Fighting poverty and social exclusion by stepping up adult education - research report

The present paper aims to point out the urgent need of significantly expanding and improving adult education provision as a measure to alleviate (the risk of) poverty and social exclusion, in the context in which the current technocrat government of Romania recently adopted a quite comprehensive anti-poverty package containing 47 measures (www.gov.ro/ro/stiri/pachetul-national-anti-saracie), which prioritises actions of the National Strategy for Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction 2015-2020.

Key words: poverty, social exclusion, Romania, TAP project

Romania is among the poorest countries in the European Union (EU), with the highest relative poverty rate (25.4%) (http://www.agerpres.ro/economie/2015/10/27/ins-romania-primul-loc-in-ue-privind-rata-saraciei-relative-12-24-19). This rate is the share of people with an equivalised disposable income (after social transfer) below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold, which is set at 60% of the national median equivalised disposable income after social transfers. Yet, Romania also has the lowest rate of adults aged 25 to 64 who participate in education or training among the EU Member States. According to Eurostat, the rate of participation in lifelong learning is the percentage of people aged 25 to 64 who stated that they received education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey (EU Labour Force Survey) out of the total population of the same age group (excluding those who did not answer to the question referring to 'participation in education and training'). In 2015, in Romania this rate was 1.3%. It is noteworthy that the information collected relates to all education or training whether or not relevant to the respondent's current or possible future job (Eurostat, 2015).

Furthermore, the results of the 2016 Baccalaureate1 which were made public a few days ago inform us that of the roughly 130,000 students who sat for this examination, around one third (32% - i.e. over 41,000) failed to pass2, meaning that they do not qualify for higher education and also that essentially they do not hold any qualification for a job. If, within 60 days of finishing school, these young people do not find a job, they qualify for unemployment benefit, and consequently for a maximum period of 6 months they may get 250 RON (around 55 Euro).

The situation of young school leavers without a secondary school diploma is worrying in light of the high percentage of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET). In 2014, 17% (over 440,000) of the people aged 15 to 24 were NEET (as compared to 12.5% of the EU28 average figure) (https://issuu.com/socialdoers/docs/invisible_generation_neet). At the European level, NEET and giving up early on education and training are hot issues. According to the Eurydice brief Tackling Early Leaving from Education and Training (Eurydice, 2015), “leaving education early leads to reduced opportunities in the labour market and an increased likelihood of unemployment, socio-economic disadvantage, health problems,

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1 National upper secondary school leaving examination, taken at around the age of 18/19.
2 The national-level passing rate was 68.1%, with extremes at over 84% and under 40%.
as well as reduced participation in political, social and cultural activities. Furthermore, these negative consequences have an impact on the offspring of early leavers and thus the problem may be perpetuated.” (p. 5)

Given the above worrying figures related to the risk of poverty and social exclusion, and the fact that under the open method of coordination in the field of Education and Training (ET 2020), Member States agreed on a target to be reached by 2020, according to which at least 15% of the adults (aged 25-64) should participate in learning (*Skills for the Labour Market, 2016*), Romania must step up adult education, and on the whole implement the concept of lifelong learning much more effectively.

The 2011 Law of National Education (Law 1/2011), which regulates the organisation and functioning of the national education system, names ‘social inclusion’ as one of its fundamental principles (Article 3, letter o), and states that ‘lifelong learning is a right guaranteed by law’ (Article 13, para.1). The overall goal of lifelong learning is the individual’s full, comprehensive development and the sustainable development of society (Law 1/2011, Article 329). Lifelong learning is centred upon developing key competences and competences that are needed for specific fields of activity or for qualifications. Furthermore, adults’ access to training (whether employees or people looking for a job) is guaranteed by the Code of Labour (Law 53/2003).

At the central level, the Ministry of National Education and Scientific Research manages the education and training sector. However, the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Protection and the Elderly also has responsibilities in the realm of training, being in charge – among other – of the professional training of adults.

The site of the *Agentia Nationala de Ocupare a Fortei de Munca* (*National Agency for Employment*), in response to the question: “How is the professional training of people in search of a job done” has the following brief message for visitors to the site: ‘Professional training programmes ensure, according to the law, the initiation, training, retraining, professional development and specialisation of persons in search of a job. The forms in which the professional training of people in search of a job are done include: courses, internships/practicum and specialisation, as well as other forms, according to the law.’ (*www.anofm.ro*, our translation). On a different page of the same site (under Frequently Asked Questions (*www.anofm.ro*)), the following message informs people in search of a job about learning and professional development opportunities, which “can be provided for a fee as well by service providers from the public or private sector accredited and / or authorised under law”:

“People who have registered with ANOFM benefit from the following services (*www.anofm.ro*):

   a) Professional information and counselling;  
   b) Work mediation  
   c) Professional training  
   d) Consultancy and assistance for starting an independent activity or for initiating a business.”

Clearly, this message is not very helpful. Digging further, from the same website one can learn that the adults’ professional training is provided by Regional Adult Training Centres. To check the provision of the Cluj Regional Adult Training Centre, we visited the institution’s website, and found that while it did name 37 professions in which it provides training, it was last updated in June 2010 (*www.crfpacj.ro*).

Either webpage we turn to, it would be hard to imagine how a person in search of a job, especially those most vulnerable, with low literacy skills, could actually learn anything from this unfriendly website.
As for information available on the website of the Ministry of Education, we find from a report on the state of pre-university education in Romania aiming – among others – to analyse the quality of this sector of the education system in 2012 (www.edu.ro) that there is one single mentioning of Second Chance Education (which theoretically should include adults as well), and which simply states that around 12% of the schools included in the sample of 1023 schools provide Second Chance Education. However, nothing specific about the quality of this type of education is mentioned. Similarly, in a more recent report (processing data from the school year 2013-2014), there is no mentioning whatsoever of Second Chance Education, which – however – is part of pre-university education system (www.edu.ro). This is a finding of deep concern, when combined with the conclusion of a report on the state of literacy instruction in Romania that states that “There is no specific literacy provision for adults in Romania. However, some aspects of adult literacy are embedded in the teaching of Romanian language within the Second Chance Programme. […] Adult literacy remains invisible as a policy issue, with no coherent structure to identify or meet the literacy needs of the adult population.” (www.eli-net.eu).

The question arises: given that

a) “analysis of historic PISA data suggests that many adults will struggle to meet current and future demands on their literacy skills” (www.eli-net.eu),
b) under 2% of adults participate in adult education,
c) Romania has the highest rate of relative poverty,
d) national level institutions whose role it would be – according to law – to provide adult education and training either ignore the educational needs or are silent about them,

what could be done to make adult education more effective as a way of alleviating poverty?

In terms of adult education and training, the recent plans expressed in the Anti-Poverty Set of Measures essentially aim to step up Second Chance Education and to improve vocational education and training. We are yet to see to what extent the plans of the government will bear fruit. It is nonetheless clear that the domain of adult education and training needs clear focus and a lot of determination if it should be expected to play a role in combating poverty and social exclusion.
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