

## THE ROLE OF LIFELONG LEARNING IN INCREASING OF LABOUR MARKET COMPETITIVENESS

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**Abstract:** *In today's knowledge-based society, lifelong learning is essential for maintaining competitiveness in the labour market. The study aims to examine the role of lifelong learning in increasing employability and reducing social inequalities in Hungary. A literature review and document analysis of national and EU-level reports and statistics are used to identify the main challenges and developments in adult education and training. The results show that while participation in lifelong learning is increasing, Hungary still lags behind the EU average. The results highlight the importance of strategic support for disadvantaged groups, especially the Roma population, in order to strengthen social inclusion and economic competitiveness.*

**Keywords:** *Lifelong Learning, labour market, competitiveness, employability, social mobility*

**JEL Classification:** Z13

### 1. Introduction

Social capital must play an increasingly important role in improving the competitiveness of a nation. Lifelong learning plays a crucial role in boosting labour market competitiveness, as continuous training and skills development are essential to maintain a workforce capable of meeting the needs of the modern economy. The concept of lifelong learning emerged in the 20th century and has since become a globally accepted strategic goal. Technological developments and the ever-changing needs of the labour market require workers to acquire new skills throughout their lives, ensuring their employability and productivity. Lifelong learning plays an important role in the integration of adults into the labour market and contributes to the development of successful labour market competences. Lifelong learning is becoming increasingly important today as the world is changing rapidly and information is constantly updated. Rapid developments in science and technology, as well as changes in the labour market, mean that formal education alone is no longer sufficient. The key to success and personal development is the ability to constantly acquire new skills and knowledge. The distribution of labour market participation by educational attainment shows clear trends and very clearly demonstrates the extreme importance of education in employment. In all cases, education contributes to the development of individuals' intellectual capital, helping them to become more effective workers. High employability and higher productivity have many economic benefits. Adult education and training provides opportunities

to overcome social disadvantage, to achieve social mobility through stratification and to keep up with the labour market needs of the economy, to meet the evolving economic and social needs and to acquire new skills.

## **2. The development and evolution of lifelong learning**

Lifelong learning as a "way of life" can be described as the result of a process over several decades, during which theoretical research has become practice and a globally accepted strategic objective. Continuous learning and education have become a means of social coexistence, which can be seen as a way of adapting to the challenges of the knowledge society. The paradigm of lifelong learning has been the dominant agenda of the 20th century. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948 states that everyone has the right to education (UN, 1948). In the 1970s, the report of a UNESCO working group on "Learning to be, Education for Today and Tomorrow" addressed adult education from an economic and employability perspective, and the concept of the learning society was born in the same decade (UNESCO, 1970). At the Fourth World Conference on Adult Education in Paris in 1985, adult education was considered as a key to solving social conflicts (Koltai, 2003). In the 1990s, lifelong learning became a strategic program, to which the Delors Report (Delors, 1997), prepared by the European Union, contributed. This document stated that individual development is an essential component in responding to the challenges of the information society, and that lifelong learning must be provided for this purpose.

## **3. Unravelling the link between lifelong learning and the economy**

The spread of lifelong learning can be traced back to a number of social and economic causal factors: one of the fundamental phenomena is the rise in unemployment, which has been accompanied by the devaluation of unskilled labour. The re-integration of unskilled labour into the labour market is only possible through retraining, education and new skills. For workers, it is important to develop their adaptability, as technological progress requires individuals to be more practical. Negative demographic change across Europe and the emergence of ageing societies have contributed to the priority given to lifelong learning. It is essential to keep the older population in the active labour market as long as possible, contributing to economic output growth, for which up-to-date knowledge is indispensable. As info communication technologies are increasingly gaining ground in modern societies, and the welfare state is receding, leaving room for the family, the individual, the non-profit sector and market solutions, it has become necessary to redefine and transform the traditional educational structure (Csizmadý & Schmidt, 2007).

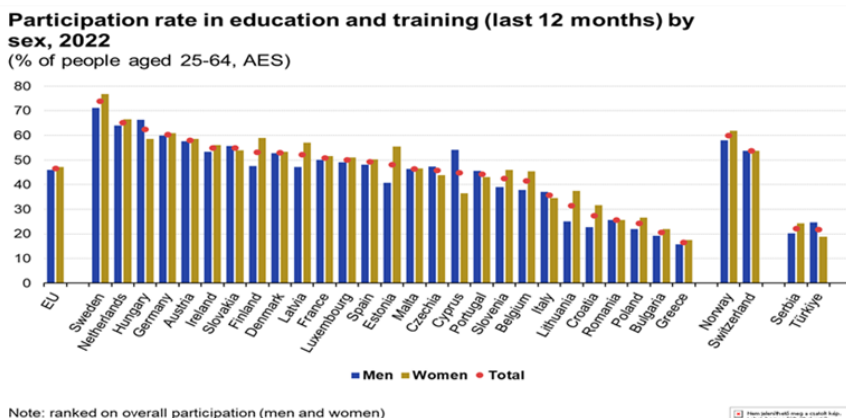
Today, knowledge is seen as a resource that plays a crucial role in the functioning of the economy. The challenges of our knowledge-based society require continuous development and the acquisition and application of flexible, transferable knowledge. Individuals who are open to new knowledge are an essential condition for

maintaining economic competitiveness, as lifelong learning is a necessary and indispensable component for the reintegration of low-skilled groups into the labour market, for the development of labour market competences and for successful economic development. The role of knowledge and the education that makes it possible to acquire it has become more valued in modern societies and is an indispensable component for achieving social inclusion (Taródiné, 2017). One of the reasons that has made adult learning a market player is the need for lifelong learning. On the one hand, adult learning adapts to the demand side of employers in order to meet their need for skilled workers, but at the same time it also provides workers with the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and competences that will increase their chances on the labour market (Mócz, 2010).

The modern economy requires workers to continuously develop their knowledge. Training helps those who are employed to keep their jobs, while unemployed people are ideally equipped for work by developing their competences (Halmos, 2005).

Globalization and the technological revolution are placing new demands on workers. Old skills are rapidly becoming obsolete, while new competences are needed as new technologies and methods are introduced. In order to remain competitive in the labour market, workers need to continuously train themselves. Adaptation to environmental and social changes, the increasing use of artificial intelligence and the spread of automation have also transformed the needs of the labour market. To ensure that the employability of individuals in this changing economy does not deteriorate, the creation of a skilled and innovative workforce is key. Lifelong learning has become a key factor for business competitiveness and individual success, as it is the basis for flexible adaptability to changing labour market conditions. Adaptability, the willingness to expand knowledge, is the cornerstone of lifelong learning. A key point is that enterprises must also encourage and support their employees, contributing to their development needs, as a skilled workforce can give them an advantage over their competitors (Schulcz, 2023).

Experts in the field have concluded that it is foreseeable that new jobs will emerge in the next decade as a result of technological and industrial developments that are not yet known today (Agcas et al., 2021). The retraining of manual workers will become essential as a result of automation and they will increasingly need to acquire skills in IT and related fields in order to keep their jobs. In some areas, digital competences are already today, but in the future, they will become an essential workforce skill, with the use of digital tools and technical proficiency becoming a basic requirement. Adult learning plays a key role in acquiring these skills. Adult learning services, online training that goes beyond traditional education, new skills acquired through distance learning, mentoring programs provided by employers, help workers to evolve to meet changing market needs (Schulcz, 2023).



**Figure:** European Union Participation rate in education and training last 12 months by sex

**Source:** Eurostat, 2022, online

Knowledge is no longer the only key pillar of employability, as a number of key skills and competences now play an irreplaceable role in determining employment prospects, such as: work culture, flexibility, problem recognition and solving skills, responsibility, communication skills, creativity, stress tolerance, foreign language skills, IT skills, workload management, adaptability. All these are skills and competences that can be developed through lifelong learning. It is important to underline that the lifelong learning process is based on volunteering, so that the individual's intrinsic motivation to develop plays a decisive role. Lifelong learning is important not only for adaptability to the labour market, but also for personal development and quality of life. The acquisition of new skills can help to increase self-esteem and maintain mental well-being.

#### 4. Lifelong learning in Hungary

In Hungary, the accession to the European Union has brought with it the concept of lifelong learning and has become a priority in our country as well, a requirement for the orientation towards a knowledge-based economy and society, which justifies the reform of education and training systems (Memorandum, 2000).

In 2023, an Evaluation Report on the evaluation of lifelong learning measures related to relevant EFOP interventions was prepared for the Prime Minister's Office. The evaluation examined the improvements and results of the lifelong learning measures for the 2014-2020 programming period. The evaluation examined eight EROPs and one VEKOP (EFOP-3.3.3- VEKOP-16, EFOP-3.3.2-16, EFOP-3.3.3-VEKOP-16, EFOP-3.7.3-16, EFOP-3.7.1-17, EFOP-4.1.7 16, EFOP-4.1.8-16, EFOP-4.1.9-16, EFOP-3.1.9-17, EFOP-3.7.1-17, VEKOP- 7. 3.4-17). The aim of the report was to identify critical points, based on the results and experience gained, which could be corrected in order to improve the effectiveness of the programs in

the future. The evaluation sought to identify the forms of development that could be used in the future, either modified or unchanged, which procedures had proved to be good practice and how future assistance could be better targeted.

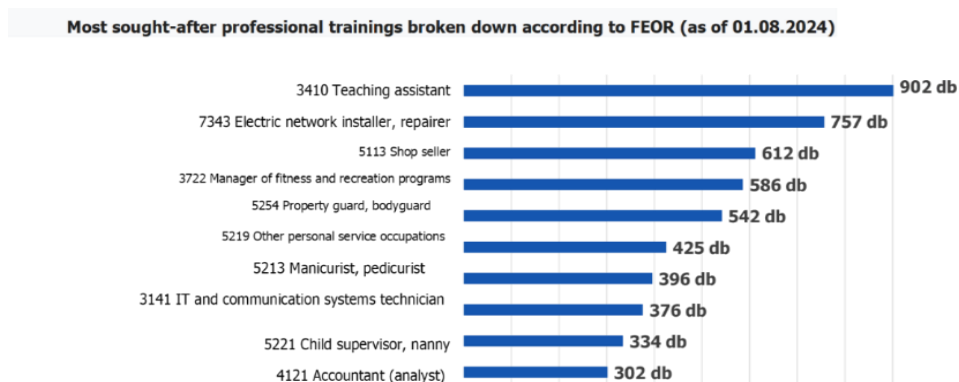
In total, 553 projects were implemented under the schemes examined, covering the following elements of the Lifelong Learning Framework Strategy 2014-2020:

Development of methodological improvements, system of professional training, development of model projects. Competence development. Creation of infrastructural conditions for non-formal and informal learning in museums, libraries, archives, other community cultural institutions. Reintegrating young people with no secondary education beyond compulsory school age into secondary education. Reducing early school leaving. Improving the employability of people with low educational attainment.

Based on the main findings of the Lifelong Learning schemes implemented in the 2014-2020 programming period, it can be stated that in Hungary, lifelong learning has an important role to play in spreading lifelong learning as widely as possible, and therefore, in order to raise and develop the knowledge level of the population, it is essential to preserve the projects implemented and to reallocate further resources to this area (Kopint & Tarki, 2023).

According to KSH data (KSH, 2023), in the early 2000s, the share of people aged 25-64 in education and training was only 3% of the population and stagnated at 4% in the following years until 2012, when it started to decline. It can be observed that Budapest has an outstanding record in terms of the share of people participating in adult learning, but the statistics show that a single project with a major training component can have a significant impact on the change in the figures. Unfortunately, these figures are still below the European average, as the average participation rate in adult education and training in the European Union for the 25-64 age group over the same period was 9.2%. In two years, the national indicators for lifelong learning have moved in a positive direction. In 2022, the share of the population aged 25-64 in education and training increased to 7.9%. The largest gender gap in participation in education was observed in 2022. The balance shifted towards women, with 9.2% of women and 6.7% of men participating in education and training.

In 2022, the regional figures also include Northern Hungary (8.5%), Southern Great Plain (8.3%), Budapest (8.3%) and Northern Great Plain (8.2%), as these regions have above national average indicators. Our country is also currently performing below the EU average, with an average of 11.9% of 25–64-year-olds in education and training in the EU Member States in 2022. Sweden has the highest participation rate (36.2%).



**Figure:** Most sought-after professional training broken down according to FEOR 2020- 2024

**Source:** Ministry of Culture and Innovation, 2024, online

## 5. Developing workers' skills and social benefits

In today's market economy, the role of education and knowledge has become more important as technological change has transformed the needs and expectations of the economy. Equal access to employment is a prerequisite for tackling social exclusion and reducing and fighting poverty. Improving employment conditions for disadvantaged and marginalized groups of workers is of paramount importance (R. Fedor et al, 2022). It has been found that lifelong learning serves labour market needs and contributes significantly to reducing unemployment, as there is an inverse correlation between unemployment and the increase in educational attainment (Csehné, 2007). The talent crisis as a phenomenon is having a growing impact on the global economy. Labour market conditions have been disrupted and there is both a shortage and an oversupply of labour. Negative labour market indicators are further exacerbated by specific local conditions, in particular severe the situation of the cumulatively disadvantaged, including the Roma population, the border the situation of the disadvantaged groups, including the Roma population, the precarious labour market conditions for people living in border areas and socio-cultural isolation. (R. Fedor & Lácay, 2021)

In our country, the Roma, who are considered disadvantaged in terms of the labour market, unfortunately have a low personal need to increase their education, and the reality that increasing their education, skills and knowledge can help them to increase their chances on the labour market and to escape from their unfavorable economic situation is often not evident for this precarious group.

The social, economic and political benefits of knowledge expansion are also crucial. Economically, it can contribute to increasing competitiveness, socially it can promote positive changes in individual well-being, and politically it can have an impact on social empowerment (Papp, 2005).

In addition to accumulated disadvantages within the family, under-schooling and early school leaving, discrimination and spatial segregation also hinder the labour market integration of Roma (R. Fedor & Balla, 2019).

Lifelong learning has a niche role for disadvantaged groups, including Roma, who are under-represented in terms of participation in learning. There is a growing need for supported programs that contribute to their integration, increase their chances of finding employment, continuing their studies, active economic participation, marketable skills and equal opportunities in education.

In most cases, disadvantage implies lower than average labour market opportunities and equality of opportunity across several areas. The lack of motivation to learn among disadvantaged groups leads to school failure, which can be seen as a precursor to under-qualification and subsequent difficulties in finding employment. This can lead to long-term unemployment, socialization difficulties and ultimately social segregation. Lifelong learning offers an opportunity to reduce these social disadvantages and to develop attitudes towards employment among disadvantaged and Roma groups (Halmos, 2005). The Lifelong Learning Policy Framework Strategy 2014-2020 has set out a number of objectives, with disadvantaged and Roma people as the main target groups.

This strategy gives priority to supporting the entry of disadvantaged people into the primary labour market, improving the labour market participation and employability of disadvantaged jobseekers, tackling segregated situations and discrimination, reducing the transmission of social disadvantage, increasing opportunities for disadvantaged young people and promoting inclusion. The framework strategy aims to improve the life chances of disadvantaged people by increasing their learning opportunities and improving access to learning opportunities. The priority objectives include improving the chances of school leavers without qualifications, early school leavers, young people who are neither in education nor in the labour market (Government of Hungary, 2014).

Training for the unemployed, including Roma, is part of the active tools used by the government to reduce unemployment and alleviate disadvantage. Training is one of the most commonly used strategies and methods to reduce the duration of unemployment, not only to acquire new skills, but also to prevent the loss of skills and to support the return to the labour market. Most experts agree that the pathway to the integration of disadvantaged Roma through education can only produce measurable positive effects in the long term. Unfortunately, both the literature and the opinion of practitioners support the fact that lifelong learning for Roma after primary and possibly secondary education is mainly provided through development programs. Adult, working-age members of Roma society mainly participate in subsidized training courses that require basic or even no basic level of education. Unfortunately, however, the voluntary nature of adult learning often means that the integration into lifelong learning of those individuals who are most in need of remedial training is still not achieved. Completion of primary education is now considered a basic requirement for vocational training, as only a fraction of the courses listed in the National Training Register can be completed without primary education. Those that do not have such an entry requirement can be considered as marketable occupations, the basis for career planning, to a minimal or almost non-existent extent (Szoboszlai, 2006).

## 6. Research methodology

The research was based on secondary analysis of relevant statistical data sets and reports. We paid special attention to indicators related to the participation of the Roma population in education and the labor market, and to the evaluation of intervention forms aimed at these. Descriptive statistical methods were used when processing the quantitative data. The aim of the study is to explore the impact of lifelong learning on labor market competitiveness in Hungary, with special regard to disadvantaged social groups, especially the Roma population. During the study, we ensured the complexity of the analysis by combining qualitative and quantitative methods. Secondary statistical data were processed and document analysis was carried out within the framework of the research. The basis of the quantitative data analysis was the evaluation reports of Eurostat, the Central Statistical Office (KSH), and the EFOP and VEKOP programs for the period 2014–2020. The data were used to examine participation rates in adult education, regional and gender differences, and the relationship between education and employment. The qualitative method was a document analysis, which covered national and international strategic documents, policy materials, and relevant scientific publications.

## 7. Results

The skills of workers are part of the economic potential of the knowledge societies and thus play a role in economic growth. Lifelong learning can also have an impact on curbing the effects of ageing societies. In our country, too, there is a downward trend in the number of people of working age. The acquisition of ever-renewing knowledge and the raising of the retirement age are helping to increase the number of people in the labour market. The possession of competitive knowledge also helps the older generation to slow down and alleviate the processes of exclusion. Education can support the economy and society not only now, but also in the decades to come, as rapid technological change requires investment in human capital, thus contributing to ensuring a mobile workforce (Taródiné, 2017). Lifelong learning plays a key role in addressing labour market needs, reducing unemployment and mitigating the effects of ageing societies. It is a tool for creating inclusion and opportunities, especially for disadvantaged groups such as the Roma population. The Lifelong Learning Framework Strategy emphasizes improving access to education, reducing early school leaving and improving the prospects of disadvantaged individuals.

Continuous investment in education supports economic and social development, ensuring a mobile workforce in the face of rapid technological change.

To sum up, lifelong learning in our country was initially a gap-filling function, its main purpose being to fill the knowledge gap, but nowadays it is a necessary process due to economic changes, focusing on meeting employers' needs, modernizing outdated knowledge, upgrading knowledge and is used in a cyclical way by the target group, the employees.

The results show positive trends in adult education participation in Hungary, increasing from 3% to 7.9% between 2000 and 2022. However, the rate remains



below the EU average of 11.9%. Regional disparities persist, with higher participation in Budapest and the Northern Great Plain region. The evaluation of EFOP programs indicates that a number of good practices have emerged, with Roma communities still limited by low motivation, poor primary education and systemic barriers. Programs that target disadvantaged groups have achieved greater success in improving employability outcomes.

Lifelong learning is a global phenomenon, which was deepened in our country by the integration processes of the European Union, thereby serving economic and social needs and wants. Lifelong learning is a prominent part of both education and employment policy, but it also fulfills catch-up, opportunity-creating and integration functions among disadvantaged groups, including the Roma.

Lifelong learning is becoming increasingly important for national competitiveness and economic growth, as it plays a key role in the integration of adults into the labour market and the development of essential skills for success. It helps overcome social disadvantages, promotes social mobility and responds to labour market needs, adapting to constantly changing economic and social needs. Lifelong learning is therefore not only the key to success in the labour market, but also contributes to personal satisfaction and social integration. In order to be successful in the modern world, it is essential to be open to receiving new knowledge and to constantly develop yourself.

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