

Learning Against the Odds: An Overview of Lifelong Learning and Online Learning in Romania

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Abstract

The usage of online platforms has been a subject of controversy, as the benefits of the digital medium seem to be diminished by negative consequences regarding the integrity of the individual. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the existence of the internet was regarded as a blessing, as it allowed us to continue our activities. Unfortunately, the context of the pandemic has accentuated the already existing flaws in the educational system, both at a national and international level. The socio-economic disparities have made it almost impossible for some students to continue their learning, as they do not have the necessary financial resources to deal with this situation. This matter is even more alarming, as the lifelong learning (LLL) concept has grown massively in popularity in the last few years. Apart from being a widely researched academic concept, lifelong learning has been integrated into national and international strategies. Countries have set objectives regarding the percentage of the population engaged in lifelong learning activities. With the emergence of e-learning and with multiple types of learning available, individuals should be more involved in continuous learning. But such social and economic differences mentioned earlier make it impossible for some people to continue with their education. Therefore, although citizens should have equal opportunities, in the end, it is obvious that only a small percentage of people have access to continuous learning. Undoubtedly, we live in a fast-changing world, as we have seen in the last year and a half, and with the dynamics of the 21st century job market, the role that education plays in the development and well-being of the population cannot be denied. The present paper discusses some of the main problems in Romania, emphasized by the recent medical crisis, with references to theoretical frameworks, statistics, and legal documents. The following paragraphs will also highlight the difficulties regarding lifelong learning activities and discuss the implications of this study.

Keywords

Lifelong learning; online learning; education; social inequality; digital skills.

Introduction

The recent global crisis has undoubtedly shed a light on the underlying problems and challenges in the education sector. As the risks of the COVID-19 pandemic became more and more prevalent, organizations were faced with the necessity to move their activity online. Therefore, educational activities such as school and university classes, training, or courses have become even more dependent on digital tools. While the possibility of online learning is seen as a cure and revival for the educational system (Dhawan, 2020), it has also accentuated the social inequalities between people, and even between countries (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Taking into consideration these aspects, we turn our attention to lifelong learning, a concept which has gained a lot of popularity in the last few years among countries' development plans.

Lifelong learning represents an asset and a meaningful contribution for society, improving areas such as life satisfaction, general well-being, active citizenship, and economical benefits, as well as increasing the longevity of the labor market (Boeren et al., 2012; Midtsundstad & Nielsen, 2019; Rüber et al., 2018). However, the main drawback of lifelong learning is the tendency to help the ones who already have a good educational background and a high socioeconomic status (Boeren et al., 2020; Narushima et al., 2018).

The present study is a synthesis of existing knowledge about lifelong learning and online learning practices and a step towards building a start point regarding these two topics in Romania. Although subsequent research is required, this study should highlight the importance of the topic which could lead to a beginning of venture regarding lifelong learning and online learning in Romania.

Lifelong learning

Lifelong learning (or LLL) is a highly debated subject, mainly for its implications in various areas. Lifelong learning is the enhanced version of recurrent education and it promotes evolving and cultivating knowledge throughout a person's lifespan (Kallen, 2013, p. 51). One of the most common definitions of lifelong learning is the one provided by the European Commission, which states that LLL is "all purposeful learning activity undertaken throughout life with the aim of improving knowledge, skills, and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective" (European Commission, 2000 as cited in Power & Maclean, 2013, p. 30).

The importance of LLL for the development of the individual can also be seen in the recommendations and legal documents drafted by European institutions. Therefore, the European Commission (2019c) has composed a manual comprising eight key competencies, amongst which literacy, cultural awareness, and digital competencies can be noticed. Every competence includes directions regarding the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed in the 21st century. For the purpose of this paper, we take special notice of digital competence, which refers to understanding digital technologies, knowing the opportunities and limitations of such tools, having a curious and open-minded attitude, and an ability to use programs, manage digital identities and carry out safety actions (European Commission, 2019c).

Furthermore, LLL can be characterized by three stages - being, becoming, and belonging (Kidd, 1973 as cited in Narushima, Liu, & Diestelkamp, 2018) and it can be classified into three parts - formal, nonformal, and informal (Power & Maclean, 2013, p. 30). Correlating those three parts leads to developing new skills throughout one's lifespan and also improving the quality of life (Laal, 2011, p. 473).

The distinction between different types of learning has drawn attention since the beginning of the 20th century. One of the most notable quotes belongs to John Dewey, who emphasized the importance of combining both formal and informal learning: "One of the weightiest problems with which the philosophy of education has to cope is the method of keeping a proper balance between the informal and the formal, the incidental and the intentional, modes of education" (Dewey, 1922, p. 10).

Formal education refers to learning experiences that take place in organized contexts (European Commission, 2015). Often referred to as institutional learning, formal education includes intentional learning, at the end of which the student gets a qualification, usually in the form of a diploma or a certificate (Legea educației naționale nr. 1/2011, 2011). While some of the previous research distinguishes only between formal and informal learning, recent developments in this area also take into consideration nonformal experiences. Nonformal education is perceived as including planned activities in terms of the time frame and learning objectives but, in addition to formal education, it is adapted to the needs of an individual or a group (European Commission, 2015). Examples of such learning experiences are job training or structured online learning. In contrast with these two elements of LLL, informal learning is more spontaneous. Mainly, informal learning includes unintentional and everyday learning or, as John Dewey (1922) names it, incidental, which can occur in a variety of contexts throughout the day. Volunteering, cultural or family activities, and self-learning are several forms of informal learning (European Commission, 2015). The distinction between nonformal and informal learning is, unfortunately, still blurry, as the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably.

Although the participation of adults in learning activities is considered an individual activity, it is the result of complex correlations between the country's leadership, educational institutions, and the individual per se (Boeren et al., 2012). Thus, there can be observed three layers of adult participation in lifelong learning: micro, meso, and macro (Boeren, 2017). The micro-level refers to the differences between individuals such as motivation or attitudes, the meso one takes into account the match between the individual and the offers of the education or training programs, and the macro one is being defined as the situation of the country variation, which refers to a certain level of education indicators that a country must achieve (Boeren, 2017). Based on these three levels, Boeren (2017) proposes a model that integrates the micro, meso, and macro and argues that when an element is blocked, the whole process is affected and individual participation in lifelong learning activities is much more difficult.

Reshaping lifelong learning during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic gives us the opportunity to study Boeren's model (2017) more closely. As stated before, learning activities shifted into the online environment, in an attempt to decrease the risk of transmitting the virus. Apart from dealing with an unexpected situation and the necessity of fast adaptation, the educational systems were faced with an increase in the gaps between different social categories. Research has shown that, recently, there have been notable differences regarding the online learners' social profiles. Mainly, at the micro-level, young individuals and people with higher education levels engage more in online learning activities (Eynon & Malmberg, 2021). As far as the macro level is concerned, underdeveloped countries in terms of educational systems and internet infrastructure are usually disadvantaged when it comes to online learning (Adnan & Anwar, 2020).

Before the pandemic, a new trend, called e-learning, was incorporated into the field of education. Educational institutions have begun to offer online courses, designed to complement face-to-face classes (Anderson, 2008). Such courses offer several benefits to students and pupils by reducing travel time to schools, reducing the cost of purchasing additional textbooks, reducing the time to search for information, interconnecting with students or pupils from other locations in the country or abroad, and offering free resources. The learning process through e-learning thus becomes flexible through the multitude of resources offered to students, such as images, text, and e-books. In addition, with the development of online resources, the learning process becomes personalized, as each student will use the best tools for themselves, which will contribute to a better understanding of the subjects (Anderson, 2008).

Analyzing the present situation in the context of Boeren's (2017) model, it is obvious that the current educational framework is facing challenges, or blockages, at some of its levels. While the transition to online learning has undoubtedly brought more benefits to those with a better social background - e. g. higher income to support digital-related costs, internet accessibility -, it is also responsible for accentuating the already existing gap between individuals. In addition, attention must be brought to underdeveloped countries, where the differences at a micro level are accompanied by the limited facilities offered by the economic or political characteristics of that region.

Benefits and detriments of lifelong learning

Although lifelong learning is not a new concept, it plays an essential role in today's society given the challenges the world is facing right now. Globalization and its economic dimension have made people realize that to differentiate themselves on the labor market, but also to cope with modern-day to day activities, they have to constantly improve their knowledge and skills (Laal, 2011, p. 470). The importance of LLL for the labor market cannot be overlooked, as many European countries have developed qualification frameworks and validation systems for non-formal and informal learning (e. g. Spain, Luxembourg). LLL has also gained strategic importance, as it has been included in national policies and strategies (see, for example, Denmark Strategy for Lifelong Learning or Estonia Lifelong Learning Strategy), and even in European Union's long-term objectives (European Commission, 2010).

An important aspect in analyzing the relationship between LLL and success in the job market is the extent to which nonformal and informal education are recognized by employers. While formal education is usually carried out in institutions, which offer official documents as proof of one learner's skills and knowledge - such as a diploma or a certificate, what is the process of acknowledging the nonformal and informal learning experiences? The benefits of such activities cannot be overlooked and, as stated before, some countries have developed legal documents to validate these kinds of education.

For example, volunteering is one of the preferred methods for developing abilities that may later prove to be useful on the job market. In certain countries (such as the US), volunteering is a mandatory part of the high school experience and is often perceived as an advantage in front of a prospective employer (Veres et al., 2019). While volunteering is usually regarded as an activity that requires face-to-face interactions, the development of digital tools has contributed to the emergence of *online volunteering* (Ackermann, 2019; Amichai-Hamburger, 2008). Examples of online volunteering activities include the voluntary contribution to different sites' maintenance and writing articles on websites such as Wikipedia. Again, we notice the impact of digital tools on the transformation of LLL, as well as on the development of certain individual skills and abilities.

Lifelong learning is not only beneficial to the individual himself but also society altogether. Some of the most valuable outcomes for the individual are namely that it improves the already gained knowledge and skills, it increases the chances of obtaining a better job, but it also has an impact on general well-being, life satisfaction, and gratification levels (Midtsundstad & Nielsen, 2019; Rüber et al., 2018). On the other hand, the society as a whole gains higher levels of active citizenship and volunteering, social cohesion, but the most noticeable impact can be observed from an economical point of view (Boeren et al., 2012; Midtsundstad & Nielsen, 2019; Rüber et al., 2018). Used at its fullest potential, LLL can be a salient method of increasing the overall longevity of the labor market, which is one of the challenges of the new aging societies (Midtsundstad & Nielsen, 2019). Moreover, lifelong learning can be seen as a necessary part of active aging, being a way of escapism for the elderly population; the involvement of individuals over 65 in lifelong learning activities has advantages such as psychological well-being, significant social participation, increased quality of life and stronger feelings of belonging to the community (Narushima et al., 2018). However, LLL can have a negative impact on social inclusion mainly because marginalized groups do not have access to certain learning opportunities, which leads to educational segregation (Boeren et al., 2012).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a negative impact on organizations and different domains of work. Thus, areas such as the hospitality industry, small organizations, or services provided through gig economy platforms may no longer find their place in the post-pandemic labor market and lifelong learning will need to provide the right answers to avoid a possible new economic crisis (Boeren et al., 2020). Moreover, the post-pandemic world will provide a new dynamic, adults will return to classes, being forced to retrain and look for new jobs, hence the greater importance of LLL (Boeren et al., 2020). Furthermore, the current pandemic is highlighting one of LLL's major

problems represented by the fact that continuous education serves mainly the ones who already have a high degree of instruction or training, this concept being also referred to as “the Matthew effect” (Boeren et al., 2020; Narushima et al., 2018). Financial struggles are frequent in underdeveloped areas, such as rural areas, but also among students that cannot work or have low chances of employment (Anderson, 2008).

LLL and online learning in Romania

There is no doubt that online learning has become an essential aspect when it comes to LLL. Even before the pandemic, the internet proved to be a place that offered multiple learning opportunities. But people cannot benefit from these opportunities if they do not have the necessary digital skills, nor internet connection, and digital devices.

Analyzing the situation of Romania, there are a few aspects that should be a trigger warning for the authorities, as outlined by the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) (European Commission, 2020). In terms of connectivity, in the year 2019 Romania was ranked 11th among European Union countries. Higher values than the EU average were registered for Fixed Very High Capacity Network (VHCN) coverage and the indicator regarding 100 Mbps fixed broadband take-up. At first glance, in comparison to other European countries, the connectivity dimension in rural areas is ideal, as coverage in such households is up to 39%, almost double than the EU average (European Commission, 2020). But the difference between Romania’s urban and rural areas is still significant, which is proof of the growing inequalities between social categories.

As far as digital skills are concerned, the DESI values are even more worrying. Only 31% of people aged 16-74 have at least basic digital skills, which means that, although citizens have access to the internet, they may not have the required skills to perform basic tasks. Individuals with more advanced digital skills are even fewer, with only one-tenth of the population having this kind of ability (European Commission, 2020).

The explanation for the underdeveloped digital skills among Romanian citizens may rely on the fact that the educational system is flawed. Apart from lacking basic competencies, such as reading or mathematics, young individuals have problems when it comes to digital skills too (European Commission, 2019b). In the 16-19 age segment, Romanian teenagers lack basic or above basic digital skills. While the EU average is around 83%, the value for Romania was placed around 52% in the year 2017 (European Commission, 2019b). If the school system doesn’t encourage students’ development in this direction, teenagers may grow up to be adults who have trouble using the basic functions of the online medium. Therefore, their lifelong learning opportunities are drastically limited, as they are not able to engage in online learning activities properly. In addition, many schools in Romania lack digital equipment, which may add to the already existing problems (European Commission, 2019b). Rural schools are even more disadvantaged, as 38% of them do not fulfill basic conditions, such as running water or sewage (European Commission, 2019a).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, in 2020 the most widely used online learning platforms in Romania were Google Classroom – 41%, Moodle – 2%, Edmondo – 2%, Easyclass – 1%, other – 14%, while 39% of the study's respondents stated that they have not used online platforms (Statista, 2020). The 39% of individuals who have not used online platforms can be perceived as quite disturbing, as Romania has one of the worlds' most high-speed Internet and as of 2020, 86% of Romanian households have internet access (Statista, 2021).

Looking at the way Romanian citizens use the internet, there is a clear tendency to online social networking (82% of internet users, compared to 65% EU average) and engaging in video calls (67% compared to 60% in EU). Unfortunately, one of the most underdeveloped dimensions is the one regarding online courses. Only 4% of Romanian internet users engaged in this kind of activity in 2019. Even more worrying is the fact that this value has dropped one percent in comparison to 2018, and it is very low compared to the EU average (11%) (European Commission, 2020).

The low interest in online learning may be because there seems to be an overall problem when it comes to lifelong learning in Romania. Among young adults, aged 20-34, a significant percentage represents individuals who are neither in employment nor in education and training (NEET). In 2019, almost a fifth (19.4%) of young adults were included in this category (Eurostat, 2019d). The gaps between social categories are still present, as NEETs are more prevalent in rural areas (25%) compared to cities (10%) (Eurostat 2019c).

Moreover, Romania also has worryingly low rates of adults participating in education and training. A statistic carried out in 2019 revealed that only 1.3% of individuals aged 25-64 participate in lifelong learning activities, whilst the average European Union percentage was one of 10.8% (Eurostat, 2019a). These disturbing statistics are related to other areas in which Romania is currently struggling. For instance, in 2018, in Romania, the rate of school dropout was 16.4%, while the European Union level was situated at 10.6% and, in 2019, 15.3% of Romanians were early leavers from education and training, the UE rate remaining 10.2% (Eurostat, 2019b; Statista, 2019).

We have already emphasized some of the existing flaws in the Romanian educational context, such as underdeveloped infrastructure and difficulty in developing students' basic skills. To acquire a more detailed picture of the current situation, we must turn our attention to the legal system - are legal documents regarding lifelong and online learning insufficiently developed, or is it just a matter of poor implementation on behalf of those in charge?

Two of the most important national legal documents that regulate the educational landscape are *Legea Educației Naționale* [The National Education Law] (2011) and *Strategia Națională de Învățare pe tot parcursul vieții 2015-2020* [The National Strategy of Lifelong Learning 2015-2020] (2015). The first document includes, among other points of interest, references to the characteristics, principles, and responsibilities associated with lifelong learning. Taking into account some of the principles listed, such as the principle of relevance or the principle of ensuring equal opportunities, the following question is open to debate: to what extent are these principles applied and

respected? According to these, the educational system should respond to “the personal and socio-economic development needs” (Legea educației naționale nr. 1/2011, 2011).

As far as the national strategy regarding lifelong learning is concerned, this document provides a broader perspective on the socio-economic context of education in Romania, with an emphasis on the necessity of aligning national efforts to European strategies and objectives. One of the main objectives established in the national strategy refers to having “at least 10% of the adult population (aged between 25 and 64)” engaged in lifelong learning activities (Strategia Națională de Învățare pe tot parcursul vieții 2015-2020, 2015). While we do not have access to recent statistics, according to a study conducted in the European Union, as stated earlier, in the year 2019 only 1.3% of the adult population had taken part in education and training in the previous four weeks (Eurostat, 2019a). Therefore, almost a year before the deadline regarding the national objective, Romania seemed to be worryingly far from its purpose.

Conclusions

The importance of combining different forms of education has been a widely discussed subject in the last century. But the role that education plays in the development of individuals and countries has suffered a massive change, as nations had to face the unpredictability and implications that came about with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The nature of education itself has been altered, as online learning has become prevalent due to the efforts to reduce the spread of the virus. Apart from many obvious benefits, learning in the last year and a half has highlighted numerous problems, not only in the educational system but also regarding social and economic inequalities.

As part of the European Union, Romania needs to comply with certain international standards as far as education is concerned. While Romania seems to have the necessary infrastructure to sustain the transition to online learning, its development in the right direction is slowed down by the inequalities between urban and rural areas and also by the insufficiently developed digital skills of the population. The low interest of the adult population in taking part in lifelong learning activities is also a main problem for a country that, at least at first glance, seems to have the necessary legal documents to encourage continuous learning among its citizens. Therefore, we highlight the importance of a critical analysis of the current situation. What are the high-priority problems that need to be solved and what are the next steps that should be taken to improve the educational system? How can we better prepare our students for an unpredictable and ever-evolving world? To what extent is the educational system adapted to the needs of the peers and the 21 century standards, or are we just stuck in the current way of doing things?

The present study aims to raise awareness of the existing weaknesses in Romania’s educational system among communities, organizations, and officials. We highlighted social inequality as the main problem which needs to be addressed in the near future, as the medical crisis is still rapidly evolving. The consequences of the educational gap on students’ knowledge and development should not be overlooked, as educational

representatives and organizations have the responsibility of ensuring equal opportunities for learners. Although, as highlighted before, the current national and international legislation is adapted to 21st century standards, involvement from local communities and authorities is essential. Solutions must be developed accordingly, to solve problems that may vary between institutions or geographical areas. Therefore, the implications of this study exceed the theoretical framework and serve as a starting point for developing practical solutions to improve the educational system. Acknowledging the challenges with which each educational actor confronts is the first step to offering better educational opportunities to learners.

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