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Overcoming Barriers in Lifelong Learning: Moving Towards ET2020 Goals

Alexandru CLAIN¹

Abstract

In the last two decades, lifelong learning has become a priority at the level of the European Union. However, empirical data shows that adult participation in lifelong learning is still low at the level of EU member states, especially if we take into consideration the benchmarks included in the Education and Training 2020 Strategy. While the analysis of results achieved through the different EU programmes, policies and strategies in the field of lifelong learning is an avenue of research, the present paper focuses on an aspect which requires more attention, namely barriers which are preventing adults from participating in lifelong learning. Understanding these barriers and trying to develop ways to overcome them could prove beneficial for reaching the goals which have been set in the ET2020 strategy. Thus, the main objective of this paper is to identify and discuss the different types of barriers which deter adult learners from participating in lifelong education, as well as to propose several solutions for overcoming these barriers. The paper is structured into three main parts. The first part consists in a brief discussion regarding the different conceptions and definitions of lifelong learning, with special focus on the perspectives of the European Union, as well as those of established authors in the field. The second part is meant to provide a general image on the different types of barriers which adult learners encounter, based on studies conducted by different authors, as well as on the latest statistical data available in this regard at the level of the European Union. The last part of the paper discusses several solutions for overcoming barriers in lifelong learning, with special focus on the role of national authorities, education providers and private companies.

Keywords:

lifelong learning, adult education and training, barriers to lifelong learning, Education and Training 2020 Strategy;

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1. Introduction

In the last two decades, lifelong learning has become a priority at the level of the European Union, being considered as an instrument for surpassing the challenges that EU member states were facing in the context of demographic changes, changing economic and social circumstances, as well as the regular need for updating and developing skills (Council Conclusions of 12 May 2009, p. 3). The need to increase the participation of individuals in lifelong learning activities, be they formal, non-formal or informal has been asserted again and again by the EU in strategic documents such as Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality, the Education and Training Strategy 2010, as well as the subsequent Education and Training Strategy 2020. What is more, in 2009, the Council of the European Union developed a new benchmark for assessing the performance of member states in the field of lifelong learning as part of the ET2020 benchmarking system, which referred to the fact that by 2020, at least 15% of adults should participate in lifelong learning (Council Conclusions of 12 May 2009, p. 9). The ET2020 strategy has a very broad focus, aiming to achieve objectives such as the development of national frameworks for qualifications and correlating them with the European Qualifications Framework, increasing quality and efficiency in education and training by elaborating efficient quality assurance systems for education and training institutions, ensuring quality training for teachers and stimulating their continuous professional training, increasing openness towards non-formal and informal education and promoting adults learning, as well as to promote equity, social cohesion and active citizenship by ensuring access to education for all citizens (Council Conclusions of 12 May 2009, pp. 3-4).

However, the most recent data available on Eurostat shows that in the five years which have passed since the launch of the ET2020 Strategy significant progress towards reaching the 15% benchmark has not been made. In 2010, the EU-27 average regarding the percentage of adults aged 25 to 64 participating in education and training 4 weeks prior to the application of the Eurostat/Labour Force Survey was only 9.2%, while in 2014, the EU-27 average went up to 10.7% (Eurostat, 2016). In spite of the fact that in 2014 we can note some good performers, such as Denmark (31.7% participation rate), Sweden (28.9% participation rate) and Finland (25.1% participation rate), in most EU member states the participation of adults in lifelong education is still well below 10%, the

lowest participation rates being registered in the case of Bulgaria (1.8%) and Romania (1.5%) (Eurostat, 2016). Thus, at least at this time, the probability of reaching the 15% benchmark, at least at the EU-27 level, seems quite low, especially if we take into consideration the impact that the economic and social crisis has had on educational systems in Europe, with special reference to funding and human resources.

This current situation raises the question of what is actually deterring adults from participating in lifelong learning, since the EU has invested significant amounts of funds in order to support lifelong learning, especially through the Lifelong Learning Programme 2007-2013. While the analysis of the results achieved through the different EU programmes, policies and strategies in the field of lifelong learning is an avenue of research, the present paper focuses on an aspect which in my opinion requires more attention, namely barriers that are preventing adults from participating in lifelong learning. Understanding these barriers and trying to develop ways to diminish them could prove beneficial for reaching the goals which have been set in the ET2020 strategy.

Thus, the main objective of this paper is to identify and discuss the different types of barriers which deter adults from participating in lifelong education, as well as to propose several solutions for overcoming these barriers. The paper is structured into three main parts. The first part consists in a brief discussion regarding the different conceptions and definitions of lifelong learning, with special focus on the perspectives of the European Union and those of established authors in the field. The second part is meant to provide a general image on the different types of barriers which adult learners encounter, based on studies conducted by different authors, as well as on the latest statistical data available in this regard at the level of the European Union. The last part of the paper discusses several solutions for overcoming barriers in lifelong learning, with special focus on the role of national authorities, education providers and private companies.

The main limitation of this paper from a methodological point of view is that it is not based on empirical research, such as conducting a survey regarding the participation of adults in lifelong learning at the level of the European Union. The process of identifying barriers to lifelong learning is based on the analysis of studies which have been conducted by different researchers in the European Union and the

United States of America in the last decade, as well as on the most recent data available on Eurostat regarding the participation of adults in lifelong learning. Consequently, the overarching objective of this paper is to identify the most important barriers to lifelong learning, to propose several solutions for overcoming them, and hopefully to generate a debate on this topic, in order to ensure that the best possible steps are taken in order to reach the objectives of the ET2020 Strategy, especially in the field of lifelong learning.

2. The concept of lifelong learning

Gelpi (as cited in Aspin & Chapman 2007, p. 19) was one of the first authors that pointed out that lifelong learning suffered from a lack of conceptual clarity and that there was a need for a clear definition of the term, especially due to the fact that the concept was frequently interchanged with others such as continuous education or permanent education. Thus, the purpose of this first section is to discuss some conceptions regarding lifelong learning, focusing both on the views of the European Union, as well as on the views of established authors.

In its communication ‘Making lifelong learning a reality’ from 2001, the European Commission defined lifelong learning as all learning activities that are undertaken throughout life, be they formal, non-formal or informal, with the purpose of improving knowledge, skills, competencies within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective. Several principles which underpinned lifelong learning were also established, such as the centrality of the learner within all types of learning experiences, equality of opportunity and access to lifelong education, as well as the high quality and relevance of the learning process (European Commission 2001, p. 9).

Turning to literature in the field of lifelong learning, we find that Jarvis believes that lifelong learning represents the combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person—body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses)—experiences social situations, the perceived content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person’s biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person (Jarvis, 2007, p. 1).

Aspin, Bagnall, Chapman and Evans (2012, p. li) believe that lifelong learning has a triadic nature which manifests itself through a complex relationship between three elements, which can also be viewed as long-term results of lifelong learning—education for a highly qualified labour force, personal development, which leads to a more fulfilling life and lastly, the creation of a stronger and more inclusive society. Ultimately, the combination and interaction between these three elements transforms lifelong learning into a complex and multifaceted process. The authors believe that the learning process begins before school, continues through compulsory and post-compulsory education and then spans across the individual's lifespan, being kept up to date through learning activities and experiences at home, at the workplace, in universities and colleges and other educational, social and cultural agencies and institutions, as well as in different contexts, both formal and informal, within the community.

Thus, it seems that the concept of lifelong learning has finally reached a greater level of consistency, since international organizations which are active in the field of lifelong learning, as well as established theorists are focusing on the same aspects of lifelong learning, namely that lifelong learning occurs throughout an individual's entire lifetime in all contexts, such as formal, non-formal and informal.

3. Barriers to lifelong learning – an overview

In the process of identifying barriers to lifelong learning, a useful starting point is to determine the main types of barriers which can be encountered. In her seminal work *Adults as learners*, Cross (1981, p. 98) identified three main categories of barriers to the participation of adults in lifelong education: situational barriers, institutional barriers and dispositional barriers. McGivney (1993, pp. 17-22) further elaborates this typology by discussing the barriers which are part of three categories. For example, in the case of situational barriers, the author points out that lack of time for participation in education is most frequently mentioned by adults who are not participating in learning, closely followed by the financial costs of participating in education. In the case of institutional barriers, McGivney highlights that the unresponsiveness of the educational system to the needs of adult learners in terms of teaching methods and strategies, issues related to timetabling and admission to courses, as well as the lack of adequate information and publicity

regarding learning opportunities are some of the main issues which deter adults from participating in adult learning. Lastly, dispositional barriers include individuals' perceptions of inappropriateness and lack of relevance, no awareness of learning needs, hostility towards school, the belief that one is too old to learn, as well as the lack of confidence in one's ability to learn.

Having made this distinction between different categories of barriers, the following section focuses on identifying concrete examples of barriers to lifelong learning, both from the perspective of established authors in the field, as well as by analysing empirical data collected at the level of the European Union.

From a conceptual point of view, Titmus (1999, pp. 350-352) argues that the division between initial education and adult education represents a significant obstacle in the way of lifelong learning, which is neglected quite often. On the one hand, initial education is characterized by fundamental elements such as compulsion, authoritarian teacher-taught relationships, curriculums which are restricted to what sponsors rather than learners wish. On the other hand, adult (lifelong) learning requires flexibility in content, teaching method and administration, and needs to be designed to meet the wishes of learners, providers and sponsors. However, as the authors argues, most adult education programmes, especially those offered by higher education institutions, are still subject to the traditions and rigidities of the initial education system, which discourages adults from participating in lifelong education.

Another overarching issue, as Jarvis (2006, p. 162) points out, is the fact that in this time of globalisation and emergence of the knowledge economy, opportunities for adult education are not evenly spread across the entire adult population. As Jarvis argues, the fact that the knowledge economy only requires certain types of workers has a significant impact on the development of adult education programmes, which are mainly geared towards satisfying the demands of the labour market. This means that some adults might end up not finding educational programmes that fit their current needs, thus discouraging them from participating in education and training.

In their study, Chapman et al. identify five main types of barriers that impede the participation of adults in lifelong learning (Chapman et al., 2006, pp. 156-157). The first type is represented by personal and societal barriers, which mainly consist in aspects such as lack of

information, lack of confidence, lack of resources, personal histories that cause people to be cautious about formal education, as well as the influence of family members and friends in reinforcing this reserve towards education. Next, there are financial barriers, which appear due to the fact that incomes, as well as employment status play a major role in the ability of individuals to fund their ongoing education. The third type of barrier to lifelong learning consists in geographical barriers, which appear due to the fact that access to education is quite often impeded by the distance people have to travel to the nearest educational centre, especially in the case of people leaving in rural or remote areas. The fourth type of barrier can be found especially at the level of education providers, which need to face many management problems such as planning, accountability, staffing, clerical and compliance issues, which makes it difficult to focus on providing solutions for widening participation in lifelong learning. The last type of barrier is a conceptual one, being strongly connected to understanding the real purpose of lifelong learning. While most people believe that adult education represents a chance for making the transition from an economic, educational, social or personal disadvantage, there is a need to define more clearly, measure and report the other economic, educational and social impacts of lifelong learning, in order to make people more interested and determined to participate in education throughout their lifetime.

A similar study was conducted in 2007 in the US by Malhotra et al. in order to identify the barriers to participating in higher education perceived by potential adult students. The authors found that the main barrier was represented by the cost of books and tuition, closely followed by lack of time to participate in education and training and job responsibilities. Other significant barriers were represented by the amount of time required to complete the educational programme, strict attendance requirements, as well as the fact that the time spent in adult education could not be converted into college credits for getting a degree. With regard to personal barriers, some respondents stated that they simply did not want to go to school full-time, while others said that they did not participate in lifelong learning because they did not enjoy studying (Malhotra et al. 2007, p. 84). Similar research was conducted by Grześkowiak in Poland, which uncovered the fact that most adults who were surveyed believed that lifelong learning activities were not needed

for their work, or that re-skilling at their age did not make sense to them. Furthermore, disappointment with previous educational experiences was also an important barrier, since a significant proportion of respondents claimed that previous courses or training gave them little benefits or satisfaction (Grzeškowiak, 2014, p. 23).

With regard to personal barriers, in-depth research conducted by Norman and Hyland revealed that student teachers who were learning to teach in the post-compulsory education and training sector were also facing issues similar to those of adult learners. The authors found that lack of confidence was the most important barrier, which encompassed aspects such as over-estimating task requirements, self-doubt, the fear of not being accepted by others, feelings of inferiority and a perceived knowledge deficit, negative thinking, being afraid of being judged by others and the uncertainty of being successful (Norman & Hyland, 2003, pp. 267-268). This shows that the personal barriers of adults are just one side of the story, since adult educators seem to be facing the same issues as them, at least in terms of confidence.

Further concrete data on obstacles to participation in lifelong learning can also be found on Eurostat, which is based on findings from the Adult Education Survey and the Labour Force Survey conducted in 2011 (Eurostat, 2015). A brief review of the average values for the 28 member states of the European Union reveals a series of fundamental issues, which can be grouped into several categories such as personal barriers, work-related barriers and systemic/institutional barriers. With regard to personal barriers, 20.9% of respondents stated that they did not participate in lifelong education due to family responsibilities, while 8% pointed out that health problems or inadequate age for training deterred them from participating. Work-related barriers are also significant, since 18% of respondents claimed that they could not participate in lifelong learning activities due to conflicts with their work schedule or to the fact that training was organised at inconvenient times. Furthermore, the lack of employer's or public services support for continuing education was pointed out by 8% of respondents. Turning to systemic barriers, which can also be connected to financial barriers on the personal level, 13.2% of respondents did not participate in lifelong learning due to the high costs of education, while 6.1% stated that training took place at a too distant location, an issue which is closely tied

to the ability of public authorities to provide equal access and opportunities to education, especially in more remote locations.

However, the most worrying aspect is that 50% of respondents stated that they did not participate in lifelong education because they did not need further education and training. In my opinion, this value is very high, and speaks to the importance of personal barriers in lifelong learning, since personal attitudes towards learning and personal values play an important part in an individual's decision to learn throughout life, be it in a formal or non-formal setting. This also indicates the fact that the EU's policies and programmes in the field of lifelong learning should focus on the implementation of actions for weakening these personal barriers, especially by conducting awareness campaigns regarding the economic and social benefits of lifelong learning.

The final report on the interim evaluation of the Lifelong Learning Programme (2007-2013), which was published in 2011, also uncovers a series of barriers which affect the participation of potential beneficiaries in lifelong learning (European Commission, 2011, pp. 84-87). The most pressing issue which was identified is represented by the language barrier, especially knowledge of less widely used languages, which had a significant impact on the quality of mobility experiences of students who were participating in the Erasmus programme. A second type of barrier consists in the lack of appropriate funding for supporting learners with special needs or responsibilities, such as domestic care of children, elderly or disabled family members, which sometimes make people unable to participate in lifelong learning, even if they want to do so. Another barrier which affects international mobility in lifelong learning within the Lifelong Learning Programme is represented by the fact that subsistence grants can sometimes prove to be insufficient, especially in the case of countries with higher living costs, which can lead to the danger of social selectivity of participants. Other types of barriers include the lack of willingness of potential individual beneficiaries for participating in lifelong learning, as well as personal values and attitudes which are unfavourable towards leaning.

Overall, the main point of this section was to identify the most frequent and pressing barriers to the participation of adults in lifelong learning. It is abundantly clear that many other barriers exist, especially at the personal level, which influence to different extents the decision of participating in lifelong learning activities. Still, providing solutions for

the most frequent ones might lead in time to a spill-over effect, thus reducing barriers which have lower impact as well.

4. Overcoming barriers to lifelong learning

Having identified some of the main types of barriers that impede the participation of adults in lifelong learning, it is now time to discuss possible solutions for overcoming them. Before doing so, it is important to acknowledge, as Chapman et al. (2006, pp. 155-156) argue, the fact that these barriers are not unidimensional, and that they do not exist in isolation. Barriers in lifelong learning often interact with one another and form complexly interlocked patterns, which means that implementing solutions for overcoming one type of barrier does not necessarily mean that participation rates in adult education will increase. It is also important to note that while institutional and situational barriers might prove easier to surpass, personal barriers that prevent adults from participating in lifelong learning might prove more difficult to overcome, since it entails changing an individual's values and attitudes towards learning. In the following I will briefly review several solutions suggested by established authors, as well as propose several new solutions which could have a positive impact.

Cross proposes three strategies for removing barriers in adult learning, namely valuing all venues and forms of learning, valuing all outcomes of learning and empowering learners and potential learners. In the case of the first strategy, Cross argues that learning does not necessarily take place in a formalised setting. For example, informal learning venues such as neighbourhood houses or community centres, social groups and clubs, museums and galleries, libraries, learning circles or study groups can help meet a wider range of learning needs within the community, as well as contribute to removing some of the barriers associated to formal adult education. With respect to the strategy of valuing all outcomes, Cross believes that adult learning should not be expressly associated with obtaining a certificate or a job. In many cases, this approach can be inadequate for truly addressing the learning needs of adult learners, which can later on lead to frustration and abandonment of adult education. Instead, policy frameworks need to be developed in order to acknowledge competencies and skills which are gained in non-accredited and non-vocational learning activities, thus encouraging adults to participate in learning activities that suit their current needs, even if

they do not get a certificate. Lastly, Cross argues that adult learners should be empowered, in the sense that they need to be included in the process of developing policies and practices for adult education, as well as in evaluating the results of adult learning (Cross, 2004, pp. 2-5).

The quality of learning environments is also very important for encouraging the participation of adult learners. As Knowles (1984, p. 102) points out, teachers should be more involved in helping adults learn by using several methods, such as establishing a climate conducive to learning, involving adult learners in the mutual planning of methods and curriculum, helping participants diagnose their own learning needs and to formulate their own learning objectives, using teaching methods and resources which are most appropriate for achieving these objectives, as well as involving adult learners in evaluating their learning and reassessing their learning needs. In the same line of thinking, Galbraith (2004, pp. 8-9) believes that teachers of adult learners should understand and accept the variability and diversity of adult learners, and consequently try to reduce physical, social and psychological behaviours or actions that could produce resistance to learning. Furthermore, adult learners should be presented with opportunities to scrutinize, question, and develop alternative ways of thinking and acting, with the ultimate goal of encouraging their autonomy, empowerment and self-direction.

Higher education institutions also need to take steps in adapting their educational model to the needs of adult learners, in order to remove as many potential barriers as possible and encourage adult education. For example, Saar et al. (2014, p. 706) recommend the development of shorter-duration programs of study, or programs which are divided into smaller parts, each offering an intermediate credentials recognised by employers. Apart from offering classes in evenings and weekends, the authors believe that universities should also focus on developing distance learning and online learning programs, thus diminishing the impact of barriers such as long distances, family responsibilities and even costs. In my opinion, universities also need to have a more active role in providing information on educational programmes for adult learners and on opportunities for adult learning. As it was previously pointed out, lack of information is one of the most frequent barriers to lifelong learning, so even small things, such as the creation and distribution of informational leaflets, or the development of

sections dedicated to adult learning on the websites of universities could aid in the better dissemination of information.

Another related issue is that of adults who have not graduated the upper secondary level of education, who are generally reluctant to enrol and finalize their education and training, mostly due to personal barriers which have been discussed. In their case, educational providers should acknowledge the fact that they need to adapt to the specific needs of adult learners, by taking measures such as organising classes at more convenient times, adapting teaching methods and materials, as well as conducting awareness campaigns regarding the benefits of learning in order to attract more adult students.

The provision of education and training for adults who are struggling with unemployment is also an issue that requires greater attention. Most of the times, adults in this situation have neither the necessary financial means, nor the appropriate support for participating in education and training, which could help them in the process of finding a new job, either through professional reconversion or through acquiring new job-specific skills and competencies. To this end, public authorities, as well as educational institutions need to work together in order to support those who are currently unemployed. The development of state-funded educational programmes, as well as the greater involvement of educational institutions and public labour force agencies in providing information on learning opportunities and professional guidance and counselling to unemployed adults could be a potential solution both for increasing adult participation in education and for lowering unemployment rates. In this context, it is also important to note that EU member states need to make greater use of EU funds for developing these types of initiatives, and to focus on importing best practices in the field from EU countries where the participation rate of adults in education and training is high.

Private companies can also play an important role in stimulating participation in lifelong education. Multinational companies already seem to be aware of the added value of providing opportunities for the continuous education and training of their employees. On the one hand, investing training courses for employees ensures a better trained and more productive workforce, which can increase the overall economic competitiveness of the company. On the other hand, employees are given the chance to advance in their careers, as well as to increase their

earnings. However, small and medium businesses have yet to reach this level of organizational culture, one that is beneficial for them, as well as for their employees. Thus, these businesses should acknowledge the importance of continuous education at the workplace if they are to be truly part of the knowledge economy, and take steps to provide educational opportunities for their employees. For example, small and medium businesses could apply for grants from the Human Resource Development Operational Programme, which is financed by the EU through the European Social Fund, in order to finance education and training activities within the company. What is more, employers need to increase their flexibility and create mechanisms for allowing employees to participate in education and training outside the workplace.

Lastly, at the governmental level, Chapman et al. (2006, p. 167) believe that an integrated, whole government, whole community approach is necessary in order to increase the participation of adults in lifelong education. Furthermore, the authors believe that it is important to connect strategies in education with regional and rural development strategies and to establish shared priorities between stakeholders and public authorities. In this same line of thinking, I believe that the issue of lifelong learning should become an integral part of national development plans and strategies at the level of EU member states, and all priorities in this respect should be established after extensive consultations between the government and stakeholders, which include a variety of actors, such as adult learners, adult teachers, providers of adult education and companies from the private sector.

5. Conclusions

From what has been discussed, it is quite clear that the types of barriers in adult education and training which have been identified have an important impact on participation rates of adults in lifelong education, thus effectively diminishing the chances of reaching the desired goals of the Education and Training 2020 Strategy regarding the participation of adults in lifelong learning. While some barriers, such as situational and institutional barriers, might be easier to overcome, the personal barriers of adult learners themselves will prove to be more challenging.

The overarching conclusion is that all the actors involved in lifelong learning, such as governmental and public authorities, educational providers, private enterprises and adult learners need to start working together towards the same goal. On the one hand, governments

in EU member states should start working towards ensuring equal access and opportunities for adult learners, as well as supporting vulnerable individuals, such as unemployed adults. On other hand, educational institutions need to become aware that they need to adapt to the needs of adults learners, in terms of teaching methods, organization of classes and types of programmes and courses. Private enterprises need to recognize the importance of providing continuous education and training for their employees if they are to be truly part of the knowledge economy. The list of recommendations presented in this article is by no means exhaustive, but it could serve as a starting point for moving towards the ET2020 goals.

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