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Skills Development and Employability in Europe: The New Skills Agenda's document expertise¹

Doskonalenie umiejętności i zatrudnialność
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– badanie dokumentów

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Abstract: Artykuł stanowi krytyczną analizę dokumentu „Skills Development and Employability in Europe: The New Skills Agenda’s”. Celem rozważań jest refleksja nad 10 obszarami problemowymi, określonymi w dokumencie, ze szczególnym zwróceniem uwagi na implementację wskazanych zagadnień z perspektywy krajów Europy. Rekomendacje przedstawione w odniesieniu do każdego z problemów mogą stanowić istotne wskazówki dla kształtowania wizji edukacji zawodowej nakierowanej na rynek pracy krajów Unii Europejskiej.

When striving to find the best possible solutions to meet the needs of numerous entities: young people and adults, the unemployed, the excluded, employers, government members as well as non-governmental organisations, it is worth referring to the studies which monitor the level of various issues raised by the EU, by particular governments, organisations and associations as well as experts and employers. There are many reports concerning the monitoring of relations between employment and skills, which have been referred to above, help diagnose the current need for skills and competences necessary on the labour market and forecast the direction in which they change². One of the latest is „*Skills Development and Employability in Europe: The New Skills Agenda’s*”, which points out the significance of the issue of competences and skills from the employment perspective. The labour markets of EU Member States

¹ The document was drawn up on 8 September 2016, Brussels, [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/587312/IPOL_STU\(2016\)587312_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/587312/IPOL_STU(2016)587312_EN.pdf) [accessed on: 15 June 2017].

² CEDEFOP, <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/pl/publications-and-resources> [accessed on: 5 June 2017]; Eurydice: <http://eurydice.org.pl/portfolio-types/publikacje-tematyczne/> [accessed on: 15 June 2017].

are certainly affected by a number of factors including the rebirth of national state concepts, which put forward economic nationalism postulates; the deepening global security crisis, the threat to the stability of EU structures, refugee inflow and issues relating to their adaptation to new dimensions of reality, which often lead to marginalising the importance of the civil society and hence the concept of truly democratic states.

The analysed document draws attention to the need to involve European structures in the life-long learning process. It is especially necessary in order to shape the need for education and new life-long learning trends in response to the constantly changing labour market. Nonetheless, one should not forget that it is government structures and non-governmental organisations of a given country which are responsible for implementing new solutions and creating new educational and professional opportunities. For instance, growing unemployment and a difficult situation on the labour market in Poland pose problems for university graduates as regards their chances to find employment after graduation. The discussion becomes even more important since nearly two thirds of employers struggle to find appropriate employees for their companies³. It is worth pointing that the issue of a relatively easy access to education (including training) should not only be perceived from the perspective of institutional availability but also (or maybe even primarily) from the perspective of subjective employee motivation⁴. A growing number of university graduates are aware that the capital of a potential employee applying for a job on the contemporary labour market is not only the ability to think analytically and critically and a set of soft skills (such as communication and team work, task delegation or negotiation skills) but also expe.

Solutions which are put forward in a broader discussion often entail changing the perception of various educational actions by different social groups and obtaining their trust in the proposed solutions, e.g. basic skills level diagnoses (Skills Guarantee, Europass CV, Language Passport), employers' contribution in vocational and dual training, making use of the European Qualification Framework, steps undertaken by Member States' governments (adjustment of European and National Qualification Framework, changes in vocational training systems in the direction of dual and BA level learning: engineer and bachelor degree studies), and supporting STEM Skills (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). Such changes also entail redefining educational paradigms and introducing structural changes in EU Member States. The proposed solutions, based on particular tools will require investments in staff and finance, structural changes, and reforms at the particular Member States' level.

It is worth stressing the strong involvement of EU funds in raising qualifications, however, there are two crucial problems which need to be evaluated here. The first one is lack of real insight into the quality of training programmes and courses. Evaluation questionnaires which are filled in by those who complete such courses contain

³ *Pracodawcy o rynku pracy*, Human Capital Balance Sheet, 2012 www.bkl.parp.gov.pl [accessed on 15 June 2017].

⁴ Czarnik S., Turek K., *Wykształcenie, praca, przedsiębiorczość Polaków*, Report from a population survey conducted in 2012 as part of the 3rd edition of the Human Capital Balance Sheet, Polska Agencja Rozwoju Przedsiębiorczości, Warsaw 2012, p. 9.

leading answers which prove the efficacy of a given course regardless of the participants' actual opinion. Not all training programmes are well-adapted to the actual needs of participants or labour market needs.

Issues presented above in the light of the document analysis raise the following questions concerning the 10 actions⁵ defined on 10 June 2016 as those which are expected to reduce shortage and mismatch of skills to the labour market by promoting ideas and encouraging Member States to implement the assumptions of the Europe 2020 strategy⁶. With respect to the analysed document, we recommend a deepened reflection on the following issues:

How to create a Skill Guarantee for adults with low level of key skills and encourage them to develop writing and reading skills, to develop digital skills, and to take the baccalaureate exam?

From the perspective of a learning society, it is hard to criticise the need to develop basic competences (such as, for instance, speaking, reading, writing, counting). However, it is necessary to make every effort to ensure that every EU citizen's development path provides sufficiently high quality of development in the case of more complex competences. It is therefore recommended to undertake actions aimed not only at developing reading, writing, counting, or computer skills but also a positive motivation and eagerness to learn. Introduction of the *Skills Guarantee* will entail the necessity to teach basic skills (relating to reading and writing, social and digital skills), which one will be able to assess and compare and which will constitute a proof of a certain level of competences.

However, there is a doubt whether it is possible to provide such guarantees at an institutional level. This is confirmed by the discrepancy following from various research results, according to which the majority of educational institutions believe that their graduates are prepared to work, however, when one asks graduates themselves, this view is shared by only a little over 1/3 of respondents.

How to analyse the EQF so as to better understand and use currently available skills and qualifications?

It seems that the framework should constitute only the basis and concern the assessment of the basic set of skills. It is also worth paying attention to the fact that European and national skills agendas (qualification frameworks) should constitute the basis for competitiveness on the labour market and fitting into a specific/desired model should give a real possibility to successfully become part of that market. There is a certain risk that strongly formalised processes or stringent skills cataloguing will cause people to expect ready-made solutions and guarantees without any personal involvement or com-

⁵ The 10 actions defined on 10 June 2016 are expected to reduce gaps and mismatch of skills to the labor market, it is worth promoting such ideas and encouraging Member States to implement the assumptions of the Europe 2020 strategy. http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-16-2039_en.html [accessed on 10 June 2017].

⁶ Main assumptions of the *Europe 2020* strategy concern supporting any attempts at ensuring the fastest possible recovery from crisis and creating conditions for a more competitive economy with a higher level of employment.

mitment. It is appropriate to reflect on whether the term „European Qualification Framework” is not in itself a self-stigmatising and restricting factor and whether there is actually no doubt that the EQF should become the quality benchmark for potential employees.

It is worth acknowledging the fact that the document draws attention to the need to develop critical thinking skills. It is undoubtedly a legitimate, however, not sufficiently defined, assumption as it is not clarified how this skill could be translated into the educational practice so that it could be verifiable in a standardised manner, in accordance with the assumed trends. One should note that, as regards the selection of development paths, offers of educational institutions and expectations of potential clients do not seem to match.

How to commit employers, corporations, industry, and Member States to the development of digital skills among European employees?

A significant number of employers report that employees lack qualifications, however, there is no clear indication of what skills are missing and no idea how to develop them. In turn, 1/3 of employees claim that their work is not connected with their qualifications. At present, many employers look for „tailor-made” employees to fill vacancies in their companies. From this perspective, job seekers continuously lack sufficient competences (hence constant training, retraining). Not all employers want to invest in an employee who is willing to further develop in a particular company but not on subsequent training courses. Dual learning also provides an opportunity to check one’s professional interests and verify them fairly quickly.

It is extremely important to involve various groups, such as employers, in direct work on NQF and EQF in various economy sectors and then in effectively taking advantage of them. Such a solution may raise optimism: if employers co-create the tools (Skills Guarantee, Language Passport, Europass CV) and the Qualification Framework, they will probably have trust in them and use them when training or hiring new staff.

How to develop skills which are indispensable for the needs of particular economy sectors?

It would be desirable to involve in the fulfilment of this task governments or EU institutions which could work together with employers and co-create applicable tools (Skills Guarantee, Language Passport, Europass CV) and qualifications framework, co-develop vocational education, thus allowing for a harmonious co-existence of the educational and professional market, enabling employers to become educators. Another issue is a lack of precise definition of what support processes should concern.

How to develop a tool for early diagnosis and identification of the level of skills and qualifications of asylum seekers, refugees, and other immigrants in order to provide effective help?

The migration crisis has become a significant problem in the EU today. Certainly, the inflow of refugees constitutes a substantial challenge for the economies of host countries and may constitute a heavy burden for them. In the face of the inflow of people having different cultural and religious roots, it is worth paying particular attention to

adapting the welfare and social system of host countries which accept non-EU immigrants and providing them with mediators coming from the same cultural/religious/ethnic background that the incomers. Examples of countries with the greatest number of refugees/immigrants show that such countries have not fully developed procedures for supporting incoming persons who intend to stay for a longer period. Such persons are usually blocked by one of the strongest barriers, the language barrier, which hinders full social integration and assimilation⁷. Therefore, educational systems of host countries face a particular task of providing incomers with opportunity to develop and reducing (in the future) the need to provide welfare.

Compared to host country children, immigrant children less often attend kindergarten due to weak or lack of knowledge of the host country language. Consequently, they are placed in classes below their age or in classes dedicated for children with special educational needs. In addition, more immigrant children attend high schools which have a low level of education and vocational schools. As a consequence, immigrant children less frequently take the bacalaureate exam, which in turn effectively hinders their start in life, studying opportunities, and the chance to find a satisfactory job.

How to promote the Europass programme which is expected to provide tools for presenting self and one's own skills with a biofeedback regarding the skills and qualifications which are necessary from the perspective of possibilities of flexibly finding one's own place on the labour market?

It is worth praising the use of changes proposed in the analysed document, such as Skills Guarantee, Language Passport, Europass CV, European Qualification Framework, in the process of training and seeking future employees. Nonetheless, any tools, which support vocational pre-orientation and education from the Life Long Learning perspective should not only be introduced by persons working for institutions which deal with the labour market, vocational or personal advisers, but also by properly trained teachers. As shown in the report by J. Górniak, the majority of employers wish to recruit people who can work well in a team, good specialists in their respective fields, loyal persons who can flexibly adapt to change⁸.

It seems wrong to introduce so-called soft skills subjects at university level as late as during the final years of studies. Soft skills are an area which takes time and work to develop, with their efficiency stemming from the experience of course participants. It is necessary for various institutions, including secondary schools, to increase the availability of the Europass programme and better propagate it so as to enable persons with lower education to effectively take advantage of the „open” labour market.

How to make vocational education the first choice?

It is necessary to stress the importance of and the need for vocational education as well as to change its perception. Changing the image of VET is strictly connected with

⁷ *Education and the Integration of Migrant Children*, NESSE Report 2008, <http://www.nesse.fr/nesse/activities/reports/activities/reports/education-and-migration-pdf> [accessed on: 8 June 2017].

⁸ see: Górniak J. ed., *Młodość czy doświadczenie? Kapitał ludzki w Polsce*, Human Capital Balance Sheet, PARP Warsaw 2013.

the „economic value” of such qualifications. Nonetheless, it is worth stressing that the attractiveness of vocational training in this respect may vary significantly depending on the specificity of a particular country, awareness of needs, opportunities, industrial traditions, and the aspect of potential remuneration. It is vital to invest in the development of professional competences in order to enable particular economy sectors to develop the most effectively or to prevent the eradication of certain professions. It would be desirable to introduce to educational systems information classes concerning the possibilities and needs of vocational training at an early stage of education in order to present its advantages as well as to undertake activities to increase the importance of VET.

Introducing changes in the vocational education system would require a redefinition of the role of the school and enterprises in the process of vocational training. Those proposals may require a reform of the educational system (new scope of vocational schools, dual schools, and the vocational BA level learning). Considering the increased risk of unemployment among graduates of humanities faculties, it is worth stressing the importance of dual learning for universities and faculties which deal with teaching humanists. Dual learning is successfully introduced by technical universities, technical secondary schools, and vocational schools. However, there are no offers for humanities. The dual system would enable them to know the specificity of the profession better, to gain experience, and potentially verify their professional choices in the future.

How to develop recommendations regarding key competences for the 21st century?

Developing recommendations regarding key competences would primarily require persuading employers and educators that it is a tool which accurately confirms the quality and level of skills acquired by a given person. It also requires modifying the attitude of persons who dropped out of the education system and who do not in any conscious way take advantage of the possibility to develop their competences, with their education experience being negative. In order to achieve satisfactory effects, it would be recommended to introduce appropriate changes in the education process and vocational consulting as well as to provide structuralised aid to the unemployed, the excluded, and migrants. Changes in the educational process should be implemented both at the basic level as well as at the higher and vocational level. Wider propagation of such a self-promotion tool may also bring measurable benefits to persons having low qualifications.

How to track and monitor how graduates of different schools deal on the labour market in order to better diagnose constantly changing labour market needs?

It seems that the assessment of the efficiency of graduates' skills requires developing the ability to „listen to market's needs” in order to prepare the most efficient educational offers, based on a vision of the future, market analysis, and related research. Researchers who study the issue of entrepreneurship⁹ distinguish between two types of entrepreneurial skills: those which are easy to acquire (such as, for instance, functional skills relating to management and business) and those which are harder to acquire (such

⁹ Douglas E., Shepard D.A. (2000) *Entrepreneurship as a utility maximizing response*, Journal of Business Venturing, 15, pp. 393–410, or Rae D. and Carswell M. (2001) *Towards a conceptual understanding of Entrepreneurial Learning*, Small Business and and Enterprise Development, 8, 2, pp. 150–158.

as creativity or innovative aspects of entrepreneurship). However, this subject is very often taught in limited hours, which results in reducing the scope of curriculum to the indispensable information relating to establishing one's own business and obtaining funds to finance the operations. It is also vital to strengthen entrepreneurial attitudes among young people and combine learning with business. As P. Drucker has noticed, an increase in the number of workplaces is a consequence of small and medium enterprises' development dynamics. It is one of indispensable conditions for building an entrepreneurial society¹⁰.

It is worth noting the role of Career Centres in the process of monitoring graduates' experiences. However, the practice shows that it is a fairly difficult task. The majority of university graduates lose touch with their *alma maters*, they do not have any motivation to share their experiences after graduation. A good example are alumni associations or even agreements with graduates on mutual cooperation after graduation.. In the case of vocational or technical schools, this role could be played by companies and enterprises where graduates are employed after completing traineeships and education.

What to propose regarding further analysis and exchange of the best practices with respect to efficient ways to prevent „brain drain”?

From the political and economic point of view, one may ask about the return on investment in education from the perspective of macroeconomic indicators, which often stand in contrast to the motivation, dreams, and abilities of individuals. In practice, this question translates into the operating aspect: how to effectively combine knowledge with practice, verify and develop skills during work. It is necessary to change the awareness, mainly among co-workers/mentors. Return on investment is a key business indicator, therefore, from the employer's point of view, providing opportunity to practice is understandable if it is perceived as beneficial, however, the benefit must also be perceived by the future employee. In a broader perspective, „brain drain” should be prevented by encouragement to adjust the EQF and NQF, transforming vocational training systems and supporting STEM Skills as significant areas of activity which affect national economies. Nonetheless, such changes also entail changing educational paradigms and introducing structural changes, resulting in a need for reform in many EU Member States.

The document analysis has been based on source materials and conclusions from participation in the *New Education Forum* (NEF) concerning „*Counteracting youth unemployment*”, which was held on 17–18 November 2016 in the European Parliament in Brussels. It is worth stressing the dominant theme of the forum, namely that today more than ever we need flexible, well-qualified teachers and that it is difficult to predict what skills will be necessary in the foreseeable future. We are currently facing a snowball growth of knowledge, new technologies and solutions, therefore, we should make sure that future pupils/employees that we teach are able to dynamically adapt to new conditions and acquire new, indispensable skills and qualifications so as to increase their own professional attractiveness.

¹⁰ Drucker P., *Innowacja i przedsiębiorczość. Praktyka i zasady*, PWE, Warszawa 1992, s. 270–271.

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