

## Barriers to Adult Learning with Some Evidence from Romania

~ Ph. D. Lecturer **Radu Herman** (Faculty of Administration and Business, University of Bucharest, Romania)

E-mail: [radu.herman@faa.unibuc.ro](mailto:radu.herman@faa.unibuc.ro)

**Abstract:** *The aim of this article is to explore some of the barriers which adult learners encounter and how to overcome them in the approach of lifelong learning. The literature usually recognizes two types of barriers to adult learning: external or situational and internal or dispositional. When facing internal and external barriers, students are not able to continue their learning. This article explores some reasons which they encounter in reaching their target of learning. The purpose of lifelong learning is to develop the required competencies in order to be permanently adapted and fitted in a continuous changing world. If learners acquire new competencies, they will be able to live more productively and have a better understanding of their own needs and how to better adapt to changes. After attending the training and some barriers are overcome, some learners encounter some changes which refer to a shift in mind and attitude changes, which increase their quality of work and social relationships. Some practical evidence is presented from the report "Implementarea Programului Învățare pe Tot Parcursul Vieții în Anul 2012" from Romania with respect to how some barriers were identified and overcome. Descriptive statistics is presented in a table of data for Romania that refers to persons aged 25 to 64 for the years 2010-2015 who stated that they received education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey.*

**Keywords:** lifelong learning, adult learning, barriers to education, education, motivation.

**JEL Classification:** D83, I21, P36

## 1. Introduction

From the specialized literature, we find that the generally accepted scope of lifelong learning is to engage in self-directed learning. The self-directed learners are those individuals who think critically and can take responsibility for their state of learning. They do not wait passively to be taught and can anticipate certain situational changes and can learn the specific knowledge with or without the help of others. However, achieving the status of self-directed learner is not easy due to internal and external barriers encountered by the learners. The self-directed learners are those individuals who think critically and can take responsibility for their state of learning. They do not wait passively to be taught and can anticipate certain situational changes and can learn the specific knowledge with or without the help of others. The inquiring minds, the constant search for meaning and purpose in different contexts is a characteristic of the self-directed learners. Lifelong learners are in a permanent seeking of meaning throughout the life. Adult learners have different responsibilities from youth which are considered barriers to continue their learning. According to literature, lifelong learning is a particular type of education and adult learners have specific needs and barriers to overcome. "The European Agenda for Adult Learning" highlights the need for an increased attendance of adult learners in formal, non-formal and informal learning for personal development, acquiring new competencies or more active citizenship and social inclusion. A way of motivating adult learners is to improve the reasons for attending training and to decrease the barriers.

## 2. Literature review

The literature usually recognizes two types of barriers to adult learning: external or situational and internal or dispositional (Falasca, M., 2011). Gene E. Fusch. (2000) argues that some traditional industries have met some levels of resistance from their blue-collar workers because of perceived barriers to learning, like cultural, social, familial, personal, financial barriers, cultural, social, familial, personal, or financial barriers. Moody (1986) argues that a strong barrier to lifelong learning is the perceived barrier that education is not appropriate in late life, although there is evidence that people can continue to learn at any age. Moody (1986) points out that adult learners are generally interested in credentials or degrees, like tests, grades or competition, and they prefer learning about hobbies, personal growth or physical health needs; they prefer participative learning where they can be involved in and active.

Marina Falasca (2011) identifies some internal barriers to learning:

- having a certain mindset and fixed ideas that sabotage the process of learning like "memorization is how you learn in school" or "I'm too old to learn" etc.;
- having the wrong vision towards the objectivity of knowledge in the sense that they try to understand new concepts relying on their own past learned concepts;
- seeing just some elements "of the big picture" while failing to perceive the whole idea;
- being anxious about their own inability to learn and being skeptical of the values of the process of learning.

Marina Falasca (2011) describes some external barriers to learning:

- some physiological constraints like problems with seeing or hearing, which is a barrier to actually acquiring knowledge;
- some general problems in the capacity of learning, like illness or fatigue, which influence the learners' level of energy, preventing them from maintaining a certain level of focusing;
- some changes in family or workplace which have an impact on adult learning;
- motivational factors which are considered mandatory for acquiring a new job position, but which is not perceived as an internal need by the adult learner.

### 3. Lifelong Learning

A view to education is the concept of lifelong learning. The reason behind lifelong learning is that we live in a world with accelerates changes, which require a process of lifelong learning. Therefore, a continuous learning will develop the required competencies in order to be permanently adapted and fitted in a continuous changing world. Lifelong learning provides the means and support for self-directed inquirers (The Modern Practice of Adult Education, From Pedagogy to Andragogy).

The purpose of education is to achieve competencies from people and the generally accepted scope of lifelong learning is to engage in self-directed learning. Competency is a notion which is synonym in theory and practical training with people's attitudes, knowledge, skills, values and interests. Structured learning experiences enhance the quality of lifelong learners with respect to a better adaptation to the dynamic changes of the needs of society. If learners acquire new

competencies, they will be able to live more productively and have a better understanding of their own needs and how to better adapt to changes.

The European Agenda for Adult Learning highlights the need for an increased attendance of adult learners in formal, non-formal and informal learning for personal development, acquiring new competencies or more active citizenship and social inclusion. The participation rates of adults are stagnating from 1.4% to 31.6% (2012 data). The target set for 2020 is that 15% of adults aged between 25 and 64 should be taking part in adult education (European Agenda for Adult Learning). The participation rates are reduced mainly for low-skilled and older adults and there is a need for increasing the participation rates and different policies and actions are formulated to improve this situation.

Four objectives are included in the strategic framework to respond to the challenges for 2020: (European Agenda for Adult Learning)

- "Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality";
- "Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training";
- "Promoting equity, social cohesion, and active citizenship";
- "Enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training".

The objectives addressed by the European Commission require working on these topics:

- raising awareness;
- validation of informal and non-formal learning;

- increasing the quality of the process;
- the monitoring of the adult learning sector;
- adults' access to higher education;
- financing the learning of adults;
- reaching the specific targeted groups.

The Council Resolution on a renewed European agenda for adult learning highlights some aspects like: (European Agenda for Adult Learning)

- "An Agenda for New Skills and Jobs, which calls on Member States to ensure that people acquire the skills needed for further learning and the labor market through general, vocational and higher education, as well as through adult learning" from the Europe 2020 flagship initiatives;

- "Adult-learning reforms are increasingly anchored in overall developments in education and training, notably the development of national qualifications frameworks and lifelong-learning strategies."

- "Quality assurance has been raised as an important issue in adult learning and strides are being made in developing the professional profile and training of adult-learning professionals, the accreditation of adult-learning providers and improved guidance services for adults."

#### **4. The adult learner and barriers to lifelong learning**

Stephen Lieb (Principles of adult learning) identifies some barriers for adult learning:

- a lower level of educational attainment;
- a lack of supervisory approval or the inability to leave the work;

- a lower level of formal education;
- a lower socio-economic status;
- a social pressure from family or the environment to attend the trainings;
  - when they cannot identify the benefits of attending a training course;
  - a lack of experience regarding how to apply to a training course;
  - a lack of knowledge regarding how to identify some current opportunities for trainings;
  - a lack of time to attend courses;
  - insufficient financial resources or barriers regarding the transportation or other logistical obstacles;
  - a lack of social support if they have a child.

The self-directed learners are those individuals who think critically and can take responsibility for their state of learning. They do not wait passively to be taught and can anticipate certain situational changes and can learn the specific knowledge with or without the help of others. The inquiring minds, the constant search for meaning and purpose in different contexts is a characteristic of self-directed learners. Lifelong learners are in a permanent search of meaning throughout their life.

Sarah Tullos Hutto (2009) believes that some personality traits are related to the thinking process and an individual has a "learning personality" which includes learning styles, frames of reference, beliefs about learning and theories on the self, which are changed by experience. Sarah Tullos Hutto (2009) argues that frames of reference for learning are not constructive and represent barriers to learning and self-fulfillment. A better understanding of the learning process

gives the trainer a better perspective to adapt to the internal learning processes of the student. If the student has a better awareness of the internal learning processes, then the barriers to his understanding will decrease and the communication with the trainer will increase.

A way of motivating adult learners is to improve the reasons for attending training and to decrease the barriers (Principles of Adult Learning). In this view, trainers learn what motivates the adult students and explore which are reasons that keep them away from attending the classes. The trainer will know better how to motivate the students, which is measured by their expected output from attending a training course. Usually, incentives include the need for acquiring new competencies, an increase of the job's benefits after attending training, an increase of quality at their job, a better adaptation to changes at the workplace and to satisfy the need for training from their job employers. The trainer will explore which are the incentives of their students to formulate and adapt a proper strategy related to the output of the training course.

Knowles (1980) cited in Falasca, M. (2011) identifies several particularities of adult learners:

- Adults need to feel free to direct themselves, they like to be autonomous and self-directed;
- Adults have accumulated a certain amount of life experience and knowledge and need reasons to learn something new;
- Adults are less subject-oriented and more problem-centered.

Kimmel, S. B., & McNeese, M. N. (2006) found out that:

- Adult students will differ significantly by gender in their motivations for seeking education;

- Adult students will differ significantly by gender in their barriers to higher education;

- Adult students will differ significantly by race/ethnicity in their motivations for seeking education;

- Adult students will differ significantly by race/ethnicity in their barriers to higher education.

Adults have different responsibilities compared to youth, which are considered barriers to continue their learning. These barriers include confidence, money, lack of time or interest, lack of information regarding the opportunities to learn, information regarding the output of learning, transportation and their responsibility to take care of their children (Principles of Adult Learning).

Gene E. Fusch. (2000) found out that after removing the barriers, workers changed some of their behavior and engaged in new productive behaviors. Some changes refer to a shift in mind and attitude changes, which increased their quality of work and social relationships. The existence of so many programs of lifelong training is itself evidence that the barriers can be overcome. If the financial and logistical aspects are overcome, then a shift in the mindset is possible and individuals will be able to become better learners.

### 5. Evidence for Romania with respect to lifelong learning

In "Implementarea Programului Învățare pe Tot Parcursul Vieții în Anul 2012", we find out some ways in which the barriers are perceived:

- a lack of implication from the individuals with low opportunities;
- the lack of communication competencies in a foreign language and some barriers regarding the alphabetization and other basic competencies in the case of individuals with low opportunities;
- the challenges and opportunities met in a learning mobility should be used as knowledge for a better future planning;
- the ways in which some teaching activities were developed had the purpose of creating an image of an educational system without barriers in communication, regardless of the country from which the participants attended;

- the necessity of continual training of the trainers to apply the new methods of learning in future classes;
- by attending an Erasmus Program, individuals will shift easier from certain prejudices and cultural barriers, they will interact better with the local students, will gain more interest in knowing and visiting Romania and will be better prepared for future experiences in mobility;
- organizational barriers can be overcome by the professionalism of the organizing team and by the common sharing of success.

space/time	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
EU (28 countries)	9.1	8.9	9.0	10.5	10.7	10.6
Romania	1.2	1.4	1.3	1.8	1.5	1.1

Source: Eurostat, 2016

In the table above, the indicators of Lifelong Learning refer to the percentage of persons aged 25 to 64 who stated that they received education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey (numerator). The denominator consists of the total population of the same age group, excluding those who did not answer to the question 'participation in education and training'. Both the numerator and the denominator come from the EU Labor Force Survey (Eurostat 2016). The information collected relates to all education

or training, whether or not relevant to the respondent's current or possible future job. We can see that in Romania the participation rate in an educational or training program is much lower than in the EU (28 countries).

In the table above, the indicators of Lifelong Learning refer to the percentage of persons who did not want to participate in education or training. We can see that in 2007, the participation rate in EU (28 countries) was 19.7%, while in Romania was 9.6%.

space/time	2007	2011
EU (28 countries)	80.3	83.0
Romania	90.4	-

Source: Eurostat, 2016

## 6. Conclusions

Understanding the barriers to adult learning is a first step in having some insight into the factors which lower the efficiency of the educational programs. Attendance to lifelong learning programs in Romania is much lower than the average of the EU 28 countries. An explanation for these lower rates of attendance is related to the barriers which the adult learners encounter. The quest of the adult learners is to achieve the state of self-directed learners in order to think critically and

take responsibility for their state of learning and to gain specific competencies with or without the help of others. I consider that having a better understanding of the self, learning about the barriers that exist in the process of lifelong learning will foster the attendance and improve the results of training programs. If barriers are not understood by students and trainers, then the process of adult learning will continue to stagnate, as we can see from the descriptive statistics for lifelong programs attendance by Romanian students.

---

## REFERENCES:

1. **Falasca, M.** (2011), *Barriers to adult learning: Bridging the gap*. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 51(3), Available on 7 April, Pp. 583-590
2. **Gene E. Fusch.** (2000), *Breaking down Perceived Barriers to Lifelong Learning*. *Journal of Educational Technology & Society* 3 (1), *International Forum of Educational Technology & Societ*, Available on 7 April: Pp. 88-92
3. **Hutto, S. T.** (2009), *The relationships of learning style balance and learning dimensions to self-directed learning propensity among adult learners*, Available from ProQuest Central; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global, Available on 7 April
4. **Kimmel, S. B., & McNeese, M. N.** (2006), *Barriers to business education: Motivating adult learners*, *Journal of Behavioral and Applied Management*, Available on 7 April, Pp. 292-303
5. **Knowles, M.S.** (1980), *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy*, (2nd ed.), New York: Cambridge Books, Available on 7 April
6. **Moody Harry R.** (1986), *Daedalus, Vol. 115, No. 1, The Aging Society*, The MIT Press on behalf of American Academy of Arts & Sciences, Available on 7 April: Pp. 191-210
7. *European Agenda for Adult Learning*, [online], Available: <http://www.eaea.org/en/policy-advocacy/european-agenda-for-adult-learning.html> [07 April 2016]
8. Eurostat, [online], Available: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database> [07 April 2016]
9. *Implementarea Programului Invatare pe Tot Parcursul Vietii in Anul 2012*, [online], Available: [http://www.anpcdefp.ro/userfiles/Raport\\_2012.pdf](http://www.anpcdefp.ro/userfiles/Raport_2012.pdf) [07 April 2016]
10. *Principles of adult learning*, [online], Available: [http://carrie-ekey.com/handouts/Rotterdam2012/Eu\\_Coaches\\_Conf2\\_Rott\\_Day\\_1\\_A4.pdf](http://carrie-ekey.com/handouts/Rotterdam2012/Eu_Coaches_Conf2_Rott_Day_1_A4.pdf) [07 April 2016]
11. *The Modern Practice of Adult Education, From Pedagogy to Andragogy*, [online], Available: Available [http://www.umsl.edu/~henschke/articles/a\\_The\\_%20Modern\\_Practice\\_of\\_Adult\\_Education.pdf](http://www.umsl.edu/~henschke/articles/a_The_%20Modern_Practice_of_Adult_Education.pdf) [07 April 2016]