

Skills and lifelong learning

The need for skills and lifelong learning

To undertake any job effectively, it is clearly essential to have the appropriate skills, and jobs in local and regional government, from social work to highway maintenance and from accountancy to waste collection, are no exception.

It is also increasingly being realised that it is no longer sufficient to rely on the skills and qualifications acquired at or before the start of a career. Instead employees need to be able to update and adapt their skills to changing circumstances, including potentially changing employment, through lifelong learning and continuing vocational training. This has wide ranging benefits for all concerned. It enables employees to do their jobs effectively, but it also makes it easier for them to transfer between jobs – aiding restructuring; it allows older workers to acquire and develop new skills – aiding retention; and it makes jobs more interesting and varied – aiding recruitment.

This necessity has been recognised in a range of European Union policy documents. In 2005, the European Commission in a communication to the Spring European Council noted that, “Structural change, greater labour market participation and productivity growth require a continued investment in a highly skilled and adaptable workforce” and that lifelong learning made “an important contribution to social cohesion”.¹ In 2009 the Council of the European Union concluded that, “The challenges posed by demographic change and the regular need to update and develop skills in line with changing economic and social circumstances call for a lifelong approach to learning”. The Council also set a benchmark that “By 2020, an average of at least 15 % of adults should participate in lifelong learning”² (as defined in the Eurostat Labour Force Survey – see below).

More recently the Commission document “An Agenda for New Skills and Jobs”³ launched as part of the Europe 2020 Strategy in November 2010, identified four key policy priorities as supporting the overall goal of “comprehensive lifelong learning”. These were:

- improving access to lifelong learning;
- adopting targeted approaches for the more vulnerable workers;
- enhancing stakeholders’ involvement and social dialogue; and
- establishing effective incentives and cost sharing arrangements.

The communication also restated the 15% target for participation in lifelong learning.

Identifying the skills required in local and regional government

Like other parts of the economy, local and regional government faces a range of challenges which require the acquisition of new skills and the updating of existing ones. These include changes in work organisation, the introduction of new technologies, the shift to a low-carbon economy and increasing globalisation and liberalisation. There are also more specific concerns such as major reductions in funding, with consequent restructuring and job losses and the introduction of e-services.⁴ The question for local and regional government is to determine exactly what skills are needed to meet these and other challenges.

In many other sectors this question has been answered at national level in sector skills councils. In most cases, these include a range of stakeholders (typically employers, unions, educational bodies and policy makers); they analyse the likely development of employment and skills needs on an ongoing basis, and they draw up policy proposals on how these needs might be met.

However, as a recent study into sector skills councils indicates, there appear to be no sector skills councils at national level for local and regional government.⁵ This is in contrast to other sectors. In fashion and textiles, for example, a much smaller sector in terms of employment, there are sector skills councils in Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Finland, Romania and the UK.

One reason for this is likely to be the wide range of services that local and regional government provides and the wide range of activities its employees undertake. This is illustrated by a recent study in the UK prepared the Local Government Association. It found that occupations within UK local government, which has a smaller range of responsibilities than in some other member states, were split between 14 separate sector skills councils or similar bodies. There were also substantial numbers of administrative and corporate services staff (around 17% of the total local government workforce) who were not covered by the any sector skills council at all.

A second reason may be that many of the skills essential to local government are also found elsewhere. In most of the UK sector skills councils the local government workforce accounted for only a minority of the employees covered and was not therefore their main focus.⁶

Whatever the reason, the fact that there are no national sector skills councils for local and regional government makes it more difficult to develop European structures to identify current and future skills needs, as well as finding ways to meet them.

In sectors where national sector skills councils exist, the European Commission is considering introducing EU sector skills councils. These are to be led by the European social partners and will provide an opportunity for dialogue and an exchange of information between existing national sector skills councils, as well as making recommendations on issues such as qualifications and training strategies.

The lack of national sector skills councils in local and regional government mean that currently it is very unlikely that an EU council for the sector will be set up. This makes it more important that issues of skills and lifelong learning should be examined within the existing social dialogue structure.

The extent of social partner involvement

Cooperation between employers and trade unions has played a crucial role in the area of skills and training and particularly in the area of lifelong learning.

This is recognised in the Agenda for new skills and jobs communication from the European Commission, where “enhancing stakeholders' involvement and social dialogue on the implementation of lifelong learning” is seen as a key priority. The communication points out that, “social partners' dialogue is particularly important on effective cost sharing arrangements, on the provision of learning in the work-place, and on the promotion of cooperation between public sector organisations and business”.

The extent of dialogue and agreement between union and employers on training and lifelong learning is evident at both European and national level.

At European level, 76 separate texts have been agreed between the unions and employers on training/lifelong learning, including a cross-industry framework for action on lifelong learning signed by the employers (CEEP and UNICE – now BUSINESSEUROPE) and the unions (ETUC) in 2002.⁷

This framework for action affirmed the “joint responsibility of social partners at all levels with regard to competencies development” (competencies are defined in the document as knowledge, skills and know-how in a given work situation). It drew up four priorities for action:

- identification and anticipation of competencies and qualifications needs;
- recognition and validation of competencies and qualifications;
- information, support and guidance;
- resources.

At national level, a 2009 report published jointly by the EU training body CEDEFOP and Eurofound concluded that “*Social partners play an important role in most countries both in the process of building the CVT [continuing vocational training] system and in its implementation by means of collective bargaining or by participating in joint committees and/or the boards of institutions designed to govern CVT.*”⁸

In some countries, there are collectively agreed provisions on training and lifelong learning that cover the whole economy. These can be either specifically on training, such as the lifelong learning agreement signed in France in January 2009⁹, or part of wider agreements covering a range of issues, such as those in Belgium, Greece and, until recently, Romania.

However, as the CEDEFOP/Eurofound report notes, “*collective bargaining at sectoral and company level plays an important role in promoting CVT.*” Countries, where agreements on training at sectoral level are important include Germany and Italy, while in the UK a large number of training agreements have been signed at company level to permit the operation of a new type of employee representative, Union Learning Representatives.

There is frequently coordination between different bargaining levels. In Germany and Denmark, for example some sectoral agreements provide a framework for company level arrangements. In Belgium there is a hierarchy which reaches down from the national interprofessional agreement, to sectoral agreements and finally to training plans negotiated between unions and employers at company level.

Agreements between unions and employers in local and regional government

Although there are no European level texts on training/lifelong learning in the area of local and regional government, there are a number of examples of agreements between employers and unions in individual member states.

In the UK, for example, the revisions to the national agreement for local authority staff, agreed in 2005, make it clear that while training “should be designed to meet the corporate and service needs of authorities both current and in the future, it should also take account of the “individual needs of employees”. It also states that all employees should have access to training and that “the needs of part time employees and shift workers need particular consideration”. The full text of the national agreement dealing with training is set out in the Annex.

In Germany, the national agreement for public sector workers,¹⁰ initially signed in September 2005, and subsequently amended, identifies four types of training to be supported:

- the further development of existing competencies for the work being undertaken;
- the obtaining of additional qualifications;
- training to maintain employment – training for new activities and retraining; and
- refresher training after a long period of absence.

The agreement also states that employees have a right to a regular meeting with their manager to establish their training needs. These meetings should take place once a year unless something else has been agreed.

In Finland, the agreement signed by the unions and municipal employers in August 2008, provides for the use of joint working parties between unions and employers on training, whose aim is not just to improve employee performance, but also “the quality of working life”. The Finnish agreement also refers specifically to the use of mentoring for personal development.

The current extent of lifelong learning and training in local and regional government

However, although these agreements and others at national level show that substantial progress on training and lifelong learning has been made in local and regional government, the available statistics indicate that there is more to do.

Although there are no European-wide figures on the extent of lifelong learning and training specifically in local and regional government, Eurostat’s Labour Force Survey (LFS) provides information on participation in education and training by employees in the three sectors, which cover most of the activities undertaken by local and regional government. These are public administration, defence and compulsory social security, education and human health and social work, although all these sectors include employees outside local and regional government.

The LFS figures for the whole of the EU show that in public administration 12.6% of employees aged 25 to 64 were taking part in education and training in 2010; in education the figure was 18.2%; and in health and social services it was 17.2%. Participation in lifelong learning and training in all these areas was higher than in the economy as a whole, where it was 10.4%, although in public administration it is the below the 2020 benchmark target of 15%. (Participation is defined as having received education or training in the four weeks preceding the survey.)¹¹

However, the figures also show the very major differences between countries. Participation in lifelong learning and training across the three sectors is highest in the three Nordic countries, with the United Kingdom, Slovenia, the Netherlands and Estonia also involving a high proportion of employees. A further four countries, Luxembourg, Spain, Austria and the Czech Republic have levels of participation in all three sectors which are above the 15% benchmark agreed as a target for 2020 by the Council in 2009.

However, there are 15 countries, where in public administration at least, participation in lifelong learning and training is below the 15% target and 13 where it is below 10%. Those in the below 10% group include Germany, Italy and France, as well as Greece, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria.

Proportion of employees aged 25 to 64 participating in education and training in the previous four weeks: 2010

(Figures are ranked by participation in education and training in public administration)

Country	Public administration	Education	Health and social work	Whole economy
Denmark	40.4	43.5	41.4	34.1
Finland	33.5	38.8	33.0	26.3
Estonia	30.1	23.4	21.2	13.2
Sweden	29.7	35.1	30.6	24.3
Slovenia	29.2	32.7	26.6	19.5

United Kingdom	27.9	31.4	33.4	22.3
Netherlands	23.4	25.1	22.3	19.0
Luxembourg	16.7	29.3	19.7	14.5
Spain	16.4	23.2	19.4	11.6
Austria	16.2	31.5	22.6	14.7
Czech Republic	15.3	15.0	15.4	9.1
Cyprus	11.6	22.4	20.5	9.1
Poland	11.2	11.8	11.4	7.3
Belgium	9.6	11.4	8.8	7.6
Germany	9.0	17.2	12.5	7.8
Latvia	8.5	11.2	11.7	5.4
Italy	7.7	11.8	13.1	6.2
Portugal	7.0	9.9	6.4	5.5
Lithuania	6.7	7.1	6.3	4.7
France	6.4	7.4	6.2	5.4
Ireland	5.9	9.9	9.2	6.6
Slovakia	5.1	5.5	6.1	3.1
Greece	3.9	5.5	6.3	3.6
Hungary	3.6	3.7	3.6	2.6
Romania	2.7	2.7	n.a.	1.2
Bulgaria	1.9	n.a.	n.a.	1.0
Malta	n.a.	15.8	n.a.	8.1
European Union (27 countries)	12.6	18.2	17.2	10.4

Source: Eurostat: Participation in education and training by sex, age groups and NACE Rev. 2 - % [trng_ifs_08b] Last update 30.01.12

The LFS figures also show that the proportion of those participating in training and lifelong learning has fallen since 2008 by 1.3 percentage points on average in public administration and by smaller amounts in health and social work and education (see table).

	2008	2009	2010	Change 2008 to 2010
Public administration	13.9	13.3	12.6	-1.3
Health and social work	17.8	17.6	17.2	-0.6
Education	18.6	18.4	18.2	-0.4

Source: Eurostat: Participation in education and training by sex, age groups and NACE Rev. 2 - % [trng_ifs_08b] Last update 30.01.12

This reduction may be a result of the financial crisis, with employers cutting back on the training they are providing in order to save money. In public administration participation in lifelong learning and training fell between 2008 and 2010 in most EU states. The exceptions were Belgium, Estonia, Greece, Luxembourg, Poland, Slovenia and Sweden.

The countries seeing the greatest proportionate falls were: Latvia, where participation fell from 15.7% to 8.5%; Romania, down from 4.4% to 2.7%; Ireland, down from 9.6% to 5.9%;

Hungary, falling from 5.6% to 3.6%; Lithuania, down from 10.3% to 6.7%; Slovakia, down from 7.8% to 5.1%; and Bulgaria, falling from 2.8% to 1.9%. These are all countries which have faced significant public sector funding difficulties.

The way forward

The CEEP report on skills development in the context of restructuring identifies some of the new challenges which need to be addressed. These are:

- anticipating future skills;
- preparing for diversity;
- preparing for the effective use of ICTs;
- customer satisfaction orientation; and
- new jobs.

As already noted, the wide variety of activities undertaken across local and regional government makes it difficult to identify specific skills gaps for the whole of the sector and develop policies to fill them. This approach, being used in other sectors, such as gas and electricity, is more problematic in the case of local and regional government.

However, the sector can build on the work that has already been done by the social partners at national level. One way forward could be to collect the agreements which have already been reached to examine whether these could form the basis of a common EU framework. Another would be to examine in greater detail what lies behind the EU statistics, which seem to show that while some states have already reached the 15% benchmark targets, others have a long way to go.

Whichever way is chosen, it is clear that skills training and lifelong learning has a vital role to play in allowing local and regional government to meet the challenges it faces in the workplace of the future.

Annex: National Agreement for local government

Training and Development

Authorities will develop local 'Workforce Development Plans' closely linked to their service delivery plans, which will provide the focus for the establishment of training and development priorities. Training and development should be designed to meet the corporate and service needs of authorities both current and in the future, taking into account the individual needs of employees. Local schemes on training and development should enable authorities to attain their strategic objectives through development of their employees. Training and development provisions should be shaped to local requirements and take account of the full range of learning methods. Such an approach should enable access to learning for all employees. The needs of part time employees and shift workers need particular consideration.

Employees attending or undertaking required training are entitled to payment of normal earnings; all prescribed fees and other relevant expenses arising. Employees are also entitled to paid leave for the purpose of sitting for required examinations. When attending training courses outside contracted daily hours, part-time employees should be paid on the same basis as fulltime employees. (Assistance for other forms of learning, for example that directed at individual development, will be locally determined). Some training can be very expensive and authorities may require repayment of all or part of the costs incurred should an employee leave the authority before a reasonable time period has expired. The authority's policy in this regard should be made explicit.

Objectives for training and development programmes should include the following:

- To enable Councils to attain their strategic objectives via investment in their employees.
- To promote equity of access to learning.
- To encourage employees to develop their skills and level of responsibility to the maximum of their individual potential.
- To widen and modernise the skills profile of employees to maximise their versatility, employability and so, job security.
- To enable employees to raise productivity, quality and customer service in pursuit of sustainable improvement

Authorities should establish local partnership arrangements, to include recognised trade unions, to develop their local workforce development plans.

The NJC endorses partnership provision such as the "Return to Learn" scheme. Authorities and the recognised trade unions shall encourage and support employees taking on the statutory Union Learning Representative (ULR) role. This will include agreeing facilities and paid release in accordance with statutory provisions. ULRs should be enabled to play a full part in promoting and implementing local training and development programmes.

¹ Working together for growth and jobs: A new start for the Lisbon Strategy, European Commission , 2005, COM(2005) 24 final

² Council conclusions on the "Strategic Framework for European cooperation in education and training ET (2020)" (doc. 9845/09).

³ An Agenda for new skills and jobs: A European contribution towards full employment, European Commission, 2010, COM(2010) 682 final

⁴ See Change in public services: Fora for the improvement of expertise in restructuring; Factsheet No. 4: Skills development in the context of restructuring in Public Services, CEEP by Anna Kwiatkiewicz, November 2011

⁵ Sector Councils on Employment and Skills at EU level: A study into their feasibility and potential impact, ECORYS Nederland BV in cooperation with KBA, 2010

⁶ Local government workforce: mapping the sector skills' footprints, prepared by Local Government Association Analysis and Research on behalf of SkillsPlus UK, April 2009

⁷ Social dialogue texts database, European Commission, <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=521&langId=en>

⁸ Contribution of collective bargaining to continuing vocational training, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2009

⁹ L'accord national interprofessionnel du 7 janvier 2009 sur le développement de la formation tout au long de la vie professionnelle, la professionnalisation et la sécurisation des parcours professionnels

¹⁰ Tarifvertrag für den öffentlichen Dienst, 13 September 2005, subsequently revised

¹¹ The Eurostat figures also breakdown participation by sex and they show that on average in the EU the proportion of women participating in lifelong learning and training is higher than the proportion of men in public administration (13.3% for women, 12.1% for men), but lower in education (18.1% for women and 18.5% for men) and health and social services (16.9% for women 18.2% for men).