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A discussion paper:

**Issues related to the provision of ample new skills in
Europe**

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1. From data to action: Translating information through policies into action

At the outset it is suggested that the inherent difficulties involved with translating objective data into sensible policies and subsequently into concrete workable projects on an acceptable scale are often not sufficiently understood. Or at least both the theoretical and practical difficulties involved are seriously underestimated.

It is not suggested that there are problems with the data, but with the notion that they carry with them, implicitly, some guide to action; that once we know what the situation is like, we more or less know what to do. This is very far from being the case.

The basic problem is twofold. At the one side there is the multiplicity of venues that might be chosen, e.g. when wanting to remedy a skill deficiency situation. These might range from changing the workforce, changing the jobs, re-educating the workforce or even transferring the jobs to different regions. At the other side is then the political decision to select the most sensible action; a decision that may not be the technically most obvious one. On the whole all inferences to actions are political rather than implied by the data.

2. On the theme New Skills¹ – New Jobs

It is accepted that any society that wants to keep abreast of the developments in the world must be awake and be prepared to take proactive action in order not to fall behind. This certainly holds true with reference to the modern economy which is constantly changing, requiring new infrastructures, new technologies, and new skills and opening the arena for new jobs.

The present paper is a part of an ongoing discussion on how these developments can be facilitated, to the extent they are progressive and politically sound.² It is based on extensive work that has been carried out recently in Europe, related to the general debate on expected developments and suggested actions by, in particular, the European Commission but also by individual nations and also nations and groups outside Europe.

The paper is meant to be reflective and hopefully constructively critical, inviting debate concerning various aspects of policy relating to changes both within education and the labour market, and perhaps suggesting the bridging of some gaps between these two important spheres of modern society. It is aimed at those involved at the governmental and inter-governmental levels, but it suggests that many more actors need to become actively involved if

¹ We suggest that new skills refer to skills that are new in a particular setting. Thus up-skilling or upgrading of skills fits well in with our discussion.

² “Politically sound” does not indicate any party political bias. It simply means that any decisions taken must have a sound technical basis but must also be tempered by a variety of sound political judgements. They may have to take into account various egalitarian issues, issues related to sustainability, and be pragmatic with reference to the resistance to change of any infrastructures.

the various policies and key actions are going to become effective. The paper is intended to be a basis for discussion and pose questions rather than answers.

Furthermore we suggest that a great deal of the patterns describing the relationship between education and the world of work are quite well known. The problem is not the descriptive part but rather how we should respond to the data.

It is important to find out what should be done and why. This is the normal first stage of the discussion. But we should also discuss how feasible the proposed actions are, who should do what and how? It will be suggested that it is time to become preoccupied with those stages, no less than the first, as important as it certainly is. In this second stage a number of stakeholders in the labour market and educational institutions become the crucial actors. Their task will be to adapt to and cater for enterprises and individuals who need to develop.

We want in particular to discuss what we expect of our schools or the educational system in general, what we expect of the labour market, especially the enterprises themselves, and what cooperation one might envisage that might help or stimulate the development of the relevant new skills.

The paper takes as an explicit point of reference two recent documents from the Commission on the New Skills for New Jobs agenda. First, an EU Communication setting the stage, i.e. *New Skills for New Jobs: Anticipating and matching labour market and skills need*.³ Second, the report *New Skills for New Jobs: Action Now. A report by the Expert Group on New Skills for New Jobs*.⁴ The latter report suggests a number of key actions which are in many cases directly related to the discussion in the present paper. These reports are not referred to but the latter is especially seen to have had considerable influence on what is being discussed.

Furthermore we will assume that the discussion in these reports should be taken as an explanation of the general rationale for debate on new skills and new jobs and clarify the urgency of that discussion.

In the current general discussion, both terms *skills* and *competencies* are used, sometimes as synonyms and sometimes with a slight difference in meaning. We suggest that the term competence has a somewhat broader meaning, referring both to the ability to do something (i.e. having the skill), the disposition to do it and also the judgement to determine what action might be appropriate. Some may, however, feel that the word skill has, indeed, the wider meaning. We would prefer to talk about competencies in the present context but the term skill is used in the heading of this action. We don't think that these nuances in terminology affect the substance of our argument.

³ European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, Unit D.2, Directorate-General for Education and Culture, Manuscript completed in April 2009.

⁴ Prepared for the European Commission. February 2010. There was also the conference on February 4th 2010 even though the documentation from the meeting is not extensive.

3. How to approach the desired goals?

Incentives

It is certainly important to provide the right incentives to upgrade and make better use of skills, both for individuals and employers. It is somewhat tautological to state that incentive schemes work, but if the proper incentives are chosen they work, perhaps sometimes even better than intended, i.e. they become a force that takes its own course. But what is most important is that if the intention is to elevate a particular operation by an incentive scheme, it must be transparent what activity is being reinforced or what action might be taken to achieve the goals set. In order to encourage someone, e.g. a company or an individual, to perform better it must be fairly clear what counts as an improvement but more importantly, and this is the main point we are making, it should be clear how this might be achieved.⁵

Incentives at the employer level. It is important to assess correctly the operative incentives. In an evaluation of the UK Employer Training Pilots programme⁶ it is noted in a section: What attracts employers to the pilots?:

[E]mployers report that the most attractive elements of the pilot offer are the free and flexibly delivered training rather than the wage compensation – although the latter is important to around 10 per cent of the employers involved and can be useful in securing initial interest with employers. Hard-to-reach employers appear to be particularly attracted by the brokerage element of the pilots and, for instance, the help provided with identifying their training needs.⁷

The quote is presented, not to emphasise this particular scheme (which was illuminating), but rather to raise the general point that it might be useful for a lot of enterprises, especially towards the smaller end of the scale, to receive inspiration, guidance, co-operation and help to change things. This might *inter alia* aid the plan of the appropriate training for their employees rather than e.g. a simple monetary incentive. In this case that seemed not to be relevant. Or, to put it differently, it may need some careful analysis to figure out what facilitating mechanism might be most appropriate in every single case. It also brings up the rather sensitive, but crucial issue, that some infrastructure might be advisable to facilitate such support. Some see this as just another government system, some kind of a school system. But it may be necessary, at least for the smaller companies.

Incentives at the employee level. Here there are a number of perspectives that should be kept in mind. One is to figure out what important incentives there are for different groups. For large groups of people credentials provided by the school system are seen as very important. Thus the credential value of any educational provision may have far greater significance than those

⁵ It might be argued that precisely the opposite should be the case in an entrepreneurial economy where the general aims might be set, such as to increase profits without further guidelines, and this would spur innovative action. But this presumes that the general workforce is indeed capable of such an action as a part of its normal routine and thus the incentive scheme would have its intended effect. We suggest that this is, unfortunately, not the case and incentive schemes normally only work if it is clear what behaviour is being reinforced.

⁶ Mutual Learning Programme, <http://www.mutual-learning-employment.net/> see Peer Reviews, UK, the Employer Training Pilots. See also Giguere and Nativel (2006).

⁷ Hillage, Jim. (2005). Employer Training Pilots: Discussion Paper. http://www.mutual-learning-employment.net/uploads/ModuleXtender/PeerReviews/58/PR_UK_Discussion_Paper.pdf see p. 30. The discussion on this paper showed how important such supporting systems were seen to be.

more preoccupied with the substance (e.g. key competencies) may think.⁸ Thus any educational provision that does not carry any credential value may be a problem especially for the younger sections of the labour force (but probably for most sections). But curiously enough the opposite may also be true. For many, having dropped out of school or not having been successful in the system, any formal association with the school system may be a hindrance.⁹ Thus it is a substantial logistic problem to construct an infrastructure that facilitates participation of different groups of people where the operative incentives and thus the optimal educational environment are balanced.¹⁰ Including incentives in pay agreements does have an effect but there are two problems associated with such incentives that may, however, not be substantial. One is in the same category as the credential issue, i.e. the controlling factor is the pay rather than the substance that spurs participation. The other is that as such pay schemes are often in fact tied to credentials (or formal recognition of some sort) which may become a controlling factor.

Incentives at the institutional level. We will return to the institutional problems later but we note that the financial and structural base of the educational system is very firmly attached to initial (pre-service) training (which tends gradually to be extended in duration). This makes it difficult for the educational system to enter the arena of continuous vocational or professional development which it should do, nevertheless. The educational system should indeed make a great effort to make continuous education and also professional development a serious and a substantial part of its function. This is sorely lacking, and there is little sign that it is changing. Even though much of the training must take place after people have completed their initial education the sturdy infrastructure of the school system is not geared to deal with this continuous education.

Develop the right mix of skills

The curricular debate is a longstanding one; it is of great significance and it is very complex. It is also perhaps not always treated with the respect and professionalism it deserves. Traditionally it has had two distinct but related strands. We will here add the third one. See Figure 1 where we attempt to depict these three dimensions. The vertical axis denotes the actual content, i.e. what ingredients there should be in an educational curriculum that prepares people for an active moulding of and participation in a democratic society with a flourishing economy? This represents the area of the more traditional debate about the various approaches to the curriculum, the classical or cultural, the disciplinary, the economically relevant or that preparing for functioning in daily life. Normally these different strands are mixed in the debate. It is into this discussion we normally merge the 21st century skills debate.

Then there is the curricular question about how to achieve the aims that justify the different content. Here we turn to the procedural dimension, i.e. the characteristics of education; how is it

⁸ I have spent much effort in recent years probing this credential aspect of education.

⁹ It is a well known pattern that those who have least formal schooling are by far the least likely to attempt to increase their formal schooling, whereas those who already have a higher degree are very likely to add to their formal qualifications; the same patterns hold for informal education even if they are not equally pronounced.

¹⁰ Thus the move to recognize formally prior competence or competence evaluation in general is an attempt to find that middle route (without going into the debate about the pros and cons of the effort).

instituted and where? Is it at the work place or at the school?¹¹ Why does school look the way it does? Why are continuing education programmes very frequently framed as academic courses? It is quite noticeable how the vocational and professional education was through the last two centuries gradually shifted from the work place to the schools. Education that was in the past in several ways characterised by an apprenticeship approach, learning *in situ*, was gradually transferred into academia, the procedural character was replaced by declarative¹² education.

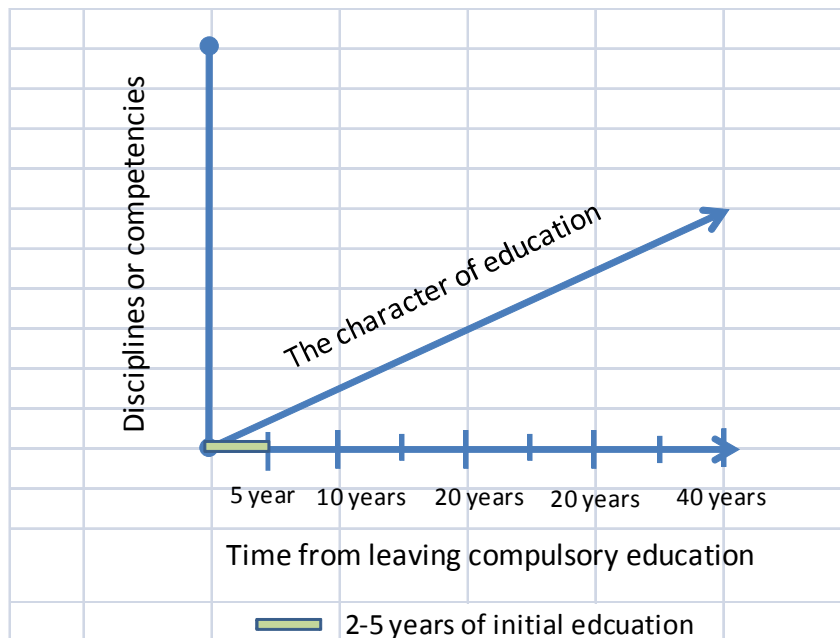


Figure 1. The three essentially orthogonal dimensions of curricular discourse. The vertical dimension indicates the content. The dimension going into the paper indicates the character of education or the procedural component, how it is carried out and where. The horizontal dimension indicates the time component which signifies the lifelong learning dimension. In the figure we want to emphasise the relative brevity of the duration of initial education.

There are a number of good reasons for this but they seriously undermine the value of situational education. In this context we mention two reasons why it was thought so important. One was that there was no way around dealing with such a complex task (as education for any vocation or profession is) but to institutionalise it. It had to be removed from an apprenticeship situation that was perhaps sometimes self-serving, narrowly defined, erratic and conservative. The other is the importance of the declarative mode for transmitting ideas which is very expedient and thus economical. Both of these remain strong grounds for a school type educational arrangement. There are, on the other hand, at least four very important reasons for attaching education to the situation where it is meant to be relevant.¹³ One is that a crucial part of acquiring a skill can only happen in the situation where it will be used. A second reason is that some people seem only to be at ease with most of what they do if they are allowed to be in the procedural mode (do things) rather than in the declarative mode, i.e. learn by the book. A

¹¹ Into this debate come the more school-related debates about guided discovery, problem based or case based approaches. But also and more related to the workplace the cultural activity based approaches of Yrjö Engeström (2008) and colleagues.

¹² The terms here might be academic, propositional, codified or declarative knowledge.

¹³ We will certainly make the case that this applies to all education.

third reason is that for innovative practices to take place, they must be allowed to develop in a situation where people appreciate that things may not work out or can be done differently and changes can take place. The fourth reason is that with our basic system of schooling, once people have left school and if they have employment, they are simply at work and there they have to learn new things. They cannot leave and go to school. It is well established (by the background skills report) that there are enormous changes in the working environment of most people that occur after they have left school, changes that normally call for very substantial continuing education or professional development.¹⁴ But the problem is that neither does the workplace normally have the professional (nor perhaps the financial) capacity to institute the necessary professional development nor perhaps the imperative for changes that might be relevant. A typical company is just that, a company, not a school.¹⁵

We have already mentioned the third dimension shown in Figure 1: The time scale. The enormous changes that constantly take place in our environment suggest two conclusions. One is that the initial stage of any vocational or professional education must have as a point of departure how much of present normal practices will soon become obsolete. Thus a large part of any such programme must involve the preparation for continuous education. The second is that because of the massive developments that take place in science, technology, and in the market itself, continuous education or professional development must be very effective to be able to follow these changes; but preferably to lead them. This seems to require institutionalising this training no less than initial education and the most obvious route to take is to require this task to be undertaken by the school system.¹⁶ As things stand, the school system, as it is set up, as it is financed, as it is conceived of both by its own professional staff and by outsiders (politicians and the labour market), all continuous education is either squarely outside its purview or is seen as a marginal task undertaken by subsidiary departments. The institutional framework of the school system is not expected to be instrumental in merging the new skills, new competencies, into the operation and culture of a developing democracy and economy, except through initial, pre-service education.¹⁷

Here we have hinted that the task of mixing the new skills must take into account all three curricular dimensions. This means that blending must take place, both along all the dimensions and between them, and this is a truly formidable task that neither our current discourse nor our institutional framework seems to manage. We will come back to the barriers or potential hindrances but they are largely implicit in what has been said.

In order to widen the perspective of the curricular debate we have eschewed what many see as the real problem of mixing skills or competencies, i.e. blending along the first dimension. But we

¹⁴ Here we distinguish between the two. Continuous education may mean that people are renewing their background competencies, e.g. to be able to cope with layoffs or changing jobs. Professional development refers to development within a particular field, whether we classify it as vocational or professional.

¹⁵ This does not, of course, preclude that companies may be very innovative and dynamic, but their primary aim is not education.

¹⁶ Here we are referring mainly to the ISCED 4+ levels.

¹⁷ It is also quite possible that the labour market would not want the school system to become involved. Be that as it may the point being made here that an infrastructure may still be needed. But the explicit attitudes of each social partner must of course be clarified.

see this as an important and a fundamental problem for three reasons. One is that there are genuine and deep differences of opinion about what the school system should be about, e.g. to what extent it should for instance be preoccupied with the transmission of culture or laying the foundations for a skilled economy.¹⁸ The second is that even though this was settled, it would still remain to be ascertained how things might be done; e.g. how much should be done during initial education and in school? The third reason and probably the most importance is that several “new” competencies that are seen as important for the coming decades are somewhat difficult to handle. Rhetorically, they sound right and have gathered considerable consensus, but it is often somewhat or even totally unclear what should be their weight in the curriculum (e.g. to what extent they should replace other more traditional parts), how they shall be taught and assessed, when, and not least, by whom? These include education for sustainability, citizenship, democracy, gender equality, education for all, multiculturalism, critical thinking, creativity, problem solving, entrepreneurship and ethical responsibility, and many more. Most of these are discussed explicitly in the documents on which the panels in Figure 2 are based. Figure 2 shows two panels that list competencies that are seen as relevant for a new economy, for the societies of the 21st century. In both cases the list combines old and new emphasis, modern and traditional content. In recent years calls have been made for a variety of important themes that should be addressed by the educational system.

European Framework for Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, suggests these key areas:	The Partnership for 21st Century Skills; from the USA
1. Communication in the mother tongue	Core Subjects
2. Communication in foreign languages	21st century interdisciplinary themes into core subjects
3. Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology	Information, Media and Technology Skills
4. Digital competence	Learning and Innovation Skills
5. Learning to learn	Life and Career Skills
6. Social and civic competences	Sometimes put as:
7. Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship	3 Rs Reading, writing, arithmetic
8. Cultural awareness and expression	Critical thinking and problem solving, communication, 4 Cs collaboration, and creativity and innovation

Figure 2. The left panel shows the Commission’s proposal for key competencies.¹⁹ The right panel shows a kindred idea from the partnership for 21st century skills in the US.²⁰

Some of these ideas are of course not new, but some are and they all seem eminently relevant. It may be debated how well some important new ideas, such as those relating to creating a sustainable society (or world), are included in these lists.²¹ It is suggested here that if one wants to take these ideas seriously, as they deserve, a very critical look must be taken at them, each

¹⁸ See e.g. the debate being taken up again from different perspectives in Grubb and Lazreson (2004), Ravitz (2010) and Young (2008) and earlier by Wolf (2002).

¹⁹ See e.g. http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/publ/pdf/ll-learning/keycomp_en.pdf

²⁰ See material on <http://www.p21.org/> These are two (EC and US) very important frameworks but there are others. We present the two to underscore that it may be to some extent a matter of perspective which areas are selected.

²¹ See e.g. UNESCO’s effort in this area. See www.unesco.org/en/esd/

one, and they should be probed from the perspective of making them work. Both their nature and the logistics of their implementation need to be discussed.²²

The emphasis on creativity is a case in point. It is both a new theme and an old one. But what shall the school system do? How shall the topic be handled by the system and how shall it be prepared to do it? Anna Craft (forthcoming) tackles these issues head on. She claims that the school system not only needs to take this theme very seriously but goes on to assert that it can be done and explains how.²³ But it is clearly as complex as it is important. The school system may have difficulties handling it in a performative era, but with determination and vision (or vice versa!) it may make some headway; but it has the institutional basis to do it.²⁴ But what about industry; how will it introduce these values and the relevant competencies into its culture? Is an infrastructure needed to achieve any such goal on a grand scale?

Bring the world of education and labour market together

Perhaps the only way to make some serious headway with these problems is to ensure a much closer and a genuine cooperation between the world of the labour market and the world of education. While considering this we suggest that it is useful to look at the worlds of education and the labour market as two major social systems, which are governed by radically different networks of rules, have different hierarchies of values and have very different aims and interests. Furthermore, neither of these large and fuzzy spheres should be regarded as a homogenous entity. Far from it, within each there exist internal tensions and hierarchies and a variety of value systems. In principle, they may want to work together, but both demand that this occurs on their own terms; according to the rules they set themselves. But the argument for a stronger link between these two is very strong.

Brining these worlds together can mean a number of things and we think it is important to probe why they should be brought together and attempt to gauge the feasibility of this occurring to a greater extent than is now normally the case. Here we mention six different areas where this is an important issue.

I. Respect for each other's recognition of competence. This would mean that the labour market values the credentials provided by the educational system (which is normally the case) and that the school system accepts the competencies gained within the labour market (which it normally does not). There is no symmetry between the two and perhaps understandably so. The school system has been preoccupied with credentials for a very long time and has developed quite an elaborate system to ensure their recognition. The labour market has not done so and, indeed, it is not its task. It is difficult to see much headway being made in this area, even though that might be quite important. Recognition of real competence is a move in this direction but it remains to be seen how it fares. And the value of that recognition is largely determined by the school system.

²² It is not suggested here that their implementation should await a critical analysis. Then they would never be tried out.

²³ In her preface she notes that "we have perhaps never before in our history, needed to draw on our creative potential as urgently, and with as much insight as we do today (p. vi)" and then she proceeds to discuss what this means and what might be done.

²⁴ It is doubtful than any large strides will be made unless a strong institutional base exists.

II. Developing a dynamic relationship between the world of work and the schools for the sake of initial training is important. It is an essential part of initial training to see the potential working environment from the perspective of an expectant worker. Such liaison presents perhaps the strongest existing link between the two spheres. It varies between countries and cultures how strong the bond is. A strong apprenticeship system only exists where there is a long tradition for such cooperation and the benefit is mutual.

III. Bringing the world of work and the school system together on a truly cooperative basis throughout the working life of any person seems to be the big next step to take. Both, because of the relatively rapid changes taking place and because of the nature of the maturing mind it would be healthy for most people if learning became truly life-long. People would obtain their initial training at school, but then come back on a regular basis to refresh their knowledge. It would be in line with EU's lifelong learning ideology and that of individual countries all over the world. It would also be a much more effective learning cycle than the quite typical modern arrangement of a long stretch at school (university) and then only sporadic dipping into courses or training at later stages. Bridging the gap between them for this purpose would require two major concessions and one major initiative. The first concession would require the schools system to accept that such a bridge should be built. The second would be to have the labour market to do likewise. The initiative would be to allow the infrastructures on both sides to adapt to the task. There seems to be some way to go.

IV. We have suggested that by far the best place for professional development is in the working environment. Continuous professional development centres on becoming more competent at work, learning new skills, applying them, thinking new thoughts, adopting new perspectives and gradually and consequently affecting changes in the way things are done. Thus it is of utmost importance to change the way people often perceive professional development, accepting that a large part of it must occur at work. But we also suggest that if this is to happen on a large scale probably some infrastructure enabling this cooperation must be put into place. The role of the school should also be seriously reconsidered in this connection. It is imperative that those working at schools or universities and those who are most up to date in their professional field, should be made active participants in continuous professional development in the labour market. There are three reasons for this, their expertise, their close ties to the workplace from which they also have some healthy distance and because they need to keep abreast of what is occurring in their field.

V. It is important for the teachers, at schools, colleges or universities, to know what is happening in the work place. To know what the reality is in the world of work and thus get a good grasp of what the problems are, seen from the perspective of the shop floor. To know with what people are preoccupied and with what the field or the industry is dealing. Also to shower the workplace with new ideas, new practices, new attitudes. It is very important to note that even though some enterprises are very dynamic, some (or perhaps most?) are not. It is important to keep in mind that many workplaces desperately need infusion of ideas and new practices; being a workplace is simply not enough to be a dynamic and a fruitful learning environment. A normal workplace has no means to do ensure this continuous development on its own.

VI. It is important for the school system to know how their students fare out in the world; in the complex democratic society and the labour market; to enquire what would make the best or at least a good preparation. Even though this is difficult to ascertain, it is important in principle to ask, and to reflect on it. This does not mean that a narrow perspective of a particular employer should be in control. The role of the school is so much wider and complex than that. Thus the schools should be very sensitive to their roles, and how these might best be fulfilled. The problem is that it is very difficult to ascertain how the best answers are obtained.

Now there may be a number of other reasons why the worlds of work and schools should be brought together. These should be enumerated and discussed with the others.

We have presented a number of reasons why the links between the labour market and the world of work should be strong. But we have not discussed what such a link would entail. What kind of channels or infrastructures must be established to ensure the necessary flow of ideas and influences between the two spheres? In particular to enable them to cooperate together in sufficient harmony for their mutual benefit.

Anticipate future skills needs²⁵

Given all the well known problems of anticipating the future, the position is adopted here that in many ways the future is quite predictable. And predictions are important and properly grounded predictions should be taken very seriously. These range from changes that are in fact easy to quantify, such as demographic developments, to the differential strengthening of competing regions. They also range from knowing what skills will become obsolete to prediction about new technological skills. We will also have trends such as the relative growth of educational credentials and unfortunately will we also have the perennial problems of uneven distribution of educational achievement. We see that dropout patterns, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, are strikingly robust and universal.²⁶ We also know well the problems in attracting those with least education to participate in continuing education courses; we also know how important it is to allow some people to develop their skills in their own working environment and that some are more at ease transferring their academic knowledge to new situations than others, even though such transfer is normally vastly overestimated. Our systems should strive to become proactive *vis-à-vis* those patterns. We also know, even if only roughly, how our technological and industrial environment is changing, often at quite a fast pace. But with reference to the notion of skills needs we will only touch on two related problems. The first relates to the question of needs.

Even though the process of needs analysis is well established and may often be very useful, we suggest that terms *useful* or *helpful* should be used instead of *need*. We are interested to know what skills are potentially helpful or useful, rather than what skills are needed. This is meant to move beyond the implicitly narrow framework of the skills needs ideology by requiring discussion of what may be helpful in many different ways. This may not be the same as what is needed in the strict sense. This calls for a change in perspective and requires forward looking,

²⁵ In addition to the reports on which this paper is based, see e.g. Giguere and Nativel (2006).

²⁶ See e.g. a forthcoming study comparing the dropout patterns in a number of countries, Lamb, Markussen, Teese, Sandberg and Polesel (2010).

more directly than the needs analysis perspective. By changing the nuance in phrasing it is being emphasised that many different combinations of skills may be useful, even far beyond what may be strictly necessary.²⁷ This stance may also help to move away from traditional ways of doing things and adopting totally different operational modes on the basis of skills that were not seen by most people to be relevant.

The second and related aspect of skills we want to touch on is that it is often (but definitely not always) quite open or undefined what skills may serve well for a particular task, in particular as many tasks can be executed in many different ways. Thus, when forecasting the spectrum of skills that may be needed, or rather potentially useful, one important factor may be just their variety; the width of the skills spectrum available. Different skills may be used in many and often unexpected ways.

On these issues there is presently a lively debate in Iceland, not explicit, but implicit. What skills are needed to become a good banker, a good journalist, a good politician?²⁸

How far should we go when we contemplate these issues of considering the wide social scope of these occupations, or should we think of them only from a fairly narrow technical perspective? Here it may also be important to contemplate on the relevance of a strong institutional culture, say in the banking industry that may prevail in Europe; then again it may not have prevailed everywhere. But a long-standing financial culture was certainly not present in the new Icelandic banks that then collapsed.²⁹ This indirectly begs the question: how do we talk about the preparation for the labour market; what skills should be included? Thus we speculate if the labour market rhetoric is too dominant in the prevailing European discussion. Does it e.g. place enough emphasis on including how the ethical or social dimensions could be included, not least for those who receive higher education, but in principle for everyone?

4. The barriers

We will return to all the issues discussed above and note the weakness of many policy initiatives and discuss what kind of understanding and cooperation must prevail if these policies are to have a substantial impact. We have already referred to several impediments to change, but hope to pinpoint better where the obstacles to development and cooperation lie.

We have suggested that the school system is not geared to serve the continuous professional development arena. No institutional arrangement is in fact equipped to do this at the high

²⁷ Needs analysis frameworks, or needs assessment frameworks, would accept this and claim this is indeed what the procedure is all about, even if it does not always transpire when the analysis is done. In Iceland much more emphasis on ethics and social responsibility in our banking and other sectors was not seen as needed, but those competencies within our banking community would certainly have been useful.

²⁸ We are preparing a PLA on the professionalism of teacher educators; what do they need to know? Or what would be useful for them to know?

²⁹ We take banks as a case in point as their behaviour is such an overwhelming issue in Iceland at the present time. Strong financial culture was perhaps more prevalent in the banks previously to their privatization, but a sizable portion of the most experienced staff was gradually but systematically laid off when the banks were privatised.

standard that is needed. Programmes having this mission should match colleges or universities in status and have a matching economic base. Here it is suggested that there are at least three problems.

One is simply the system itself. Rhetorically it is clearly a system of lifelong learning. In practice it is not. See Figure 1 which symbolises these two ways of looking at the system of education and continuous education. There are in place essentially two systems of education, one of initial education which is well developed and has its clear infrastructure, operational rules, financial base and status. The other system is that of continuous education. It is fuzzy, has very loose infrastructure, uncertain financial base and little status.

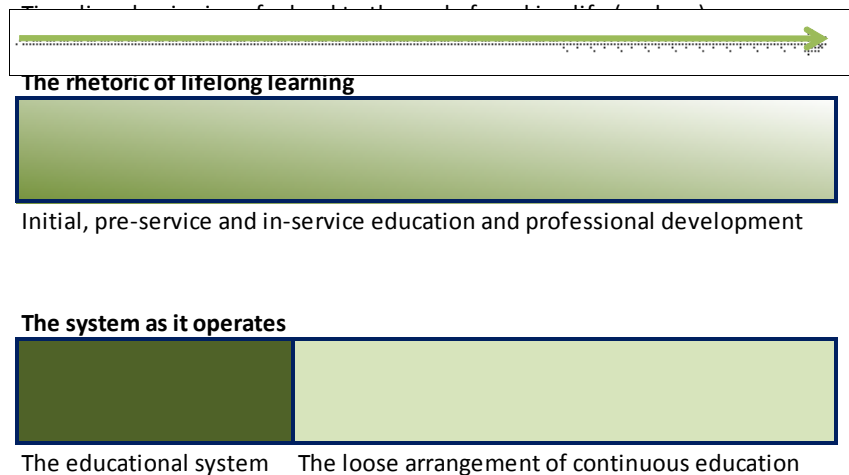


Figure 3. An attempt to show in a symbolic way the rhetoric of lifelong learning (top panel) and the normal educational practice (bottom panel). The top shows an educational continuum which is generally agreed to be sensible from most perspectives and the bottom shows a system that has been developing for a long time and is entrenched both in the culture and the funding mechanisms.

Next we should look critically at our delivery systems for the development of (new) competencies, be it schools or the labour market. It may well be the case that they are often not doing their job efficiently enough (even though some may be). The problem here concerns both attitudes and infrastructures. Neither of which may be conducive to the effective development of any new skills.

In this connection, we take up the third point of concern, which are the incentive schemes both spheres use for the encouragement of education. The school system uses various scales (e.g. the international comparisons), or selection processes in the recruitment of students (vis-à-vis student drop-out) and we may ask if they these schemes are fit for enhancing the competencies they are meant to deliver. The labour market has very scarce ways to monitor the development of competencies within their sphere.

In summary, we may ask if the various aspect of the infrastructures and operational modes of the system are really geared to the multiplicity of aims the school system has: in the present context, to deliver new competencies at an acceptable level of expertise? Or if the labour market has any structured modes to evaluate the delivery or development of competencies.

We have suggested that the labour market is not geared towards extensive vocational development at the work place. Industry, on the whole, is somewhat lacking in the financial but even more, in professional capacity to enforce ambitious development within the enterprise or with other companies.

It may be maintained that what we have discussed here are not real barriers to the development of competencies but rather signs of the lack of any facilitating mechanisms. But closer analysis shows that the structures of these systems impede changes in the direction of effective development of new skills.

We have also suggested the labour market and the school system have not established a *modus operandi* for cooperating, except for initial training. If the various stakeholders don't work effectively in unison, the laudable policies will come to little, as many of the noble objectives are simply too complex or diffuse to implement. The problem lies partly in attitudes, partly in the infrastructures or the lack thereof and partly of course in the question of who carries the financial burdens any effective cooperation entails. If either, both or all social partners have a negative stance to close cooperation, this would of course present areal barrier. Thus we want to clarify as well as possible the willingness of each partner to cooperate on equal terms.

We suggest that the barriers or hindrances can occur at different levels, ranging from conceptual problems through problems related to inflexibility within systems and to issues related to conflict of status and control.

The first level is simply the analysis of the problems. If they are not correctly or sensibly analysed, it is unlikely that good policies will be directed at solving them. An example would be if the lack of skills at within a certain section of the workforce is essentially a problem of skills shortage or perhaps of attitudes to change, either within the labour force or among employers.

When constructing a policy it must also be clear who the real stakeholders are. Are they the employers or the employees or even the educational providers or all of these in concert? Have they been properly consulted, and in fact brought into the forming of the policy. If that is not done it is unlikely that the execution of the policy will come to much.

It must also be clear that there is capacity to implement the policy or policies. We suggest some of the ideas about skills are somewhat vague or rhetorical in nature and it is not clear that they can be implemented on a large scale without very extensive professional development involving the schools and the professionals.

It must also be clear who are in fact meant to implement the policies and on what terms. Are these agents capable, in terms of competence, attitudes and infrastructures to carry them out? If any of these factors are lacking, this will present real barriers to change.

It is also important to decide when a policy is necessary or not or if it advisable to implement a policy, or implement it perhaps for all groups when it might be fitting for some and then not others. If funds are set aside to finance a support programme or a set of course, it must be clear that programme would have functioned otherwise.

5. Forums for debate

The questions, or rather discussion topics, are suggested according to their order of relevance, given the scope of the PLA discussion, even though their order seems to be the reverse of that presented in the paper above. We attend to three main areas for debate.

The pragmatics of the implementation of policy. Now assume that some general agreement is reached on the basic policies regarding education for the new skills; education that should reach both our young students in our school system (at all levels), but also and of no less importance, both the general work force and those out of school and out of work. In fact we assume in particular on the basis of the extensive and thorough research done, but also for the sake of argument, that the analysis concerning both the new skills and the new jobs is generally valid.³⁰ We will also assume, perhaps with some reservation, that the policy initiatives are sound and important. Then we might discuss the following questions: To whom should these policy initiatives be directed? What should be done in order to ensure or facilitate their implementation? Who should shoulder different responsibilities and how? Or perhaps from a somewhat different perspective, how should the policies be constructed and focused in order to ensure their positive and substantive impact?

These questions derive partly from two problems? One is the distance between those who make the policy on the one hand, and both those who are meant to implement it and benefit from it, institutions, industries and individuals. The other problem is the related issue of the capacity and the understanding of the sense of urgency among those agencies and potential participants. Thus we ask: Who are going to implement the policy and do they have the professional and financial means to do it?

We can divide our discussion on policy into two basic categories: a) What should the policies look like and b) who should implement them? These are different but obviously related areas for debate. As our emphasis is on policy we might dwell on both of them but separately. To the former, we have responded in general terms, but we also want to look specifically at the challenges “to bring the worlds of education, training and work force closer ...” and “to develop the right mix of skills.” How shall the policies on these issues be framed in order to have a real, pragmatic thrust? The latter category of questions refers to the term “we” used in the expert group report. Can we specify the agencies that are intended to become responsible and the extent to which they attend to and develop their operations in order to respond to the policies? It is suggested here that these latter questions should be taken very literally, and it should be delineated who the appropriate partners are.

The actors. On the basis of these questions, we should enter a discussion about who are the actors or agencies that should shoulder the responsibility of implementing the policies. There are, as is both explicit and implicit in the background reports, a variety of agencies who should participate actively in the policy implementation. These range from the basic school system (kindergarten to university), through the semi-formal or informal system of continuing education, to industry in general, represented by the work places themselves. But are they equipped to do

³⁰ In fact the opposite conclusion has been reached, i.e. that a number of policies have been based on faulty analysis (Jónasson, 2002).

respond to this challenge? What understanding, professional capacity and institutional frameworks (e.g. within enterprises, large and small) do we require in order to enable these actors to shoulder these responsibilities, with flexibility and vigour? What kind of incentive schemes, if any, are needed? Would the participation of both the labour market and the work force be entirely on a voluntary basis? Is it necessary (or conceivable?) to construct some kind of institutional scaffolding in order to enable the labour market to shoulder its responsibilities, in terms of development, obviously less structured than the school system (which the labour market perhaps does not want in any case)?

The skills. Whether we talk about skills or competencies, there is apparently a consensus that there is lack of vital ingredients in the basic education of European citizens. It varies how dramatically this is stated. There are certainly pressing questions that should be discussed. But are we, indeed, clear about what we mean by these new skills? Can we move beyond the rhetoric and explicate what these skills mean? Do we know how the programmes should be implemented? Who have the grasp and expertise to introduce them into our educational systems and into the operations of the labour market? Or, in more direct terms: are we confident enough to explain how these shall be taught, fostered and evaluated, whether in the schools or in the labour market. Do we know who shall do it and what preparation they might have? How do we balance the new competencies with the older more traditional curricula? Are the new competencies transparent enough, defined well enough, in fact manageable to the extent that they can gradually replace the more traditional subjects, disciplines, or values of our educational systems?

For all of these areas it is imperative to attempt to figure out what are the pressing questions. We should be preoccupied with working hard to state the questions clearly and perhaps provocatively. They should be posed as constructive reflection or criticism. They should call for a heated debate; because we want to approach the core of the educational problems we are dealing with and find out all the weaknesses of our current systems and discourse. Because we want to improve, to take important steps forward, but we don't do that if there is nothing to improve.

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