CONTEMPORARY WORKING DILEMMAS AND EUROPEAN POLICIES FOR TRANSFORMATION

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ABSTRACT: *The contemporary societal characteristics, the rapid development of technology, the intense demographic changes, the high and persistent unemployment rates have led to major changes in the workplace. More and more professional groups are becoming vulnerable and they need to redefine their work profile and strengthen it with skills that will let them respond to the mental, physical and emotional demands of the new labor market. In such a context, the training and education of potential professionals becomes a matter of major importance and a reference point for the policies of international organizations. The European Commission has drafted texts which aim to increase the employability of individuals. One recent text is that of "A New Skills Agenda for Europe", which was adopted by the Commission on 10 June 2016. Following the quantitative methodology and in particular the content analysis of the text we examine the way it can be achieved. The categories used for the analysis of the text come from the transformative learning theory of Mezirow and in particular the ten stages of stochastic processing. The results of this study show that the aim of this text seems to be the learning transformation of employees in order to become more employable.*

KEYWORDS: Employability, Transformative Learning, Dilemma, European Policies, Skills.

INTRODUCTION

The intense unemployment rates have led to significant changes in the workplace, resulting in a change in wages, productivity, working conditions and relationships, types of occupations and organizational models (UN Human Development Report, 2015). This pace of change is expected to continue in the coming decades, causing workers to feel uncertain, complex and volatile. In addition, the increased life expectancy has as a result the increase of work life limits. More and more elderly people continue to work or are forced to work. These particular conditions, coupled with intense population movements, bring about professional groups that are vulnerable not only in developing countries but also in developed. These groups need to redefine their work profile and strengthen it with skills that will let them find, keep and improve their job. Consequently, there is a strong demand for policies that aim at developing the employability of individuals.

Thus, the United Nations (UN) with the Sustainable Development Goals program, adopted in September 2015, establishes seventeen key objectives for sustainable development. As it is stated in the preamble of its official text, it is "an action plan for people, the planet and prosperity", with its main axes being economy, society and the environment (paragraphs 7, 19, 25). In an effort to align with UN objectives, the European Commission has drafted texts which aim, through the adoption of common cohesion and synergy policies, to help achieve the goals of the 2030 Agenda.

One recent text is that of "A New Skills Agenda for Europe", which was adopted by the Commission on 10 June 2016. It is the result of communication from the Commission of the

European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. This agenda aims to make sure that European people develop the right skills for the jobs of today and tomorrow. This task is essential to boost employability, competitiveness and growth across the EU.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

Employability and skills

Employability has been defined as the capacity of getting and keeping satisfactory and fulfilling work. It is also considered to be the consequence of having key skills, a likely effect of having good working experience, a product of skilful career planning and interview technique, a mix of cognitive and non –cognitive achievements and representations (Knight & Yorke, 2005). In addition, it is a complex and lifelong process which involves a number of areas interlinking.

Dearing (1997) links employability to the acquisition of skills for life, while Hillage and Pollard (1999) suggest that it should also be considered in terms of knowledge and attitudes. In addition, Dacre and Sewell (2007) focus on Career Development learning, work and life experience, degree subject knowledge, understanding, skills and emotional intelligence.

One major factor that helps people be employable is skills. Skills refer to a set of achievements, understandings, knowledge and personal attributes that make individuals more likely to get employed and be successful. Right skills ensure that labor market participants have the capability of being effective in their workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy (Knight & Yorke, 2004).

Employability and skills are major factors contributing to prosperity, productivity, social justice and safety. And while skills were once a key driver of prosperity and fairness, now they are the key driver. However, there are some principles regarding their delivery and the achievement of prosperity. First, it is a shared responsibility. Not only Governments but also employers and individuals should increase investment and action. Second, there is need for a focus on economically valuable skills, which will provide real returns for employees and society at large. In addition, these skills should not be centrally planned but demand-led. Besides, these needs must adapt and respond to future demand needs. Last but not least, continuity is of major importance as well.

International organizations – employability skills and prosperity

The guarantee of a decent standard of living is a key issue for the global community and a lasting historical challenge. In this historical challenge, the UN plays a special role through its policies and its programs. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been the basis for many others, including the Millennium Development Goals Program (2000-2015), the main objective of which was to increase the potential of the individual and to promote the appropriate means for a productive life. This program was followed by "Agenda 2030-Sustainable Development Goals" (2015-2030), which, as stated in its preamble, constitutes "an action plan for people, the planet and the prosperity" (UN, 2015: 1). The goal of the Agenda is to engage all the developing and non-developing countries and its basic promise is: "No one will be left behind" (UN, 2015: 3).

The European Union has a long history in shaping policies regarding the development and prosperity of societies. Thus, at the beginning of the 1990s, the European Community stressed the importance of coherence in the effectiveness of development policies, while the Treaty of Lisbon (2009) states that the Union should take into account the fact that the coherence and cooperation of policies can affect developing countries (Mackie, 2007).

To sum up, a common reference point for many official texts is the emphasis on shaping those conditions that will help people acquire the right skills and become more employable. "*With the right skills, people are equipped for good-quality jobs and can fulfil their potential as confident, active citizens*" (European Commission, 2016). This should be taken seriously into account given that, according to the OECD Survey (2013) of employability skills, roughly one third of workers are over or under qualified for their job, while one sixth report a mismatch between their existing skills and those qualified for their job. Skill gaps, skill shortages and skill mismatches can affect labor productivity and employability. Consequently, skills development is considered to be a wise and vital investment, since not only can it reduce unemployment, inequality and poverty, but also promote economic growth (UNESCO, 2012).

Adult education and empowerment of employability

The idea of adult education was developed in the 19th century in Western Europe alongside the development of technology and industry, as capitalism overturned traditional productive relations, dissolved the trade unions and created huge needs for a skilled workforce. The first term "*adult education denotes the entire body of organized educational processes, whatever the content, level and method, whether formal or otherwise, whether they prolong or replace initial education in schools, colleges and universities as well as in apprenticeship, whereby persons regarded as adult by the society to which they belong develop their abilities, enrich their knowledge improve their technical or professional qualifications or turn them in a new direction and bring about changes in their attitudes or behaviour in twofold perspective of full personal development and participation in balanced and independent social, economic and cultural development, adult education, however, must not be considered as .an entity in itself, it is a sub-division, and an integral part of, a global scheme for life-long education and learning*" (UNESCO, 1976).The new Recommendation provides a more detailed definition of adult learning and education (ALE), distinguishing three core areas of skills and learning: to equip adults with literacy and basic skills, to provide continuing training and professional development, and to promote active citizenship through what is variously known as community, popular or liberal education. It also refers directly to the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and highlights that the "*aim of adult learning and education is to equip people with the necessary capabilities to exercise and realize their rights and take control of their destinies. It promotes personal and professional development, thereby supporting more active engagement by adults with their societies, communities and environments. It fosters sustainable and inclusive economic growth and decent work prospects of individuals. It is therefore a crucial tool in alleviating poverty, improving health and well-being and contributing to sustainable learning societies*" (UNESCO, 2015).

Adult education is considered as one of the main means of assimilating global socio-economic and cultural changes, and it contributes substantially to the specialization and upgrading of human resources. Its benefits include ensuring a decent standard of living, increasing opportunities for finding, preserving or changing work, improving self-confidence, changing attitudes and perceptions, strengthening social cohesion and involving citizens in social and political life, and in general the development and growth of the individual (UNESCO, 2016).

Growth is a process of economic and social transformation, a widening of human choices and concerns the ability to influence the processes that shape man's lives, to read, analyze and solve problems (Escrigas, 2008).

Transforming learning and dilemmas

One of the main founders of adult education is Jack Mezirow (1923-2014), the main representative of transforming learning. Mezirow's theory has been influenced by Freire's concept of consciousness, Kuhn's examples, Roger Gould's psychiatrist practice, and the philosophy of Habermas. Transformative learning is defined as the process by which we transform problem contexts, sets of beliefs and expectations so that they become more inclusive, multidisciplinary, open, stochastic and emotionally ready for change.

Critical thinking and critical self-deception are the basic steps in transformative theory, while the main stages of stochastic processing are: disorienting dilemma, self-examination of feelings of fear, anger or guilt, critical assessment of assumptions, recognition of the source of dissatisfaction, exploration of options for new roles and actions, design of an action plan, acquisition of knowledge and skills to implement the project, testing of new roles, building of capacity and self-confidence for new roles and relations, and finally the reintegration into life according to the conditions which are now shaped by new perspectives (Mezirow, 2000).

Stochastic processing begins with a disorienting dilemma, which usually occurs when individuals have experiences that do not fit their thoughts or their expectations and consequently they cannot resolve the situation without changing their views (Mezirow, 1991).

METHODOLOGY

Research aim –research questions

The aim of this study is to explore through content analysis of the recent European Union text "Communication: A new skills agenda for Europe" whether the formulation and implementation of EU policies on increasing citizens' employability follow the stages of Mezirow's stochastic processing. Particularly:

- Which is the disorienting dilemma for the EU in terms of employability?

- Which stages of stochastic processing are followed and implemented?

- Is the desired transformation achieved through the formulation of EU policies?

FINDINGS

A disorienting dilemma for the EU is the rapid social, economic, political, technological and demographic changes that greatly affect the employability of European citizens who are at risk of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion.

In an effort to adapt to the new reality, the Commission seeks to formulate and implement relevant policies. Thus, it proceeds to the critical assessment of the assumptions, with reference to research data. In particular, it is reported that 70 million Europeans are lagging behind in

basic reading and writing skills and even more in mathematics and computers. More than half of the 12 million long-term unemployed are considered as low-skilled, while 40% of European employers have difficulty finding people with the right skills. In addition, although women represent 60% of new graduates, their employment rate remains below that of men and women and men tend to work in different sectors. More than 65 million people in the EU have not achieved a qualification corresponding to upper secondary level. Despite continued strong employment growth, the number of unfilled vacancies for ICT professionals is expected to almost double to 756000 by 2020. Furthermore, almost half the EU population lacks basic digital skills; with around 20% of people having none at all. Last but not least, about 25% of the non-EU nationals are highly-skilled. However, within the group of highly-skilled, around two-thirds are inactive, unemployed or over-qualified for their jobs. In addition, some migrants already residing in the EU, as well as those recently arrived, including refugees, may have limited knowledge of the host country language.

The EU institutions, recognizing these problems and the source causing them, are embarking on a process of transformation involving everyone in solving these problems. We find that the use of the plural person often takes place within the text: "we need". In addition, it is mentioned that EU-level action alone will not suffice. Success depends on the commitment and expertise of many players: national governments, regions, local authorities, businesses and employers, workers and civil society, and people themselves, taking up opportunities to make the best of their talents.

Next, formal and informal education, vocational education and training, innovation, research, mobility of students, professionals, researchers inside and outside the EU can contribute to the exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions.

Regarding the design of action programs, the EU at a first level places great emphasis on systemic reforms in education and training as well as on smart investment in human capital from both public and private sources. To improve the employment opportunities of low-skilled adults in Europe, Member States should put in place pathways for upskilling via a Skills Guarantee established in co-operation with social partners and education and training providers, as well as local, regional and national authorities. Upskilling should be open to people both in-work and out of work. A Skills Guarantee will provide a skills assessment, a learning offer, responding to the specific needs of individuals and of local labor markets, opportunities to have their skills validated and recognized. To help more people acquire a core set of skills, the Commission intends to launch a revision of the Key Competences Framework. The goal is to develop a shared understanding of key competences and to further foster their introduction in education and training curricula. Special attention will be paid to promoting entrepreneurial and innovation-oriented mindsets, including by encouraging practical entrepreneurial experiences.

In addition, the Commission, in co-operation with Member States, social partners and education and training providers, will support the implementation of the Riga Conclusions by supporting opportunities for learners to undertake a work-based learning experience, increasing opportunities for VET learners to combine learning experiences acquired in different settings, building on the existing VET instruments for quality assurance and credit, supporting the development and visibility of higher VET opportunities through partnerships between learning providers, research and business, with a particular focus on needs for higher level skills at sectoral level, improving data availability on labor market outcomes of VET, exploring ways to streamline the existing EU level governance of the VET sector, including a more explicit

coordination role for the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training.What is more, the Commission is launching the Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition to develop a large digital talent pool and ensure that individuals and the labor force in Europe are equipped with adequate digital skills. This includes establishing national digital skills coalitions connecting public authorities, business, education, training and labor market stakeholders, developing concrete measures to bring digital skills and competences to all levels of education and training, supporting teachers and educators and promoting active involvement of business and other organizations.

To make it easier to understand qualifications and related skills and contribute to their better use in the EU labor market, the Commission is putting forward a proposal for the revision of the European Qualifications Framework. The revision will support a regular update of the national qualifications systems, ensure that qualifications with an EQF level are underpinned by common principles for quality assurance, ensure that common principles for credit systems are used when qualifications with an EQF level are built on credits, encourage the use of EQF by social partners, public employment services, education providers and public authorities to support transparency and the comparison of qualifications, promote the comparability of qualifications between the countries covered in the EQF and other countries, in particular Neighbourhood Countries and other countries with mature qualifications frameworks, in accordance with EU international agreements. To more rapidly integrate third country nationals, the Commission will launch a 'Skills Profile Tool for Third Country Nationals, work with national authorities to support recognition of migrants' skills and qualifications, including refugees', support the training of staff in reception facilities to speed up recognition procedures, and promote the sharing of information and best practices on understanding and recognition of skills and qualifications. Last but not least the Commission will make available online language learning for newly arrived migrants, including refugees, through Erasmus and online linguistic support.To help people make informed career and learning choices, the Commission will propose a revision of the Europass Framework to set up an intuitive and seamless online service platform. It will provide web-based tools for documenting and sharing information on skills and qualifications, and free self-assessment tools. Data on skills needs and trends will be improved by web crawling and the analysis of big data, and further underpinned by evidence from different sectors, bringing together accurate and real-time information in the service offered by the existing "Skills Panorama" tool as part of an integrated Europass service. To improve skills intelligence and tackle skills shortages in economic sectors, the Commission is launching a Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills. Sectoral skills partnerships, in industry and services, will be set up at EU level and then rolled out at national (or, when relevant, regional) level to translate sectoral strategies for the next 5-10 years into identification of skills needs and development of concrete solutions and support agreements on the recognition of sectoral qualifications and certifications. The Blueprint will be supported by existing EU funding and initially piloted in a demand driven process in 6 sectors, with preparatory work starting in 2016: automotive, maritime technology, space, defense, textile and tourism. Additional areas (construction, steel, health, green technologies and renewable energies) will be assessed in a second wave of implementation starting as of 2017. The selection of sectors includes high-end technologies with a view to ensuring long-term competitiveness as well as more traditional sectors facing specific short- to medium-term challenges.

The Commission will also support the sharing of best practices in this area among Member States and stakeholders. This will include supporting flexible curricula, promoting interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches within institutions, and supporting professional

development to enhance innovative teaching practice, including ways of using and bringing digital tools into the classroom and stimulating entrepreneurial mindsets.

Particular emphasis is placed on the kinds of knowledge and skills that European citizens must acquire in order to cope with new working relationships and conditions.

To begin with, there are the basic skills, such as numeracy, literacy, basic digital skills. Research shows the important benefits of these skills in the lives of adults, their families and their communities, as better socio-economic opportunities and employment opportunities are guaranteed (UNESCO, 2013; Vorhaus et al., 2011). In addition, people who are literate trust a wider circle of people. In addition, there are the key competences and the higher, more complex skills. Skills that open doors to personal fulfillment, development and prosperity, social inclusion, active citizenship and employment. Science and foreign languages are referred as some of them. Transversal skills, including entrepreneurship, critical thinking, problem solving, learning to learn, financial literacy, innovation and creativity, is another important category. The building of these skills, according to Schuller et al. can contribute to the development of self-confidence, self-fulfillment and personal efficiency and performance. Through these skills, people can take on new challenges and provide practical and emotional support to those around them (a.c. Panagiotopoulos, karanikola, 2017).

The demand for digital skills in on increase, since they are in lack in Europe at all levels. 20% Europeans have no digital skills at all, while almost half the EU population lacks basic digital skills. The number of unfilled vacancies for ICT professionals is expected to double to 756.000 by 2020. These skills are of great importance, since they increase the opportunities for information, communication and dialogue (OECD, 2015; Zinnbauer, 2007).

As for the testing of new roles, the EU-level already makes an important contribution to strengthening Europe's skills base (Investment Plan for Europe, "ET2020", European Structural and Investment Funds). The European Social Fund and the European Regional Development Fund alone will inject over EUR 30 billion to support skills development in the period 2014-2020, and the Erasmus+ program supports skills development in education and training with nearly EUR 15 billion. The Commission has developed reference frameworks for digital competences and entrepreneurship, while it will also support EU countries, regions and education and training institutions. EU programs such as Erasmus+, COSME, and the European Social Fund already provide financial support to this end. At EU level, directive 2005/36/EC facilitates mutual recognition of professional qualifications and helps access to regulated professions. The European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF) was also established to make it easier to understand and compare what people have actually learned ('learning outcomes') while gaining their qualification. The EQF encouraged actors from different national educational sectors to work together to design coherent national qualification frameworks based on 'learning outcomes'. The European Alliance for Apprenticeships has so far mobilised 250,000 in-company training and job opportunities for young people. Through the European Pact for Youth, one million young people will be trained in digital skills, and a 'smart classroom' program will reach 100,000 students. Through the Grand Coalition for Digital Jobs companies and other organizations have offered millions of additional training opportunities.Social partners in several sectors (commerce, construction and telecommunication), have reached joint positions on skills, including specific initiatives on traineeships. The Commission will help social partners take forward the results of their joint projects, for example exploring the cost-effectiveness of apprenticeships and establishing a possible Quality Framework for Apprenticeships. Apprentices also benefit from learning and

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working abroad. In order to improve conditions for their mobility, the Commission is carrying out a pilot project commissioned by the European Parliament to assess the feasibility and benefits of longer mobility periods abroad (6-12 months) for apprentices.

People also need appropriate means to assess their skills and to present their skills and qualifications effectively. Equally, employers and other organizations would benefit from more efficient and effective ways of identifying and recruiting people with the right skills.

Lastly, as regards the latter stage of reintegration into life, the Commission considers that, through the implementation of all the above mentioned actions and programs, human capital, employability and competitiveness can be achieved. The supply of right skills at the right time is the key for enabling competitiveness and innovation. In addition, improving the quality and the relevance of skills formation, in order to keep step with the rapidly changing skills requirements of the labor market, equip everyone with a minimum set of basic skills and make qualifications easier to understand, helping workers and learners to move around more easily within the EU.

CONCLUSION

Underemployment and unemployment are now affecting the lives of people worldwide. More and more people are either inactive or working somewhere below their level of skills and abilities. In addition, the nature of work and employment contracts are constantly changing and people feel more and more insecure and vulnerable. They need to be supported and equipped with the right mental, sentimental and cognitive skills. These types of skills can be a pathway not only to employability and prosperity but also a key to social cohesion and fulfillment. This European Commission text highlights the impact of right skills on employability. Emphasis is placed on the adoption of corresponding policies, on the search for ways of financing, on the cohesion and co-operation of many actors and partners. These skills should correspond to the needs of the professional groups. Therefore, it appears from the analysis of the text that on the basis of the current miserable labor dilemmas it seeks, on the basis of experience and its extensive networks, to contribute to the transformation of the structures of economy, education and society.

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