

THE NEW CONSUMER OF LIFELONG LEARNING PROGRAMMES

Simona Roxana ULMAN¹, Krisztina Melinda DOBAY²

¹ Dissemination expert, PhD, "Apollonia" University of Iasi, Romania

² Researcher, PhD, Romanian Academy, Iasi Branch, "Gheorghe Zane" Institute for Economic and Social Research, Romania

Corresponding author: simonaulman@yahoo.com

Abstract

Lifelong learning encompasses all formal, non-formal and informal learning activities attended by each person along his/her life, being one of the most used concepts nowadays, due to its positive impact on the development of individuals, companies and on the entire economy. In our article, we present some general aspects regarding consumer behavior and the trends in the consumption of lifelong learning services in the European Union member states. Finally, we are focusing on some practical ways for overcoming the major obstacles to participation in lifelong learning programmes, illustrated with a case study in Romania.

Keywords: *Consumer Behavior, Lifelong Learning, PECAFROM project, Romania, Participation in Training.*

1. INTRODUCTION

At European level, lifelong learning has led to developments within the entire society, but the level of participation in training, as percentage of the entire population, is different from country to country. This article argues about the importance of identifying the real needs of lifelong learning programmes' consumer and the changes caused by different influences. In the last part of the article we are analyzing closely the main obstacles that consumers are facing with in Romania when choosing to participate or not in a training programme.

2. CONSUMER BEHAVIOR - GENERAL ASPECTS

It is generally accepted that deep understanding of consumer behavior - the way of taking a buying decision - is of great importance for all companies. The first step of the process is recognition of the need (problem recognition) that stays at the basis of all buying decisions. The

next stage is the research done for the selection of the best choice (information search), followed by the evaluation of alternatives, effective buying (purchase) and evaluation of buying action outcomes (postpurchase evaluation). These stages can differ from a situation to another according to the type of product or service that we are buying.

Marketers should give attention to all these specific phases in order to use the proper manner of communication for each stage and to detail the strategic marketing plan for not neglecting important elements of the buying decision process. In this way, this concept is an encompassing one, including in its area of interest, besides the specific purchase, consumer's perceptions in terms of emotions, beliefs, behaviors related to the buying act.

This approach suggests that research on consumer behavior covers both aspects of actions/attitudes/positions that precede the act of purchase, and also of the post-buying act ones (including satisfaction on usage, loyalty, recycling, reuse etc.). In this way, the consumer behavior research can emphasize a variety of contexts and can approach many perspectives with different situational influences, i.e. *the physical surroundings, social surroundings, temporal perspective, task definition, antecedent states* (Belk, R.L. 1975,159). However, as this research has as central aim the institutional guiding, focus will be laid on the general dynamics of the customers from the target group, that represents the basis for creating better products/services, for promoting the specific offer in a more effective way and for fostering in a sustainable manner the competitive advantages.

In order to achieve success on the market, the general strategy should be based on the idea

that the main institutional objective is to meet consumers' expectations, based, indeed, on functional needs, i.e. physiological needs, but also on the need for security, the need for love and belonging, the need for esteem and the need of self-fulfillment – according to Maslow's pyramid of needs and theory of motivation (1943). Each need can be fulfilled by different categories of products/services and the marketers have to correctly identify the proper nature of need that can be addressed through their offer. Based on these findings, not only the communication strategy, but also the entire marketing plan can be properly designed.

A critical question is related to the product/service attributes expected by consumers and what factors decide on the amount of money they are willing to pay for them (Rucker et al. 2011,8). For example, Dhar and Wertenbroch (2000) revealed that the willingness to pay for objects/services depend on whether these are included in the hedonic or utilitarian category. It should be also taken into consideration the facets of the buying process, that can be the result of an extensive problem solving, of an experiential perspective or of a routinized behavior (Mihart 2012,123). All these aspects require different approaches in terms of communication in order to give the proper response to each situation and to each category of customers. These different requirements need to be solved taking into consideration the principle of integration of all brand's components, in order to transfer the information with a single voice by different and appropriate methods, revealing together the complete identity of the brand (Ulman and Dobay 2016,68). In this manner, the audience will not have the feeling of chaos provoked by the vast amount of information from all contact points, understanding better brand's message.

3. CHANGES IN THE CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

The concept of consumer behavior has been affected by the progress registered in the last decades in terms of economic, sociologic, psychological dimensions.

It must be mentioned that one of the most important roles in the evolution of the concept was played by the *US Consumer Bill of Rights* of 1962, which determined over time changes in consumer behavior perspective both in theory and practice. Its major impact was on consumer's rights, the Government taking on the responsibility to protect them. The Bill focused on *the right to safety*, aiming to protect against the goods or services hazardous to health or life; *the right to choose*, encouraging competition policies and taking a position against monopolistic markets; *the right to information*, in terms of transparency of prices, quality, and other useful data that can influence the consumer and grant the necessary conditions for taking the proper buying decision; *the right to be heard*, emphasizing on consumer's interests and his full consideration in Governmental policies and in relation to the law (Kennedy 1962). This document influenced the perspective of taking decisions in the companies, generating the idea that the correct approach for the entire marketing process is the outside-in orientation. This means that consumer needs are in the center of this process and its starting point must be the information about these needs and wants. In other words, the customer should be positioned at the basis of the integrated strategy, being, in the same time, the ultimate objective. The assumption is especially valuable, as it emphasizes the importance of all stakeholder groups and, in particular, customer loyalty (Rose and Miller 1994; Eagle and Kitchen 2000; Kitchen and Burgmann 2010). Accordingly, this enlarged perspective guides the companies to direct their marketing communications (and the related range of activities) based on consumer needs and interests (Kitchen et al. 2004,19).

The integrative perspective must be adopted taking also into consideration the effects of the recent economic crisis upon consumption, specialists largely speaking about the so called "**new consumer**" (Euro RSCG Worldwide 2010; Egol et al. 2010; Mansoor 2011; Voinea and Filip 2011). Some years ago, the loyalty to the brand was of great importance. Today, the first aspect of paying attention is the quality-price report, the consumer evaluating the product/service especially from this perspective. Also, researchers discuss about the strategic position of the buying

act, that becomes forward-looking (Cachon and Swinney 2011,781). The consumers become aware that the practice of promotions and discounts is frequently adopted, and delay their purchase until the price becomes lower. In this way, it seems that the place of impulsive purchase is taken by a more *rational buying act*, that does not only depend on the image promoted on the market, but also on a moderate evaluation in terms of usefulness, quality, proper moment for acquisition, and attention on quantity and price. Also, one should also consider other *consequences of economic recession on consumer behavior evolution*, as Mansoor (2011) reveals: *the need for simplicity, temperance, smart consumption and green and ethical consumerism*. These changes in consumer behavior are new challenges for the companies, and the winners will be those capable of responding quickly and effectively comparatively to their peers.

4. LIFELONG LEARNING ACROSS EUROPE

One of the new priority areas of the European Commission is related to lifelong learning, being emphasized that relevant and high-quality knowledge, skills and competences are keys for employability, innovation, active citizenship and well-being (European Commission 2015, C417/27). In order to encourage and develop the correlation between the lifelong learning concept and the labor market, and the principle that high level of education is translated into a high level of employability and well-being to become a reality, specific policies must be established by each member state.

Lifelong learning programmes should boost this correlation, responding to the needs of the society, and should be capable to be adapted to the permanently changing labor market and, in this way, to have a positive influence on economic growth. The importance of the training dimension for the entire performance of a country is proved by the fact that it is part of one of the 12 pillars of national competitiveness, i.e. *Higher education and training*.

A general overview on the participation to training in the EU member states is useful for

finding out whether these countries offer the proper background to their citizens for attaining the lifelong learning principle. We can also analyze the levels of participation for each state and whether the stage of country development is correlated with the level of national training.

As shown in Figure 1, Romania is at the end of the list, having the lowest level of participation to training in 2014, with no visible progress since 2009. It must also be mentioned that the levels offered in both years are very low (1.5% of the population between 25 and 64 years in 2009 and 2014), compared to the levels offered by the most competitive country in terms of training, i.e. Denmark (31.2% of the population between 25 and 64 years in 2009, and 31.7% in 2014). It can be seen that Romania is followed in a progressive way by all the 28 EU countries, with nearby position of Bulgaria (1.8% in 2014), Croatia (2.5% in 2014) and Greece (3% in 2014). On top of the list in 2014 are Denmark (31.7%), Sweden (28.9%) and Finland (25.1%), with much higher levels of participation. At first sight, it is obvious that the developed countries are able to offer better conditions for their citizens for their participation to training, the higher levels of training being correlated to the higher level of development. But, although the percentage of the population that pass through a training programme is higher in the developed countries than in the least developed ones, these percentages still remain low and there is a huge space for improvement in all member states.

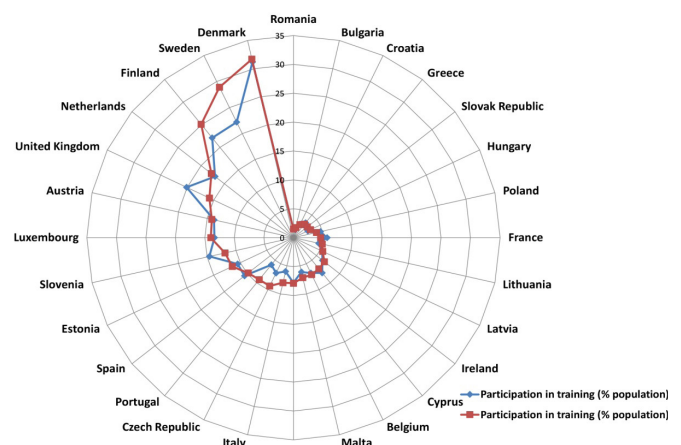


Fig. 1. Participation to training in 2014 vs. 2009 – comparative levels (% of the population between 25 and 64 years in the EU countries) (data source Eurostat 2015)

The unfavorable environment for this central socio-political concern, i.e. lifelong learning, as revealed by the statistics of Eurostat (2015), is also confirmed in a study realized by the World Economic Forum – *The Global Competitiveness Report 2015-2016* (Schwab, 2014). Two aspects are analyzed: the level of availability of the training programmes and the level of investment in training and employee development in 144 countries (Romania included). Comparatively with all these countries, Romania is on the 68th place when the following question is addressed to Romanian respondents: *In your country, to what extent are high-quality, specialized training services available?* Related to the same problem, in the European Union, our country is on the 24th place from the 28 member states. It is obvious that Romania must take the proper decisions and implement specific policies to recover the disparities registered comparatively to the other EU member states. The same conclusion can be formulated about the extent of staff training with the employers support (*In your country, to what extent do companies invest in training and employee development?*). Romania is on the 111th place of the 144 analyzed countries and on the 24th place of the 28 EU countries. The following graph is revealing the lower levels of availability of training services and the extent of staff training in Romania versus the other EU member states. Almost similarly low levels are met in Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Croatia in comparison with the most competitive countries, i.e. Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Finland, Luxembourg, Austria, that register significantly higher performances regarding the training services.

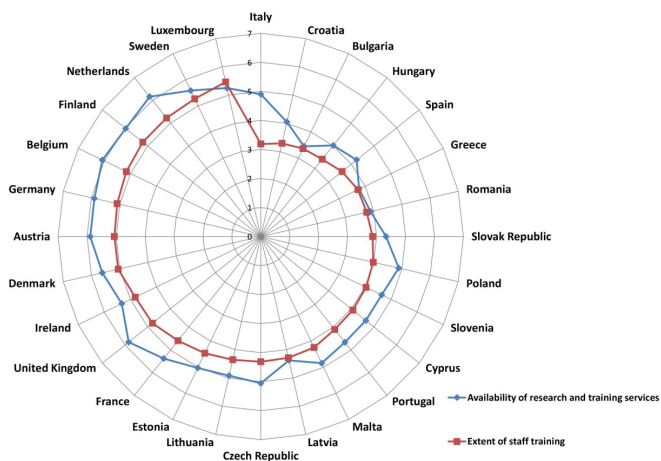


Fig. 2. General perspective on the training levels in the UE countries in 2015

(data source *Global Competitiveness Report 2015-2016*)

In this way, the countries from the first, second and transition stages of development should learn from the developed societies and also be aware that *investment in human capital is money well spent* (EU Commission 2015, 25). To outline this state of fact, the *2015 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020)*, emphasizes that *a good education and training help promote sustained economic growth, as well as sustainable development: they fuel R & D, innovation, productivity and competitiveness* (EU Commission 2015).

This general perspective on the levels of performances registered in national training leads to the conclusion that, especially in the developing countries, awareness on the importance of education’s influence on well-being and growth levels should be raised. To this end, special attention should be centered on consumer behavior on the lifelong learning market, in order to discover the main obstacles met in this area and, in this way, to have the ability to fight against them with proper instruments. It must be mentioned that these obstacles have to be emphasized in order to draw attention upon two distinct areas - the political zone and the institutions that offer training programmes. The solutions must come from both parts, as a result of cooperation.

5. FACTORS INFLUENCING THE CONSUMER OF LIFELONG LEARNING PROGRAMMES’ BEHAVIOR

For establishing the reasons of the low levels of national training, the first step is to identify the main external and internal influences on consumer’s intention and decision of buying within the market of lifelong learning programmes.

External influences (H_1) can be *favorable* to the decision of participating in a training programme and of choosing a certain institution that offers lifelong learning programmes (H_1'), or *negative*, discouraging the intention to be trained ($(-) H_1''$).

As a result, the external influences are a cumulation of the favorable and negative context with impact on the intention to participate in training programmes ($H_1 = H_1' - H_1''$). Consequently, there can be external influences, related to the general economic, social, political environment, such as labor market offering, competition on the labor market, middle levels of remuneration related to the price of training programmes, but also correlated to the institutions that offer such lifelong learning programmes, i.e. institutional trust, frequency, relevance and variety of available courses, institutional notoriety, contacts' experiences related to training in general and to the institution/s offering such programmes. Depending on different contexts, experiences, points of contact etc., these external influences can be either favorable (H_1') or unfavorable ($(-) H_1''$). What matters is that both the public policies encouraging the development of individual competencies and the centers that offer training should not neglect these issues when planning their general strategy.

Other internal influences, such as the educational background, self-awareness, area of expertise, spare time/ readiness, personality,

self-concept, usefulness of courses should be also mentioned as the most significant ones in the decision to improve personal competencies through training (H_2); they may be positive (H_2') or negative ($(-) H_2''$) as to the participation in lifelong learning programmes ($H_2 = H_2' - H_2''$).

Taking them into consideration either consciously or not, and filtering them through self-rationalization, the intention to participate in training programmes is materialized either in the selection of an institution that offers lifelong learning programmes or in the decision of not participating in training. This process of information filtering through self-rationalization considers three aspects: economic efficiency, social integration/social status and personal commitment. When the external and internal influences are positive ($H_1' + H_2' > H_1'' + H_2''$), the intention will be translated into the decision to participate in training programmes, and the first act will be to select from the market the institution that offers the proper institution in terms of personal context. After graduation, the overall opinion is made, and the option to select for the second time the same institution for another course depends on the level of satisfaction.

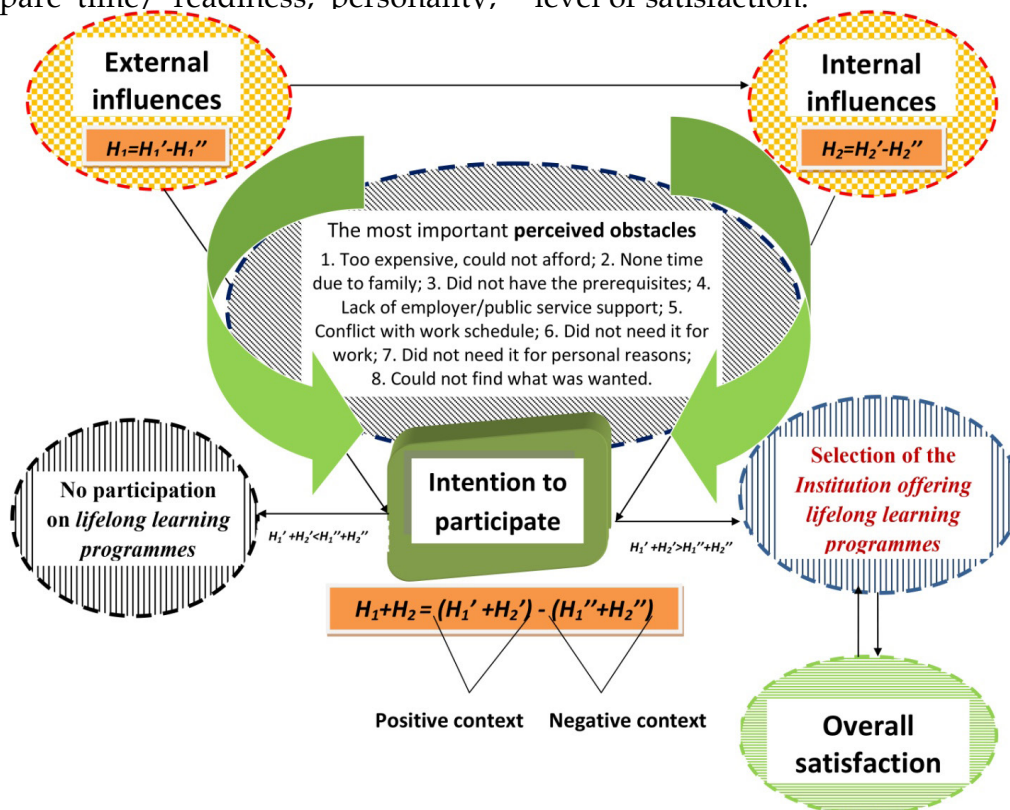


Fig. 3. Consumer behavior on lifelong learning programmes market

Related to lifelong learning programmes and adapting the *theory of market segmentation* (Keen et al., 2004), four types of consumers can be identified: **the generalists**, who opt to participate to different educational programmes as part of their overall professional experience; **the formatters**, who care greatly about which kind of training they attend and only participate to those properly nationally/internationally certified; **the price sensitives**, who purchase courses from the cheapest source; and **the experiencers**, who prefer to use the same training provider that was successfully used before. Depending on the category to which consumers belong, the internal and external influences will have different weight in the decision of participating in training programmes. For example, for price sensitive consumers, the price will be the most important element when selecting an institution for taking a course, general institutional trust being of less importance to them.

When the sum of influences is negative ($H_1' + H_2' < H_1'' + H_2''$), the intention is not concretized into behavior and the desire for training is not put into practice.

In a research made by Eurostat in 2011, the most important obstacles perceived (Eurostat 2011) were related to both external and internal influences. We noticed that the external factors are less mentioned than the internal ones. But, it seems that the external context (H1) highly influences the internal/personal one (H2) in terms of intention to participate in training programmes. In this study, the Romanians most pointed to **external and internal obstacles** to participation in education and training, as follows (Fig. 4): 1. *Did not need it for work* (91.3% of the respondents); 2. *Too expensive, could not afford* (52.9%); 3. *Conflict with work schedule* (34.7%); 4. *No time due to family* (30.9%); 5. *Lack of employer/public service support* (30%); 6. *Did not need it for personal reasons* (19.2%); 7. *Did not have the prerequisites* (12.9%); 8. *Could not find what was wanted* (6%).

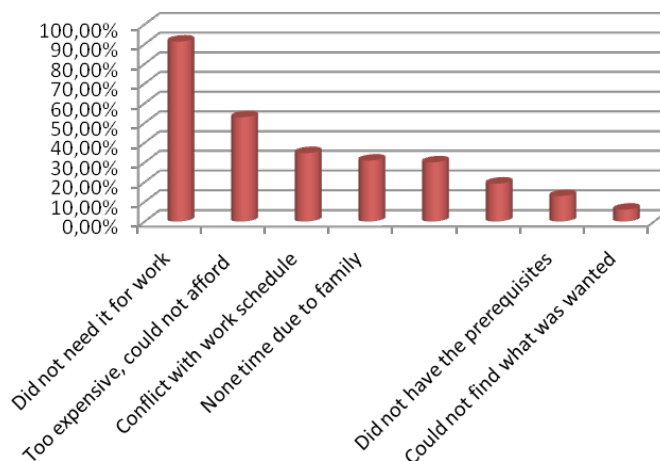


Fig. 4. Obstacles to participation in lifelong learning programmes (data from Eurostat 2011)

In most of the cases, the combination between external and internal contexts is obvious. The uncompetitive socio-economic Romanian environment, that does not encourage the development of competencies, is influencing the perceptions on training. In these conditions, the employees do not find any advantage in the job related to training and choose to not participate in lifelong learning activities. This situation is completed by the fact that these programmes are perceived as being very expensive compared with their salary and that they impose an extended schedule that conflicts with the time dedicated to both work and family.

6. OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

According to Popescu (2012,70), in Romania, “the market for educational programs for adults and the institutions authorized to provide such programs developed quite chaotically, with educational programs not entirely tailored to adults’ learning needs, nor to labours’ market’s requirements”. Despite this fact, we have to admit that we are noticing a positive trend. Thus, since 2011, we have a law recognizing the concept of “lifelong learning” (Law of Education 1/2011), as it is promoted at European Union level.

We witnessed also the development of training activities, due to the projects implemented all over the country and funded by the European Social Fund through the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013. There is no data available yet for the final ex-post evaluation of the programme, but we can notice that the targeted objectives were significant as to their importance for Romania. The general objective of SOPHRD 2007-2013 was "the development of human capital and increasing competitiveness, by linking education and lifelong learning with the labour market and ensuring increased opportunities for future participation on a modern, flexible and inclusive labour market for 1,650,000 people" (Government of Romania, Ministry of Labour, Family and Equal Opportunities 2007,4). It is stipulated that "the educational and training systems require further investment in quality education and competences of staff in education" (Government of Romania, Ministry of Labour, Family and Equal Opportunities 2007,59) and, in this respect, ESF interventions offer support: for 75,000 teachers, trainers and other staff in education - updating of skills and competencies, for 15,000 people - funding for doctoral and postdoctoral programmes of research in economy and high technological sectors, for 25,000 people - re-entry in education, for 25,000 students - the transition from school to the labour market, for 538,000 people - vocational training, for 30,000 people - training in advanced technological and engineering sectors, environment, ICT, for 15,000 people - training on managerial skills, for 30,000 people - training for developing entrepreneurial skills.

SOPHRD 2007-2013 has 7 priority axes, each of them dealing, to a certain extent, in a form or another, with training activities. For instance, *Priority Axis 1 Education and training in support for growth and development of knowledge based society* aims to approach nationally the education and training systems having as core the Lifelong Learning principle, *Priority Axis 2 Linking lifelong learning and labour market* increases the access and participation in Continuous Vocational Training, *Priority Axis 4 Modernisation of Public Employment Service* focuses on training the staff from the Public Employment Service, while *Priority Axis*

3 (Increasing adaptability of workers and enterprises), 5 (Promoting active employment measures) and 6 (Promoting social inclusion) are tackling with participation in Continuous Vocational Training, ensuring equal opportunities for individuals (Government of Romania, Ministry of Labour, Family and Equal Opportunities 2007, 61-62).

As mentioned in the EUROSTAT document regarding Lifelong Learning, according to the Romanian people, in 2011, the major obstacles to participation in education and training programmes were related to their utility for their job, prices perceived as too high, program conflicting with work schedule, lack of time, lack of support from the employer etc.

Under ESF funding, in Romania were implemented several projects with the aim to overcome certain obstacles to participation in education and training. One of these projects was the "Promoting Equal Opportunities in University and Academic Career for Women in Romania" Project (PECAFROM - SOP HRD/144/6.3/S/127928), *Priority Axis 6 Promoting Social Inclusion, Key area of intervention 6.3 Promoting equal opportunities on the labor market*. It was implemented between May 2014 and December 2015 by the Romanian Academy, Iași Branch, as the beneficiary of this project, and other four partners: Apollonia University of Iași; Romanian Academy, Cluj-Napoca Branch; Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu; University of Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca Technical University - Baia Mare Northern University Centre. The project aimed at increasing access to employment opportunities and career paths for 550 women with higher education that intended to work within universities and/or research institutes in Romania, or to advance in their career. Its major objective was to offer to this target group proper lifelong learning programmes, and the main activities consisted in providing training programmes certified by The National Qualifications Authority for career development, information concerning labor market developments in Academia and university, employment opportunities and entrepreneurial career development and career path through the on-line Newsletter and direct support for starting a business (Ulman and Dobay 2016, 69-71).

Within the PECAFROM Project, the major obstacles to the participation in lifelong learning programmes were tackled as follows:

1. *Did not need it for work* – **selecting the proper programmes for the target group’s career path**; in this respect, and in order to identify customers’ needs and requirements, a training assessment needs questionnaire was developed and applied to all women from the target group;

2. *Too expensive, could not afford* – **no cost** for the courses and certifications was charged for the target group;

3. *Conflict with work schedule* – **variable schedule** and registration in classes depending on individual spare time; also, for some training programmes, the **direct on-line registration in calendar** for each course and class was assured;

4. *No time due to family* – **subsidy** for the time spent in courses;

5. *Lack of employer/public service support* – **partner institutions encouraged participation** of the target group in training activities and **promoted** the project to their own employees too, the transparency and principle of the equal opportunity being guaranteed through on-line registration of the potential target group;

6. *Did not need it for personal reasons* – there were only **personal options** for the desired programmes according to the individual targeted career path; the advantages for the target group, due to the obtained certifications, on long term are: advancement in academic degree in order to occupy a higher position; participation in projects on a higher position than the latest one attained; transition to a superior level of studies; gaining a doctoral/postdoctoral fellowship or research grant or scholarship; occupying a better position in domains related to Academia, that contribute to a future academic career etc.

7. *Did not have the prerequisites* – all training programmes certified by the National Qualifications Authority organised within the project required **high level studies** and the target group was selected according to this criteria too;

8. *Could not find what was wanted* – being centered on target group needs (our consumers’ requirements), the entire project was designed to help women with higher education to overcome the problems that are facing with, such as the need for continuity in the academic career for

women, the need for opening up the geographic mobility, the need for balance between professional and private/family life, the need for recognizing the self-problem solving potential (Ulman and Dobay 2016,69); the initial training programmes were established according to this aspects and, during the project implementation phase, curricula were extended according to the new **identified requirements**.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Nowadays, lifelong learning is a point of central attention coming across several EU strategies and initiatives, including the Europe 2020 Strategy, the Youth Guarantee, the Youth Employment initiative, the Digital Single Market initiative, the European Agendas on Security and Migration and the Investment Plan for Europe (European Commission 2015, C417/25). Also, cooperation in education and training complements national action in supporting Member States through *peer exchanges, mutual learning, evidence and data collection, in pursuing reforms to further improve their results* (European Commission 2015, C417/25).

Considering that the obstacles people are facing with are different from case to case, each action’s success, at country level, will depend on the quality and availability of data gathered regarding consumers’ needs in matter of lifelong learning programmes. In this regard, the national policies and training services providers should focus on understanding the new trends in consumer behavior, especially on the major changes that took place after the recent global financial crisis period.

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