

ROMANIAN EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEM IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Today we are living in the knowledge - based society. This type of society requires a reconsideration of the importance and the role of human capital in the society and above all, the role of education and training system. Investing in education and training means to promote growth, given that in the new knowledge-based economy the basic factor of wealth is firstly, knowledge acquisition and use and not material factors of production.

Starting from these considerations, this paper aim is to highlight the influence of the education and training system in increase competitiveness at organizational, national, regional and international level. Firstly, the paper presents some aspects regarding the evolution of education and training concept over time and also the main indicators of education and training system in Romania, in the context of European Union strategic framework. Secondly, the paper formulates several conclusions and recommendations regarding the development of education and training system in Romania, in accordance with European requirements.

Key words: *knowledge-based society, education and training, lifelong learning, European Union.*

JEL classification: M53; O15; J24;

INTRODUCTION

Today, the whole world is going through a period of transformation, of changes. Long-term challenges, such as globalization, pressure on resources, ageing etc. have intensified. To all these adds economic crises that causes major imbalances in global and European economy. The economic downturn puts these long-term challenges even more into the spotlight. Public and private budgets are under strong pressure, existing jobs are disappearing, and new ones often require different and higher level skills. Education and training systems should therefore become much more open and relevant to the needs of citizens, and to those of the labour market and society at large.

In the knowledge-based society human capital becomes a strategic asset and the investment in such assets is critical to economic and social development. It is recognized as the fundamental factor of overall progress, and experts agree that long-term investment in human capital has strong propagation and training effects at individual, organizational, national, regional and international level. Although the value or cost of human capital includes several components, the essential active component is **education and training**.

In current conditions, the education, through its functions, is an important pillar of economic and social development, as far as meeting the requirements of society and to the extent that is capitalized by using the skills and qualifications acquired through learning. For this reason, education and training is enjoying a major concern and a priority position in EU programs, particularly in developed countries, in close relation to

economic, demographic, social and political processes. Education and training are central to the Lisbon agenda for growth and jobs and a key element for its follow-up with the 2020 perspective. Creating a well-functioning “knowledge triangle” of education, research and innovation and helping all citizens to be better skilled are crucial for growth and jobs, as well as for equity and social inclusion.

Lifelong education and training is one of the major targets of the EU and this actually came as a result of the study and understanding of current economic and social environment and the challenges it posed.

Starting from these considerations the paper presents some aspects regarding the evolution of education and training concept over time and also a comparative analysis of education and training system in Romania, in the context of European Union strategic framework. In the final of the paper I formulated several conclusions and recommendations regarding the development of education and training system in Romania, in accordance with European requirements.

EVOLUTION OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING CONCEPT

Education and training is now a global concept under which they are meeting all aspects of education and training in the formal, non-formal and informal system.

The right to education is provided in the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**. Over time, content and meaning of this law have quality evolved, *from initial education, to the lifelong education and training*, as a result of economic, social, cultural transformation, and as a result of transition to the knowledge-based society.

During the period **1940-1960, the emphasis is on initial education**, respectively, the acquisition of basic knowledge for the entire population of school age. The major objective of that period is the eradication of illiteracy in the world. Although there have been significant expenditure in this respect, the results were below expectations.

During the period **1960-1970, the focus has shifted from initial education to basic education (preschool and primary education)** considered fundamental and binding. This is the starting point of the ongoing process of lifelong education. Therefore, education cannot be interpreted only as a means of tuition, but it is the basic factor of fundamental and lifelong learning, beyond the training in specialized institutions through training courses or work in the workplace, etc.

Since the '70s, the focus is, more and more, on lifelong education and training. If at first the initial education and continuous professional training were considered complementary concepts, those concepts were then integrated into a single concept that covers all aspects of education.

UNESCO was the major force in promoting global discussions of lifelong learning, strongly promoting the idea that education should occur universally and across the life span, and should not merely be formal education for a “privileged few” [8].

Initially, in the late 1960s and in the French context the term used was ‘éducation permanente’ and it was in 1965 when UNESCO International Committee for the Advancement of Adult Education started using the term “**lifelong education**” to describe its initial concept of learning throughout life. According to Faure Report “*continuous education and training is not only a coherent system, but is the principle that underlies the organization of the entire global system of education and training and, consequently, the development of each of its parts.*” [15]

The new concept of lifelong education and training appeared as a response, as an alternative to the major problems facing humanity, as a result of globalization, under new requirements imposed by knowledge-based society and knowledge-based economy.

This concept was reconsidered at each stage of work on European Employment Strategy (EES 1997), as evidenced by the debates which took place in the European Council meetings in order to establish the strategy to be followed every year in this respect: the Lisbon European Council, March 2000, European Council in Santa Maria de Feira, June 2000, the European Commission Memorandum of Lifelong Learning, October 2000 and subsequent European Councils (Stockholm - 2001, Barcelona - 2002 Brussels - 2003, 2004, 2005).

When European Employment Strategy was launched, lifelong education and training was conceived as *"all useful learning activity, permanent aimed at improving knowledge, skills and competence."* [1]

This way of defining the concept, has created controversy in the debate to cast European strategy for education and training, considering that lifelong learning activities would have a restrictive, controversy finally led to a universally accepted definition: *"lifelong education and training includes all acquired learning activities throughout life in order to improve knowledge, skills and competencies in terms of a person, environment or civic employment prospects."* [3]

According to this definition, the concept of lifelong education and training includes all forms of learning and training, operated by the person during its existence, from early childhood to retirement, and in different learning environments, and it comprises: *formal learning* (in schools, training institutions, universities), *non-formal learning* (like structured on-the-job training), and *informal learning* (skills learned from family members or people in the community).

As stated in the European Commission Lifelong Memorandum, *"lifelong learning ... must become the guiding principle of education and participation in continuous learning process. (...) Learning is the common umbrella under which all classes should be aggregated to learning and instruction. The implementation of lifelong learning requires that all work together effectively - both as individuals and as entrepreneurs."* [2]

The content and the meaning of the concept of lifelong education and training, with its specific issues, vary depending on the existing diversity of national policy and markets policy at a time (supply and demand for education and training), and according to other aspects derived from national characteristics and priorities. Long-term goal of these systems is to contribute to full expression of individual personality, by acquiring a high quality training, by highlighting their traits and talents, by stimulating their development.

INDICATORS OF ROMANIAN EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEM IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

Policy cooperation at European level in the areas of education and training has, since 2002, provided valuable support to countries' educational reforms and has contributed to learner and practitioner mobility across Europe. Building on this approach, and fully respecting Member States' responsibility for their education systems, the European Council endorsed in May 2009, a Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training ("ET 2020"). [4] The main strategic objectives of ET 2020 are:

1. Early leavers from education and training: By 2020, the share of early leavers from education and training should be less than 10 %;

2. Tertiary level attainment: By 2020, the share of 30-34 year olds with tertiary educational attainment should be at least 40 %;

3. Adult participation in lifelong learning: By 2020, an average of at least 15 % of adults should participate in lifelong learning;

4. Low achievers in basic skills: By 2020, the share of low-achieving 15-years olds in reading, mathematics and science should be less than 15 %;

5. Early childhood education: By 2020, at least 95 % of children between 4 years old and the age for starting compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education.

Since then, the economic and political context has changed, creating new uncertainties and constraints. The European Union had to take further action to stem the worst financial and economic crisis in its history and, in response, has agreed on a strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, “**Europe 2020**” [5]. Education and training play a crucial role in this strategy, in particular within the Integrated Guidelines, Member State National Reform Programmes and the Country-specific Recommendations (CSR) issued to guide Member State reforms.

ET 2020 can make a major contribution to achieving Europe 2020’s objectives. An assessment of progress made in achieving ET 2020 objectives shows the following results for EU and for Romania:

1. Early leavers from education and training

In 2010, despite some progress, **the rate of ESL** still averaged 14,1 % across the European Union, with considerable differences between countries (figure 1).

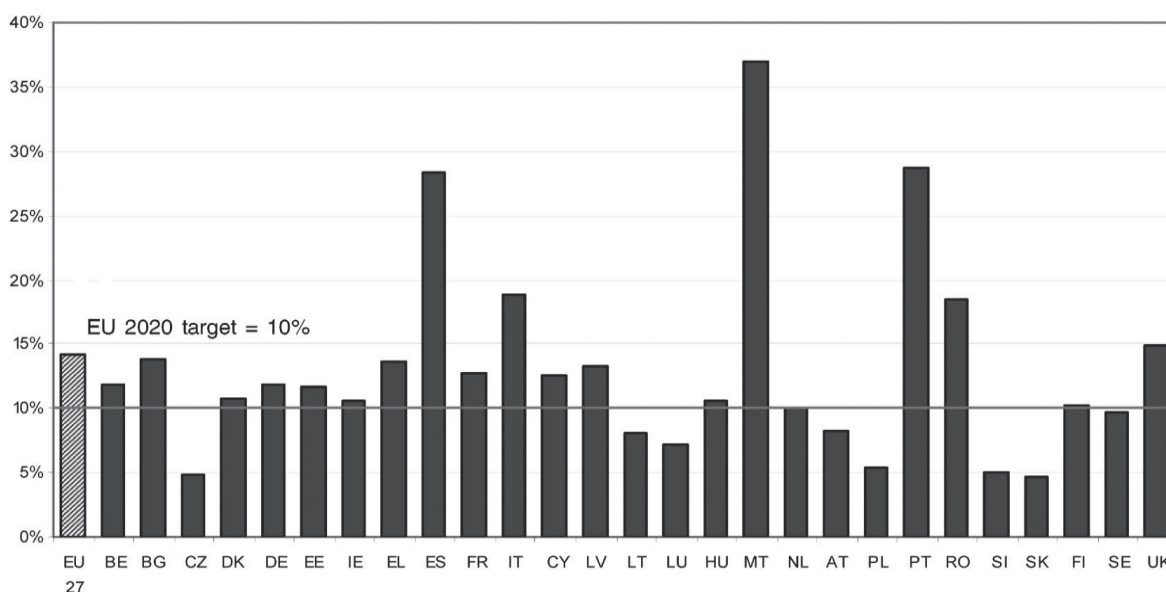


Figure 1. Early School Leaving (2010 rates).

Source: EUROSTAT (2012) [7]

As the figure 1 shows, the countries that are reached the target or are close to the target are: CZ, LT, LU, AT, PL, SI, SK, SE, DK, IE, HU, NL, FI.

In **Romania**, the rate of ESL was 18.4% in 2010, being the fifth higher rate, above the EU average and our country is one of the few Member States where early school leaving has increased during the last three years. The main cause of early school leaving is poverty, and its incidence is significantly higher in rural areas, where the barriers to access to upper secondary education are biggest, and among the Romani population.

Bringing the ESL rate down below 10 % is a difficult challenge. The 2011 Council Recommendation on policies to reduce ESL calls on Member States to implement coherent, comprehensive and evidence-based strategies. All Member States should implement targeted measures to reach young people at risk of dropping out. **Prevention and early intervention** are key to tackling the problem; however, Member States devote too little attention to prevention. There should be stronger focus on

preventive and early intervention measures in the contexts of teacher education, continuing professional development and quality early childhood education and care.

2. Tertiary or equivalent education attainment

In 2010, the average level of tertiary or equivalent education attainment of this age group was 33,6 %. Attainment rates vary considerably across countries (figure 2).

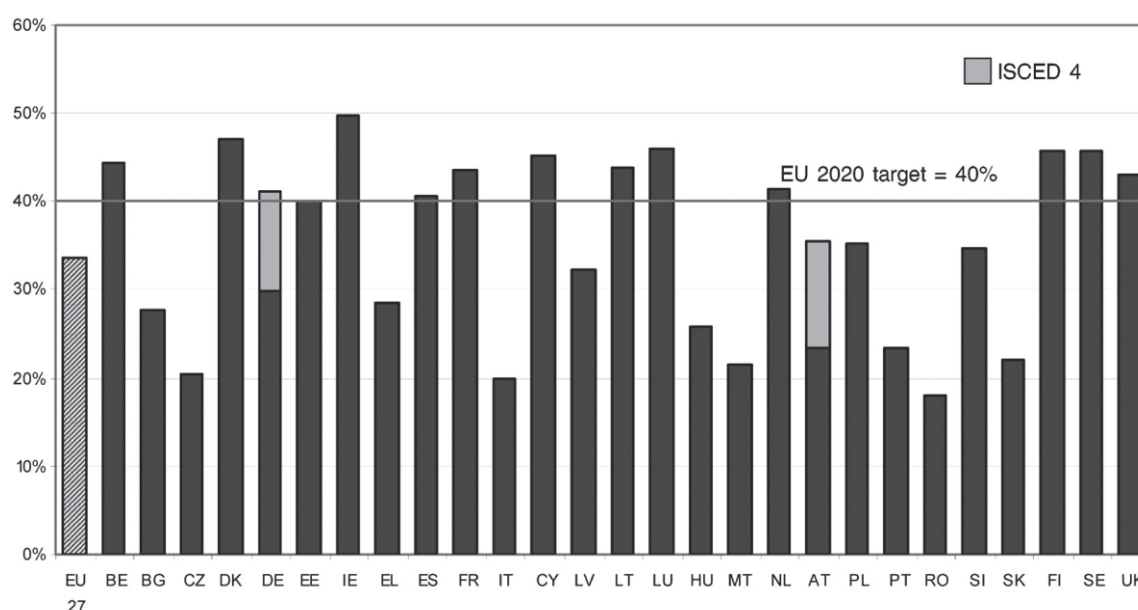


Figure 2. Tertiary or equivalent education attainment (2010 levels)

Source: EUROSTAT (2012) [7]

In **Romania** the average level of tertiary or equivalent education attainment of this age group was 18.1% in 2010, more under European level (33.6%). Our country is the worst performer on this indicator, occupying, unfortunately, last place in EU-27.

Participation in tertiary education by students from urban areas is double the rate for rural areas. Attracting more students from lower-income families, particularly from rural areas remains a big challenge.

Reforms should address the challenge of increasing the number of graduates, while maintaining and enhancing the quality and relevance of education and research.

3. Lifelong learning strategies

For the majority of Europeans, lifelong learning (LLL) is not a reality. While participation in education and training during the early years of life has increased, recent data on the number of adults aged 25-64 participating in LLL show a slight downwards trend. The current level of 9,1 % (2010) is far below the ET 2020 benchmark of 15 % to be reached by 2020 (figure 3).

Figure 3 shows that **Romania** and Bulgaria are still the worst performers on this indicator, while Greece and Croatia have improved their positions by 1, and respectively 2 percentage points. The best performers from EU 27 in this context are still Denmark (32.8%), Sweden (24.5%), Finland (23%), and UK (19.4%).

In Romania, despite all the efforts, adults' participation rate in education and training decreased since 2008. This weak performance is especially serious given the crisis. Unemployed young people and low-skilled adults need to be able to rely on education and training to give them a better chance in the labour market. Not investing in their competences weakens their chances to get back into employment and limits Europe's potential to create growth and jobs.

4. Low achievers in basic skills

Recently, some progress has been made in EU-27 on the European benchmarks of reducing the share of **low-achievers in basic skills** (20 % in 2009 vs. a benchmark of less than 15 % by 2020).

In **Romania**, the indicators for 2010 are: reading 40.4% vs. 20% EU average, mathematics 47% vs. 22.2% EU average, science 46.9 vs. 17.7% EU average. A progress is observed in all the three indicators, compared to year 2000. [6]

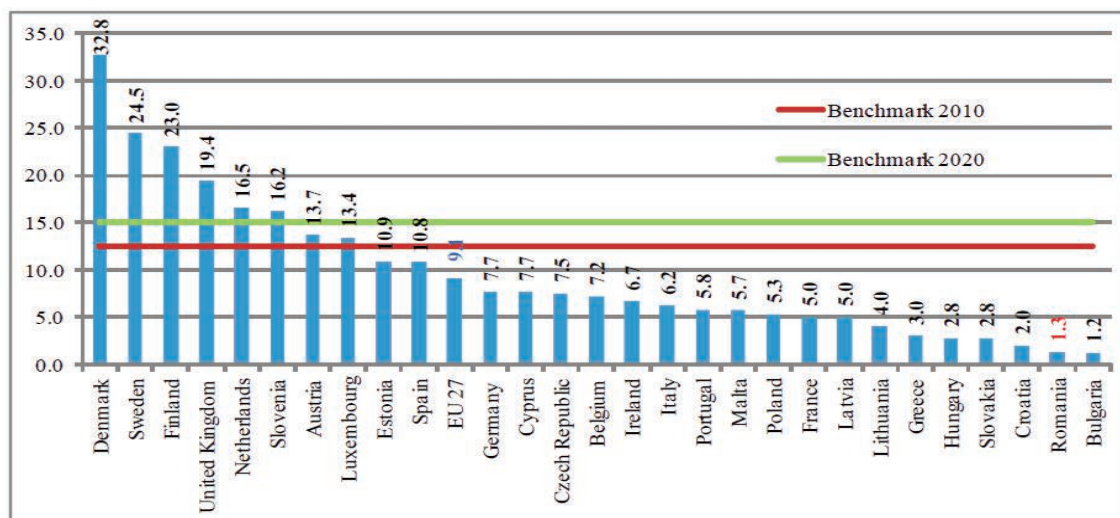


Figure 3. Participation in education and training of adults aged 25-64 (2010 rates).
Source: EUROSTAT (2012) [7]

5. Also, some progress has been made on the European benchmarks in increasing **participation in early childhood education** (92 % in 2009 vs. a benchmark of 95 % by 2020); however, efforts on both issues need to continue.

In **Romania**, the rate of participation in early childhood education was 82.3% in 2010, much better than 67.6% in 2000. [6]

These objectives can only be achieved by sustained long term effort. In the last years there has been a general improvement in education and training performance in the EU. However, the majority of the benchmarks set for 2020 will not be reached in time, while in the case of the vital benchmark on literacy performance is in fact deteriorating. Attaining these benchmarks will require more effective national initiatives. The economic downturn, combined with the demographic challenge, serves to underline the urgency of reforming while continuing to invest in education and training systems to meet core economic and social challenges.

ROMANIAN STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Following the integration of Romania into the European Union, Romania's strategic objective is to ensure convergence with European Union member states, in terms of individual welfare of its citizens and large society.

Human capital development is one of the major directions of future development of Romania, in order to ensure socio-economic development of European type. Convergence with the EU can only be ensured in the long term and requires the development of two major categories of infrastructure, the physical infrastructure and, respectively, *human infrastructure*. Investment in human capital (through education, training, lifelong learning, strengthening the link research - development - innovation, effective public health policies, social policies and modern occupational) ensure

sustainability of economic growth, since an educated and healthy population is efficient and adaptable to the EU and globally.

The **National Reform Program 2011-2013** [12] addressed the issues of continuous professional education, the quality of education and the acquisition of new competences by employees, as factors to enhance competitiveness in the knowledge economy. It is acknowledged that in terms of continuous professional education, Romania registers one of the lowest participation rates for the age group 25-64. This low participation rate is determined by the fragmentation of the offer for continuous professional education, limited geographic coverage of the Romanian territory with suppliers of continuous professional education, reduced interest of the entrepreneurs and companies to finance the development of the human resources (Romanian Government, 2010). Taking into account the significant differences between Romanian and EU values for basic indicators of performance in education and training area, the document aims to continue the priorities sets in the previous National Reform Program (NRP 2007-2010): promoting job creation, promoting the adaptability of businesses and employees to social and economic changes, fighting illegal/undeclared employment; improving the access to the labour market for vulnerable groups; promoting competitiveness in the labour market, through a better correlation between the education and training system and the labour market demands. The NRP mentions programmes and/or projects to stimulate continuing vocational training for employees and to involve social partners in order to correlate the education and training systems with trends on the labour markets.

Consistent with the programmatic documents of the European Union, human capital development in Romania will be held on four main areas, listed in the **Post-Accession Strategy of Romania, 2007-2013**, [10] as follows:

1. **lifelong education and training;**
2. research, development and innovation with significant impact on the economy;
3. increasing labour flexibility and security (flexicurity), improving labour market access by minimizing bureaucratic constraints, by the elimination of discrimination (based on sex, age, origin, etc..), social inclusion, social protection (social insurance and pensions);
4. improving public health.

In the context of ensuring convergence with EU member states, a particularly important role is the **National Development Plan 2007-2013 (NDP)** as an instrument to accelerate the process of Romania's economic and social convergence with the EU. Its main goal is to just reduce swift socio-economic disparities between Romania and EU member states. [9]

Priority number four in the NDP 2007-2013 is: *"human resources development, employment, social inclusion and strengthening administrative capacity."* [9] The overall objective of this national priority is the development of human capital and increases its competitiveness on the labour market by ensuring equal opportunities for **lifelong learning** and by developing a modern labour market, flexible and inclusive.

In the context of the NDP 2007-2013 was developed **Human Resources Development Sectoral Operational Program 2007-2013** [11], which sets the priority axes and key areas of intervention of the Romanian human resources. This program is an important tool in supporting economic development and structural changes, taking into account investments in human capital that will complement and give long-term sustainability of productivity growth.

Human Resources Development Operational Programme 2007-2013 supports the Lisbon Strategy in terms of achieving the objectives of full employment. In this respect, the programme aims to reintegrate inactive population in the labour market

(long-term unemployed). Also, it takes into account the hidden unemployment in rural areas and the vulnerable groups. Of these groups, the main target group is the Gypsy population to be attracted into the labour market. For all these groups and also for the active population is mandatory lifelong education and training, to acquire human capital performance in the coming years.

The development of the lifelong learning system in Romania is supported by **the project of the Integrated Strategy for Human Resource Development from the Perspective of Lifelong Learning 2009-2020** wants to be a manifestation of Romania's efforts to align with Revised Lisbon Strategy, to contribute to its implementation, to compatibilize Community objectives of the European Employment Strategy (EES) and of Cohesion Policy with the national strategic. [14]

The Law of Education no. 1/2011 [13] is the first law to bring in line the Romanian education and training system in a European approach. The Law dedicates the last title (Title V) to Lifelong learning. A number of measures planned in the new Education Law, regarding early school leaving such as: postponing tracking, lengthening lower secondary education and introducing after-school programmes. Other measures, such as the introduction of per-capita financing, the planned decentralization of pre-university education and the consolidation of the school network, would need to be managed carefully.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ROMANIAN EDUCATION AND TRAINING SYSTEM

In the context of the economic crisis, a sustainable way to past its effects is the investment in education and training to increase the adaptability of the labour force and of the companies.

Human resource development, sustainable integration into the labour market are possible, while promoting lifelong learning as a principle and framework for restructuring and development of education and training, to ensure consistency between the key skills and formal, non formal and informal learning.

As the European reports show [6], main policy challenge for Romania is to improve the quality of the education and training system. The recent rise in early school leaving rates combined with poor basic skills are at the root of skill mismatches on the labour market. The ambitious education reform agenda implemented via the new Education Law includes relevant reforms, such as improving the quality of early childhood education and care, and postponing early tracking, but it should be reinforced by streamlining and broadening programmes for student support. Current efforts to better align higher education offer to labour market needs should be sustained, and additional reforms are necessary for broadening access to higher education. A broader offer of tuition-free places for disadvantaged students or study loan programmes could open access for low income students.

Finally, increasing adult participation in lifelong learning is crucial, particularly for the low-skilled. This requires *additional fiscal and financial incentives*. Not only the long-term competitiveness but also the economic recovery risks otherwise to be constrained by the inadequate skills levels of the work force.

In the context of European strategic framework other measures are required: the adoption of a Lifelong Learning Strategy, continuing progress towards the national qualifications framework, the revision of the occupations classification and the planned revision of the legislative framework in the sector of adult education. All these measures should be accompanied by programmes stimulating participation in lifelong learning.

The new knowledge-based society offers great potential for reducing social exclusion and cohesion, both by creating conditions for increasing economic welfare

(the economic growth and employment) and by opening new avenues of participation in social life. All these benefits carry a certain risk: the distance created between those with access to new knowledge and those who are excluded, due to inadequate educational and training system. Removing this risk can be made through efforts to improve the competencies, abilities and skills, tackling unemployment and creating jobs.

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