

EDUCATIONAL POLICIES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract:

Educational policies are the strategic development directions of the educational system created according to some studies of analysis, synthesis, diagnosis and prognosis typical of educational environment at all levels.

Preparing a coherent set of educational policies involves identifying the social demands, aspirations and major educational issues of the community and of its development process.

In the European Union, all member states are responsible for their educational and training systems; the EU policy is supposed to support the steps taken at national level and to help address common challenges such as population aging, lack of skilled workers, technological developments and global competition.

In Romania, the educational system has required an ongoing reform meant to ensure a balance among quality, equity, diversity and competence at central and local levels. The Romanian educational system is continuously changing and improving in various fields and levels, in compliance with economic, social, political and cultural changes.

Key Words: *educational policies, educational system, education, training*

JEL Classification: *I2*

1. Introduction

Nowadays, it has been demonstrated worldwide that investment in human capital, human education are major determinants to the future of any country. The knowledge, skills and creative abilities, moral and spiritual qualities of individuals in any society depend to a large extent on educational policies, education systems' quality.

European Union imperatives in the field of education system aim at a harmonious, well built system, where the main role lies with the youth. The first steps for achieving this goal have been made with the establishment of the European Union. Thus, the Treaty establishing the European Community has laid down steps to support Member States in developing their educational policies, each Member State having complete freedom and responsibility in the organization of its education in compliance with community principles, namely: non-discrimination, free movement of people, freedom of settling, etc. Thus, they have reached a consensus on joint objectives and an exchange of best practices in the field has taken place. After this time, they have developed a series of programmes for educational purposes, such as those designed for the academic level or vocational training for young people.

2. European Cooperation in Education

European cooperation in education begins with the adoption of the *White Paper on Education and Training*, "*Teaching and learning - towards Knowledge-Based Society*", by means of which the European Union is moving towards a knowledge society based on lifelong learning.

In the field of education, a prerequisite for adjusting to economic, social, informational requirements in constant change is ongoing learning. Both at European and global levels, lifelong learning has become a priority of education systems in recent years.

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Formal and informal education must customize and develop skills taking into account society requirements as a whole and the needs of each individual.

At EU level, they have implemented the "Lifelong Learning Programme" comprising a number of sub-programmes, namely:

- *Comenius* for public and private school education, and for those who operate in this sector: students, teachers, parent associations, local authorities, NGO's etc. This sub-programme financially supports school partnerships, teacher training, initial and ongoing training in order to increase the quality and enhance the European dimension in education;
- *Erasmus* for higher education seeks to increase the quality and volume of students' and teachers' mobility at European level, cooperation among higher education institutions in Europe and increasing transparency and compatibility between higher education and vocational qualifications achieved at European level;
- *Leonardo da Vinci* for vocational training and education aims at transnational cooperation in the field of labour force vocational training. It aims to increase the quality of vocational training systems and practices, to use new methods and tools for vocational training throughout life;
- *Grundtvig* for adult education offers educational alternatives to those who want to acquire new skills, regardless of age. This sub-programme is addressed to institutions or organizations dealing with education for adults, namely people aged over 25 years or young people under that age no longer part of a formal education system;
- *Jean Monnet* for European integration in higher education institutions.

The feature of lifelong learning is that an individual is at the core of learning bearing all responsibility of learning, formal education being complemented by informal education and implicitly non-formal education.

Cooperation at the European Union level for the current period is regulated by a new strategic framework "2020 Education and Training" which aims to support Member States with regard to the further development of their education and training systems which should provide all citizens with the necessary means to reach their own potential, to ensure sustainable economic prosperity and professional integration or employability.

"2020 Education and Training" – Reference Criteria

Table 1

<i>No.</i>	<i>Reference Criteria</i>
1.	at least 95% of children aged 4 and of mandatory school age should attend preschool education;
2.	the share of young people aged 15 who do not have enough knowledge of reading, mathematics and science should be below 15%;
3.	the share of young people aged between 18 and 24 who have left school early should be below 10%;
4.	at least 40% of people aged between 30 and 34 should have graduated from some type of higher education;
5.	at least 15% of adults should attend lifelong learning activities.

Source: prepared by the authors

From the perspective of lifelong learning, European cooperation is based on the efficient use of the *Open Method of Coordination* (MDC) and ensuring the synergy among all stakeholders. In order to achieve these goals, they have created in the European Union a platform for sharing best practices, for gathering and disseminating information and

explanations about the tools that have proven functional, and advice and support for such reforms. Additionally, they have organized working groups made up of experts from member countries that prepare strategic guidelines and joint tools to ensure the smooth implementation of the strategic framework “2020 Education and Training”.

3. European Policies for Higher Education

In terms of educational policies for higher education at European level, one of the important documents was the 1999 *Bologna Declaration* whose aim was to create a “*European area of higher education*” based on international cooperation and academic student, teacher and researcher exchanges.

The Bologna process envisaged:

- *higher education* in two cycles, namely two distinct situations of undergraduation and graduation, the access to the latter cycle being conditioned by the graduation of the former, and it can take at least 3 years and should lead to getting a Master’s degree / Ph.D. degree;
- *providing quality education*, that is increasing the competitiveness of European higher education systems internationally;
- recognizing qualifications and periods of studies, namely adopting a comparable degree system, adopting a system of transferable credits (eg. ECTS) in order to extend student mobility and recognizing periods of studies regardless of places of training sessions.

When harmonizing educational policies at European level there were some remarkable moments, namely a series of conferences held on the subject in Prague, Berlin, London, Leuven / Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgium). Thus, in Prague in 2001, they outlined the idea of “*lifelong learning*”, involving students as active partners and increasing attractiveness and competitiveness. The Berlin Conference of 2003 aimed at accelerating the achievement of the European higher education area, and in Bergen in 2005, they stressed the importance of partnerships of all stakeholders (students, universities, academic staff, employers). For the first time, they talked at this conference about the principle of sustainable development in education. The 2007 London Communiqué emphasized the role of higher education in promoting social cohesion, reducing inequalities and raising the level of knowledge, skills and competences in society. At the conference of Leuven / Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgium), they focused on the social dimension, lifelong learning, student-centered learning, employability, mobility, research and innovation. One should also mention the Lisbon Strategy (2000) which aimed at creating a “*European Research area*” and also ongoing education and training.

In Romania, educational policies should comply with the new changes generated by the current state of higher education. In academic year 2014-2015, the national higher education system included 101 institutions, of which 55% were public property covering 38 counties and Bucharest (which owns a quarter of students enrolled in the public education system and half of the students enrolled in the private education system).

In the same academic year, higher education institutions in Romania welcomed 541,700 people, 6.4% (37,100 people) fewer than in the previous academic year. Of these, 76% were enrolled in undergraduate degree programmes, 20% in Master’s degree programmes, 3% in doctoral study programmes and about 1% in postgraduate programmes.

In this context, namely a downward trend characteristic for the entire Romanian higher education, it will be difficult for our country to achieve one of the targets of the “2020 Europe Strategy” which stipulates that at least 40% of the population aged between

30 and 34 years should have completed tertiary education or have obtained a university degree or a similar qualification.

In the European Union, in 2014, 37.9% of people aged 30-34 were graduates of tertiary education, of which 42.3% women, 33.6% men respectively. In 17 EU countries, the 40% target has already been reached, and in 5 countries (Lithuania, Luxembourg, Cyprus, Ireland, Sweden) the share of graduates in the age group 30-34 years has exceeded 50%. In contrast, in 8 EU member countries including Romania, the share of university graduates is less than 30% of the 30-34-year old population.

For the 2020 time horizon, Romania has set a target of 26.7% university graduates in the total population aged 30-34 years, ranking second to last in this endeavor.

The future of the Romanian higher education requires several changes, both quantitatively and especially qualitatively. According to the document “*Vision on Romanian Higher Education in 2025*”, the principles that will govern this type of education are:

- *customization* in order to ensure flexibility of the educational process;
- *diversity*, that is the possibility of diversely developing higher education institutions;
- *transparency*, namely the existence of a strategic relevant information system that is easily accessible to all stakeholders: students, academics, employers etc.

Achieving these goals involves certain stages related to the classification of universities and the ranking of study programmes, effectiveness of quality assurance systems, effectiveness of mechanisms for financing higher education.

3. Educational Policy in Romania

The Romanian education system is continuously changing and improving in various fields and levels, according to economic, social, political and cultural changes in society. The main issues envisage:

- *Practical lifelong learning and mobility*. As of 2009, along with the development

of the “*Lifelong learning strategy*”, they have made much progress in identifying strategic priorities and areas for action in the field of lifelong learning, such as the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal education, and orientation of education and training towards the development of transversal skills at any age.

- *Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training*, focusing on learning foreign languages and acquiring some basic skills of reading, mathematics and science. Initiatives have aimed at promoting multilingualism that is increasing the diversity of modern languages learned; according to European recommendations tailored to the needs of the labour market, it is required there should be many foreign language speakers. Thus, they have set up bilingual classes and groups as of the fifth grade. Particular attention is given to the improvement of key competences in primary education, namely the development of linguistic communication competence in the Romanian language.

- *Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship*. At European level, according to the 2020 Europe Strategy, the rate of early leaving the education and training system should not exceed 10% by 2020. Romania aims at reaching 11.3% by 2020. In 2015, the rate of early school leavers was 18.3%, the most affected being children from rural areas, Roma children and children with special needs. It is estimated that 1 in 3 children in rural areas leaves school before the 9th grade because of poverty, limited education of parents, low level of accessibility to educational services, poor infrastructure.

One of the outstanding issues has focused on early education for children under 3 years old as the basis for later learning. Thus, via substantial investment in this kind of education, in the long term there will be a lower dropout rate, there will be foundations for lifelong learning and an increased rate of socio-professional integration. Particular attention must still be given to children with special needs in order to prevent school dropout and improving school success rate for these students with special needs.

- *Enhancing innovation and creativity, as well as entrepreneurship at all levels of education and training, namely all citizens' acquiring transversal competences and securing the smooth running of the knowledge triangle: education-research-innovation.*

2020 Europe Strategy Objectives and Romania's Targets

Table 2

No.	2020 Europe Strategy Objectives	Romania's Targets (%)
1.	75% of the population aged between 20-64 must be employed;	70
2	The share of students who leave school early should be below 10%;	11.3
3.	At least 40% of people aged between 30 and 34 must have graduated from tertiary education;	26.7
4.	At least 15% of people aged between 25 and 64 must attend lifelong learning.	10

Source: prepared by the authors

2020 Europe Strategy, via the largest of the objectives it pursues, particularly aims at education due to the direct impact that the latter has on employment growth through employment on the labour market, acquisition of skills and vocational training.

The targets set by Romania for the year 2020 are mainly generated by the current situation, both economically and socio-politically. Statistics show that of the total population, the one in rural areas has the lowest rate of participation in education and training: 45% of youth live in rural areas and their percentage of attending tertiary education is relatively low, with 24% of students in this category.

Education remains a sensitive area of the Romanian economy. Although in recent years the public spending for this sector has increased (from 2.8% of GDP in 2012 to about 3.8% in 2015), there remain several issues that still have not been solved.

Conclusions

Major changes in all areas of economic and social life in the world pose new challenges for education policy reforms in each country, ensuring a balance among quality, diversity, equity and efficiency on the one hand, and skills and autonomy on the other hand.

European educational policies, today more than ever, must be oriented to education and social cohesion; the effective functioning of any educational system must be based on a high quality level by which every individual should be able to discover, improve and use their skills.

Europe's becoming a knowledge society with a key status in the globalized world economy depends, inter alia, on the way education and ongoing training are performed.

Policies aimed at young people should not be limited only to education but they must consider other issues, too, related to their right to enjoy equal opportunities in all aspects of social life: high quality education and training, services for seeking jobs, jobs appropriate to their skills, the right to social security benefits and the right to receiving housing.

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