

ASSURING QUALITY IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING – A REQUIREMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Due to the changes generated by the new economy, the European Union countries must adopt proactive attitudes in order to remain productive and competitive, at the same time trying to achieve a balance on the labour market. Forecasting jobs that will be available in the future has become a stringent requirement, as well as anticipating the competences and skills that will be required. More than 4 million vacancies is the main challenge currently being faced by the E.U., i.e. the challenge of providing solutions for combating the lack of skills and competences required by the labour market.

Keywords: labour market, employment, higher education, employees, aptitudes, competences

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1. Introduction: Forecasting jobs of the future and anticipating future competences and skills

The changes generated by the new economy determined EU countries to adopt proactive attitudes in order to remain productive and competitive, trying at the same time to achieve a balance on the labour market. ***Forecasting jobs that will be available in the future has become a stringent requirement, as well as anticipating the competences and skills that will be required.***

The impressive number of more than 4 million available jobs represents the main challenge currently being faced by the E.U., i.e. the challenge of providing solutions for combating the lack of skills and competences required by the labour market.

"By 2020, the number of jobs for skilled workers will increase by one third whereas the number of available jobs for unskilled workers will decrease by 15%. "(László Andor, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion)¹. The European Commission aimed at identifying the best solutions for defining and anticipating the demand for knowledge and skills and promoted at the same time certain examples of best practice to support new jobs creation in all EU member states and to prepare workers for the new jobs of the future, in order to reduce current discrepancies.²

Starting from this real and irrefutable challenge, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, regarding the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education in Education and Training 2008/0069 (COD) in 2008, recommends it as the main instrument for supporting member states in promoting and monitoring the continuous improvement of the Vocational Education and Training (VET) based on common European references.

The framework must also improve the quality of education and training and build mutual trust in national systems of education and lifelong learning³.

2. Education and labour market requirements

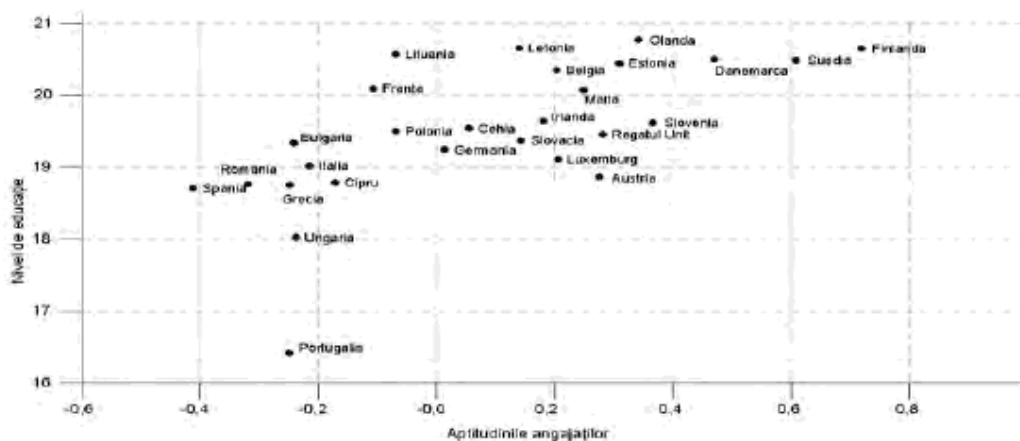
The compatibility between education and labour market requirements can be estimated through the average of knowledge and aptitudes, experience and education level of the workforce that is available on the labour market. If we compare Romania's current situation with that of other EU member countries, the result shows a relevant analysis on the education qualitative level and needs required by the labour market. (Graph no.1.1.).

¹ Andor L., Opening speech of the Conference on The Future of European Labour Markets, Brussels, 10 March 2011

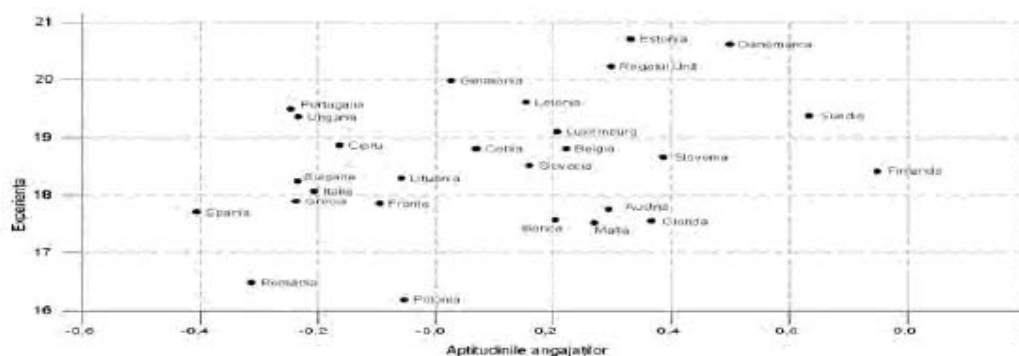
² Skills for Europe's Future: anticipating occupational skills needs, CEDEFOP Series, Luxembourg Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2009.

³ European Communities Commission: „Recommendation Of The European Parliament And Council concerning the establishment of a European Framework for Quality Assurance in Education and Training" COM (2008) 179 final 2008-2009 (COD) Brussels

Taking into account the criterion regarding the employees' aptitudes in relation to education, Romania occupied an inferior position in a ranking of EU countries, namely the 28th position, being included in the group of poorly performing countries: Portugal, Spain, Greece, Hungary, Cyprus, Italia, Bulgaria (graph no.1.2.).



Graph no. 1.1. Average of aptitudes and education level of employees⁴



Graph no. 1.2. Average of aptitudes and experience of employees⁵

These results should be regarded as warning signs on the relative compatibility between the current system of education and the labour market, pressing for tools, mechanisms and policies of improving lifelong learning, as well as support for reducing discrepancies between knowledge and skills supply and labour market demand.

The nature of higher education graduates is continuously changing, since many students already have part-time jobs.

Instructions' reaction to this particular evolution of employment is different. This phenomenon deals with the development of a closer relationship between education and labour. Employers are increasingly interested in what higher education can offer, both for recruiting and for part-time training and development of the existing employees. Higher education institutions are regarded as communities, collaborating with employers and developing innovative and effective way of increasing their students' chances of getting hired. Thus students are allowed to manage their own careers, preparing them for lifelong learning and providing a continuing professional development.

Labour market changes of higher education graduates include the following:

- changes in the structure trade and industry, especially small organizations wishing to advance;

⁴ EWCS, 2005. Study conducted by EWCS Foundation (European Working Conditions Surveys) based on an enquiry on working conditions in Europe (once every five years – 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005). The survey included Romania beginning with 2005, when the number of countries rose to 31.

⁵ EWCS, 2005.

- more graduates employed part-time in small organizations become their full-time employees and they combine their part-time job or fixed-term employment with freelancing;
- public sector reform, especially the government's efforts to improve performance and responsibility.

The National Qualifications Framework lays the foundations of a new, integrated system of qualifications, which is more flexible however. The need for such a system arises mainly from the national objective of making the transition to a lifelong learning society, in which those who learn will be able to benefit from learning opportunities in various stages of their lives. The diverse communities in which they learn, will include in the future more people who attend part-time training or trainings organized at regular intervals.

The concept of National Qualifications Framework and the integration of the various classes of award-type (major, minor, supplemental and special purpose) depend on the existence of assessment and comparing the learning results in a lesser extent than those associated with major rewards⁶.

The Framework describes a coherent national policy approach to qualifications, an inspiring source to support the lifelong learning society and a basis for international comparison and alignment (to the trends of the European policy and agreements from Lisbon, Copenhagen and Bologna, European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

EQF aims at identifying the training needs directly linked to the labour market demand (that of employers). Labour market demand for competences and qualifications (that require training) is transmitted to universities, which in turn process it and transforms it into training strategies and later into university curriculum.

All qualifications (assessed through learning results) should be transparent and relevant to the economic environment. In enterprises, qualifications are required by specific conditions, at the same time ensuring competition and innovation.

Consequently, the university and the enterprise send the information to the National Authority for Qualifications in Higher Education, which synthesizes and defines the formal qualifications.

The main purpose of EQF is to provide a common language to describe qualifications, which will help member countries, employers and individuals to compare qualifications in the entire European Union that has various education and training systems⁷. The key element of EQF is a set of eight reference levels describing what a person knows, understands and can do on completion of a learning process – the learning outcomes, regardless of the system in which the qualification was obtained. Therefore EQF's reference levels shifts the focus away from the traditional approach that places a great emphasis on learning inputs (length of a learning experience, type of institution).

As a tool for promoting lifelong learning, EQF covers general and adult education, vocational education and training as well as higher education. The eight levels encompass the entire span of qualifications, starting with those achieved at the end of compulsory education up to those awarded at the highest level of academic, professional, vocational education or training.

The award acknowledges the learning outcomes, which can be described or defined in detail, but there are no tools to assess them, the most commonly used tool in Europe is the number of hours – ECTS-based assessment⁸. ECTS is used to provide a mechanism that connects the national framework to the world in order to enable the following:

1. international transparency between universities, employers and stakeholders; instrument: diploma supplement;
2. international recognition of qualification;
3. international mobility of learners and graduates refer to:
 - learners can have greater confidence that the learning outcomes they achieved abroad will contribute to a better qualification in their own country.
 - A framework will be especially useful in supporting development and recognition of joint degrees from more than one country.

3. Romania's efforts to meet the requirements of the European education

Both higher education and labour market is changing rapidly in the current era, which is characterized by rapid changes, globalization and increasing complexity in economic, social and cultural relationships.

⁶ Roșca I. Gh., Lefter V., Academia de Studii Economice, București, Simpozion România în Uniunea Europeană. Calitatea integrării. Creștere. Competență. Ocupare, A.S.E., București, 2007, p18-20.

⁷ The European Qualifications Framework a new way to understand qualifications across Europe

⁸ Roșca I. Gh., Lefter V., Academia de Studii Economice, București, Symposium România în Uniunea Europeană. Calitatea integrării. Creștere. Competență. Ocupare, A.S.E., București, 2007, p18-20.

The speed of these changes is reflected in the context in which future objectives concerning education system and training must be considered. The new structures and the current society are increasingly governed through information and knowledge. Moreover, due to the increase of the social development pace and complexity of economic environment, an ordinary professional life of the future will be to be made up of several sequential careers. Lifelong learning becomes thus a necessity rather than an opportunity of spiritual enrichment as it might have been in the past.

Romania has made important steps towards European Higher Education Area, by reorganizing the entire spectrum of university programs. A new higher education structure was adopted by the law no.288/2004 on organizing university studies, the legislative framework of introducing the three stages or levels: bachelor's (undergraduate), master's (graduate) and doctoral degrees, in accordance with the Bologna principles. The law came into force in the 2005/2006 academic year and the first generation of graduates of the first Bologna level graduated in 2008/2009. The ministerial order no. 3617/16.03.2005 generalizes the application of ECTS in all universities from Romania. The ministerial order no. 4868/2006 on implementing the Diploma Supplement to certify the completion of a cycle of studies, stipulates that all higher education institutions will issue free of charge the Diploma Supplement beginning with 2005/2006 academic year.

One of the most important achievements of the Romanian higher education system was the adoption of the law no. 87/2006, on the approval of the Government Emergency Ordinance no.75/2005 concerning the education quality assurance. Its main purpose was to turn the Romanian system of education into a more attractive and active one for the European Higher Education System.

In Romania, National Qualifications Framework In Higher Education (NQFHE) is the responsibility of the National Agency for Qualifications in Higher Education and Partnership with Economic and Social Environment⁹ (ACPART), which has become the national authority that sets up and regularly updates the national framework of qualifications for the higher education system, subordinated to the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports – a public institution that has legal personality.

The agency has offices in Cluj-Napoca, Galați, Timișoara and Iași. The National Qualifications Framework aligns to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

The Framework fully acknowledges the competence of the member states. Its purpose is to stimulate the following:

- establishment of more developed and coherent quality assurance systems between countries;
- increasing transparency of quality assurance systems and improving VET approaches in order to strengthen mutual trust and facilitate mobility;
- cooperation and mutual learning in order to involve stakeholders in a culture that enhances quality and responsibility on all levels.

The main users of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework will be the national/regional authorities as well as public and private entities responsible for quality assurance and improvement, including suppliers.

Nevertheless, the improvement of the quality of education and training is essential in order to meet consumers' needs.

The establishment European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training is a priority of the European Union on the implementation of a coherent and effective strategy regarding lifelong learning and training.

This vocational education-based action is regarded as a key element of applying the principles of labour market flexicurity, sustainable economic growth and last but not least, of improving the quality of life.¹⁰

The decision-makers from Romania are not able to say undoubtedly that Romania has a well-defined **strategy** on human resources, which is integrated into the learning types (subsystems of education)¹¹ and credible anchored into the European space. Certain strategies are being currently developed, focusing on components of lifelong learning, which will be applied beginning with 2013-2020. Statistical studies and research conducted on the Romanian education system, compared to some other European countries, show poor performance in implementing the existing strategies.

⁹ Government decision 1357/2005 on setting up, organizing and running the National Agency for Qualifications in Higher Education and Partnership with Economic and Social Environment- ACPART

¹⁰ Crețu A.S., Indicatori relevanți ai ocupării și formării profesionale în România. Opinii și sugestii privind îmbunătățirea monitorizării forței de muncă. Propunerea de noi indicatori, Proiect de cercetare, numărul POSDRU/89/1.5/S/59184, cofinanțat din Fondul Social European, prin Programul Operațional Sectorial Dezvoltarea Resurselor Umane 2007-2013, ASE, București, 2010, p.105

¹¹ Vasile V., coordonator, ș.a, Îmbunătățirea competențelor profesionale în rândul absolvenților și tinerilor: o șansă pentru viitor, Institutul European din România, Proiect SPOS 2009, 2010, p.141

The main strategic documents that point out the relationship between learning and the labour market are the following:

- *Romanian Higher Education strategy for 2002-2010, which emphasized only the general principles, the strategic objective being the structural improvement of the higher education system, and also the operational objectives, but not explicitly itemized (such as resources and implementation instruments);*
- *National Strategy for Sustainable Development of Romania – horizons 2013-2020-2030 addresses education and training, scientific research and technologic development, innovation in a separate chapter, as inter- and intra-sector topics, but the way they are approached is somehow identical with the previous one;*
- *Integrated Strategy for Human Resources Development from the lifelong learning perspective that substantiates POSDRU for 2013-2020 – currently under finalization at the Ministry of Labour;*
- *The main operational instrument, at the strategic level, aiming at achieving quality assurance in human resources is The Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), whose main objective is the development of human capital and increasing competitiveness, by correlating education and lifelong learning with the labour market and ensuring increased opportunities for future insertion in a modern, flexible and inclusive labour market.*

But in spite of all efforts of adapting and aligning the Romanian higher education system onto the European level, several **negative aspects** can be currently identified that impairs its quality:

- there are certain discrepancies between the qualifications required by the labour market and those provided by the higher education system;
- higher education system still focuses heavily on theory (most of it), instead of achieving professional competences, etc.

Conclusions

The Romanian graduate, the final result of the higher education system, does not always have the knowledge and competences required by the labour market. This conclusion is also backed up by international rankings that point out the above-mentioned aspects. Meanwhile the labour market is looking for specialists that the tertiary education cannot currently provide.

There are multiple causes but the quality certification plays a very important part. Quality certification requires both that the assessment of the institution to be achieved taking into account the assumed standards and compatible with the European ones, and the assessment of the student, testing his or her competences related to creativity, initiative, logic thinking, entrepreneurship, etc. The division of the labour market is not supported and promoted by the higher education institutions, i.e. the ideal student is not thoroughly described, focusing on the aptitudes, competences and a level of education worthy to be considered by employers¹².

Moreover, mention must be made here that the higher education system does not have all the necessary means to retain well-trained students, who chose to continue/complete their studies abroad. On the other hand, the labour market does not offer proper incentives to retain them (inappropriate jobs, inferior to their level of training, poor pay, lack of career prospects etc.)

We also notice the lack of interest of the business environment for the education system, especially the higher education system. There are few specialists in business environment that are willing to teach interdisciplinary studies, to draw students' attention to market economy and its realities. Another possible explanation for the fact that the Romanian graduate does not have the necessary knowledge and skills required by the labour market is the current system of education itself, which allows mass access to higher education opportunities, thus being transformed into a "commodity"¹³. In Romania, almost all applicants are admitted and with minimum effort, almost all of them graduate as well.

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¹² Vasile V., coordonator, ș.a, Îmbunătățirea competențelor profesionale în rândul absolvenților și tinerilor: o șansă pentru viitor, Institutul European din România, Proiect SPOS 2009, 2010, p.100

¹³ Pânzaru I., Învățământul superior românesc și integrarea europeană, conferință la Biblioteca Centrală Universitară, 10 decembrie 2008, http://www.unibuc.ro/ro/invatamantul_superior_romnesc_si_integrarea_europeana

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