

Two decades of slovenian adult educational experience

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ABSTRACT ITALIANO

ENGLISH ABSTRACT

1. INTRODUCTION

Slovenia, with a population of 2,060,868, covers 20,526 km² and borders four EU Member States – Austria, Italy, Hungary and Croatia. Its location at the junction of several ecological systems (Mediterranean, Alpine, Dinaric and Pannonian) and language groups (German, Roman, Ugrofine, Slavic) results in the biodiversity of the landscape and historical development which consequently has an impact on the recent population needs. Slovenia, from 1991 organised as an independent parliamentary democracy, became a full member of the EU in 2004.

Educational system from the nineties on has the following adult education accents: inclusion and the improved access to lifelong learning, programme variety support, diversification of paths to qualifications, democratisation, equal opportunities provision, quality promotion etc. The administrative system, centralised until independence, diversified with the introduction of new institutions, among which was also Slovenian Adult Education Institute. Two decades of GDP growth together with professional and personal enthusiasm have enabled substantial growth and the development of the adult education sector, providing internal, as well as international references in research and development by responding to population educational needs of the aging society, its service sector increase and trends in rural development.

However, after less than 25 years of sovereignty and initially praised seemingly non-problematic transition from the socialistic system to the Western European concept of market economy, a heavy multidimensional crisis has emerged, now stimulating the diversity of social initiatives and those having to adjust to limited financial resources. Adult education is faced with challenges from different angles justifying the effect of non-formal education and the network of providers, its quality and unequal addressing of different population segments (e.g. gaps in ICT use, covering non-market(able) topics etc.).

Our presentation is based on the latest documents, such as work by Pečar (2014), the National

Programme for Adult education, entitled ReNPIO (2014), as well as data from other sources (e.g. PEST, 2013), contextualisation of Slovenian adult learning results by LLL Index (Hoskins et al., 2010) and EC benchmarks and personal experience of R&D engagement in the non-formal field of adult education at Slovenian Institute for Adult Education. In this respect the main policy features and trends are presented, likewise are institutional frame and strategic national documents described, while practice is illustrated by the selection of the best practice, recently adding value to the initial model with the local development perspective.

2. THE MAIN FEATURES AND TRENDS

Adult education in Slovenia is defined as a wide range of diverse forms of education and training which include formal education (general, vocational, technical, professional, academic), formal specialised training, and non-formal education and learning of adults (Pečar, 2014).

Its provision has been regulated since 1996 (The Adult Education Act, amended in 2006) implying principles of continuous learning throughout life, accessibility, autonomy of choice, professional and ethical responsibility of educators and respect for dignity of mature students. The Act regulates non-formal education, also emphasized as the first priority in the NPAE (see below) and learning of people who have completed basic education and do not hold the status of a pupil or student. It defines the general rights, programmes and service providers, and special features of the financing and organization of adult education. A conceptual framework, entitled the Strategy for Lifelong Learning in Slovenia, was issued in 2007, but in 2008 it was already reviewed in order to achieve the following outcomes:

- to develop public service in this area;
- to specify terms and conditions of the operation of public institutions which provide adult education;
- to strengthen expert support at the relevant ministry;
- to review the legal basis of adult education;
- to increase the proportion of population in formal education;
- to introduce systemic and financial mechanisms to promote lifelong learning; and
- to introduce unified recognition and validation system for academic performance as a result of non-formal and informal learning.

The general economic crisis hindered the process, which is why the government has recently been trying to fulfil commitments within the current legal framework and in accordance with EU recommendations. Recent focus is put on the negotiations for the new European Social Fund perspective (2014–2020), adoption of the Resolution on the National Plan for Adult Education (ReNPAA, cited in Slovenian as ReNPIO, see below), defining standards for the public AE network and results of PIAAC, in which Slovenia is taking part in the second round.

After approximately two decades of relative financial stability and development we have recently been faced with a heavy debate regarding limited resources and – at least aimed – reorganisation. On the basis of the abovementioned Act, around 70 million euros has been annually spent for adult education in Slovenia from the budgetary assets of the parent Ministry to the present day. Most of these resources are regularly delivered via public official invitation for tenders for the provision of educational and vocational programmes, but partly also distributed to diverse networks providing general education. Two financing schemes are provided: one for programmes and the other for infrastructural support. The latter covers counselling, quality provision, ICT based learning infrastructure etc., whereas programmes are suggested not only when particular to-

pics take place (e.g. languages, ICT learning, the basic literacy programmes), but also for non-formal programmes, for instance, study circles, described in detail below, in which learning plans are developed as a part of a learning process (and not in advance). Apart from this budgetary financing, substantial additional financial means for promotion of sectorial interests and/or target groups are sometimes available also as an instrument of the active policy provided by other Ministries, e.g. the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Environment and the Ministry of Infrastructure and Spatial Planning. Job related training is, however, provided separately by employers or privately (e.g. driving schools) and offered by authorised providers. It is, therefore, logical for the intersectional approach to take place in the preparation of the latest NPAE. The support of municipalities is not required by law, and as a consequence their support is indeed significantly various. In the case of already mentioned study circles the support of municipalities has been steadily rising, but such a trend can only be identified after the first decade of practice and state, based on the argument of recognition of contribution of study circles to the development of municipalities (Bogataj et al., 2012).

The results of budgetary investments are reflected in diverse indicators, among which the most prominent role is given to participation. In 2010 Slovenia already reached and surpassed the European objective of the Education and Training Strategy Europe 2020, i.e. 15% of adult population (aged 25–64) participating in education. However, the past three years have been characterised by the decline in participation (i.e. in 2013 12,6%), which, therefore, opened an ongoing debate on the organisational framing and system financing, characterised also by general social circumstances in the country, such as:

- a relatively high number of ICT and web users and distance education development;
- the new competence-based approach;
- local partnerships, developed under the frame of the EU Social Fund 2008-2013;
- lobbying of different subgroups;
- lagging behind EU countries in terms of investment into R&D, relevant also to adult education;
- the change in government (elected in September 2014) and others.

2.1 The implementation frame provided by the National Programme

The national interest in adult education is articulated in a strategic and developmental document, confirmed at the National Assembly, entitled a National Programme for Adult Education (NPAE) - the basis for the Annual Plan (APAE) - just recently published for the period 2013-2020 (ReNPIO, 2014). The amount of public budget there is based on the following goals and priorities, grouped into three clusters:

- the development of general non-formal adult education;
- the increase in educational levels of adult population by providing formal education with a stepped approach (thus reducing the level of social marginalisation due to educational inequality and promoting a higher level of education for the whole population); and
- education and training for the unemployed and assistance for the employed that need to adapt to the labour market.

The achievements of the recent NPAE underline the past increase of participation in formal and non-formal programmes, the development of new educational programmes, accessibility to learning and counselling locally, the role of the promotional event of LLL Week, the development of local partnerships and e-learning materials, the role of the EU Social Fund in all these activities and the leading role of SIAE in this respect. Weaknesses of the past period to be overcome in the

future are the following: more educated participants still prevail, project based finances are unstable, cooperation among providers is poor, regional differences are evident, the validity of non-formal skills in comparison with public ones is low (ReNPIO, 2014). Crucial problems to be addressed in the future therefore are:

education and its quality (the rise of the level of primary school attendants, the rise of general knowledge, the acquisition of key competences),

participation and justice in adult education (the development of new approaches, getting in touch with participants)

system environment (stable public network financing, the stimulation of diverse partnerships, the procedures for knowledge recognition).

The prioritized target groups are unemployed people over the age of 50, employed over 45 years of age and having the education level lower than the 4-year secondary school, young dropouts, the less educated and other vulnerable social groups, other groups of adults with limited accessibility to goods (e.g. farmers, people from less developed regions) (ReNPIO, 2014). When referring to educational offer this represents different kinds of non-formal programmes aimed at improving basic skills for citizens with disabilities or special needs, minorities and migrants, also identified by the first OECD survey to have a negative educational experience, which should be turned into a positive one in the future. Poor results of Slovenia in this survey have led into investments in educational attainment, already cited above (the quantity of human capital) and non-formal programmes (the quality of human capital). Findings provided by Hoskins et al. (2010) on rural development needs in Slovenia and regular international references were used as new arguments for further investments in the development of community learning (e.g. new subfields of the Slovenian study circle model and also new educational approaches to stimulate territorially based participation).

2.2 Institutional frame and staff recognition

The main department for the design and implementation of adult educational policy is the Higher Vocational and Adult Education Division within the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. There is also a special department for vocational and job-related trainings within the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities (MLFSA), namely the Sector for Lifelong Learning and Scholarships. The Government has entrusted professional matters and programme development to the Council of Experts of the Republic of Slovenia for Adult Education (CEAE), which monitors and evaluates the conditions and the AE development from the viewpoint of quality and international comparability.

The institutional frame is further divided into five institutes: Andragoški center Slovenije (Slovenian Institute for Adult Education - SIAE), Center za poklicno izobraževanje (National Institute for Vocational Education and Training), Zavod za šolstvo (The National Education Institute), Šola za ravnatelje (National School for Leadership in Education - NSLE) and Državni izpitni center (National Examination Centre). Their three main roles are: R&D, the implementation of trainers' training programmes for the "providers'" network, and the certification of programmes, skills and knowledge. The whole above described structure has recently been faced with the reductions in staff and material costs. Consequently, this also poses a threat to the humanity-based long-term approach of general non-formal education and similarly endangered are also programmes which emphasise human and social capital on the basis of self-learning, community learning, empowerment etc., due to the accent on short-term vocational goals oriented to the market logic

and poor employment situation.

On this legal and organisational basis, a variety of organisations have developed during the past two decades and have recently been offering a range of training activities and non-formal AE programmes: folk high schools (from the 1950s onwards), private educational organisations (thriving particularly after the independence), schools, disability centres, vocational and expert associations, NGOs and educational departments of public institutions (museums, libraries, galleries, etc.), as well as education centres within companies and chambers of commerce, universities of the third age and folk high schools association (recently undergoing the process of reorganization). Adult educational activity of this network largely depends on earmarked public funds.

All teachers and trainers who teach in state-verified educational or vocational programmes for adults must have andragogical knowledge and competences, which can be acquired either at the Department for Pedagogy and Andragogy at the Faculty of Arts (The University of Ljubljana), or by attending special training to receive the certificate of andragogical competences, provided and issued by the Pedagogical faculties and Faculty of Arts. Quality standards are based on various forms of supervision and evaluation, such as the verification of public institutions, regulatory procedures for the adoption of curricula, and the obligatory Teaching Certification Examination for teaching and other professional support staff. In 1999, a set of instruments for self-evaluation were introduced along external assessment of knowledge at the end of upper secondary education, in-house evaluation, and external evaluation of programmes via external contracted evaluation.

2.3 From Slovenian adult education policy to a case of best practice

We argue that Slovenian practice is from the nineties on characterised by an accent on the bottom-up approach, theoretically rooted in humanistic pedagogical thought from the seventies (e.g. Freire, 1970, Illich, 1971), own referential theorists (Karl Ozvald (Ozvald, Pangerc Pahernik, 2000), Franc Pedišek (1970, 2007) and recently still active professionals (dr. Krajnc, dr. Findeisen, dr. Jelenc).

Slovenian Institute for Adult Education, established in 1993, introduced and tested non-formal programmes based on diverse founders: British model of “open learning” for knowledge exchange, project studying of the young (PSY) on the basis of Danish public education, literacy programmes developed after the first literacy survey on the basis of previous programmes of general education and study circles based on the Swedish Oscar Olson frame. Their general common denominator was the accent on inclusion, equal opportunities provision, access, diversification and democratisation. In 2008 a Strategy for Lifelong Learning in Slovenia supported public service in this area, while recent NPAE despite strong oppositions continues a tradition of providing the first priority to non-formal education even if financial realisation can hardly meet such strategic goals.

The improvement of human and social capital, engaged in the development was thought to be and still is considered as the essence of Slovenian contribution to adult education in the society and its future. The transformative role of knowledge is not understood unidirectional (the change of individual) but bidirectional (the same individual also changes his/her context), meaning that education is not only implemented on participants but also co-created by participants through educational setting, which responds to locally determined needs.

In this aspect, an example of Slovenian study circles may be presented. Started in 1992 in the frame of non-formal programmes, study circles have continued to grow up till now in response and

adjustments to temporarily specific local needs. Their attribute of best practice is based on particularly high motivation of participants (more than 94% want to repeat attendance), the inclusion of marginalized people by 50% on average, yearly awards of the state or municipalities for their achievements and also the fulfilment of recent national and European educational goals. Since the beginning, there has been constant, but constant support provided by the state amounting to cca. 900 EUR per study circle on the basis of its yearly report and fulfilled criteria (licensed leaders, applying the primary principles, publicity of results). Recently, they have spread all over the country in app. yearly number of 300.

3. STUDY CIRCLES AS A COMMUNITY LEARNING PROGRAMME

Study circles are represented by small groups of learners who are free to choose most of the features of learning, such as the learning content, goal, pace and location, but have to distribute learning duties democratically and publish their results and achievements in the local environment, after finishing the standardised process. This freedom in addition to modest state support, results in the variety of providers engaged with diverse topics and highly motivated participants, evaluated in regular internal evaluations (Urh et. al., 2012), but also international communications (Gougoulakis, Bogataj, 2007, Bogataj, Del Gobbo, Slaniska, 2012, Del Gobbo, Bogataj, 2014).

The most frequently selected topic during the whole twenty-year long period is Slovenian heritage regardless of dichotomy of attendance aims (personal/ local learning, life quality, local development), types of participants (retired/employed) and effects (most effective are considered those who use local history as means of community development). For example, a group of hand-crafts started only as an interest group, but under certain conditions became an initiative for the local primary production revival and in this manner groups sometimes succeed to be linked with the top-down developmental strategies of diverse Ministries.

This proves that not only that learning activation takes place in adult education activities, but that AE may also become a developmental potential. The case of study circles is particularly interesting as their new roles represent an added value also in economic terms (e.g. at the tourist market), which has not been directly addressed up till now. Material outputs (booklets, local editions, exhibitions) are, therefore, considered not only as the result of such a self-organized group, but also as a sense of belonging which may develop in a long term, leading to active citizenship and community social cohesion, usually reported by participants and external evaluators. Urban environments certainly respond in a different way, but also address social responsibility, e.g. by counterbalancing consumption, rising self-consciousness and supporting face-to-face democratic procedures of decision making, demolishing ideologies and technological approach to communication. Last but not least, we can consider study circles as a resource management practice due to their free adjustment of (scarce) financial resources to the micro local needs and potentials.

4. DISCUSSION

Humanistic driven adult education in Slovenia has developed after gaining independency in the nineties and followed the democratisation process and welfare growth. However, a reasonable governmental support is weakening now, so a range of institutions and programmes face resource competition. New challenges of equity (e.g. poor accessibility in rural areas, low functional literacy among some target publics, lack of community initiatives) seem to prevail as an argument for keeping the established, functioning, well grounded in the national and European policy documents and benchmarks and at the same time well responded practices.

As Education and training benchmarks in lifelong learning by 2020 show relatively good results

for 2013 in: 1. the participation rate with an average of 12, 5% (of which at least 15% is the age group 25-64) which is better than in the past undemocratic regimes and also some surrounding states, 2. the rate of early school leavers (3,9% in comparison with the benchmark of 5%), and 3. the share of 30-34 year olds with tertiary educational attainment (similar than benchmark of 40%) (http://ec.europa.eu/education/dashboard/index_en.htm).

Future challenges therefore seem to lay in the ability to turn the competitive trend into a cooperative one and overcome those still not well developed areas, e.g. the transition from individual based learning to community based one, reaching target groups poorly addressed at the moment, and rising relatively low achievements in reading and mathematics (21% and 20% respectively in comparison with the benchmarks of 15%) (http://ec.europa.eu/education/dashboard/index_en.htm). According to the internationally comparable insight into learning roles, Slovenians assign priority to learning for the purposes of formal education and job market, while personal growth motivation (understood as cultural activities) still above the average leaves social cohesion provision far below (Hoskins et.al, 2010). This means that a concept of lifelong learning, firmly rooted in Slovenia, still faces challenges to be addressed even without responding to the recession issues.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The creation of an individual learning path and competence may expand results of formal education and, above all, provide contextual adaptation through life span competences building. Slovenian adult education may be considered a good example in this respect despite recent facing plenty of challenges. National policy documents, diverse network of adult education providers and comparatively relatively good status among European states regardless the preferred approach (LLL Index or EC benchmarks) provide reasonable optimism, as long as motivated learners respond to adult education offer. However, weakness of recent functioning is high dependency from state budget, declining in the last decade.

Adjustments, necessary not only among participants of adult education, but also on the organisational level, should turn competition (e.g. for funds or prestige) into co-operation by seeking complementarities, covering new target groups, new fields of work or innovative approaches, and being initially project based, but in case of territorial success (field response) they should also be based on the more long-term basis. Slovenia is not one in this situation, so European context and the already established international cooperation with the neighbours and other countries may improve and fasten this process.

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