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## **Changing patterns of guidance, learning and careers of older workers in Europe**

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**Abstract:** This chapter draws on evidence from a pan-European study (2008 – 2010) of the different patterns of guidance, learning and careers of almost 300 older workers aged over 45 as their careers and identities developed over time. The strategic biographies of these workers were traced, as they responded to the challenges of continuing to develop their work-related learning, careers and identities. The careers of many respondents demonstrated the value of learning while working as this helped individuals keep their skills, knowledge and competences up-to-date and maintain a positive disposition towards learning. The role of guidance for older workers will be examined, particularly as it relates to successful transitions involving upskilling, reskilling, career change and an increased likelihood of remaining active in the labour market for longer. With changing expectations of how long many people will work, and as the workforce ages, there are challenges of supporting the continuing development of older workers, who may need to maintain a set of work-related competences and manage effective work transitions for much longer than has been customary in the past. This chapter will give indications of how these challenges may be met. For example, there could be cost-benefit advantages in offering mid-career workers career guidance which could extend the length of their careers. From a policy perspective access to career advice and guidance services for adults at times of transition appears crucial in facilitating positive outcomes both for the individual and for the smooth functioning of the labour market.

## **1 Introduction**

### **1.1 Context of the research**

In March 2010, a research team completed a major comparative study of changing patterns of work-related learning and career development in Europe (Brown *et al.*, 2010). The research was funded by the European Commission in 2008 in light of the review of continuing vocational training policy (European Commission, 2002) and the Council resolution on lifelong guidance (Council of the European Union, 2008). This chapter examines the strategic biographies of almost 300 older workers aged over 45 who participated in that study, as they moved through different work and learning contexts as their careers and identities have developed over time. The older workers were a sub-group of a much larger sample. Data were collected using an on-line survey from over a thousand respondents drawn from 10 countries (France; Germany; Italy; Netherlands; Norway; Poland; Portugal; Romania; Turkey and the United Kingdom). Participants 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 sample included a small sub-set of participants with few qualifications and/or who worked in jobs requiring few qualifications.

This study sought to develop an understanding of the different ways individual careers are unfolding over time. This paper will examine how different types of learning, work and guidance interact across the life-course and how they are linked to adaptability and mobility in the labour market. Many cases demonstrated the value of learning while working, as this helped individuals keep their skills, knowledge and competences up-to-date and maintain a positive disposition towards learning. Access to opportunities for learning and development is crucially important, though some individuals were much more pro-active than others in taking advantage of these opportunities. The role of career guidance for older workers will also be examined, particularly as it relates to successful transitions involving upskilling, reskilling, career change, perspective transformation and increased likelihood of remaining active in the labour market for longer.

## **1.2 Challenges for guidance of an ageing workforce**

Older people are becoming an ever larger proportion of the population and recent employment legislation has been in part designed to encourage older workers to continue working. Proposals to increase or abolish fixed retirement ages mask the fact that distinctions between work and retirement are becoming blurred by the notion of semi-retirement as a way of easing the transition from work to full retirement, with employees moving into self-employment, taking short-term contracts, reducing their working hours or moving away from their previous main line of work (Humphrey *et al.*, 2003). Also significant numbers of people post-retirement age are engaged in civic and social activities, such as caring and volunteering (McMunn *et al.*, 2009). So with changing expectations of how long many people will work, there are challenges of supporting the continuing education and development of older workers, as workers may need to maintain a set of work-related competences and manage effective work transitions for much longer than has been customary in the past.

Personal agency is an important driver of individual work and learning trajectories, and there is an increased role for reflection and reflexivity as individuals shape their work trajectories, and individuals seek a degree of personal autonomy in how their careers develop (and the meaning attached to career) but, in parallel, they also seek opportunities to exchange experiences with peers, colleagues and guidance practitioners. 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; and introducing reflective strategies in organisations (in support of both individual empowerment and organisational development). It was also noticeable that even within generally successful careers, anxieties were expressed about the risks connected to overall dynamics and change associated with career development and with organisational changes and structural constraints – people recognised that navigating a career path could be fraught with difficulties.

Personal agency (pro-activity and responding to opportunities) is important but there is also value in helping individuals develop a coherent career narrative: where they have been; are; and where they are going. Many individuals are actively shaping their personal work biographies (but they also value help to do this) and older respondents were engaged in active career development in their 40s and 50s. However, a few had

decided that they were not going to engage any further in substantive learning and development, above what was required to work effectively in their current job. This attitude was sometimes linked with a lack of reflexivity of individuals to think about their own skills, a reluctance to think in terms of skill sets - rather there was a tendency to rely upon an attachment to an occupational / organisational identity that may be vulnerable to change. In this context, coupled with the demographic shift towards an ageing workforce, it is clear that there could be real cost-benefit advantages in offering mid-career workers career guidance which could extend the length of their careers. One benefit could come from an increased willingness to continue working after a career shift for some, while others could also value the career guidance process for affirming them in their current path. Job mobility for some individuals in a range of contexts could act to support upskilling, reskilling, employability and integration of older workers for longer in the labour market. From a policy perspective access to career guidance services at times of transition appears crucial in facilitating positive outcomes for individuals and in the labour market.

### **1.3 Changing understandings of career development**

The nature of career development has changed and continues to change. Osipow and Fitzgerald (1996) distinguish between career choice as a point-in-time 'event' and a developmental 'process' over a longer period of time (p. 54), while others emphasise career as 'the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time' (Arthur *et al.*, 1989, p. 8). Young and Collin (2000) argue that 'overall, career can be seen as an overarching construct that gives meaning to the individual's life' (p. 5). Differences in the interpretation of concepts and terminology in this area extend to cultural, linguistic and methodological differences (Van Esbroeck and Athanasou, 2008). Ball (1996) recognises that individuals are able to take responsibility for their own career choices and decisions and in order to achieve this effectively, individuals' ability to review and reflect upon their career transitions needs to be developed. Through a process of self-reflection and evaluation, individuals become: more comfortable and confident in their decisions (Gati & Saka, 2001); aware of their particular skills (Boyatzis *et al.*, 2000; Gati & Saka, 2001); and are able to identify preferred outcomes and goals (Boyatzis *et al.*, 2000).

The process of self-reflective evaluation (sometimes prolonged) that is characteristic of this career decision-making style is closely linked to the development of greater levels of self-awareness and self-knowledge, with individuals using this as the basis for future action and decisions. On the other hand, individuals who take opportunities that have presented themselves, however unexpected, and tried (often successfully) to turn them to their advantage are described as engaged in a process of opportunistic career decision making. These individuals exploit opportunities rather than make active choices about work (Banks *et al.*, 1992; Bimrose *et al.*, 2008). Clients' career plans could seem vague, undecided and uncertain. This resonates with the concept of 'planned happenstance' that encourages receptiveness to randomly occurring opportunities that could be critical in shaping careers (Mitchell *et al.*, 1999) and the need for practitioners to place greater importance on context (Bright *et al.*, 2005).

Other approaches to career development emphasise the importance of personal agency and the integrative process model explains mechanisms through which intrinsic motivation can influence career self-management and subsequent career success

(Quigley & Tymon, 2006). One other relevant concept is career-related continuous learning (CRCL). A key assumption here is that individual and organisational learning are intertwined. Individuals learn as members of organisations, pursue their own interests and expect a personal benefit from engaging in learning activities. The concept of CRCL relates to a process of individual, self-initiated, discretionary, planned and proactive pattern of activities that are sustained over time for the purpose of career development (London and Smither, 1999; Rowold & Schilling, 2006). This approach aligns with a challenge identified in the ‘key competences for a changing world’ of ‘implementing lifelong learning through formal, non-formal and informal learning and increasing mobility’ (EC 2009), by drawing attention to just how these different types of learning interact across the life-course and how they may facilitate mobility in the labour market.

## 2. Findings from the 10 country European study

### 2.1 Older workers’ changing patterns of guidance, learning and careers

The major comparative study of changing patterns of work-related learning and career development in Europe that is the focus of this chapter included 1148 respondents, of whom 902 gave details of their age, with 296 people identifiable as 46 or over (see table 1). The older workers in the ten countries surveyed were mostly nationals, but some worked in other countries and 17 had dual or other nationalities. The older workers were mainly in permanent employment (224), although 72 had one or more of the following statuses: 20 part-time employed, 10 full-time temporary; 3 part-time temporary; 34 self-employed; 4 in full-time education; 6 unemployed and seeking work; 2 out of workforce and not seeking employment; 5 semi-retired and 6 engaged in voluntary or charity work. Most of the sample were in (highly) skilled employment, but they had a wide range of formal qualifications, so the most striking results were the breadth and depth of forms of learning and development in which they had engaged relevant to their work (see table 2).

**Table 1: Age and nationalities of older workers in the sample**

Age (years)	Nationality of respondents											Total
	FR	GER	IT	NL	NO	PL	PT	RO	TR	UK	Other	
46-50	15	21	20	8	24	8	12	12	5	12	10	147
51-55	6	8	13	7	4	11	14	14	1	16	4	98
56-60	8	3	4	3	1	3	1	4	1	12	1	41
61-65	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	2	7
over 65	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	3
N	30	34	37	18	29	22	27	30	7	45	17	296
Percentage of sample by country	10.1	11.5	12.5	6.1	9.8	7.4	9.1	10.1	2.4	15.2	5.7	100

**Table 2: How older workers acquired knowledge and skills to perform in current or last job (multiple answers possible)**

	N	%
your studies or initial training	219	74
additional training in your current work	175	59
self-directed / self-initiated learning, inside or outside workplace	193	65
learning through work by carrying out challenging tasks	206	70
learning through life experience	177	60
learning from others at work	165	56
learning from networks, working with clients	129	44
other	23	8
N	296	

Their initial skills and knowledge base has been developed in number of ways, including through self-directed learning, formal training and learning from others, while the challenges inherent in their work are acting as a driver of their continuing learning and development. That most of these older workers are thriving and meeting new challenges can be seen from their answers in table 3: their skills are mostly either in alignment with current duties or such that they could cope with more demanding duties. Most older workers drew extensively upon their past work experience in performing their current work (see table 4). Formal qualifications were also seen as important (see table 5) and for many people learning from past work experience would seem to complement learning represented in formal qualifications.

**Table 3: Matching of skills and duties in current or last job**

	N	%
I need further training to cope well with my duties.	40	14
My duties correspond well with my present skills.	137	47
I have the skills to cope with more demanding duties.	99	34
I am new to the job so I need some further training to learn new aspects of my duties.	16	5
	292	100

**Table 4: Use of past work experience in current or last job**

	N	%
Almost none	16	5
A little	37	12
A lot	123	42
Almost all	109	37
This is my first job	11	4
N	296	100

**Table 5: Use of formal qualifications in current or last job**

	N	%
Almost none	28	10
A little	70	24
A lot	108	36
Almost all	84	28
I have no formal qualifications	6	2
N 296	296	100

This largely optimistic picture of older workers positively engaged in challenging work, substantive learning and development and interacting with a range of others in support of their own and others' learning and development is a timely response to those who over-generalise the problems older workers face. Those older workers considering a career change were almost equally divided as to whether or not they were likely to face difficulties in making a change (36 – 34). Most of the barriers (limited opportunities with employer or sector; financial issues; and caring commitments) were the same for younger groups, with the exception of being 'too old', which was mentioned as a possible barrier by 11 of the older workers considering a career change.

## 2.2 Importance of personal agency

Our sample of older workers was in the main well-qualified, in employment (often engaged in challenging work) and had opportunities for learning and development associated with their jobs. Most demonstrated very positive actions and attitudes towards learning in a wide variety of forms, including on-the-job training; self-directed learning inside or outside the workplace; learning from networks, working with clients; learning through life experience; learning through work by carrying out challenging tasks; learning from others at work; and learning through participating in seminars and conferences (Brown *et al.*, 2010). Interestingly, the reasons they took part in training and learning activities were primarily related to skill development and personal development – many of these individuals were driving their own development, liked learning new things related to their job and enjoyed new challenges at work, partly because they offered opportunities for learning. The career decision-making styles of respondents were mixed, but again an emphasis upon learning and development was strongly apparent, with learning from previous experience and needing to reflect, plan and analyse when thinking about career development all emphasised. The willingness to take opportunities as they arose also reflected the pro-activity of most of the respondents (Brown *et al.*, 2010).

The respondents had, however, had varying degrees of success in the labour market over their life-course and relatively few had completely untroubled career histories. Their learning and work trajectories resonated with the structural conditions which they faced. For example, in Romania and Poland workers over the age of 45 had had to negotiate major shifts in societal and organisational structures and had to demonstrate the ability to operate effectively in very different contexts. Personal agency is clearly an important driver of individual work and learning trajectories, but for many older workers their working lives had become more complex. Additionally, it was found that:

- There is an increased role for reflection and reflexivity as individuals shape their work trajectories (choices and possibilities have expanded and structural, organisational and technological change have added complexity to work trajectories)
- Experience developed through engagement with challenging work is the main vehicle for professional growth, but this needs to be supplemented in a variety of ways and individuals have choices 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 the meaning attached to career) but, in parallel, they also seek opportunities to exchange experiences with peers, colleagues and experts.

The survey findings provide support 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, by paying attention to the following factors:

- Reflection and guidance support: 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, coupled with introducing reflective strategies in organisations (in support of both individual empowerment and organisational development). Even within generally successful careers, anxieties were expressed about the risks connected to overall dynamics and change associated with career development and with organisational changes and structural constraints – people recognised that navigating a career path could be fraught with difficulties.
- Personal agency and career narratives: pro-activity and responding to opportunities is important but there is also value in helping individuals develop a coherent career narrative: where they have been; are; and where they are going). Many individuals are actively shaping their personal work biographies (but they also value help to do this).
- Engagement with CVT: individual traits can be influential here, but in any case a proactive approach to career development, self-management behaviour and experiences of learning influence engagement and persistence with CVT and lifelong learning. People can reinforce their satisfaction (and in some cases even overcome dissatisfaction) with work by engaging in CVET (which people often believe has value in itself – even when not strictly necessary for current or likely future job performance).
- Active career management: much continuous vocational learning is influenced by motivational factors (such as willingness to make the most of learning affordances and opportunities at work). By engaging with CVET, many individuals have learnt how to actively manage their careers and progress their future plans (this could be either through self-directed learning or where formal CVT opens up other potential career pathways). One key factor in continued career success for older workers in a changed context is a positive disposition towards learning and development.
- Space for career development: a proactive approach to career development is associated with employees being given encouragement, time and space to

engage in self-directed learning and critical reflection; learning from others and through networks; organisations that emphasise breadth of competence development; timely and appropriate feedback and support for development of employees' learner identities.

### 2.3 Structural constraints on personal agency:

In transition economies such as Poland and Romania the shift towards personal responsibility for career development was a major turning point for older workers brought up under centrally planned economies. In Romania one legacy of the earlier system was in some areas there was a feeling that school-based training resulting in formal certification was the most 'powerful' form of training. On the other hand, the emergent economy was making use of different types of jobs, skills, companies, forms of work organisation and career patterns. In such circumstances older low skilled workers could be part of a 'fatalistic' culture in which they viewed themselves as out of step with the way the economy was evolving, with immobility being linked to demography and getting employment depending on luck and contacts rather than individual merit. Two workers in their forties exemplified how if they were in employment they were determined to hang on to their current jobs but saw no prospects of doing anything else. The first person had worked in a large factory for fifteen years but when that was restructured he was made redundant and then, after a spell unemployed, retrained to be a tram driver ten years ago:

*'I am satisfied with my job because it is well paid and I can support my family, although it is difficult and stressful. I don't have the formal qualifications to think of a better position in the company. I am fed up with training and courses.'*

The second person was working as a chef:

*'I have no formal qualification. I learned cooking from my mother and I also learned a lot from my colleagues. I think it is a good job in that I can support my children growing up without any other support. The new colleagues that come have certificates but they still ask for my help. For the future, I am waiting for my pension time only.'*

Similarly, seeking to make a labour market transition at a time of high unemployment could be constraining. A Library and Information Services Manager in Health Care recalled how 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.'*

Some qualified workers had made successful transitions or exhibited greater resilience in overcoming periods of unemployment, but the extent of over-qualification compared to the jobs available meant that expressed interest in learning could be

driven by personal development rather than as being a tool for career progression. It may be that messages promoting learning through strongly emphasising employability are less effective than those which emphasise personal development, establishing social networks, meeting a wider range of people together with increasing the likelihood of getting employment. That is, messages should emphasise the immediate benefits from being a learner rather than seeing learning primarily being judged by where it might lead.

From an individual perspective, handling the inter-play between opportunity structures (Roberts, 2009) and personal agency (pro-activity) is not easy to achieve on your own. Being able to discuss such issues with a guidance practitioner could be useful at any time an individual is considering a major transition, but one interesting dimension for older individuals was that it was particularly valued because it could help make sense of their existing career narrative as an aid to projecting into the future: the next stage of the story.

#### **2.4 Intensive periods of (substantive) learning across the life-course**

From a career guidance perspective, it was also interesting to consider the implications of the finding that substantive learning for individuals tends to be episodic rather than lifelong in the sense of people being engaged continuously in substantive learning (Brown *et al.*, 2010). Substantive learning in this context means learning which results in a significant change in values, attitudes or behaviour, rather than just learning a new technique etc. Occasionally, an individual might engage with formal education and training for most of their working life, but it is much more common for workers to have bouts of intensive periods of (substantive) learning across the life-course. These intensive periods of substantive learning, following initial VET or HE studies, are typically concerned with either 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.

The career trajectory of one participant illustrated an intensive period of part-time formal learning (educational upskilling) followed by a later period of formal training coupled with more challenging work leading to further development, upskilling and reskilling. In 1989 Michelle started doing routine administrative work on benefits claims straight from leaving school at 18. In the period 1996 – 2000 she completed a skilled worker qualification and then a degree which led to career development: first, in becoming a trainer, then an operations manager before becoming a regional trainer. She then completed a range of specialist advanced level vocational qualifications in 2005 – 2009 which equipped her to take a job in a new sector (health) as a manager with responsibilities for business change based upon IT systemic change and for measuring the benefits of such deployments.

How learning at work is coupled with career progression influences how individuals engage in continuing learning (for example, in some contexts after initial recruitment, promotion is almost wholly dependent upon performance at work, which is itself linked to learning through challenging work, interactions and networks at work. In other cases, some form of formal continuing professional development would be expected, such as taking *Meister* qualifications in Germany, as a prelude to

promotion). Another participant provides an example of upskilling through initial hospital-based (sub-degree HE equivalent) vocational training coupled with completion of two intensive mid-career post-graduate diploma programmes as well as learning while working and through career progression. Karen qualified as a radiographer in 1984; in 1991 she completed a Diploma in Management Studies and in 2004 a Postgraduate Diploma in Advanced Practice (Imaging) as she progressed through linked progression pathways as an advanced practitioner, clinical tutor and then a Research Radiographer recruiting patients to clinical trials, promoting & active involvement in radiotherapy research from 2004.

Rather than engaging in continuous learning at an even pace year after 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 and periods of intensive learning could be decisive for individuals' career direction. 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.).

This finding is really important for career guidance for older workers in countering the view that 'I am not a lifelong learner - it is a long time since I engaged in substantive learning associated with education and training or learning a new role at work etc.' Almost everyone across their life-course engages in episodic learning – at some periods making a conscious effort at learning compared to other times when other aspects of their lives may take priority. This type of dialogue would seem much more empowering – this line of argument was often used by 'women returners': 'now it is my turn.' It is not a deficit model but rather a positive one: in a lifetime there will be a number of times when a person makes learning a priority – would now be a good time to do so?

## **2.5 Skill development for workers in low skilled work by changing jobs**

Brynin and Longhi (2007) in their summary of findings from a major European project (on 'Work organisation and restructuring in the knowledge society - WORKS project') reported on individual-level change using panel data and found that both 'dissatisfaction with work and skill mismatches are widespread, and while tending to be overcome through career switches, thereby contribute to the overall prevalence of work flexibility' (p. 7). So job mobility can be viewed as positive for individuals where it leads to progression, greater satisfaction and personal development or negative if it is considered forced, unrewarding and involves a 'sense of loss' rather than development.

Interestingly, in nearly all European countries the most common way for people in low skilled employment to update their skills was by changing their jobs. This finding is important in two respects. First, it means that public policy should encourage people to find more challenging work if they are in undemanding work – guidance and counselling could play a key role in this respect. Second, it resonates with a number of 'case histories' of people in our research study whereby their personal

development took off as they passed through ‘low skilled employment’ with the switch to other forms of work opening up opportunities for learning and development whether these were related to training and/or more challenging work.

For example, in Portugal and Poland a number of people worked in assistant or junior positions before finding more challenging work in the same sector or in a different field altogether (after transferring from work in for example hotel and catering). In some cases a shift between different forms of low skilled work could allow for greater development within work, enhancing adaptability and the ability to apply skills, knowledge and understanding in different contexts.

For example, one respondent started out over forty years ago without any formal qualifications as an apprentice painter and decorator and then moved through a number of low level jobs in construction and retail and progressed to managing a mobile shop, travelling to remote communities, then a small travel agency, before becoming self-employed as a grocery shop owner. Apart from some training and minor qualifications related to work in a travel agency the driver for development was always self-directed learning, inside or outside the workplace.

Being able to apply your skills, knowledge and understanding in a number of contexts can itself act as a considerable spur to development. Again this has profound implications for the career guidance of older workers – it is possible that individuals in their early forties have made considerable progress with their skill development since entry into employment and now need a slightly different approach to enable them to make a career transition. It is at this point that would value support in helping them make that transition. For a number of our respondents, career possibilities had broadened since they first entered the labour market. Facilitating such individuals to make these changes often seemed to re-energise their work and learning trajectories.

## **2.6 Older workers’ careers: dynamic or stable**

Many of our older respondents were engaged in active career development in their 40s and 50s. However, a few had decided that they were not going to engage any further in substantive learning and development above what was required to work effectively in their current job: one respondent represented this as ‘coasting’ (doing the minimum possible) while waiting for (preferably early) retirement. One respondent did recognise that there dangers associated with ‘coasting’ in that employability becomes dependent almost solely upon the current job. This attitude was sometimes also linked with a lack of reflexivity of individuals to think about their own skills, a reluctance to think in terms of skill sets - rather there was a tendency to rely upon an attachment to an occupational / organisational identity that may be vulnerable to change. In this context, coupled with the demographic shift towards an ageing workforce, it was clear that there could be real cost-benefit advantages in offering mid-career workers guidance which could extend the length of their careers. One benefit could come from an increased willingness to continue working after a career shift for some, while others could also value the guidance process for affirming them in their current path.

Available evidence including our research survey and the associated literature review, together with the policy challenges outlined above all highlight the importance of job

mobility for individuals in a range of contexts to support upskilling, reskilling, employability and integration of older workers for longer in the labour market. The literature review and the survey also highlighted how individuals often valued support in making career decisions. This support could take various forms, but from a policy perspective access to career advice and guidance services for adults at times of transition appears crucial in facilitating positive outcomes both for the individual and for the smooth functioning of the labour market.

### **3. Guidance for (re-)engaging older workers in learning and development**

While career guidance services for adults at times of transition has positive outcomes for individuals and the labour market, issues of access to such provision remain a challenge. Indications from the research are that differentiated needs-based services would be the most cost effective way of ensuring that the career development support needs of individuals are appropriate or relevant to particular phases and stages of their career trajectories. For example, workers in undemanding jobs (low skilled employment), those wishing to change sectors or seeking to change intensity of work because of changed responsibilities and older workers seeking a career change are all groups which could benefit from improved access to career information, advice and guidance. Additionally, policy could give greater emphasis to the value of career guidance in helping individuals articulate and possibly align goals, expectations, development strategies and outcomes in relation to learning and career development.

Many older workers in our sample were committed to learning and development, so it is clear that a lack of engagement with learning is not a function of age per se. It is partly about access to opportunities to learn and partly about motivation, so for those who have not engaged in learning for some time then involving them in identifying the type of learning with which they want to engage is critical. This approach underpins both the union learning provision and some state-funded CVT provision. Older workers could also be encouraged to become coaches, mentors or trainers.

### **4. Conclusions and recommendations: career guidance for older workers**

Policy makers and practitioners should consider the following points of leverage in trying to engage more older workers in learning and development and to keep them in the labour market for longer. It is important to recognise the importance of the personal dimension in generating commitment to continuing learning; consider the idea of using key transition points to help target provision; and to acknowledge the significance of networks in supporting skill development at work. These points could be aligned with the four priority areas of the Council of the European Union resolution on lifelong guidance (2008). The key priorities of the resolution are: developing career management skills; facilitating Access to guidance services for all citizens; improving quality assurance mechanisms in guidance delivery; and supporting guidance policy coordination and cooperation in the Member States.

In this study most of the sample was in (highly) skilled employment and, although many of them had undertaken lower skilled work at some point in their career, they still remain a particular segment of this age cohort. They are, however, a significant group in that their experience of continuing substantive learning and development underlines the need to adopt a differentiated approach to the needs of this cohort.

They do not fit the stereotype of older workers reluctant to engage in learning and development and a deficit model of support for engagement in learning and development would be inappropriate. It would nevertheless be helpful to conduct similar research with other segments of this age group: the unemployed or those working in less skilled work.

The work with this more highly skilled segment of older workers can contribute ideas about constructing a model of how to support effective learning and development for older workers. Career guidance practitioners and others supporting learning and development could consider the following characteristics in developing or evaluating appropriate provision:

- Individual engagement: is it personally meaningful for individuals in relation to development in their current occupation or career progression and / or is it personally rewarding, for example, resulting in an increase in self-esteem, confidence as a learner or self-efficacy? Does it resonate with an individual's motivation, where the individual feels a clear drive for achievement and development? Does it require active engagement of participants – is it sufficiently demanding (for example, does it challenge or extend current ideas, assumptions, attitudes, constructs, knowledge and understanding)? Does it require engagement with particular ways of thinking and practising (including how individuals are connected to particular knowledge cultures)? This might include development of particular approaches to critical analysis, evaluation, problem-solving etc.
- Personal development: Does it provide opportunities for a significant shift in personal perspective (whether this was values-based or interest-based)? Does provision help individuals develop greater opportunity awareness, especially because much continuing vocational learning is at least partly dependent upon an individual being aware of and then taking advantage of opportunities for learning and development? Does it help individuals' develop judgement, for example in the ability to make choices in relation to values, goals, plans and aspirations; make decisions; self-motivate; and display resilience. Does it use reflection upon experience (including reflections on prior learning) as a driver of further learning?
- Collaboration: Does it support collaboration between learners: for example, are learners engaged in a collective enterprise (for example, in relation to performance improvement activities; or as a member of group engaged in a formal programme of study) or even if the learning activity is predominantly individual does it draw on the support of significant others in order ways, for example to help consolidate their learning?
- Progression: Is it relevant for vocational progression (either as part of an established progression pathway or through establishing an enhanced personal base from which to seek further career development – for example, through the completion of a substantive further qualification);
- Career Orientation: Is provision linked to a clear career orientation in that it is linked to an individual's career goals directly or else was helpful in developing skills which were also helpful for career management purposes and does it fit with an individual's clear career narrative (about 'becoming')?

Career guidance practitioners should also recognise the complementarity of different forms of learning in support of skill development. Our 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 underpinned many apprenticeship systems, sandwich degrees and much professional training. However, we found many examples of the value for individuals when they applied such modes of alternance learning across the life-course: 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.

Quality of work remains a key factor in determining the extent of continuing vocational learning and skills development. Where individuals are engaged in challenging work they are likely to have opportunities for development in significant ways from learning while working. However, a company's field of operation, future horizons, product market strategy and organisation of work may all place constraints on the extent to which workplaces offer 'expansive learning environments.' Where a company offers only limited opportunities for substantive learning while working efforts to encourage employers to offer additional training have had only limited success, not least because employers may think employees would then be more likely to leave. Public policy should therefore perhaps focus upon giving workers entitlements to career guidance and further learning opportunities.

Continuing vocational training development could also be linked to the notion developed by Amartya Sen (1999) of the importance of developing individual capabilities in a broader sense. Applying this idea to skill development 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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