

SKILLS: A PATHWAY TO EMPLOYABILITY AND PROSPERITY. EUROPEAN COMMISSION POLICIES

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ABSTRACT: *The contemporary societal characteristics, the rapid technological developments, the increase in age limits, the strong demographic changes, the high rates of unemployment have led to major changes in the workplace. There is a strong demand for national and international policies, which aim at the development of employability and prosperity of citizens. In a context of global co-operation and coalition, international organizations, such as the United Nations Organization, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU) Institutions, are called upon to play an important role in the development of prosperity, social cohesion and the economy of the countries, given that they have both the appropriate experience and the extensive diplomatic networks. In such a context, a great number of significant official texts have been drafted. Texts which provide policy guidance to member states in order to achieve growth and prosperity. This study, through the qualitative analysis of the European Commission's text "Communication: A new skills agenda for Europe", tries to capture and investigate the way employability can be protected and maintained. The analysis shows that a basic dimension of employability concerns the improvement and development of a skillset which people need to obtain in order to get and keep employed. These skills are planned and supported by corresponding policies and they are also differentiated according to target populations.*

KEYWORDS: Skills, Policies, Employability, Prosperity.

INTRODUCTION

In a fast changing global economy, skills are considered to determine competitiveness, employability and the capacity to drive innovation. National and regional labor markets encounter specific challenges: the digital transformation of the economy, new ways of working, skills shortages and mismatches, demographic changes, increase in life expectancy and in work life limits, changes in business models, robotisation, artificial intelligence. In addition, in the global race for talent nations should nurture their skilled workers, reduce brain drain, facilitate mobility, attract talent from abroad and make better use of migrants' skills (European Commission, 2016a). Under these particular circumstances, different professional groups need to redefine their work profile and strengthen it with skills that will allow them to respond to the mental, physical and emotional demands of the new labor market.

Tackling these skills challenges will require significant policy efforts and systemic reforms in education and training of human capital from both public and private sources. In such a context, improving the quality and relevance of skills formation and making them more visible and comparable becomes a matter of major importance and a reference point for the policies of international organizations. Thus, the 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". In addition, it aims to ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and high-quality technical and vocational education, and calls on governments to equip adults with skills that will ensure decent work for everyone, increase productivity, promote their labour rights. In an effort to align with UN objectives, International Organizations, such as UNESCO and European Commission, have drafted texts which aim, through the adoption of common cohesion and synergy policies, to help achieve the goals of employability and prosperity.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNING

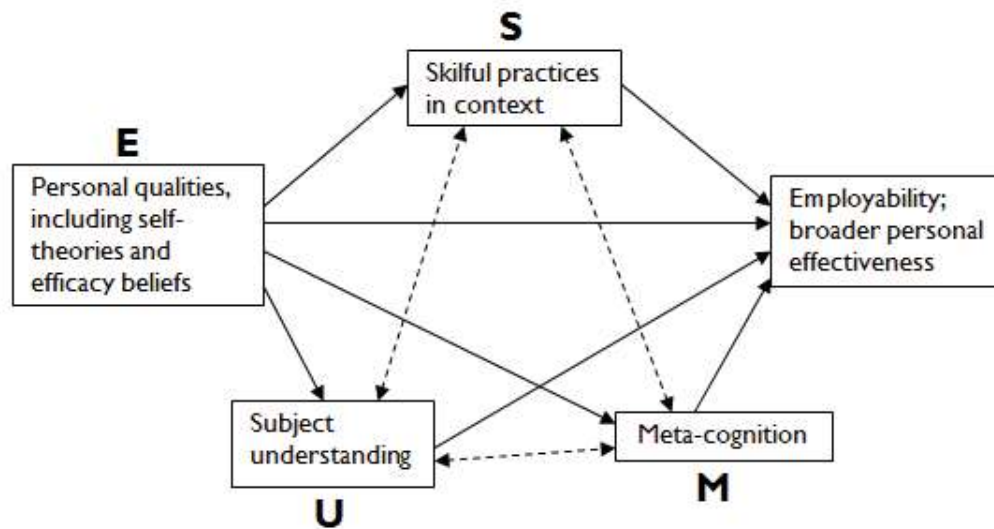
Employability, skills and prosperity: content and dimensions

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. More comprehensive employability is the capacity to move self-sufficient within the labor market to realize potential through sustainable employment. In addition, according to Bowden et al (2000), one major dimension of employability refers to the preparation of individuals to contribute to society as citizens.

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 to be successful in their chosen occupations. 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).

There are different models regarding employability. For example, Knight and Yorke presented a well known model that proposes four inter-related components. The first one is understanding the subject matter and the way an organization works. The second regards the skilful practices (academic and life skills). The third is about efficacy beliefs, while the fourth regards metacognition (self-awareness, strategies for learning, thinking and problem solving, lifelong learning) (Knight & Yorke, 2004, p 37.).



In addition, Dacre and Sewell (2007) proposed the Career EDGE model of Graduate Employability, which focuses on Career Development learning, work and life experience, degree subject knowledge, understanding, skills and emotional intelligence.

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. Current structures should be improved (LEITCH, 2006).

To sum up, the key role of skills in fostering prosperity is evident worldwide: countries that have invested wisely in skills training have made considerable progress in equitable development. Such investment could also help to protect countries from the impact of economic downturns and lift large numbers of people out of poverty.

International organizations – employability skills and prosperity

The prosperity of human beings and 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). Its main objective was to increase the potential of the individual and to promote the appropriate means for a productive life. Emphasis was placed on three key areas: human capital (nutrition, health, education), infrastructure (access to drinking water, energy, technological communication and information) and human rights (social, economic and political). 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). It includes 17 global, ambitious, linked objectives and 169 goals which aim to eradicate poverty and hunger, generalize the education at all levels both in developing and developed countries, develop gender equality, health, well-being and prosperity, improve access to new forms of energy, environmental protection, respect for human rights.

The basic dimensions of human development and well-being are divided into those that directly improve human abilities (health, longevity, knowledge, resources, living standard of living) and those that create conditions for human development and prosperity (participation in political and community life, environmental sustainability, security, human rights) (UN, 2016).

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).

In addition, in a context of global cooperation for the prosperity and development of people and societies, UNESCO has taken action and measures and prepares official texts based on international research data, analyzes policies, develops appropriate mechanisms.

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. "*With the right skills, people are equipped for good-quality jobs and can fulfil their potential as confident, active citizens*" (European Commission, 2016b). 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).

METHODOLOGY

Research aim

The aim of this study is to explore through the thematic analysis of the recent European Commission's text "Communication: a new skills agenda for Europe. Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness" the way in which skills can help improve employability.

Research Questions

- What kind of skills are proposed to be related to employability?
- Which population groups should be equipped with these skills?
- In which ways can these skills be delivered and implemented?

Presentation of research material

The new Skills Agenda for Europe 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. Besides, it calls on EU countries and stakeholders to improve the quality of skills and their relevance for the labor market. Different actions are designed in order to improve the quality and relevance of training and other ways of acquiring skills, to make skills visible and to enable people make better career choices, find quality jobs and improve their life chances.

Presentation of a methodological tool

The research material was examined through the qualitative analysis, while the thematic analysis tool with the use of thematic networks was namely used. Thematic analysis is an inductive analytical process and it is based on the principles of the argumentation theory of Toulmin, as reported in Attride & Stirling (2001). This method provides a methodical and systematic analysis of the material under investigation, facilitates the organization of analysis and allows a profound and rich exploration of the superficial and deeper structures of the text (Gibbs, 2007; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Boyatzis (1998) states that the thematic analysis is a process of coding quality information. In addition, it provides a rich, detailed and complex report of the data, while interpreting various aspects of the themes (Braun, Clarke, 2006).

Three classes of topics are included: basic theme, organizing, and global. The basic one is about the simplest features of text data, and by itself it gives little information about the text as a whole. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the content of the text, we must read it in relation to the other key issues and together they form the second class of subjects, the organizing theme. The organizational theme is a middle class theme, which organizes the core issues in groups of similar topics. Its role is also to increase the meaning and importance of a wider subject, which unites several organizational issues. This creates the third issue, the Global Theme. The overall theme is a superordinate theme and includes the basic idea of the text as a whole (Attride & Stirling, 2001).

Setting up of thematic networks

The global issue of the research material is employability skills. The organizational issues that emerged from the analysis of the text are: population targets, types of skills, policies/ strategies, players.

Description of thematic networks

The first thematic network regards the population target. Groups that need to be equipped with the appropriate skills are all the European citizens. Citizens that are long-term out of work and considered to be low- skilled, citizens that lack adequate reading and writing skills, numeracy and digital skills, citizens that are under-skilled. All these categories are vulnerable groups that suffer from poverty, social exclusion and unemployment. Besides, there are people that work in jobs that do not match their talents. Simultaneously, mismatches and skills gaps are striking, since 40% of European employers have difficulty finding employees with the right skills. Women and migrants are a population target as well. Women's employment rate remains below

that of the men. Except for the vulnerable groups, there are also those who are skilled, but they want to obtain more complex skills in order to become more creative and innovative.

The second thematic network is about different types of skills. 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 Institute for Lifelong Learning, 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 can contribute to the development of self-confidence, self-fulfillment and personal efficiency and performance (Schuller et al., 2006). Through these skills, people can take on new challenges and provide practical and emotional support to those around them (Balatti et al., 2007).

The demand for digital skills is 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 (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015; Zinnbauer, 2007).

The third network is about policies and strategies regarding the development and the delivery of the right skills. One measure proposed by the Commission is “Skills Guarantee”, which will provide a skills assessment, a learning offer and opportunities for the adults to have their skills validated. The second measure regards the “Key Competences Framework”, which launches in 2017 and pays special attention to the promotion of entrepreneurial and innovation –oriented mindsets and experiences. The fourth measure regards the implementation of the “Riga Conclusions” for quality and labor market relevant vocational skills. “A first European VET Skills” week was launched in 2016, while there is increasing cooperation with the “World Skills Organization”. Another important measure is the “Digital Skills and Jobs Coalition” in order to develop a large digital talent pool. Member states are also invited to develop national digital skills strategies: national digital skills coalitions connecting public authorities, business, education, training and labor market stakeholders and provision of digital skills to all levels of education and training. The revision of the “European Qualifications Framework” is another measure towards this direction. This measure updates the national qualifications systems, ensures the quality of these systems, encourages the use of them by services, authorities and providers in order to support transparency. The measure “Skills Profile Tool for Third Country Nationals” is about understanding and supporting the skills, qualifications and professional experiences of newly arrived migrants. In addition, online linguistic support will be given to migrants and refugees. The revision of the “Europass Framework” will provide web-based tools for documenting and sharing information on skills and qualifications and free self-assessment tools. The “brain drain issue” will be further analyzed. “Blueprint for Sectoral Cooperation on Skills” will improve skills intelligence and tackle skills shortages in economic sectors. The first six sectors which will be promoted by the Blueprint are: automotive,

maritime, technology, space, defense, textile and tourism. The second wave of implementation will include: construction, steel, health, green technologies and renewable energies. The last measure is about “An Initiative on tertiary graduate tracking”. This measure will improve information on how graduates progress on the labor market.

The fourth thematic network refers to the “players”, who will contribute to the development and the provision of these skills: national governments, regions, local authorities, employers and employees, civil society, teachers, educators, trainers.

DISCUSSION

In a context of rapid economic, social, cultural, demographic and labor changes finding and keeping a job is becoming increasingly difficult. The working population is ageing and shrinking. More and more people are under-skilled or low-skilled. Skills gaps and skills shortages exacerbate the problem. Communities locally, nationally and globally are called to make proper interventions, in order to reduce brain drain, increase the productivity, attract talent, make better use of the skills people have. According to the thematic analysis of the European Commission text, it is obvious that all countries should try to upgrade labor supply to meet new work evolutions. Emphasis is placed on the type of skills that are inevitably linked to the employability and to the needs of the citizens. Vulnerable groups need basic skills, while other categories of professionals need training that will enhance the skills they have already acquired (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2015). Achieving this goal involves activating not only the public and the private sector but also the individuals. According to the European Commission, ten measures have been taken towards the direction of employability. However, in any case these skills need to be recognized and certified (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010). Some countries, such as the Netherlands and Finland, are continually reinforcing workers' skills profiles and qualifications certification structures (Singh & Duvekot, 2013; Gaylor, 2015).

Implication for research and practice

The importance of this study lies in the fact that it provides useful contemporary information about European Commission efforts to meet the demands of contemporary work. These efforts can be compared to those of other international organizations, such as UNESCO and UN, thus creating large databases. Data that will multiply and will be indicators of evaluation and comparison of relevant actions at a local, national or international level. However, in a future research, it would be useful to explore what will actually take place and how all EU policies on the right skills will actually be implemented, contributing in this way to the wider development of the societies. The prospect of global cooperation and addressing major social and economic issues remains a major challenge.

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 there is a shift from full employment to short-term contracts with irregular hours of work. These

phenomena affect mainly disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. However, skills can be a pathway to employability and prosperity, a key to social cohesion, a pull factor for investment. Current and future skills need to vary across different sectors of the economy. Universities and VET need to understand labor market trends. Work-based learning and apprenticeships are a proven springboard to developing labor relevant skills, including transversal and soft skills. The cooperation of European and International Institutions will contribute to the delivery of these skills and the increase of employability.

To sum up, *“When the youth is affected, so is the country. When the life of the youth is improved, so is the country’s status. They go hand in hand. If one person opens a business, that person gives a job opportunity to a lot of people. So, if there are 10 business owners and they hire 100 people each, that would have a big positive effect on unemployment”* (Young man, Ethiopia).

FUTURE RESEARCH

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. Economic, cognitive, digital, social skills that will contribute to global development and prosperity. It would be useful in future if official texts of other organizations were also investigated. A comparative approach could then be made regarding their actions and their willingness to contribute to the global development and prosperity. A comparison that will lead to the enrichment of international data and its subsequent dissemination. As policymakers look to the future, they will need to develop a deeper understanding of the interrelationships of different policy solutions, and how different mixes of policies can increase employability.

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