

Adult Education in the Lifelong Learning Era: The case of G.S.A.E.

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Abstract: Systematic efforts to organize the lifelong learning vision to a reality are being made at international, european and national level. Priorities set by UNESCO and the European Commission are discussed. The adult education framework as set by the General Secretariat for Adult Education of the National Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs of Greece is presented and new challenges of adult education are considered.

Keywords: Adult Education, Lifelong Learning, Literacy

1 Introduction

The cooperation among formal, non formal and informal learning for the continuous learning of all is also stressed by international organizations, such as OECD [5] and UNESCO. Learning at all ages, special measures for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, policies to improve the quality of education and engage stakeholders are some of the priorities set by UNESCO.

2 The Lifelong Learning Challenge

Literacy, in particular, is highlighted as a challenge for all societies, as it is "a basic tool for making informed decisions and participating fully in the development of society" [9, p. 62]. The prevention of early school drop

out, adult literacy, gender disparity and the measurement of literacy are issues which have to be handled not only by developing countries but by all countries in general. Data from censuses and surveys show that worldwide, approximately, 774 million people are illiterate, the majority of which are women. Literacy is also linked with poverty, minorities and socially disadvantaged groups [10].

Nevertheless, literacy as knowing how to read and write is only one dimension of the concept. Literacy as a social practice and its uses in diverse contexts [6], family literacy, literate environments are some other critical dimensions. The family, the school, the workplace, the community are contexts in which literacy skills are applied for practical purposes.

Making literate environments in which continuous opportunities for the developing of literacy skills are offered need the availability of resources, such as printed materials, libraries and ICT. Intergenerational learning and family literacy, in particular, can empower both parents and children, motivate children to develop literacy skills and parents to strengthen their own and also cultivate better parenting skills [1]. Lifelong Learning takes into account that adult learning is one of its key components. A series of goals set by the European Commission and the European Council lead to this direction. The European Council set in 2000 in Lisbon the goal for Europe to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge based society in the world by 2010 [4]. The European Commission states in 2001 the Communication "Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality" and suggests that the learners should have the opportunity to choose their individual learning pathways. The Joint Interim Report in 2006 "Education and Training 2010" as well as the Communication "It is Always a Good Time to Learn" [2] underline the need for all citizens regardless the level of their skills, to continually upgrade their skills and competences. In 2006 the European Commission through the Communication on Adult Learning "It is Never too Late to Learn" [3] stresses the link which connects adult education, citizenship and competences. This Communication stresses the importance of the implementation of five key messages:

- 1) Increase the participation by removing barriers. Community based programmes, learning opportunities to people who have not achieved key competencies, migrants, senior citizens are among the proposals for facilitating the access of more people to adult learning;
- 2) Improve the quality of the provision of adult education sector. Along with components, such as the resources and the accommodation, a crucial element is the training of the trainers;
- 3) Organise the process of recognition and validation. Skills and competences must be assessed, validated and recognized. The European Qualification Framework should be linked to National Qualification Frameworks, in order to facilitate a transfer of qualifications among formal, non formal and informal learning. Adults should be given the opportunity to raise their qualifications at least one level higher;
- 4) Facilitate funding and provide citizens with incentives for participation;
- 5) Organise the monitoring of the sector by producing core and comparable data among the countries. Research on the benefits of adult learning should also be produced.

For that purpose the European Commission has established a Working Group on the Adult Learning Action Plan, in order to coordinate national efforts to the realization of the above mentioned key messages. The General Secretariat for Adult Education (G.S.A.E.) participates in this Working Group.

3 Adult Education in Greece: The model of General Secretariat for Adult Education

G.S.A.E. of the National Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs is the main institution of adult education in Greece. The Institute of G.S.A.E., the Institute for Continuing Education (I.D.E.K.E.) implements the programmes.

In Greece the 3369/2005 law systematizes lifelong learning. It defines lifelong education as an activity across people's life-span aiming at the acquisition and improvement of general and scientific knowledge, skills and competencies as well as personal development and employability. Lifelong training is defined as the initial and continuing vocational training, which help people enter or reenter the labour market and ensure the professional development. One of the main points of the law is the establishment of the National Committee for Lifelong Learning, which aims to ascertain the needs of lifelong education and training, to evaluate the overall quality of delivery and to co-ordinate the institutions of lifelong education and training.

G.S.A.E. in order to facilitate access to its programmes leads the way in cooperating with local authorities. Recognising the hectic lifestyle of adults and the need to increase participation, signs contracts with municipalities, in order to use local premises for the delivery of courses. The courses taught are selected according to the needs of the people.

3.1 Programmes

Recognising that learning happens in a social context, G.S.A.E. plans programmes which combine new knowledge to social issues and activities, so that trainees can be in a position to use their learning in similar daily situations. The scope of the programmes is a wide one. It deals with literacy and numeracy, IT literacy, Parents' Schools, Greek for Migrants, courses for farmers, entrepreneurship, environmental issues, culture, foreign languages, distance education.

More specifically G.S.A.E. has the following structures, which offer an array of courses and operate in all parts of Greece.

- a) 48 Second Chance Schools. They target people between 18-40 years old, who have not completed compulsory education. The certificate is

equivalent to Elementary School Qualification or High School Certification. Currently, 48 Second Chance Schools operate in Greece and from the educational period 2008-2009 their number will rise at 57.

- b) 58 Adult Education Centres. They offer a wide array of educational programmes in the following thematic fields: Greek Language and History, European Languages and History, Basic Knowledge of Mathematics and Statistics, Information and Communication Technologies, Economy and Enterprises, Environment, Active Citizenship, Culture and programmes for socially vulnerable groups.
- c) 54 Parents' Schools. They provide counselling support to parents in order to improve their parenting skills.
- d) 54 NELLE. These prefectural committees of folk education offer educational programmes for the general population and programmes for physically handicapped persons.
- e) Centre for Distance Education. It follows the blended learning model of delivery, combining face to face teaching and distance learning [7]. It offers the following thematic units: ICT, Economy-Enterprises-Management, Social Economy, Social Skills in the Workplace, Crisis Management, Training of Trainers.

Besides, G.S.A.E. has several autonomous programmes, which also operate throughout the country. Those programmes are:

- i) Education in basic ICT skills, a programme targeting digital literacy. Through this programme adults are introduced to basic skills in computers and the use of Internet;
- ii) Greek as a second language for working immigrants, which offers four levels of greek language. After completion of the fourth level trainees can take examinations to certify proficiency in greek language, a prerequisite for the acquisition of long term residency in Greece;
- iii) Education of farmers in the secondary and tertiary field of economy, which encourages and prepares trainees to become active in the secondary and tertiary sector of economy;
- iv) Volunteerism for crisis management in cases of earthquakes, floods, fires and other disasters;
- v) Health Education for the sensitization of citizens to sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS.

All programmes provided by G.S.A.E. are tuition free. Most of the programmes are cofunded by the European Social Fund and National Funds. Additionally, incentives are provided for trainees to be encouraged to continue lifelong learning or validate the learning outcomes. Trainees who have attended

courses on IT are entitled a reduction in the fees for the exams at Certificates of IT. Second Chance Schools trainees have a card which gives them free access to museums. Trainees of Second Chance Schools, which operate in prisons serve reduced time.

3.2 Participation

The participation rates in adult education in Greece are low in comparison with other european countries. Nevertheless, a continuous improvement is achieved during the last years. It is estimated that 256.015 citizens attended the programmes of G.S.A.E. in the educational period 2007-2008. During the last four years 754.226 adults participated in the courses offered by G.S.A.E. in comparison to 157.864 citizens, who participated in the educational programmes of G.S.A.E. in the period 2004-2008, reaching a participation increase of 378%. Respectively, in the educational programmes for special groups, such as repatriates, the muslim minority, ROMA, immigrants, prisoners, 18.500 adults participated in 2007-2008. In the last four years 51.554 adults attended those courses, while in the years 2000-2004 the participants were 2.033.

3.3 Trainers

The G.S.A.E. follows a threefold strategy for adult education trainers: modern learning methods through the use of ICT, training of trainers and adult education staff and continuous learning.

In 2007 the G.S.A.E. launched a 100 hour programme for the training of trainers. The programme consisted of four modules. The first module introduced the participants in notions and themes of the adult education, the characteristics of the adult learners, the role of the trainer, needs assessment and theories of adult education. The second module focused on the group dynamics, the importance of the educational group and its differences of the therapeutic group, the socially vulnerable groups, the initial meeting and the learning contract. Topics discussed on the third module were the planning and delivery of a course, with themes such as the learning objectives, the techniques and the delivery means. The fourth module concentrated on evaluation, techniques and means, self evaluation.

The programme was delivered in the blended learning method. There were five live meetings of total duration 24 hours and 76 hours were delivered by distance. The educational material was presented in a platform and was accompanied by multimedia. Part of the educational material was also a DVD, which consisted of interviews of academics as well as microteaching. Trainees and trainers communicated

via a platform in asynchronous learning and the platform also hosted the community of trainers.

The needs for trainers training are continuous. For that reason G.S.A.E. establishes the Centre for the Training of Trainers under the name of "PLATO" [8]. The Centre will provide continuous training and will develop an array of courses for the trainers and the staff. Distance learning will continue to be a central way of delivering those courses.

Another effort in training trainers of adult education was carried out by the National Accreditation Centre (EKEPIS), which had organized a training of trainers programme in 2006 and in which 6.000 trainers participated.

The Centre of Studies and Research "ARISTOTLE" is established. The Centre's mission is the conduct of researches in the field of adult education. Library will also operate within this Centre.

4 Conclusions

There is general agreement on the central role of adult education within the lifelong learning field. Nevertheless, many challenges for the implementation of lifelong learning remain. The development and implementation of cohesive strategies, the monitoring of governance, policy and delivery, the increase of participation rates in adult learning, the tackling of early school dropout, the mobilization of key actors, such as parents and local communities, are some of those challenges. The development of policies and strategies which will implement a holistic lifelong learning approach seems to be one of the bridges that need to be crossed.

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