

# The Role of Marketing in Adult Permanent Vocational Training in the Context of the Current Economy

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## **Abstract**

The problem of permanent vocational training is important in sustaining the vocational conversion of the working class. A change of views and mentality is desirable regarding vocational training, in the sense that people need to be more aware of the importance of permanent learning, more motivated in order to broaden their horizon and more willing to develop their professional skills. The labour market in Romania has suffered important changes due to the economic transition process, which has been materialized especially on the level of reducing the number of active workers and of employees, thus maintaining a relatively constant rate of unemployment and affecting the labour marketing especially by a limited number of jobs.

**Keywords:** network, training, marketing, adults

## **1. Introduction**

The problem of permanent vocational training is important in sustaining the vocational conversion of the working class. It is the main instrument that helps to adapt to the new standards, making it easier in this way to change domains. A change of views and mentality is desirable regarding vocational training, in the sense that people need to be more aware of the importance of permanent learning, more motivated in order to broaden their horizon and more willing to develop their professional skills. The labour market in Romania has suffered important changes due to the economic transition process, which has been materialized especially on the level of reducing the number of active workers and of employees, thus maintaining a relatively constant rate of unemployment and affecting the labour marketing especially by a limited number of jobs. This accounts for the necessity to shift the focus towards investments in the permanent vocational training. Yet there are two problems that need solving: the insufficient participation in the permanent vocational training and the defective quality of the actual permanent vocational training. In order to put an end to this situation our attention and efforts must be focused on the following problem categories: Insufficient laws that would allow recognition of previous studies to build up a system based on transferable credits; Too many limitations and an inflexible approach to the Labour Code; Defective laws that sit on the basis of initial-stage and permanent vocational training; Lack of a flexible permanent vocational training system based on competences; Insufficient connections and coordination between the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Education; Lack of an organizational structure, of executive power and of financial means for the National Council for Adults Vocational Training as a National Authority of Qualifications: including the

regional committees, providing qualitative training, as well as supporting qualitative improvements; Insufficient involvement of the social partners in developing permanent vocational training; Lack of an organizational framework in order to set up executive power regional committees, to establish their responsibility to elaborate qualification standards and to analyze the training needs; Defective administrative power of the information services as well as of the professional counseling and guidance; Insufficient quantity and defective quality regarding the actual permanent vocational training; Insufficient funds and structures allotted to finance permanent vocational training; Defective quality regarding the actual permanent vocational training, including quality assurance on all levels to promote administration of and to monitor the permanent vocational training towards a final result. All state and private institutions involved in training must do what it takes to assure equality of chances no matter the age, sex, ethnical orientation, deficiencies, economic status or geographical situation of the trainees. Schools will cooperate with all institutions necessary to reach their goals. The principals, managers, administrative councils and the personnel must analyse the following: the type of school / institution they are or want to be; the values that are important within a particular school; the target market and its thorough identification according to the activities offered by other training providers; whether these target markets are likely to change in the future; in what way the role and the purpose of one school differs from those of other schools (both public and private schools) in the same region; whether the school really obeys the principle of client needs or whether its activities are centered around the offer proper; the way in which the school / institution is able to cooperate closely to several other partners, including schools/economic agents; the type of these partnerships and the cooperation networks.

## **2. Strategic planning, marketing strategy and educational institution**

It is only a strategic planning that can indicate the educational programs and the target markets upon which the institutions must focus. Educational institutions must develop a marketing strategy for every program selected or target market chosen to promote. The formal marketing plan will synthesize the information and analyses that will sit at the basis of a certain strategy and will detail the way in which that strategy can be put into practice. Any educational institution must elaborate several strategic alternatives as a response to the market particularities and requests. Each and every time they must choose the best option according to the characteristics of the market. The matrix for the market program/opportunities can help the management department to come up systematically with new options. The newly discovered ways can be analysed carefully for their own equilibrium, for the market stability, costs or other components. Creating a competitive environment with the educational domain will necessarily lead to the introduction of some professional management systems and of some new marketing techniques adequate to these systems. Only by using the specific marketing strategies and techniques will educational institutions be able to take part in an actual competition, which aims to offer the services most useful to the market. Using educational marketing can create a permanent competition between educational institutions and vocational training centers for the following gains: students and trainees; the best teachers and trainers; public and private finance; increase of tax collections and of services on the market; heritage development (equipment, buildings, research centers, etc.); expansion on regional and national level; national and international reputation (reflected in the profile statistics); obtaining authorizations and recognition of the diplomas. An overall look on the permanent vocational training in Europe and the United States showed surprising changes a few years ago. The traditional system has been abandoned in many training centers in order to meet a more insecure future. Orientation and behavior change on the part of the trainee has jeopardized many institutions that were unable to understand the necessity of reorganization. Competitiveness and financial resources have become the great challenges that question the capacity to survive of some institutions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Adaptation to social and economic

changes, to the needs and expectations of the consumers is reflected in the high development of the institutions involved in training. The successful institutions' 'upbringing' has been based on a mix of technology, studying accessibility and new learning paradigms, capable of satisfying the needs of a new type of educational services consumer. In order to succeed, both state and private institutions involved in training have had to elaborate and put into practice some marketing strategies and, moreover, to make the necessary and realistic changes as far as the educational curriculum is concerned. They have to have been changed in such a way that they meet the goal and the objectives established. The target population for permanent training has met with fundamental modifications in all economically developed countries of the world, which has led to the need to abandon the traditional training techniques based on a certain age of the trainee, on a formal institutional framework of the classes or on classical, conservatory teaching methods. New technologies and new alternative teaching methods have appeared which aim at making education more accessible to different, unconventional market areas. At present, those professional institutions whose main objective is permanent vocational training have directed their efforts towards adults who try to specialize in various dynamic economic domains, to suffer vocational reconversion, to complete certain competences necessary in the context of a rapid evolution of economy and society or to maintain their professional standards at their workplace. The external, economic, social and political environment have changed so much in Romania as well, that the educational system also felt the need to make some fundamental changes in this respect. Permanent vocational training is one of the domains that suffered a blasting increase in the years following 1992. Many private institutions appeared, as well as a great number of new specializations in the state institutes, which needed experienced workers. Various training programs appeared on the permanent vocational training market, but a lot of them were defective in point of quality. Many laws were issued to regulate permanent vocational training and, as a result, a coherent framework was shaped for the permanent vocational training system to function on. Nevertheless, the framework has suffered some further improvements by means of law amendments. Moreover, the problem of qualitative learning has been considered a real issue all around the world lately. Specialists think that high standards have lowered so much that some countries have started worrying about the consequences of defective quality, more and more obvious within society. En masse education represents the main factor of the economic crisis marking the European economy at present. It has been statistically recognized that poorly educated graduates no longer find jobs. This fact affects society, which has itself spent money for their education. Additionally, these graduates become a responsibility of the community, burdening the public finances to pay unemployment benefit. In Canada and the United States poor quality teaching is more obvious in the state sector both concerning permanent vocational training and universities. Private universities keep on being more selective in point of educational preparation of the students – especially the acknowledged ones – compensating this way for the quality deficiencies of the mass education. This is why the American economy is less affected than the European economy. The qualitative American learning is attractive to a great number of students around the world, which is the reason why Europe has started fight to this fierce competition. According to some academic managers, competition in the educational system will become fiercer in the years to come. Academic learning institutions in our country could easily be dismissed from the market in the years following the European integration because of their ancient, extremely bureaucratic and fund less structures. There are approximately 4.000 youngsters who leave the country every year to study abroad. This number is not too big related to the total of 60.000 students who join the university annually. But the real problem is that those youngsters who go abroad are the smart ones. Further, the list is completed with students who win scholarships in American universities and they are no less smart. Finally, there is the category of youngsters whose parents prefer to pay more for the studies abroad in the hope that they will have better perspectives in their future careers. Consequently, a vicious circle is created. On the one hand the number of youngsters decreases because of the constant low birth rate after the 1990s and,

on the other hand, less talented and smart teenagers remain in Romania because the integration of our country in the European Union and a new distribution of incomes create new perspectives for them in point of vocational and career orientation. In order to allure students our universities make quite a lot of compromises. And this fact has become most obvious starting with the academic school year 2000-2001. The phenomenon has repeated itself in the following years as well and it was quite clearly seen in the fact that private universities did not have enough candidates for the number of places released even if several entrance sessions were organized. In the end, the entrance examination was replaced by the final Bacalaureate grade. There were even some state universities that were confronted with this problem, but the deans of such universities had no problem reassigning the spare places. In order to control the learning quality and the permanent vocational training as well as possible, every European country has created – starting with 1990 – national authorities, agencies, quality evaluation and authorization committees to supervise learning. They have appeared as a response to the rapid evolution of learning systems which the ministries of education could no longer control. Minimum qualitative standards have been established at a European level, according to which specialists have to be trained. Those universities that will not take these requests into account will be dismissed from the educational market.

In Romania, the system of monitoring learning quality has been established only on judicial level. It will be no longer possible to continue with the present system because of the demographic decline. In this case, many of the permanent vocational training institutions will simply surrender. At present, The Ministry of Education and Research has not come up with any strategy to solve this problem. All the research so far and different other analyses conducted on the market concerning the educational system show that educational institutions in Romania have no personal development strategies no matter the level of study or the social status – state or private institutions. They are not anchored to the economic system and they are not engaged in more competitive relationships because a very ‘friendly’ environment has been created for them. On a market characterized by the desire to acquire a diploma - just like it was after the 1990s- with minimum of costs and effort, educational institutions were able to develop ‘naturally’ because they had no real competitors. That is why the educational product has not evolved according to some clear standards and distinct declarations, to some fundamental values on which the long term strategies should have normally been built. The educational product has only been an element belonging to some circumstances specific to the educational domain, and not a nucleus around which price policies should have been built and to which marketing strategies should have been applied. Because of the unfriendly environment that has been forecasted, only those institutions that will be capable of building their own coherent strategies with educational marketing as a key point of development will have any chance of survival on the market. Expanding the marketing domain to education is a reality that reflects the new requests of the modern society, and the present situation on the Romanian educational market shows that using these techniques at least empirically can lead to actual benefits for their users. Research conducted in the south-east of Romania for the permanent vocational training shows that, at present, institutions do not have their own marketing department, although their strategy development plans refer to its importance. There are only a few such institutions which have been able to create a public relations nucleus that helps them create a clearer image on the educational market. Neither here, unfortunately, the activity is oriented towards consumers by anticipating their needs and wants. This situation is reflected in the organization of the institutions on domains which are easier to cover and structure and also easier to sustain financially. Lack of marketing strategies to attract donors (local and central administration authorities, agencies, etc.) and investments proves the same thing. The lack of cooperation with the market and with the beneficiaries of the permanent vocational training system results in the creation of some strong barriers between the request and the actual offer. This fact has been demonstrated by the lack of ability on the part of

schools or the training providers to gain some financial sources from the business community which, theoretically, is the main beneficiary of the educational products. Even those institutions that actually use marketing – be it declared or intuitive – to promote and develop educational programs and services recur to a global, undifferentiated marketing. The educational system – even the marketing oriented system- does not have clearly divided departments of educational marketing. Their need has started to be felt, and the proof of this is the declaration made by some educational institutions expressing their intention to create such a department. This tendency is more and more obvious in the Transilvanean area, where the idea of entrepreneurship in the educational activity has started to shape better. But there is still a long way from the declaration to create and implement some educational marketing strategies until their actual creation and implementation, even in the case of those institutions which have improved and modernized their methods of approaching the public. The moment when permanent vocational training institutions will actually conceive some marketing strategies will be that moment when the funds allotment (budgetary or community funds, international programs funds, sponsorship, etc.) will be distributed according to some educational marketing classifications conducted by independent organizations or with the help of surveys among the beneficiaries (trainees, graduates, employers). It is a fact that the small number of young population, according to demographic statistics, will contribute to the rearranging of the training systems on the market, where competitiveness will be one of the most objective criteria to adjust the training market in the near future. There is, for now, a certain competition between the acknowledged training providers and those providers in the big cities, as well as between the private centers and the state institutions of training. But competition is at an early stage even in these cases. Suppose that there will be an orientation towards the consumers by understanding the way in which they prefer the services in case of unaccepted working environment, there is a chance of survival for those institutions which will be capable of conceiving their own coherent marketing strategies based on educational marketing. Expanding the marketing domain to education is a reality that reflects the new requests of the modern society, and the present situation on the Romanian educational market shows that using these techniques at least empirically can lead to actual benefits for their users.

The orientation towards the consumers by understanding the way in which they prefer the educational services and towards the means which will encourage them to buy these services is nowadays represented only by the development of the permanent vocational training system and the maintenance of a low tax level. Private kindergartens and inclusive learning schools are the only educational institutions that recurred to a segmentation of the market in order to gain clients. In their case competition is quite small, but gaining the clients is quite a challenge due to the reduced number of people who can afford to pay for these educational services. They are the only institutions that have shown any interest in developing some programs meant to be attractive for their target training market. Private education units generally use an offensive communication strategy in order to promote themselves on the market and to recruit students. The marketing politics will be materialized at all educational levels by means of leaflet distribution to present the annual education plan, local mass-media and educational fairs which the local school units participate in. As far as preschool education is concerned, marketing politics present some specific features, such as visits to the school and parents discussion.

Although this direct relationship with the beneficiaries of the educational services has proved to be efficient, it is not very common for the other levels of education. At the university level, the dialogue with the future students and an analysis of their actual needs are only formal and take place strictly during the period before the entrance exams, when university representatives visit high schools to make a flat presentation of their educational offer. The academic management seems to be satisfied with some official declarations made by their institutions

with the help of a press office run by inexperienced students or newly graduates who have neither the necessary competences nor a real strategy to develop a visual image on the market. Both printed and oral publicity (by word of mouth) occupy an esteemed place in the structure of promotional activities. There are a few shy attempts made by some universities that have initiated some activities in order to cultivate a certain pride of its ex- students. They belong to a certain graduates' association of the type Alumni and are trying to set up a tradition for the graduates to meet periodically, to issue votive medals, etc. Among the common actions on the Romanian academic level we can give the examples of symposia, annual students' seminars, periodicals or contests organization which are meant to create spiritual bonds between generations and to produce a certain impact on the target market.

No matter their needs or preferences, the beneficiaries of the educational services do not have many alternatives to choose from. There are no differentiated offers on the market, and the ones that have certain qualities or seem more attractive are simply forbidden to them out of various reasons. The most important reason is the low purchasing power of the majority of people in Romania. Although there are many youngsters interested in training centres abroad, the low purchasing power simply blocks this kind of transactions. Consequently, the international competition is blocked as well. Given the context, the educational institutions are certain to conclude that they have to set up marketing departments, with specialists who will be responsible for issuing marketing politics necessary to face competition on the market. Only in this way will the management department be able to take rapid decisions that will take into consideration the characteristic features of the market: dynamics, structure, change rate, demands and competition level. A mature educational market based on new technologies, on international standards and on high power of acquisition on the part of the clients (where the clients are the beneficiaries of the educational services) will force the educational institutions to define the proper strategies to match these changes. Marketing will definitely have a defined role and place in this process because with its instruments the management department will be able to identify the proper means and methods to implement the development strategies or to adjust the balance between consumer's needs and the possibilities of the institution.

The type of marketing functioning in educational institutions will bring along a better view of the political, law-marking, economic, technological and social environment, of the market environment, of the local, regional and even European educational sector. Having a good knowledge of the size, potential of the educational services market and of the beneficiaries' behavior allows the understanding and appreciation of the competitive advantages. This way the best distribution ways and the most accessible prices will be chosen by dividing the market into target groups or by establishing some differentiate product policies: according to quality, uniqueness, brand or other services related to the educational process proper. The first step in this process of change is, undoubtedly, represented by the training and specialization of the managers running an educational institution. It is them who are responsible with the cooperation and good practice of a professional, individual and coherent activity within the educational marketing domain. The marketing activity will permanently monitor the environment, the educational market, the competition and the actual results. Moreover, it will issue the strategic plans by which every member's contribution to the general goals fulfillment is established.

The existence of a competitive environment which tends to be more and more dynamic, 'richer' with opportunities and dangers justifies the need to adopt some competitive marketing strategies. Managers, but marketing specialists also, are challenged to face these situations created not only by the competition itself, but by the worldwide economic globalization as well. It takes good knowledge of concepts for the strategic planning and for the formulation of the strategies in order to reach the goals. But this would definitely be a clear advantage in

winning a good position on the market as far as a certain activity domain is concerned. Yet as a response to the market requests, the typology for the marketing strategies is vast and constantly changing. We can even talk about a strategic behavior of the economic agents that try to adapt to the situation and to develop original strategies at the same time which will further bring them a leader position on a certain market.

Apart from the many strategies that actually function in practice, there are also a considerable number of unconventional strategies that are less known by people and that are considered helpful alternatives used by the competition. These strategies have usually come into use thanks to the well-developed skills of those who work in the marketing domain and thanks to the experience they gained along the way, thus permitting them to develop and implement new strategies, different from those of the competition. It is worth to know the fact that those competitors that use this kind of strategies have harmonious behavior on the market, because they will always be forced to discover and actually use new strategies, which are unconventional most of the times. Consequently, the variety of marketing strategies widens as soon as the possibility to penetrate the external market appears. In this case, of course, a study of the international market and its opportunities is needed. As far as the marketing mix is concerned, the matching strategies will be developed permanently, with the purpose that either some original or borrowed strategies are adopted. Moreover, the marketing mix strategies can be either innovative or conservative, belonging to the market leader, the challenger or the survivors. The *push* and *pull* strategies are famous, and they tend to focus either on 'pushing' the product (service) towards the client or 'pulling' the client towards the product. There are also the public relations strategies -whose purpose is to determine a certain behavior for the target group - ; the aesthetic strategies –that aim at creating and promoting a distinctive image for the company and product – and many other examples from different domains.

It is quite obvious by now that the role of marketing is to exist as a framework, a starting point in the process of shaping strategies for a company, being aware of the fact that it is the actual practice which has always been developing new, optimum strategic alternatives. What is known for sure is only the fact that a strategy represents its capacity to transform the company into a winner at the end of a real, free and loyal competition. Shaping the leadership at the institutional level is the most important part in the changing of the educational system in Romania, together with orientation towards the internal clients needs (trainees, trainers, administrative personnel, etc) and the external ones (employers, donors, etc.). It is the leadership that will transform a reactive system into a proactive one, with the help of the many generous marketing instruments applicable to the educational institutions as well.

### **3. Conclusion**

There are still a lot of problems in Romania related to initial-stage training and permanent training. The initial-stage training system does not accept the certificates obtained as a result of the permanent training system for the next level of studies. Usually there is no correspondence between the certificates obtained at the end of an adult vocational training course and the certificates issued by the national educational system. And the partial acknowledgement system is unaccepted. Consequently, it is quite difficult to speak about shaping the training programs under these circumstances. Both employers and employees generally have the same attitude towards training, an attitude characterized by a fading interest or even a lack of interest in permanent vocational training, with the exception of those cases when the training is vital and the costs are minimal. Employers will always be pleased to find ready-trained and well-prepared employees on the market rather than investing their capital in vocational training. They prefer that the trainees invest their own time and money in their vocational training

separately from the company they work for. It is vital that the following measures be taken in order to increase the number of working population:

- ✚ Motivate the company owners to recruit unemployed people belonging to under-privileged groups (long-term unemployed people, physically challenged people, young orphans);
- ✚ Increase the number of working women in the women activity sectors;
- ✚ Adopt a new law regarding the workforce employment and the social protection for those who seek jobs;
- ✚ Adopt a new set of laws regarding employment and social protection;
- ✚ Align the labour laws to the European framework regarding employers' rights protection in case of changing companies or businesses and in case of bankruptcy;
- ✚ Accept the principle of equality between men and women in all domains and at all social levels;
- ✚ Adopt a set of laws that will guarantee women's right to security and physical and psychological integrity, as well as reject any forms or manifestations of violence against women both at home and outside; promote educational programs in the spirit of respecting human rights and democracy;
- ✚ Start a medical insurance reform by changing the public pension and medical insurance system, by introducing the private administration of universal pension funds and by introducing extra insurance;
- ✚ Develop the services that help to recover the working capacities inside of the public system of pension with a view to a possible social and professional reinstatement.

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