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# A European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning

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## **1.0 VALIDATION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN ROMANIA**

*By Prof. Anca Dumitrescu (University of Bucharest)*

### **1.1 Introduction**

The European Commission documents outlining the action strategy for building up the European lifelong learning community have been analyzed and discussed in Romania. In order to develop a lifelong learning culture in this country and also follow the EC action guidelines, orientating the educational policies in the European space.

In the context in which Romania has adopted a national policy for lifelong learning and has taken concrete steps for its implementation, this national chapter aims at providing aspects on validation of non-formal and informal learning, thus contributing to the European Inventory extension. Within the methodological matrix a comprehensive list of national sources of information is given together with the stakeholder mapping. The paper contains references to political and practical initiatives regarding the ongoing validation process in the public sector as well as the private and voluntary ones. The initiated practices reveal the increasing awareness of the need for a global approach to foster validation of both non-formal and informal learning.

The final conclusions synthesize the issues of the previous sections, dealing with key action directions to build comprehensive strategy frameworks and the future policies, which measure's needs to properly develop non-formal and informal learning in Romania.

### **1.2 Review of existing initiatives: Public Sector**

Romania is a country with a steady tradition of lifelong education, especially adult education, which has developed in different social-economic, political and cultural contexts during more than one century. If the first forms of institutional organization and social recognition occurred in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after Grundtvig's model this form of education flourished in rural and urban areas of the country, supported by outstanding intellectuals' initiatives, e.g. N. Iorga, D. Gusti and S. Haret. During the 50-year communist period, adult education was on the decline, as although it became a mass phenomenon, it had to acquire ideological connotations. To achieve mass education, a strong institutional network was built up, but the theoretical approaches and scientific research were neglected, especially in the '80s.

In the '90s in spite of considerable efforts<sup>1</sup> the educational policies in democratic Romania focused on sectoral approaches (formal education, VET system, higher education) rather than on a holistic outlook, which need the support of the systemic reform meant to tackle all the aspects of education and career progression in the lifelong learning perspective.

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<sup>1</sup> We refer especially to the projects co-financed by the World Bank for the reform of pre-university education, of university scientific research and human resources development, as well as Phare-VET Program.

In this context, fostered by the favorable moment of Romania's starting the adherence negotiations with the European Union, the need to properly develop lifelong learning in our country became an obvious priority.

At the level of *public authorities*, a series of initiatives were introduced mainly by the Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity (MLSS), Ministry of Culture and Cults (MCC), Ministry of Education and Research (MER) to create specialized institutes or departments dealing with the lifelong learning issues, including its validation. In 1998, the National Council for Lifelong Education was set up and in 1999 the National Center for Lifelong Education and Distance Education was founded. MER worked out a strategy for adult education to be implemented by lifelong learning programs run within universities. 103 such programs were funded by World Bank (1997-2002) and administrated by the National Council for Higher Education Financing.

An example of good practice: In the mid '90s, MER launched the *ROEDUNET Program* aimed at linking every educational institution in Romania to the Internet. This program together with other facilities were developed locally or based on European projects, provides a platform for implementing the eLearning initiative of the European Commission.

The new dynamics of labor market, the changes occurring in the structure of qualifications and work organization, technology evolution brought about an increase of vocational training demand and implicitly, of providing it. The National Agency for Labor Force Employment (NALFE) organizes continuing vocational training by its centers or by external training providers, accredited according to Law No.: 76/2002. For the year 2002, the National Plan of Vocational Training (NPVT) stipulated, for instance, the organization of 1070 such courses focused on 162 trades. Attended by 17,350 unemployed workers (8,339 of which were women), mostly within NALFE Centers. By Government Ordinance No.: 129/2000 and the new Labor Code, qualification by apprenticeship and job training was re-introduced. This ordinance also points out that starting in 2010 the training providers will be authorized only if they use teaching staff with specialized pedagogical studies connected to adult training.

Important educational changes were implemented in September 2003, among them the fact that existing vocational schools and apprenticeship schools will disappear and will be replaced by Arts and Trade Schools. At the end of compulsory education graduates from the Arts and Trade Schools can obtain a level 1 qualification. This enables the holder to perform relatively simple work. Level 2 and 3 qualifications, which are more in demand within the labor market, will still need an additional one to three-years of further study after compulsory education<sup>2</sup>.

The Phare 2001 VET program (RO0801), which started in April 2003 includes a proposal for a National Qualification Framework (NQF) in order to cover the provision of formal initial and continuing (vocational) education and training, as well as non-formal and informal learning. The NQF has also been addressed in a Phare 2002 twinning project on continuing

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<sup>2</sup> Romanian vocational qualifications are based on the European five-level framework as defined in the Council Decision 85/368/EEC.

vocational training (CVT) with the Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity and Family (MLSSF). This project reviewed current adult learning policies. The involvement of social partners and other stakeholders was also given special attention. The NQF was the subject under discussion during the Human Resources Development (HRD) strategy debate for 2004/06. Clear coordination mechanisms among the different programs need to be ensured in order to maximize synergies and ensure close links between initial education and training, and adult learning.

### **1.3 Review of existing initiatives: Private Sector**

Participation in continuing vocational training is still rather low, due among other factors, to the very restricted CVT access for people living in rural areas.

The formation of social partnership bodies with a role in VET increased in 2002. Regional consortia have been set up with representatives from county school inspectorates, county employment agencies, regional development agencies and social partners. The regional consortia have a role in all Phare funded HRD activities, including the VET projects and the CVT Twinning project. The Local Development Committees have been active in the planning for TVET in all counties, and county employment agencies have witnessed the start of the activities of county tripartite boards. These developments give social partnership an important local and regional dimension. However, sectoral issues are not raised, because sectoral representation of social partners is still relatively weak.

More and more *private institutions* offer courses for career progression, especially in the fields of IT and telecommunications, foreign languages, management, etc. Not all of them impose a quality standard in the respective targeted area or internationally recognized certificates. A good example of a centre which does is the Center for IT Training that offers also Microsoft Certificates.

The Government Ordinance No.: 129/2000 approved by Law No.: 375/2002 stipulates the implementation of a National Authorization System of the specialized training providers, a system on whose basis the certificates issued at the end of different training programs should be recognized on labor market. This is the first step to a fair competition among all public or private providers of adult training. Government Ordinance No.: 129/2000 also stipulates the publication of the National Register of specialized training providers meant to include all programs for which providers are authorized to give qualification or graduation certificates recognized at national level. Both types of certificates have a supplement specifying the skills acquired during the respective training. This important Government Ordinance No.: 129/2000 stipulates the setting up of assessment centers (accredited by the National Council for Occupational Standards and Certification - NCOSC), where competencies acquired by non-formal or informal education are also evaluated and certified.

By Law 375/2002, the NCOSC integrated in the National Adult Training Board, which deals more with regulating the CVT provision than with policy development.

The NATB elaborated a procedure approved, by order of the minister of labour, social solidarity and family and the minister of education and research, a procedure for evaluating

and certifying the professional competencies obtained by other ways than the formal one. This procedure allows an individual to address an assessment center in order to obtain the validation of their competencies acquired by non-formal or informal ways.

The 2002 law on adult vocational training, which entered into force in 2004, is probably to most important legislation to support lifelong learning measures passed so far. It directly refers to evaluating and recognizing competencies gained through non-formal and informal learning and describes this as an important area that should be further developed. As a result of this law around 300 occupational standards are being developed that in the near future will become reference points for the validation of non-formal and informal learning through the local accreditation committees set up locally to initially accredit vocational training.

In the Romanian *individual companies*, there are stakeholders interested in developing validation methodologies. The weight of the lifelong learning training fields varies according to activity sector, company size and property type. For instance, in the public sector, a special focus is on foreign language learning, in private sector on trade and marketing issues, whereas in mixed property units the target is personal skills development. The Romanian Commercial Bank has an assessment centre for validation of the competencies specific for occupations within the banking field.

An example of good practice towards the development of validation methodology is: *ROI - Return on Investment in Training*.

Period: November 1st, 2002-November 1st, 2004.

Promoter: CECOA – Vocational Training Centre for Trade and Service Activities, Portugal.

Partnership: the project benefits of a wide network of 11 partners from Portugal, Finland, Czech Republic, Greece, Bulgaria, Austria and **Romania**. General Objectives: to conceive and develop a methodology and a set of tools allowing training providers, companies (namely small and medium-size enterprises) and other stakeholders to evaluate the return (skills, performance, turnover, organization structure) on training investment. Specific Objectives: to build a tool to calculate the connection between cost/profit of any training programme; to define a frame for the evaluation model according to the project objectives and well-adapted to each country reality.

#### **1.4 Review of existing initiatives: The Third Sector**

As far as the *third sector* is concerned, different NGOs have had good initiatives of non-formal and informal learning programs, however these are hard to monitor. The training courses cover a range of fields:

a. courses of the second chance, for those with early school drop-out, without gaining any qualification or the ones willing to get a new qualification. An example of good program for validation methodologies is:

*Euro-Child-Centre Leonardo da Vinci Programme* (2001-2004), promoter: Save the Children Foundation, Romania; coordinator: Economic Software Systems International, Romania;

partners: Universiteit Antwerpen - UIA-Centre for Language and Speech, Belgia; Soziale und Padagogische Massnahmen, Germania; Romanian Society for Life Long Learning, Romania; Institut Régional du Travail Social de Lorraine (IRTS), France; Tulossilta Ltd, Finland; Satakunta Polytechnic/Social Services and Health Care Pori, Finland; University of Bucharest, Faculty of Social Work, Romania; University Babes-Bolyai, Cluj, Department of Social Work - Babes, Romania.

The project objective is to create family-like climate for institutionalised children, so as they may develop harmoniously both psycho-affectively and intellectually, (being able to attend and graduate school), according to the rights stipulated in the Convention for Children's Rights.

Project beneficiaries: institutionalised children

Project result: educational modules for educators; traditional and distance courses, finalised with graduation diplomas for educators and social workers taking care of school-age children; basic-computer and Internet courses for educators and children, to create the abilities they need in order to contact children of different nationalities; English and French courses for children, to acquire knowledge necessary to communicate with other children in Europe; data base including all children that are taken care of and identification of their training needs; a site for institutionalised children in Europe to include educational components (interactive games, encyclopaedias, ability tests, multimedia applications) and a chat service; dissemination of project result through 500 CDs.

**b.** courses for personal development, especially organized in the free time, where the participants come out of their own initiative, mainly for their overall culture development. In many cases, the participants' indirect aim is socialization.

The National Association of Folk Universities in Romania (NAFUR) has much contributed to the development of validation methodologies. Only in 2001, for instance, these universities as the main providers of courses in the cultural area, organized 2,467 courses attended by 42,785 participants who got different types of certificates.

**c.** courses for communitarian education development focused on topics such as: democracy, intercultural education, political culture, etc., which are part of larger projects, with mixed actions (festivals, exhibitions, conferences, etc.). In most cases, a clear-cut distinction can't be made among the different types of courses, as the participants have a mixed motivation or the organizers' target is combined (e.g.: vocational training courses also used for the participants' personal development).

A good practice in this respect is the contribution of the *Romanian Society for Lifelong Learning* to the European Project: *Animated Debate* - Computer animation workshops for dysfunctional groups with a view to foster European partnership (under Minerva -109988-CP-1-2003-1-PL-Minerva-M).

Period: November 1st, 2003-November 1st, 2005. Coordinator: Bielskie Stowarzyszenie Artystyczne Teatr Grodzki, Poland. Partnership: Istituto Mediterraneo Ricerca e Comunicazione, Italy; WAC Performing Arts and Media College (Interchange Trust), United Kingdom; Niepubliczna Placowka Oswiatowa EST, Poland; *Societatea Romana de Educatie*

Permanenta, Romania. General Objectives: The main objective of the AD Project is to create a new learning environment in which dysfunctional youth can develop artistic talents in close cooperation with their European counterparts. This will be facilitated by communications technology. Specific Objectives: - encourage the use of new technologies and multimedia in institutions providing care for disadvantaged children and youth; record and disseminate the results of experiments with new forms of art based on multimedia and ICT; advocate the promotion of traditionally overlooked talents, especially those that relate to visual domain. Project results: Computer workshops already existing at each site will be adapted to become "film studios". They will be upgraded in terms of hardware and software adequate to the students' abilities and age; Interactive project website will be created in order to establish the communication platform for the participants of the workshops and their instructors; Three animated films will be shown on the project website at the end of the first school year showing the provisional results of the first round of workshops; Animated Debate Guide for Educators; 10 seminars for arts and IT trainers from schools and therapeutic institutions in Silesia and Malopolska regions (Poland) will be organized.

In the voluntary sector, a very good, efficient program is *Art for Social Change* (2000-2004) organized by European Cultural Foundation and implemented in Romania in partnership with CONCEPT Foundation. Budget: 25,500 €

This program by its component for Eastern Europe: *Play against Violence* introduces theater as an education method for young people facing violence, in order to prevent the effects leading to quick changes of attitude or conflict situations. To achieve its main target, the program offers training courses for artists and other professionals (teachers, psychologists, social assistants, educators) who work with youth, as well as support for running local and regional projects carried out by the persons already trained in this respect.

Another target is to contribute to social change by providing for the young generation instruments that can help them to participate in the (re)construction of civil society. The beneficiaries in 2002, for instance, were about 200 young people (12-21 years old) from 16 institutions of Constanta and Targu Mures and also over 30 artists, psychologists, social assistants from Bucharest, Constanta and Targu Mures, who got trained in the respective field. In 2003 two resource centers for the youth facing violence were set up to help them.

This section looks at qualitative and quantitative information on validation of non-formal and informal learning in Romania. Further efforts should be made to bring added value to this ongoing work at local, sectoral, regional and national level, as validation is a question of sound methodologies and transparent institutional arrangements, but it represents also a question of making political choices on how to value knowledge and experiences. As Romania is heading for the EU integration its endeavors to contribute to the development of a set of common European principles on validation are more visible.

## 1.5 Conclusions

The long tradition of adult education in Romania has pointed out its synchronism in time, and more important, also at the conceptual level, with the European concerns and developments in this field. In the context of the EU accession strategy the efforts of this country have been focused on harmonizing lifelong learning with today's standards in the member states.

As key action points in this area, priority has to be given to:

- Support for non-formal and informal learning by social and managerial recognition, extension and diversification of learning provision;
- Promotion of training and education incentives within economic, social and regional programs;
- Provision of an increased and diversified number of training opportunities to stimulate a greater demand;

In spite of the general efforts and obvious progress made in Romania for implementing the EU Memorandum on lifelong learning, there are still many drawbacks, difficulties and constraints, which have to be tackled and solved in time appropriately.

This national chapter has tried to identify good practices and promising validations initiatives, which it is interesting to report on, as they significantly illustrate the process of reasoning and also the state of progress in particular filed in Romania.

For instance, the project linked to key message 4 (valuing learning): the Romanian Council for Occupational Standards and Certification was set up with the World Bank financial support to ensure the recognition of professional competences based on occupational standards.

An example of efficient regional validation approach is the *Regional Program for Art and Culture* coordinated by the Institute for an Open Society in Budapest and implemented in Romania by *CONCEPT Foundation*. Target: to support artistic cooperation and stimulate the structural changes process in the field of cultural policies in Central-Eastern Europe. Main focus: to help the process of cultural structures changes and to guide towards essential changes and the autonomy of artistic field. Budget: 73,101 USD.

In the near future further policies and measures are necessary to breakdown the existing divisions between formal initial and continuing (vocational) education and training, as well as non-formal and informal learning. One of the locally accepted tools to achieve this goal is a common *National Qualification Framework (NQF)*. Although the conceptualization of the NQF is incorporated in existing Phare Projects under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Research or the Ministry of Labor and Social Solidarity and Family, there is a risk that implementation will be fragmented. It is anticipated that progress will be slow without a common endeavor in which these two ministers and the social partners are equal participants<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> *Review of Progress in Vocational education and Training Reform in Romania*, European Training Foundation, Turin, 2003.

In order to ensure the labor market value of the NQF, the development needs to be facilitated through a social dialogue taking into account sectoral interests. This implies measures to strengthen sectoral representation of social partners<sup>4</sup>.

A much needed policy to enforce is to increase accessibility of guidance and counseling services for adults and members of the local community, as well as the need for these services to extend beyond the strictly vocational and educational dimension and to include also more and more social and citizenship aspects.

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<sup>4</sup> Idem.