The Influence of Universities of Applied Sciences on the Increase of Adult Participation in Life-Long Learning

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Abstract

Modern economy already went deeply into the area of service-oriented economy and labour market demands for highly educated workers. Not every profession, for which higher education is necessary, requires a classical university tuition. Rather, it requires a vocationally trained student/worker. Nevertheless, lifelong learning programs have a significant effect on the employability of workers. In this paper we discuss the effect of a university of applied sciences as an institution usually located in smaller urban areas and, more importantly, usually a higher education institution that has focuses more on training and vocation, rather than science work. Since lifelong learning is strongly connected with the European union, its goals and funding will also be discussed in this paper.

Keywords: university of applied science, lifelong education, Europe 2020 Strategy projects

1. The Notion of Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning, as a notion, was first intensively applied in the European union terminology after the European Council meeting in Lisbon (March 23rd to 24th 2000), where it was concluded that, by accepting the European Framework, new basic skills to be acquired with life-long learning should be defined and that they are a key measure of the European response to globalization and the transition to economies based on knowledge, as well as highlighting that people are the main strength of Europe [1]. That is when the focus was moved from education, which is an institutionalized and organized process, to life-long learning which includes all forms of learning in all circumstances of life [2]. It is important to highlight that life-long education must be observed outside of the concept of adult education. Life-long education means precisely what the term implies: learning throughout a person's whole life. The definition of life-long education mostly used today is: life-long learning relates to all the activities of acquiring knowledge, skills, attitudes and values throughout life with the aim of adopting or expanding them, within the framework of personal, social or professional development and actions of an individual [3]. According to that, life-long education does not necessarily require an educational institution because it can be done on a personal level.

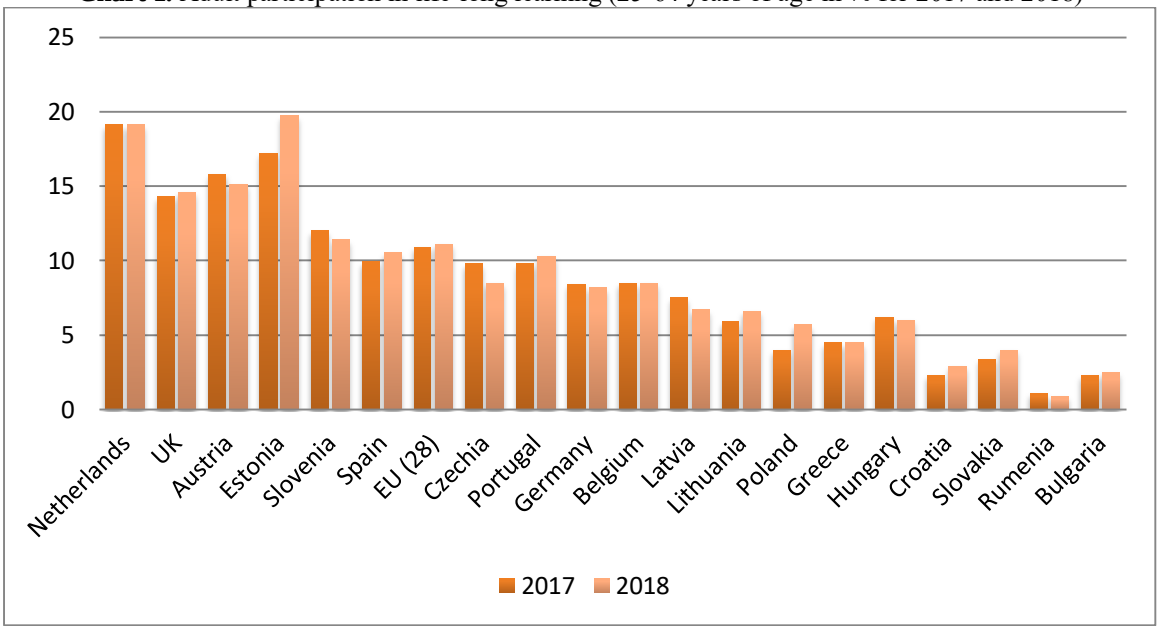
What is key for life-long education is the awareness of the usefulness of it and the awareness of personal and professional gain for every person involved in it. Therefore, a person who is *learning* must differentiate that activity from a cultural or sports activity and aim to enforce the activity of *learning.* The most important principles of life-long learning for an individual are: the possibility to adopt advancements and/or expansions in knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values; the possibility and the need to develop personal potentials in different life periods; and the possibility to access different forms and contents of learning due to the realization of personal desires and the development of abilities. Chart 1 shows a portion of adults taking part in life-long education. Countries like Denmark and Sweden were excluded from the chart because the percentage of life-long learning in those countries, according to the criteria observed, is around 30% so the chart results deviate excessively.

From the observed results, we see that the percentage in Croatia is among the three worst ones. A percentage of 2,3 in 2017 and 2,9 in 2018 is far below the EU average of EU 10,9 or 11,1, respectively.

What concerns the most that the trend, unlike in the rest of the EU countries, is declining in Croatia.

If the results of previous years would be observed, it would be visible that the percentage was over 3% at the beginning of the decade and that it declined towards 2020. What is also concerning is that, according to a research by Jukić and Ringel, students of institutionalized life-long learning are people with primary or secondary school [2]. Therefore, life-long education is still considered to be a form of re-qualification for people with lower levels of education, not as a form of acquiring new knowledge and skills which will advance the individual at their current place of work. According to a research of work conditions from 2005, taking part in life-long learning reflects positively on employability which is higher in countries where taking part in life-long learning programs is more developed and more pronounced [4]. According to the Management Lexicon, employability is defined as a constant competitiveness of an individual on the labour market considering the knowledge, skills and abilities which are required. It is a need to replace constant employment with constant development and securing the latest knowledge and skills which the labour market demands i.e., constant employability [4].

Chart 1. Adult participation in life-long learning (25-64 years of age in % for 2017 and 2018)



Source: Eurostat, Code: tsdsc440

Apart from having to differentiate it from adult education, life-long learning must also be separated from formal education. Back in 1974, Coombs and Ahmed separated the types of education into informal, non-formal and formal education. They define these three types the following way: informal education is a life-long process during which a person acquires knowledge, skills, and attitudes through everyday experience and being exposed to their environment (family, friends, media etc.); non-formal education is every organized, systematic, educational action outside of the framework of the formal educational system which gives a certain form of education to a certain population group, children or adults; formal education is an institutional, chronologically divided and hierarchically structured educational system which starts in primary school and lasts up until the highest academic titles [6]. A university of applied sciences or a university in general are primarily formal education institutions and, as such, they fulfil their purpose. However, higher education institutions must act in the best interest of the community in which they exist; finally, higher education institutions are a pool of knowledge and skills which could be useful to a much wider community, not just students. For that reason, and for the purpose of strengthening the competitiveness of universities of applied sciences, it is necessary to include them in non-formal educational and use the subventions given for life-long

education in the process. The EU funds can play an important role in the strengthening of the competitiveness of the university of applied sciences.

2. European Funds and Increasing the Competitiveness of the Universities of Applied Sciences

In order to, especially in light of the economic crisis and the investments, growth, and job openings connected to it, achieve set aims and speed up the realization of projects and investments, the European Commission prepared a new regulation for EU funds for the program period of 2014-2020.

The new regulation enabled the implementation to become simpler, more transparent (partially standardized for various funds) and more focused on set aims, thereby making the effect of available funds greater. This was done, primarily, in a way that a package of common general regulations relating to key funds was brought [7]. This section is not necessarily connected to life-long education, especially in its infrastructural portion. However, what we need to pay attention to are the possibilities that the European funds give for strengthening a non-formal education institution, which has a prerequisite of strengthening the position of it as a formal education institution. We differentiate between five European union funds: Cohesion Fund, European Regional Development Fund (ERDF in further text), European Social Fund (ESF in further text), European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development [7]. The common regulation defined priority investment areas of EU funds. One of the priority areas for investment is the investment into education, skills, and life-long learning. As far as the competitiveness of universities of applied sciences goes, the ERDF and ESF funds are most significant. ERDF highlights (among other things) investing into education, skills, and life-long learning through the development of educational infrastructure as a priority investment. The infrastructure, as such, is necessarily also connected to competitiveness, whether it is attracting students or professors and teachers.

2.1 The role of the Ministry of Education and Sports

In an announcement for the delivery of project proposals: Preparing the reserve of infrastructure projects for the European Regional Development Fund[8], the Ministry of Education and Sports states: it is necessary to renew the infrastructure and equipment of research organizations and high education institutions in order to increase quality and availability of services/research and in order to become well-integrated into the European Research Area (ERA) as a scientific/research and educational centre by doing so. Using new capital investments, the development of competitive economy based on knowledge will be supported through encouraging innovations and support for research and development in the private and public sectors. Furthermore, it is stated that, considering the recommendations coming out of the Bologna process, but also the global standards for high-quality teaching, the Ministry prescribed, in one of its acts, that the adequacy of spatial capacities for performing classes is determined by putting in relation the foreseen number of students enrolled with the size of usable space in a way that every student must, as a rule, have 1,25 m^2 of usable space.

The fact is that most of our universities of applied sciences have significant problems with capacities and infrastructure and that classes are more often than not held in multiple locations which are, more often than not, intended for other purposes and are only secondarily used for applied sciences education. There are two types of projects that the Ministry is calling for: scientific infrastructure and educational infrastructure. Considering that the university of applied sciences is not a primary scientific institution, such as a university, the projects are that much more significant for its competitive position. Their aim is to ensure better quality and service availability of educational services in order for them to be better integrated in Europe i.e. become recognizable educational centres.

2.2 Life-long learning and Europe 2020

Education is only one of the wheels in the Europe 2020 program. The experience of member states showed that only absorbing EU funds through projects which are not strategically well thought-out

will not ensure synergy and a swing in economic and social growth. Therefore, it is extremely important that the access to planning development be integrated i.e. that it includes all the relevant participants and politics in order for the effect of implementation to be as big and as strong as possible for the development of economy and society as a whole [7]. The European strategy was brought in the midst of a global economic crisis which is unprecedented for current generations. The constant economic growth realized through the previous decade was almost erased during the crisis – the EU GDP 27 dropped by 4,3%, industrial production is on the level of the 1990s and 25 million people, or 11% (in some regions even more than 30%) of the work force was unemployed. Similarly, the public finance area was struck hard. The average deficit of 7% GDP and a public debt of over 80% of GDP shows that 20 years of fiscal consolidation were erased in the two crisis years [7]. With the aim of encouraging the economic growth of the European union, the European Commission started the Europe 2020 project with the idea of creating conditions for a smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. The Europe 2020 strategy consists of five goals: employment, research and development, climate changes and energy sustainability, education and vocational training, and the fight against poverty and social exclusion.

When we talk about education and vocational training, the Europe 2020 strategy encompasses the following reforms: a) prevention of early abandonment of education, b) improving educational outcomes, the quality and relevance of high education programs, c) improving skills and quality of vocational education for the reduction in youth unemployment, d) increasing the participation of adults in life-long learning. Life-long learning finds its place in the Europe 2020 strategy primarily in the encouraging of the development of tertiary economy. In the program guide, the term *Information and Communication Technologies (ICT in the following text)* is used. ICT is an Inter-sector project the aim of which is the development of a common vision on how ICT can help everybody have use from life-long learning based on scenarios and everyday life insights. The use of ICT in education in Europe is spread more and more, but in order to unleash its potential as a starter of change in economies and societies, progress must be made from a fragmented and test use towards the development and the acceptance of the system. Partners include a series of high education institutions, skill development organizations working in a series of educational areas [8]. The College of Slavonski Brod, for instance, included establishing and implementing educational programs not considered to be a study course in the sense of the Law on Scientific Action and High Education in Art.5 P.1 of its Statute. They are based on the life-long learning principles. So far, the College of Slavonski Brod implemented 10 life-long education projects.

2.2.1 The inclusive growth initiative

The inclusive growth initiative means the strengthening of people with a high rate of employment, investing in skills, fighting against poverty and the modernization of the labour market, as well as a system of training and social protection for the purpose of providing help to people in foreseeing changes and controlling them, as well as building a connected society. One of the measures expected from member states is the so-called *flexicurity.* The European Commission, back in 2007, detected a problem in the system of employment and the social state system. The European Commission text, titled *Communication of the Commission on the Common Principles of Flexicurity* starts with an assessment that the way in which European citizens live is rapidly changing. They highlight four main reasons: The European and international economic integration (globalization), the development of new technologies, particularly information and communication; the demographic ageing of European countries, along with the still relatively low average employment and high long-term unemployment pressuring the social system; the development of a segmented labour market in which, at the same time, some workers are overly protected and other are not protected enough [9]. The European Commission highlights that it is necessary to introduce high quality of initial education, but also to continue investing into skills and knowledge in order to increase the possibility of employment. High participation of life-long education is positively linked to high education and, in the long run, low unemployment [10]. Successful prediction demands constant and detailed dialogue between

participants in economy, social partners and other interested sides in the public and private sector: local authorities, public and private employment services, as well as subjects dealing with education and life-long learning. As was stated in the "New knowledge for new workplaces" initiative started by the Commission, this kind of application should help long-term reduction of the imbalance between the supply and demand for certain qualifications on the labour market in order to help improve professional orientation and define the initial and continued schooling which is better adapted to the needs of companies in the context of life-long learning strategies [11].

3. The Influence of Life-Long Education on Employability

The social benefits from education and benefits such as lower crime rates, better health of the population, strengthening social cohesion and increasing the quality of political processes due to a better informing of citizens. Finally, it is about investments engaging significant financial means, on average almost 6 percent of GDP in the OECD members, a significant part of which goes to high education. Therefore, it's important to know whether social return justifies those investments i.e. are the benefits of those investments at least equal to the return from alternative investments [12]. The young are, for the reasons stated, encouraged to get educated and stay in education as long as possible.

However, a problem that appeared, especially in the midst of the global economic crisis of 2008, is the question of youth unemployment. This is a growing problem with long-term consequences for individuals, communities, economies and societies. This age group and the question of its unemployment is hard to observe, considering that a good portion of young people in this group is still getting educated.

3.1 Statistical indicators of the NEET category

The statistics done in the EU and in the International Labour Organization encompass the young people aged 15-24. In order to get the most precise ratio of youth unemployment, the so-called NEET category (Not in Education, Employment and Training) is used and it represents the 15-24 age group which completed schooling, is not employed nor is it in training. The NEET category includes young people who are unemployed and are actively looking for work, but also those who are economically inactive for a number of reasons, such as long-term illness or something else. The rate of unemployment is an indicator of those who are unemployed but are actively looking for work and are ready to start working in the following two weeks – the part of economically active population [13].

That is why the literature dealing with this problem is relatively widespread. Bilić & Jukić further state that young people encompassed by the NEET categorization are also called the lost generation, and there is a total of 13.941.264 of them on the European union level and they cost the Union as much as 153.013.053.902 Euros. Such a massive expense makes up for 1,21% of the EU GDP, which represents an increase in comparison to 2008 when it was 0,96%.

The NEET expense is noticed in the paid social compensations, expenses of various supports and the assumption of the welfare of the lost generation [13]. In the research done back in 2008, Koller-Trbović researched unemployment in the experience of unemployed young people in Croatia. This kind of research, dealing in deprivation and personal experience is not so interesting for this paper, but there is one very interesting category: namely, most of the categories and notions from the questionnaire which was done are focused on the negative causes and consequences and social terms from the "guilt" aspect of the others and personal "sacrifice". He states that there is a bitterness, anger, a feeling of injustice and mistrust towards most social elements which have a certain impact on contemporary courses of development can be read. Primarily, it is highlighted that the "state" and the politicians are the ones that are expected to help the most, especially employers and private company owners foremost. Participants in the research expect the state and the politicians to use legislative solutions, stronger control and similar measures to introduce order into everyday life, employment included. From that, it is derived that employers are seen as the basic problem and enemy to potential

employees and the state is a wanted and necessary arbiter and support to all, not only unemployed citizens [14].

3.2 Level of education and position on the labour market

As we stated in point 2, Croatia has continually had one of the lowest rates of life-long learning.

That is why it is, when we talk about competitiveness from the position of life-long education, necessary to present the university of applied sciences as an institution where one can acquire knowledge which would drastically improve their position on the labour market. A smart network of high education institutions achieves making education into not only its own purpose but also education having a purpose of achieving new knowledge and skills to be applied in the future employment of young people. Mataković has a different viewpoint. He considers that the percentage of young people who are out of work in Croatia is irrelevant for people with higher, and especially those with a high, degree of education because, at the age of 24, half of them are still in school while others only just finished it. The abovementioned percentage of unemployment of the young primarily relates to those with a secondary school education who enter the labour market at the ages of 17-19 [15]. Therefore, he concludes that one of the basic prerequisites for solving the problem of a high degree of unemployment of the young is to encourage them to continue education. This, of course, agrees with the need for tertiary professions which was mentioned several times previously and they most often cannot be acquired with secondary school education.

What is left to be explored is the correlation between youth unemployment and high education.

Biavaschi *et al*., researched vocational education and the labour market, with a special review of the German dual system of vocational education [16]. Their paper relates to the secondary school education, but it is also applicable to high education; the basic conclusion they make is that every labour market asks for a different approach to education. Therefore, the German dual system of vocational education is impossible to apply as successfully in other countries without the labour market being changed completely alongside education [16]. Vocational education must be adapted to the labour market in order to gain the most of it. The basic challenge is how to enable students to learn on the job and how to bring vocational education, which is still within the classroom, to the labour market. They conclude that the two prerequisites are: better institutional management and encouraging employers to take part in education [15]. In the time of crisis (in 2010), Spain and Ireland noted the greatest increase in the number of unemployed young people within the European union, while the lowest was noted by Germany and Netherlands [17]. Bell and Blanchflower also state that the traditional response of young people in recession is to exit the labour market and enter education.

This way, young people acquire new knowledge and skills, but a great number of them is also removed from the labour market i.e. the list of unemployed people [17].

In his conclusion, Bilić states that unemployment of the young people does not only affect them, but also society as a whole, whether it is the economic, political or social aspect. The number of taxpayers is reduced and the assignment of funds for social compensations is, therefore, larger and the drop in buying power of the population and demand for goods causes a reduction in production while hopelessness and resignation grow among the population. Inactive young people, in time, become socially excluded and feel isolated from the rest of the community [13]. On the one hand, we have a larger pressure on state-funded education and, on the other, a smaller number of taxpayers who are filling the budget. With the assumption that investments in education will pay off in the future and that young people will earn more and pay more taxes comes the momentary risk that society accepts, whether it is aware of it or not. The consequences can, therefore, be positive, but also negative in the sense of an increasing level of development in the system of education and a smaller number of young people to be educated.

4. Conclusion

Universities of applied sciences have numerous comparative advantages in the life-long learning projects. Teaching programs of universities of applied sciences are focused in examples from practice and training of students. Such an approach can simply be repeated through training and education of adults, those who are unemployed and those who are employed but want to further educate themselves. At this time, it is clear that we will not fulfil the aims of the Europe 2020 strategy on the increase of inclusion of adults in life-long education. European funds provide significant aid in order to improve these trends. The final goal is to increase employability of workers, their efficiency, and the participation of people in economy in Croatia.

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