

Active ageing in a greying society: training for all ages

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SUMMARY

With the ageing of society, policy-makers are aware of the need to retain older workers in employment. Across Europe, lifelong learning is increasingly important. Adults who remain active longer need (re-)training to maintain their productivity. However, vocational training tends to decline with age. The article analyses European employment policy developments, the ‘active ageing’ concept and life course changes, and examines the question of whether the productive potential of older people is substantially impaired by age per se. The role of the social partners regarding the possible benefits of vocational training for a high-skilled workforce is analysed. The article challenges traditional mindsets about older workers and advocates an age-neutral approach of vocational training: learning must become a habit that is not moderated by age.

Overview of the main labour market changes in Europe

European employment policy developments

Labour markets in the European Union are experiencing substantial and rapid change. Key drivers include sophisticated technology and innovation, which increasingly facilitate the tradability of services. The revised *European employment strategy* has taken these developments into account and foresees a significant increase in the employment rate of workers. Increasing employment of all workers, in particular women and older people, is a key element of EU strategy for sustainable social security systems at the height of population ageing.

While the need to boost employment is an urgent issue of common European interest, employment policies – including vocational training programmes – come within the exclusive competence of the Member States and national social partners. Employment policies at European level remain vague about how to promote training programmes. With the *Open method of coordination* ⁽¹⁾, the European Commission encourages Member States to cooperate on social policy issues while taking into account the diversity of national situations.

According to the European employment guidelines, EU Member States should provide incentives for employees to retire later and in a more gradual way, plus incentives for employers to retain older workers, i.e. workers aged 55-64 ⁽²⁾. The guidelines lay out different, but complementary approaches: employment policies should promote training, lifelong learning strategies and active labour market policy measures for everyone regardless of their age.

The focus of the European Employment Strategy is on raising employment, not solely on reducing unemployment. Increased employment of older workers is seen as a means of easing the burden of societal ageing and demographic change in Europe ⁽³⁾. The two groups considered to have greatest potential were women and older workers. But while promoting employment opportunities for women has ranked high on the European Employment Strategy agenda from the very beginning, this has not been the case with the employment of older workers ⁽⁴⁾. Since 2002, the European employment guidelines have included two quantitative targets for older workers, both introduced as part of the Lisbon strategy: the first is to raise the employment of older workers in the EU to 50 % on average by 2010; the second is to increase the effective average retirement age by five years by the end of the decade. EU average employment was 59.9 years in 2001; the target is 70 % by 2010.

In line with its objective of becoming the most competitive knowledge-based economy by 2010, the Lisbon strategy was reborn in

⁽¹⁾ The new open method of coordination (OMC) was laid down at the Lisbon Council meeting in 2000. The summit proposed that this method should facilitate work on social protection 'as a means of spreading best practice and achieving greater convergence towards the main EU goals' in areas where Community powers are limited. See also: Pochet, 2001, pp. 291-307.

⁽²⁾ Some 79.7 million older workers had a job or a business activity in the EU-25 according to a Eurostat survey of 2004, News Release 112/2005, 8 September 2005.

⁽³⁾ European Commission Communication *Increasing the employment rate of older workers and delaying the exit from the labour market*, COM (2004) 146, March 2004.

⁽⁴⁾ The first Employment guidelines for 1998 hardly referred to them.

2005 with its economic goals prioritised and a new focus on national 'ownership' and reform commitments (Pisany-Ferry and Sapir, 2006). The new strategy, widely known as 'Lisbon 2', further stresses the need for concrete structural labour market reforms combining market flexibility and security of working conditions. In its Annual progress report on the Lisbon strategy of 2006, the European Commission acknowledged that progress on growth is still uneven and the spotlight is now moving to delivery of results. The Commission has redefined the four priority areas to make investment in education and research the first, with the aim that it should be increased to 2 % of growth domestic product (GDP) from the current 1.28 % by 2010. Improving the adaptability of workers involves a broad range of actions, supported by the EU through legislation and Community funds ⁽⁵⁾.

In January 2007, a new European Structural Funds programme began for 27 Member States. A new set of regulations governing the funds brings some of the biggest changes in over a decade. The European Social Fund (ESF) should contribute to achieving the objectives of the Lisbon strategy for growth and jobs. The new regulatory framework is more focused than the current one: the ESF will be a significant funding and policy tool for worker skills development.

An important part of the EU's social agenda 2005-10 was the European Commission's consultation on the need to review current labour law systems; this concluded at the end of March 2007. The *Green paper on modernising labour law to meet the challenges of the 21st century* ⁽⁶⁾ asked what role law and/or collective agreements might play in promoting access to training over the course of a fully active working life. The Commission is preparing a follow-up communication based on the responses received. It remains to be seen if the document will take on board the importance of access to training throughout the whole life cycle.

The active ageing concept

Demographic changes in the 21st century are confronting European countries with a substantial challenge. These developments are part of a wider trend: the world in general is witnessing, or will witness, demographic ageing over this century. Age has an impact on the ability to work and research by the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health suggests that individual differences in work ability – a sum of indi-

⁽⁵⁾ The new European structural programme 2007-13.

⁽⁶⁾ COM(2006) 708 final; see the EU Commission website:

http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/labour_law/green_paper_en.htm

vidual and work-related factors – depend on the type of work: ‘white collar’ office work or physically demanding work. The findings underline the need for individual arrangements in working environments when people are getting older (Ilmarinen, 2001; Reday-Mulvey, 2003). Proper training programmes and individual training incentives would also support the increased heterogeneity of the older labour force at a higher age. New forms of so-called end-of-career management must take these differences into account to avoid resistance from parts of the working community and the costly strikes that some countries have already experienced, for example among truck drivers, craftsmen and firemen.

The concept of ‘active ageing’ was originally developed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and launched at the Second assembly on ageing in Madrid in April 2002. WHO offers the following definition: ‘Active ageing is the process of optimising opportunities for health, participation and security in order to embrace quality of life as people age’ (7). WHO underlines the close link between activity and health, suggesting how important it is to enhance the quality of life far into old age by maintaining mental and physical well-being throughout the life cycle. It is a preventive concept which means involving all age groups in ageing actively during the entire course of life. The focus is on enablement – restoring function and expanding the participation of older people – instead of disablement, the increasing needs of the elderly and the risk of dependence.

European institutions have also taken the active ageing strategy on board, with the notion being introduced in the guidelines for 1999 and 2000. In its active ageing strategy the European Commission emphasises a participatory approach giving citizens adequate opportunities to develop their own forms of activity. The focus is shifted from the elderly as a separate group and directed at all citizens, since everybody is ageing all the time. From 2001 onwards, ‘active ageing’ was given more prominence by making it a separate guideline. The 2001 guidelines stress the need for ‘in-depth changes in the prevailing social attitudes towards older workers (...) to raise employers’ awareness of the potential of older workers’, as well as a revision of tax-benefit systems to reduce disincentives and make it more attractive for older workers to continue participating in the labour market’. The Employment Taskforce’s report *Jobs, jobs, jobs: creating more employment in Europe* of 2003 paved the way for active ageing becoming a top priority for the EU. It remains to be seen if the active ageing approach will gradually help to replace

(7) Website of WHO: www.euro.who.int/ageing

today's glorification of youth with values of solidarity and a more age-neutral approach in employment and human resources practices. The European Commission's orientation towards active ageing policies, i.e. the strategy of mobilising the full potential of people of all ages, seems to be the right policy for the future.

Continuous vocational training in the knowledge society

Adapting education and training for the knowledge society

Globalisation and the consequent intensification of direct competition have had a large impact on work organisation, including on the quality of supplies. Vocational training practices and policies have to respond to changes in working conditions. The main developments in the late 20th and early 21st centuries have been characterised by the term 'knowledge society', though to date, there appears to be no clear definition of what the knowledge society might be (European Foundation, 2005). A useful way of thinking about the knowledge society, however, is that it involves several significant trends. The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions tried to summarise the main trends in the *Handbook of knowledge society foresight* ⁽⁸⁾ as follows:

- the development of the information society based on the utilisation of new information technologies (IT); the information society appears to be a condition for a knowledge society;
- further to the implementation of information technologies, the increased importance of innovation as a source of corporate and national competitiveness;
- the development of service economies, where the bulk of economic activity takes place; more value can be generated by distribution, marketing and services rather than manufacturing;
- knowledge management, i.e. efforts by organisations to apply new information systems to make them more efficient by using their data resources and human resource development;
- the need for lifelong education and training, enabling people to become adaptable and to acquire new skills and knowledge (European Foundation, op. cit).

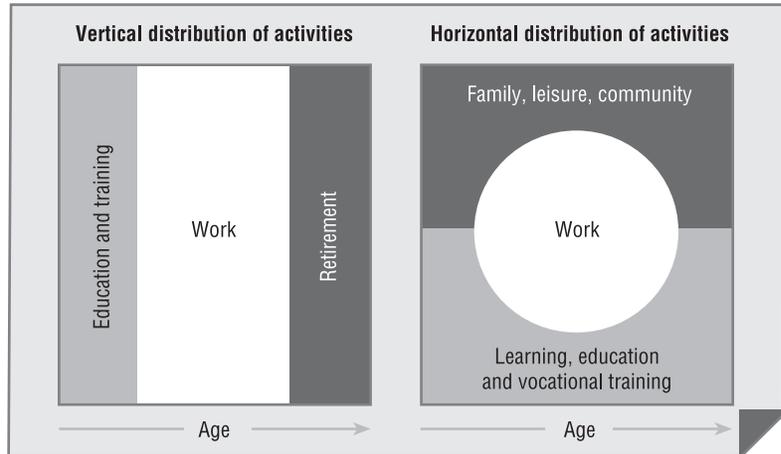
⁽⁸⁾ The handbook was issued in 2003 and is available in electronic format only:
www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef0350.htm

The High Level Group, installed by the European Commission and chaired by Wim Kok, required urgent action regarding the knowledge society as one of five policy areas. In its mid-term review *Facing the challenge: the Lisbon strategy for growth and employment* (November 2004), the expert group recommended fostering lifelong learning for all and adapting education and training systems to the knowledge society. Investment in human capital thus becomes a condition *sine qua non* for future competitiveness. By extending training opportunities, making employees more employable, the stage can be set for more flexible and hence more productive employment systems. However, it appears to be crucial to extend (re)training opportunities until the end of people's careers and not to reduce them from the age of 50 onwards.

The horizontal distribution of activities during the course of life

Most industrial societies have been experiencing a trend towards diversification and individualisation of leisure time activities and training patterns. Traditionally, citizens' life-cycles have been vertically divided into education, work and retirement. This perspective – deeply rooted in the citizens' mindsets – no longer corresponds to the course of life of today's workers. The transitions between the various stages of life have become more complex. Entering into the labour market and pursuing a career is often interrupted by periods of vocational training or maternity/paternity leave. Likewise, discontinuity through new employment arrangements, such as short-term project contracts or unemployment, plays an increasing role in work biographies (European Foundation, 2004). The demarcation between working as an employed wage earner and being self-employed has become difficult to draw in many countries. In addition, continuous vocational training has gradually become a common feature in modern working life.

Indeed, a new perception of the course of work/life is needed. In its *Green paper on demographic change*, the European Commission concludes that one of the key priorities for the return to demographic growth is to find 'new bridges between the stages of life' and to alter 'the frontiers (...) between activity and inactivity' (European Commission, 2004). In the past decade, large parts of the socio-economic research community began promoting a horizontal life cycle approach (see Figure below) (Reday-Mulvay, 2005, p. 21).

Figure 1. **Activities over life cycles**

Source: Reday-Mulvay, International Association for the Study of Insurance Economics (Geneva Association); further developed by the author.

To transform the horizontal life cycle approach into concrete, consistent practice, large advances must be made to implement and coordinate employment, family, social and financial policies. However, serious knowledge gaps still persist regarding new work biographies in a comparative perspective. Each generation ages differently. This is called the 'cohort factor' by sociologists: each cohort or generation is affected by its own history. It is therefore very unlikely that today's children will have the same sort of life cycle as today's adults. Correspondingly, social expectations of workplace training are inappropriate and take time to change. Society is still geared to the ageing patterns of the previous generation. Every generation perceives itself as justifiably different from the preceding generation, but plans as if the succeeding generation will be the same as their generation (see also Handy, 1995).

Research provided by the EU agencies in Bilbao (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work) and Dublin (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions) indicate that older workers' employability can be enhanced by improving the quality of workplaces⁽⁹⁾. It was found that that older wage-earners in low-quality employment with limited training possibilities withdraw from the labour market before the statutory retirement age much more than workers who profit from extensive training programmes until the end of their career.

⁽⁹⁾ According to Art. 137 para. 1 EC Treaty, the Community shall support and complement Member States' activities regarding working conditions.

In developing economic giants like China, governments are now trying to emulate the EU's vocational educational and training policy. However, the worries that highly-skilled European workers might lose their jobs to colleagues from the developing world seem to be exaggerated. The *McKinsey global institute* argues in a large-scale study ⁽¹⁰⁾ that only about 10-13 % of Chinese engineering graduates and highly skilled workers are currently capable of working for western companies in a high-grade job; at the moment their education is often inadequate. Language skills and intercultural competences are lacking; Internet penetration is low in the rural areas. Geography is also imposing limits: in large countries like China and India many graduates live far away from international airports and developed urban infrastructure ⁽¹¹⁾.

Less vocational training for older workers

In the OECD member states, on average 26 % of employees participate in employer-sponsored continuous vocational training each year. Each participant receives on average about 68 hours of training per year (approximately nine working days). In all OECD countries, the incidence of training tends to decline with age: average training participation among workers aged 56-65 is about three-quarters that of workers aged 36-45 (OECD, 2003, p. 240-241). However, the country with the highest continuous vocational training volume (CVT) and the highest participation rate is Denmark, where workers receive on average 36 hours of employer-sponsored CVT per year. In France, since 2004 all employees have been entitled by law to an average of 20 hours' training per year ⁽¹²⁾. Legislation also obliges companies to earmark financial resources for training purposes: the equivalent of at least 1.6 % of salary. In French companies, works councils have to be informed about the aim of the various training programmes.

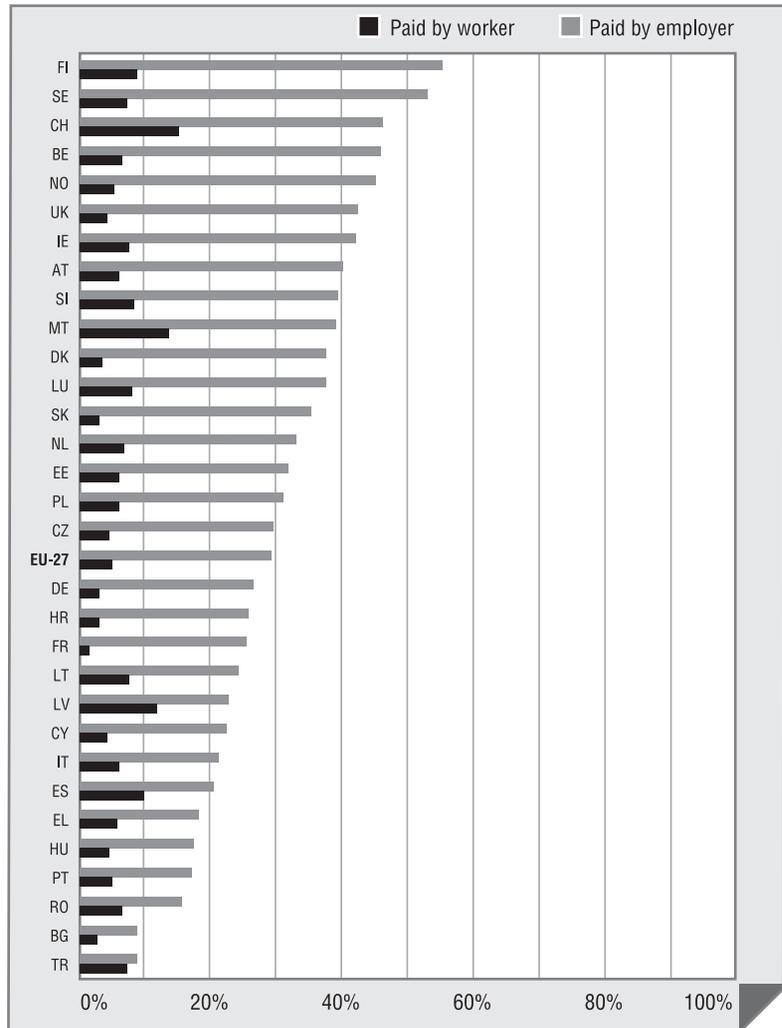
In the Member States of the EU, only 10.8 % of workers and non-active adults participate in formal, non-formal and informal lifelong learning, a long way short of the EU benchmark of 12.5 % participation by 2010. The Member States with the highest attainment in lifelong learning are Finland, Sweden, Belgium, the United Kingdom

⁽¹⁰⁾ The Economist, 7 October 2006, p. 12.

⁽¹¹⁾ In comparison, India's difficulties have more to do with a limited scope of high-tech businesses and poor governance: the country's infrastructure is crumbling and the education system is clearly uneven. Graduate unemployment is 17 % at a time when information technology is booming.

⁽¹²⁾ DIF – *Droit individuel à la formation*; the DIF is supposed to depend on the employee's initiative but the employer has a duty to initiate the training programmes required to maintain people in their job.

Figure 2. Percentage of employees who received training, by country (%)



Source: Fourth European working conditions survey, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2007), p. 49.

and Austria (see Figure 2). In these countries, between 40 and 56 % of workers reported receiving paid training at work. The EFTA-countries Switzerland and Norway have also high training levels. In addition, 15 % of Swiss workers also pay themselves for training schemes. According to the *Fourth European working conditions survey* (European Foundation, 2007) ⁽¹³⁾, less than 30 % of EU

⁽¹³⁾ www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/htmlfiles/ef0698.htm

employees received any type of training at work in 2005. The levels of training have not increased in the past 10 years. There are, however, very substantial country differences. At the bottom of the league are most southern and eastern European countries, where the levels of training are very low, hardly reaching 20 % of employees in Spain, Greece, Hungary, Portugal, Romania and only 10 % of workers in Bulgaria and Turkey. Within the EU, expenditure on continuing training represents only 1-2.2 % of total labour costs.

Giarini and Malitza (2003, p. 9-10) postulate an interlocking system of learning and work, whereby workers in many sectors would alternate between education and work. According to this theory, active people would earn credits for both productive and non-productive periods during their life span to the age of 76. The distinction between work and education would blur, as credits for both would become increasingly interchangeable. Accomplishment in both areas would be evaluated and quantified. In addition to the usual degrees and diplomas, persons would earn 'stars' for continued academic accomplishment – with transferable credits from work. Over a lifetime of creative work and education, a typical person would accumulate credits – over a thousand of them for an academically ambitious person by the age of 76 – and a corresponding number of award stars.

Is it more difficult for older workers to learn?

An important aspect of ageing and productivity is whether older workers have greater difficulty in learning new skills. Their educational needs are known to be different from those of younger people. Training for older workers must be designed to take full advantage of their experience and knowledge while introducing to them new ways of thinking and acting. 'Trainability', i.e. the ability to learn, is not easy to measure. However, the *International adult literacy survey* (IALS) ⁽¹⁴⁾ is an important source of evidence about the relationship between age, productivity and trainability. The IALS indicates that literacy skills improve with practice and deteriorate if not used: phases where workers disengage from learning tend to erode learning habits. A possible lower motivation of older employees to enrol in training activities is often falsely ascribed to their age.

Evidence proves that the productive potential of older people does not appear to be substantially impaired by ageing per se (Warwick Institute, 2006; OECD, 2006, p.2). Workers employed in a learning

⁽¹⁴⁾ The *International adult literacy survey* (IALS) is a seven-country initiative conducted in 1994. Its goal is to create comparable literacy profiles across national, linguistic and cultural boundaries; the survey offers the world's only source of comparative data on participation in adult education and training.

environment appear much less susceptible to a decline in trainability. A decline in performance may be due to skills obsolescence or a burn-out phenomenon which may occur at any age and can be remedied through appropriate training practices or adaptation of working conditions. Trainability is not age-determined but mirrors the work settings encountered during working life. Hence, training and retraining are important factors in enhancing the employability of older workers.

The trend towards early retirement seems to have slowed down or stopped in all European countries. However, reversing this trend is highly unpopular: delaying the effective retirement age – currently at approximately 60 years within the EU – to the statutory retirement age – 65 in several Member States – meets broad resistance. Some evidence suggests that continuous workplace training could encourage workers to stay longer in the labour market.

This theory is supported by the significant link between the level of education and retirement age. According to the Danish report *Seniors and the labour market* (January 2004), employment among persons aged 60-66 with a university education is 52 %, whereas only 16 % of persons in this age category whose education stopped after primary school are still working (see Table below). This gap increases with age. As more educated people reach 50 and 55, prospects for working later in life are improving.

Figure 3. **Employment rate by educational level and age in Denmark (%)**

	Aged	55-59	60-66	67-74
Primary school level		58	16	4
High school level (10-12 years of education)		75	30	5
Short higher education (12-14 years of education)		81	37	13
Medium higher education (15-16 years of education)		86	39	10
Long higher education (17-18 years of education)		91	52	19
Total		74	27	6

Source: Statistics Denmark, Copenhagen 2004 (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, online newsletter, news update: Denmark).

In many countries, increased flexibility in working-time arrangements has led to the creation of working-time accounts for individual employees. About one quarter of large collective agreements in the Netherlands, for example, include the possibility of saving spare time for educational purposes. An employer survey in western Germany reported that 11 % of all companies that offer training and operate working-time accounts offer the option of using the accumulated working-time capital for training purposes (OECD, *op. cit.*, p. 265-266).

The role of the social partners

Social dialogue, i.e. communication between the social partners ⁽¹⁵⁾, is a key component of the EU's employment policies. According to the principle of subsidiarity, decisions should preferably be taken at local, decentralised level. Due to the closeness to working life, social partners are best placed to understand the specific needs of employers and employees and to design and implement appropriate lifelong learning strategies ⁽¹⁶⁾. In employment policy, management and labour is often the most appropriate level of action: when social partners agree on common solutions, they have a better chance of succeeding because the compromise has a more widespread support (Welz, 2007). The role of the social partners should be taken into account when seeking to enhance awareness of workplace learning and its benefits. Successful vocational and adult training schemes are often based on partnerships between business, the public sector, social partners and local third sector organisations: they focus on specific target groups and their individual training needs.

From the trade union side, there is empirical data that unionised employees receive more training than those who are not members of trade unions. Trade unions can improve training outcomes by systematic promotion of learning-conducive workplaces which release the learning potential of employees through an efficient combination of formal, non-formal and informal learning (European Commission, Dion, 2006, p. 38). However, trade unions themselves are often 'ageing' in the sense that union members maintain their membership even after they retire. This is the case in countries such

⁽¹⁵⁾ See the definition of the European Foundation's industrial relation dictionary under www.eurofound.europa.eu

⁽¹⁶⁾ See websites of the European social partners: www.etuc.org; www.unice.org; www.ceep.org; www.ueapme.com

as France, Germany, Italy and Spain⁽¹⁷⁾. According to Tito Boeri, economist at Bocconi University in Milan, Italian trade unions have more retired people than working members⁽¹⁸⁾. As a consequence, the retired trade union representatives in these countries should be aware of the need to promote modern learning-conducive workplaces which they might not have experienced during their own careers.

The EU is supporting the role of social partners in the new Member States and the candidate countries⁽¹⁹⁾. Their expertise is required to implement the *acquis communautaire*, i.e. the complete body of EU legislation. In these countries, however, social partners are rather weak, heterogeneous and fragmented. For example, in Romania, five national trade union organisations coexist while for Hungary the figure is six. Bulgaria and Poland continue to be characterised by dual trade unions (bipolarism)⁽²⁰⁾. Discussions between business and workers are underdeveloped at sectoral bipartite level. Trade union membership in Turkey, for instance, is approximately 7.5 %, much lower than the approximately 42 % of the EU as a whole.

When analysing the case of Finland, an example of a highly competitive economy, a consensual style of dialogue between government and strong employers' and employees' organisations can be observed. Until 40 years ago, Finland was mainly known for its endless forests and the paper and gum industry. Today, Nokia has 32 % of the global cellphone market. Evidently, a strong social dialogue culture is not an obstacle to this success. Correspondingly, the candidate countries, and also some of the central and eastern European Member States and neighbouring countries, have to invest time and money in capacity building to create an efficient social dialogue framework at local, regional and national levels. In some new Member States, well-structured workers' organisations have only recently started to get established. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, for instance, traditional 'enterprise councils' were dismantled, because they were considered as a 'relic of socialism', or because they met with strong opposition from local trade unions.

(17) In France, every trade union has institutionalised unions for retired members, the *syndicats des retraités*. In Spain, employees can maintain their trade union membership after retirement. Nevertheless, they can only participate in the collective bargaining as advisers without voting rights; they cannot be included as candidates to participate in the public administration's representative body elections.

(18) *Financial Times* of 12 November 2003.

(19) Article 137 EC Treaty stipulates in paragraph 1 that the 'Community shall support and complement the activities of the Member States (...) representation and collective defence of the interests of workers and employers, including co-determination'.

(20) European Commission, DG EMPL, *Industrial relations in Europe*, 2004, p. 95.

On the other employers' side, central and eastern European countries have only a short tradition of bargaining due to the complete reorganisation of their economies after the collapse of the Communist regimes. While trade unions are often ready to enter into collective bargaining, employers often are not. In some rural regions of Turkey, the employers' side is still completely missing. In the Czech and Slovak Republics and Poland, however, the government provides considerable assistance to the creation of employers' organisations.

Today many companies are not much in favour of providing older workers with training. Training time is often considered 'lost' as it reduces the time in which the worker can be 'productive'. This view – though convincing at a first glance – seems to be short-sighted: there is substantial evidence that when companies decide to invest in appropriate, tailored, quality training they are compensated by mid and long-term benefits of higher skills and consequent better job performance ⁽²¹⁾. There is clearly a cost involved in upskilling staff, but the cost of inaction is, in most cases, greater.

The social partners can promote learning environments by the implementation of personnel and organisational measures for a modern age-management. They should take into account the characteristics of older employees such as their education and learning histories: workers who are not used to continuous learning might be afraid to engage in training. These fears need to be acknowledged and competitive learning situations must be avoided. Both employers and trade unions should support training measures which take into account that the learning pace varies substantially between individuals. Self-paced learning should be promoted.

Good practices within IT-supported learning initiatives should be promoted. For instance, the eLearning programme 'i-AFIEL' (Innovative approaches for full inclusion in eLearning) ⁽²²⁾ created by the European Commission in early 2007 and run by partners such as the European Institute of Public Administration (EIPA) and the Spanish Region of Valencia is using IT services for lifelong learning focusing on less advantaged social groups (eInclusion).

The machine tools sector of Germany reports that it owes a large part of its international success to the experienced-based 'innovative milieu', founded on cooperation between older workers and new recruits (Cedefop, Dworschak et al., 2006). Social partners

⁽²¹⁾ Warwick Institute for Employment Research (University of Warwick), Economix Research & Consulting Munich, op. cit., pp. 200-202.

⁽²²⁾ See the website www.iafiel.gva.es

should disseminate good sectoral practices of age-mixed teams. Inter-generational transfer of know-how is a key issue for companies since it triggers competitive business advantages. Further initiatives are needed to develop sensitivity and accreditation of workforce diversity in management policies.

A significant proportion of training costs is borne by employers. Social partners should therefore influence governments to introduce tax deductions to stimulate lifelong learning financed by individuals.

Finally, the vocational training market is rather complex in most countries, judged by its capacity to deliver on skills scarcity in the labour market. There is significant room for better performance monitoring of training providers by social partners and other stakeholders. The better the assessment of quality of training programmes, the more the training offer can be used to ensure that workers will be equipped with the right skills.

A refocused European framework: matching labour market needs and training provision

Since Europe is characterised by a great diversity of training systems, the European Commission has recognised the need for increased transparency of worker qualifications by developing a European qualifications framework (EQF) ⁽²³⁾. The core element of this framework is a set of eight reference levels which will act as a common reference point for education and training authorities at national and sectoral level. The eight levels cover the entire span of qualifications from those achieved at the end of compulsory education and training to those awarded at the highest level of academic, professional and vocational education and training.

The description of the EQF reference levels is based on learning outcomes in the EQF, understood as the statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process. Research findings reveal that learning situations need to permit older learners to make links with previous working experience. The training should take account of the worker's practical interests so that what is learnt can be used in practical problem-solving tasks. The focus on learning outcomes reflects an important shift in the way education, training and learning is conceptualised and described. This policy change introduces a common language allowing qualifications to be compared according to their content and

⁽²³⁾ Proposal for a *Recommendation on the establishment of the European qualifications framework for lifelong learning* (COM(2006)479 final), 9 September 2006; see also the Commission's website: http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/eqf/index_en.html

profile and not according to methods and processes of delivery.

At the ministerial meeting in Helsinki on 5 December 2006, the European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training (VET), the European social partners and the European Commission reached the conclusion that more attention should be paid to the image, status and attractiveness of VET⁽²⁴⁾. As a further European tool paving the way towards a European VET area, the *Helsinki communiqué* emphasises the development of the European credit system for VET (ECVET)⁽²⁵⁾. Since vocational education and training does not fall under the exclusive competence of the Community, the task will now be to improve coordination and trust between the stakeholders at sectoral, national and European levels and to implement the objectives of the Copenhagen-Maastricht-Helsinki processes.

Complementing the debate related to the *Green paper on modernising labour law* (European Commission, 2006), the European Commission in June 2007 published the communication *Towards common principles of flexicurity*⁽²⁶⁾ proposing a set of common principles on how to create more and better jobs. The paper suggests a broad approach on what is meant by flexicurity, defining it as an integrated strategy to enhance at the same time flexibility and security for workers and companies. Flexibility is 'not limited to more freedom for companies to recruit and dismiss'; it is more about 'successful moves during one's life course' such as the education-work-transition, from one job to another, between unemployment and work, and from work to retirement. Security, on the other hand, is about 'equipping people with the skills that enable them to progress in their working lives'. The Commission and Member States have reached consensus that flexicurity policies can be implemented across four policy components. One of the components encompasses 'comprehensive lifelong learning strategies to ensure the continual adaptability and employability of workers'⁽²⁷⁾. Also the OECD defines a high level of participation in lifelong learning as a core feature of the flexicurity concept (OECD Employment Outlook, 2005). The Communication states that flexicurity policies encompass

⁽²⁴⁾ *The Helsinki communiqué on enhanced European cooperation in VET*; see website of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Education and Training (Cedefop): www.cedefop.europa.eu/index.asp?section=3&read=2198.

⁽²⁵⁾ http://ec.europa.eu/education/ecvt/index_en.html.

⁽²⁶⁾ http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/news/2007/jun/flexicurity_en.pdf.

⁽²⁷⁾ The paper's three further policy components are: flexible and reliable contractual labour law arrangements, effective active labour market policies (ALMP) and social security systems that encourage labour market mobility and help people to combine work with private responsibilities.

training opportunities 'for all workers, especially for low skilled and older workers'.

The Commission's flexicurity concept recognises the need for labour market actors to become more responsive to socioeconomic changes in times where jobs for life no longer exists for the majority of the labour force. However, implementing the flexicurity concept and obtaining a better match of labour market needs and training provision responds to a number of challenges: flexicurity triggers substantial costs and seems to work only in highly-developed welfare states with generous unemployment benefits, moderate job protection legislation and high trade union coverage. Countries with a weak social dialogue culture or low rates of unionisation seem to face difficulties in finding the right balance between rights and obligations, thus creating the positive interplay between flexibility and security.

Conclusions and perspectives: vocational training for all ages

With the ageing of the labour force, lifelong learning takes on increasing importance. Continuous training keeps peoples' minds sharp and their employability high. Increasing employment among the elderly means taking a lifelong perspective on the need for continuous vocational training; ensuring that across the labour market regular, tailored training becomes a habit for all ages. Training of workers aged 50-plus can both increase their productivity and defer their labour market exit. The social partners have a crucial role in promoting learning-conducive workplaces which release the learning potential of employees.

Regardless of whether decision-makers seek to promote access to training, active ageing policies or flexible working time practices, if they want to involve more elderly citizens in the labour market, the focus should not be limited to the 50-plus age cohorts. Ageing in a healthy way means being active and receiving continuing training input throughout the life cycle. Work adaptability and employability means upskilling and adjusting competences from the beginning of a career path. The above policies can only be successful if they are accompanied by measures that increase the employability of older workers: a holistic policy of change management is needed ⁽²⁸⁾.

⁽²⁸⁾ Regarding suggestions bringing in line the productivity of older workers and related wages policies, see: OECD 2005, p. 5-6, op. cit.

Age still reinforces the inequalities in access to continuing training which separate wage-earners according to their socioprofessional group from the very beginning of working life. Training and the acquired learning outcomes should have a concrete impact on career paths: better links between training and career advancement would undoubtedly help to increase the desire for training at all ages. Such a prospect presumes a new approach to lifelong learning which would envisage training programmes at all ages in the function of qualification levels.

Measures aimed generally at those over 50, denying the multiplicity of strategies, objectives, employment conditions and, above all, career paths, cannot reduce inequalities and are even likely to aggravate them. Employability depends essentially on individual human capital. Paradoxically, efforts to change attitudes by promoting positive images of older people can end up reinforcing age-related stereotypes. Every statement that an older worker is more reliable sends out the message that younger workers are unreliable. The Employers forum on age (EFA), a network of leading British employer organisations, is promoting an even-handed campaign proclaiming that, in the long term, discrimination against younger workers could turn into the biggest issue facing employers ⁽²⁹⁾.

Further research is needed into continuous learning by older workers and the ways in which different sectors are affected by socioeconomic developments towards more knowledge-intensive processes. The employment problems confronting older workers are likely to intensify unless counteractive measures are taken and efforts made to establish age-appropriate human resources policies. Training and other work-related policies must become age-neutral, i.e. an attractive option for younger, medium-age and experienced workers alike.

⁽²⁹⁾ See the EFA's website: www.efa.org.uk

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