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INCLUSION AND INTEGRATION OF VULNERABLE POPULATION GROUPS THROUGH LIFELONG LEARNING

Inclusion and integration of vulnerable population groups through lifelong learning is a vital strategy for fostering social equity and empowerment. Lifelong learning encompasses all learning activities undertaken throughout life, aiming to improve knowledge, skills, and competencies within a personal, civic, social, or employment-related perspective.

Contemporary economic and societal challenges determine the need to develop a new paradigm of education - that of lifelong learning (LLL) and the awareness that education does not end with obtaining a degree or a job, permanent learning is a prerequisite for adapting to the ever-changing professional, economic, social, informational and technological demands.

Lifelong learning is considered an essential feature of the information society. Population ageing; massive emigration of adults in search of better job opportunities; low employment rate; low level of competitiveness; shortcomings in the education system; lack of skills; early leaving of studies; functional illiteracy are just some of the challenging causes for supporting long-term economic growth, which led to the need to reformulate the concepts of educational systems.

Lifelong learning is all learning activities, intentionally undertaken on an ongoing basis with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences.

The central priority of the Lifelong Learning Program is to transform the European Union into the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth accompanied by a quantitative and qualitative increase in the number of jobs and greater social cohesion. [1]

Lifelong learning encompasses early childhood education, pre-university education, higher education, adult education and continuing vocational training.

The European Parliament and the Council of the EU recommend that Member States develop „the provision of key competences for all as part of their lifelong learning strategies”. [3]

Thus the key competences comprise three aspects of life [4]: personal fulfillment and lifelong development (cultural capital); active citizenship and inclusion (social capital); employment (human capital).

In this context, the inclusion of vulnerable groups through lifelong learning is a topic of great importance from the perspective of social and economic development.

Vulnerable groups of the population are segments of society that are in a more fragile position from a social, economic, or other point of view, and that are more exposed to various risks and difficulties [2]. These groups may include, but are not limited to: older people, children and youth, people with disabilities, ethnic and cultural minorities, people who are homeless or in poverty, women and children victims of domestic violence, refugees and asylum seekers, LGBTQ+ people, migrant or precarious workers, people with mental health problems, and other.

These vulnerable population groups face multiple barriers and challenges in accessing education and training: lack of physical access to educational institutions; discrimination and social prejudice; insufficient financial resources; lack of adequate support; lack of adapted policies and infrastructures.

Here's a detailed exploration of how lifelong learning can aid in the inclusion and integration of vulnerable groups depending on their specifics:

1. Enhancing employability and economic participation. Lifelong learning initiatives provide vulnerable groups with the skills and qualifications needed to enter or re-enter the workforce. Programs focused on vocational training, adult education, and skill development can help individuals gain employment and improve their economic situation.

2. Improving social integration and civic participation. Educational programs promote social cohesion by helping individuals from diverse backgrounds understand and respect each other. Lifelong learning fosters a sense of community and belonging, encouraging active citizenship.

3. Addressing health and well-being. Lifelong learning can contribute to better health outcomes by providing education on health-related topics. Vulnerable groups often face health disparities, and education can play a crucial role in mitigating these.

4. Promoting inclusivity and reducing discrimination. Educational initiatives designed with inclusivity in mind can help reduce discrimination and social exclusion. By creating learning environments that are accessible and welcoming to all, education systems can promote equal opportunities. (Inclusive Education Policies, Diversity Training: Educates about the importance of diversity and inclusion in both educational settings and workplaces)

5. Empowering women and marginalized groups. Lifelong learning provides marginalized groups, particularly women, with opportunities to gain education and training, which can lead to greater empowerment and independence. (Women's Literacy and Education Programs, Support for Marginalized Communities: Tailored programs for ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other marginalized groups), and other.

Key Strategies for Implementation:

- Multi-stakeholder Partnerships: Collaboration between governments, NGOs, educational institutions, and the private sector.
- Flexible Learning Pathways: Offer various entry points and flexible schedules to accommodate different life circumstances.
- Access to Technology: Ensure that digital learning tools and internet access are available to all, especially in remote or underserved areas.
- Policy Support: Advocate for policies that promote lifelong learning opportunities and remove barriers to education for vulnerable populations.

Inclusion and integration through lifelong learning is not just about providing education but also about creating a supportive environment where all individuals have the opportunity to thrive. By addressing the specific needs of vulnerable groups and implementing inclusive educational practices, societies can build more equitable and resilient communities.

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