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The involvement of the universities in adult education – compulsion or necessity?

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Abstract

The world today is not only a knowledge society but also a competitive society, where the competition is one of the fundamental characteristics of contemporary economic and social context. The accelerated dynamics of change in all areas, the high perishability of information, major fluctuations in the labor market and increasing leisure life make adult education a necessity. The competition for adult education involves not only universities but also non-governmental organizations or large corporations. Understanding the exact training needs of adults and providing appropriate educational programs is one of the basic conditions for successful involvement of universities in the competition to attract adults to long life learning programs. Situated in this context, our research aims both to identify the extent to which university teachers are prepared for educational work with adults as well as highlighting possible solutions for correcting existing shortcomings.

Keywords: adult education; educational market; training needs; teaching skills; relational skills.

1. Problem statement

Contemporary society is, due to technological progress, a communicational society, a society of generalized communication, which involves appropriate restructuring at the level of educational reality. This restructuring of education is accomplished in the context of the communicational society and is imposed, in the opinion of J.-F. Lyotard, by the transition, due to technological progress, from "games with incomplete information" to "games with complete information". In the context of modern society games with incomplete information were predominant and the level of performance of those who are educated was very limited and strictly conditioned by their ability to acquire, store and update various information and knowledge. Technological progress and the characteristics of the communicational society determine the appearance of games with complete information. As stated by the previously mentioned author, the present and the future belong to informational networks and huge databases that provide the prerequisites of the game with complete information and will constitute the educational environment for

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the man of the contemporary society. “As long as the game is based on incomplete information, the advantage lies with those who know and can obtain additional information. In the game with complete information, the best performativity can not consist, by definition, in the acquisition of such a supplement but it results in a new layout of data. This new arrangement is obtained most often by connecting a series of data considered independent so far. This ability to articulate together what was not so before can be called imagination. Speed is a property of such capabilities. It is permitted to imagine the world of postmodern knowledge as governed by a game with complete information, meaning that its data is accessible to all individuals. The added performativity, in equal skills, lies in the production of knowledge and not its acquisition, depending either on this ability to make new connections, either on the possibility to change the rules of the game” (Lyotard, 1993, p. 83-92).

Beyond these aspects, the specifics of the postmodern age imply, at the level of pedagogy, not only epistemological readjustments but also readjustments regarding the relations of the school as an institution with the state authority. Over time, the role of the state in terms of education was monopolistic: the educational system was entirely created and run by the state, the state was the one that adjusted the educational system to the needs imposed by the structure of the labor market and assigned clear tasks regarding the civic training of citizens and the cultivation through education of a certain loyalty to its institutions. Postmodernism reserves the state a reduced role in the organization and functioning of the educational system, by providing it with the position to facilitate decentralization, diversification and flexibilization of the educational networks to ensure a better folding towards the options and interests of those who are being educated.

Substantial changes are also expected to occur at the level of circulated formative instructional content. Social actors of postmodern society increasingly realize the fact that in terms of accelerating the scientific and technical progress, the acquisition of high quality current skills and knowledge decisively determines their status and professional success. From this perspective, the effectiveness of educational systems is largely superposable to the extent to which they constantly update and diversify the curriculum structure and the supply of information.

Diversification and timely updating of the curricular structure of educational systems belonging to postmodern society is also determined by another phenomenon, namely the merchantilization of the informational offer. The reduction of the state's involvement in the organization of educational systems implies, alongside decentralization, the reduction of budgetary resources allocated to them. This situation increasingly calls for both the assumption by various educational institutions of the principles of self-management and self-financing as well as the concern for competitiveness as a prerequisite for survival in the conditions of a competitive type of educational reality.

In this context, those who are educated are not only interested in the truth of knowledge or theories but in their actual practical use, in the added actional competence that their acquisition can bring about. School as an institution and in particular universities thus become competitors in the market of educational offers and the potential beneficiaries of the various educational systems are, ultimately, consumers of education.

Contemporary educational institutions, under the ever increasing pressure of the educational market and aiming to achieve and maintain competitiveness in this sector, are forced not only to frequent restructuring of the content of education and a better teacher selection policy but also the establishment of close ties of collaboration to existing research departments in various fields of activity. Over time, due to competition in the education market, raising standards for the selection of candidates will be added to these priorities. In the context of self-financing and competitive educational systems, the fact that relevant criteria should be established for the selection of candidates becomes obvious so that their education involves costs as low as possible and their subsequent performances will contribute to the improvement of the institution's image.

Postmodernism thus brings an enhanced professionalization of education, the criterion of its efficiency being competitiveness and the degree to which graduates are equipped with the required operational skills in the context of an educational market that often transcends national boundaries, becoming international. Education, in this regard, will mainly focus on the training, as much as possible, of experts and highly qualified personnel for the top sectors, elements capable of ensuring the viability of various educational institutions and validating the place these occupy in the competitive space of the educational offer market (Stan, C., 2001).

According to a United Nation report (2010): "World population ageing is unprecedented, a process without parallel in human history and the twenty-first century will witness even more rapid ageing than did the century just past. Population ageing is pervasive since it is affecting nearly all countries of the world. By 2045, the number of older persons in the world will exceed the number of young for the first time in history. □ In developed countries, 15% of the population are old and will increase to 26% by 2050. Japan and Italy, which currently have the world's oldest populations, with nearly 20% of their populations above 65 will face greater increase to more than 30% (Hayutin, 2007). In view of this development, many sectors such as health, education and economics would be severely affected. For instance, higher education sector including distance education programs will soon have greater number of older adult learners in their programs. Consequently, relevant policies and programs should be planned to cater for this new group (Nailul, M., 2011). Adult education has developed in different contexts and is structured differently in sub-sectors, which are partly overlapping. This is true for most European countries. In some countries, especially in Southern and Eastern Europe, adult education is very closely connected to the societal areas in which it has originated and continues to develop such as social movements or the business sector. In other countries, especially in the North and West of Europe, there exist also different fields of adult education that are defined by a certain type of institution, such as folk high schools, private commercial providers, institutions of social and cultural education or technical colleges. In all cases, the whole picture of adult education (and the related «profession») can only be understood against the background of its historical development and its current links with other societal sectors (Nuissl, E., 2010).

Globalization has been affecting both the professional roles and the modeling and re-modeling of the multiple and changing identity of school teachers. In a constantly changing society new data and responsibilities are created which are controvert to the substance of education as it has been established during the 19th century and developed through the 20th. Thus, the role of the educator-school teacher needs to be radically reformed. Both the educator-school teachers and the adult trainers need to cope with a continuously growing and changing spectrum of requirements, and are called to develop a multidimensional professional role (Chatziefstathiou, E., Niki Phillips, N.). Globalization and economic dynamics have forced individuals and organizations to search for new ways to strengthen their competitive advantages.

Improvement of learning and human performance for sustainable development has been recognized as a key strategy (Tynjälä, 2008; Wang & Yang, 2009; Wang & Chang, 2012). In this context, it is crucial to help learners in educational institutions and knowledge workers in organizations to improve their capabilities for self-directed and life-long learning (Wang, Vogel, & Ran, 2011). Moreover, learning in this context has expanded from individual to organizational and community levels with new focuses such as creation of new knowledge and retention of knowledge assets for sustainable development (Liebowitz, 2009; Rosenberg, 2012). In the meantime, advances in technology have been increasingly enabling and facilitating learning and knowledge-related initiatives. Technology has fundamentally changed the way to access knowledge and to communicate with others. Various technology-enabled solutions and novel approaches are widely used in educational institutions, corporations, governments, and communities. They have largely extended learning opportunities through the provision of resource-rich and learner-centered environment, computer-based learning assistance, and expanded social interactions involving the development of new forms of learning communities and networks (Minhong, Chi-Cheng, & Feng, 2013).

The exponential growth in the volume of information, the high degree of its perishability as well as the accelerated pace of change in all spheres of the socio-economic life, are just some of the elements that make adult education a vital necessity both for people who want to specialize in a particular field or seeking to change their career, as well as for universities, in their capacity as providers of educational services in the labor market. In competition with other providers of education (non-governmental organizations or companies who use their own resources for the professionalization of employees), universities are obliged not only to restructure the supply of information and skills but also to ensure a high quality of teaching in the educational relationship with adults.

2. Purpose of study and major coordinates of the research

As can be seen based on the information above, specialized studies provide a relatively clear image regarding the importance of adult education and the challenges that universities have to face in this regard. Overall, our study aims to identify the extent to which the university is truly prepared to meet the requirements that adult education in the XXI century entails. Thus, the main purpose of the investigation conducted was to provide an overview regarding the opinions that university teachers have in terms of the particularities of educational activities with adults.

The research method used was that of a questionnaire-based survey. The questionnaire included a total of 8 closed items. The reason we reduced the whole problem investigated to this number of items was that the use of a larger number of questions could generate the risk of superficial answers. For reasons of admission to the number of pages allocated to this survey, we will refer only four items considered to be most relevant to the questionnaire. The questionnaire was applied to a total of 57 university teachers involved directly in the activity of adult education through professional training or retraining courses. Of the 57 university teachers, 5 did not fully respond to the questions so the total number of usable questionnaires was 52. For the processing and analysis of data, the tool used were frequency tables.

3. Presentation, analysis and interpretation of results

The first item of the applied questionnaire was aimed at the extent to which university teachers consider that pedagogical training prepared them for educational activities with adults. The answers are presented in a summary form in the table below.

Table 1. The usefulness of psycho-pedagogical training in college regarding educational work with adults

Item/Answer	Very much	Much	A little	Barely	At all	Total
To what extent do you consider that the psychopedagogical preparation during university prepared you for educational activities with adults?	2 3.94%	13 25%	14 26.88%	16 30.72%	7 13.44%	52 100%

As we can see in the table above, only 28.94% of the teachers surveyed consider that psycho-pedagogical preparation during university provided them with the skills and competencies needed for the success of adult education, while most of them, 71.06%, believe that this training was mostly on insufficient in this regard. In other words, the activity of preparing future teachers includes very few useful items in terms of educational activities with adults.

The next item was aimed at the extent to which the subjects questioned consider that the principles of school pedagogy can be applied in educational activities with adults.

Table 2. The compatibility of school pedagogy with adult pedagogy

Item/Answer	To a great extent	To a certain extent	To some extent	To a very small extent	At all	Total
To what extent do you consider that it is possible to apply school pedagogy in educational activities with adults?	13 25%	10 19.2%	17 32.64%	23.04 30.72%	0 0%	52 100%

The data presented in Table 2 indicate a clear polarization of views expressed by interviewed subjects. Thus, if 44.5% of the respondents consider that there is a very high level of compatibility between school pedagogy and adult pedagogy, with the former's principles able to be applied without problems in the context of educational activities with adults, the other part, with 55.8% of respondents consider that the application of school pedagogy in

the field of adult education is doomed to failure. We consider important the fact that more than half of the teachers are aware of the importance and necessity of a different style of teaching, structuring of information and relationships in educational activities with adults.

Another element was aimed at the opinion of university teachers regarding skills that ensure efficiency and success in educational activities with adults. The results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Skills deemed necessary in educational activities with adults

Item/Answer	N (%)
Psychopedagogical competence	16 (30.72%)
Scientific competence	15 (28.80%)
Social competence	13 (24.96%)
Managerial competence	6 (11.82%)
Digital competence	2 (3.94%)
Total	52 100%

Analysis of the data presented in the above table reveals that, in terms of educational activities with adults, among the powers deemed to be absolutely necessary in this area are psycho-pedagogical competences (the ability to make the information transmitted accessible, interactive methods, empathy, pedagogical tact), scientific competences (clear, selected, updated, accurate information) and social competences (ability to establish appropriate interpersonal relationships with adults without difficulty, understanding, friendship), while competences like managerial competences (ability to organize, monitor and coordinate adults' activities) and digital competences (ability to develop electronic materials and use of information and communication technology resources) are regarded as less important. We should note in this context that the subjects questioned social conferred a relatively equal percentage to social competences as compared to psycho-pedagogical competences and scientific competences, demonstrating an understanding and acceptance of the reality that the relationship between teacher and adult fall, as is natural, on other coordinates than the teacher-student relationship.

The fourth item of the questionnaire sought to identify the main difficulties faced by teachers in educational activities with adults. The results obtained are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Difficulties in educational activities with adults

Item/Answer	N (%)
Failure of separation of theory from practice	16 (30.72%)
Conflicting behaviors in adults	11 (21.12%)
Counterexamples made by the learners	12 (24.96%)
Excessive digressions of adults	9 (23.04%)
Reluctance in carrying out work tasks	4 (7.76%)
Total	52 100%

As we can see based on the data from the table above, the main difficulty faced by teachers in educational activities with adults is the impossibility of separation of at this level of the theoretical exposures from the concrete practical reality, point of view expressed by 30.72% of subjects. We refer in this context, to the fact that adults with experience from work quickly identify invalid or irrelevant theoretical aspects from practice. In second place in the ranking of difficulties lies, according to 21.12% of the teachers, conflicting behaviors of adults, especially behaviors that are generated in the emergence of theoretical disputes, adults sometimes act impulsive, with their socioeconomic status placing its mark on the way they involve in controversy.

Counterexamples raised by participants in relation to various allegations of teachers ranks third in the problems arising in educational activities with adults, reported by 24.96% of the subjects. Almost as disturbing prove to be excessive digressions of learners, digressions that in the opinion of 23.04% of the teachers divert attention from the subject of the course and require much diplomacy in the effort to stop them. The last position in the ranking of

difficulties in educational activities with adults is, for 7.76% of the teachers, the reluctance of accomplishing work tasks, reticence equally determined by laziness and reduced power of concentration but also the relatively short time that, for often objective reasons, students can devote to complete the work required during courses.

4. Conclusions

Adult education is at present one of the main concerns of universities but also of other organizations with expertise in this regard. In order to be competitive in the increasingly competitive conditions existing in the educational offer market, universities must not only proceed from restructuring and curricular adjustments in accordance with the current progress of knowledge but also to provide a teaching staff equipped with the skills and abilities necessary to achieve a successful educational activity with adults. This need is widely confirmed by the data of our study, the majority of teachers surveyed stating that psycho-pedagogical training in college was inadequate from the perspective of adult education requirements and that school pedagogy is not enough and cannot replace adult pedagogy. Thus, along with psycho-pedagogical or scientific skills, the teachers surveyed expressed the need to develop a higher level of social competence, competence absolutely necessary in carrying out educational activities with adults where the teacher-learner relationship is more of a collaborative relationship between equals than a relationship of subordination. No less important for ensuring the competitiveness of universities in adult education is the adequate preparation of trainers in order to find solutions to the major problems that may occur at this level: the impossibility of separation of theory of practice, conflicting behaviors and attitudes of the learners, counter-examples made by them regarding the teacher's claims, excessive digressions from the topic or reluctance in carrying out work tasks.

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