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The Development of Adult Learning Strategies in South Eastern European Countries.

“Learning does not stop when you finish school or university. We live in a rapidly changing world in the information age and our workforce must make sure it has the general skills required by our demanding globalised environment. Also, as our society ages, it is more important than ever before that adults continue to learn new skills or refresh old knowledge throughout their lives.”(Ján Figel, European Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Multilingualism).

The necessity of unremitting education is generally well understood and some people nowadays would query the importance for adults to persistently update their skills in line with needs of labor market, and for governments and social partners to provide an environment that supports skills acquisition and updating. Nevertheless, it is clear when we consider data from the European Union Member States that a great deal of lifelong education takes place in the framework of the context of employment: it can be given, financed and outsourced by employers, making it strictly relevant to the needs of the workplace. We realize that access to such learning possibilities is not evenly spread across the working population. They are more likely to appear in bigger companies and to be targeted at the better educated staff in middle-ranking positions. What can this imply for lifelong learning in the countries of South Eastern Europe? These countries suffer from high unemployment and low economic activity rates, so very big amount of the active people are immediately barred from workplace education. Hence, those who are working are most likely to be acting so in the informal sector or in small or micro-enterprises. The aim of the investigation of lifelong learning is to look at how its strategies can be developed in such an environment, using recent data collected from South Eastern Europe, and to provide guidance to those countries and others operating in a similar context. It underlines the necessity for more attention to be paid to workplace learning and to exploit the potential of enterprises as providers of unremitting learning.

The basic problems that are barriers to developing adult education in the region and the principles on which comprehensive adult learning strategies are to be built should be taken into account. Moreover, the importance of creating a positive environment that encourages collective effort in the countries with a view to developing and funding adult learning, increasing participation across the board, and involving vulnerable people, should also be carefully investigated. They consider strength and weaknesses in the adult unremitting learning infrastructure and make certain suggestions as to how these might be addressed over the recent period of time.

The quality of human and social capital is a basic determinant of wealth creation, future economic growth and social progress in any wealth creation and social progress in any country. If we take no action to raise overall skill levels in the transition countries and areas in question, this is probably to be a key constraint on productivity and competitiveness, but also on efforts to reduce poverty. While it is self-evident that improving skills across the board will not tackle chronic unemployment or reverse economic decline on its own, investment in people's skills is a central part of integrated measures to solve these problems. The overall objectives of an adult education strategy are to improve the competitiveness of the economy and the labor force by enhancing the general skill level of the workforce and making people more adaptable and able to take and cope with change, as well as to promote the social goals of equity and participation. These are general lifelong learning purposes that are related to initial learning and training and adult education. They are also in one line with the general objectives of the European Union's economic and unremitting learning strategies. In order to gain these objectives and help overcome the difficulties in adult learning in South Eastern Europe, strategies are to be based on some principles of good governance.

These principles include a clear policy provided by government in adult learning; the sharing of responsibilities for policy and strategy formulation, action designing and implementation including the social partnership and other stakeholders; the adjustment of provision in the framework of learning proposals, modes and settings to suit learners'

needs; a shift in balance to support employee development; and a rational financing system that achieves a balance between efficiency and equality objectives.

Implementing adult learning strategies, creating diverse learning opportunities for all and raising participation hinge on whether governments and stakeholders play their crucial part in promoting a learning culture and increasing the value of learning for enterprises and individuals. Government and employers should visibly and concretely signal the importance of learning for economic competitiveness and individual employability.

The government needs to take the leading part in developing and finding the resources for adult learning in consultation with main partners. This means that all the relevant ministries have to contribute, within their areas of responsibility, to the formulation of the strategy and its implementation, which is a long-term commitment. Determining ministerial responsibilities and departmental budget commitments to adult education, having a shared vision, sharing priorities and adopting an integrated approach are complex points, but they are essential for the coherent and comprehensive development of adult learning, the optimal implementation of public and private resources and mutually reinforcing actions.

Below national level, regional partnerships are important in bringing the designing and delivery of adult learning closer to the place of residence and work and ensuring that provision meets labor market necessities more effectively. These partnerships could identify the main learning needs of their areas through labor market assessments; assess the supply of learning opportunities and how provision might be developed; coordinate research and survey work; ensure the quality of learning offers within the region; assist the employment service in its provisions for unemployed ; and possibly allocate government and donor funds within the region.

Effective partnerships rely on consultation and open dialogue. They work best when there is legitimacy, mutual respect, a shared vision and common aims, and when partners have a great desire to work commonly. To establish and run successful partnerships, South Eastern European countries require substantial capacity-building and support.

Ensuring that the managers of leading companies are well educated and competent will lead to better business performance and higher overall training levels. Governments and

their partners from the private sector can promote this by introducing high standards in business and management training, and by assisting intermediary organizations and providers that support management development. Formal management training courses should be assessed to ensure that what they suggest is in line with best practice in other more developed economies. In order to increase the transfer of management training expertise, existing links between institutions in different countries could be widened. Centers for management education could be established to bring together existing providers, to develop their provision to suit new and established companies and to meet the necessities of various regional and local economic profiles. A basic aspect of successful management training is flexibility and the diversity of provision and quality. A careful understanding of a company's market situation and how it could be improved is the key point of a company's business strategy and for identifying the contribution that employees can make to upgrade their skills and competence. Further capacity-building is important for the design of human resource development(HRD) strategies and the creation of learning systems.

Adult learning represents a demanding and complex challenge for teachers and trainers of adults. Adult learners need to have choices and be able to influence courses or programs they follow. Teachers and learners both share responsibility. Adult learning supply must be opened and expanded to provide a wide number of learning suggestions, in diverse settings, using essential methodologies. It also has to make learning attractive, interesting and important for adults. The environment, organization and content of learning are essential. A great deal of adults learn best when educational conditions and relations between teachers and learners are warm and tolerant. Learners welcome a participant-centered approach. When the content of learning is concentrated on real life or work issues related to the learners, this helps people to make links between previous knowledge and experience and new learning. Important indicators of the quality of adult learning provision include: the availability of a wide variety of adult learning opportunities; a favorable learning environment allowing adult participants to

choose courses and course content and course content related to real issues; and, the existence of a framework for the continuing training of adult teachers and trainers.

There is a need in the short term to develop a strategy for data collection for adult learning, labor market intelligence and further skills forecasting. The purposes of the strategy would be to enlarge the quality and a great number of relevant datasets, to fill gaps and systematize mechanisms for gathering data, and to develop capacity to analyze trends and forecast further needs. Public and private training providers could provide participation data at the time of enrolment. Companies could include training data in their annual business reports.

Adult learning is a branch of science that has so far been neglected in education and training reforms in South Eastern European countries and areas but which has its source to emerge as an important policy. This investigation aims to provide national policy with debate and development in adult learning. It establishes the development of adult learning strategies in the context of transition, the importance to adapt to the demand for new ways of skills in the open market and to be sure that people who do not work and young people starting to work have the employability competence to compete in the labor market. It also necessary to take an account of the skills efficient to people dislocated by the war accompanied by the break-up of the former Republic of Yugoslavia and the need for innovation competences to build trust and reconcile divided organizations. It provides a synthesis of the adult education strategies developed by local authorities in Croatia, Kosovo, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia under the European Training Foundation's adult learning development project. It takes into account the countries' stocktaking data and the discussions with representatives from the region in regional seminars and workshops provided by the members of a forum with the exchange of country intelligence. The report is presented on the European Training Foundation documents and reviews and shows the international literature on adult learning as well as the first national adult learning strategy documents. It gives the examples of good practice from the European Union and South Eastern Europe, taking into account the recent experience of such countries as Hungary.

The scope of adult learning spans all formal, non-formal and informal education undertaken by adults to “improve knowledge, skills and competences” (European Commission, 2001, p. 9) for the aims of work, employment, personal interest and social

activity. The main focus in the investigation however, is on the skills that learners need to be able to adapt and stay employable in the open market and the employability opportunities that help people to avoid unemployment and marginal employment. Despite the characteristic value of all learning, we believe that the first priority for governments, in the context of transition and inefficient financial resources, is to concentrate on the competences that support economic growth, competitiveness and employment and, hence skills that people in charge to enter into profitable employment or self-employment, to remain employable and to avoid poverty and social exclusion. The concentration is therefore on learning depending on employment, which is underpinned by the European employment objectives.

An important catalyst for partnership working is the shift in governance apart from central control to frameworks that empower stakeholders. New coordinating structures at national and regional levels are necessary. The membership of a future national council for adult unremitting learning would need to reflect the set of interests involving all the relevant ministries, the social partners, the employment service and the (macro) regions, if relevant. Such a council would act as a useful sounding board for providing informed opinion and advice to the government on strategy suggestions and action plans, and holding their implementation on. The immediate task of this partnership could be to define the adult learning strategy, the priorities in line with government guidelines and the responsibility for delivery. The council could see the drafting and monitoring of National Employment Action Plans in line with the European Employment Strategy over; provide common supervision of infrastructure and relevant structures; ensure the whole planning and monitoring of national, European Union and other donor interventions in partnership with the organizations in charge, as well as supervise lower-level partnerships.

The strategic objectives of an adult learning strategy can be achieved through a series of special measures, each of which needs its own action plan, budget and implementation

of timetable. The measures must be realistic, concrete, achievable, measurable and time-bound and they must be broken down to cover the short, medium and longer term.

Basic measures to implement the adult learning strategy include the improvement of basic skills by low-skilled adults and overall support to the acquisition of skills relevant for the market economy.

Responsibility for the allocation of resources and the development of appropriate measures to address the basic skills problem in South Eastern Europe clearly correlates with government. Improving basic skills and key competences is likely to be successful when learning is meaningful and relates to people's prior knowledge and competence, and when occupational skills are integrated into the curriculum. Investment would need to be made in teacher training and in developing adult-friendly learning environments and processes. Whilst ministries may prefer to work through formal public institutions, there are advantages to opening up training to a wider range of providers and consortia following a competitive bidding procedure. NGOs are closer to hard-to-reach populations. Partners need to work together to develop local services and adjust provision to meet the scale and pattern of demand. Employers can make a valuable contribution by providing information on the key competences that are likely to increase prospects for employment and, perhaps, by offering work placements. The partnership would need to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of local skills provision.

The approach that employers should be responsible for training their own employees has not been entirely successful in ensuring a sufficient level of company training. In many EU Member States, governments have intervened to try to achieve a more efficient solution. Where financial considerations prevent companies from offering training, the case for providing targeted financial incentives can be made. It may be possible, for example, to provide free assessments of training needs or of the existing stock of skills of small and medium-sized enterprises, or to fund training for workers under threat of redundancy in enterprises facing restructuring. Joint funding arrangements between employers and the employment service are also useful, for

example in apprenticeship schemes. A number of EU countries have experimented with levy schemes. Financial incentives for individuals to undertake training also boost participation, although they may be difficult to administer and may not reach low-

skilled people without essential targeting built into the framework conditions of programs and the selection of beneficiaries.

Networks of companies involved and interested in management organization could be built at the essential level. This action is likely to be taken forward by the economic and crafts chambers or other employers' organizations and huge enterprises which might act as mentors for other companies, and especially for small businesses. Managers would benefit from a better implement of the power of trade companies, entrepreneurs' networks, standard-setting offices, quality centers and technology networks. Clusters in particular have the potential to enlarge access to information, services, technology and special skills. Special programs for managers could help them to overcome any hesitation they may have in creating and supporting the development of clusters, which are geographically oriented groups of related businesses and establishments. They typically include buyers and suppliers, distributors, related service firms, training organizations or others. Special courses could be provided locally to train people on cluster keeping technology, the economic and regulatory environment and aspects connected with human resource development. Some people could act as experts in certain clusters. Small laboratories situated within a cluster could be funded and would provide local solutions to local problems. An important sphere of support within clusters could be the implementation of information and communication technologies and the development of related electronic skills.

Governments, the social partners and intermediary organizations could complement the above mentioned efforts by carrying out campaigns to raise awareness among managers about the benefits of education and by reducing regulatory or administrative burdens affecting entrepreneurial activity and training.

The adult learning strategy is to make the best use of all adult learning providers. There is currently little information on their numbers and types in each country and territory, or on the quality of their provision.

Once this information is available it should be possible to identify serious gaps in provision at different levels and in different areas, and for the regional or local partnership to encourage networking and links between providers and users. Basic

priorities for providers include teaching the trainers to ensure that learning is grounded on modern teaching practice and updating its content to meet new labor market demand. It is important that stakeholders in the learning system have confidence in its operations. Learners want to know that what they have learnt is recognized, is of high quality and profitable for them. Employers want to be aware, when recruiting staff, that their qualifications meet recognized national standards. Hence it is recommended that frameworks for national qualifications are developed. Assessing an individual's previous learning and experience is another aspect of accreditation that helps to improve access to learning and shape education by providing a demonstrable background on which further learning can be constructed.

Besides, any person undertaking formal education will be curious whether the provider is effective and efficient in what it is supplying. Countries may have a system of accreditation or certification of providers, implementing national guidelines and possibly regional administration to enhance and reduce bureaucratic problems. Accreditation systems need to be aware that private providers are financially provided, that they are not making exaggerated claims in their publicity literature, and that their pedagogy and teaching are appropriate. With regard to monitoring and evaluation, at the national level there are necessities to be a mechanism for permanent reviewing the progress of the adult learning strategy as a whole. This would cover both the process and the outputs. The latter would, for example, include tracking how many people are educated in particular skills, whether they got a qualification and whether those whose training was intended to involve them into work have in fact find jobs. This will help to establish if publicly funded adult learning programs are meeting their objectives and giving good value for profit. In order to evaluate credibility it needs to be undertaken by an independent professional organization. As learning and employment options have become more volatile, less secure and less transparent, people potentially need more support in finding their way through the education system and into the labor market.

The importance of career guidance and its contribution to policy goals in lifelong learning, labor market efficiency and social inclusion is widely spread in the European Union. Guidance also includes the development of a person's career management skills with the help of any form of education, including adult learning also. What is essential

in South Eastern Europe, where respective schemes are underdeveloped, is a policy and legislative background for the provision of high-quality lifelong guidance provision for all citizens, including adults. The framework would need to specify the roles, responsibilities and mechanisms for cooperation between public education and labor market authorities at local, national and regional levels; the infrastructure and information used; the standards of guidance delivery and the qualifications of guidance experts; and the means to include other basic stakeholders, such as social partners, guidance agencies, parents, young people and consumer institutions , and guidance practitioners in policy and systems development.

In planning financing strategies, countries and territories must pursue two key objectives. The first is to ensure an adequate level of investment in adult learning, which means increasing the aggregate finance background from all sources. Incentives are necessary to encourage investment in education by companies and individuals. The second aim is to ensure an equitable distribution of adult learning, which is currently completed in favor of the more advantaged members of society and larger enterprises or certain sectors. Unless associations can enhance the lifelong learning participation of groups who are excluded or represented, there is a risk of widening current social divides. Financial sound is one of the crucial policy moments for balancing efficiency and equity gains, but information is important for underpinning this balance. The lack of essential resources can determine the development of adult learning. In most countries expenditure on education and training can be considered as a cost by individuals and employers more than an investment for the future. The fact that value-added tax is imposed on course fees gives the wrong misunderstanding when the focus should be on encouraging people to learn. Some incentives, such as the voucher system in Serbia, can be attractive for citizens. Others, such as introducing tax incentives to encourage companies and/or individuals to invest in learning, could work in some countries, but are not one more opportunity for countries where tax collection systems

are not very strong. Creative conclusions can be made to encourage companies and persons to participate more widely in education and training. This investigation lists a great amount of incentives and financing mechanisms available to enterprises or individuals that exist in other countries. Donor or other funds are surely to be available

in all countries and areas: these could be pooled or redistributed to adult learning. However, South Eastern European countries need to give priorities the population groups and economic sectors that should be targeted by national programs. Measures that could be taken in the short period to build consensus and provide a basis for creating a comprehensive adult learning strategy and its subsequent implementation include an agreement within government of:

a timetable for increased resources to be spent on education and learning, specifying the share to be collected for adult learning; the establishment of a 'learning partnership', keeping together appropriate ministries and the different stakeholders with a view to considering the priority spheres for action and funding in adult learning; improving the policy capacity of the lead ministry and other relevant ministries to develop a comprehensive strategy for adult learning in consultation with main stakeholders; and, the development of partnerships at and below national level (e.g. allocation of funds, definition of functions, membership, objectives) and capacity-building for ministries, social partners and other stakeholders to give them the possibility to engage in effective partnerships, using international experience and donor or expert assistance.

The scarcity of resources across South Eastern Europe warrants concentration on a few priority actions. These could include a policy and action plan for the development of work-based learning, especially management and entrepreneurship training for small businesses, as well as the development of special programs to address particular skills shortages, where there is certain evidence of demand and where the training cannot be met by employers; to improve basic literacy and occupational skills including key competences; and to widen and develop active labor market opportunities for the registered unemployed and inactive individuals who is seeking for work.

A successful way of meeting training and development needs within smaller companies effectively and efficiently is through economic clusters. In addition, other incentives and measures will be needed to raise workforce participation in learning, to create a

culture of learning in enterprises and support the development of ‘learning enterprises’. Enterprises, trade unions, chambers, individual employees and governments all have a shared interest in driving this agenda forward.

A higher level of education tends to make people less vulnerable on the labor market, which is illustrated by the fact that the unemployment rate is lowest among people with a higher education degree in all countries. Compared to the situation in the EU Member States, however, the unemployment rate even among more highly skilled people is considerably high.

Labor market training providers face several challenges: the adaptation of training programs to changing skill requirements, the development of new programs that respond to the skill requirements of new occupations and to the demand for higher level skills. Programs also have to be customized to meet the needs of employers and individual learners. Targeted programs for disadvantaged groups have to be designed and providers, both public and private, have to develop learning methodologies appropriate to different types of learners. Whilst short conversion or updating training programs may suffice for the better qualified or for those unemployed for short periods of time, unskilled people with low educational attainment levels who have been out of work for several years need longer, more complex programs that combine support measures, integrated training programs and work placements.

Ensuring political stability, strengthening democratic institutions, law and order, and promoting active citizenship are important tasks for the countries of the region due to the political, economic and social uncertainties. In part, this agenda is being tackled at national level with support from the European Union for institution-building for public administrations. At the same time, local projects initiated by foreign donors or non-governmental organizations working with their local counterparts are helping communities to help themselves, and through collective civic action to foster trust and collaboration.