



Partnerships and networks support lifelong learning in companies

POLICY BRIEF
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IMPRESSUM

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PARTNERSHIPS AND NETWORKS SUPPORT LIFELONG LEARNING IN COMPANIES

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Introduction

How do partnerships and networks develop lifelong learning in companies?

There is much evidence that social networks affect the lifelong learning of individuals. In our research, we have investigated how far this is also true of business enterprises. Companies do not exist in a vacuum. Partnerships and networks are vital in developing and supporting lifelong learning opportunities within companies.

A wide range of organisations and agencies play a part: private companies, government agencies, public educational, training and research bodies, and NGOs – including especially social partners such as trade unions, employers’ associations. Our “policy trail” methodology enabled us to explore their role in supporting and developing lifelong learning for enterprise employees.

Key Observations

The benefits of education/ enterprise relationships are mutual, but there are also risks

Countries differ in how companies’ role in education is organised (or “institutionalised”). In particular, this differs by education level: for example, in Denmark companies participate in course accreditation up to Masters level; Germany has a dual system at all levels. There are also differences in how public finance for training and education is delivered, and in the understanding of the company as an education/ trainer.

When a company’s key staff know “how the educational world works”, their enterprise is better-positioned to take advantage of the opportunities available to it and its staff. Well-networked companies, with a good range of collaborations, tend to have better understanding of education and training options.

Good networks enable companies to identify and meet specific learning and training needs more effectively, and to develop employees in accordance with company needs.

Companies' involvement in NGOs and professional networks facilitates participation in highly valued peer-to-peer learning and knowledge transfer. It also contributes to a better identification of educational and training needs that align with business development needs.

Strong relations between companies and education institutions generate mutually beneficial knowledge exchange dynamics.

Companies can benefit from building relationships with educational institutions. However, there are also risks: in particular, public educational and training organisations should ensure that the public interest is not subordinated to the business interests of particular companies (e.g., in marketing their products). Public regulation has an important role in protecting the public interest. This risk is particularly acute where public bodies are short of funding.

Social partners play a vital role in developing workplace lifelong learning

Professional associations play a valuable role as mediators or brokers in relations between governments and companies. (In 13 out of our 14 case studies, companies we investigated were members of one or more professional association.)

Professional associations and trades unions can play a role in defining public training provision priorities, and in the provision of lifelong learning for employees. (We found that their role varies by country and by sector).

Involvement in social networks and NGOs can constitute a form of 'social partnership'. Though often directed towards lobbying particular group interests in public policy environments, this also encourages lifelong learning opportunities relevant both within companies and for public policy-makers.

Where trades unions are well-established, they provide an important source of pressure to encourage and support lifelong learning. Building lifelong learning into collective agreements can be particularly important.

How company/ government relations can strengthen lifelong learning

Professional associations can facilitate knowledge and experience exchange, and awareness of the availability of lifelong learning, amongst companies and managers.

Relations between the companies we investigated and government agencies were mainly those of supplier and/or customer.

For some enterprises, provision of services to government and public agencies is financially important. Some of these companies provide advanced expertise. Commercial engagement such as this benefits lifelong learning both within government and in the private sector.

Some enterprises have a clear “ideological” position. For instance, we investigated companies committed to extending the benefits of “free software”, and to “architecture for the common good”. While these stances were commercially advantageous, they were not generally adopted for instrumental reasons. Such companies may be motivated to intervene in the public policy environment to promote their principles.

Recommendations for Policy-Makers

Encourage enterprises to see the value of strong networks

Invest in educational and training programmes and organisations that encourage partnerships with companies and build lifelong learning within companies.

Encourage strong relations between business enterprises and education institutions: these have mutually beneficial knowledge exchange outcomes.

Involve social partners in the lifelong learning policy process

Involve professional associations and trade unions in policy development and encourage them to collaborate to develop lifelong learning opportunities for workers and to provide mechanisms for dispute resolution in relation to employees’ training.

While encouraging strong relations between public educational bodies and private companies, regulatory frameworks should ensure the autonomy of educational institutions and strengthen and develop both students' employability and their roles and rights as citizens.

Policy should ensure public educational institutions are able to deliver a range of economically and socially significant curricula.

Research Parameters

LLLight'in'Europe research project

The policy trail method involves combining analysis of national legislation and policy initiatives with the results of case study research in and around enterprises. Fourteen case studies were conducted, involving interviews with samples of managers, workers and policy actors, and analysis of company documents. The enterprises were located in Denmark (1), Germany (7), Italy (1), Slovakia (1) and Spain (4). Of the enterprises, five had over 250 employees, five between 50 and 250 employees, and four fewer than 50 (including one with fewer than 10).

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.

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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.

01	Resources of society for learning
02	Institutions of learning
03	Circumstances of learning
04	Role of transversal skills
05	Role of job-specific skills
06	Productivity of skills
07	Outcomes of skills

This policy brief discusses findings related to **Institutions of learning** at the analysis level **country**. For further publications and multimedia material related to the project, please visit www.lllightineurope.com