge, enriching or expanding one's foundations, satisfy one's interest, and to learn skills required in one's social and professional life.

must adapt to this change. According to their provisions, the employability of an individual should be promoted by means of the education system and trainings, as well as in the workplace. This is a shared responsibility of the public and private sectors, which also fits in the framework of lifelong education (A. Nalaskowski, 2005, p.46-48).

Adult education is assumed to be the central element of the contemporary life and common education. In reality, however, it is pushed out of the mainstream, and its potential is not fulfilled by governments and social groups. A difference in the way adult education is approached in Western and Eastern Europe is also visible. Years of neglect and limitations in the post-soviet states are noticeable. In the West, adult education fulfils an important social and educational role in the face of unemployment. Here, its position is recognized and high. Adult education is also praised in third-world countries, where teaching basic reading skills is the main task. In the majority of countries, formal education processes are recognized, whereas informal adult education has not received its due recognition and is not praised. Furthermore, in such traditionally non-educative activities such as labor, culture, the economy, the role of adult education is undervalued. Table 1 illustrates the share of adults in overall education.

Table 1. Adults' participation in learning in EU, 2015 (%)

Country	Total population (25-64 years)	55-64 years	Unemployed (25-64 years)	Low-qualified (25-64 years)
Belgium	6,9	4,0	9,0	3,0
Bulgaria	2,0	data not available	data not available	data not available
Czech Republic	8,5	3,7	3,8	1,9
Denmark	31,3	23,6	28,9	21,7
Germany	8,1	3,1	6,2	3,4
Estonia	12,4	4,5	9,9	4,5
Ireland	6,5	2,7	7,4	2,4
Greece	3,3	0,5	2,7	0,4
Spain	9,9	4,0	11,2	3,6
France	18,6	12,8	14,7	7,7
Croatia	3,1	data not available	2,4	data not available
Italy	7,3	4,0	5,3	2,0
Cyprus	7,5	3,5	5,8	1,6
Latvia	5,7	2,6	5,3	2,4
Lithuania	5,8	3,1	data not available	data not available
Luxembourg	18,0	7,1	22,0	7,0
Hungary	7,1	3,1	2,3	3,4
Malta	7,2	3,3	6,4	2,4
Netherlands	18,9	11,8	18,3	9,3
Austria	14,4	7,5	16,6	4,5
Poland	3,5	0,8	3,4	0,6
Portugal	9,7	4,1	11,3	4,2
Romania	1,3	data not available	2,1	0,3
Slovenia	11,9	4,0	13,1	2,8
Slovakia	3,1	0,9	1,0	data not available
Finland	25,4	15,6	19,2	12,8
Sweden	29,4	20,8	44,0	20,0
United Kingdom	15,7	10,8	14,2	6,8
EU	10,7	6,0	9,5	4,3

Source: Education and Training Monitor 2016, p.80

A low education level and discontinuing education result in a low status of the poorly qualified workforce on the labor market, one that can ultimately lead to social exclusion. According to the studies, the disabled, people of poor health and people from risk groups due to poverty and homelessness due to low income, as well as some groups of immigrants are the most prone to this risk. The status of low-qualified adults on the labor market is illustrated in table 2.

Table 2. Low qualified adults (age 25-64) and their labour market status, 2015

Country	Total low qualified population (in millions)	Active population (low qualified)		Employed (low qualified)		Unemployed (low qualified)		Low qualified as a share of total population
		Number (in millions)	%	Number (in millions)	%	Number (in millions)	%	

Belgium	1,510	0,826	54,7	0,704	46,6	0,122	14,8	25,5
Bulgaria	0,730	0,391	53,6	0,294	40,3	0,096	24,7	18,1
Czech Republic	0,408	0,216	52,9	0,171	41,9	0,045	20,7	6,8
Denmark	0,562	0,372	66,2	0,340	60,5	0,032	8,5	19,6
Germany	5,881	3,896	66,2	3,453	58,7	0,443	11,4	13,2
Estonia	0,064	0,043	66,4	0,037	58,1	0,005	12,5	8,9
Ireland	0,485	0,281	58,0	0,237	48,8	0,045	15,9	20,2
Greece	1,752	1,151	65,7	0,850	48,5	0,301	26,6	29,6
Spain	11,138	8,086	72,6	5,746	51,6	2,340	28,9	42,6
France	7,486	4,633	61,8	3,913	52,2	0,721	15,6	22,5
Croatia	0,385	0,197	51,3	0,155	40,2	0,043	21,6	16,7
Italy	13,272	7,767	58,5	6,664	50,2	1,103	14,2	40,1
Cyprus	0,101	0,069	67,4	0,056	55,3	0,012	17,9	21,9
Latvia	0,106	0,073	68,6	0,056	53,2	0,016	22,4	9,9
Lithuania	0,102	0,062	61,0	0,046	45,0	0,016	26,2	6,5
Luxembourg	0,073	0,048	66,2	0,045	60,8	0,004	8,2	24,0
Hungary	0,912	0,519	56,9	0,438	48,1	0,080	15,5	16,8
Malta	0,131	0,077	58,5	0,071	54,2	0,006	7,3	56,5
Netherlands	2,073	1,370	66,1	1,243	60,0	0,127	9,3	23,6
Austria	0,729	0,431	59,1	0,283	52,9	0,046	10,6	15,4
Poland	1,935	0,934	48,3	0,789	40,8	0,145	15,5	9,2
Portugal	3,096	2,287	73,9	1,989	64,3	0,298	13,0	54,9
Romania	2,803	1,630	58,1	1,505	53,7	0,125	7,7	25,0
Slovenia	0,156	0,088	56,7	0,076	49,0	0,012	13,6	13,2
Slovakia	0,273	0,144	52,5	0,094	34,4	0,049	34,4	8,6
Finland	0,348	0,211	60,5	0,185	53,1	0,026	12,3	12,3
Sweden	0,778	0,573	73,7	0,492	63,3	0,081	14,1	15,7
United Kingdom	6,713	4,369	64,9	4,050	60,2	0,319	7,3	20,3
EU	64,0	40,741	63,6	34,084	53,2	6,657	16,3	23,5

Source: Education and Training Monitor 2016, p.81.

Low participation of adults in education can be also explained. Researchers studying this issue have determined that the causes which hinder or prevent adults from continuing their education include various personal causes and obstacles or certain practical reasons. In their most frequent justification, adults claimed they needn't have studied to raise their professional qualifications (38%). Other reasons included: the lack of time due to family responsibilities (21.8%); not identifying the need to learn for personal purposes (not related to work) (18.1%); lack of possibility to take on education in work hours (13.6%); training courses are too expensive or adults not being able to afford them (13.3%); the lack of possibility to participate in training courses for health reasons or due to one's age (13%); failure to fulfill conditions for entry (7.1%); difficulties finding a suitable training course (8.2%); the lack of support from one's employer or public services (6.8%); no accessible training courses in the vicinity of one's place of residence (6.0%); lack of access to a computer or the Internet (for the purposes of remote learning) (3%) (*Adult Education and Training in Europe*, p.74).

Considerations concerning the scale of adult participation in education and continued education should also take into account the motivations of individuals in their undertaking various forms of self-improvement or in their acquisition of new skills or knowledge. As it turns out, an adult will most often commence education to adapt to new requirements posed by the modern world. In doing so, they are able to keep up with cultural, social and economic changes, and can become their participants. Failing to take part in various forms of continued education can result in being "left behind", "falling out of the circuit" of the fast-changing society. Therefore, facing their liquid realities, adults find continued education a necessity, although a voluntary one. It is necessary, even though it does not give any guarantee of employment, as no institution organizing continued education can guarantee any jobs for its students. Nonetheless, apart from many other values, continued education increases the possibility of finding a job. By contrast, people in late seniority have different motivations when taking on continued education. The same applies to the financially independent individuals. We can agree that autotelic motives dominate in this group. At this age, education is not motivated by material aspects, but contributes to satisfying the students' social needs. Participating in educational activities makes their lives more interesting, more universal, helps them build their own image, identify with the cultural values of the community. Education commenced at an old age becomes a part of the seniors' lives, creates opportunities for maintaining and establishing new acquaintances, provides an opportunity to find themselves

and function, conflict-free, in the postmodern world. It also reinforces their sense of independence. What is however noteworthy, in this age group, educative efforts are usually exercised by people with higher or secondary education. Therefore, it is the domain of people with an extensive educational background, curious to learn about the world, about the lives of other people, who once stood out with their creative attitudes and activity in their local environment (R. Kałużny, 2015, p.48-49.)

3. Challenges facing adult education

To change this state of affairs, we need to change the approach of the general society to lifelong learning. The benefits that can be derived from teaching adults are measurable. Adult participation in education is beneficial not only to the very participants or training and courses, but also for the world in general. According to numerous studies, adults recommencing education at various stages of their lives have more trust for the political system, they participate more actively in the public life, they are more inclined to take on various non-vocational forms of activity to benefit other people (e.g. volunteer work or accepting various active roles in local and supra-local communities). Furthermore, adult learners feel healthier, conduct healthier lifestyles, build new community networks and have better moods. Thanks to them, it is easier to build social cohesion and promote fairness and equality. Adult education provides many possibilities for making societies more equal and more fair, and stimulates economic growth. Learning in the workplace is also one of the key factors that contribute to increasing the share of adults in lifelong learning. In the era of vast digital transformations, adult education can aid in eliminating the digital gap. Furthermore, civic and intercultural education can create cultures that promote integration. Teaching language and basic non-language skills can help immigrants become active citizens in their new destination countries. One of other, undoubtedly positive effects of teaching adults is the fact that lifelong learners are more active, both in their communities and in their workplace, and are generally healthier. Adult education can further help supply information, create a space for debate and creativity, as European citizens require many streams of information and innovative spaces to develop their new lifestyles, new projects, new approaches. Adult education can also contribute to developing main European strategies in growth, employment, innovation, social cohesion, active citizenship, limitation of poverty, climate change, internal market, migration, peace etc. (*Edukacja i szkolenia dorosłych w Europie*, p.2).

The European community is unaware of the importance of adult education. Lifelong learning is a recognized sphere in several European countries only. This is proven by the percentage of adults commencing education. The most educationally active societies include: the Danes (where the percentage of adult learners is more than 30%), the Swedes, the Fins and the Dutch (G.Maniak, 2015, p.132). We should therefore strive to promote various forms of formal and informal education among these social groups. There are immense challenges facing adult education. The most important are:

1) *Effective development of adult education in the global scale*. Each country currently has the right to establish their own priorities in terms of adult and lifelong education. The main premise for the development of adult education should be the quality of life and its constant improvement. Each citizen has the right to start education at various stages of their lives, and the possibility to exercise this right should be the foundation of personal, social and economic well-being. Commencing education as an adult results in a situation when the society is formed by well-informed, educated, active people who can define the causes of social problems in a clear manner, and who can attempt to overcome them. We should therefore encourage as many people as we can to take on various forms of postgraduate education and training, which will contribute to better living conditions for people all over the world, to a smaller number of conflicts, and to building a global society of knowledge (T. Aleksander, 2015, p. 15-16).

2) *Development of effective management of adult education*. So far, adult education has been pushed to the background of the education policy, although it is rooted in the everyday life. The indispensable elements of this policy include mutual trust of local authorities, business representatives, trade unions, non-government organizations and local community institutions. This trust is the foundation for all efforts to fulfill common goals. The basic challenge that awaits the adult education policy is to coordinate its various levels and areas, e.g. agriculture, health, employment and the environment (A.Fraćkowiak, J.Pólturzycki, 2010, p.64).

3) *Investment in adult education*. The current level of financing of adult education is too low, falling below 1%.

Insufficient financing of adult education institutions translates into low participation in this education. Particular countries should therefore strive to increase their expenditures on adult education by approximately 6%. Investing in adult education can surpass financial aid and can include extensive support in the form of paid leaves, broader access to various, free e-learning programs and courses, or awarding micro-credits for learning (*Funding of Education* 2013, p. 79-84).

4) *Promotion of equality, inclusion and social cohesion*. To provide all citizens with access to education, we should aim at social inclusion and social cohesion. In many countries, adult participation in education is still insufficient or hindered. The excluded groups often comprise women, seniors, people from rural areas, immigrants, native citizens, ethnic and language minorities, the disabled, prisoners, people with basic education. There are instances when several adverse factors concentrate in a single person, which ultimately results in total social exclusion. In the recent years, many countries and societies have struggled with the inclusion of immigrants arriving in Europe from Arabic states. In the face of immigration processes, destination countries must strive to include immigrants in their societal, economic and labor market structures.

5) *Literacy for all and strengthening of competences*. All adults must be guaranteed a right to literacy. Coping with the requirements of the contemporary life depends on the level of knowledge and the way it is increased, as well as on the level of skills displayed. Adult and lifelong education help cope with fast-changing requirements of the social and professional life.

6) *Care for the quality and evaluation of the results of learning*. To ensure a proper quality of adult education, we need to monitor the usability of contents taught in terms of the lives of the adults in question, and we need to ensure the professional development and training of adult teachers. Another important factor is a learning-friendly environment, one that is well-equipped and accessible for diverse groups of learners. Adult education programs must respond to the needs of the learners and must comprise elements for building their high self-esteem. Furthermore, the expected outcomes of the education process should be defined in order to ensure that their practical use in the learners' everyday and professional lives were clear for the adults. It is also important to develop assessment procedures for knowledge and skills learned in out-of-school and informal education processes, in order to evaluate the effect of such learning on the lives of adults. Evaluation and proper quality of education also require in-depth and interdisciplinary studies, applying quantitative and qualitative methods (A. Frackowiak, J. Półturzycki, 2010, p.64-65).

4. Conclusions

Top-to-bottom financial support to all educative enterprises and recognition of adult education are indispensable for achieving the goals that are inherent to adult learning. Adult education should be elevated to a high position, it being a factor in peace, the law, equality and understanding among nations and people in multicultural and intercultural interactions; as a spiritual development process, the determinant of changes and a means to adapt to a changing existence. The state should include adult education in its national education policy, teaching and training specialists in adult education, stimulating and developing surveys of adult education needs, participating in the financing of the basic education forms and measures. Adult education is a value shared by all participants, social groups, facilities, organizations, associations and the state in general, and its condition and development depend on the tradition and world activity, as well as on the promotion of a culture of democratization of the society and the role and function adult education fulfills in a given country. Support should be followed by care for the quality of adult education in the European Union. If the organizers of adult education insist on keeping it at a high level, it will surely attract participants from other environments, for whom participation is essential (such as the unemployed, the socially excluded, those requiring special care). The truth is that what the society really needs is to shift its mentality, its approach to science and promoting lifelong learning as a lifestyle going beyond mere career advancement or improvement of professional competence.

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