

COGNITIVE AND INTERPERSONAL COMPETENCES AS IMPORTANT FACTORS FOR 'EUROPE 2020' AND 'NEW SKILLS FOR NEW JOBS' STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

In the current paper one is to focus especially on two of the eight key competences, i.e. the ones devoted to cognitive (learning) and interpersonal skills, seen as important factors for further development of the 'new skills for new jobs' agenda and 'Europe 2020' strategy. Among other issues the paper will reflect some results of two recent international conferences devoted to the 'new skills' issues (held in Gothenburg in October 2009 and in Brussels in February 2010) as well as on a need to develop 'new' jobs serving in a professional way a growing demand for 'learning-to-learn' skills as well as high quality measuring (assessment) of 'soft' competences, talents and individual predispositions of potential employees.

INTRODUCTION

We all have faced the crisis. And the crisis seems to be a 'key' or 'front' word in most of discussions or debates carried out presently at a European level. The focus in the debates is on how to overcome the current situation and manage to 'push' development of the European Union not only in order to 'survive' and fix all financial, economic and other problems but also help society of the 'old continent' not to become (through the results of the crisis) the population of 'the lost decade' (2010-2020).

Some new 'roads' and developing 'fresh', holistic and more human than economic-oriented approach to the current dramatic situation may only guarantee a real progress in our society.

Educational and labour market problems, lack of jobs for young people (often well educated) combined with an extension of the working age for mature part of the society as a result of demographic changes and aging population cannot be discussed without taking care not only of developing lifelong learning schemes and investing in ‘white’ (i.e. medical) personnel but also through looking in-depth into new possibilities for youth to combine their working life with starting family and growing-up children.

Flexicurity, which is to guarantee flexible and secure labour market for all, will not reach its targets with forgetting about basics of ethics, social communication rules and in that context about such observed issues as mobbing (especially towards matured staff), gender inequality, or lack of privileged teleworking conditions for young mothers or those taking care at home of elderly relatives or handicapped members of their families.

Developing the “right” mixture of skills and competences, even by means of top-level advanced surveys and technologies, involvement and collaboration among all stakeholders and - as a result – a full compatibility between the labour market and education and training sectors will not give the proper result without ensuring people that they can have not only a proper balance between their working life and education and training but first of all a desirable life balance.

‘Do we live to learn and work – or – do we learn and work to live ?’ is a crucial and urgent question to answer at the edge of the first decade of the 21st century.

Social and ‘human’ aspects of economic changes as well as education and training issues are visible to some extent in the two strategies we are going to look at, i.e. ‘New Skills for New Jobs’ and ‘EUROPE 2020’.

OVERVIEW OF ‘EDUCATION AND TRAINING’ ASPECTS OF THE TWO STRATEGIES: ‘NEW SKILLS FOR NEW JOBS’ AND ‘EUROPE 2020. A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth’

Keeping in mind that the problem of our aging population (by 2020 the working age population is to be reduced by about 2 million), which without

taking radical steps and initiatives is not going to change for better but rapidly go worse over the next decades, we have to acknowledge that changes in educational, training and labour sectors are not only big challenges and targets for us and the whole after-crisis European economy and development, but simply a must, our “to be or not to be”. Within that theme a very special place has to be given to a problem of new skills which have to be developed consequently and continuously in order to serve ‘new jobs’ and new demands of our changing world.

An initial point for discussion during the conference in February 2010, and among experts who prepared a special report titled: ‘New Skills for New Jobs: Acton Now’ was a statement “Europe’s ‘inconvenient truth’ is that we are not sufficiently skilled”. Humanization of work and problems of values and ethics in the whole process of working new skills and competences have been also tackled.

The reporters pointed crucial features of the ‘New Skills for New Jobs’ strategy which have not reached a satisfactory level yet and have to be worked on intensively in the coming years. Among them there are the following issues:

- full recognition of prior learning, competences and qualifications acquired outside the school system, and also during different kinds of on-the-job-trainings;
- transformation of public institutions into “modern, flexible and adaptable service providers”;
- appropriate matching of skills and jobs;
- ensuring adequate motivation to enable the long life learning process (through better incentives, better advisory services for individuals, raising awareness about schemes created to guarantee recognition, certification and counseling or guidance);
- introducing common skilled-based qualifications measures;
- implementation of experimental elements and innovative solutions: “to make workplaces more receptive to receive students for learning practice, to make education programmes more receptive to include work-related components”
- creation of so-called T-shaped individual profile / skills portfolio: specific knowledge and skills are to be combined with essential transversal skills;
- upgrading (and starting to teach at an early stage) such competences as creativity, innovation and entrepreneurial ability;

- paying special attention to Qualifications Frameworks, well-defined learning outcomes/results, appropriate matching of learning activities with the envisaged learning outcomes, introducing adequate assessment methods

There are three priorities set in the document / presentation prepared by Mr J.M. Barroso for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, described in the 'EUROPE 2020' strategy (presented during an Informal European Council on 11 February 2010). Two of them, mentioned below, are directly linked to the areas of education, training, and employment as well as interaction among them, which are to guarantee successful overcoming of the still existing in Europe poverty, and creating a well educated, innovative, inclusive and skilled (also 'digitally') and high-employed society:

1. Growth based on knowledge and innovation (with such elements as: **innovation, education and digital society**)
2. An inclusive high-employment society (with emphasis on such components as: **employment, skills and fighting poverty**)

Among other facts given in the presentation there are two following ones:

1. lifelong learning scheme benefits mainly better educated people whereas about 80 million people in Europe have only low/basic skills;
2. "by 2020, 16 million more jobs will require high qualifications, while the demand for low skills will drop by 12 million jobs"

It has to be added that demand for 'middle-level' skills will stay more less the same. For such forecast there seem to be just one solution, i.e. going one step up with own skills and qualifications. Up-grading process will be important for both groups: for those with low competences who have to go for the middle level, and for some 'middle' and 'high' ones who have to go up or forward as well to satisfy the needs occurring at the labour market. Also less clerks and more specialists will be required, so a lot of desirable skills and competences will become more sophisticated, specific jobs oriented.

Among seven leading projects described in the 'EUROPE 2020' strategy there are two directly related to education, i.e. "youth on a way" and "program aiming at new competences and employment". Both of them deal with extending connection between educational sector and labour market, based on innovation, creativity, quality, effectiveness, wide introduction of

flexicurity (among other initiatives based on extension of the working age and better combining the working life with the private life). – The programme is in general much more ambitious than the Lisbon Strategy which – as we know especially through the crisis – has not fully worked.

Apart from some discussable weaknesses (like not fully respecting the subsidiarity rule) the Strategy includes very valuable points which hopefully push the sectors of education, training and labour market on a right track in the coming future.

The good points include among others: introducing to official learning programmes at schools elements of creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship, upgrading general quality level of education as well making an entrance of high school pupils and students into the labour market smoother (for example through efficient service of professional career/job/advisory centres, pedagogical and psycho-pedagogical support, interdisciplinary and holistic approach in a daily teaching routine).

Another important issue stated in the Strategy is to continuous teaching of 'new skills' to adults who have already finished their formal education, and need to up-grade or develop their skills and competences, with full recognition of different forms of informal learning.

Extension of working age will result with a need to learn new competences through the whole life, and clearly understand that necessity. Therefore a lot of attention is paid in the Strategy to proper motivation and incentives, such as: tax reliefs, learning vouchers, co-investments etc.

The Strategy stresses also a need to create a partnership of different stakeholders: representatives of educational and training sectors as well as the representatives of the labour market, including private persons, to plan in advance demands and needs in the field of education and training in order to make them compatible with demands of the labour market, and avoid any mismatches.

Other important topics tackled within the Strategy are: social/pension security system combine with flexible labour market, structural funds seen as a key factor to achieve the set goals, and eventually working out a transparent and clear tool for a common language to describe aims of education, trainings and jobs, i.e. a set of common European regulations for competences and jobs called ESCO (European Skills, Competences and Occupations taxonomy). – Discussion on the theme, started in Brussels in

March 2010, are to be continued through the second half of 2010 and 2011. “ESCO is a key priority for the Commission in the context of ‘New Skills for New Jobs’ and ‘EUROPE 2020’”.

TWO OUT OF EIGHT: COGNITIVE AND INTERPERSONAL COMPETENCES SEEN WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE TWO EUROPEAN STRATEGIES

We all know the eight key competences: communication in the mother tongue, communication in foreign languages, mathematical competences and basic competences in science and technology, digital competence, learning to learn, social and civic competences, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and expression.

Although they are different we may all agree that they are equally important for different reasons. There is also clear mutual liaison among the competences, which are often supporting and overlapping each other. Some basic skills like literacy, numeracy or ICT essentials enable further learning. Numerous transversal features such as: problem-solving, taking initiative, creativity or critical thinking are present in most of the eight competences. So why two of them: learning to learn and social and civic competences (which might be called interpersonal competences) are so “special”, and could be seen as essential factors for the European strategies ?

Because ability to learn, to make best of our brain is the basis for everything else, is essential to work better, be productive, and – above all - be satisfied with own work. “Learning to learn support all learning activities”

People who are now in their 40s or 50s, important part of working force for next years, have not been taught how to learn at schools. Within some informal educational schemes they may now discover (along with children and youngsters who have also started to pay attention to that competence) how the brain works, how to make the best of it, how to ‘train’ own intelligence, how to retrieve and select information, to take notes in an efficient way, to memorize important facts, to read faster, and how to learn new competences and skills in a more efficient, easier and more pleasurable way. – It is therefore crucial to pay more attention to that competence as without it other things will not reach their full potential and work properly.

Ability of learning is at the beginning of changing one's life, getting new skills, finding a new profession – and become more a job shaper than a job seeker. At the other end of that process there is something 'surrounding' or 'closing' our potential, making sense of all gained competences – and that is a whole scope of our interpersonal, social and civic, skills. – We do learn to achieve personal development but we also have to act as a society and citizens, not just a sum of individuals. All competences (eg. knowledge of foreign languages, a proper communication in an own tongue, cultural awareness and expression, digital competences, mathematics seen as ability to respect of truth and searching for reasons, taking initiative and entrepreneurship) should lead us to a better life, a better work, and also a better coexistence and relationships with other people. For the future of the European society even more important than 'technical' and job-specific skills and even the whole economic growth are such skills and abilities of the citizens as: managing own feelings; tolerance; empathy; overcoming prejudices and inequality; respecting different views, value systems and religions; respecting privacy, ability to work in a team etc. Without them other competences may not be very useful and could just stay a theory.

When we know how to learn, and achieve a satisfactory level of interpersonal skills, we will know how to change theoretical issues and goals into practice. And when we talk about skill mismatch we cannot really include into it learning to learn and social/civic competences. - Nobody can be overeducated in regard to those issues.

There is an urgent need to 'develop' already known but still 'new' jobs, such as: adult trainers, mentors, advisors (especially job advisors) and coaches (dealing with business, managerial and leadership skills, with effectiveness and integral personal development, helping others to find life-balance and work on their interpersonal, cognitive and other skills).

Especially important is quality of professionalization for those dealing with assessment of others' competences and qualifications as far as job competences and different 'soft' skills are concerned. It could be essential for discovering talents and individual predispositions of potential employees in the context of requirements given by some specific employers. The proper evaluation of the individual predispositions and qualifications may have a very important effect on choosing and changing a job, sometimes going back to work after a long break or starting an own business. It helps to realize if we are 'made' to devote ourselves to creative/artistic work, to social contacts based professions or perhaps to areas of education or research. – Through looking into our cognitive potential, and getting to know

how our brains work, we may learn how to be more effective in our approaches to learning new things (eg. languages, basic or advanced digital competences, creative thinking, auto-presentations skills, body language etc.), and get to know better the process of learning (and retrieving/selecting information, taking notes through using mind maps, taking advantage of memo-techniques etc).

There are a lot of 'soft' or so-called 'horizontal' competences to be learned if the target of common level of key competences knowledge and usage is to be reached. Among them are: self-discipline, self-confidence, time management, stress management, leadership, assertiveness and manipulation techniques resistance, ability to listen in an active way, an ability to speak in a such way others want to listen to us, abilities to discuss and negotiate, to defend their opinions but be also open towards a possible compromise, to respect other views and cultures etc.

Other important abilities to learn and taught, and be applied in our daily routines at work and also at home, and during different interpersonal contacts are: openness, innovation, emotional intelligence as well as developed skills of analyzing, summing-up, planning and reflection. Without them, without our conscious effort to take a direction towards activeness and challenges our knowledge, experience, and even individual predispositions and talents may fast 'get old' and become not quite useful.

'New jobs' need to be developed in a professional, high quality standards way, combining theory and practice ('train-the-trainer'), and with clearly defined ethical principles. Well prepared trainers, ready to get into a lifelong learning process themselves have to apply in their daily work (which should not really become a 'routine') different and innovative pedagogical and psychological methods, such as learning-to-learn, learning-by-doing, peer-learning, step-by-step learning, project-based learning, learning through experience, internships, apprentices, multi-intelligence theories, assessment centre, sociological techniques, memo-techniques, interactive tools and group activities such as role-playing or brain-storming etc. Methodology as well as all pedagogical and psycho-pedagogical aspects of adult learning are very important for specific character of the target group, informal education standards and its recognition.

CONCLUSIONS

These days, in an after (?)-crisis circumstances, we not only have to protect our environment, take care of a “smart, sustainable and inclusive growth” and do our best to get back to a progress path, but above all we have to remember that we are the main part of this environment and the most important ‘component’ of sustainability. Therefore we have to concentrate above all on protecting our lives, and take care of a ‘shape’ of our lives. To understand this, to get involved in this challenging process one has to develop an ability to learn in an continuous way about themselves and about the surrounding world, and also to create an appropriate scope of ‘horizontal’, cultural, civic and social competences. This is really a crucial issue for the future of present generations who have to find a right balance between their work, training and education and their personal and social life, between ‘have and know’ and ‘be and let others be’.

Lifelong learning is our future. Key competences are essential to face challenges of the coming years and decades. But people have to find ‘deeper’, well proved, not only economic-reason based motivation for their participation in a continuous learning process, with openness towards flexibility and mobility at the labour market, and friendly attitude towards other people, in a spirit of well understood tolerance and democracy. They have to see a true sense in the ‘learning society’ vision, directed towards the future but not forgetting about the past, and learning the right lessons from it.

Not only education-training-work but also, or above all, education/training-work-home/family life balance is important.

Let’s not only keep our fingers crossed for the success but be personally involved in the process of changes in the education and labour market sectors which are very challenging and have to be very dynamic and carried out with great responsibility and care.

In our undertakings and initiatives let’s keep in mind a very simple and short sentence included in the presentation of Mr J.M. Barroso in February this year:

“2020 starts now”.

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