

## **Adult Education in Conditions of Economic and Political Transition**

### **Abstract**

The paper presents an analysis of the situation and assessment of the reform initiatives in adult education in the Republic of North Macedonia since 1990. The aim of the research was to establish the changes in adult education in an environment of economic and political transition. The findings are a result of the research focused on stakeholders' perceptions on the impact of economic and political changes on adult education reforms. The research is predominantly qualitative, analysing in addition to reform documentation and statistical data, also data collected through interviews and focus group discussions.

The results show that the need for strategic approach to transformation of adult education is a consequence not only of changes on national level, but also of the external, i.e. global and general influence factors shaping adult education.

Adult education in the Republic of North Macedonia has been pressured strongly to modernise since the country's independence. In addition to economic and political transitions, globalisation and technological innovations brought about rapid changes in the type of jobs and the content of labour in national economies, changing the demand for qualifications and new skills on an on-going basis, with the complexity of the demand for new skills on the labour market dramatically affecting and shaping the goals, structure, organisation and content of adult education.

The core of the modern process clearly positions the needs of the labour market as the foundation for the design of adult education programmes. "Homo politicus", "Homo socius" and "Homo amans" gave way to "Homo faber" which created the basis for production of good workers who knew much and were very capable in their vocational area, but knew very little or were incapable in other areas of human manifestation and development of civil society. This technological determinism, which has as a consequence the production of "good workers", will seriously marginalise the efforts of adult education systems for educating persons with general culture and civil values, creative and self-aware individuals, capable for self-development and development of society as a whole. For these reasons, adult education has increasingly been playing the role of parallel and alternative educational system, of something that is outside the formal system and that serves the purpose of remedying what the formal education system has let "slip through the cracks", has failed to prevent or managed to spoil, losing in the process its creative and emancipatory role and its place as an integral element of the overall education system.

The question "Which path to choose in setting the goals of adult education?" has been preoccupying educational thought. In the attempt to solve the problems of the state and build a strong and functional, not only national but also European "architecture", the system of adult education has constantly been facing a serious challenge in addressing the questions: How should it be set up, what mechanisms should it have at its disposal, and towards which goals

should it endeavor, so as to adequately prepare adults for all challenges and changes they are facing and will continue to face in the course of their lives?

Key words: Adult Education, Reform, Transition, Labour Market, Civil Society

The development of adult education in the Republic of North Macedonia shares the same fate as in all the other republics that emerged from the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), of which Republic of North Macedonia was a constituent part until its independence in 1991.

In its early stage of development, adult education was characterised by pronounced expansion and extensiveness, but also by disharmony. These education segment's features were largely a result of two essential factors: low levels of education attainment and qualifications of the population at the end of World War II, and the need for economic strengthening of the country and modernisation of its war-torn economy.

The need for expansion of education and promotion of the population's educational mobility in this period becomes very clear in the light, on one hand, of the fact that over 40% of Republic of North Macedonia's population at the end of the War was illiterate and its qualification structure disastrous (National History Institute, 1964), and of the struggle, on the other, of the state for fast industrial development and establishment of a new socio-political order. A comprehensive body of legislation governing education was adopted, and it was decided to commence development and organisation of literacy courses and general education courses for adults (National History Institute, 1964).

The intensive delivery of literacy courses established the platform for the future architecture of adult education epitomised in its cultural, emancipatory, social and labour oriented function, opening the door for a multitude of different initiatives and for establishment of a broad network of institutions, including cultural centres, community colleges, people's universities, people's libraries and reading corners, domestic skills schools, cultural and artistic associations, theatres, museums and cinemas. These institutions comprise the organisational structure and represent the conceptual and mobilising force for adult education in the Republic of North Macedonia.

In parallel to the robust initiatives for raising literacy levels, activities were implemented for raising the cultural level and for development of ideological and political awareness and interest for learning among the of the general population.

Although adult education in this period may have been characterised by its erratic and non-systemic approach, evident in the introduction and termination of activities, as well as by its pronounced pragmatic and short-term nature and desire to achieve immediate effects (Samolovcev, 1985); its ideological and political basis may have been non-emancipatory; however, its institutional and organisational diversity, breadth, comprehensive coverage, humanistic approach, equality of opportunities and accessibility for all cannot be disputed. This

stage in the development of adult education was strongly supported by the authorities and enthusiastically taken on board and utilised by the population.

Whilst adult education lacked systemic positioning as its expansion was caused by the need for addressing the severe illiteracy and for raising the educational and cultural levels of the general population, nevertheless this compensatory role reveals elements of the future andragogical system and directions of the future development of the andragogical theory and practice.

The strong demand for educated and qualified workforce necessary for the country's development needs caused inconsistencies not only in the design of education policies (in the form of pronounced state regulation and control of education) but also in their implementation (Kamberski, 1994). Speed and short deadlines were pursued at the expense of quality of the educational work with adults. This situation is characteristic not only of adult education but also of education in general.

This approach, accompanied by the urgency of implementation for the purpose of eliminating the severe underdevelopment, defines the dominant educational and enlightenment features of adult education in this period. Adult education does not take the form of organised systematic education based on systematic acquisition of knowledge from specified scientific, cultural, artistic or vocational technical areas and facilitation of relevant practical skills (Samolovcev, 1963).

The starting disadvantages related to the low educational attainment levels of the country's population and lack of qualified workforce accessible to the economy, combined with rapid scientific and technological progress, demonstrated in the coming period all their deficiencies. Unfortunately, Republic of North Macedonia has been experiencing residual consequences of the past until recently.

The 1950-1985 period saw gradual construction of a modern system of adult education to meet the economic, political and cultural demands of the population, by developing prolific, modern, organised, systematic and well conceptualised educational work and a system which is in tune with the pertinent theories of the age and adult education practices in the developed countries.

The creation of education policies in former Yugoslav times was directly dependent on the commitment to the *full employment* policy. Education input and output were directly linked with and depended on the situation on the labour market and the number of the unemployed, differentiated by sectors. This policy was founded on the understanding that each final educational profile (graduate) that the education system "churned out" onto the labour market had to have a suitable labour equivalent, i.e. a suitable job. Hiring of new workers was conducted irrespective of the real objective needs of the economy. This was a semblance of a labour market regulation, and in the majority of cases resulted in drop of productivity and in continuous increase of over-employment as a special type of covert unemployment, which revealed all of its austerity at the transition to market economy. These practices brought about increase in the number of workers occupying jobs for which they lacked the appropriate qualifications and professional abilities; increase in the number of the employed without working assignments; drop in the productivity of enterprises; poor utilisation of facilities; and increase in the number of

unemployed qualified persons. The extent to which these decisions were flawed is exemplified by the fact that in 1986, 36.14% of public sector workers occupied jobs which required higher level of qualifications (State Statistical Office, 1992). It becomes clear that the projection for staff development, i.e. the balancing of education supply and demand was flawed and lacked a quality long-term strategy.

Andragogical institutions played a significant role in the delivery of vocational education and training in our country. The cooperation between enterprises and institutions for adult education was a regular practice until 1974, when with the adoption of the new constitution, the state withdrew from its role and involvement in the operation of these institutions. Vocational training organised by institutions for adult education became predominantly focused on sets of competences instead of full qualifications. It marked the beginning of the decline of the adult education system.

One of the most significant, if not the largest, failures in education policy design in the Socialist Republic of North Macedonia, adversely affecting adult education, is the adoption of the so-called “*Law on Vocationally-oriented Education*” (1985). The initial intention for transforming the education system in accordance with the demands of the technical-technological development and differentiation of labour turned into its own mockery during its implementation, especially in the process of employment of graduates (Velkovski, 2005).

The reform of the education system following the concept of vocationally-oriented education offered only on the surface a good perspective for institutions for adult education. It purported that adult education positioned in this way would be able and in a position to develop a rich andragogical activity primarily in education for acquiring a qualification, for acquiring a different qualification and for refreshment of the existing qualification; in research of education needs of enterprises; and in employment, selection of workers and planning of staff development, among other areas. However, allowing schools to educate and up-skill workers with vocational qualifications in levels 1 to 4, considerably “tied the hands” of andragogical institutions and reduced their area of operation. Instead of the expected connection and cooperation in the development of workers for the needs of the economy, the opposite happened, namely the gap between the formal pedagogical and the andragogical pathways began to widen. This situation resulted in a reduction of a number of responsibilities of adult education and its financial and institutional impoverishment. Adult education lost in this case the right to award officially acknowledged qualifications, which brought about didactic impoverishment of the andragogical practice. The loss of state financial support, on one hand, and necessity to operate on the free market in an environment of a weak economy, on the other, facilitated the decline of adult education.

The introduction of the system of vocationally-oriented education coincided with the further decline, regression and erosion of adult education (Andragogy, 1985), and with the unwarranted and unjustified closing of a number of institutions for adult education (workers’ universities, company education centres, evening schools for adults, centres for education of managers, etc.) (Andragogy, 1985).

Regardless of its declarative *equality* with mainstream schooling, especially highlighted in the *Agreement between the socialist republics and socialist autonomous provinces for common*

*grounds of the system of education* (Novi Sad, 1981), adult education failed to secure real equal treatment in the country. The idea that we “will merge the school and the workers’ university” (Kranjc, 1980) was yet another poorly articulated and impracticable phrase which has sadly been trickling down until today.

In this period, 12.2% of North Macedonia’s adult population was illiterate, 62.35% of the employed lacked vocational qualification, and over 40% of employees in public sector occupied positions that require a higher qualification than the one they possess (State Statistical Office, 1982). With this recognition, it is difficult to understand the attempt to downgrade adult education and marginalise its role in the strategies for future development. The fact was disregarded that without the support of adult education, the newly introduced vocationally-oriented school could not achieve the declared goals of the reform. The idea that the school is sufficiently powerful to balance the educational and cultural shortcomings evident in the family and work environments is an illusion characteristic for the collectivistic and ideologically petrified way of thinking according to which the collective has unlimited compensatory force.

The notion that insufficient education attainment and skills are characteristic only of the older share of the population persists sadly to this day, claiming that with its “dying out”, on one hand, and the coming of the new “educated” youth, on the other, favourable education attainment levels and structure will be achieved in the country, is not only morbid but also highly incompetent. Entire generations do not “exit” all at once from the “social stage” to make room for the next generations; they live intertwined for longer time periods, creating fertile ground for possible influence of destructive mechanisms in the overall economic, political, educational and cultural development of the country.

Institutions for schooling and skilling of adults were affected in this period by significant drop-out in attendance and reduction in educational activities. Primary and secondary education of adults lost large numbers of learners, and secondary education of adults ceases to exist as of 1988.

The crisis was evident in both the declining education mobility of adults and also in the andragogical institutions themselves. Workers’ and people’s universities had to reduce their operation and focus on enrolling learners who had failed to acquire sufficient skills in the process of their schooling or who had for various reasons left formal education. The number of learners at workers’ universities dropped by 68.18%, i.e. from 38 842 in 1984/85 to 12 358 in 1990/91 (State Statistical Office, 1989). As a consequence of education policies and domination of market oriented andragogical operation, as of 1985 people’s universities ceased to exist in Republic of North Macedonia, whereas cultural centres were either closed or carried out all sorts of activities except their primary function - social, cultural and educational mobilisation of the population. The work of the workers’ universities was evidently curtailed and their financial status declined; with the exception of a few located in bigger urban centres the majority operated only symbolically on a commercial basis and with a limited offer.

One of the principal problems that plagued the country’s education in the past was the absence of an inductive approach in defining its goals. The deductive approach to defining the goals of the education system caused mismatch between what was a theoretical concept and what was

actually implemented in practice. Neoliberalism, as an imported ideology, became soon dominant in determining the role of adult education as opposed to the former abstraction of ideologically declared goals and roles of adult education. In reaction to the clash between the old and the new ideology, significant room was left open for positivistic, technicistic and scientific interpretations of the role of adult education. The development of the individual became only a formalistic routine, whereas knowledge and skills became dominant features of adult education.

The situation in the country in the period of gaining independence was characterised by all-encompassing transformation, including at socio-economic, political, employment and work, cultural and individual level. Introduction to the “New” was the foundation for action in many areas of everyday life. Problems arising during the so-called transition period were more or less expected, but psychological adaptation to the new environment created greater difficulties. Dealing with the baggage from the past left profound consequences on all. Changes in priorities on the value scale reflected themselves on successfulness of people’s adaptation. Individual’s ability and readiness to in the first place understand and embrace newly implanted values and to subsequently internalise them, depended significantly on the degree of petrification of one’s already formed personal value system. To what extent the new values, which ruthlessly shaped people’s everyday life, in fact became their personal resolve, and to what degree people managed to internalise them within their individual value systems, were questions that were not taken into account in the process of defining the goals of adult education.

The new era, globalisation, technological predetermined reality and strong influence of neoliberal views in defining the role of education, radically shifted old dogmas that the relation between state and adult education institutions was based on. All this brought about immediate weakening of the support that adult education had been receiving from the state. Adult education lost the priority status it had enjoyed and became just one of the many sectors.

Actions and reactions of adult education institutions clearly indicate how they, under the influence of neoliberal views of education, markedly changed their education offer. Many general education contents that were present in the former education offer were discarded and new ones were introduced which were focused on restricted needs of the labour market. One extreme set-up (too wide general educational and theoretical) was replaced by another (too narrow vocational and specialist). “Homo Scientificus“ stepped back and made room for “Homo Faber“, laying the foundations for production of good workers who know and can do much in their occupation but know and can do very little in the other fields of human existence.

This is a period when the dominant opinion was that the economy and not education would solve all the country’s problems. The two seemingly conflicting viewpoints of education clashed. On one hand stood the vision of education and learning as an emancipatory process, contrasted with the vision of education and learning as the driving force of economic development on the other.

The intention was to position the focus of the formal education system in the economy at the expense of decreasing the role of education in the personal, social, cultural and aesthetic development. These developments found their reflection also in the non-formal sphere of education. The ideas of lifelong learning, of learning society, of knowledge-based society were largely understood as concepts that would contribute to satisfying the dynamic changes on the

labour market.

The economic and political climate in which adult education found itself can best be described with an old adage “beating you but not letting you cry”. Political elites speak constantly and vocally of the significant role of adult education, of the need for lifelong learning and for building a knowledge-based society; this has become an integral part of the political rhetoric. On one hand, many programmes, laws and strategic documents have been adopted that glorify the need for lifelong learning, while on the other no real support is provided for the implementation of such initiatives. The share of adult education in public expenditure is marginal, reducing the participation of persons with educational disadvantages in education to an individual adventure and personal responsibility. Unemployment is not seen as a consequence of insufficient creation of new jobs but as a consequence of individual educational disadvantage, unsuitable qualifications and inability of the individual to find a job.

The overall organisational and reform interventions in the “new” state completely marginalised adult education, treating it as a minor activity at the bottom of the priority list of the country’s education policies. It only became attractive when specific problems or education flaws emerged that the formal schooling system had failed to address, and after all potential solutions, i.e. political measures, had been exhausted. Most often, adult education was resorted to through projects as an alternative solution to problems.

Left to its own devices, adult education has been slowly “disappearing”. Activities realised in workers’ universities, primary schools for adults and municipal and culture centres are being reduced to the minimum. The drop in the number of learners as well as of staff after 1990 is due to a number of reasons, among which the most obvious are:

- social transformation made a number of activities disappear that had previously attracted large number of learners, primarily courses for socio-political education and civil defence courses,
- economic crisis caused companies to lose interest in investing in their workers’ further training,
- transformation of social capital caused the closure, reduction or division of significant proportion of large enterprises,
- impoverishment of the population brought about reduced education mobility.

Until 2008, adult education in the Republic of North Macedonia was in a serious crisis. Former institutions for adult education (workers’ universities and people’s universities) dissolved and adult education was in chaos. In 2008, the country adopted its first Law on Adult Education (Official Gazette, 2008), which aimed at regulating formal and non-formal education of adults, institutions for adult education and programmes. The law provided for the establishment of the Centre for Adult Education, institution competent for regulation of adult education.

Despite its intentions for regulating adult education, this law sparked strong reactions, primarily from education service providers, especially in regard to the process of verification of programmes and licensing of institutions. The reason was the absence of bylaws and clear guidelines. Almost ten years after the fact, shortcomings of the law have still not been remedied and by-laws have not been adopted. This speaks volumes of the treatment of adult education by

the state. If in the past, adult education displayed signs of an integrated element of the overall education system; today it lacks the architecture of a system and is not treated as indispensable and imperative constituent part of the overall education system. Adult education seems to share the fate of the school system, which has since independence been constantly confronted with challenges and initiatives with different values.

Each education tiers is a world in itself and at the same time a functional and inseparable part of the entirety of the education system. Therefore, reforms in adult education must be viewed only in the context of the reforms of the overall education system. Efforts so far have been plagued by a series of contradictions and weaknesses, precisely due to disjointed and isolated approaches and interventions.

In the first 10 years since independence, a number of interventions were initiated in the education system, primarily on project level. The goal of these initiatives was the improvement of the quality of education. Unfortunately, most of them were implemented in isolation from each other and in an environment wrought with political influence and tensions, marginalising the significance of the impact of education reform.

In the second decade of the country's independence, reforms in education followed largely the foundations laid in the Phare VET Reform, the National Programme for Development of Education in the Republic of North Macedonia 2005-2015, various law and bylaws, the Bologna Process in Higher Education, the Nine-year Primary Education Concept, the Compulsory Secondary Education Concept, the Integral Vocational Education and Training Policy, and the national goal-oriented strategic documents for national and local economic development, for poverty and unemployment reduction, and for improving the culture of living.

The ultimate goal of all these activities was improvement of the quality of education. Unfortunately, the majority of interventions were carried out in an environment of intensive political tensions which marginalised the importance of education reforms. Implemented under the shadow of political rivalry, they manifested a number of inconsistencies and faults:

- Activities were undertaken without the existence of strategic documents that would define state priorities in the area of education.
- In case when there were strategic documents pertaining to specific tier(s), regardless of their quality, due to the frequent turnover of political parties and personnel, the ruling party ignored those that had been prepared by the previous one, and so on...
- Reforms were characterised by poor coordination, slow bureaucratic procedures and inefficiency.
- Reforms were carried out by politically (party) affiliated national experts, who due to their poor competences, did not have the capacity to implement reforms.
- To compensate for the "poor" quality of national experts, international experts were hired who were not familiar with the situation in the country, which resulted in unnecessary activities and waste of time and money.
- National and international implementers acted without efficient coordination. Thus, there were overlap and some crucial issues fell through the cracks, with significant funds being used on issues pertinent to some other countries, but not for Republic of North Macedonia.



- Concepts and policies characteristic of developed countries were adopted without critical inquiry into their relevance for the country.
- Despite the existence of various analyses of the situation in education, many new analyses were prepared, frequently leading to the same conclusions already present in existing documents.
- Education reforming lacked an integrated approach. Most interventions were limited to specific segments (teacher training, HIV/AIDS prevention, development of curricula for a specific level or specific subject, provision of PCs to schools where due to infrastructural, human or organisational weaknesses they were hardly used; interventions were made in primary education without link and coordination with preschool and secondary education, VET reforms were carried out without coordination with primary and higher education, etc.).
- State institutions, frequently stuck in their own bureaucratic procedures, due to slow decision-making, lack of clear vision on the strategic outcomes, and the poor professional and managerial competences, were more of an obstacle in the reform processes.

Internal transformation processes and planetary globalisation processes have made a strong impact on the redesign of the overall structure of society, giving rise to the need for national and international cooperation and compatibility of systems, and thus also to innovating the role and structure of adult education, as a significant and effective agent of change.

The need for a strategic approach to transformation of adult education is a consequence not only of changes on a national level, but also of the general and external, i.e. global, influence factors that shape adult education in other countries.

In essence, the core of the modern process clearly positions the needs of the labour market as the foundation for designing adult education programmes. Each document developed in this process emphasises the labour market and the need to develop competences for work as the primary goal that all educational institutions should aspire to. “Homo politicus” made room for “homo faber”, creating the basis for production of good workers who know much and are very capable in their vocational area, but know very little or are incapable in other areas of human manifestation. This technological determinism, which has as a consequence the production of “good workers”, will seriously marginalise the efforts of adult education systems for educating persons with general culture and civil values, creative and self-aware individuals, capable for self-development and development of society as a whole. For these reasons, adult education has been increasingly assuming the role of an alternative medicine, of something that is outside of the formal system and serves the purpose of remedying what the formal education system lets “slip through the cracks”, has failed to prevent or managed to spoil, losing in the process its creative and emancipatory role and its place as an integral element of the overall education system.

There is no doubt that education and training have difficulties in adapting to emerging changes and carry part of the blame for the slow resolving of social challenges. The set-up of education and training offers few opportunities for timely reaction and adaptation to the dynamics of change in the area of labour and life in general. However, it is also true that demands made of education and training in an environment of unresolved and inconsistent relations in the economy and in society, and of marginalised position in budget allocation processes, are unfair and unrealistic.

Successful anticipation of future changes to a large degree depends on the quality of analysis of the current reality and ability to forecast the functionality and validity of specific knowledge and abilities in the times to come, from the perspective of both social requirements and individual self-realisation. In the process of defining the special goals of adult education, attention must be devoted not only to training and skilling of adults for work but also to their spiritual, physical and intellectual growth and development. This functional unity must be integrated in the requirements and duties of all adult education institutions.

Only time will tell whether we will learn, and when, that adult education is not an alternative remedy that can cure failed treatments of the problem of “educational handicap”, and that it is an integral part and equal partner in the overall education system.

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