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TRAINING PROGRAMS APPROACHES IN THE CONTEXT OF ADULT EDUCATION. CASE STUDY ON A TRAINING PROGRAM IN DEVELOPING ENTREPRENEURIAL COMPETENCES

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Abstract: *The European strategies in education focus on key competences as autonomous elements of personal and professional development to be supported by specific learning activities and patterns. One of these key competences at European level is represented by the entrepreneurial competences. From this perspective, the need for communication and collaboration, for exchange ideas and experiences in order to harmonize the training programs approaches is obvious. This paper is aimed to present the lesson learnt after implementation of professional development training program on entrepreneurial competences and the benefits for all involved, in the context of adult education. This training program was developed throughout a European project, coordinated by the University Politehnica of Bucharest and represents a suitable solution to transfer good practice in training field and to support mutual learning, as specific practices in adult education and professional development, particularly. During 3 years of implementing this European project, among other specific activities aimed to promote the entrepreneurial culture and increase the awareness, a training program in entrepreneurial field was designed, authorized and implemented, as a key element of sustainability. The training program has benefited of comprehensive curricula, in terms of knowledge and skills, and consists of 10 modules focusing on development of entrepreneurial skills and competences and is addressed to employers, employees and persons who want to start an independent activity, in order for them to get support in term of counseling and expertise in entrepreneurial field.*

Keywords: *adult education, training program, entrepreneurial competences.*

1. THE ROLE OF TRAINING PROGRAMS IN ADULT EDUCATION

From an organizational perspective, professional development has to ensure that the performance improvement needs are met, generating, in this way, some adaptation and compromise of the main adult education principles. The application of these principles requires practitioners to experience and manage effectively the tension created between adult learning characteristics and organization's performance principles. For this

reason, any initiative in designing and implementing professional development training programs has to take into consideration the key assumptions about adult learners, defined by the Eduard Lindeman (1926), statements which focus on the following aspects, commented by M.S. Knowles [4]:

- Adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy; therefore, these are the appropriate starting points for organizing adult learning activities (i.e.

professional development training programs).

- Adults' orientation to learning is life-centered; therefore, the appropriate units for organizing adult learning are life situations, not subjects.

- Experience is the richest source for adults' learning; therefore, the core methodology of adult education is the analysis of experience.

- Adults have a deep need to be self-directing; therefore, the role of the teacher is to engage in a process of mutual inquiry with them rather than to transmit his or her knowledge to them and then evaluate their conformity to it.

- Individual differences among people increase with age; therefore, adult education must make optimal provision for differences in style, time, place, and pace of learning.

Moreover, defining adult education as the process of adults gaining knowledge and expertise based on their goals, we need to take into consideration the phases of the adult learning planning process. The four phases set up by the R. Swanson in 1996 [4] are referring to:

- *Need* in order to determine what learning is needed to achieve goals.
- *Create* strategy and resources to achieve the learning goals.
- *Implement* the learning strategy and use the specific resources.
- *Evaluate* the attainment of the learning goals and the whole process of reaching them.

From another perspective, one of the main objectives the European policy in education and training set out in the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training – ET 2020 [2] is focused on improving the quality and efficiency of education and training by enabling all learners to acquire the basic skills and competences needed for their employability by encouraging cooperation between all sectors of education, training and the world of work. This specific important objective, emphasized at the European level, might be achieved even using professional development training programs

and European educational projects focused on human resources development as useful and adapted implementation tools.

2. EDUCATIONAL PROJECTS AND THE PROFESSIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS

In line with the social and educational policies promoted at the European level, one of them already mentioned above, there is an important direction in educational projects dedicated to the human resources development, particularly Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), to emphasize, among other objectives, the role and benefits of professional development training programs. One example is represented by the professional development training program in entrepreneurial competences field, designed and implemented through the European project “Development of the entrepreneurial competences - an efficient alternative for adaptation to the labour market in the information society (SOP HRD/92/3.1/S/62353)”. This is a project financed by the European Community through the Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD) 2007 – 2013, Priority Axis 3: „The adaptability's growth for employers and IMMs”, Key Area of Intervention 3.1: „Promotion of entrepreneurial culture”.

During 3 years of implementing this European project, among other specific activities aimed to promote the entrepreneurial culture and increase the awareness, a professional training program in entrepreneurial field has been developed, authorized and implemented, as an important argument in ensuring sustainability of the project's activities.

The specific project objectives, correlated to the main activities, were aimed to: (a) increase the awareness and promotion of the entrepreneurial mind through public information campaign, networking between different categories of beneficiary as well as the development of a study which refers to entrepreneurial opportunities correlated with

the new occupations on the labor market; (b) support and provide counseling and expertise in entrepreneurial field by carrying out the specific activities of Entrepreneurial Assistance Center; (c) develop the entrepreneurial skills and competencies in order for a number of 500 persons to start business by specific activities and training programs; (d) certify 95% participants of the professional training programs in entrepreneurial field; (e) ensure the appropriate conditions, study facilities and educational resources for all participants of training program by using the dedicated e-Learning platform.

3. CASE STUDY ON TRAINING PROGRAM IN ENTREPRENEURIAL FIELD

As we already mentioned, a professional training program has been developed throughout the project, based on the main findings and results of the empiric study *Entrepreneurship – opportunity, ability, innovation, and future*, focusing on entrepreneurial opportunities development, with specific reference to the new occupational domains on market labor and to the dimension of entrepreneurship in Romania.

The training program has benefited of comprehensive curricula, in terms of knowledge and skills, in an attempt to cover the major areas of interest in order to provide support and assistance to someone interested to start a business/independent activity.

For this reason the training program includes ten modules with different perspectives, as follows: 1. *Entrepreneurial culture*; 2. *The business and the legal framework*; 3. *Business plan*; 4. *Innovation in business*; 5. *Strategic Management*; 6. *Marketing*; 7. *ICT supporting your business*; 8. *Project Management*; 9. *Human Resources Management in start-up business*; 10. *What an entrepreneur must know about finance?*

The training program, as the listed modules suggest by names, is aimed to familiarize participants to main contents and information needed for setting up an overview on the entrepreneurial field in order for them to

develop and practice entrepreneurial skills and competences. In line with these ideas, the increasing ability of participants to put in practice various, creative and practical business ideas became one key issue of the training program, focusing on practical applicability of the modules in the real life contexts and situations.

The training program was based in its design on the key aspects of a general framework outlined in the financial proposal of the project, basically referring to the principles of entrepreneurship in information society; ABC in business and the development of a business plan; culture, motivation and entrepreneurial attitude; strategic management and marketing; risk management; ethics in entrepreneurship and competences' development; creating social networks; labor market's trends and opportunities of development; relevant legislation supporting the business competition.

For each module of the training program was developed a specific manual, which was distributed to the participants and uploaded to the dedicated e-learning platform of the project. The study materials and the complementary educational resources have been designed by the experts according to the specific features of the adult learning – accessible content and a friendly format, which facilitate individual study, but also stimulate the dialog and debates during the face to face interactions in training sessions. All these materials and resources are still available on the project e-learning platform, having a user-name and password for access.

The training program has been accredited by the National Authority for Qualifications and implemented during the period March, 2013 – June, 2013, involving 20 trainers and 153 participants who completed the program out of 168 selected to start the courses. The attendants have been organized in six groups – G1-G4, persons who want to start an independent activity and G5-G6, employers and employees, distributed in two locations.

Each group has covered 105 training hours, as follows: 20 hours for theory concepts and 85 hours for applications, including individual study. Moreover, 50 hours (20 hours -

teaching activities and 30 hours practical activities) out of those 105 training hours of the program, have been designed as face to face activities, during of 8 training days (i.e. 3 alternative weekends spread out on 5 weeks). The rest of the training hours, according to the accredited technical proposal, worked out in individual study sessions and applications facilitated by the e-learning platform, dedicated to the training program.

The training program ended in June 2013 with a graduation exam, and all those promoted have been received a certificate, recognized by the Ministry of National Education and the Ministry of Labor, Family, and Social Protection.

Moreover, after the completion of the training program, the participants benefited of two counselling/coaching sessions for each group.

4. IMPACT STUDY AND RESULTS

In order to evaluate the effect of the implemented activities, a project's impact study has been developed. Based on the data collected by questionnaire and focus-group instruments and analyzed on different topics with relevance for the main activities implemented (i.e. networking, information campaign, Entrepreneurial Assistance Center, training program), conclusions have been drawn and shared with all the beneficiaries during the closing project conference.

The specific objectives of the impact analysis imply the correlation between the results and proposed objectives for the main activities, and the identification of the next directions for action, in terms of project sustainability. The good lessons learnt from the project experience will become the starting points for planning the next steps in action plans.

As far as the training program is concerned, the main findings emphasize high levels of **beneficiaries' satisfaction** and, respectively, **appreciation of the program quality**, as the following diagrams show, taking into consideration the two locations involved for the six groups of trainees.

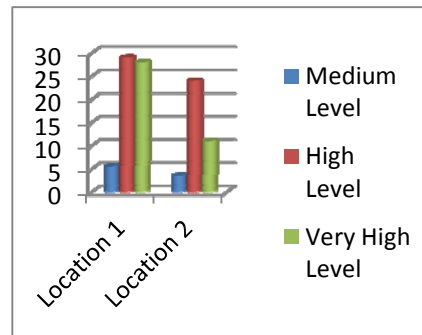


Figure 1 - Level of beneficiaries' satisfaction

In the above diagram it is significant that the "low level" receive no answers from all those 143 respondents to the questionnaire and participants to the training program, and the last two options of the answers, "high level" and "very high level" registered 91,61% of the total appreciations.

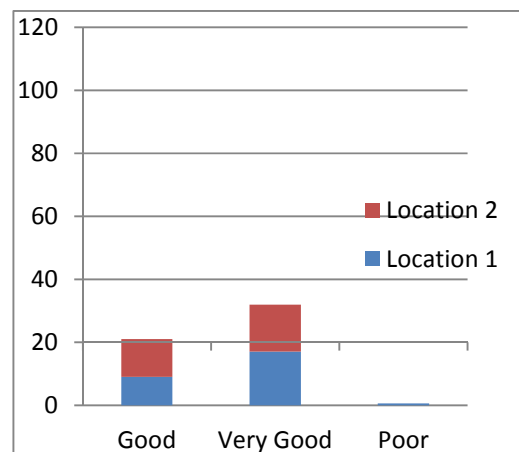


Figure 2 – Training program's quality

Referring to the other findings of the impact study, the quality of training program, in terms of contents/modules (the Figure 2), the number of beneficiaries who answered according to the descriptors "good" (30,7%) and "very good quality" (68,53%), cumulative, leads to an impressive percent of 99,3%. Majority of these respondents have declared that they started courses with high expectations, which have been met after the training program completion (59,5%) or they had different initial expectations, but the quality and accuracy of information, the examples used and the educational resources provided and accessible on the e-Learning

platform, have convinced them to appreciate the training program content's quality as very good (9%).

These arguments are only a part from those which recommend the training program in developing entrepreneurial competences as an important element of project's sustainability.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The project impact study focused mainly on levels of objectives' attainment, but not forgetting the entrepreneurial opportunities development, with specific reference to the new occupational domains on market labor. Many respondents considered the project as "very applied", "a challenging experience", "open mind experience which stimulated learning of entrepreneurship fundamentals", "an experience which motivated participants in their will to become entrepreneur" etc.

Moreover, in their opinion, the professional training program in developing entrepreneurial competencies has contributed substantially to provide participants better opportunities for an active, adapted participation on the actual labour market, flexible and inclusive.

Overall, "no educational institution teaches just through its courses or workshops; no corporation teaches just through its in-service training programs (...). They all teach by everything they do (...) and this argument leads us to place increasing emphasis on the importance of building an educative environment in all institutions and organizations that undertake to help people learn" [4].

This line of reasoning has led to the conclusion that beyond the training program implementation, in terms of courses and modules taught, the real profit for everyone, trainer or trainee, is the innovative approach put in practice, with a flexible structure, in a warm atmosphere, stimulating communication and feeling expression, emphasizing on developing and using resources, based on a functional collaboration.

Summarizing, the professional training program the paper presented, is the main benefit for all those persons who promoted it

and its replication is also a key issue for all those are willing to learn about entrepreneurship and business plans, or to improve their entrepreneurial competences.

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