

## **Getting to work on lifelong learning: policy, practice and partnership (Summarized conference report)**

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**The European Centre for the Development of  
Vocational Training (Cedefop) is the European Union's  
reference Centre for vocational education and training.**

**Implementing lifelong learning is the paperclip that holds everything together – it lies at the heart of an integrated and coordinated approach to meeting the Lisbon goals.**

**Johan van Rens  
Director of Cedefop**

**In line with Cedefop's role as Europe's reference centre for vocational education and training, contributions and discussion at its conference Getting to work on lifelong learning centred on work-related adult learning. Particular attention was given to the learning needs and demands of low-skilled workers and disadvantaged groups, with a specific highlight on the training and employment situation of people with disabilities. Given this explicit focus, conceptual debates about the definition and remit of lifelong learning did not deflect attention away from the main purpose, which was to bridge policy with practice. Three broader kinds of issues were, however, taken up in a number of contributions:**

- **What kind of education and training do knowledge economies and societies require?**
- **How can rates of return on investment in education and training best be envisaged and assessed?**
- **Can public policy as currently practised cope well with implementing**
- **lifelong learning?**

**The view that lifelong learning is vital to Europe's future development was in no dispute, nor that social and economic change now threatens to outpace institutional change, not least in education and training. Many – but not all – commentators are convinced that 'the global knowledge economy is transforming the demands of the labour market in economies throughout the (10) world' (David Fretwell, World Bank) (1). The extent to which citizens in**

**Europe are already experiencing the employment and working conditions that are routinely described in policy documents was queried, given that the majority of the active population still experience greater continuity than change in this respect. The picture may well look different twenty years from now, as younger age cohorts whose trajectories into the labour market are definitely more prolonged, diversified and fragmented move forward through active life. This process will show whether greater change and discontinuity in occupations, employment and career development patterns become characteristic for people of all ages.**

**No less importantly, current changes have implications for what it is that people need to be able to know and do. For example, IT prompts the redefinition of literacy, not only by adding digital literacy but also by introducing the negotiation of diversity into everyday learning processes.**

**Debates over the importance of old vs. new basic skills are misleading, since both are essential and interdependent. In reality, they are intertwined to make up diverse layers of skills and hence literacies of wider scope than in the past.**

**These developments require new approaches to teaching, training and learning throughout**

life, which will ultimately 'create new persons able to plan their personal life and shape the social future' (Christos Doukas, Grek General Secretariat for Adult Education).

Certainly, the 2003 Lifelong Learning Eurobarometer findings show that too many people do not feel comfortable with IT, science and technology, and languages. European citizens are aware of the much-debated 'skills gap' – but for many people, everyday lives at home and work do not yet provide any immediate urgency to change the situation. The Eurobarometer findings also show, however, that motivation to learn begins from the personal and the social, not from instrumental or narrowly vocational reasons. Therefore, employability as such may not be the most promising way to sell lifelong learning to citizens, even if it is a crucial outcome of continued participation in learning throughout active life.

The increasingly central role played by human capital in the economic success of nations and individuals was not in any dispute, either, but many took the view that more attention should be paid to the role of social capital, that is, that social relationships as well as individual attributes play a critical role in economic activity and human wellbeing. Individuals, society and economy all have something to gain from investing energy, time and Money in learning throughout life. This implies shared responsibility on all sides, including for its costs – although what the balance should be and how contributions should be made is nowhere near a consensus solution.

Indeed, there was some doubt about whether the returns on investment in learning are as high as has been declared in some of the research and policy literature, otherwise many more people would invest their time and money to do so, expressed most strongly by Frank Coffield (University of Newcastle; now at the University of London Institute of Education) in arguing that 'economists have seriously over-sold the significance of individual and social rates of return to education. It would be more accurate to claim that investment in education appears to be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for economic growth.'

On the whole, although education and training may be framed by economic development and change, their quality and effectiveness are certainly not economically or indeed technologically determined in a direct or simplistic manner. Gerhard Bosch (Institute of Work and Technology, Gelsenkirchen) pointed out, for example, that barriers to lifelong learning are found not only in the education and training system but also in other subsystems such as work organisation, labour and product markets, industrial relations and innovation policy.

Removing barriers to learning is a crosscutting task that requires cooperation between actors from different subsystems and cannot be left only to education and training specialists.

The major challenge is to develop consistent policies in these different fields, but it is no less important to foresee analysis, monitoring and assessment of their potential impact, consequences and side effects from the outset. By definition, lifelong learning is a major policy challenge because its logic goes beyond that of organised learning in the public – and publicly funded – domain. To what extent will the scope and nature of policymaking itself need to change, if it is to respond appropriately to the differently structured organisation and culture of knowledge societies? This was a question that went well beyond the remit of this conference, but in the light of parallel debates on new forms of governance is one worth posing, especially given the diversification of education and training provision.

(1) Quotations in the text are taken directly from contributions to the conference proceedings available at [www.trainingvillage.gr](http://www.trainingvillage.gr). Text inserts comprise summarised extracts from specific contributions, and the text of this summary report itself synthesises from the full range of contributions.

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