Lifelong Learning is a growing factor in employability

POLICY BRIEF
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Pavol Babos
Institute for Forecasting, Slovak Academy of Sciences
Slovakia

Martina Lubyova
University of Economics Bratislava
Slovakia

Ivana Studená
Institute for Forecasting of the Slovak Academy of Sciences
Slovakia
IMPRESSUM

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Coordinated by
Zeppelin University
Am Seemoserhorn 20
88045 Friedrichshafen
Germany

Authors:
Dr Pavol Babos
Dr Martina Lubyova
Dr Ivana Studená

Graphics, Design and Layout:
Maren Sykora

Multimedia and Website:
Urs Boesswetter, Spoo Design

Video Production:
Sascha Kuriyama

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About the authors

Pavol Babos

Dr Babos is a junior researcher at the Institute for Forecasting, Slovak Academy of Sciences and assistant professor at the Department of Political Science, Comenius University in Bratislava. Dr. Babos studied social policy analysis at K.U. Leuven and completed his PhD in political science at Comenius University in Bratislava. Before his academic career Dr. Babos had worked as journalist for several years.

In his past research, Dr. Babos has studied Varieties of Capitalism in Central Eastern Europe and non-standard work. Apart from labour market issues he also published several articles regarding voting behaviour and corruption. His current research interests are political accountability, non-standard jobs and labour market transitions. Dr. Babos teaches mostly methodology and economic courses at the Department of Political Science.

Martina Lubyova

Dr Martina Lubyova is Director of the Institute for Forecasting of the Slovak Academy of Sciences and Lecturer in Social Statistics at the Economics University in Bratislava. Ms. Lubyova holds PhD in Economics from the University of the State of New York and CERGE-EI in Prague, PhD in Statistics from the Economics University in Bratislava, Doctor of Law and M.Sc. in Biophysics from Comenius University in Bratislava. Prior to taking up her current position, she spent more than ten years at the service of the International Labour Organisation, where she worked as the Director of ILO Sub-regional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia in Moscow, Employment Specialist at the ILO Office in Moscow, and Employment Development Specialist at the ILO Multidisciplinary Team for South Asia in New Delhi.

Her research interests are focused mainly on labour and education economics, international migration, forecasting, social affairs and development. She has been member of OECD Expert group on Migration (SOPEMI) since 1995 and member of editorial boards of several journals focused on social affairs and development.

Ivana Studená

Dr Ivana Studená is a researcher at the Institute for Forecasting of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. Previously, she worked as a senior policy analyst for the OECD LEED Trento Centre for Local Development based in Italy on design of assessment tools for local development. She has also acquired business experience working in private sector on business development in Prague and Bratislava. Ivana holds a Ph.D. in Economics from the University of the State of New York and CERGE-EI in Prague and a M.Sc. in Computer science from Faculty of Electro-engineering at Slovak Technical University.

Her current research interests include labour and education economics, with special focus on individual and firm level adjustment processes and entrepreneurship development.

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Introduction

Transitions to and between jobs are marked by increasing complexity

In the turmoil of structural and global shifts affecting economies, some European job seekers do not find jobs in long-term. Some do not find jobs at all or get discouraged and give up on job prospects. While in the past initial higher education has been the key entrance ticket to employment, among European job seekers in difficulties are these days also young university graduates. At the same time, European employers face difficulties to fill considerable number of vacant positions. It is evident that labour market transitions are flagged by increased complexity.

Employability is shaped by skills, attitudes and knowledge

Variety of factors combine in channelling individuals towards employments that correspond best to their potential, skills and individual expectations while the individual employment paths are becoming increasingly dynamic. New organisational setups develop and create pressure on individuals and their composition of capacities, knowledge and skills. The restructuring of organisations brings about a more dynamic employment model based on careers with multiple employees rather than a single lifetime employment (de Grip et al, 2004, Kenny et al, 2007, and Clarke, 2008). These trends make career management, and hence employability skills, essential.

Structural economic and social changes have given strong impulses to adjustment processes across all EU economies affecting directly individuals and their capacity to maintain or develop personal prospects in satisfactory ways. The personal prospects are most closely linked with capacity to find, maintain or change a job. Being or not being in a working position crucially impacts social standing of an individual.

Evidence suggests strong links between participation in lifelong learning and employability. Hence, what shapes the ability of adults to learn and what hampers them in participating in learning opportunities is of crucial importance to actors at national and European policy levels. Life-long learning has therefore emerged as important inter-connecting element in designing effective policy measures for interconnected policy areas of employability, social inclusion and welfare.

Life-long Learning is a key a driver of enhancing employability
In addition to changes implied by structural changes and global liberalisation, limitations introduced by negative demographic trends in EU economies aggravate labour market shifts and create frictions. While ageing population and declining birth rate leads to shortages in skills and labour, the incidence of unemployment persists and signals that labour markets continue to follow worryingly unbalanced paths. At national level actions and solutions are expected from policy makers and employers.

In view of on individuals pressures implied by shifts in the labour and product markets, adjusted capacity of individuals to deal with new types of problems at work and life and to cope with changes towards complexity is required. This capacity and its enhancement is closely linked with the ability and willingness of individuals to learn and to enhance skills through the whole span of their life.

Lifelong learning concept is a natural response to new demands on individual skills as it encompasses life-long and life-wide learning. (Rubenson 2002). As such, lifelong learning is an optimal candidate for interconnecting support element of social policy and in particularly well suited to target enhanced employability.

**Key Observations**

Employability is closely connected with social inclusion and welfare

The way an individual copes with changing economic and social environment is in major way connected to his or her employment prospects. Employability, the ability to find, keep or change a job position, when an individual needs or wishes to, is determined by combination of his or her attitudes, knowledge and skills. These interact with personal characteristics and background conditions and imply how an individual performs at the labour market.

Prevailing empirical evidence on what and how affects employability is based on analysis of a spectrum of factors and their attribution to the labour market status of an individual.
The employability measured this way therefore refers primarily to the information whether an individual is employed, unemployed or inactive at the time he provided information about his work, skills and education. In LLLight, Babos, Comincini (2015) examine links between education, skills and employability following a different approach. They measure employability using the share of working life an individual has spent in a paid work as a better assessment for one’s ability to get and maintain a job during the whole working life.

This allows for a more evidence-based analysis of the effectiveness of different factors that the literature indicates are likely to play a role in shaping one's employability.

Mainly, the proposed measure provides a “backwards” perspective in terms of the time period when the processes related to individual factors and circumstances potentially influence individual employability are analysed and allows for analysing time effects of longer duration.

The analysis broadly confirms general line of results generated by other employability studies namely that it is a mix of personal capacities and circumstances that play key role in influencing employability.

Firstly, different types of skills contribute to one’s employability in various ways. IT and problem solving skills are more significant among the skills spectrum and together with attitudes and non-cognitive skills they increase a person’s ability to get and maintain a job. But different country frameworks decide how education and skills can improve employability while personal factors such as having children can worsen employability.

From the post-communist countries, according to this analysis, the Czech Republic rewards educational level relatively high while there is no evidence that the problem solving skills would be rewarded in terms of employability.
At the same time, having children is a significant barrier, especially for women who have lower employability than men. Effect of educational level on employability is high.

In contrast to this case is the way education and skills interact in countries with high employability like Sweden. In Sweden both education and skills are rewarded with higher employability. Social frameworks and support structures for families are instrumental for employability as family situation or gender do not have any (negative) effects on employability.

Finally, in case of UK as an illustration of an economy with relatively low investment in general education, both education and problem solving skills are relevant for improved employability. However, having children does have a negative effect on employability, though the effect is smaller than in case of the Czech Republic.

This evidence reflects on the links between employability, lifelong learning and social cohesion. Participation in lifelong learning in form of training is highly relevant directly, for improved employability as well as indirectly via contribution to skills upgrade.

In light of increasing evidence on links between skills and lifelong learning activities on one hand and employability on the other, the insights into what are the factors shaping participation in learning are of high importance.

As outlined in other parts of LLLight research, non-formal learning activities are the prevailing practice in lifelong learning as on average one in three adults in EU in 2011 undertook some non-formal learning activity in the span of past 12 months. We also know that major part of this form of learning is funded prevailingly by employers.
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The outcomes of non-formal learning activities reveal that they are well recognized by the participants as to have had positive effects on their employability. In particular, getting a job or finding a new job and get a promotion are leading outcomes of non-formal participation (Figure 1).

Figure 1: 2011, Outcomes of one non-formal learning activities per individual participant, including all countries in Adult Education Survey, Source: AES 2011, Eurostat
The country patterns (Figure 2) document that in countries with high participation rates most participants can clearly attribute lifelong learning outcome to improved employability. In countries with low participation, in most cases relatively smaller share of participants ho can improved employability attribute to the outcome of participating in lifelong learning activities.

Figure 2: Outcomes of non-formal education activity, 2011 AES, one selected activity undertaken in span of past 12 months (outcomes getting a new job or other outcomes relates to all respondents including inactive and unemployed), Eurostat

Most individuals who do not want to participate in lifelong learning in fact face obstacles preventing them from participation

For illustration in Sweden, where almost 70% of adults participate in lifelong learning, about 60% participants report a lifelong learning activity had positive outcome on employability leaving 10% of participants reporting other outcomes. In Italy the share of respondents reporting other outcomes is the same as in Sweden, 10%, but the share of respondents reporting positive outcome of LL activity in terms of employability is around 25% compared to 60% in Sweden.
Inquiring further about the obstacles that might lie behind non-participation we find that most individuals across all countries report in first hand they do not want to participate as opposed to those who wanted to participate but encountered difficulties in doing so (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Motivation not to participate in LLL in 2011, Source: AES, Eurostat

Family responsibilities are mostly cited specific obstacle to lifelong learning participation

However, when asking about the reasons for not wanting to participate we find that only more then one third of individuals who did not want to participate report they feel no need for further education or training. Other two thirds of those who did not want to participate signal obstacles to participation, among which as much as 15% of all non participating respondents report family responsibilities (Figure 4).
Figure 4: Main reason for not wanting to participate in formal or non-formal learning, % share of total non-participation including all countries where information was collected in AES 2011, source AES 2011, Eurostat

2011: Reasons for not wanting to participate in LLL, EU28 average

- No need for further education and training: 15.1%
- Family responsibilities: 11.2%
- Conflict with work schedule or training: 9.2%
- Other personal reasons: 6.2%
- Cost too high: 4.6%
- Lack of employer’s support or public services: 4.3%
- No suitable education or training activity: 4.3%
- No answer: 2.2%
- Lack of prerequisites: 2.0%
- Training takes place at a too distant place: 1.9%
- No access to a computer or internet (for): 0.2%

**Recommendations for policy-makers**

The research undertaken in LLLight hints towards IT and problem solving skills as good candidates for enhancing ability at workplaces and positive effects on employability. Programmes supporting access to learning in this area might be instrumental for improved prospects of adults.

**Employers play important role in lifelong learning support at workplaces**

Non-formal learning is effective for its participants. Once individuals participate in lifelong learning, most of them connect the outcome with positive effects on employability. Since most non-formal learning is happening at workplaces and due to support of employers, effective policy measures might need inputs from and coordination with the spectrum of employers.
When designing national policies supporting employability via lifelong learning participation, the nature of obstacles to lifelong participation perceived by individuals represent vital input for effective delivery across spectrum of social and personal backgrounds.

Since lifelong learning participation and the role of personal and institutional factors vary across countries, policy measures need to refer to country specific circumstances created by social welfare and labour market setups. At the same time the role of institutions signals room for improvement in the institutional and socio-cultural context to increase participation in lifelong learning in many European countries.

In particular, non-selective and administratively easily accessible programmes for the whole population are a key success factor to avoid market distortions and address risk of specific business interests. The dominating and increasing importance of SMEs in EU create favorable conditions for such policy solutions.

**Room for improvement in the institutional and socio-cultural set-ups to increase participation in lifelong learning**

**Administratively accessible programmes are a success factor to reach all companies including SMEs**

**Research parameters**

Babos, Comincini (2015) use OECD’s Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) to test suggested links between education, skills and employability in different countries representing different labour market regimes. Structural equations are used to model complex relationships between education, skills and employability. Employability is conceptualized in a retrospective way: the years a respondent has been working as a share of the respondent’s whole working life. This way longer-term effects are addressed compared to other studies based on probabilistic modelling. For illustration, within the probabilistic approach, only the relationship between the current willingness to mobility and the likeliness of employment can be addressed, whereas Babos, Comincini take a broader view on the possible effects of actual mobility in the past 5 years on employability.
Adult Education Survey rounds 2007 and 2011, both individual data as well as Eurostat aggregated results were used to provide insights into patterns of lifelong learning participation.

**Literature**


Project Identity

LLLight’in’Europe is an FP7 research project supported by the European Union, which has investigated the relevance and impact of lifelong learning and 21st century skills on innovation, productivity and employability. Against the background of increasingly complex tasks and jobs, understanding which skills impact individuals and organizations, and how such skills can be supported, has important policy implications. LLLight’in’Europe pioneered the use of an instrument to test complex problem solving skills of adults in their work environment. This allowed for the first time insights into the development of professional and learning paths of employed individuals and entrepreneurs and the role that problem solving skills play. Additionally, LLLight’in’Europe draws on a series of databases on adult competences from across the world to conduct rich analyses of skills and their impact.

These analyses were conducted in concert with different disciplines. Economists have been analyzing the impact of cognitive skills on wages and growth; sociologists have been investigating how public policies can support the development of such skills and lifelong learning; innovation researchers have been tracking the relationships between problem solving skills, lifelong learning and entrepreneurship at the organizational level; educational scientists have investigated how successful enterprises support their workforce’s competences; cognitive psychologists have researched on the development and implications of cognitive skills relevant for modern occupations and tasks; and an analysis from the perspective of business ethics has clarified the role and scope of employers’ responsibility in fostering skills acquisition in their workforce. The team has carried out its research and analyses on the value of skills and lifelong learning in EU countries, USA, China, Latin America and Africa.

The result is a multi-disciplinary analysis of the process of adult learning and problem solving in its different nuances, and of the levers which can support the development of these skills for both those who are already in jobs, and for those who are (re)entering the labor market, as well as the development of effective HR strategies and public policy schemes to support them.

Coordinator
Zeppelin University

Project Director
Peer Ederer

EU Project Officer
Monica Menapace

EU Contribution
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Supervisory Board

Xavier Prats Monné
Director-General, Directorate-General for Education and Culture, European Commission

Andreas Schleicher
Director for Education and Skills, and Special Advisor on Education Policy to the Secretary-General at OECD

Iain Murray
Senior Policy Officer responsible for Policy on Learning and Skills, Educational Policy, and Regional Government and Devolution, Trades Union Congress (TUC), United Kingdom

Oskar Heer
Director Labour Relations, Daimler AG Stuttgart

Roger van Hoesel
Chairman of the Supervisory Board at Startlife and Managing Director at Food Valley

zeppelin universität

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Iain Murray
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Oskar Heer
Director Labour Relations, Daimler AG Stuttgart

Roger van Hoesel
Chairman of the Supervisory Board at Startlife and Managing Director at Food Valley
This policy brief is part of the publication suite of the FP7 Project LLLight’in’Europe. The publication suite consists of 21 policy briefs, 6 thematic reports and 1 synthesis report. The 21 policy briefs discuss findings and policy implications proceeding from the project’s research; they are organized along three level of analyses (persons; enterprise; country) and seven topics.

This policy brief discusses findings related to **Outcomes of skills** at the analysis level **enterprise**. For further publications and multimedia material related to the project, please visit [www.lllightineurope.com](http://www.lllightineurope.com).