

THE CURRENT SITUATION OF THE VOCATIONAL TRAINING SYSTEM IN ROMANIA

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***Abstract.** The education and training play an important role in solving many socio-economic, demographic, environmental and technological challenges faced by the countries and their citizens now and in years to come.*

Although at present, Romania does not face a serious unemployment problem (the unemployment rate in 2017, at national level, was 4.9%, compared to the European average of 7.6%) the activity rate and the occupancy rate of the population working age, registered in our country, continues to be among the lowest in Europe. Also, persist or even deepen the disparities between urban and rural areas, between small and big towns and between different social groups.

One of the important challenges currently facing Romania is the problem of the labour training. The reforms in the field of vocational training applied after 1989 have not always been anchored in economic realities and have not had the necessary coherence for a key area that guides and ensures economic development in the medium and long term. In this context, the results of Romanian educational system evolutions and initial and continuing vocational training have become more and more visible in recent years when a large number of young people and adults have difficulties in entering the labour market, or are forced to practice professions unrelated with the graduate studies.

Starting from the analysis of official statistical data over the last years regarding education and vocational training, the paper highlights the intrinsic link between education, vocational training and the labour market.

Keywords: education, training, lifelong learning, key indicators

1. Introduction

Throughout the years, cooperation at European level in the field of education and professional training has played a decisive role in creating the future European society.

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In Europe, the economic and social developments of the last decade have shown the growing need for a European dimension of vocational education and training. Moreover, the transition to a knowledge-based economy capable of sustainable economic growth, with more and better jobs, with greater social cohesion, creates new challenges in the field of human resource development.

The expansion of the European Union adds a new dimension and new challenges, opportunities and requirements to the work in the field of vocational training.

Generally, Vocational Education and Training (VET) contributes to the development of human capital, enhancing people's knowledge, skills and competences as well as social, cultural and identity capital and has positive outcomes on personal level, wage, career development, improving employability, health and quality of life.

Studies in the literature on VET indicate that the implications of the process are even more extensive, the process of continuous training generating benefits and rates of return similar to those of the initial education process.

Numerous studies and quantitative research conducted in several countries show that VET brings many economic and social benefits such as higher wages for workers, increased productivity for organizations and growth in general. Also, the VET process is considered as a tool for promoting social inclusion and equity, contributing to health and workplace satisfaction.

Also, at the level of the economic entities, the vocational training process leads to increased labor productivity, encourages cooperation between workers, thus creating a positive working environment. Workers respond positively to the firm's "effort" to invest in human resources training.

At national level, the recognized economic and social benefits of VET include increasing competitiveness and supporting economic growth, facilitating the integration of young people and other disadvantaged groups into the labor market, and promoting social inclusion in general by improving the employment and promotion prospects of individuals.

2. Vocational training in the context of the Europe 2020 strategy

European cooperation on Vocational Education and Training was launched in Copenhagen in 2002 and was further strengthened by the 2010 Bruges Communiqué [1] and the Riga Conclusions of 2015 [2].

The Copenhagen process was launched with the Copenhagen Declaration [3], endorsed on 30 November 2002 by the Ministers responsible for education and training in the Member States, the candidate countries, the EFTA-EEA countries, the European social partners, and The European Commission.

They agreed on priorities and strategies for promoting mutual trust, transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications to enhance mobility and facilitate access to lifelong learning. The declaration aimed to improve European cooperation in VET, highlighting the contribution of education and training to the challenges identified in the Lisbon Strategy [4]:

- strengthening the European dimension of VET;
- improving the transparency of information and counseling systems;
- recognizing skills and qualifications – including non-formal and informal learning;
- promoting cooperation in the field of quality assurance.

The following three Ministerial Meetings (Maastricht, 2004, Helsinki, 2006, Bordeaux, 2008) reiterated the priorities set in Copenhagen and, in addition, specified the priority areas for the next period. The Progress Review Meeting, held in Bordeaux at the end of 2008, set out the objectives and directions for action for 2009-2010, most important being the following [5] - [7]:

- **implementing tools and schemes to promote VET cooperation;**
- **increasing the quality and attractiveness of VET systems - by promoting the attractiveness of VET across all target groups, as well as excellence and quality;**
- **improving the relationship between VET and the labor market – by ensuring the involvement of social partners; development of validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes; increasing mobility;**
- **strengthening cooperation arrangements - by increasing the efficiency of mutual learning activities; strengthening the links between VET, school education, higher education and adult vocational training.**

Through these documents, the European Union, the candidate countries, the countries of the European Economic Area, the social partners in the EU, the European Commission and the European providers of

education and training agreed on a set of objectives for the period 2015-2020 [5] - [7]:

a) "promoting workplace learning in all its forms, paying particular attention to apprenticeship (by involving social partners, businesses, chambers and VET providers) and stimulating innovation and entrepreneurship;

b) further development of quality assurance mechanisms in VET;

c) increasing access to VET and qualifications for all through more flexible and permeable systems, and by facilitating the validation of non-formal and informal learning;

d) further strengthen key competences in VET programs and providing more effective opportunities to acquire or develop these skills through Initial Vocational Education and Training (IVET) and Continuing Vocational Education and Training (CVET).

e) introducing systematic approaches and opportunities for the initial and continuing professional development of VET teachers, trainers and mentors both in the school environment and at work."

These actions carried out by the European Commission in the field of VET are supported by the European Center for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) (which contributes to the development and implementation of European VET policies) and the European Training Foundation (ETF) (contributing, in the context of EU policies in the field of external relations, to the development of human capital) [8], [9].

VET systems in member countries are supported by the European Union either *through various mechanisms* such as:

- through the *European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training* (ECVET), VET learners are helped to gain validation and recognition of skills and knowledge gained in different systems and countries;

- Member States are supported in promoting and monitoring the continuous improvement of VET systems (based on mutually agreed references) through the European Quality Assurance VET Framework (EQAVET);

- the 14 criteria contained in the Council Recommendation on a European Framework for Quality and Effective Apprenticeship Programs [10] which EU states and stakeholders should use in order to develop effective and high quality apprenticeship programs;

- starting 2016, the European Professional Skills Week is being held annually to improve the attractiveness and the image of VET;

- in 2013, the European Alliance for Apprentices was set up, which effectively mobilized the EU Member States, the European Free Trade Association countries and the EU candidate countries, as well as over 230 stakeholders to take part in enhancing the provision of apprenticeship programs and increasing their quality and image [11];

- the European Apprentices Network, created in 2017 to support its members in adopting VET measures and apprenticeship programs;

- in developing policies and practices for teachers and trainers to enhance their potential, but also to improve apprenticeships and workplace learning, decision-makers are supported by the ET2020 Working Group on VET;

- the UNESCO-led Inter-Agency Group on Technical and Vocational Education and Training (IAG-TVET) provides for the coordination of activities among the major international organizations involved in research, vocational education and training policies, programs and research;

or through financial instruments such as:

- the Erasmus+ program, which has an (initial) overall indicative financial envelope of EUR 14.774 billion. For the 2014-2020 period, nearly 3 billion euros of this amount will be targeted at VET, and each year around 130000 trainees and 20000 VET staff benefit from the mobility opportunities offered by Erasmus+;

- European Social Fund (ESF): over 2014-2020, around € 15 billion was earmarked, inter alia, for strengthening equal access to lifelong learning and promoting a flexible career path, as well as improving the relevance for the labor market of systems education and training.

As a key tool for upgrading VET, the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training ("ET2020"), drafted in 2012 by the European Council can have a major contribution to achieving the Europe 2020 objectives [12]. But for this to work, ET2020 needs to be adjusted by updating its work priorities, instruments and its governance structure.

In this context, the long-term strategic objectives of EU policies on vocational training are:

- i) improving the quality and efficiency of education and training;
- ii) promoting equity, social cohesion and active involvement of citizens;

- iii) enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.

However, for lifelong learning and mobility to become realities, flexible access to new learning and skills, the development of a strategic

approach to the internationalization of IVET and CVET and the promotion of international mobility are needed.

To increase the chances of success in life, in order to support a fair, sustainable and inclusive growth and to ensure social cohesion, it is necessary to increase skills levels, promote cross-cutting skills and find ways to better anticipate future needs in the labor market for work.

Against this background, in June 2016, the European Commission adopted a New Comprehensive Agenda for Competence in Europe [13]. Its aim is to guarantee the assimilation of a wide range of skills from a young age and to make the most of Europe's human capital, which will ultimately increase employability and competitiveness and stimulate economic growth in Europe.

Also, in 2017, EU leaders proclaimed the European Social Rights Pillar as a guide to increasing employment and social convergence and promoting better opportunities especially for young people in Europe [14].

3. Vocational training in Romania from the perspective of the targets and indicators derived from the Europe 2020 Strategy

As a member state of the European Union, Romania actively contributes to the realization of the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training - ET 2020. In this context, the objectives assumed by Romania in the field of education and lifelong learning for the 2020 horizon are:

- ♦ reducing the school dropout rate to below 11.3%, with the EU target being 10.0%;
- ♦ reaching at least 26.7% of young people aged 30-34 with tertiary or equivalent education (EU target: 40%);
- ♦ promoting lifelong learning and increasing the participation rate of the population to continuing vocational training up to 10% (EU target: 15%);
- ♦ improving the impact of career guidance services offered to secondary school students, which would contribute significantly to the awareness and awareness of native learners' abilities both by them and by their families and teachers;
- ♦ reducing the level of functional illiteracy;
- ♦ increasing of the employment rate of graduates aged between 20 and 34, at the latest 3 years after graduation. With a graduate employment rate of 70.6% in 2017, across all levels of ISCED 3-8, Romania is below the

European average of 76.2% and far from the 82% target proposed at European level for year 2020;

♦the rate of adult participation in lifelong learning programs was 1.1% in the year 2017, well below the European value of 10.9% and far from the 12% target proposed by Romania for 2020.

Therefore, the analysis of the indicators and benchmarks underpinning policy development in the field of education and training in Romania indicates that the initiatives taken in recent years have led to an improvement in the situation but the gaps towards the EU average remain significant (Figure 1) [15].

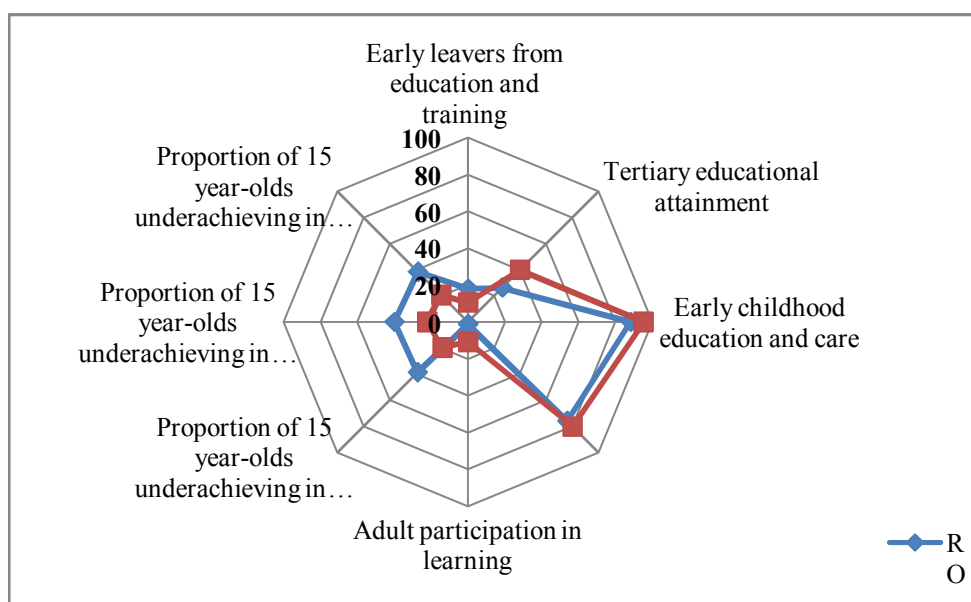


Figure 1. The indicators of education and training in Romania in European context.

Data source: Education and Training MONITOR 2018, Romania, [www. eu.europe.eu](http://www.eu.europe.eu)

The relevance of Vocational Education and Training (VET) to the labor market is another challenge for Romania, but the new initiatives adopted in recent years aim to improve the situation.

Romania, as a Member State, drafted, by an act of the Chamber of Deputies, the Decision no. 92 of 4 October 2016, opinions on the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – New Skills Agenda for Europe (NSAE) COM

(2016) 38197 [13]. Through this declaration of principle of the Romanian legislature, the main axes of the European initiative are supported.

An important role in the implementation of NSAE in Romania is played by the Ministry of Labor and Social Justice, which has also assumed the role of coordinator of national implementation of the Recommendation *Skills Update Paths: New Adult Opportunities* of 19 December 2016 [16].

Also, in the spirit of the Recommendation, a number of recent amendments to Romanian legislation have taken into account the need for professional training of low-skilled people, including those with level 1 qualifications. According to data provided by the National Institute of Statistics, in the last years there has been a decrease in the employed population who has primary education or has no studies (from 3.54% in 2015 to 2.79% of the employed population in the year 2017). Thus, about 5-6% of the unemployed are without education or only with primary education.

In this context, through GD no. 92/2018 amending the Government Decision no. 1352 / 2010 regarding the approval of the structure of the Occupations Classification in Romania, the Government has established the renaming of the Major Group 9 of the COR, so it is would not be called "Unskilled Workers" anymore, but "Elementary Occupations" instead [17]. These changes identified the need for training for the low-skilled and ensure the possibility of authorizing training for Level 1 qualification.

An important step in Romanian legislation was the transposition of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), revised in May 2017 [18], in the national regulations through the approval of *Order no. 5039/2126 of September 5, 2018 regarding the approval of the correspondence between the levels of the National Qualifications Framework, the education / qualification papers to be issued, the type of education and training programs in Romania through which the qualification levels can be acquired, the reference levels of the European Qualifications Framework, as well as the appropriate access conditions for each level of qualification* [19].

The issue of competitiveness of human resources has been put on the decision agenda as a priority area of short and medium term intervention in the context of Romania's efforts to counteract the effects of the global economic crisis. Also, in recent years, the context of training policies has been marked by the development of the VET Strategy that promotes smart growth, achievable through major investment in sustainable education,

research and innovation, inclusive growth, with a focus on job creation and poverty reduction [20].

This is complementary to the National Lifelong Learning Strategy 2015-2020 and the Strategy on Reducing Early School Leavers and, together with them, aims at meeting the common objectives at European level regarding the increased participation in the labor market of a highly skilled workforce adaptability, improving the education system and increasing its adaptability to labor market demand, promoting lifelong learning, increasing adaptability of employees and businesses, ensuring qualifications and knowledge for integration and mobility in the labor market and facilitating economic development.

The overall objective of the strategy is "to develop a vocational education and training system tailored to the needs of the labor market and the needs of the direct beneficiaries derived from four specific (strategic) objectives [20]:

1. improving the relevance of vocational training systems for the labor market;
2. increasing participation and facilitating access to training programs with strategic objectives:
 - a) increasing the share of students enrolled in technological high school and vocational education to 60% in 2020;
 - b) increasing the participation rate of adults in lifelong learning programs to 10% in 2020;
3. improving the quality of vocational training with strategic objectives:
 - a) reducing the drop-out rate to 2% in technological secondary education and vocational education in 2020;
 - b) increasing the share of graduates of technological high school education declared successful at the baccalaureate exam at 60% in 2020;
4. developing national and international innovation and cooperation in the field of vocational training".

Regarding the *initial vocational training* in Romania, the high share of young people enrolled in vocational and technical education in the total number of pupils enrolled in upper secondary education demonstrates the importance of initial vocational training for the Romanian labor market.

In the 2016-2017 school year, in high schools in the technological branch, 42.7% of the total number of pupils studied in high school education, and 7.8% opted for the profiles in the *vocational branch*. Within the technological branch, 44.3% of the students were enrolled in the

technical high schools and 38.8% in the high schools with a service profile. Also, the analysis of the distribution of high school students highlights differences in the public sector compared to the private sector. Thus, while 49.1% of pupils in public high schools followed the theoretical course, in private high schools the students opted for this (71.8%). The vocational pathway was followed by 7.9% of public high school students and only 0.8% of private high school students.

In the school year 2016-2017, 84.4 thousand pupils were enrolled in vocational education, accounting for 5.6% of the total secondary school pupils and 2.3% of the total school population. The number of students enrolled in this educational level continued to increase, so 22.9% more pupils were at the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year compared to the same period of the previous year. Regarding the gender structure of students in vocational education, the male population was a priority (69.5%).

Students in this educational level followed mainly courses of urban public schools (83.7%), vocational education in the rural area comprising only 15.9% of the total number of pupils at this level of education.

Continuous vocational training ensures the growth and diversification of professional skills through the initiation, qualification, re-qualification, improvement and specialization of jobseekers in order to achieve their mobility and re-integration into the labor market. Professional training programs for job-seekers, according to the law, are coordinated at national level by the National Agency for Employment, which also organizes vocational training programs for these categories of adults through their own centers, private centers or through authorized professional training providers. In addition, businesses can develop programs for on-going employee training.

Statistical data available for 2015 indicate that the provision of training programs to employees for the purpose of correlating the level of education and qualifications with the labor market requirements was a priority objective for 13586 enterprises (representing 26.7% of all enterprises from Romania). Continuing vocational training provided by Romanian enterprises has focused more on training staff employed through other forms of Continuing Vocational Training (CVT) (other than courses) such as: guided training, training or practical workplace experience; rotation of staff to different jobs, exchange of experience, temporary posting for specialization; conferences, lectures, seminars, the main purpose of which is the training of employees; participation in knowledge

training / improvement circles, quality circles; self-training including electronic learning.

By *economic activity*, higher shares of enterprises offering CVT (total enterprises in each economic activity) were registered in the activities of: production and supply of electric and thermal energy, gas, hot water and air conditioning (51.4%), real estate transactions (48.6%), financial intermediation and insurance (44.8%), other service activities (41.6%) and information and communications (41.2%). The lowest share was found in hotels and restaurants (12.9%) (Figure 2).

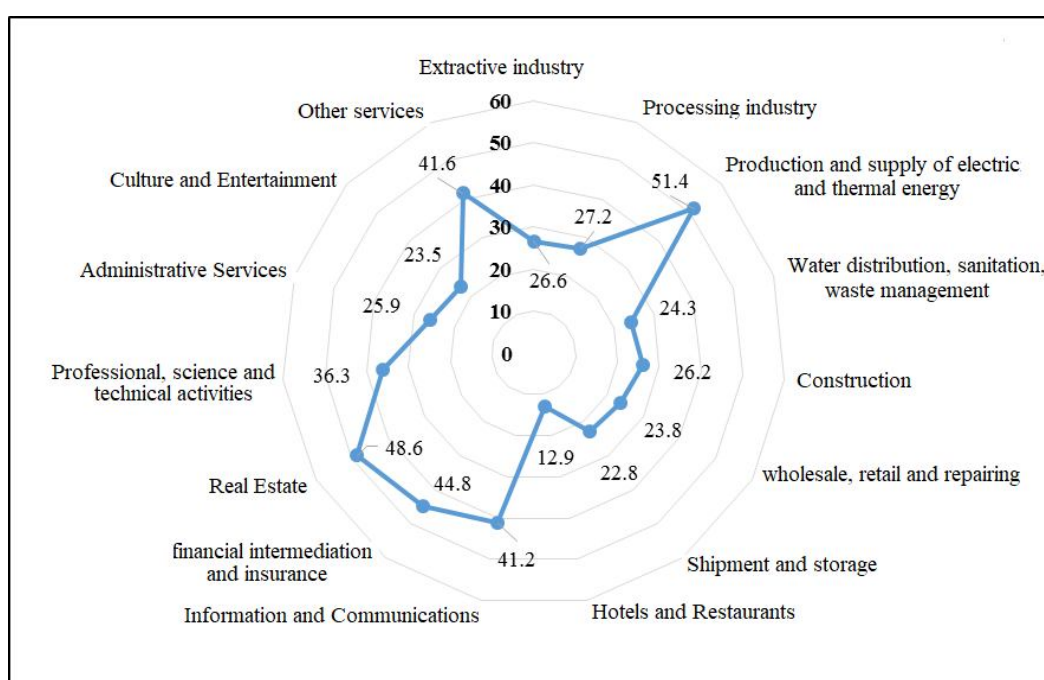


Figure 2. Share of enterprises after participation in CVT by economic activity in 2015.

Data source: TEMPO-online database, National Institute of Statistics, www.insse.ro

In terms of investment in vocational training, it was more pronounced at the level of large enterprises (67.4%), while the share of medium-sized enterprises that provided CVT to employees in 2015 was 38.0%, and those of small-sized only +21.7%.

Of the 13586 enterprises providing CVT, in the year 2015, 10748 organized employee training through courses, and, over two thirds of those opted for employee training through external courses.

By *economic activity*, 25.1% of the total enterprises that provided training of employees through internal and/or external courses belonged to

the manufacturing industry, 23.0% to trade (23.0%) and 12.8% to construction.

By *size classes*, the share of small enterprises in total enterprises offering CVT was 55.8%, while large enterprises accounted for only 11.0%.

The analysis of the distribution of enterprises according to the type of skills and competences to which CVT courses were oriented in 2015 highlights the fact that, regardless of the size class of the enterprise, most of them have focused mainly on the development of *technical and practical skills and competences or workplace-specific* (Figure 3). Also, a large number of enterprises focused on CVT courses for the development of team work skills (51.2% of enterprises) and problem solving (47.0% of enterprises), this being a characteristic among all size classes (Figure 3).

External CVT was provided by private training facilities, 81.4% of enterprises benefited from those services, equipment providers serving 54.9% of enterprises, while trade unions or professional unions provided external courses only for 8.9% of enterprises.

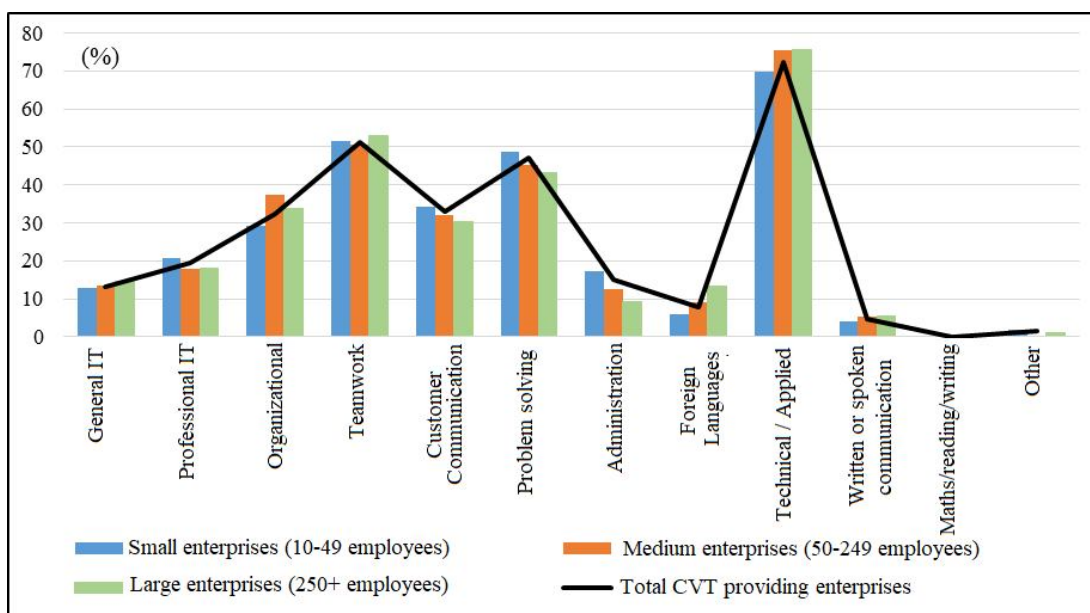


Figure 3. Distribution of enterprises according to the skills and competences to which the courses provided were oriented in 2015, by size class of enterprises

Data source: TEMPO-online database, National Institute of Statistics, www.insse.ro

The global participation rate for CVT courses in 2015 increased by 3.5 percentage points compared to 2010 and by 3.9 percentage points

compared to 2005, reaching 21.3%. In terms of the overall participation rate of women in CVT courses, this was slightly higher than that of men (21.5% for women vs. 21.1% for men) (Figure 4).

By size classes, the highest level of the global rate of participation in CVT courses (32.6%) was observed among large enterprises. Small enterprises recorded a global participation rate of 8.8% (Figure 4).

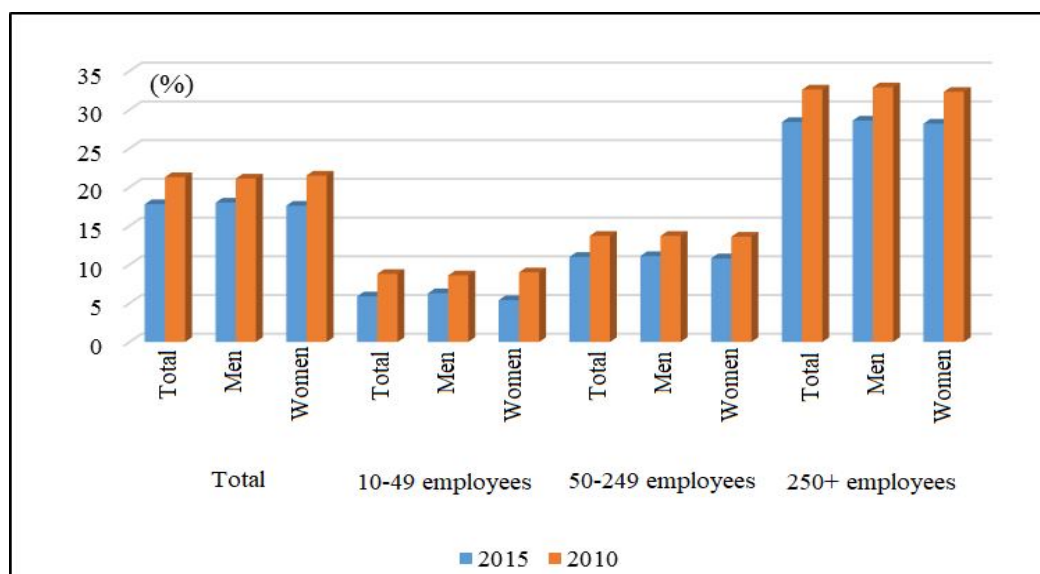


Figure 4. Total Participation Rate for Employees of All Enterprises in Continuing Vocational Training, by enterprise size and Gender, in 2015.

Data source: TEMPO-online database, National Institute of Statistics, www.insse.ro

By *economic activity*, the highest values of the global participation rate were registered in financial intermediation and insurance (52.9%); production and supply of electric and thermal energy, gas, hot water and air conditioning (45.8%); extractive industry (37.3%); respectively information and communications (32.2%). The lowest overall participation rates were found in other service activities (6.9%), hotels and restaurants (8.7%).

The rate of participation in CVT courses also registered slightly higher values in 2015 than in 2010 (42.3% in 2015 compared to 41.2% in 2010) The rate of participation of women in CVT courses was superior to that of men, both at the level of all enterprises and by size classes (Figure 5).

The highest level of participation in CVT courses (51.7%) was observed among small enterprises, with medium enterprises registering the lowest level of participation rate (36.5%).

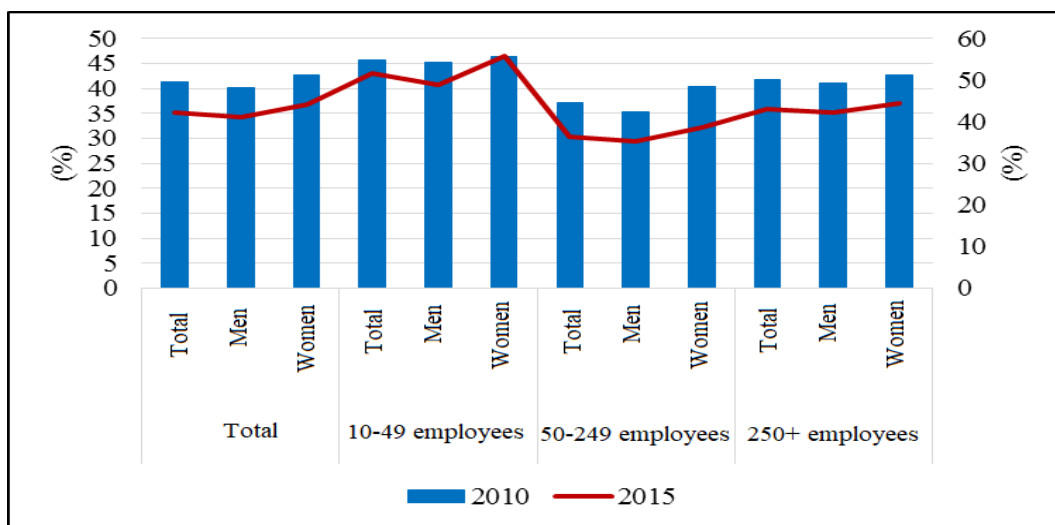


Figure 5. Participation rate for employees in enterprises that have offered continuous training courses by size class of enterprises and gender in 2015.

Data source: TEMPO-online database, National Institute of Statistics, www.insse.ro

The analysis of the rate of participation in CVT courses by age groups shows that the highest value was registered in the age group 25-54 years, regardless of the size of the enterprise (Figure 6), followed closely by that of young people under 25 years.

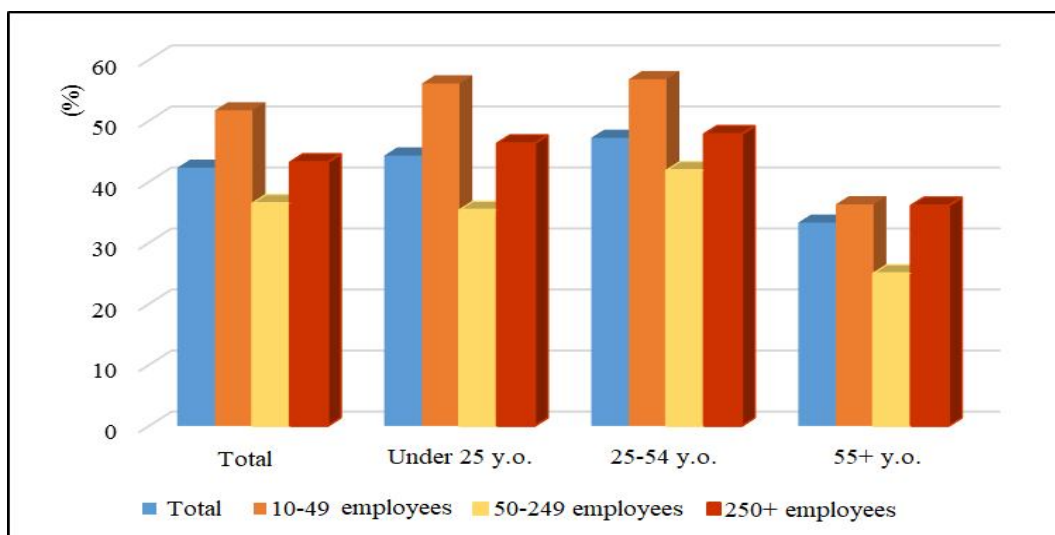


Figure 6. Participation rate for employees in enterprises that have offered continuous training courses by size classes of enterprises and age groups in 2015.

Data source: TEMPO-online database, National Institute of Statistics, www.insse.ro

The highest rates of participation were recorded in financial intermediation and insurance (67.0%); production and supply of electric and thermal energy, gas, hot water and air conditioning (49.3%); information and communications (49.2%); trade (47.3%); respectively extractive industry (46.5%). The lowest participation rates were recorded in construction (27.4%) and other service activities (29.7%).

In 2015, only 4.0% of enterprises offered *initial vocational training* (IVT), by economic activity, their choice of IVT varied according to their specificity but also their resources financial and material resources available. Most of the enterprises that provided IVT were those in the manufacturing and commercial sectors. The main reason companies offered IVT was "qualifying potential employees according to the needs of the enterprise". A specific feature of enterprises performing information and communication activities, namely production and supply of electric and thermal energy, gas, hot water and air conditioning, is that they usually recruit participants to IVT at a rate of 88.7 % and 80.0%, respectively.

4. Conclusions

The relevance of education and training in the labor market is still a challenge, but the new initiatives aim to improve the situation. The implementation of the dual education and training system, the recently adopted measures on the development and updating of professional qualifications and training standards aim to increase the quality and efficiency of the workforce.

In spite of these measures, efforts and investments are still insufficient to adapt the education and training offer continually or initially to the needs of the Romanian economy.

The statistical data highlights the low share of investments made by Romanian enterprises for continuous professional training in total labor costs.

Participation and access to adult learning remain very low, despite the urgent need to improve the qualification and retraining of the workforce. Participation of adults in learning was 1.1% in Romania in 2017, well below the EU average of 10.9%. Digital capabilities of the population are improving but continue to remain among the lowest in the European Union.

Labor skills are inadequate for the needs of a modern economy. As in many other countries, in Romania automation of production processes determines the demand for higher levels of cognitive abilities.


In terms of continuing vocational training, 26.7% of Romanian companies compared to 72.6% in the EU-28 provided training to their employees in 2015, with 42.3% of employees taking part in this activity.

In the same year, most businesses in Romania revealed that the main skills needed to develop their business were the technical, practical or job-specific skills; teamwork and problem-solving skills.

In line with the EU Council Recommendation on ways to improve qualifications, a series of changes to national legislation have been adopted in Romania, which took into account the need for vocational training for the low-skilled, including those with qualification level 1.

There are, however, a number of challenges that include, among other things, mobilizing / reducing the number of inactive adults; the limited supply of non-formal education and training; restrictive access to vocational training programs for the low-skilled; database shortage and coordination between stakeholders; quality assurance and monitoring, staff training; assessing competences on the basis of training programs that respond effectively to the ever changing needs of the economy.

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