

## *Conference:*

# Anticipating skills needs at EU level - Report on EU Skills Panorama

The aim of this report is to give a short overview of EU Skills Panorama, but more importantly, to give some critical insight into the dominant approach to education and learning and into prevailing terminology, such as *skills, occupations, mismatch*, etc.

## **Background of EU Skills Panorama**

The context of EU Skills Panorama can be found in EU documents such as:

- ‘Rethinking Education’ strategy;
- Europe 2020 flagship Agenda for New Skills and Jobs;
- The European Vacancy and Recruitment Report (EVRR).

Better matching between labour supply and labour demand is one of its key strategies, as outlined in the Commission’s April 2012 Employment Package. It is considered in EU discourse that this aim can be achieved through, *inter alia*, better forecasting of skills needs, allowing the relevant authorities and stakeholders to adapt education and training curricula for young people so as to make education and career choices more information- and analysis based.

The Panorama complements other EU tools such as the European Vacancy Monitor, employer surveys, and the European Sector Skills Councils. It completes practical information such as the Europass CV which is used by more than 10 million Europeans. The Skills Panorama is to be further developed and updated with the support of Member States and various partner organisations.

## **What is EU Skills Panorama?**

EU Skills Panorama is a website presenting quantitative and qualitative information on short – and medium-term skills needs, skills supply, and skills mismatch-

es. Drawing on data and forecasts compiled at EU and Member State level, the Panorama will highlight the fastest growing occupations as well as the top ‘bottleneck’ occupations with high numbers of unfilled vacancies. The website contains detailed information sector by sector, profession by profession, and country by country. It is supported by the Network of National Observatories on Skills Needs and Mismatches, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), and the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound).

The Panorama includes:

- Analytical highlights focusing on occupational trends as well as on specific sectors or on transversal skills. The trends in the top growth occupations, and in the top ‘in demand’ occupations are analysed, and forecasts at sector level, together with specific skill needs and mismatches are presented;
- An inventory of existing information sources at the national, European or international level, which allows users an easy access to previously dispersed information.

### **Who is the target group?**

This first version of the Panorama is mainly intended for policy-makers, researchers, intermediary services, and practitioners. It allows for in-depth analysis and the development of evidence-based policy in the areas of training and education planning, as well as the development of targeted measures to tackle labour market mismatches. The Panorama will be further developed to meet the needs of jobseekers, workers and students, so that they can make more informed career choices.

### **Upskilling vs. education: possible consequences**

Firstly, it is interesting to look at how education is understood in the framework of the EU Skills Panorama. In almost all speeches and presentations delivered at the final conference, it is emphasised that educational reforms need to change schools and universities into institutions that are more responsive to labour market needs (not a new idea, but at the peak of economic crisis a very influential one), which obviously reduces *education* to mostly *upskilling*. Since the initiative is developed in cooperation between DG Employment and DG EAC, it is ex-

pected and understandable that the focus would be on vocational education and training. However, we do need to raise further questions of how this approach to education and learning will influence educational thought in general. If we in the field of education accept (and it seems that we already did) the concept of 'upskilling', what else do we accept? We cannot forget that policy is discursive practice, which means that it is constructed in a socio-political context and it will continue to build up European society according to architecture that is created in economic narrative and within the neo-liberal approach. Even though the relationship between work and education is highlighted, it is not perceived as a functional one – it is more about two parallel, independent data bases. The 'educational part' is very 'weak' – which is obvious, for example, with indicators, or transversal skills – they do not seem to be of any importance.

Years ago an unwritten 'agreement' was made to use the term 'competences', in order to put an emphasis on the ability to perform and to accentuate 'knowledge in use'. The consequence was that not just the general public, but also scientists and researchers have begun to use the term. What kind of reality will be created if we use the term 'upskilling' as a synonym for 'education'? This question is even more problematic if we look at issues brought on by terms such as 'sectors' and 'required skills'. For instance, *environmental awareness skills* are defined as knowledge, abilities, values, and attitudes needed to live in, develop, and support a society that reduces the impact of human activity on the environment. Obviously, there is confusion about the term 'skill' here, since it covers knowledge, abilities, values, and attitudes. Even the Commission was aware that 'awareness' is not and cannot be reduced to 'skill', but it was necessary to use the 'waffle iron' in order to highlight the imposed uniformity of things and to offer a clear, linear solution to the problem of unemployment.

Of course, there is a question of why there was such a huge necessity to make a shift towards using the term 'skills' instead of 'competence'? Certainly, this is related to the issue of unemployment, but we suggest that it is essential to be critical towards the terms and concepts being used, since these terms create reality and, as we said, reduce education to 'upskilling' and therefore human development to workplace context.

### **Skill mismatch: reality or discourse?**

Policy makers create not only solutions, but also problems that need to be resolved. They construct discourses that offer both the dilemma and the answer. In trying to find a way out of the economic crisis and a solution to the unemployment faced

by many member countries, the Commission brought out research that suggests that one of the main reasons for this difficult situation is *skill mismatch*. Hence, it is not the low salaries, poor work conditions, or the huge amount of stress that keep people out from – for example – nursing profession. No – people just do not have enough skills to cope with reality. This contradiction is even more obvious in analytical highlights: the work conditions are clearly laid out and explained, but this is done in the framework of skills mismatch. During the panel discussion it is even emphasised that the information about payment is not relevant. So what should we conclude? Who should be blamed for this *skills mismatch*? It is – of course – the unemployed people and the educational institutions.

### Objectivity of Panorama

What should also be taken into account is how the information is selected. The main idea behind the EU Skills Panorama is to offer neutral data that will provide evidence for policy-makers. But is it possible to choose neutrally what data will be included? The sets of collected data will send a certain message to decision makers, practitioners, and individuals, and will have an influence on beliefs and decisions since quantitative data have ‘the authority’ of knowledge and truth. How will this Truth be created and further developed?

### Conclusion

Finally, what will be the future of education? Or should we use the term ‘up-skilling’? What will happen to personal development, creativity, critical thinking, relatedness, openness, tolerance, empathy, and trust? Will these other ‘skills’ disappear from the education agenda just because they do not fit the term and are not considered important to economic growth? The fact that soft skills and some of the key competencies have not been methodologically enough approached by CSOs and non-formal education will remain an obstacle in the future in the situations when we try to lobby for them. The *Network* plans more intensive cooperation with OECD, especially after PIAAC results are published – this might be a good opportunity for the educational sector, but it might also be a symptom of further shifting of EU educational policy towards OECD policy.

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