

## THE CONCEPTUAL APPROACH TO LIFELONG LEARNING

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### Abstract

Contemporary society faces multiple challenges related to socio-economic development, economic growth, enhancing competitiveness, providing jobs, etc. One of the key pillars of implementing an approach that would respond to these challenges is the quality of human resources, the competence of the workforce, which directly depends on the quality of education and professional training. The constantly changing socio-economic environment requires permanent improvement/expansion/updating of professional knowledge, skills and competences. In this sense, capitalizing on the concept of lifelong learning (hereinafter LLL) opens up major opportunities for the development and continuous adjustment of skills to the needs of the labour market. Thus, the promotion of LLL has become one of the main factors in ensuring the sustainable development of society and economies, including in the Republic of Moldova.

However, the concept of LLL is frequently misunderstood, including the academic environment, being often limited only to continuing education. The university concept of LLL (University LLL) is not clearly defined in specialized sources, which leads to different perceptions of the LLL content and, accordingly, the importance of its promotion. All these have a negative impact on the development and implementation of the policy in the field of LLL, both at the institutional (university) and national levels.

This paper analyses the EU vision of the LLL concept, the regulatory framework of the Republic of Moldova in this area and presents the vision of the LLL content at the university level. Such a systemic approach will contribute to raising awareness and valorising the LLL concept within the country, developing programs and boosting LLL actions.

**Keywords:** lifelong learning, University lifelong learning, competences

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### 1 Introduction

In the conditions of globalization, informatization, rapid technologization of all areas of human activity and increase in the differentiation of skills, education, professional training and the continuous updating of skills have become imperative for the socio-economic development of any country, ensuring the progress of society, professional insertion in the labour market, improving the quality of life and self-realization of each person. Modern economic and societal challenges

determine the need to develop a new paradigm of education - that of lifelong learning (Lifelong Learning - LLL) and the awareness that education does not end with obtaining a diploma or a job, continuous learning being a necessary condition for adapting to the ever-changing professional, economic, social, informational and technological requirements. In this context, the implementation of the LLL concept acquires major significance and a special importance, and those who invest in this area (persons, institutions, enterprises) will receive long-term benefits.

The implementation of LLL has economic, social and personal implications. The *economic impact* is to reduce the consequences of modern phenomena, such as "professional ageing" of the population, migration of the workforce, lack of qualifications in the labor market, global competition, etc. In the *social* aspect, lifelong learning is the condition for improving the quality and efficiency of education and professional training processes, promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship. The impact of LLL on the *personal* level is to stimulate creativity and inventiveness, entrepreneurial spirit and increase the responsibility of individuals. LLL offers a wide range of opportunities to better meet the skill needs of the economy and the individuals [1].

The concept of *lifelong learning*, which appeared in the 70s of the last century, has evolved and changed over time, advancing in the European Community at the policy level. At present, the strategy of lifelong learning has become a priority of the national educational policies due to its role and importance in the economic and social development and in the personal development of each citizen, as well as the benefits that it offers. In the Republic of Moldova, despite the fact that multiple actions have been undertaken in the area of regulation and promotion of LLL, the implementation of this concept on a large scale is only at the beginning of way.

## 2 Methodology

The purpose of this study is to conceptualize LLL within higher education institutions in the context of ensuring the continuity of lifelong learning. The objectives set to achieve the proposed goal are: analysis of the European vision on the LLL concept through the prism of EU policies; assessment of the regulatory framework of the Republic of Moldova with reference to LLL; argumentation of the LLL university concept, which meets the modern challenges and needs of the labour market from different socio-economic environments.

To conduct this study, a complex methodology was used, which comprised various research methods, including analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, documentation, comparative analysis, scientific abstraction and historical method, applied for a visual and representative interpretation of the research results.

## 3 Results

### 3.1 Conceptual approach to lifelong learning through the prism of the European vision

The European path of LLL implementation registers a continuous ascent. With the adoption of the White Paper on Education and Training in 1995, the European Union has oriented itself towards a learning society, based on the acquisition of new knowledge and lifelong learning.

In 2000, the Lisbon Summit announced Europe's entry into the age of knowledge. During this Summit, the document “European Communities: A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning” [2] was adopted, which stated that the labour market constantly requires improvement/renewal/updating of professional knowledge, skills and competences. According to the European Commission, the central priority of the Lifelong Learning Program is to transform the European Union into the *most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world*, capable of sustainable economic growth, accompanied by a quantitative and qualitative increase in the number of jobs and greater social cohesion.

The aforementioned Memorandum approached the LLL concept and defined *lifelong learning* (definition taken from the European Employment Strategy) as “*all purposeful learning activity, undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies*”. The Memorandum included six key messages that provide a structured framework for the practical application of Lifelong Learning: new basic skills for all; more investment in human resources; innovation in teaching and learning; valuing learning; rethinking guidance and counselling; bringing learning closer to home.

Later the concept of LLL was developed and expanded, so as in the Communication of the European Commission of 2001 on “Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality”, lifelong learning is defined as including “*all learning activities undertaken throughout life, with the aim to improve knowledge, skills and competences in a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective*” [3]. At the same time, during the consultation on the adoption of this document, in particular, the idea was supported that lifelong learning should include all *stages and forms of learning*, from pre-school to post-retirement learning. The breadth of the above definition also draws attention to the full spectrum of *formal, non-formal and informal learning* activities.

Such an approach was indicated by the Research Service of the European Parliament [4], which specified that LLL includes the following *stages of lifelong learning*: early education (ISCED 0); compulsory general education (ISCED 1-3); technical vocational education and training (ISCED 4-5); tertiary education (ISCED 6-8); adult education, conceived as *stages of lifelong learning*. At the same time, some of these stages, in particular adult education, can be achieved in terms of learning (the process of acquiring the skills or behaviours necessary to carry out certain activities at work) and *formal, non-formal and informal education*.

According to the European concept of the classification of learning activities, the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED-2011), art. 35-44 and Eurostat, *formal, non-formal and informal learning* are defined as follows.

- *Formal education* is institutionalized, intended and planned education through recognized public and private institutions and, in their totality, constitutes the formal education system of a country.
- *Non-formal education* is any learning activity organized and supported outside the formal education system and can involve persons of all ages. Non-formal education is institutionalized education, conceived and planned by the educational service provider. The system of classification of learning activities (CLA) distinguishes the following categories of non-formal education: non-formal programs; courses (which can take place in the

classroom, individual lessons, combined theoretical and practical courses, including workshops, etc.); guided on-the-job training.

- *Informal learning* is a form of learning that is intentional or deliberate, but not institutionalized. Informal learning does not fall within the scope of ISCED. A broader feature of these learning contexts has been presented in previous publications [5].

Based on the above, it can be concluded that the *European model of lifelong learning* is a continuous process of flexible learning opportunities, correlating the education and skills acquired in formal educational institutions with the development of skills in non-formal and informal contexts, especially at the work place.

Recognizing the major significance of developing a new educational paradigm, the Community authorities declared 2006 - the European Year of Lifelong Learning, which was marked by a number of initiatives and actions in this area. Thus, in 2006 the Council of Europe launched the Lifelong Learning Program 2007-2013 [6], designed to contribute to the development of the Community as an advanced knowledge-based society, characterized by sustainable economic development, accompanied by a quantitative and qualitative increase in the number of jobs and greater social cohesion, and to support the creation of a *European area of lifelong learning*. The implementation of this program has enabled European citizens to participate in various forms of learning at all stages of life and boost the development of the education and professional training sector in Europe.

Also in 2006, the European Parliament and the EU Council adopted the Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning [7], which recommended that Member States develop *"the provision of key competences for all as part of their lifelong learning strategies"*. This document set the European Reference Framework for Key Competences and defined the competences that every citizen needs for personal development, employment, social inclusion and active citizenship.

As requirements to skills are constantly changing and more and more jobs are becoming highly technological, development of skills is increasingly relevant to ensure resilience and adaptability to change. This led to a revision of the 2006 Recommendation and the adoption in May 2018 of the new Recommendations on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning [8]. This document states that European societies and economies are facing major technological and digital innovations, as well as changes in the labour market and demographic changes. Many of today's jobs did not exist ten years ago, and various new forms of employment relationships will be created in the future.

The European Commission Communiqué "Delivering lifelong learning for knowledge, creativity and innovation" (2007) [9] reaffirmed the importance of lifelong learning and stressed the need to develop national strategies in this regard that would contribute to the realization of the *European area for lifelong learning*. As a result, several EU states have developed and adopted national strategies for lifelong learning, such as Austria, Romania, Bulgaria, Germany, Estonia, the Czech Republic, etc.

Thus, according to the Community concept, learning is not limited to one specific stage of life, but takes place in different contexts throughout the lifecycle. Within the *Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (ET 2020)* [10], launched in 2009, the

European Union identified as one of the long-term common strategic priorities of the EU policies the *transformation of lifelong learning and mobility into reality* [11] and has set the following benchmarks, which should be achieved by 2020: at least 15% of adults (population aged 25-64 years) should participate in lifelong learning activities; at least 40% of people between the ages of 30 and 34 years must complete higher education. As tools for the implementation of the European policy in the area of lifelong learning, the following were highlighted: the European Framework on Key Competences; European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS); Europass; European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF); European Quality Assurance Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET); European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) [12] etc.

At the end of the implementation period of the ET 2020 Strategic Framework, it was assessed the progress made towards achieving the strategic goals, including those aimed at *making lifelong learning and mobility a reality for all*, however, it was found that the participation rate of adults in lifelong learning rose to 9.2% in 2020 from 7.8% in 2010, but the target (15%) was not reached [13]. The *Resolution of the Council of Europe on the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training in the perspective of the implementation and further development of the European educational area (2021-2030)* [14] notes that "social, technological, digital, economic and environmental challenges are increasingly affecting how we live and work, including the distribution of jobs and the demand for skills and competences". In this context, lifelong learning is becoming the most important tool for professional transitions in the context of the demand for diversified skills in the labour market and raising the retirement age. For these reasons, the priorities set in the previous Strategic Framework (ET 2020) have been reaffirmed for the next decade (until 2030), including the priority placement of *lifelong learning and mobility*.

The Resolution states that lifelong learning influences the overall vision and global goals for education and training in the EU and reaffirms that LLL *encompasses all levels and types of education and training, as well as non-formal and informal learning from a holistic perspective*.

The *White Paper on the future of Europe. Reflections and scenarios for the EU-27 until 2025* [15], launched by the European Commission in 2017, highlights that "it is likely that most children entering primary school today will end up working in new job types that do not yet exist" and that addressing this situation in the right way *"will require a massive investment in skills and a major rethink of education and lifelong learning systems"*. The document recommends that Member States support the right to quality education, professional training and lifelong learning, favourable to inclusion, by supporting and strengthening the continuous development of key competences from an early age for all citizens as part of national strategies for lifelong learning.

### **3.2 Challenges, regulations and the vision regarding LLL in the Republic of Moldova**

Education, vocational training and lifelong learning play a decisive role in building a country with a sustainable, competitive economy, as they, on the one hand, are key factors for economic growth, jobs and social cohesion, and, on the other hand, contribute to the development and use of human potential. In a rapidly changing and highly interconnected environment, each person needs a wide range of skills, and their development should occur continuously throughout the lifecycle. The implementation and capitalization of lifelong learning opportunities in the Republic of Moldova

is becoming increasingly important.

The ageing of the population and the emigration of a significant part of the economically active people have led to a decline in the number of the working-age population, which is a serious challenge for sustaining economic growth in the long term.

Demographic trends, rapid technological progress, digitalization and changes related to professional profiles and requirements increase the need to expand LLL opportunities in our country. At the same time, lifelong learning must be based on close collaboration between business, education, and training and learning environments. Nowadays, it is no longer enough for young people to acquire a fixed set of skills, they must build resilience, a wide range of skills and the ability to adapt to change. Therefore, the need and value of a lifelong learning perspective is more relevant than ever, and the implementation of the LLL concept has become an urgent need.

Long-term challenges, such as population ageing, adaptation to the requirements of the digital age and the development of competitiveness in the context of a globalized and knowledge-based economy require the *rethinking of lifelong education at all levels* in the Republic of Moldova, from the institutional to the national level.

The aspirations of the Republic of Moldova for European integration, for integration into the European Area of higher education, as well as the recognition of the contribution that professional development and professional skills can bring to the economic and social evolution, is one of the priority tasks for the development of education - the *implementation of the concept of lifelong learning*.

In the Republic of Moldova, lifelong learning is regulated by various legislative and normative acts, such as the Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, the Labour Code, the Education Code, the National Framework of Qualifications, the Classification of Occupations of the Republic of Moldova, the Regulation on the Continuing Training of Adults, Guidelines for External Evaluation of Lifelong Vocational Training Programs, etc.

According to the Education Code [16], *Title VII "Lifelong learning"* regulates the general framework of lifelong learning (structure, forms, funding, certification of acquired knowledge and skills), teaching methods and sources of funding in the context of formal, non-formal and informal education. Thus, the Education Code identifies specifically the concept of lifelong learning as a process that *"includes learning activities carried out by a person throughout his life, with the purpose of learning or developing competences from a personal, civic, social and professional perspective"*. Lifelong learning includes *general, vocational-technical and higher education, as well as continuing professional training of adults* (art.123).

In the context of the stated regulations, lifelong learning is carried out in different contexts and is aimed at any form of *formal education* (carried out in an educational institution), *non-formal education* (development outside the formal curriculum of those skills that everyone feels closer to their needs and preferences; carried out at the workplace, in society and sometimes in educational institutions) or *informal education* (represents unorganized influence of the environment on the individual - family, workplace, in society, mass-media, volunteer activities, etc.) from early childhood education to higher education and professional training for adults. These three concepts – formal, non-formal and informal – complement each other within the framework of lifelong learning programs. Therefore, lifelong learning can be implemented in *various forms*, taking place both *inside and outside the traditional system of professional education and training*.

Thus, the LLL concept, regulated by the legislative and normative documents of the Republic of Moldova, corresponds to the EU vision in terms of definition, content and approach. However, at present the Republic of Moldova does not have a separate Lifelong Learning Strategy, like other EU countries. Specific actions are to be taken to develop and implement policies in this area at all hierarchical levels and by all actors involved in the promotion of LLL, so that lifelong learning truly becomes a reality with an impact on the development of the economy and society.

### **3.3 University concept of lifelong learning (ULLL)**

Changes occurring in professional profiles and requirements reinforce the need to expand opportunities for continuing education. In order to meet the new demands and provide the society with qualified human potential, higher education institutions, through the proposed study programs, can make a significant contribution to the implementation of lifelong learning strategies and to improving the relevance of the education system for the labour market.

In accordance with the Education Code (art. 124), higher education institutions can be fully involved in the implementation of lifelong learning in the segment of initial and continuing professional training programs pursuant to the competence and the scope of activities that lifelong learning involves.

Based on the European and national vision of LLL, we believe that *lifelong learning combines at the university level* firstly the following elements:

- initial professional training (tertiary education) (ISCED 6-8);
- continuing training of adults (mainly professional, according to the institutional profile, but it could also be general, under specific conditions);
- participation in non-formal (and informal, as appropriate) learning activities;
- validation of learning/skills acquired in a non-formal context;
- provision of services in the LLL area;
- other activities related to the LLL area.
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ULLL activities can be carried out in various forms (full-time, part-time, e-learning, distance learning, blended learning, etc.) and environments (institutionalized in educational institutions or at the workplace, in other environments).

The range of LLL activities is determined by the higher education institutions in accordance with the development strategy of the university, areas of competence, skill and qualification requirements of the labour market, the needs of various categories of beneficiaries, etc.

The architecture of the university in the field of Lifelong Learning, the model and forms of organization, and the services provided are established based on the principles of university autonomy and institutional policy, adopted at the university level.

Building on the European Union's target of increasing the share of people aged 30-34 years who have completed tertiary education (ISCED 6-8) with at least 50% by 2030 (EU average in 2019 was 40.3%), as well as increasing the participation rate of adults in lifelong learning (in 2019 - 11.3% of adults aged between 25-64 years, the objective for 2020 being at least 15%), the role

of higher education institutions in promoting lifelong learning and ensuring the increase of its impact on economic, social, but also personal development is particularly relevant and requires joint efforts from all stakeholders to achieve these desired EU goals. These goals also become relevant for the Republic of Moldova in the context of its European integration aspirations.

#### 4 Conclusions

Lifelong learning has become an imperative for societies and economies opting for bottom-up development, economic performance and improved quality of life. Recognition of the importance of lifelong learning and implementation of the LLL concept in the EU area for more than two decades generate economic, social and personal benefits. National LLL strategies in EU countries have become important components of national strategic framework for economic and social development.

The demographic context, the trends on the labour market, the discrepancies between the skills required in the labour market and those developed by the educational system, but also the prospects for the evolution of occupations in the future require a proactive approach towards LLL in the Republic of Moldova. Although lifelong learning is regulated by national legislative and normative acts and other documents on educational policies, nevertheless, in very frequent cases LLL is perceived and approached ambiguously by the society, including the academic and business environment, but also by the individuals, being identified only with continuing education. This study was initiated to clarify the situation in the area. Following this, it was found that, according to the European vision, lifelong learning is "*all learning activities undertaken throughout life, with the aim to improve knowledge, skills and competences in a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective* " and encompasses *all stages and forms of learning* (from early education to post-retirement), as well as *formal, non-formal and informal learning activities*. The same approach to LLL is supported in the national regulations of the Republic of Moldova.

Through the prism of the European and national LLL concept, it can be concluded that *lifelong learning at the university level* refers to activities that fall within the competence of higher education institutions and, first of all, includes: initial professional training; continuing training of adults; participation in non-formal learning activities; validation of learning/skills acquired in a non-formal context; provision of services in the area of lifelong learning; other activities related to the LLL area, which can be carried out in various forms and environments.

We hope that the visions, clarifications and concepts argued in this paper will contribute to the understanding and awareness of the concept and constituent components of LLL and ULLL, to the design of LLL development strategies at the national level and, more importantly, at the institutional (university) level and in their implementation.

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## **DISCLAIMER**

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