

BULLETIN

Changing patterns of working, learning and development across Europe

Introduction

Since 2000 European Union policy has sought to develop the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world. In line with this goal, member states committed themselves to increasing European cooperation in education and training, but what was missing was some sense of how individuals are putting learning and development to use in their evolving careers over a much longer time period. So the European Commission commissioned a major comparative study, led by IER, of changing patterns of work-related learning and career development in Europe (Brown et al., 2010). The study sought to develop an understanding of the different ways individuals' careers are unfolding over time, how different types of learning interact across the life-course and how they may facilitate mobility in the labour market. This bulletin outlines the key findings and issues arising from the research. The research findings draw upon evidence from a survey and literature review and are exemplified with some 'case histories' of individuals. A brief summary of the survey is as follows: there were 1148 respondents drawn from 10 countries – they were mainly in full-time permanent employment in their mid-career (aged 30 to 55), having achieved skilled worker or graduate qualifications in engineering, ICT or health, working primarily in health, ICT, education or manufacturing. The ten countries surveyed were: France; Germany; Italy; Netherlands; Norway; Poland; Portugal; Romania; Turkey; and the United Kingdom. The sample mainly comprised people qualified for, and in most cases working in, skilled, associate professional or professional occupations, with a small sub-set of people with few qualifications and/or who worked in jobs requiring few qualifications.

Complementary role played by different forms of learning in skill development at work

Respondents, mainly highly skilled workers in their mid-career, acquired the knowledge, skills and understanding necessary to perform in their most recent job in a wide variety of ways (see table 1). That 71% of respondents pointed to the importance of their initial education or training highlighted how this continued to provide an underpinning to their continuing work. The most striking results, however, show the breadth and depth of other forms of learning and development relevant to work. Learning through work by carrying out challenging tasks was important and could result in significant upskilling or reskilling. There could also be 'virtuous spirals' between the successful completion of challenging tasks and opportunities for further learning and development (and possibly promotion).

Learning through self-directed or self-initiated learning, inside or outside the workplace, was highlighted by 55% of respondents. Hence personal agency is important for individuals in responding to learning opportunities at work and/or in seeking to supplement their learning at work in order to pursue personal learning goals. That over fifty per cent of respondents acknowledged that additional training, which was often associated with new ways of working, undertaking a new role or the introduction of new equipment, was important to improve their performance showed that continuing vocational training (CVT) could play an important role in continuing professional development as part of a mix of formal and more informal methods of skill development. Valuable work-related knowledge and skills were also acquired through interactions at work, from learning from others at work or through the use of networks or engagement with clients, and, for almost 50% of the sample, learning through life experience.

Table 1: How did you acquire your knowledge and skills to perform your current or last job? Please tick all that apply. (in percentages)

your studies or initial training	71.5
additional training in your current work	51.6
self-directed/self-initiated learning	55.7
learning through challenging tasks at work	60.9
learning through life experience	47.6
learning from others at work	52.5
learning from networks, working with clients	32.1
other	5.1

Total number of respondents: 1148

The knowledge, skills and understanding to underpin job performance can be developed in different, but complementary, ways, but for some respondents their learning and development was running ahead of opportunities to display their capabilities, as they felt over-qualified to carry out their current duties (see table 2).

Table 2: Matching of skills and duties in current or last job (in percentages)

Need further training to cope with my duties	17.0
Duties correspond well with current skills	40.9
Have skills to cope with more demanding work	37.0
New to the job so need some further training	5.1

Total number of respondents: 1115

Past work experience and formal qualifications were seen as very important to their current job by about 70% and 56% of respondents respectively. Qualifications can also be important in getting an individual a particular job, even if they are not actually directly used in the job.

Overall, for many people learning from past work experience would seem to complement learning represented in formal qualifications in supporting skill development at work. The survey highlighted the variety and depth of learning opportunities in many work settings and the increasing differentiation within and between labour markets in the extent to which learning opportunities are available in work settings. Formal continuing training remains important for many workers, particularly in the context of dynamic and/or uncertain labour markets, as it can be used to up-date existing skills, develop new skills, consolidate and deepen work-related knowledge and understanding and help maintain employability over a longer period of time. Personal professional development often involves complementary forms of learning and development over time.

The importance of episodes of substantive learning and development across the lifecourse

The survey showed that CVT and learning while working were both often significant in many successful careers and individual career biographies showed individuals had episodes of substantive learning and development which often transformed their prospects, while also learning more incrementally through challenging work, as the following example illustrates:

Catherine: a self-employed management consultant learned while working in a series of highly challenging managerial roles in different sectors (local government, education and the third sector) as well as engaging with formal continuing education, interspersed with shorter periods of on and off-the-job training. Some specific formal training was linked to the exercise of new responsibilities, for example, for inspection of services, but Catherine also used participation in formal continuing education programmes for personal development, to broaden social networks and to situate and deepen her developing professional knowledge and understanding in a wider context. She registered for and successfully completed a post-graduate diploma in the late 1970s, a part-time Master's programme in Public Sector Management in the late 1980s and a part-time PhD in Strategic Management in the 1990s.

The above illustration is an example of a recurring theme of how employees working in learning-rich work environments often have a positive disposition towards learning and a proactive approach to career development (Bimrose & Brown, 2010; Brown, 2004). In other cases, where there was only limited challenge in their work activities individuals' engagement with substantive learning and development was a way of upskilling leading to opportunities for more challenging work: for example, a junior science technician took two further technical qualifications and progressed to being a clinical technologist. Some people use intensive episodes of substantive learning for career progression, but others link various forms of learning intensively in different ways, for example, taking many smaller work-related units and qualifications:

Bella: upskilling and reskilling through short courses and substantive continuing education and training in order to underpin a series of promotions from an administrator through trainer, operations manager, regional trainer to business change manager. Bella started work in public administration, completed a technician level qualification and then took a degree in professional learning and development which helped refocus her career as a trainer. While working in a variety of training and management roles over the next decade Bella completed ten certificated units in aspects of general management and human resources development and then took further qualifications in training, coaching and performance improvement to underpin her switch from regional trainer to business change manager.

The above examples illustrate how engagement with formal education and training could transform individual career prospects, but intensive periods of (substantive) learning across the life-course could take various forms: upskilling within recognised career pathways or reskilling associated with a significant career change. The upskilling or reskilling could comprise a formal educational programme, CVT, learning while working or a mixture of two or more of these components.

However, the biographies also give examples of downward career drift where individuals had not engaged in any substantive learning and development since their early twenties – in some cases one consequence had been difficulty in finding new employment after being made redundant, while in others individuals hoped to ‘hang on’ in their jobs until retirement.

Overall, the survey and linked career biographies provided evidence of how people learn across the life-course. Rather than engaging in continuous learning at an even pace every year, people are likely to have periods of more and less intensive learning. The key here is to make a distinction between learning which fits into an individual’s current set of values, attitudes, competences, networks, behaviour and identities and learning which leads to significant personal development or transformation. Respondents to the survey had little difficulty in identifying the role of learning and development in making significant work-related transitions. CVT policy should recognise that while a focus on performance improvement can help individuals develop their current skills, they also need opportunities for personal development which transcend their current roles.

Lifelong Learning rhetoric about ‘learning all the time’ may be insufficient, because although continuing adaptation can keep individuals employable in their current roles, it is periods of intensive learning which tend to be decisive for individuals’ career direction (that is, most people with successful careers display episodic learning: periods of intensive learning interspersed with ‘quieter’ times, which nevertheless can involve learning through challenging work etc.). Lifelong learning itself as a concept has different dimensions including skill growth, personal development and collaborative learning and interventions may be targeted to achieve different ends.

The importance of personal agency

Most respondents were well-qualified and had opportunities for learning and development associated with their jobs, but even so the extent of their engagement with a wide range of learning activities was striking: see table 3.

Table 3: Learning or training activities participated in the last 5 years, several answers possible (in percentages)

off-the job training	38.0
on-the-job training	53.5
self-directed learning in/outside workplace	55.3
learning from networks, working with clients	50.2
learning through life experience	59.6
learning through challenging tasks at work	65.0
learning from others at work	58.2
group training in workplace (by employer)	33.4
individual training at work by mentor/colleague	30.6
course by training organisation at workplace	42.9
course by training organisation outside work	42.5
additional training in your current work	35.9
seminars, conferences	59.6
correspondence course	7.4
training that leads to further qualification	25.5
Other	2.3

Total number of respondents: 895

The rich range of learning activities participated in the last 5 years included both formal education and training activities, with learning through challenging work, networks, from others, experience and self-directed learning also figuring prominently. Interestingly, the reasons they took part in training and learning activities were primarily related to skill development and personal development (see table 4), with over three quarters wanting to develop a broader range of skills and/or knowledge and two thirds wanting to develop more specialist skills and/or knowledge. Eighty per cent of the sample also expected to take part in learning and training activities over the following five years, with the reasons for participating largely mirroring those outlined in table 4.

Table 4: Reasons for taking part in training/learning activities, several answers possible (in percentages)

to develop broader range of skills/knowledge	77.9
to develop more specialist skills/knowledge	67.6
I wanted to change my career options	29.2
to improve my job prospects	43.1
training is required for my occupation	36.2
employer requested/required me to do so	26.7
to perform more demanding tasks at work	45.0
to prepare for a new job or new career	26.8
to obtain unemployment benefits	0.4
for my own personal development	60.6
because of threat of redundancies	4.4
rights to training from employer or legislation	13.6
other	1.5

Total number of respondents : 895

The respondents had mainly very positive attitudes towards learning: their jobs often required them to learn new things, employers were generally supportive, and most liked learning and were proactive in their own learning and development.

Most respondents had a strong sense of personal agency in their commitment to their own learning and career development, despite individuals having had varying degrees of success in the labour market as their learning and work trajectories resonated with the structural conditions with which they were faced. For example, many older workers had had to negotiate major shifts in organisational structures as well as in their own work roles. Personal agency is an important driver of individual work and learning trajectories, and some individuals were reflexive about how their careers were developing and how their choices and possibilities could be expanded or constrained in different ways:

My career advanced because I had a track record of success and delivery, I note that many organisations in the latter part of my career are more concerned with academic distinction than substantive evidence of capability.

I spent 10 years getting my qualifications as an adult and worked part time in the education sector whilst I did it. On graduating I was looking for full time work and found a training position in the NHS. Since then I have changed departments 3 times on different secondment opportunities and now do Project Management and IT.

I have had numerous changes in my working career, for a variety of reasons, but mostly because I wanted to learn more/improve skills/learn something new or work somewhere new.

When I left university with my qualifications I didn't have a set career in mind. Over the years I have acquired experience by working in different sectors and with different people. All of this has developed my transferable skills and I take forward learning experiences from one work place to the next. I am now in a set career path and believe that the experiences along the way have helped to bring me here.

From the survey it was clear that experience developed through engagement with challenging work is a major vehicle for professional growth, but this needs to be supplemented in a variety of ways and individuals have different degrees of choice in the combination of learning activities (formal, non-formal and informal) with which they engage. Individuals seek a degree of personal autonomy in how their careers develop (and in the meaning attached to career) but, in parallel, they also seek opportunities to exchange experiences with peers, colleagues and experts about possible lines of career development.

Overall then, those individuals with a proactive approach to career development are more likely to engage in CVT and lifelong learning and individual traits (such as a proactive personality and self-management behaviour) and experiences of learning influence engagement and persistence with CVT. Formal CVT provision could be highly valued as a form of personal development even without a direct career benefit (Biesta, 2008): 'I love learning - for the pure enjoyment of learning something new'. The survey findings offer reinforcement for the idea that individuals are responsible actors in creating their own career pathways through learning and development linked to opportunities in education, training, employment and other contexts. However, at the same time, there is an urgent need to support individuals in navigating their way through increasingly complex work and life contexts and, in particular, helping individuals become more reflective at the individual level through provision of career guidance and counselling as a key component of a lifelong learning strategy (see also, Biesta, 2008).

Negotiating careers within different opportunity structures

Even within generally successful careers anxieties were expressed about career development at a time of organisational change and structural constraints – people recognised that navigating a career path could be fraught with difficulties:

My career history has been largely determined by living in very rural areas. I became a careers adviser 'by accident' because the employer happened to be based near-by and had a reputation as a good employer. I wanted to work 'with people' but for anything else I would have had to move. I have since moved to even more rural areas and this has meant I have haphazardly taken opportunities whenever they have arisen. This has led me to build up a wide range of skills and I think keeps me highly employable but doesn't necessarily mean that I am specialising in one area of my career. Because of my rural location senior jobs and ones where I might use my skills more fully are much less possible to progress into.

Employment opportunities in the public sector across Europe are very dependent on the different selection processes (e.g. in Spain you need to sit an exam to get a general post in the health service). Also, a non medical consultant in public health in the UK couldn't get a job at that level in Spain. This is restricted for medical doctors. So career development in this area is pretty much exclusive to the UK, as far as I know.

Personal agency (pro-activity and responding to opportunities) is important but there is also value in helping individuals develop their own career story of where they have been and where they are going. Many individuals are actively shaping their personal work biographies (and even

then they may value help in doing this), while others feel they would like to develop a clear sense of career direction but are struggling to do so without support.

Career options and choices are limited by context, but individuals can use career self-management to negotiate their own position within these constraints (King, 2004). Constraints, such as high unemployment, though, can sometimes have longer term consequences:

Initially 'my career was blighted by the recession of the early 1980s. I could not find work after university for four months, and I found the experience of unemployment (and unsuccessful job interviews) very traumatic. Once I had found work (in the book trade) I stayed in that sector for too long, fearful of unemployment again, although I was not happy; it was eleven years before I found my present career as a librarian, in which I am much happier.'

In the survey some workers were over-qualified for their jobs with their interest in learning being driven by personal development rather than career progression. Indeed given the strong emphasis given by respondents to learning for personal development it may be that messages promoting learning for employability are less effective than those which stress personal development, establishing personal networks and meeting new challenges. That is, messages should emphasise the immediate benefits of being a learner rather than where it leads, particularly if the opportunity structures available to an individual at that time are limited (Roberts, 1997).

The pathways available and different sets of expectations about career choice and occupational mobility are framed within clear opportunity structures which vary within and between sectors and countries. For example, in ICT both learning and career patterns are highly individualised and as informal learning plays a key role, formal qualifications and career progression are only loosely coupled. In engineering there is quite a strong linkage between learning and careers, as formal training has a key role for many in the close coupling between continuing vocational learning and individual career development. In health the linkage between learning and careers was quite complex. In some cases making a career involved vertical mobility, whereas others were happy to continue in a single specialisation or engage in horizontal mobility. There was, however, strong continuity through highly formalised initial and continuing education and training pathways, with a wide range of development opportunities on offer for most people working in the health sector. As a consequence individual career progression was often linked to formal qualifications. Career pathways were therefore strongly framed by organisational opportunity structures in the different national health systems.

The use of the term 'opportunity structures' itself neatly expressed the tension between openness and flexibility and structured pathways. Both are valuable and it is finding an accommodation which works well for most members of a society but also provides opportunities for those who do not fit initially which should be the goal of a CVT policy informed by concerns for individual career development. It is extending the breadth and quality of the opportunity structures which should be the goal of policy in this area.

Policy challenges arising from the research

A major challenge for skills development policies and practices is to take account of current, and possible future, patterns of individual skills development across the life-course. The research findings suggest that the following issues need to be tackled:

- although many individuals learn in adaptive ways through challenging work, learning and development which results in substantive changes in attitudes, knowledge or behaviour is often episodic, and the rhetoric of lifelong learning should reflect these two different forms of development: adaptive learning may occur more or less continuously but individuals' transformative learning may follow an irregular rhythm and tempo across the life-course.
- individuals who do not engage in substantive upskilling or reskilling, for say five to ten years, through either formal CVT or learning through work, run the risk of being 'locked into' a particular way of working and are more vulnerable in the labour market if there is a significant change in their job or their circumstances.
- the focus on formal qualifications as a proxy for learning and development does not do justice to the range, depth and variety of forms of learning while working. We should look to promote the latter and consider the most appropriate timing for validation of learning and the use of qualifications in this process.
- there is a need to provide support for people moving between sectors as well as offering development and progression within sectors.
- low skilled work is not a problem per se (and because of high replacement demand many people may 'pass through' such employment) - it is staying in work which lacks challenge or opportunities for development which can erode an individual's broader employability prospects over the long term. It is important to encourage and support people in seeking more challenging work, especially as this is rated as the most effective form of skill development by the low skilled in almost every country in Europe.
- if we want more older people to remain engaged in the labour market – and one of Europe's key future challenges is an improved integration of older employees into the labour

market – there is a need to encourage more people to consider mid-career change.

- people need support and guidance to develop coherent career narratives of where they have been; what they are doing now and where they are going.
- a challenging working and learning environment facilitates informal learning and many workers value challenges at work and this in turn produces a positive disposition towards learning. Not all work supplies such challenges, however, and thought should be given as to ways to improve the proportion of high quality jobs.
- CVT development should recognise the complementarity of different forms of learning in support of skill development at work. The research findings provided a strong endorsement for the complementarity of learning through engaging with challenging work and institutionalised learning which is able to help individuals look beyond their immediate context. Such complementary learning has of course underpinned many apprenticeship systems, sandwich degrees and much professional training. However, the survey produced many examples of the value for individuals when they applied such modes of *alternance* learning across the life-course as a whole: that is, where learning was predominantly work-based but with periods of institutionalised learning interspersed. Learning through challenging work alone may be insufficient and other forms of learning may be necessary to help the employee make a quantum leap in their broader understanding of a particular field.
- Enhancing individuals' capability to exercise greater control over their own lives: CVT development could be linked to the notion developed by Sen (1999) of the importance of developing individual capabilities in a broader sense. Applying this idea to skill development at work the ultimate goal is to increase the freedom for individuals to exercise greater control over their own lives (in relation to what they value being or doing): this includes expanding opportunities to access knowledge, meaningful work, significant relationships and exercise self-direction. Other capabilities (ways of being and doing) could benefit from engagement with other forms of education and training.

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Other Publications

- For selected linked publications in this area please see: <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/people/abrown/publications/>
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Further Information

Further information about IER's programme of research into the changing patterns of working, learning and development across Europe can be obtained from:

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The second Warwick Festival of Social Sciences will take place at the University of Warwick from Monday 16 to Friday 20 May 2011. Departments from across the Faculty of Social Sciences, including the Institute for Employment Research, will be celebrating Social Science at Warwick with a programme of events including seminars, workshops, exhibitions, Twitter feeds and blogs.

To find out about the programme of events, visit the Festival page on the Faculty of Social Sciences website <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/>. Further information will be posted on the website as events are confirmed.