



## Lifelong learning and digital inclusivity of older persons in Moldova

Mariana Buciuceanu-Vrabie, PhD, Associate researcher

National Institute for Economic Research, Chisinau, Ion Creanga 45 str., MD 2064,  
Moldova, [buciuceanuvrabie@gmail.com](mailto:buciuceanuvrabie@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** The article presents a tangential analysis of the demographic changes that are accelerating the aging of human resources, lifelong learning, and the development of digital skills in the context of active aging. Lifelong learning and digital literacy in late adulthood deserve more attention in the condition of various changes and our longer life. In the Republic of Moldova, the potential of the elderly is poorly tapped in terms of economic productivity, although among seniors there is a high level of education. At the same time, lifelong learning and digital literacy are not a priority at the individual level, although sectoral policies are adjusting to the principle of active aging and the achievement of nationalized SDGs Goals. The article highlights the current situation but also the barriers to lifelong learning and the development of ITC skills among the elderly population.

**Keywords:** older persons, lifelong learning, active ageing, digital literacy /inclusivity, SDGs Goals.

### Introduction

In the context of accentuated demographic processes, marked by a performance of humanity such as increasing the longevity of life, but also of rapidly developing technological innovations, the issue of lifelong learning and digital literacy becomes imperative for all countries. Technological change demands stronger and more continuous connections between education and employment. Technological advances are increasingly becoming entrenched in our lifestyles and are accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As in all of the countries in the European region, older people are a large and growing part of the population, and this is changing our societies in fundamental ways. Older persons wish to be active participants in their workplaces and communities, but in many cases,

opportunities and facilities are not available or accessible.

From the perspective of demographic changes, the Republic of Moldova has a rapid depopulation which, according to forecasts [11], will evolve in the next two decades. In the coming decades, demographic aging will increase as a result of the return of older adult migrants. It endangers national security and undermines opportunities for sustainable economic growth if the full potential of the older adult population is not realized and their integration into contemporary technologies is not facilitated. Thus, the growth of the generations aged 60 and over is projected – by 2040, their share will reach 32.3% (Table 1). By 2040, generations aged 50 and older will be about half of the total population. The median age will increase from 37.3 years (in 2020) to 47.3 years (in 2040).

Age groups (years)	2025	2040
50-59	13	18.9
60+	25.4	32.3
65+	18.2	24.4
70+	11.1	17.2
80+	2.3	5.7

**Table 1.** Projected population structure aged 50 and over, by age groups in 2025 and 2040, Moldova, % Source: [12]

**The perspective of aging and lifelong learning in Moldovan policies.** Moldova's commitments have evolved over the past two decades, with a mix of proactive and adaptive policy interventions in the field of population aging. For the alignment with the Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging (MIPAA) and the Regional Strategy for the Implementation of the MIPAA (RIS), the Government of the Republic of Moldova has developed The program for the integration of aging issues in policies, completed over the years (2007-2011; 2012-2016; 2018-2021) with an Action Plan in the field, and adapted the international methodology for calculating the Active Aging Index (AAI) [15] and elaborated two editions with the support of UNFPA Moldova in 2016 and 2020 [2].

The perspective of aging has been integrated into the cross-cutting areas whose national action plans partially target the elderly population: Moldova-2030 National Development Strategy; National Health Strategy 2030; National Employment Strategy, 2017-2021; National Strategy for the Development of the Youth Sector 2020; National program in the fields of research and innovation for the years 2020-2023 - strategic direction Migration, diaspora, and socio-demographic changes. Virtually all ten strategic dimensions (income level; living conditions; working conditions; level of education; health; social climate; use of time; quality of government; public safety and security; quality of the environment) and the priorities set out in Moldova 2030 Strategy emphasizes the vulnerability of older citizens.

Continuing education, including in the workplace, helps workers to adapt quickly to constantly changing

conditions. The *National Action Plan for the integration of active aging issues in policies (2018-2021)* includes the commitment to promote Lifelong Learning [6] and adapt the education system to be resilient to economic, social, and demographic changes. Based on good European practices, which aim to provide good education throughout life, mentoring, employment opportunities for the elderly, the *Concept of the Adult Competency Guarantee Program* has been developed [8]. However, in the context of the barriers imposed by the intensified socio-economic crisis and the onset of the COVID pandemic, testing of the program, including the initiation of training courses for the elderly, has been postponed. In 2019, the Concept of Adult Education has been developed but has not yet been subject to public consultation. The benefits of adult education are not fully realized, especially for the elderly, although various actions are planned in the field of education for the elderly, particularly at the local level, they are not being implemented.

In national studies, topics related to lifelong learning are poorly analyzed, being highlighted recently with the nationalization of the SDG goals and the adjustment of the 2030 Agenda [1].

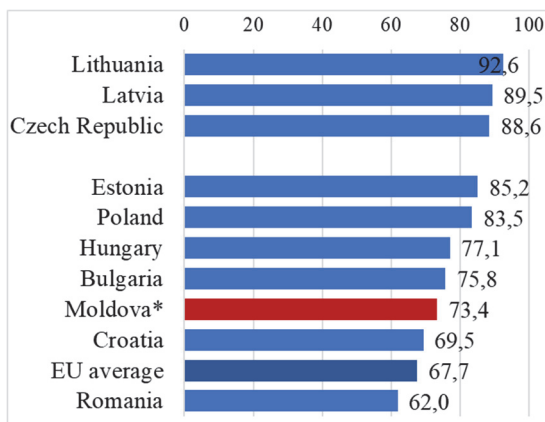
**Lifelong learning and digital literacy among older adults.** Speaking about the situation of the old population in the Republic of Moldova based on estimations of the Active Ageing Index – less than one-third of the total potential of the population aged 55+ can participate in the economy and society and over 70% of this potential is unused, with low chances to age actively and contribute to the economy through paid activities (Table 2). So, in 2020, the value of the Index estimated for Moldova was 28.6 points out of 100 (maximum value), being the lowest compared to the position of the EU countries.

	Total	Male	Female
<b>Moldova AAI*</b>	28.6	30.5	27.1
<b>EU average AAI</b>	36.8	38.5	35.3

**Table 2.** Projected population structure aged 50 and over, by age groups in 2025 and 2040, Source: \*[2]; [4]

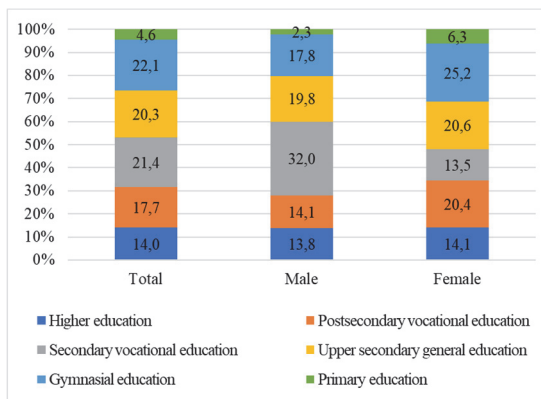
The active ageing framework [16] acknowledges that lifelong learning is an important factor that facilitates participation, health, and security, as people grow older. At the same time, lifelong learning is an important component in facilitating longer working lives as an important policy objective for mitigating fiscal pressures from population ageing, notably increasing pension and healthcare expenditures. In the Republic of Moldova, to prolonging the economic activity of the population that has reached retirement and early retirement age is a problem. Statistically, only 1/4 of the population aged 55+, is integrated into the labor market. At the same time, this category of the population has a relatively high level of education (Figure 1). Three out of four have at least general secondary education. To mention that the EU average of this indicator is lower – 67.7%, however, Moldova is overtaken by some countries in the region. But the general situation on the labour market in the Republic of Moldova, where the employment rate for economically active age (15-64 years) stays low (45.7% compared with 67.6% – EU average) with low opportunities for integration, impacts the current reality for older population.

It should be noted that the relatively high level of education among the older adults is the result of the educational program applied until the collapse of the Soviet Union, namely the compulsory general secondary education and the encouragement of vocational education.



**Figure 1.** Educational attainment (at list general secondary\vocational) among people aged 55+, the year 2020, Source:[9]; [4]

So, the distribution of people aged 55 and over by the level of education attests that over 14% of them have higher education, almost 18% postsecondary vocational education, and every fifth secondary vocational education.

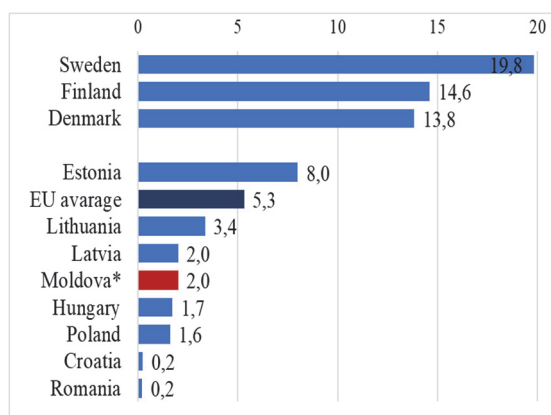


**Figure 2.** Distribution of people aged 55 and over, by the level of education and gender, Moldova, 2020, Source: [9]

Differentiated by gender, it is seen that women have a higher level of education and training, however, gender inequality in the labor market is evident - the employment rate of women aged 55+, is only 18.5%, while among men it is over 30%.

Recently, there has been a slight increase in the share

of the Moldavian elderly population involved in lifelong learning activities. In 2020 it was 2% for the population aged 55 and over, while in 2016, the indicator estimated only 0.3%. In a comparative aspect, the lifelong learning rate among the older adult population in EU countries is 5.3%. The Northern European countries are the most advanced in the field, where between 14%-20% of persons aged 55+, are involved in educational activities.



**Figure 3.** Lifelong learning among the population aged 55 and over, the year 2020, Source: [9]; [4]

In Moldova, the adult population poorly understands both the concept of lifelong learning and the process itself. In the general perception, lifelong learning is limited to professional development courses among the employed population. According to studies [5], only 13.2% of the employed population and 8.4% of the inactive population would be interested to benefit from new opportunities for learning and skills development. Among the population, aged 60+, motivated for new formal studies are about 5% and for informal studies over 2%. The main barriers highlighted by seniors (aged 60+) to continue to learn are *health or age* (30.4%) and *training costs* (18.5%). At the moment, in promoting lifelong learning for older adults, the main implication has the civil society. Starting with 2020, there are developed five Centers of Education for the elderly. The main activity of centers is focused on: training in the use of modern

information technologies; information activities on the rights of the elderly; craft workshops; seminars on employment and self-employment opportunities for older people. At the local level, about 150 territorial public libraries offer modern services such as: "50+", "Club for seniors", "Aging healthy" etc. [3; 10].

As we are living longer, our world is becoming increasingly digital. Lifelong learning helps to maintain the equilibrium between life and technology driven change in the world. Digital competence is becoming a necessity in order to succeed in everyday tasks. According to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) in the last 15 years, the connection to the Internet has quadrupled, in 2021 already 2/3 of the world's population has been Internet users [17].

	2016	2020
Poland	80	90
Hungary	79	88
Romania	72	86
Azerbaijan	77.2	84.8
Georgia	70.1	83.8
Belarus	66.7	80.3
Ukraine	54.0	79.2
Bulgaria	64	79
<b>Moldova*</b>	<b>51.3</b>	<b>64.6</b>
Armenia	61.2	
<i>CIS</i>		76.4
<i>Europe</i>		85
<i>EU-27</i>	84	91

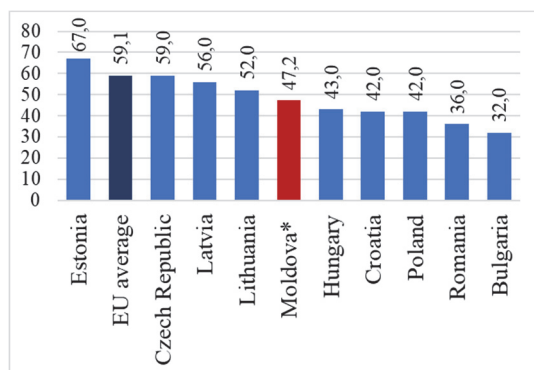
**Table 3.** Percentage of households having internet access at home, in 2016 and 2020; Source: [7]; [9]

Compared to the countries in the region, Moldova has the lowest internet connection rate of households - about 65% in 2020 (Table 3). The average for CIS member countries is 76.4%, and for EU countries - 91%. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) can enable healthy and active ageing by facilitating access to information, health and healthcare, socio-economic participation, and other

factors that promote full engagement and participation as we age.

In the last five years, strengthening ICT skills among older adults was the most obvious progress in achieving the nationalized SDGs reflected in the composite indicators of active aging.

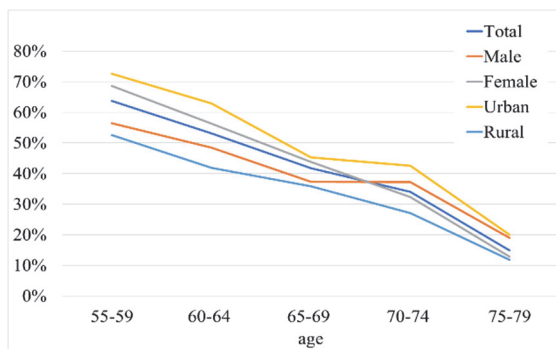
In Moldova, the share of people aged 55-74 who use the Internet at least once a week is about 47.2%, is lower compared to EU countries - 57.5%, but higher than some countries in the region such as Hungary, Poland, Romania, etc. (Figure 4). To mention, in the last five years, strengthening ICT skills among older adults was the most obvious progress in achieving the nationalized SDGs reflected in the composite indicators of active aging.



**Figure 4.** Share of ICT users at least once a week among population aged 55-74 years, 2020, Source: [7]; [13].

The Generation and Gender study, conducted in Moldova in 2020, shows that the share of ICT users decreases with age [13]. If at the age of 55-59, about 2/3 use the internet weekly, at 75-79 years - every seventh.

There is a significant discrepancy in areas of residence. Older adults from villages use ICT less often than those in the cities. Gender differences are more pronounced up to the age of 65-69, among women the share of ICT users is higher compared to men, but in older ages the situation reverses.



**Figure 5.** Share of ICT older adult users by age, gender and area of residence, 2020, Moldova, Source: [13].

Through the qualitative study [3] we can see that the digital literacy of the population in old age is poor and does not focus on complex digital skills:

- most have only basic knowledge, but they don't know how to do a banking operation, how to pay online, or to buy online, etc.
- using the internet and available gadgets is considered sufficient if they can see their adult children and grandchildren through a social media platform.
- older people in cities are more open to training than those from rural are;
- at the same time, there are no Wi-Fi hotspots in many villages, so there are few opportunities to use IT;
- a significant discrepancy in the access to information of the elderly by the area of residence is evident. Only a few people know about the existence of different projects, laws, strategies that support old people, social assistance services, etc.

In the context of the Covid pandemic, the opportunities and reduced digital skills of the elderly population have insufficiently compensated for the interrupted social contacts for the elderly, thus leading to increased loneliness and psychological stress among them.

### Conclusions

Lifelong learning, along with formal education and digital literacy, is an important factor that facilitates participation, health, and security as people grow older. Recent studies highlight the presence of the link between later-life learning and psychological wellbeing and suggest that continued engagement may

help older learners sustain wellbeing over the long term. Preparation for old age should begin much earlier, with the transition to adulthood.

Although the share of people involved in lifelong learning activities is increasing compared to 2016, lifelong learning is still a poorly developed area and still little promoted in the Republic of Moldova. In Moldova, the main persistent barriers for Lifelong Learning for older adults are:

Underdevelopment of the labor market in the Republic of Moldova, insufficiency/lack of jobs, especially in rural areas is a major barrier to prolonging the economic activity of the population in the retirement age and preventing early retirement.

Incomplete regulatory framework for the organization of adult and senior education, which would ensure the conditions for continuing education, including in the workplace for rapid adaptation to ever-changing technologies

The benefits of adult education are not fully realized by the adult population, especially by the older population.

Insufficient access for adults to education, especially informal education.

Work and family time balance and responsibilities.

The cost of formal/nonformal studies

The passivity of the local authorities in the implementation of the activities related to the lifelong learning of the adult population.

Although the aging of the population is a priority area for the government and raising the standard of living is on its agenda, it is far behind. Older people face multiple problems in their daily lives, with reduced opportunities for involvement in social life, participation in the labor market, reduced access to basic services, which undermines the right of this category of population to a decent and independent life. Promoting the learning of older adults in the Republic of Moldova is a complex process, which involves changes in perception and attitude; restructuring in the education system; extension of the attributions of the relevant ministry; reconceptualizing the process of professional training of teachers and the mission of the educational institution; creating an

attractive and accessible educational offer for older adults. This complex change requires the responsibility of the education system to take responsibility and integrate into structures and services for the learning of older (retired) adults.

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