

Life-long education – some remarks on the Polish perspective

The present note accompanies the translation of the Strategy (containing also a number of footnotes from the translator), adopted by the Polish government in 2003, concerning permanent education. This document makes a link to the European level concepts and policies and defines the activity framework meant to implement permanent education as a persistent element of the entire educational system.

1. Life-long learning (LLL) is practically equated in Poland with permanent or continuous education, as the broadly conceived learning processes concerning people at various ages and in various life situations (e.g. educational levels).
2. LLL as a concept has in Poland a relatively long history, going back to the movements and institutions of the 19th century, of grass-roots character.
3. Nowadays, LLL has in Poland a double character: on the one hand it is being organised and promoted by the authorities, starting with the central administration, and on the other hand – it is a process that goes on in the society, with a rapidly increasing intensity.
4. Thus, concerning the official governmental and organisational (“public”) side of the processes:
 - 4.1. The governmental documents, like the Strategy attached, make explicit reference to the European policies and concepts in the domain of LLL/permanent education. This is related to such aspects as (i) EU funds, which can be taken advantage of to assist in implementation of LLL policies in particular countries, (ii) the justification, mainly in terms of increased chances on the labour market (with a mention of “personal development”), and, with somewhat less emphasis, enhanced competitiveness, (iii) the understanding of the process and the institutional side of LLL as a part of the “holistic” educational system.
 - 4.2. The Strategy is primarily devoted to the organisational and technical sides of LLL, although significant attention is also paid to the institutional / networking aspect. The latter is particularly associated with the inter-ministerial collaboration, the involvement of the local and regional self-government bodies, and the social partners, notably the employers.
 - 4.3. It must be emphasised that the Polish educational system relies to a large extent on the local and regional self-governmental authorities, and their contribution is crucial for the maintenance and running of the formal educational infrastructure.
 - 4.4. The involvement of employers is actually little known on a broader basis, this being also acknowledged, indirectly, by the Strategy, in points where improvement of statistics on permanent education is suggested. The current estimates place this involvement at a very low level, but this has not necessarily to be the case, given low motivation of employers to provide appropriate data, even if they undertake and/or contract training activities.
5. On the other hand, Poland has gone through an unprecedented development of educational initiatives, not encountered in any other post-communist transition country, nor in the western countries.
 - 5.1. A vast non-public educational & upbringing sector appeared, ranging from the pre-schooling to university level. It plays an especially important role in: (i) secondary education, (ii) tertiary education, and (iii) professional training (in some domains). This non-public sector can be classified into two sub-sectors: (A) the commercial one, where schools and training establishments are explicitly meant to generate revenue for private owner(s); (B) the social or community based, where schools are established to

serve a certain purpose, related to education (denominational schools, schools run by various associations involving also parents, etc.).

- 5.2. Virtually all of non-public education sector is paid. Despite this the non-public sector developed rapidly and even nowadays, with disproving demographic situation (see the Strategy), it survives and preserves its position. Moreover, the number of university students in Poland vastly expanded after 1989, as an increasing part of tertiary education became paid (this includes also the paid extra-mural studies at the public universities).
- 5.3. On the top of this, the sociological studies and the statistics show that the persons learning at the paid educational establishments come from the statistically significantly poorer layers of the society than those enrolled at the public non-paid universities.
- 5.4. At the same time, there has been a rapid development of the various, mainly commercial, training centres, catering to employers, but also to the young facing unemployment. The relatively dense infrastructure of such centres, which encounter also competition from the formal educational sector (courses offered by the universities, high schools etc.), exists in particular in larger agglomerations, and is capable of providing a vast array of training services. Again, the fact that these centres survive on the market is the proof that demand, expressed also in monetary terms, is sufficient.
- 5.5. There has been a definite development of distant learning activities, especially, in recent years, of e-learning. There are several centres in Poland, first of all associated with some universities, which are very active in this domain, and offer a broad range of courses at various levels.
6. The above remarks indicate that the crucial aspect of motivation and awareness is not, at a general level, the main problem in Poland, which means that also the respective infrastructure is largely in place, even if its more detailed properties should still be a subject of improvement.
7. The primary issue seems to lie in the social (age, gender, handicapped), branch (declining industries, former state farms etc.), and geographical distribution of motivation and awareness, coupled with access differentiation.
8. Given that motivation and awareness are largely a function of the perspectives (on the top of information and knowledge to date), the aspect of competitiveness ought to be given more attention. There is, namely, a very effective feedback between the individual development and collective capacity. A good example is provided by the case of the Polish "aircraft valley", where development is now stifled by the shortage of adequately skilled manpower, while the areas around suffer from officially high unemployment.
9. LLL seems to be a well-rooted concept in a vast portion of Polish society, and is both well understood and promoted by the authorities, even of the latter do not dispose of means proportionate to the objectives set in this area. The primary issue lies in the skilful broadening of these areas where LLL works, so as to maximise efficiency, that is - without incurring too high social costs while achieving possibly high output in educational and personal satisfaction terms.