Distance Education for all Ages in Romania

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Abstract
Both society as a whole and each of its members have to be prepared for the changes caused by continuous evolvement of knowledge. Alongside with the traditional forms of education, distance education represents the chance people of all ages have to learn in order to have a better chance to adapt to the ever-changing society.

Keywords: *adult education; long-life education; Romania, contemporary society;*

1.Introduction – Schooling and the Romanian Background
The experience of learning, either formally or informally, is meant to change something, no matter the age, context or initial aim. Our contemporary society is in a permanent and accelerate change – that of workplace nature modification. People in Romania, as everywhere, live in a fluid environment, with a hectic rhythm of renewing, which sometimes may be felt as hostile. If not very long time ago (before December 1989 revolution) a person had a job for all their life, at present, workplaces change on average every five years, with dramatic modifications. Under such circumstances, the aid is supposed to come from the educational system, which, in its turn, is expected to adapt. Only fifty years ago, the education received in schools could be enough for the rest of a person's lifetime. However, now the situation has changed. Both society and the modern individual have to glide from the level-centered education to continuous education, which has to prepare people for society. This society can be viewed as one of continuous change of knowledge.

The mistakes in the approach of the modern education system can lead to consequences difficult to predict, even on short term, but after all, this is the challenge of the present. The institutions which offer education should therefore design new methods to promote students with abilities such as capacity of cooperation and dialogue, flexibility in maintaining the equilibrium; in other words, to

prepare the individual for a new lifestyle and for long life learning. There are the new information technologies that come to help education.

Distance education is an attempt to offer people of all ages the chance to learn in the moment, place and rhythm that best satisfy their personal needs with a view to provide them the chance of better adapting to society. (Eşi, 2014, 33-42). This does not mean that traditional forms of education are no longer trustworthy, especially for the first years of education, when the teacher is so much needed. Distance education may seem the right answer to adult education. Technology can help by eliminating time, space, accommodation costs etc. constraints. There are both advantages and disadvantages in distance learning, as beside the open access offered to everyone by this type of learning, students sometimes lack the possibility of socializing and gaining from emotional involvement. Indeed, student interaction is one of the directions in which distance education will exceed its limits. At the level of interaction, an important role is played by the tutor, who acts as a professional mediator in the process of education.

The results of the research in the countries with tradition in correspondence learning show that distance education is as effective as day courses provided the educational planning is proper. For example, The Institute for Higher Education Policy initiated a study on the effectiveness of distance education, which wanted to be an analysis of what research in the field say and what it doesn't. (http://www.ihep.org) The study suggests that many of the essential questions about the way in which distance education is done received no answer. Thus, a whole range of questions arise and can be generalized to distance education elsewhere in the world: are there difficulties in Romanian distance education? Which are the aims and the also which are the advantages of adult education? What is specific to the Romanian tutor as compared to the international acceptation of the term? Throughout the present paper these questions will be given an answer taking into consideration the Romanian distance education, highlighting the role played by the tutor, the professional mediator whose mission is of extreme importance.

The efforts of providing good quality education for adults are in line with the aims presented by UNESCO referring to the need of continuing education both for young and adult people: "adults continuing learning must be developed and diversified and integrated into the national education system and strategies for reducing poverty." (Hoppers) On the other hand, the European Commission put emphasis on the concept of lifelong learning, as a modality to fulfill the goal of making the EU "the most competitive and dynamic, knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion." (European Commission) It is the European Commission that clarifies the concept of lifelong learning, by defining the types of activities it involves: "All 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) Proposing a type of undiscriminating learning, distance education situates the learner in a privileged position, "as a self-activated maker of meaning, an active agent of his own learning process. He is not one whom things

merely happen; he is the one who, by his own volition, causes things to happen. Learning is seen as the result of his own self-initiated interaction with the world." (European Commission)

2.Distance Education for both Young and Adult People

The concept of *learning for life*, which represented for a long time a major aim of the educational systems all over the world, has become redundant in the context of the huge transformations in society due to technological and economic changes. If thirty years ago, *long life education* could be viewed as an option for an age with more free time, nowadays it has become a necessity. The education offer has become diversified in accordance with the consumers' demand. Thus, distance education can be viewed as a new orientation towards the consumer of the institutions providing such opportunities. Credit accumulation, organization of courses in modules – they are all parts of the same structural transformation of education system in Romania and elsewhere. Although not directly connected to the idea of distance education, yet of vital importance for the future of education in keeping with the principle of long-life learning, we must mention one of the most important legislative measures undertaken in Romania: the Law of Education 1/ 2011. It aligns the Romanian educational system within the European view on lifelong learning as a facilitator of the emergence of the knowledge economy, (Popescu, 2014, 49) proposing an incentivizing system, given the Romanians' lower standard of living in comparison to that of the other Europeans'. This law advances the concept of "account for continuous education", by means of which the Romanian state will give each baby at birth the sum of 500 euros in equivalent to support the right of lifelong learning. Parents have the possibility to participate to this account and redirect 2% of the tax paid every year on salary income. This account will be opened at State Treasury, it will bear an interest rate, and the child will be able to have access to it after graduation of the compulsory education. (Popescu, 2016, 69) Such a measure is meant to make individuals benefit from opportunities of continuing learning and not be limited to the initial education only. This example proves that there are similarities and differences among the European different states, largely due to geographical, historical, economic or political reasons. Nevertheless, the main tenet remains that of adult or post-compulsory learning, although the former communist states view it as a means of improving their economic development, while the western European states whose economies are already strong, consider it is as a way to maintain the stability of their market economies and to solve the emerging problems of skills shortage.

2.1 Distance Education in Romania - A Diachronic Perspective

Viewed in diachrony, one can distinguish several stages in the development of distance education at the international level: the first one is represented by the correspondence education (the first course of this type is recorded in England and it dates as far back as the year 1840). It was addressed especially to the adults who didn't manage to complete their pre-university or university studies. Letter writing with a view to teach the others can be said to be as old as the art of writing itself. Thus, it has been suggested that the epistles in the New Testament may be considered an example of distance education. (Holmberg, 2008, 13) Starting with 1920 there appear radio educational programmes, addressed especially to university studies. In 1939 in France appeared the national center for distance education, which provides correspondence courses today as well. The second

generation is represented by television education and by the industrial model and developed against a context dominated by the behaviorist trend in education. The third generation is represented by the interactive distance education. (Eşi, 2014, 73-83) The computer assisted education was the basis of the new type of intelligent tutorial systems, which offer the possibility of a dynamic generation of exercises, which adapt the difficulty level in accordance with the student's performance, and which also include the analysis of the student's behavior interpretation. Within this category we include the distance education, characterized by interactive educational technologies, convergence of distance and classroom learning, and also by the competition among the distance education providers at the worldwide level.

Romanian education can be said to have strong roots as far as the tradition of long-life learning is concerned. It dates as far back as the year 1920, (Bădina et.al., 1970, 34-36) when the model of social pedagogy was applied and which targeted different categories of students, such as women, young persons, people from the rural areas, members of some disadvantaged categories etc. It is true that at present one can hardly find traces of this tradition or of the system which was effectual in those years or even in the years before the 1989 revolution.

The concept of "continuous education", borrowed from the French literature not only into the vocabulary but also into the law system, had been the guiding principle as far as adult education is concerned until the quite recent idea of lifelong learning. It is true that there has always been a need for unconventional learning and out of this need there might have emerged new types of learning opportunities. At the international level, starting with the nineteenth century, people who didn't have a solid educational background tried to educate themselves either for personal development needs of for practical purposes, needs that prepared the conditions for the creation of distance education institutions. It is an acknowledged fact that there has always been a desire to benefit from educational activities other than those implied by the formal educational system. This doesn't mean that one lessens its value and its importance as a vital element in the development of the Romanian society.

Thus, in 1921, after the first university in Salt Lake City got the license for education through radio, the first opinions regarding the new pedagogic methods offered by educational radio appeared in Romania as well. It was then that Dimitrie Gusti, as president of the Romanian Broadcasting Society, suggested organizing conferences through radio starting with 1930. They were intended for lower and upper school and proved to be effective within the area of informal education and training. A conclusive remark regarding the function of social pedagogy within the Romanian educational system comes from Bădina et al, who remarked the fact that it appeared as a reaction to the limits of the school education, thus emphasizing the necessity to prepare the young generation with the aim of their active and creative integration in the entire social life. This is just another proof that there has always been a need for educational programmes and systems, other than the formal educational system. (Esi, 2010) Thus, one can easily see the signs of the need for lifelong learning, known as continuous education in Romanian version, given the fact that it is natural for

each part of the world to have its own characteristics of the educational system, generated by a wide variety of factors, such as geographical, historical, politic, economical, technological one, etc.

The information technological innovations allow the reduction of the distance in time, thus introducing an interactive dimension, which was reduced or even absent in the 1920s. The education at a distance, facilitated by technology, represents an attempt to make real a form of verbal exchange meant to be a dialogue, not just a mere conversation, given the distinction made by some experts in communication (such as that evoked by Guy Lochard and Henry Boyer, who distinguish between conversation and dialogue in terms of evoking themes versus stating and putting themes together). (Lochards & Boyer, 1998, 110)

2.2 Nowadays Distance Learning – Main Objectives; Advantages and Barriers

It is natural for the degree in which the concepts involved by the lifelong learning education policy as formulated by the European Commission to differ in their application in national policies. In Romania, in general, such concepts are associated especially with "adult or post-compulsory learning." (Popescu, 63) The Romanian educational system has been in continuous structural reform since the 1989 Revolution, aiming to improve its efficiency so that the country will undergo a faster development through "the development of its human capital for the knowledge society to be achieved in the future." (Ibidem)

The European Commission's plan for e-learning takes into consideration the idea of "thinking tomorrow's education", with a view to future objectives of education and training. The advantages of learning at a distance in nowadays society imply factors such as flexibility, multi-modality of learning resources and also timely distribution. Tutors' assistance helps facilitating learning, their task being that of content providers, motivators and mentors as well. (Eşi, 2014, 89-94) Unlike other educational systems which place the student centrally, the distance education positions the student in an equidistant relationship with its other components (expert, educational resources), thus suggesting the equal importance of the other components. If in the past such a type of education meant learning through correspondence, nowadays distance is "covered" by materials (either printed or in electronic form) and also by the contact with the tutor.

Taking into consideration the two-way relationship between education and the quality of life, one has to mention the importance of continuing education for labour productivity growth. Experts consider that the investment in human capital involves growth at al levels, as "education is the slowest, yet most powerful driver of growth." (Aceleanu, 2012) Therefore, one can speak of the major importance of lifelong learning at the individual level (labour market integration, work efficiency) but also at the organizational, even national level (prepared individuals area long-term investment of society).

In spite of the generous advantage offered by distance education, there are present-day barriers in implementing it in Romania, such as negative attitudes (that may result from a reduced level of interaction between students and tutor and the lack of assistance services for the distance students,

the level of involvement or quality of the distance students (Jeder, 2013), the fear of losing autonomy, inadequate support offered to tutors for planning or redesigning the courses, potential negative effects as far as professional promotion etc.), technical problems (lack of industrial standards for equipments and software, the rapid technological change which means extra money spent on upgrading the systems, difficulties in the communication through e- conferences), institutional inflexible procedures and so on (Eşi, 2014, 131-138). The strategies of overcoming such difficulties involve initial research with a view to acquiring new technology, preliminary discussions with the distance education providers, visits to the institutions which offer such systems, the evaluation of the internal infrastructure, of the hardware and software requirements and of the providers' offer of services, as well as interviews with experts in such systems of distance education. (Eşi, 2015, 7-12) Therefore, the local and national policies include the development of the regional and national telecommunication network, efforts for coherent and permissive educational methods, adoption of standards for effective distance education, and, last but not least, the creation of a consortium for software and specific programs.

Currently, in Romania, the limited space in institutions, as well as the difficulties encountered by the students as far as the need of lifelong learning is concerned, have led to a situation in which the traditional education institutions take into consideration the alternative offered by the distance education. The arguments for a distance education system in Romania are: the administrative structures of the conventional educational systems do not correspond to the development and management of the distance systems, the requirements of the distance students can be better fulfilled if the institution is dedicated exclusively to distance learning, the pedagogy of distance education differs from that of the traditional education, etc. However, there is also a mixture of the two types of educational systems, which means that within the conventional learning institutions there are departments for distance education. The arguments for this bimodal educational system are: (Istrate, 2000, 21) the courses and the additional sources of information can be used both by the day and the distance students, the self-education materials encourage the independent learning of both categories of students, students can choose one or the other system, the distance students benefit from the tradition and the reputation of the institution and they obey its standards, the teaching staff are thus encouraged to practice as interactive methods of education as possible.

Conclusions - Distance Education: the Response to the Permanent Education Needs
It is true that the importance of learning, of education in general, has been stressed since ancient times, but nowadays, with technology advancement and its implications, the need to update knowledge and abilities is necessary more than ever. We must be aware that "the world of teaching has dramatically changed and as the world is changing rapidly and is becoming smaller, faster and more competitive, approaching education through non-formal activities is a reasonable attitude" (Emandi, 2015, 152) and that either done through non-formal, informal or formal learning, through in-service learning systems or through educational and vocational guiding, lifelong education is a priority for action in nowadays Romanian society, as proved by the legal documents. In Socrate's terms, "education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel", therefore the concept, although emerged under a new name as far back as the 1960s, is not new. It was more clearly

articulated, and thus brought to the fore, through the documents produced by the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organization and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development which spoke out of the education as no longer limited to a particular age, as an attitude and dimension of life. In other words, the continuous acquiring of knowledge and skills all over an individual's life can be viewed as the most appropriate type of education for "the knowledge economy." (Popescu) As emphasized in this paper, there has always been education, either in its classical form or in other ways, but it is only recently that Romanian authorities included the principle of lifelong learning in legal documents, stressing its importance in the domain of education, permanent training and employment. Of no less importance is the recognition of the non-formal and informal education, of the educational and vocational guiding and counselling throughout life and of in-service learning systems. Specialists consider that for the progress of the Romanian educational system, it still needs the "design of a strategy for its development that will contain a vision of its long-term objectives and plan for long-term and medium-termn actions necessary for their achievement."(Ibidem)

As emphasized by the majority of the approaches, distance education is but an open learning perspective that responds to the need of permanent adult education. Its effectiveness relies on the academic characteristics of the courses provided, on the interactivity and the quality of communication among students and between each student and the tutor. Therefore, tutors have a great responsibility, in that they need to offer academic support (and for this they must have an extensive understanding of the subject they teach); they also are to provide non-academic support, nurturing collaboration, building an atmosphere of partnership and understanding. This twofold mission is the basis of success for the students who also work and have a family / social life that doesn't allow them to attend day courses. In this way we are in line with researchers (Lentel, Cowan) who placed emphasis on the fact that "important though all the services offered in distance education are, however splendid the printed texts, and however smooth the organizational system, and however refined the quality measurement tools, it is the relationship between the tutor ad the learner that determines success or failure." (Denis and al).

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