Chapter

THE INFLUENCE OF OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES IN SHAPING INDIVIDUAL CAREER DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The precise pattern of how individual career pathways develop are clearly influenced by individual decisions, attitudes and behaviour but they also take place within particular contexts. Careers and identities evolve through the classic dynamic interaction of structure and agency. The focus of this chapter is upon the influence of opportunity structures in shaping individual career development and material will be drawn from two European studies which involved interviewing either low skilled and/or intermediate skilled workers in the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom. The most obvious ways in which individual career development is facilitated or constrained in particular contexts relates to the access to the opportunities associated with different types of employment, training and education. How some of these opportunity structures influenced individual careers. Access to challenging work was often a significant driver of subsequent career development for individuals who described successful career narratives. However, other forms of work could act as barriers or faciltiators to career development. The significance of the role of initial vocational education and training in constraining or facilitating subsequent career development, including access to continuing vocational education and training to develop and deepen expertise, will also be examined.

Keywords: career development; opportunity structures; identity; learning and development.

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INTRODUCTION

Model of learning for career development: role of opportunity structures

There are a huge variety of forms, contexts and content of learning associated with learning for career development. As a consequence, the precise configuration of key learning processes for career development will vary depending on the individual and context. It is therefore an empirical question as to which are the most important factors in particular contexts and Brown (2015) has developed a model to help those interested in knowing more about career development processes. The model of learning for career and labour market transitions was developed in order to help people consider where they may like to focus their attention. The analysis of the strategic learning and career biographies of interviewees in five countries led to the design of a model of learning for career and labour market transitions which could help researchers, practitioners and policy-makers understand more about how to support people making career and labour market transitions. Learning for career development can be effectively supported if it is understood that it can be represented in three inter-related ways: as a process of identity development; a process of development in four inter-related domains; and taking place in the context of particular opportunity structures. The overall model will be briefly described but the focus of this article is upon the third representation.

The first representation views learning as a process of identity development: 'learning as becoming' outlined in the strategic career and learning biographies of individuals. Key influences in this representation of learning are: the personal characteristics underpinning learning and development: learning through self-understanding; and development of personal qualities: sense of personal agency; personality; motivation (determination); resilience; self-efficacy (self-belief; 'efficacy belief'); commitment to own learning and professional development; career orientation (career decision-making style); and career adaptability. The second way learning for career development can be represented is as occurring across four domains: relational development; cognitive development; practical development; emotional development. Learning may involve development in one or more domains and development in each domain can be achieved in a number of different ways, but development can be represented thematically, although the extent of development under particular themes varied greatly across individual cases (Brown, 2015).

The third representation of learning for career development acknowledges that learning takes place in the context of opportunity structures within which individuals operate. These structures include: employment / unemployment rates; employer recruitment practices, including openness of job offers; initial vocational education and training (IVET); occupational pathways; continuing vocational training (CVT) system; progression to and permeability with Higher Education (HE) from VET; affordances for learning and interaction at work; occupational structure (e.g. concept of 'Beruf'); transition regimes; recognition of prior learning; support structures (e.g. family, personal networks, public employment services); career guidance; support for reflection; opportunities to address skills mismatch (including under-employment); and extent of opportunities for learning for personal development.

The key to understanding learning for career development is then to switch back and forth between representations. So, for example, those wishing to support such learning may start by helping an individual with the process of identity development, reflecting upon their

career story, developing a sense of career direction and a commitment to their learning, professional development and career adaptability. The next phase of support could examine what types of learning and development were required across the four domains in order for individuals to achieve their goals. Both these processes may need to be revisited in the context of particular opportunity structures within which decisions are being made.

In practice, the support offered by those wishing to support learning for career development may start with any of the three representations, The crucial aspect is that, wherever, the starting point, they have to engage with processes of identity formation and development within and across the four domains and be sensitive to the particular opportunity structures within learning takes place. It is the influence of opportunity structures upon career development which is our primary focus and it is to that to which we now turn our attention.

Opportunity structures

Extended initial career development transitions for young people before meaningful occupational identities are established are now common in many economies because of unfavourable labour market conditions and structures, (Roberts, 1997; MacDonald et al., 2005). In addition to the occupational offers a society makes, other structural elements impinge upon occupational identity development, in that individual choice takes place within opportunity structures associated with particularities of time, place, labour market and the organisation of work (Roberts, 2009). Opportunity structures are formed primarily by the inter-relationships between family backgrounds, education, labour market processes and employers' recruitment practices. So, for example, people the same age when faced with making choices about work may be faced with very different opportunities and expectations depending upon their family and educational backgrounds. Similarly, seeking permanent employment if you possess intermediate skills is very different in Spain or Italy from Germany, due to the differences in unemployment rates, occupational pathways and employers' recruitment practices. Individuals' likelihood of realising their choices, as well as the choices themselves, is framed by the structure of opportunities available to them.

The career and learning 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. The use of the term 'opportunity structures' itself neatly expresses the tension between openness and flexibility and structured pathways (Roberts, 2009). Occupational identities are both personal and social (Brown and Bimrose, 2015), and the occupational and educational structure, patterns of work organisation, nature and buoyancy of the labour market and employer recruitment practices can act to frame occupational choices and whether choices and identities are realised or reformed.

Occupational identity development is an important driver of learning for career development, with occupational identity formation itself a dynamic process (Brown, 1997). Employers, while themselves constrained by competition, interdependence, uncertainty of demand, and complexity of their product or service etc., use various means to attempt to shape work identities through the work they expect people to do. These means include organisational structure; vertical and horizontal mobility; flexibility; learning and development; organisation of work; and power and control. Employers are also constrained by societal influences: 'offers' and expectations coming from education and training; the occupational structure and the labour market. Employees, individually and collectively, also seek to influence how their work is carried out through the actions of individuals; work

groups; communities of practice; custom and practice; trades unions etc. The nature of work identities, however, is also necessarily affected by processes internal to the individual in terms of their self-reflection and appraisal of their current situation as well as through their interaction with work, learning and relationships and interactions with others.

The process of acquiring an occupational identity takes place within particular communities where socialisation, interaction and learning are key elements, with individuals taking on aspects of existing identities and roles, while actively reshaping other aspects in a dynamic way. The formation, maintenance and change of occupational identities are always influenced by the nature of the relationships around which they are constructed. Over time these interactions may lead to modifications and reshaping of these same structures, the communities of practice and the individual's work identity (Brown, 1997).

Expectations of engagement with opportunities for lifelong learning and career development

Even where people make successful transitions into employment, there are increasing societal expectations that they will continue to engage with learning opportunities. Indeed, adults in employment who do not engage in substantive up-skilling or re-skilling for five or more years, increasingly run the risk of being locked into particular ways of working (Brown et al. 2010). They become vulnerable in the labour market, especially if their circumstances change. Another striking finding of the research by Brown et al. (2010) was that learning which results in significant changes in values, attitudes, or behaviour for individuals tends to be episodic across the life-course. In emphasising significant learning it is necessary to distinguish it as learning which entails substantial personal development or transformation—quite different from other learning which involves adaptation to minor changes in context, organisation, practices and processes of work, where basic values, attitudes and behaviour remain largely unchanged. Significant learning which is episodic fits with a more general pattern of increasing engagement by people in lifelong learning (Field, 2000).

Identity is a central concept in individual development (Castells, 1997) and Giddens (1991) linking of identity to biography where he sees identity as being 'the self as reflexively understood by the individual in terms of his or her biography' (1991, p. 18) means we need to consider learning identities and individual career development as intertwined. The self and a person's identity are shaped and constructed through past and present experiences (Ferguson, 2009). Individuals also imagine a future identity of who they want to be and become.

The identities of adult learners have been shaped by their past experiences of learning at school, in the family and the workplace. What they seek to achieve may influence the form of their learning, with some relying primarily upon learning in the workplace, whereas others may wish to engage in more formal education and training. Adults' learning careers are complex and they are constantly changing identity and, in Goffman's (1974) terms, moving from one frame to another as they switch between their learner and other identities.

Identity is shaped by social, institutional and personal experiences and processes and while learning identities are often discussed in individual terms but they can also be collective (Ferguson, 2009). A collective learner identity can help to sustain learning and enable people to cope, especially if they are in a minority in formal learning contexts. Identity links structure and agency as it is 'a function of both external (social) and internal (agentic) factors' (Côté and Levine 2002, p. 9). Berger and Luckman make a similar point: 'identity is a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society' (1973, p. 195).

The interaction between structure and agency is evident in the stories told by adult learners in a number of studies, as they strive to use their agency in engaging in learning while also sometimes struggling against constraining structural factors (Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000); Crossan, Field, Gallacher and Merrill (2003); Johnston and Merrill (2005)). Attitudes and engagement in learning are shaped by an individual's past experiences of learning and training.

Learning, in a variety of forms (formal, non-formal and informal) both inside and outside the workplace has become a mechanism and a process in the transition from one type of job to another. Learning has, therefore, come to play a central role in enabling and managing transitions in the workplace. As Field (2000) points out education in adult life becomes a resource for individuals seeking to promote their employability and mobility, but also at the same time a cause of further uncertainty and risk.

The argument here is that learning opens up opportunities, for example for prospective career development, but that these opportunities themselves entail risks especially where they involve giving up a current job. Also because future career pathways are less clear-cut in terms of progression within occupations or organisations greater emphasis is put on the individual to find a route forward rather than on society and employers to provide such pathways. The individualising tendencies in society have brought about increasing risks and uncertainties for the individual in all spheres of life (Beck, 1992). For Bauman 'individualisation' consists of transforming human 'identity' from a 'given' into a 'task' and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task and for the consequences (and also side-effects) of their performance' (2000, pp. 31-32). Bauman's argument is that say fifty years ago many more people would take on a whole series of identities from a relatively limited set of choices. So, for example, whole districts would be principally defined by their major employers and often even leisure pursuits would be shared – for example, railway workers and their allotments (Wedderburn, 1965). Identities were treated as 'givens', provided by societies, culture, institutions and localities in a framework of often relatively narrow expectations, and individuals selected from this limited palette, now choices are multiple, societal, cultural and institutional influences more muted, and for individuals finding their place is now a major task.

Some aspects of individualisation may indeed be driven by a greater sense of personal agency, but the retreat from the provision of clear but limited choices implies a greater need of the use of agency by the actor in institutional and social life (Beck, 1992). For Giddens (1991) the self, in adjusting to and coping with change, has become 'a reflexive project' constantly constructing and re-constructing self and identity. In a similar way Beck (1992) outlines what he calls a reflexive biography and asserts that the 'individualisation of life situations and processes thus means that biographies become *self-reflexive;* socially prescribed biography is transformed into biography that is self-produced and continues to be produced' (p. 135). It is noteworthy, however, that these writers were writing before the economic crisis of 2008, before then individualisation seemed to be giving agency the upper hand over structure. However, given current unemployment levels in Spain and Italy, and the scale of redundancies there and in Denmark and France too, it could be argued that the pendulum has swung back. In settings with high unemployment and few job openings on the open market individuals may believe they have limited control over their career development.

A career transition infers a change and movement from one identity, self and situation to another. It implies having to let go of part or all of a person's 'old identity' to assume a 'new

or modified identity'. This involves a process of self-reflection through learning. Transitions are, therefore, about 'becoming'. Transitions occur in between periods of stability (Levinson and Levinson, 1996) and, as Merriam argues, 'change is fundamental to adult life' (2005, p. 3). However, transitions are not linear and an individual may experience more than one transition at once or overlapping transitions. Transitions are linked to social roles, experiences, behaviour, social contexts, agency and structure (George, 1993). In the process of transition, identity formation and change becomes a dialectical process between structure and agency. For Elder et al. (2003) 'transitions often involve changes in status or identity, both personally and socially, thus opening up opportunities for behavioural change' (2003, p. 8).

Transitions can also be viewed as being driven by 'turning-point' moments (Elder et al., 2003) and could be associated with the transitions of young people when they make decisions about their future career direction (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000). Whereas for a woman returning to the labour market in her thirties obtaining qualifications as an adult substantially increases the likelihood that she will be successful in making a transition to paid employment (Jenkins, 2006). Turning points could feature changes in the opposite direction as when adults, some of whom are in employment, make use of further education (Crossan et al, 2003) in search of new identities.

Overall then, learning may drive transitions but also experience of transitions in life may drive the need for learning (Merriam, 2005). Learning and transitions have a similar dialectic relationship as structure and agency. So in the lives of adults, work transitions can be a major driver of learning, as when a person is promoted or changes jobs and is faced with a whole range of challenging tasks and patterns of interaction and engages with a range of different forms of learning in order to improve their performance. On the other hand, learning may precede transition, as when people engage in further education and training prior to applying for a new job or undertaking a role change.

Different institutional pathways into employment

The relative low incidence of institutional pathways into employment in Italy and Spain compared to, for example, those available in Denmark, France and Germany has two consequences. First, individuals are largely on their own when it comes to 'making their way' into employment. Second, individuals, however, are anything but on their own in that the problems they face, such as very high levels of unemployment and lack of transparency in many company recruitment processes, are largely structural and shared by many of their compatriots. The ways in which learning supports career paths can be understood through the lenses of an agency/structure model (Giddens, 1991; Archer, 2003). The capacity of finding different pathways through difficult structural conditions, especially as far as work and employment are concerned, can be considered as the marking sign of the epoch of late modernity and reflexivity (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992). The challenge of finding individual paths into, and then maintaining, employment through very difficult structural conditions is exactly the landscape which faced our interviewees from Italy and Spain.

Individuals facing swiftly changing situations of their own social and private life are experiencing the need for increasingly greater personal responsibilities and choices (Bauman, 2000). Autonomy, subjectivity, responsibility and choice seem to converge in the overarching phenomenon of individualisation, but within structures which can be in some respects very constraining in the lack of clear institutional pathways to permanent employment. During the

last decade, the global economic crisis has – especially in Southern European economies – further intensified such transformation effects. The continued destruction of many jobs, accompanied by the increase of precariousness in the great majority of working activities, has extended dangers of marginalisation to groups who were previously relatively secure. Thus even knowledge workers, new entrants into the labour market holding excellent educational qualifications, and experienced technicians and managers are finding it difficult to make successful labour market transitions (Eichhorst, 2010; European Commission, 2012). Individuals are increasingly alone in facing the consequences of processes, which are only partly within the control of traditional economic and political authorities. However, while individuals may feel alone, their plight is anything but unique, framed against globalising forces at work and a severe economic crisis.

Quintini and Manfredi (2009), in their comparative analysis of transition pathways into employment for young people in the United States and Europe, commented that 'in Spain – school-to-work transitions are characterised by a high incidence of temporary work. Spain has a significantly smaller share of youth belonging to pathways dominated by employment while a larger share of youth appears to enter the labour market on pathways characterised by significant instability' (p. 45).

Overall then, the literature suggests that we could expect to find evidence of more highly 'individualised' attempts at career development and learning for labour market transitions in Italy and Spain than in, for example, Denmark, France or Germany, where the opportunity structures offer much higher levels of institutionalised support and clearer progression pathways.

Role of education and training in framing career development opportunities

Before examining the positive role formal education and training can play in helping individuals' upskill and/or reskill in their mid-career, it is perhaps instructive also to consider the legacy of earlier experiences of formal (school) education. These can either be positive providing a platform for further development or negative in the sense of representing a barrier to be overcome. Wojecki's (2007) study of learner identities in the workplace used a narrative perspective to look at workers working in the community and social services sector who were studying on a two year vocational and educational training programme in a formal learning context. He draws on the metaphor of 'wounded learning practices' for those with negative prior formal learning experiences. He explains:

> 'The metaphor of wounded learning practices is offered in the externalising of some adult learners' previous experiences of formal learning environments, and the implications these experiences might have for some adult learners and the identities and relationships they construct regarding their participation in formal training programmes. A narrative perspective of identity has been developed, inviting adult educators to appreciate how adult learners' use of stories about learning may affect their current and future renderings of self […] Stories of an individual's experiences of formal learning may shape how an adult learner sees herself as a "learner"'(2007, p. 179).

Education and training can facilitate career development in a number of ways. First, there is the role of initial vocational education and training in providing a platform for initial occupational development on which an individual can build their later career development.

Secondly, systems of continuing vocational education and training can offer a range of opportunities for career progression and development. The effectiveness of these systems are multiplied where there is strong continuity through formalised initial and continuing education and training pathways, where development opportunities fit within a clear framework for career progression. In such cases individual career progression is often linked to formal qualifications. Career pathways, however, are strongly framed by organisational opportunity structures as well as national systems. Third, higher education institutions can play a role in facilitating career development, although the degree of permeability between achievements within VET and HE may be a factor influencing access to such provision.

Initial vocational education and training plays a significant role in framing subsequent career development. At the European level the importance of vocational education and training is often asserted. For example, the Helsinki Communiqué on Enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training of 2006 stressed that vocational education and training (VET) is an integral part of lifelong learning strategies. "It plays a key role in human capital accumulation for the achievement of economic growth, employment and social objectives. VET is an essential tool in providing European citizens with the skills, knowledge and competences needed in the labour market and knowledge based society". It stresses the skills, competences and mobility of the labour force should be promoted and that training opportunities should be provided for those in working life.[1] By definition, initial vocational education and training is the base of this structure, but the significance of initial VET is multiplied in those countries, such as Germany, where occupational labour markets are still very influential. From this perspective it is instructive to look at the role of initial VET in Germany in providing a platform for career development.

The defining image of participation in the dual system of firm-based training and part-time VET in Berufsschulen acting for many participants as almost a guarantee of permanent skilled employment with the possibility of further firm-based career progression has been increasingly difficult to sustain for some time (Kutscha, 2002). However, even though it is no longer unchallenged the concept of 'Beruf' persists as the dominant organizational principle for the German vocational education and training system and national labour market (Reuling, 1996). In those systems that closely link skills acquisition with institutionalised training structures and labour markets, the formalised vocational training and the socialisation in acquiring an occupational specialisation form essential elements of developing an occupational identity (Heinz, 1995). Complemented and further supported by company-based socialisation, both elements are directly linked to belonging to particular work-based communities through occupationally defined categories with which individuals identify.

Through the central role of the dual system of education and training for the German economy, the relative position of the vocational track, as against the academic route, has traditionally been very strong, much stronger than in many other countries. Also Germany stands out for an early division between the vocational and the academic route, and the dual system itself generates gendered professions and career development pathways. Almost in parallel to the dual system applying to predominantly male careers, full-time vocational schools were established in work areas, which did not form part of the crafts or industrial training system of skilled labour such as social work or health care. Conceptualised as a

[1] The Helsinki Communiqué on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training, 5 December 2006 http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/helsinkicom_en.pdf

complementary structure to the industry-based dual training system, these schools were targeted to provide vocational education for young girls to prepare them for domestic roles or jobs in personal services. From this tradition developed a school-based vocational training system that mainly covers skills formation for the major social, educational and medical professions such as child-care, nursing, elderly care, speech therapy, physiotherapy, and so on. This route comprises, overall, more than one hundred professional domains which to date remain female dominated. The historical polarisation persists and still influences job stratification between men and women in Germany today.

Overall then, the experience of initial vocational education and training (IVET) can set some individuals on occupationally-related career development pathways, whereas for others whose career development does not align with their initial training, then they may have to follow more individualised paths. Structured pathways are available, but there is still a role of individual agency in transitions, and Heinz (1999, 2000) and Witzel & Kühn (2000) stress individuals' active roles in entry into work and in transitions between education, training and employment and subsequently how they deal with the work situation and performance expectations and transform their personal resources into work biographies.

It is also important to remember that while IVET still plays an important role in skill formation in Germany, when our interviewees left school this pathway was even more important and was, and continues to be, principally organised around dual systems of firm-based training and part-time vocational education. IVET was not seen as separate from the academic pathway in that large numbers of entrants to IVET had completed their *Abitur,* which gave access to higher education (HE). By 2008 the shift meant that one-fifth of all new entrants to IVET within the dual system had completed their *Abitur* (BIBB 2010, p. 159). This figure is evidence of the high reputation, acceptance and attractiveness of IVET continues to enjoy in Germany, even if IVET is now faced with greater competition than in the 1980s and 1990s when our interviewees were choosing their education and training pathways.

Continuing vocational education and training can also frame subsequent career opportunities and for an examination of the role of continuing vocational education and training in supporting learning for career development, this time France will be used as an exemplar. The French vocational education and training system plays an important role in increasing the capacity for practical skill development, securing access to and progression within occupations and the means of linking learning paths making use of a variety of formal, informal and non-formal learning through a variety of instruments. The IVET (initial vocational education and training) and CVT (continuing vocational training) systems are interconnected and complementary. The French CVT system comprises three basic components: Employer-Directed CVT (ED-CVT), Employee Self-Directed CVT (SD-CVT) and Employee-Employer Directed CVT via the 'Individual Right to Training (DIF-Droit Individuel à la Formation)'.

Employer-initiated and Directed CVT (ED-CVT) constitutes the dominant instrument used within the French continuing vocational training system. It is generally carried out within the framework of the vocational training plan of the organisation (private or public) and includes all kinds of short term and medium term vocational training. For the enterprise, the training plan is usually financed through the firm's overall mandatory contribution (representing now an overall a minimum contribution of 1.6% of its total wage bill) to an accredited vocational training fund (acting on branch and regional levels) (Dif, 2008).

Employee self-directed continuing vocational training (SD-CVT) is usually carried out via one or more of the three main formally institutionalised vocational training regimes:

- Individual Training Leave (CIF – Congé Individuel de Formation): introduced in 1971, it was designed to allow any worker in the private sector to take (over his/her working life) paid leave (under minimum requirements adapted to the nature of work contract) to undertake self-initiated and directed training programmes independent of the organisation's training scheme (Dif, 2008; Gahéry, 1996; Guilloux, 1996).

- Professional Training Leave (CFP- Congé de Formation Professionnelle): the CFP is equivalent to CIF scheme but is for employees in the public sector, accessible after accumulating three years of full-time working experience (or equivalent). Its maximum duration is 12 months (and three years maximum accumulated leaves over the whole career of the beneficiary).

- Validation of Acquired Experience (VAE- Valdication des Acquis de l'Expereince): the validation of prior experiential informal and non-formal learning has been progressively extended over decades and following the latest act ('Social Modernisation Act' 17 January 2002) it now includes recognition for, in addition to prior work-based learning, learning gained through social and cultural activities. The procedure, which guarantees access to a VAE regime, has four basic stages: provision of information and guidance; establishing the Feasibility of the candidature; the candidate's portfolio preparation and accompaniment; and assessment, interviewing and validation.

Additionally, anyone active in the labour market who meets the qualifying criteria is eligible to undertake a Competence Audit (BC – Bilan de Compétences). BC established the individual's right to have a voluntary access to personnel and professional assessment and guidance with aim of coping with work/learning transitions and defining a clear professional or training project for future developments. As a 'formative' and 'guidance' instrument, the competence audit does not lead to any formal recognition or certification but it might lead to undertaking a 'VAE'. The assessment process has three individualised stages (Dif, 2008): preliminary information and guidance stage; assessment stage; concluding guidance stage, which allows the beneficiary through an interview to: have access to detailed results of the assessment stage; identify the favourable and non-favourable factors for the construction of a professional or a training project, and predict/plan the principal steps of its implementation.

Finally, there is the Individual Right for Training (DIF-Droit Individuel à la Formation). DIF is an individual right to training (CVT) open to any employee on open ended duration contract (justifying at least one working year with the current employer) as well as to any employee on a fixed duration contract (justifying 4 working months with the current employer during the last 12 months). The right to training is accessed (in both private and public sectors) at the initiative of the employee in consultation and agreement with the employer, is available for 20 hours per year and is cumulative within the limit of 120 hours over 6 years. These accumulated training hours can be used for taking a leave for the validation of acquired experiential learning (CVAE- Congé VAE) or a leave for competence

audit (CBC - Congé de BC). So, the training is usually undertaken outside the enterprise and financially taken in charge by the employer.

Overall, systemic support for continuing vocational education and training of the type offered by the French system can offer a range of opportunities for career progression and development. Denmark and Germany too have formalised CVT support, whereas provision in Italy and Spain is comparatively under-developed. The French system also offers continuity between formalised initial and continuing education and training pathways, so that development opportunities fit within a clear framework for career progression and access to qualifications. The French system, however, differs from the Danish and German systems in that as well as supporting progression within a sector, there are also resources available to those considering more radical career change through the system of BC and VAE. Whether taking CVT and acquiring formal qualifications actually leads to career progression, however, depends on organisational opportunity structures as well as national systems.

The role of Higher Education (HE) in framing career development was very important for the highly skilled, but our sample was specifically drawn so that individuals were in low or intermediate level positions and had usually not completed full (EQF level 6) graduate qualifications straight from school. However, HE could still play a role for adults in facilitating career development, especially in those sectors such as health or engineering where post-experience HE qualifications can be used as an indicator of higher level expertise. However, the degree of permeability between achievements within VET and HE in different countries may be a factor influencing access to such provision more generally. HE can also be used by adults who are looking to change career, but access may be an issue in this respect too. Recent changes in HE impinge upon individual intentions to upskill or reskill in mid-career.

Higher education institutions across Europe are increasingly likely to be engaged in partnerships with employers and local communities, as ‘institutional boundaries become less tight as interrelationships with the wider society grow’ (Barnett, 2003, p. 27). While some systems remain elite the system as a whole has become a mass-based one (Scott, 2001, Osborne, 2003) opening up opportunities for widening participation and access for groups who never previously entered higher education including adults. The Bologna Declaration of 1999 has led to the creation of a European Higher Education Area with the aim of creating a more common system of higher education across Europe while still respecting national and cultural diversity.

One consequence of the Bologna Declaration was to introduce Bachelor and Master’s degrees in systems, which previously operated a single-exit point at *Diplom* level. This posed a particular challenge in Germany where occupational identity development is particularly significant with traditionally high importance attached to apprenticeship, skilled work and clear occupational pathways based on the concept of *‘Beruf’*. However, attitudes to initial vocational education and training (IVET) are changing as there is an ‘academic shift in the labour market’ which is leading to changes in companies’ qualification requirements in ways detrimental to students completing IVET. The new qualification profiles of some three-year Bachelor degrees in Germany are explicitly vocational and have been devised to be an attractive alternative for upper secondary school leavers with a general university entrance qualification (Abitur). The explicit intention is to recruit school leavers who previously enrolled in IVET (often apprenticeship) programmes (Hippach-Schneider et al., 2013).

The first Bachelor programmes were introduced in Germany in 2002 and this development has led to questions as to the relative standing of the vocationally oriented degree programmes compared to completion of apprenticeship or other IVET programmes, with the concern that Bachelor graduates might displace the latter in the competition for skilled work in the labour market (Briedis et al., 2011). Some companies seemed particularly interested in applicants who had followed pathways where both practical and academic expertise had been developed (Hippach-Schneider et al., 2013). Such expertise could be developed in a number of ways as individuals moved through different education, training and employment contexts, but hybrid qualifications or dual-track pathways were one route. For example, a Bachelor's degree from a university of applied sciences might have substantive in-company component, mirroring the dual system of IVET. If the intention is to preserve IVET as an attractive educational pathway for high achievers in Germany, then this will necessitate increased permeability into HE from IVET. Companies valued having people, particularly at the intermediate level, with double qualifications or who had completed hybrid pathways which had both vocational and academic components. Hence, any 'academic shift' for IVET would not have to lead to subsequent traditional fulltime academic disciplinary university-level study, but could lead to forms of higher (tertiary-level) vocational education, which was combined with work or at least substantive work experience (Hippach-Schneider et al., 2013). In the longer run, and in contexts outside Germany, constraints on the further development of these hybrid pathways, combining a practical and academic orientation over an extended period, could come from insufficiently demanding initial vocational pathways or insufficient numbers of technically demanding jobs rather than any constraints from HE in the willingness to offer such programmes.

METHODS

Examples of the influence of opportunity structures in shaping individual career development will be drawn from two European studies which involved interviewing either low skilled and/or intermediate skilled workers in the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom (UK).The first project sought to illuminate how individuals navigate career and labour market transition processes through an examination of the strategic career and learning biographies of people with intermediate level qualifications in their mid-career in five countries: Denmark, France, Germany, Italy and Spain (Brown et al., 2012). To investigate the different ways in which learning supports labour market and career transitions for this group, the study was based on biographical research. Adults, who had occupied intermediate level positions in the labour market for at least five years in their career, were asked retrospectively to reflect upon their past experiences with career transitions and the role lifelong learning played in these. They are also asked to assess prospectively how these experiences may inform their future career plans. The narrative approach was intended to bring to the surface the heterogeneity of individuals' experiences in regard to the nexus between learning and career and labour market transitions. The intention was to conduct at least 20 interviews in each of the five European countries, so as to draw out the complexity of the linkages between different aspects of learning, careers and workers' identification with their work and performance, through delineation of their strategic career and learning biographies, with the meaning itself emerging from giving the

interviewees the opportunity to tell their stories about their careers, learning, identities and transitions.

The project was based on biographical interviews taking place in five Denmark, Germany, Spain, France and Italy. Each country partner identified a sample of between 20 - 25 people mainly aged between 35 and 45 for biographical interviewing. Each participant had a first interview, mainly between February 2012 and August 2012. About 60 participants were interviewed again, mainly between October 2012 and February 2013. The first interview enabled participants to reflect upon their learning experiences, recent career transition and aspirations for the future. The second interview allowed participants to identify the changes (or not) that learning and a career transition has had on the self, working life and private life.

The collection of narratives focused upon individuals' learning and career biographies (Brown et al., 2012), with respondents recounting how their occupational identities develop and change over time and how they were impacted by transition processes associated with changes in work roles. The interviews drew upon a number of different elements of occupational identity development (Brown, 1997). In this process individuals prioritised certain episodes from their varied experiences and form strategic career stories. The interviews were based on a semi-structured guideline in order to ensure that the following broad themes were covered across the board: how skills, knowledge and understanding for a current job were acquired, significant work and learning transitions, significant learning experiences, nature of support for career transitions, learning from previous changes and future development plans.

The sample was drawn so as to represent as many different possible types of career and learning pathways with which many people in their mid-career and with middle level qualifications in each country were likely to engage. It comprised men and women, individuals working in small, medium and large companies in both the private and public sectors who are in a range of work positions but who had not entered work on management pathways. The labour market areas chosen by each country team reflected the different nature of the labour markets, patterns of work organisation and career and learning pathways.

The second study used the same methods and was an inter-disciplinary, multi-national research study across seven European countries (the Czech Republic, Denmark, England, France, Germany, Italy and Poland). The overall aim of the study was to provide an in-depth understanding of the variety of reasons explaining why low skilled worked can be disengaged from education and learning throughout their life, whilst others are able to develop their skills to build successful careers. The narrative interviews were undertaken in 2013 and 2014 and investigated how workers who leave initial education and training with few formal qualifications (defined as low skilled) subsequently progressed in their learning activities, career development, and career transitions. According to the OECD (2013, p. 6) individuals with poor literacy and numeracy skills are more likely to find themselves at risk: "poor proficiency in information-processing skills limits adults' access to many basic services, to better-paying and more-rewarding jobs, and to the possibility of participating in further education and training, which is crucial for developing and maintaining skills over the working life and beyond." The policy implications based on that are clear: attention needs to be focused strongly on skills development of those performing less well both in initial education and in subsequent education, training and employment settings. Therefore, it is highly relevant to learn more about the constraints that those not on high-skilled pathways

face in the labour market, especially as these groups often have fewer opportunities for learning and development as adults.

EXAMPLES OF THE INFLUENCE OF OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES IN FACILITATING OR CONSTRAINING INDIVIDUAL CAREER DEVELOPMENT

The most obvious ways in which learning for career development is facilitated or constrained for individuals in particular contexts relate to access to the opportunities associated with different types of employment, training and education. Access to challenging work is a prime driver for skill development facilitative of learning for career development (Brown, 2015). Challenging work can help individuals adapt across their career through the iterative interaction between work and personal development. Indeed mastering challenging work can help build a platform from which to adapt to work in other fields. Many of our interviewees, particularly the low skilled, however, struggled to find such work and some of their stories are outlined below in order to highlight how different opportunity structures can facilitate or constrain individual career development.

The role different forms of work play in facilitating or constraining career development

The search for a permanent contract loomed large in the accounts of many of our interviewees across all countries. For example, Rainer, a German supervisor, expressed a common view in stressing the importance of secure employment. In that context, temporary work is seen in a problematic light. In Italy, Rosina illustrated how career choices can be constrained by the opportunity structures within which decisions have to be made. She grew up in a village in Southern Italy which had very few work opportunities for young people. She did undertake short a period of work experience in a shop in her village, but, due to the economic crisis, the shop owner could not employ her anymore. Rosina was then faced with the classic dilemma of a young person with very limited prospects in a rural setting: do I stay or do I go? She moved to Rome, finding hospitality with her relatives, where there were a much wider range of opportunities. Having relatives in Rome made this transition easier in many respects.

So temporary work can be a path which does not lead to any progression. However, on the other hand, temporary jobs can sometimes play an important career bridging role. For example, Christian worked as a gardener at a graveyard and as a courier driver in Germany, while waiting to gain access to his preferred course of study. Engaging in temporary work could be like doing unskilled work, in that it can be a means to develop useful skills, accumulate experience etc., and it only becomes problematic if an individual stays in such work for too long a period. Sometimes temporary work is readily accepted as being particularly interesting or challenging (e.g. Paul, a carpenter, worked in set design in theatre support roles in Germany). So temporary work can be used positively in order to stave off the prospect of unemployment and/or in order to enrich and extend your skill set in order to improve your adaptability, thereby increasing the chance one will make successful transitions in future. In addition, the experience while doing temporary work can be formative in that it may help in structuring the reflective process and can then evolve into a career, as it was in

the case of Didier who while working on a temporary summer job in France developed an interest in gardening and finally became a Landscape Designer.

Overall then, temporary work may often constrain career development, by limiting access to opportunities for both substantive learning and career development, especially if a permanent contract is desired and remains out of reach. However, in other circumstances temporary work may provide opportunities for challenge and personal development, thereby helping individuals develop their skill sets in ways which increase their career adaptability and chances of finding permanent employment eventually.

Many low skilled interviewees across the seven countries felt locked out of opportunities for permanent employment because local, regional or national unemployment rates were so high. In a number of cases individuals pointed to the existence of large numbers of more highly qualified individuals who were also unemployed as corrosive of their motivation to try to improve their prospects. For instance, Soňa from the Czech republic was not convinced that engaging in education would improve her chances to find a better job; she sees that the opposite is often true in her region: ‘There are many university graduates that are unemployed. When I went to the labour office the last time, it looked like there were more job openings for people with lower qualifications. So the having a diploma doesn’t automatically mean getting a job. You have to work for it.’

Given that permanent employment was a goal for so many interviewees, it is interesting to note that it too could either be facilitative of career progression, by setting individuals on a genuine career ladder, or it could constrain an individual from feeling he or she could move. There were cases where people felt they were locked into permanent employment: Sabine is a paediatric nurse in Germany, who had been working with the same employer in a rehabilitation centre all her working life (over 20 years), but in three different positions, for most of that time working 30 hours per week. She has tried several times to redirect her career to specialise as a speech therapist, but has not been successful due to formal obstacles, in particular the non-accreditation of prior learning. However, she assesses that her stable and privileged employment position has been the main reason why she finally never completed other career and learning pathways she started. The narrative here is that structural conditions (secure employment versus insecure job perspectives and restrictions due to formal requirements) combined with lack of support have been major obstacles to professional development and ‘moving on’. Thus, despite encountering dissatisfaction with work, the wish to keep her stable employment has locked her into the current position.

Being locked into permanent employment is of course less problematic than being locked out of such employment. Brian is an example of someone who for a long period experienced the latter phenomenon. He is 33 and has worked with a travelling fun fair for 10 years. He was expelled from school at the age of 14. He admits that he misbehaved at school and regularly failed to attend. He reflected on the need from some kind of support and a second chance:

> *‘No one ever tried to persuade me to go back or keep me on a course. I don’t expect folks to take my side [...] There should be more opportunities for people of all ages to have a second opportunity to get on training courses.’*

In his early teens, he was detained for being drunk and disorderly. He failed to attain any qualifications at school and only achieved a Level 1 qualification in later life through a

mandated training programme by the job centre. Brian was raised by his grandparents and lived in small seaside town with limited employment opportunities. He has now returned from the fun fair and has experienced significant bouts of joblessness. Supported by the Government's Work Programme, Brian has started his first full-time job, as a picker packer in a warehouse for an online retail store. His lack of opportunities for work was believed to be the result of his rural location and poor transport links to the nearest city. His efforts to engage in learning seem to be hampered by his limited access to funding:

> '*I wanted to get on a training course, but didn't have anything in mind. Every time I asked they just said the Government had pulled the funding or stopped […] I always wanted to do that [electrician course] since I was a kid but courses want £2,000 up front which I haven't got.'*

Brian represents an interesting case of someone who has disengaged from learning from an early age and wants a second chance at learning:

> *'I've got no qualifications. I wish I'd have stuck at my qualifications and everything. I'd be in a lot better job now if I had my qualifications. I never finished the courses at college, but if there had been someone I'd got on with at the College I'd have probably stuck it out the 2 years.'*

His feelings of disengagement are being amplified by his views on the lack of opportunities available to him in terms of courses that match his interests and the lack of funding opportunities to finance his participation. Brian was one of five interviewees from the UK who wished they could return to learning to 'do better'.

Gaining different forms of expereince can be difficult when a particular record of employment is built up, especially if this is on the margins of the mainstream labour market. For this and othe reasons there may be value in experiencing different work contexts for work early in your career. In the German sample, there were examples of men undertaking activities in their period of civilian service, as an alternative to military service, which were sometimes performed in a completely different context to the rest of their career: for example, Christian worked in an elder care institution. This has implications for helping people develop their skill sets and enhancing their adaptability, as learning to perform effectively in very different contexts or performing different types of work activities enhances ownership of particular skills and may broaden overall skill sets through exposure to development in different domains. This idea of exposing early career learners to a variety of contexts to broaden and deepen their learning is not new. Indeed this idea was enshrined in the regulations governing apprenticeships in medieval times, whereby journeymen upon initial qualification were expected to embark on a 'grand tour' in order to experience different ways of working and work cultures in different cities or at least agree to work a set distance away from where they were trained for a year and a day. Several French interviewees in the health field followed a similar path in undertaking voluntary work overseas.

The above examples related mainly to full-time work, even if such work was sometimes temporary. However, part-time work was a mode of work which could open up some types of opportunity while also it could close down other avenues. Many interviewees voluntarily switched to part-time work at some stage in their career, often, but not always, because of a desire to balance work and family responsibilities. Sandra, a German speech therapist, is an

example of someone who varied her hours, not only because of child-care responsibilities, but also in order to retrain and to take on responsibility as the primary bread-winner. Sandra completed secondary education with the Abitur and afterwards spent about two years doing different jobs, travelling and also studying at University for a couple of months until starting a two-years training as a masseur. She worked as a masseur with different employers for four years knowing that actually she wanted to do something different. For a five year period, during which she had two children, Sandra stayed at home as a primary care-giver and then she decided to pursue another qualification as speech therapist. Around this time Sandra also started a course programme for alternative medicine, which, however, she never fully completed. To qualify as speech therapist she was lucky to get into the three-year training programme, after which she started in her new profession, first full-time for a couple of years and then for seven years she has worked part-time (75%).

Sandra's narrative revolves around seeking to establish continuity in her working life, which was partly in parallel with building a family. Starting afresh in a new profession was also a result of the health problems of her husband that made clear that Sandra will have to become the breadwinner in the longer term. Currently, she is considering building on the courses she did in alternative medicine, because this is something that really interests her. However, financial constraints in terms of prospective loss of income loom large if she was to undertake full-time retraining. On the other hand, the amount of learning involved is a major obstacle at the moment if she was to try to do the retraining as well as her current work. Overall, however, it is clear that Sandra was previously able to vary her hours in ways which balanced her current work and family requirements and commitments, but also allowed her time to devote to redirecting her career.

While Sandra's case illustrates the flexibility afforded for career development by engaging in part-time work, it is also possible for people to feel trapped in part-time work to such an extent that they feel their careers have stalled. For example, Gabi has been working with a German bank for 20 years, but in different branches in the region. Before having her children she worked full-time, then Gabi stayed home with the children for 6 years and went back into work with the same employer, since then being employed part-time (50%). Gabi was trained in the former East Germany under the old system as a "Wirtschaftskaufmann DDR". In order to keep her job Gabi had to undergo a retraining/re-accreditation course of 6-9 months to get the equivalent West-German certificate as "Sparkassenkauffrau". With this qualification she finds herself at the lower end of career options in the bank and has remained at the reception/referral desk ever since. She also does not see herself moving up, because there is much competition from younger, more highly qualified colleagues and Gabi herself would neither have the energy nor the resources to undergo another major retraining. However, Gabi would like to work more hours and to be more involved at work, but needs to give priority to her family commitments. The narrative here is the career priorities of the partner and family commitments over own career and work interests combined with a competitive work environment where Gabi does not see that she can ever improve her current position.

Overall then, part-time work may facilitate career development, especially if the switch is made to accommodate other life transitions such as the need to exercise primary care for young children. However, a person may also become locked into part-time working, where it is difficult to return to full-time work and other career options appear to be unattainable.

The type of engagement individuals had with their work could also have implications for their subsequent career development. For example, work intensification, stress and 'burn-out' can act as barriers to career development. Experiences at work can be a major source of learning and development, but they can also lead to stalling of a career. For example, Rainer found aspects of his work as a supervisor in a German factory very difficult. Rainer pointed to work intensification, time pressure and shift work as well as acting as a buffer between workers and management as aspects that make him feel is being burned out sometimes. Stress was mentioned as a major barrier to career development in a number of the Danish cases too, but it is Anke who provides the most dramatic example of someone burning themselves out. It is an instructive example as to why it might be helpful to offer mid-career reviews to everyone rather than waiting till a crisis occurs. Burn-out can jeopadise the ability to take up new opportunities as well as being detrimental to performance in an existing job.

Anke initially wanted to do an apprenticeship in a commercial field but then decided to go straight into automobile manufacturing assembling parts in Germany as there she could earn more money. Cars were her then her fairly expensive hobby. Overall, she has been working for different suppliers for about 25 years (mainly piecework) also in different regions of the country. During this time she undertook different specialist training mostly employer directed as the employer recognised that Anke was interested in the field. She also did a distance learning course in electrical engineering. She mostly changed jobs in pursuit of earning more money, finally moving to a main city in the former eastern part of Germany to work for a company that produced medical hardware. This job was very hard and Anke worked a lot of extra hours up to 22 hours non-stop to make more money. Her plan had always been to stop working at the age of 50 to migrate to Canada.

She reflects that she learnt being a workaholic from her parents. She would take over work from colleagues and work extra hours continuously. She neglected her children through over-working and says that the hardest time for her in life has been the short periods when she had to stay home when the children were small. About 5 years ago she was totally burned-out and had to stop working completely, since then she has had to live on the savings she had accrued to go to Canada. Anke was admitted to a psychiatric clinic for 9 months, and her children moved to their father with whom they still live. For the last year Anke has been working in a museum/cultural institution in the framework of the activation programme. She has extended this job because she likes it as she learns a lot about herself. She says that she will never be able to go back to do technical work but is now doing this more as a hobby. Anke's burn-out compromised the type of opportunities with which she could engage, although earlier in her career she felt she could over-work so as to create new opportunities.

Significance of education and training in faciltating further career development

The training with the most significant influence on learning for subsequent career development for many of our interviewees was Initial Vocational Education and Training (IVET). The influence extended beyond the first labour market transition for some individuals in that it also facilitated or constrained access to subsequent opportunities in different employment, training and education contexts. For many of our interviewees their IVET or studies in HE, particularly if it constituted a vocational preparation, either established them upon their chosen pathways or else gave them an initial platform from which they could secure other education, training or employment. In systems like Denmark, France and Germany IVET typically lasted between two and four years and an apprenticeship or other

substantive IVET gave entry into skilled level work, although the proportion of those qualified who were successful in entering such work varied by time and place.

In other cases IVET was more about vocational orientation and choice than occupational preparation. For example, several interviewees either did not complete their training and switched direction or else took a second programme of IVET even after successfully completing their first. There was a smaller third group who completed IVET and then entered higher education. Finally, IVET does not only have to balance these three partly competing objectives (occupational preparation, helping with processes of vocational orientation and choice, and facilitating progression to HE), ideally it also has to support participants in the development of their career adaptability, so that they will be equipped to make successful career and labour market transitions in future.

IVET played a very clear role in developing vocational expertise in apprenticeships and other substantive IVET provision. For example, interviewees gave many examples of how the range and depth of their learning and development had been extended through participation in activities designed to improve performance on particular tasks, develop their situational or contextual awareness and understanding and improve their decision making and problem solving. Such activities typically comprise a progressive curriculum in apprenticeship training or other IVET. The experience of work within IVET programmes often also gave opportunities for development of capabilities crucial for teamwork and role performance more generally. Exposure to increasingly more complex activities were designed to improve judgement, but interviewees commented how this often developed in the post-qualifying period when more challenging activities were undertaken and judgment was able to be developed cumulatively over time.

Interviewees who followed their expected pathway into skilled employment also highlighted the importance of IVET in helping them develop the knowledge base underpinning their practice. Thus chefs, carpenters and nurses all gave examples of the subsequent value of the knowledge acquired through education and training. Knowledge development could then be consolidated and expanded through acculturation, experience, social interaction, formal reflection sessions, as well as through other less formal means of feedback. The experience of work during and after IVET was self-evidently crucial for the development of work process knowledge. The model could be quite useful in this respect as it draws attention to the different types of knowledge development and also learning to apply knowledge in different and/or more challenging contexts was an essential component of the development of vocational mastery.

Dual systems of apprenticeship institutionalise the incorporation of learning at and through work in IVET, but even predominantly education-based IVET systems will often make some use of work placements and direct experience of work. The role of learning at work (work practice) in IVET also comes out very strongly in the interviews in relation to how they developed their capabilities underlining their work performance. This could be through gradual exposure to more challenging work and learning through participation in work practices. The socialisation process was valuable too, as it enabled the trainees' integration in the work contexts and helped develop their relationships with others (members of working groups, managers, peers, subordinates, clients etc.). More senior trainees could also play a role in supporting the learning of more junior trainees and in some cases trainees' knowledge, of for example new techniques, might be picked up in the workplace, as in the exchange of ideas in a kitchen about new ways of preparing particular dishes.

Interviewees who had experienced initial vocational education and training (including through an apprenticeship) described the ways in which their initial learning and development informed how they used and further developed the knowledge, skills and understanding to perform in their subsequent work career. These represent the classic ways IVET is intended to act as both a vocational preparation and the basis for continuing skills and knowledge development.

Initial vocational education and training is on its own, however, rarely sufficient for an individual to reach the 'experienced worker' standard expected of an established skilled worker. There are different performance and task expectations for an experienced worker, at whatever level in an organisation, than for a person who has just joined the organisation immediately after completion of initial vocational education and training (Eraut et al., 2004). The increasing demands are likely to require individuals to continue to develop their skills through engaging in challenging work activities which extend their skills in a number of respects.

Interviewees also highlight the breadth and depth of forms of learning and development relevant to work with which they subsequently engaged. Where interviewees followed traditional progression pathways related to their initial vocational education or training (such as an apprenticeship) the value of their IVET was clear. However, it is interesting that people who developed their careers well beyond their initial training still gave examples of how what or how they had learned could still have relevance in new contexts. Indeed IVET is permeated by a dialectic between short-term and longer-term considerations: whereby preparing for the immediate tasks to be performed and nature of (craft or technical) work is important but there is also value in equipping people for further progression. Interviewees stressed they did not forget or give up their 'old' ways of thinking just because they move into a new area, rather they seek to adapt it in new ways. Thus the Danish carpenter who progressed to setting up exhibitions, then became a team leader and finally moved into logistics support still valued his original qualification and training as providing an underpinning for his continuing development.

Practical skills can be the basis for strong identities (as with the carpenter just mentioned) due not necessarily to a sense of continuing vocation (although that was possible too, as with German carpenter who progressed to a specialist theatre set designer), but rather as embodying a particular way of thinking and practising. However, even where this valued an individual might still be capable of a major shift, for example as in a Danish case where a craft worker switched career to become a teaching assistant for special needs. The interviewee found this rewarding in a different way from his previous work: this highlights the point about people may follow different trajectories for different aspects of their learning and development – depending whether it is primarily concerned with the cognitive; practical / technical; emotional; relational; or involves a different mix of the four domains.

The above cases show the value of structured IVET pathways which can offer individuals a clear pathway to skilled employmnet. However, while the existence of such pathways can be a boon to those who make successful transitions into such employment, the scarcity of such pathways in countries such as Spain and Italy can be problematic, as could the lack of local opportunities for progression into skilled employment for many who complete such training in countries such as in Poland and the Czech Republic. There may also be issues in terms of insufficient training places to meet demand even in places with clearly structured progression pathways. In Denmark, for example, it seems evident that structural issues, for

example concerning the availability of apprenticeships, play a huge role when looking at the number of unskilled people who have completed introductory courses at technical schools only to find out that they were not able to complete their vocational education due to the lack of apprenticeships. This is a systemic problem of the Danish vocational education and training system. Ellinor was such an example. After 10th grade, she continued directly into the hairdresser's foundation course at a technical college. She completed the foundation course but was unable to find an apprenticeship. When asked about giving up on her dream of becoming a hairdresser she answered:

> *'I think it was sad, but after 100 job applications I don't feel like going after this anymore. I was plodding up and down the streets of Copenhagen and other towns [in order to find an apprenticeship]. And in the end, I didn't feel for it. If it has to be that tough, you lose heart.'*

The experience of IVET and having secured a skilled worker qualification could also open up subsequent opportunties for learning and development, such as making use of continuing vocational education and training (CVET) programmes to develop and deepen expertise. Paul, a German carpenter, completed his apprenticeship and then stayed on as a trained carpenter with the same carpenter's shop for another 4 years. Paul wanted to deepen his expertise and then went, inspired by the carpenter who did work for the theatre, to a special full-time handicraft design school for two years. The German system makes comprehensive use of progression to Meister in order that further education and training allows skilled workers to consolidate, deepen and enhance their expertise. There were many examples from all countries of interviewees using CVT to update their skills or broaden their skill set with a view to doing their current job more effectively or facilitating subsequent career progression. CVT could vary from a few days to a few years and it could be a component of a national system, linked to a particular sector, provision supplied by regional or local providers or part of a company scheme.

In some contexts completion of IVET and securing a skilled worker qualification are formally linked to career progression in that there is a requirement of a licence to practise in speified fields. In Germany there are issues around the extent to which Meister and equivalent qualifications operate as a licence to practise as an independent tradesperson. Paul took a further qualification ('ausgebildeter Gestalter im Handwerk', i.e. certified applied craft designer), which was funded by the government (with the 'MeisterBafög'). Doing the Meister would have been the alternative, but he opted for the school-based qualification. However, in the end he found out that this qualification did not allow him to start his own carpenter's workshop (which to date still requires the 'Meister' qualification), so as an alternative he started a business for assembly ('Montagebetrieb'), which during the last years transformed into a carpenter's workshop. Subsequently, for almost 6 years he has now worked as an independent carpenter. Structurally, a licence to practice system institutionalises support for learning for an important career transition, to being able to ply your trade independently. In line with much of the German system there is an emphasis upon the importance of training for responsibility. The alternative would be to learn through the exercise of responsibility and then complement learning through undertaking challenging work with other forms of learning and development, possibly including more formal learning and development.

More generally, the structure of the different national CVT systems set the broad parameters of how adults, most often employees from companies, could engage in continuing professional development, but the interests of other stake-holders (e.g. provider institutions) will influence how the provision is implemented in practice.

CONCLUSION

The availability of opportunities (or opportunity structures) are influenced both by policy design and the macroeconomic context. The general macroeconomic conditions (strong or weak labour demand) varied between countries and over time for our interviewees. The labour market structures (the demand for specific qualifications, the status of occupations, the existence of occupational or internal / organisational labour markets) also helped frame their decisions about career and learning. The availability of and opportunity to access learning and training programmes at different times over the life-course are also important (as any difficulties and barriers encountered in trying to access them). The availability and quality of career guidance received or on offer (if any) is also important, as is the role of learning and training in human resource practices within organisations. The structure and content of job activation programmes for the unemployed could vary by place and over time too. Taken together these factors reinforce the notion that for many individuals their career decisions are strongly influenced by the context in which their decisions are made. A major challenge of how to support learning for career development is how can support offer constructive ways forward when the opportunity structures appear so constraining as at present in large parts of the Czech Republic, Italy, Poland, Spain. In all these countries many interviewees were experiencing very extended transitions even into employment for which they were fully qualified.

Learning takes place in the context of opportunity structures within which individuals operate. Work itself structures opportunities individuals have for learning and development, because work varies in the affordances it offers for learning and interaction at work. Learning and development at work depends partly on the extent to which work offers an expansive or a restrictive learning environment (Fuller and Unwin, 2006). The occupational structure is another important opportunity structure, as can be seen from the importance in Germany of recognised occupations, reflecting the power of the concept of ‘Beruf’ (occupation).

Temporary work often constrains career development, especially if a permanent contract is desired and remains out of reach, although in other circumstances it may help individuals develop their skill sets. Part-time work may facilitate career development, especially if the switch is made to accommodate other life transitions such as the need to exercise primary care for young children. However, a person may also become locked into part-time working, where it is difficult to return to full-time work and other career options appear to be unattainable. Engaging in part-time work is a highly gendered activity.

Initial Vocational Education and Training (IVET) has a significant influence on learning for career development. The influence extended beyond the first labour market transition for some individuals in that it also facilitated or constrained access to subsequent opportunities in different employment, training and education contexts. Participating in formal education mid-career can require a lot of time and people might not have it, especially if they have a job and a family. Time away from the job to engage in learning is often subject to the support from

gatekeepers (supervisors or employers). If they are supportive usually learning can be accommodated, if not it can become almost impossible. Money to pay for courses and fees is usually not a problem but an extended period without income can be. Families and parents sometimes help financially adults who are going through extended transitions or want to return to education financially.

Support from public structures for career development is very important. Activation programms embedded in active labour market policies can be useful in helping people find jobs after a spell of unemployment. However, the programmes sometimes fail to activate and engage people, having the unfortunate consequence of alienating them, as was the experience some of the Danish interviewees.

Formal support structures through provision of public employment services, transition regimes, recognition of prior learning and career guidance could influence how individuals perceived the career opportunities available to them. However, the extended transitions of some interviewees were highly dependent upon family support, while, on the other hand, family responsibilities might constrain career development.

The navigation of one's life course is constrained by specific structural, political and economic circumstances in a country. These constraints need to be identified and attention paid as to how barriers can be lowered. At the same time guidance can provide pillars of orientation as to how one needs to understand the structural conditions and act in them. A guidance counsellor can understand the interplay between external forces and individual dispositions and provide individualised advice.

If you veer from a traditional (approved) progression pathway financial support may be critical to your chances of success. Financial difficulties (whether due to the direct cost of training or not being able to afford any loss of wages consequent upon the decision to undertake training) can be a significant barrier to undertaking further training, particularly if this involves reskilling.

Paying attention to the particular opportunity structures within which career decisions are made is important. The general macroeconomic conditions (strong or weak labour demand) and labour market structures (including the demand for specific qualifications, the status of occupations, the existence of occupational or internal / organisational labour markets) help frame individual decisions about career and learning. The availability of and opportunity to access learning and training programmes at different times over the life-course are also important (as are any difficulties and barriers encountered in trying to access them). The availability and quality of career guidance received or on offer (if any) is also important, as is the role of learning and training in human resource practices within organisations. The structure and content of job activation programmes for the unemployed could vary by place and over time too. Taken together these factors reinforce the notion that for many individuals their career decisions are strongly influenced by the context in which their decisions are made. A major challenge of how to support learning for career and labour market transitions is how can support offer constructive ways forward when the opportunity structures appear so constraining as at present in much of Europe. Many individuals are experiencing very extended transitions even into employment for which they are fully qualified.

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