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Considerations on the implementation of the lifelong learning initiative in the European Union

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Abstract

The development of human potential, through a formal or informal learning process, is a necessity in a global world, characterized by a rapid exchange of information, technological development, and the interdependence of world economies. The paper aims to show the evolution of the lifelong learning initiatives from the crystallization of this concept in the 1920s until today, its implementation, especially at the level of the European Union, and some actual issues of the implementation process. There is a close connection between social welfare and lifelong learning in our present society. In this context, the idea of lifelong learning has registered a spectacular evolution since its appearance. However, there are some problems in the implementation process of the lifelong initiatives because of the existence of the inequality of opportunity between well-educated and less advantaged persons and in the ongoing of the implementation process between developed and developing countries.

Keywords: lifelong learning; social welfare; inequality of opportunity.

1. Considerations regarding the Concept of Lifelong Learning

The 21st century can be rightly regarded as a century of transformation, economic and cultural globalization, and rapid technological development. In this context, it is vital to form a society which can adapt to the changes occurring in the environment (Jarvis, 2007, p.1), by always acquiring and updating knowledge and skills, necessary for everyday life and beyond.

The above-mentioned objective could not be realized without the learning process which has to be present in every stage of our lives. The learning process that we mean, does not refer only to the knowledge and skills acquired in formal education (primary, secondary, and tertiary education), but it also refers to spontaneous modalities of learning (Klein & Osborne, 2007, p. 99), which takes place at more informal places like our family, the community in which we live, our workplace, at the library, in museums, at sport or cultural events, i.e., in our everyday life. Lifelong learning as a concept is very difficult to define, because of its wide and general character, but it is synonymous with concepts like “permanent education,” “continuous learning” and “adult education.” The concepts mentioned above suggest a supportive and everlasting process of human resources development, which empowers individuals to obtain all the knowledge, values, and skills needed during their life and to apply them with creativity and trust, and also to enjoy them in every stage of their life.

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The concept of lifelong learning has to be defined taking into considerations these facts. So, it means a series of formal and informal activities, which have as a result knowledge acquiring, skills, behaviors and attitudes, which are useful for the subjects of the learning process in their life. This lifelong learning process takes place in every stage of an individual’s life and means the liberty to choose the activities considered to be proper for the acquiring of the desired information, the liberty to choose the moment at which these activities take place and also imply the recognition of the individual’s merit for obtaining the desired objective.

Every individual who participates to the lifelong learning process has the liberty to attain his or her objectives by personal efforts or with the help of his or her social, or work relations. The process of permanent learning begins from the first moments of our life, when we start to learn to live, then it continues with the period before the beginning of primary education in the context of our families and the communities in which we live (Chapman & Aspen, 1997, p. 4), by learning how to communicate and socialize with people. At the school we are learning actually how to learn and after finalizing our studies we have to learn how to do things in our profession and also in our life. The process of learning continues, even if it slows down in the meanwhile, until we die.

The power and the coverage of the concept of lifelong learning consist just in its wide character. It encompasses all the formal and informal modalities of learning mechanisms, which fits, at a given moment, with the necessities of an individual who is in a given stage of his life. The proper learning mechanisms, or the places where it takes place can vary, according to the life stage in matter, but this does not change the essence of the lifelong learning phenomenon. The learning mechanism also evolves and adapts themselves to the requirements of the moment, having an open and flexible character, and they can be adapted to the needs of a potential "student," irrespective of his or her age.

This continuous learning process has an essential role in forming the physical, intellectual, mental and emotional capacities of individuals. So, it is not surprising the fact that lifelong learning strategies became a major element of educational, youth, research and employment policies. However, let’s see when this concept was born.

A Short History of the Lifelong Learning Concept

The concept of lifelong learning was met for the first time in the works of Eduard Lindeman (Lindeman & Brookfield, 1987, p. 210) in the England of 1920’, who regarded life as a never ending learning process, which encompasses not only the formal, but also the informal ways of learning.

In the period of 1930-1970, the concept was used mainly in relation with adult and employee education, especially in relation to professional training courses, so having a more restrictive sense, than our days. The concept widened its sense gradually, after the Second World War period. The 1970s meant the implication of three major worldwide organizations, which have manifested interest regarding lifelong learning: the Council of Europe, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. We are mentioning here the UNESCO Report from 1972 „Learning to be,” which regards „permanent education” as a cultural policy promoting the continuous change of society, which takes place in different forms depending on the social class and the age of the individual, subject of the lifelong process.

The OECD Report from 1973 has reiterated almost the same ideas presented by the UNESCO report from 1972, but some significant elements of novelty were brought by the OECD Report from 1996 „Lifelong Learning for all.” The mentioned report regarded learning process as a way to achieve civic participation, social cohesion in society and the proper method to form a well skilled workforce. In this regards the reports also specified some measures, which are essential for attaining the above-mentioned objectives by lifelong learning, such as: facilitating learning already from the early childhood; the creation of bound between learning and working; the proper rewarding of professional and educational success and a coherent governmental educational policy.

The popularity of lifelong learning initiatives has also increased, because employers have discovered the advantage to invest in human capital development as a way to streamline economic efficiency and to combat the unemployment phenomenon.

1. Aspects related to the implementation of Lifelong Learning Initiatives

There is agreement between specialists regarding the fact that lifelong learning, in order to be properly implemented, needs to have to be sustained by a proper strategy, which must have at least the following elements (Harrison & Edwards, 2002, pp. 128-129; World Bank, 2003, p. 108):
• The existence of partnerships between public institutions (Catana, 2007), which are competent to apply educational policies. Local, national and regional public authorities have to coordinate actions in order to fulfill the needs of population;

• The existence of partnerships between institutions of education and private actors (employing companies, research centers, nonprofit organizations, etc.) [Puie, 2011];

• Proper financing (OCDE, 2000), which means not only an increased budget for educational activities, which take place at every stage of life, but also refer to a proper allocation of financial resources and the finding of appropriate modalities to facilitate private investments in education and human resources;

• The development of a culture of learning – which means the growing of desire to learn in early childhood and reveals the importance of pre-scholar teaching activities;

• Facilitating access to learning facilities, by appropriate information regarding these facilities and the construction of special centers for learning activities;

• The insurance of a proper recompense for successes registered in educational matters and for the struggle for excellence, based on a proper set of indicators and other instruments for the measurement of evolution;

In the European Union, the topic of lifelong learning has gained more interest especially after the adoption of Lisbon Strategy (Rodrigues, 2009, p.17; European Commission, 2006, p. 120; Antoniou & Alexandrou, 2006, p. 52), educational strategies and lifelong learning being of a vital importance in the attainment of knowledge-based society, one of the major objectives of the mentioned European strategy for growth and development. The Lisbon Strategy was followed by other significant documents at European level, such as the Commission Communication from 2002, entitled „Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality," which was followed by the Council Resolution from 27th of June 2002 on the same topic. In order to facilitate access to education, in 2003 was established an online portal which contained data regarding the learning opportunities all across European Union – PLOTEUS – portal on Learning Opportunities throughout Europe [http://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/].

Nowadays, the educational and professional training policies of Member States reflect the Member States concern for the issue of Lifelong Learning. Even if there does not exist, as a rule, special national legislation on the topic of lifelong learning all the Member States recognizes the fact that lifelong learning is a process which regards every stage of an individual life and pays the appropriate attention to the problem.

The European Commission DG for Education and Culture Report on Implementing Lifelong Learning mentions the common aspects of the Member States approach regarding Lifelong Learning, both in what regards problems, which have benefited to a lot of attention and problems, which have been neglected by authorities.

As a common aspect, the definition of lifelong learning in every Member State is having a wide character, and it refers to all ways of learning used by the population. However, national legislations are paying more attention to primary, secondary and tertiary education and professional training. Another, common aspects regard financing, the financial burden being shared between local, national and regional authorities, non-governmental organizations and civil society. Furthermore, special attention has been given to the training of teaching staff, and for special courses organized for teachers in order to acquire the necessary skill for new teaching methods. In the context of lifelong learning, the teacher role in education shifted from that of an information supplier, to that of a coach, who supervises the education process, which takes place on an individual basis.

Besides, the above mentioned positive common aspects of the situations from the member States, the report also notifies some negative aspects, some common holes in the Member States’ Approach regarding Lifelong Learning. These negative aspects, refers to the lack of attention allocated to pre-scholar education, despite its importance for the development of a culture of education. Disadvantaged groups, like ethnic groups, asylum seekers and refugees, peoples with psychical or mental disabilities, rural populations are receiving also little attention, despite the importance of education as a lever for social inclusion. Likewise, there are too few activities, especially for those above 65 years.

Another problem is that which regards information problems. Lifelong learning projects has to be popularized and not only in places frequented by those who are already benefiting from educational facilities, but also in common places like commercial centers, pubs, clubs, museums, theatre, etc.

Last, but not least we are once again mentioning the importance of public-private partnership in the process of implementation and financing of lifelong learning projects. First of all, it is very important to establish a decentralized system in applying educational policies, in order to evaluate and meet the needs of citizens. This implies a very good coordination between ministers and local authorities. The conclusion of partnerships between
private actors and public institutions is essential for improving the skills of workforce and for reducing unemployment, but also for the facilitation of access to learning facilities.

The most relevant example of partnerships between public institutions and private actors, are those concluded between educational institutions (like universities) and companies from a given domain of activity or research institutes. Such educational clusters permit for individuals to obtain exactly those skills which are needed by the employer. Partnerships between research institutes and higher-education institutions can give rise to economies of scale and can accelerate the process of finding scientific explanations or solutions for actuality problems.

Conclusions

The evolution registered by the concept of lifelong learning since its apparition in the 1920’ until today is spectacular. Being used at the beginnings, only to designate programs designed to adults’ education, the concept widened itself in the meantime, covering all types of formal and non-formal activities, having as object acquiring the information needed for everyday life and, which take part in every stage of an individual life.

In the European Union, lifelong learning became the central part of educational policies, especially after the adoption of Lisbon strategy, in the context of struggles for a knowledge-based society. In order to ensure the attainment if this latter objective, national and European governments have developed strategies in order to implement the lifelong learning concept in education.

The basic elements of these strategies were the insurance of a culture of learning even at a pre-scholar age, the proper financing of lifelong learning projects, social inclusion, public partnerships between institutions and public-private partnerships between public institutions and private actors. The importance of learning in every stage of our lives is becoming more and more important in the process of the society adaptation to the actual economic, social and environmental conditions. So, the importance of developing more competitive lifelong learning strategies will be more and more essential for a successful governmental policy.

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