

Title: Narrative exploration of learning and career decisions across 7 EU countries.

Format of session: Symposium - 180 minutes

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Keywords: learning; engagement; career decisions; policy; transitions.

Thematic stream: Restructuring Careers under Promising Practices

Abstract:

This symposium presents analysis of narrative interviews focused on the strategic career and learning biographies of 105 low-skilled individuals in the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Poland the United Kingdom. Researchers wanted to understand how low-skilled workers construct meaning around learning and skills development in relation to work and employment. All participants were interviewed individually, then a full transcript of the interview was produced. Each country research team analysed these interviews to identify themes. Some themes were born out of the particular national context, with policy and labour market conditions each playing a significant role in the outcomes for the individual. There was evidence of the scarring effects of unemployment in Italy and for Poland, of the effect of an economy in transition. The Danish sample reflected how public support structures facilitate participation in assessment of prior learning in order to help people in the transition from unskilled to skilled positions. In the case of France there was evidence of structures resulting from national policy decisions which were effectively supporting individuals engaged in continuing vocational education.

Analysis across the whole project sample led to the articulation of major themes around learning and career decision-making. The learning themes incorporated complementary perspectives on how individuals make meaning of their experience including: engaging with learning and the different personal drivers for learning; attitudes to adult learning and how those attitudes link with personal perceptions of outcomes of learning; and accreditation of prior learning. Learning plays into the way career decisions are made, along with interpersonal influences and of course, employment opportunities.

This research delivered rich narrative of personal agency within wider structures. Close attention was paid to the exploration of attitudinal and structural obstacles and barriers to learning across the life course, including the importance of learning for identity formation. Of equal importance was consideration of the ways in which learning contributed to positive labour market outcomes. There were many examples of participants in all seven countries who had previously or were currently in the process of restructuring careers - along with examples of promising practice in this regard.