

## The benchmarking – towards a european qualification framework for lifelong learning

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### Abstract

The last years' changes and development within technology, economy and social patterns are to a large degree influencing the methods and organization of adult education in Europe. Adults learn better in a non-competitive environment where they can work together with others and where they are in control of their learning processes. The thesis of the study: the importance of implementing the European benchmarks' policies and strategies in Romania in order to EU integration. The objective: Underlining the importance of: Open learning, Distance learning, Flexible learning promoted by the Benchmarks' policies and strategies. The aim is to benchmark policy performance as far as possible independently of national circumstances so that key relationships can be identified between a type of policy and a type of impact reaching the European level.

The sources: the European legislation, researches and developing programs between 2000 and 2006.

**Conclusions:** The necessity of lifelong learning approach to transparency (EUROPASS) and recognition (European Qualifications Framework). Formal learning is the reference point for allocating credits as well as the recognition of credits (based on competence acquired). Recognition of credits always takes place in the framework of a formal qualification and is the responsibility of the provider of that qualification.

**Keywords:** benchmarking, European Qualification Framework, professional employees' standards, professional counseling lifelong learning.

### 1. The benchmarking – EU legislation for providing better educational results on long term

All organizations have some functions to perform: providing a source of employment and of income, the production and supply of goods and more than these. The goals of the organizations are the reasons for its existence. A goal is a future expectation, a desired accomplishment providing a standard of performance, justification for action taken and providing guidelines for decision-making. Every work organization is focused on efficiency and effectiveness, especially in today's difficult economic environment and in the face of fierce world competition.

Organizations are made up of their individual members. Each individual member is a central feature of organizational behavior and a necessary part of any behavioral situation. When the needs of the individual and the demands of the organization are incompatible, this can result in conflict and frustration. Organizational learning is complex, occurs at different cognitive levels and involves multiple cognitive processes as perception, thinking, memory and imagination. The information acquisition does not only involve bringing information about the external environment into the organization, but must be extended to the use of existing knowledge within the organization. But when information is widely distributed in an organization, so that more and more varied sources for it exist, retrieval efforts are more likely to succeed and individuals and units are more likely to be able to learn (Chraif, 2005).

Teachers and trainers are traditionally one of the most important interfaces between individuals and society. They have always played a vital role in the transmission of knowledge and cultural values. However, the economic and social changes in Europe proceeding from the knowledge revolution are placing increasingly complex demands on the teaching profession. Schools and teachers are expected to deal with different languages and student backgrounds, to be sensitive to culture and gender issues, to promote tolerance and social cohesion, to respond effectively to disadvantaged students and students with learning or behavioral problems, to use new technologies, and to keep pace with rapidly developing fields of knowledge and approaches to student assessment (OECD 2004).

#### 1.1. The EU Legislation environment in benchmarking implementation

The European Council in Lisbon in 2000 responded to the changing global challenge by announcing a comprehensive economic and social policy strategy: to become, by 2010, "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth, with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion." (Lisbon 2000).

The responsibility put on European education and training systems by the institutionalization of this goal is immense. Education and training help to deliver what European citizens desire most – personal fulfillment, jobs, prosperity, greater social cohesion and a cleaner environment. Without first-rate education and training systems, a skilled, flexible workforce, a cohesive, participative society, research into high-value and technologically-advanced products, it will not be possible to achieve the Lisbon goals.

The high ambitions in the field of European education and training were expressed in the wish of the Barcelona European Council of March 2002, that European training and education systems should become "a world reference for quality by 2010." (Barcelona 2002).

The detailed analyses of progress towards the Lisbon objectives in training and education (2006) is represented by a report endorsed by The Standing Group on Indicators and Benchmarks prepared by: DG Education and Culture, Unit A6 (Analyses, Indicators and Benchmarks) in cooperation with

EUROSTAT Eurydice European Unit CRELL (Centre of Research on Lifelong Learning) at the JRC. The major strategic objectives highlighted in this report were:

- 1) Improving the quality and effectiveness of education and training systems in the EU;

- 2) Facilitating the access of all to education and training systems;
- 3) Opening up education and training systems to the wider world.

In order of revealing the progress in the last five years (2000-2005) there were put in discussion 29 indicators for monitoring performance and progress of education and training systems in Europe (technical definitions), Statistics and Graphics and Standing Group on Indicators and Benchmarks.

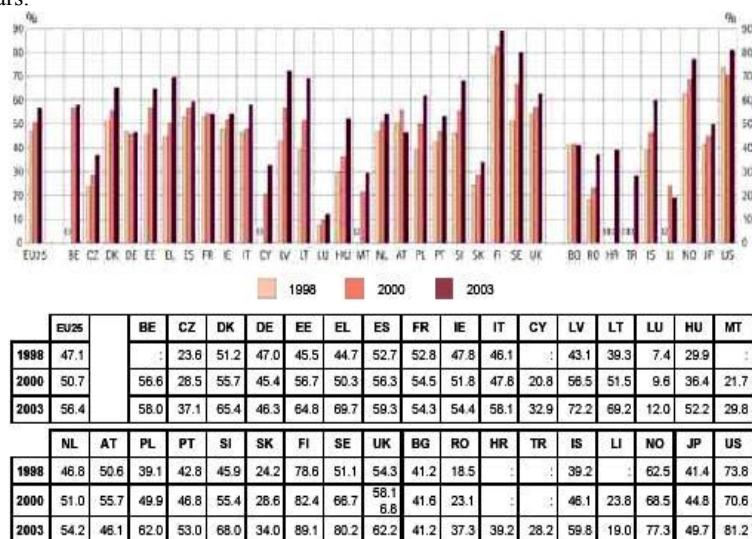
There were put in discussion and analyzed for these three major objectives the performances and progresses registered between 2000 and 2005 for the EU countries and the two Acceding countries (AC-Bulgaria, Romania), the Candidate Countries (Croatia, FYR Macedonia, Turkey); and three countries of the European Economic Area (EEA - Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway): improving education and training for teachers and trainers; developing skills for the knowledge society; increasing recruitment to scientific and technical studies; ensuring access to ICT for everyone; participation in education and training; individual characteristics of early school leavers and factors influencing early school leaving; improving foreign language learning; mobility and co-operation.

## 1.2. Investment in education and training – major objective in benchmarking implementation

Key competences represent a set of transferable, multifunctional skills and qualities that all individuals need for personal development, social inclusion and employability. Key competency areas include the foundation skills, basic competences in mathematics, technology, foreign languages, ICT, science, learning-to-learn, social skills, and general culture. These competences should be developed by the end of compulsory education and should form the foundation for more advanced or specialized training in higher education and throw lifelong learning activities. Data from the European Labor Force Survey shows that participation in lifelong learning is strongly correlated to attainment levels achieved in formal education (EU Commission report 2006). Completing upper-secondary education is therefore very important for participation in the knowledge society. It is very important to inform them about the high personal returns from education, including, for example, higher salaries, higher labor force participation and a lower risk of unemployment.

Also, in the same report on 2006, it is highlighted that The Bologna process could influence participation in higher education in the future. The two-cycle courses make first degrees shorter in some European countries, thereby lowering costs and making them more attractive to students and reducing drop-outs. Some countries which had a structure closer to that to be generalized through the Bologna process, such as the UK, Denmark and some new Member States, have exhibited higher levels of participation tertiary education than countries in which long degrees were general, such as Spain, Italy or Germany. Furthermore, the report on 2006 offer the dates of participation in tertiary education is expanding not only in some countries which showed low participation rates in the mid-1990s, such as Greece, but also in countries that already had high participation rates, like the Nordic countries. As it can be observed, the participation rate for Romania is going up in order to implement the Bologna process.

As it can be seen in Chart 1, Participation in tertiary education has been increasing since many years in the EU. In 2003, European students enrolled in tertiary education represented already about half of the European population aged 20-24 years.



Data sources: Eurostat, UOE data collection, detailed analyses of progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training, 2006 report.

The government investment and regulations play important role in shaping access to tertiary education. The state is a large provider of higher education and it defines conditions for access, including number of admitted students, mainly by financing higher education. The state can also adopt strategies in relation to financial support to students with disadvantaged background. First of all, access to tertiary education depends on the demand for it. Some individuals understand the investment in their tertiary education as investment in the future. Educational investment is worthwhile for them in relation to economic and social returns with which it is connected. Individuals demand education and training as long as it produces a return to their investment in time and money. There is also still a relatively strong link between class of origin and class of destination.

Furthermore, the access to higher education therefore depends to an important extent on the education and occupational status of the parents and, more generally, at macro-level, on the degree of income socio-economic inequalities in a given

country.

## 2. The lifelong learning participation for adults

### 2.1. Participation of adults in lifelong learning

Look at the participation in non-formal education from the perspective of integration in the labor force, the unemployed and the economically inactive persons participate more in formal education, whereas the employed persons which participate more in non-formal education. Making time available during working hours would encourage citizens to undertake more training, but the main incentive seems to be financial support. The ways of training supported funding by the employer and support by public measures (learning accounts, vouchers, and tax relief and more appropriate recognition of skills and qualifications) could increase participation in lifelong learning in general and in continuing vocational training in particular.

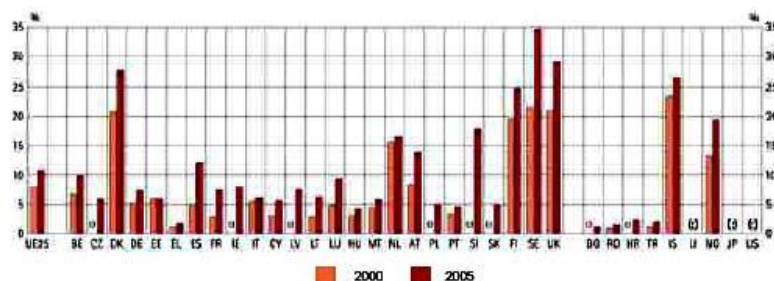
The young people who leave the education without recognized qualifications are less likely to participate in lifelong learning and also, face disadvantages in the labor market in today's knowledge-based society. Their personal and social development is curtailed and they are at increased risk of poverty and social exclusion. These facts led the Council to the adoption of a benchmark on early school leavers and to the inclusion of the target to reduce early school leaving in the European Employment Strategy in 2003 (Brussels 2006).

### 2.2. Opening up education and training systems for adults to EU and to world

The modern information society is premised on the faculty of efficient communication, and in such a diverse linguistic and cultural landscape as Europe, this presupposes a commitment on the part of European citizens to acquire each other's languages. Early foreign-language acquisition is, moreover, the forerunner to the better cultural understanding and increased mobility within the emerging European area of lifelong learning. Furthermore, a labor force with practical language and intercultural skills enables European enterprise to compete effectively in the global market-place. Looking backwards, Barcelona European Council in 2002 gave support to the issue of language learning when it called for "the mastery of basic skills, in particular by teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age" (Barcelona, 2002). Today, knowledge of foreign languages is recognized as one of the key competencies that should be intensively pursued within the lifelong learning framework.

Following the Chart 2 and the table below it can be seen the participation of adults in lifelong learning for the UE countries and for the two acceding countries: Romania and Bulgaria.

**Chart 2 – Participation of adults in lifelong learning (Percentage of population aged 25-64 participating in education and training, 2000 and 2005)**



	EU25	BE	CZ	DK	DE	EE	EL	ES	FR	IE	IT	CY	LV	LT	LU	HU	MT
<b>2000</b>	7.9	8.8	20.8	5.2	8.0	1.1	5.0	2.8	5.5	3.1	2.8	4.8	3.1	4.5			
Females	8.4	8.0	23.8	4.8	7.6	1.1	5.4	3.1	5.4	3.2	3.8	3.9	3.4	3.5			
Males	7.4	7.6	17.9	5.8	4.1	1.1	4.5	2.6	5.5	3.1	1.9	5.7	2.7	5.8			
<b>2005</b>	10.8	10.0	5.9	27.8	7.4	5.9	1.8	12.1	7.6	8.0	6.2	5.6	7.8	8.3	9.4	4.2	5.8
Females	11.7	9.7	6.4	31.0	7.0	7.5	1.7	13.1	7.9	8.4	6.8	6.1	10.0	7.8	9.5	4.8	4.8
Males	10.0	10.3	5.5	24.2	7.8	4.2	1.9	11.2	7.4	8.8	5.7	5.1	4.9	4.9	9.3	3.5	6.7

	NL	AT	PL	PT	SI	SK	FI	SE	UK	BG	RO	HR	TR	IS	LI	NO	JP	US
<b>2000</b>	15.6	8.3	3.4	19.8	21.6	21.0	0.9	1.1	23.5	13.3								
Females	14.7	7.4	3.5	21.6	24.1	24.4	0.8	1.3	26.7	13.8								
Males	16.4	8.2	3.3	17.7	19.2	17.7	1.0	0.8	20.4	12.8								
<b>2005</b>	18.6	13.9	5.0	4.6	17.8	5.0	24.8	34.7	29.1	1.1	1.6	2.3	2	26.6	18.4			
Females	16.7	14.8	5.6	4.7	19.6	5.2	28.6	39.7	33.9	1.1	1.7	2.3	2.6	29.7	21.0			
Males	18.6	13.2	4.3	4.5	16.0	4.7	21.1	29.9	24.2	1.1	1.5	2.3	1.4	23.5	17.8			

Data source: Eurostat (Labor Force Survey), detailed analyses of progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training, 2006 report.

Participation in education and training tends to be proportional to the level of prior education. As it can be observed in chart 2 (labor sources survey) in 2005 only 3.4% of the population aged 25-64 with less than upper-secondary education participated in education and training in the four weeks prior to the survey, which corresponds to less than one third of the average figure over all levels of education, and less than one seventh of the figure for those with high educational

attainment. Furthermore, sources from the DG Education and Culture, Unit A6 (Analyses, Indicators and Benchmarks), EUROSTAT and Eurydice European Unit REL (Centre of Research on Lifelong Learning) at the JRC underline in the report on 2006 regarding the detailed analyses of progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training that people with higher education levels are more easily reached by, and more receptive to, measures to encourage participation in education and training. The fact that many initiatives do not reach people with a low initial level of education is a key challenge for policy-makers.

Examining progress since 2000 to 2005 concerning participation of adults in lifelong learning it can be observed there are still countries where more progress should be achieved, and areas where further improvement must have priority, for example in order to reduce inequities. The highest percentages were obtained by Denmark (27.6%) and UK (29.1%). Unfortunately, in Romania the lifelong educational process for adults doesn't go quite expected, only 1.6% on 2005 comparing to 0.9% in 2000.

These dates from the report on 2006 concerning participation of adults in lifelong learning should determinate us to implement in our educational structures from Romania the lifelong learning and training for adults. Thus, this implementation process is important not only for UE integration according UE standards of job performances but for increasing the level of education and training of the adults in labor field in Romania for high performances in work.

The Conclusions of the Lisbon Council, regarding the potential of mobility as an economic and a social good, specifically requested that measures be taken to foster the mobility of students, teachers, trainers and research staff. The Lisbon Council also asked the Commission and Globalization and the challenges of the modern knowledge-based economy have made it imperative for Europe to mobilize its assets, in all senses of the phrase. The strategy devised by the Lisbon Council in 2000 to increase Europe's competitiveness was underpinned by the principle of dismantling internal barriers and encouraging the movement of people, as a means of stimulating the labor market and increasing the professional and personal competence of the labor force.

Student mobility is one way of stimulating the free movement of persons within the European labor market, since those who have spent time abroad in educational institutions are more likely to exploit the benefits of an increasingly international labor market. They benefit from increased cultural and linguistic competence, as well as better knowledge of the labor markets abroad. Moreover, student mobility helps developing European citizenship and European awareness. By increasing understanding of cultural and linguistic diversity, it supports the creation of a European area of Education and Training.

### **3. The benchmarking policies in Romania according the EU integration**

The diversity of the systems of education and training in individual European countries is understood as a part of Europe's cultural features. Based on the traditions and specific conditions the individual Member States tried to respond to the needs of individual citizens, economies and societies in the field of education and training in a different way. Some countries have a comprehensive, non-selective system of education and training, in other countries the systems start to be selective already at an earlier stage. Taking in consideration the Romanian educational system and its possibilities of adaptation to EU standards required it must operate changes at all the educational levels. The first changes operated were the Bologna educational system, the credits accorded for the continuum learning of the adults gained in adults learning activities and trainings.

Seeing the dates from chart 2 and analyzing the low percentage of the adults engaged in lifelong learning versus the high percentages of the EU countries we have to understand that living in a world based on knowledge and high performances we have to adapt and to evolve also as science, work performances not only as human species.

#### **3.1. The lifelong learning approach for adults in Romania**

Participation in education and training throughout life has become a necessity for the individual living in a knowledge society. The foundations for the participation in education and training, and therefore for successful personal development and professional life, are already set in early childhood. Access to and participation in preprimary education is crucial for those children who are at risk of being excluded, due to various factors (for example low economic and educational status of their parents, special needs).

However, current demographic trends imply that Romania will need to rely not only on well-educated younger generations but also on older workers – it is imperative to increase the labor-market participation of older people overall employment levels. The integration/ re-integration of these groups into the labor force will entail providing them with the skills and competencies they need to participate in a fast-developing knowledge-based economy. Moreover, all adults engaged in labor field will need to up-date their skills and qualifications throughout life for continuing personal and professional development.

Furthermore, young people who leave education without recognized qualifications are at a disadvantage in the labor market. Moreover, certain groups of early school leavers are likely to experience greater disadvantage than others, in particular those who leave the system before completion of primary education.

Adults learn better in a non-competitive environment where they can work together with others and where they are in control of their learning processes. They are more motivated when they acquire knowledge and skills in a situation where their self-respect is not at risk. The learning climate is important; age and life experience are aspects that should be taken in consideration when developing learning environments. Also the relationship with the teacher is crucial.

As a starting point in adult education in EU countries were opened centers promoting open flexible learning in adult educational environment: FOCAL network project (partly supported by the Grundtvig action of the Socrates program), The Open Learning Center at Vox (Oslo, Norway); the

Open Learning Center at Fáy András Szakközépiskola, Hungary; The Open Learning Center in Breitnerstraat (Albeda

College, Rotterdam, the Netherlands); FAEA- Spain; VUC-Oesthimmerland (one of 58 centres for Adult Education in Denmark); Cyber market- Sweden and more.

Thinking of the changes shall come into Romanian educational system we have to take in consideration that the European education is varied because Europe is a mixture of countries with different educational practices, theories and goals. The educational framework varies from country to country. Each country is unique in its approach to education, as well as facing challenges specific to the country or area.

### **3.2. Focusing on lifelong education and training of adults in the self development and knowledge acquisition way**

As we have noticed, in the last few years since the Multinational Corporations and the international companies has entered on Romanian labor market, the interest of the employee, adults and students has grown in achieving high qualification and gaining experience in the labor field.

Adults have private attitudes which can affect their possibilities of learning. In general it is their own choice to start learning (again) and most of the time they want to learn useful subjects they can use as soon as possible.

They want to have it clear from the beginning what the learning goals are and what they can be used for. The intensity of learning is lower and the time available for learning can vary a lot compared to the time usually spent in education.

The adult should be respected and accepted as an autonomous and responsible individual. Self-respect is important for everyone and especially the adult with negative school experiences should have the possibility to participate in a learning program where he can develop successfully.

Feelings of power and incompetence in the learning situations can affect the effective learning. A good learning climate for the adult learner is a non-competitive atmosphere where he can work together with others and where he is in control of his learning process.

But also within the various institutions the profile of the adult student can be very different. Irrespective from the student's starting level the curriculum should be developed in such a way that the student stays motivated. It is important that the student can learn in a climate where he feels respected, both socially and on the basis of his or her formal and informal competence.

Experiencing different learning styles and different knowledge acquisition ways in the last five years, working with employee in developing teams at different companies, I have made many researches about the training efficiency in banking organizations (Chraif 2006), the role play as active learning method in behavior control (Chraif 2005), the training focused on communication in negotiation using the role play method (Chraif 2006).

As a final conclusion, after self experiencing the efficiency of the training in adults learning and the importance of the lifelong learning for adults and young people as well, it is important to accept the implementation of the educational reforms taking place in EU (the benchmarking strategies), not only for acceding to EU as European country on the Europe's map but for self development, and self effectiveness in a world tending to Globalization where the competition in the labor market shall be very tide.

In order of growing as knowledge society and complement our knowledge, competencies and skills for personal and professional development, it is important to underline the role of the strategy adopted at the European Council Spring Summit set a new goal for the European Union, namely that of becoming: "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth, with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion."

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