Adult education and some andragogical dimensions of higher education in the Republic of Moldova

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Abstract

The “meeting” between the institutions of higher education and adult education produced not only on the non-formal educational platform, but also on that of the formal education constitutes a defiant challenge of entrenched models and traditional approaches and also an opportunity to increase the number of candidates to higher education in the situation of „loss”, out of various reasons, of traditional students. Thus, on the one hand, the adult education and andragogy as a didactic paradigm of adult education and, on the other hand, university education acquire connections determined by widening the heterogeneousness of the actors involved in the educational process in terms of age, educational pathways, professional experience, learning needs and motivations, life experience, and skills.

The article provides an analysis of policies and practices in the Republic of Moldova in the sphere of continuous education at universities, of andragogidal dimensions of university education and it emphasizes on the formal education opportunities provided by universities to mature students.

The article cited 5 sources of conceptual, policy and methodological nature of adult education researchers and many other electronic sources that show statistics and practices from the domain.

As the result of analyses, we conclude that adult education at universities and andragogical particularities of higher education derive from the judgements of organizational character of the educational system, as well as of psycho-social, demographic, economic, and psychopedagogical nature.
Adult education is recognized as an important part of lifelong learning. This „absolute” recognition from the social, economic, political, educational, anthropological etc. point of view was determined both by the tremendous quantity and quality of scientific judgements and polemics, by recent active andragogical praxis and by the evolution, in fact, of man and of humanity, of economy and society, of transcendent realities such as time, space, speed, and consistency. In other words, in order to be, to succeed and to live a qualitative life, the modern man is placed in an active position in relation to learning. Moreover, J.R. Kidd, in his work „How adult learns” wrote: „Human beings seem to pursue learning...The objective is to ensure the environment, atmosphere, freedom and self-discipline in which learning is facilitated. A human being requires an „open field” for the kind of fight that is learning” [5].

From another point of view, higher education strongly felt the changes brought by the abundant presence of the new informational technology, decrease in the number of traditional students (for ex. youth) and by increase in the number of non-traditional students (for ex. mature students), cancellation of age limit for admission to universities, increase of financial difficulties, request for educational services by the community, economy, labour market etc.

Another important factor of change is the mobility in its different aspects: population, mentality, life strategies, employment strategies, educational pathways, skills, opportunities, requirements etc.

Thus, on the one hand, both adult education and andragogy as a didactic paradigm of adult education and, on the other hand, university education acquire connections determined by the widening of heterogeneousness of the actors of the educational process (age, educational pathways, professional experience, learning needs and motivations, life experience, and skills) and by the development of approaches regarding university teaching.

In this article, we will refer specifically to the conditions of access and accessibility to/of higher education for adults in the Republic of Moldova in relation to demands and tendencies of community compatibility and dynamics of modern life.

The “meeting” between the institutions of higher education and adult education produced not only on the non-formal educational platform, but also on that of the formal education constitutes a defiant challenge of entrenched models and traditional approaches and also an opportunity to increase the number of candidates to higher education in the situation of „loss”, out of various reasons, of traditional students.

Lifelong learning has been an integral part of the Bologna process agenda and its importance was emphasized in all communications that followed the Bologna Declaration. In particular, Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communication (2009) underlines the importance of implementation of continuous education practices at the level of higher education. The preamble of the document specifies that during the decade up to 2020, the European higher education will contribute significantly to the achievement of a Europe of knowledge that is highly creative and innovative. Faced with the challenge of an aging population, Europe can achieve this goal only if it develops at maximum the talents and abilities of all of its citizens and engages them in continuous („lifelong”) learning, as well as it extends the participation in higher education [7].

Currently, the adult education practices in the higher education system differ from country to country. The Eurydice report on formal adult education in Europe (2011) reveals policies and practices applied in EU countries aimed at increase in the number of adults enrolled in formal education, especially in the higher institutions, and the development of opportunities for adults to obtain qualifications at a higher level than the previous ones [1].

The structure of the report provides benchmarks for assessing the situation of the country in the explored issue to the specialists in adult education and to universities: what policies, strategies and measures for encouraging adult participation in the higher education exist, which is the procedure for recognition and validation of non-formal and informal education, what preparatory programs for non-traditional candidates and what alternative ways of study in higher education exist?

In the same report it is specified that at the European level there is no definition, generally accepted, of a “mature student” in higher education in terms of age for the category identification. The common perception is that mature students are older students than the typical student in higher education and who returned to formal education after a period of being “out of the formal system.” At the state level, the category of mature students is sometimes defined more precisely, especially in countries that introduced specific policies and strategies to attract mature students in higher education or countries that include this category of students in their national statistics [idem].

According to the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Moldova, in those 34 higher education institutions in Moldova, 102458 of students are enrolled in the academic year 2013/2014, out of which 32205 of
students pursue part-time courses [2]. The level of participation in the educational process is determined mainly by
the demographic situation of the country. Education enrollment rate was different depending on the age group. The
lowest rate of enrollment in education (28.8%) was characteristic of the age group 19-23 years old, being the
maximum value in the academic year 2012/2013 over the last 5 years. This is explained by the low attention that
has lately been given to specialized and vocational secondary education in the Republic of Moldova. Currently, the
situation is changing due to prominent need for skilled workers in the national economy, to various educational
pathways for different category of population, involvement of employers and of course, to the policy agenda of the
Ministry of Education.

The statistic data show the following demographic structure of adult population in the formal education: the
population of the age group 19-23 years old showed greater interest in higher education (82.1%). At the beginning
of the academic year 2012/2013, the number of students registered a number of 102,5 thousand of persons, by 12,4
thousand of students fewer in comparison with the academic year 2008/2009. The share of women is higher than
that of men, being of 56,0% in the academic year 2012/2013, but with 1,8% lower than in 2008/2009. At the
beginning of the academic year 2012/2013, the distribution of students in higher education according to cycles
shows a share of 80,8% for the students enrolled in Cycle I and 15,1% - in Cycle II. The number of mature students
aged between 35-39 and over 40 years old of higher education institutions from the Republic of Moldova is 3632 in
the academic year 2013-2014, which is about 3.7% of the total number of students. The numerical value compared
to the academic year 2008/2009 is less by 445 mature students.

Admission of students to higher education of bachelor and master degrees in the Republic of Moldova is
accomplished in accordance with respective regulations [8], which, in our opinion, can be improved from the
perspective of providing opportunities for adult students.

The Regulation on the organization and conduct of admission to bachelor studies (cycle I) in higher education
institutions in the Republic of Moldova stipulates that no age limit is set for the admission contest for both full-time
studies and part-time studies.

The Regulation on the organization of master higher education, cycle II, approved by the Government Decision
Nr. 1455 of December 24, 2007 does not contain provisions aimed at encouraging the participation of adults in
higher education. It reveals a linear approach of admission to higher education – holding a bachelor degree diplomas
or equivalent issued until the graduation year of the first promotion of students enrolled in cycle I, according to the

The level of participation of adult population in higher education depends on the relevance of studies for the
person and quality of his (her) life. Nowadays, in Moldova, we can not still rate the interest of adults in obtaining a
higher qualification than the previous one as active. Traditionally, the population considers learning as appanage
of childhood and youth, and investment in education is limited generally to its financial aspect oriented to children
and grandchildren. Adults, for the most part, do not have skills on time management in a liberal way oriented to personal
development priorities. The national and organizational framework for human capital management on labour market
at the social level does not contain the necessary and sufficient procedures for reconciliation between work and
family or personal life (time off for continuous professional development is not foreseen, the learning culture at the
work place is not developed, a consistent salary that would stimulate the motivation for the continuous development
of personnel is not present etc.). Therefore, policies, strategies and measures for encouraging adults participation in
higher education in the Republic of Moldova, should refer not only to empowering the educational system as a
whole from the perspective of ensuring the universal access to studies, but also to raising awareness and motivation
of people and employers on the learning values in XXI century.

The practice of states with more sensitive educational policies from the demographic perspective and with more
prospective and advanced experience in adult education, include specific measures for facilitating the adult access to
recurrent or compensatory education, policies for alternative ways to higher education targeted at non-traditional
candidates who do not have primary standard qualification (ex. measures to increase the rate of mature unemployed
people in higher education, policies of alternative access to higher education targeted to certain age groups of mature
students, setting of measurable objectives for increase of mature students participation in full-time and part-time
higher education, financial measures to cope with the commitment on supporting students in continuous education,
validation of prior studies, development of specific higher education programmes). We will mention the open character of the measures taken and their orientation towards the needs of mature students.

The fact that surprises us in the European higher education culture regarding adult issues in universities is the real or apparent flexibility between the openness of universities and functioning of mechanisms and implicit and explicit procedures for ensuring the quality of studies, both from the perspective of curriculum and personal, social and economic rationales captured in the dynamics of their relevance to humans, society and economy.

Higher education is often seen as the most problematic level regarding the implementation of procedures for the recognition of previous non-formal and informal education, and in Europe no common practice yet exists on recognition of non-formal and informal learning as the equivalent of a higher education diploma. However, the objectives set within the Bologna process, exert an increased pressure on the level of higher education to adapt its culture and practices [1, p.48].

The concept of national system for non-formal and informal learning proposed to the Government of the Republic of Moldova for approval considered primarily the development of legal framework and of programmes on integration of foreigners and of Moldovan assisted voluntary returned migrants. During the public hearing, the concept framework was extended to the local labour market, but only for validation of workers’ skills (workers’ occupations). The aim of the concept is to shape a national system of validation of the results obtained due to lifelong learning, professional education and training, work experience in non-formal and informal contexts.

The concept stipulates that validation of non-formal and informal learning results may have three aims:

a) to obtain an educational title or a professional equivalent by shortening the study length; b) to employ (recruit) or relocate of employees in positions involving other responsibilities (or higher responsibilities); c) to ensure the quality and career promotion by assessing employees for performance of their duties in accordance with a set of standards [9].

Unlike the Concept’s purposes that refer to vocational secondary education, the recognition of previous learning in higher education may have two different aims: firstly, to allow students for enrolment in a higher education institution and secondly, to allow students to demonstrate they meet, partially or totally, the requirements of a higher education programme [1, p. 50]. Technically speaking, the aims foresee a set of assessment procedures focused on the minimum of necessary skills for entering and graduating from a university.

The finding that policies aimed at increase of mature students participation in higher education training programs should consider flexible ways of organizing studies [idem, p. 55] is relevant for the situation in the Republic of Moldova, characterized by a tendency of decrease in the number of traditional students who opt for higher education and of acquisition by adult population of various skills and competences or some abilities derived from experience that need theoretical skills and validation.

The practice of higher education institutions in Moldova oriented lately to the principle of continuous learning consists in creation of departments/units of continuous learning. Thus, in 2010, at Moldova State University (MSU) it was created the Department of Professional Continuing Education. The activity of the Department of Professional Continuing Education is conducted according to the law in force and to a Regulation that can be supplemented and/or amended by the Senate’s decision of MSU. By the Department of Professional Continuing Education there is a Center of Continuing Education (CCE) of MSU that cooperates with the university faculties, units responsible for continuing education from the Ministry of Education, authorised institutions that deal with continuing education, and educational, administrative, economic etc. units within which the specialists trained in initial training programmes at MSU conduct their activities [12].

Within the Technical University of Moldova it is created a University Training Center, which comprises: Academic Staff Continuing Education Department; Continuing Education Specialized Center of Construction Specialists; Continuing Education Specialized Center of Auto Transportation Specialists (CFCTA); “Polyethylene” Personnel Training Center (CeformPers "POLIETILENĂ"); Design School, and Information and Vocational Guidance University Center (CENIOP) [14].

In order to meet the compliance rigours provided by the Bologna process within the Academy of Economic Studies from Moldova, the Center for Economic Development and Public Affairs (CDEAP) is open. The studies on professional requalification are conducted according to the Continuing Education Programme approved by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Moldova. The studies are for all holders of bachelor degree diplomas from all spheres of activity, heads of enterprises, small and medium business owners and for those who have already
finished the first faculty at some of the specialties of economics. Graduates receive diplomas of professional requalification [6].

The Continuing Professional Training Center of the State University “Alecu Russo” from Balti opened in 2007 is a specialized subdivision of continuing professional education of the University integrated in the structure of continuing professional education system of the Republic of Moldova. The Continuing Professional Training Center organizes and performs skills upgrade training courses for preuniversity teachers at the Northern regional and republican levels on the basis of professional training plan approved annually by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Moldova [11].

Within the State University of Medicine and Pharmacy “Nicolae Testemitanu” from the Republic of Moldova there is the Faculty of Continuing Education in Medicine and Pharmacy of physicians whose mission is to create and develop an environment of continuous training for doctors and pharmacists of the country. It also promotes performance improvements by taking into account the requirements of modern informational society; creates and organizes optimal structures for the process of continuous education; optimizes forms of postuniversity training of doctors – specialists and pharmacists: Continuous Medical Education (EMC) at distance, at the work place, part-time, by modules, intensive training courses and other forms; continuously updates postuniversity training programs according to the current requirements of the public health system; uses international experience in training of doctors and pharmacists [13].

In Universities of the Republic of Moldova the adult education appears also as a subject matter (eg. MSU, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences – Complimentary and Adult Education subject, State Pedagogical University „Alecu Russo” from Balti – Andragogy subject).

Also, we will mention andragogical peculiarities of university didactics at this stage based on humanistic assumptions about the adult as “trainable”, characterized by independent self-conceptualization, intrinsic motivation, a previous deep life experience, strong psychological motivation for learning and orientation to a well-defined aim, which is usually determined by his (her) social role and professional aspirations [3, 4].

By promoting mobility and attractiveness of learning and lifelong learning, the Bologna processes support the idea of pedagogy and andragogy intersecting, so now we are talking about a psycho-pedagogical paradigm of university education. This perspective encompasses an eclecticism of didactic strategies and methods based on several judgements: humanistic concepts of self-determination and the pragmatic, practical ones that are anchored in the reality and in the dimension of „to know to do”, democratic principles of access, freedom, participation, and psycho-pedagogical principles of education that focuses on the learner.

Therefore, we would like to express our opinion that researchers in the educational sciences sphere still show a sort of scepticism in applying andragogical paradigms in the study of processes and phenomena of higher education teaching.

The concern about adult education grows over time as a prerequisite and an opportunity to enhance social and economic value of education in general, education being the source of progress for society and a means to connect to the dynamics of the socio-cultural values during life time of a person.

In conclusion to the above, we conclude that adult education at universities and andragogical peculiarities of higher education derive from the following reasons of:

- organizational nature of education system (realization of lifelong learning principle, structuring on levels and cycles);
- social nature (public diversification, social activism, need for functional learning, diversification of educational paths, etc.);
- demographic nature (ageing population, increase of population life expectancy);
- economic nature (increased wear skills, increased rate of knowledge obsolescence, decreased distance between innovation and application of technology, malfunctions of labour market, increase of occupational competition, technological advancement of work processes etc.);
- psycho-social nature (increased sense of autonomy and independence, reduction of definite boundaries between social statutes and roles);
- psycho-pedagogical nature (focusing on learner, interactive learning, distance learning, self-directed learning).
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