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THE POPULARITY OF THE IDEA OF LIFELONG LEARNING IN POLISH ECONOMY AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF THE EU-27 COUNTRIES

Abstract

The significance of lifelong education is getting into importance in the process of building the knowledge based economy where growth is determined by intellectual capital investment. It seems to be obvious that future wealth of nations will mainly depend on knowledge. What is more, it allows to presume simultaneously that successful economies will be those that skillfully create, disseminate and embody knowledge in the new technologies or products.

It has to be added that rapid changes in technologies, growing competition pressure and adverse demographic changes concern also Poland. Taking it into consideration, the activities focusing on education, skills and competencies improvement are a matter of high importance. The main purpose of the article is a description of permanent education development in Poland in comparison with other EU-27 countries. Because its economic growth and competitiveness depend heavily on the capacity to encourage and facilitate the concept of lifelong learning, the further discussion concerning this problem is undoubtedly worth undertaking.

Key words: lifelong learning, knowledge based economy, factors of economic growth.

Introduction

An initiative of lifelong learning is based on creating educational opportunities over the lifespan. Learning throughout life became the objective necessity in order to fully adopt to current market demands which is influenced by rapid changes in technology and organization. Functioning on a such kind of difficult and unpredictable market requires people to be open to new ideas and eager for knowledge. Otherwise, those who are not able to anticipate and adopt themselves to market requirements are likely to become increasingly marginalized both in economic and social sense. However, it brings many undesirable disadvantages also to global economy because its prosperity and competitiveness is, to a certain extent, determined by the quality of human resources.

That is why the issue of lifelong learning has become an integral part of the EU strategy of development. It seems to be obvious that creation of knowledge based economy would be simply impossible without human capital investments, especially those in education and vocational training. Going with the times, the idea of lifelong learning is getting more important in case of Polish economy which aspires to be recognized as one of the most modern and competitive economies in the XXI century. The article undertakes an issue of lifelong learning popularity among Polish society against other EU-27 countries.

The concept of lifelong learning

The idea of lifelong learning emerged three decades ago, through the efforts of the OECD, UNESCO and the Council of Europe. According to the majority of those institutions lifelong learning is a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills and understanding. What is more, it no longer refers simply to current or adult education but encompasses all the learning endeavours over the lifespan (Lifelong 2004: 1). Taking into account the performance of the EU-27 in education and training levels with the best in the world, such as the US, Japan or Korea it can be said that there is lots to do in this field. For this reason education, including lifelong learning, has an important place in the integrated guidelines for delivering the revised Lisbon strategy for jobs and growth, especially if the available statistics show that almost 108 million people (about 1/3 of the labour force in EU-27) still have relatively low educational attainment (Progress 2008: 9).

OECD members unanimously maintain that future citizens must be equipped with the skills of the “knowledge economy”. These include wide-ranging and thorough bases of knowledge content and cognitive competences, such as: communication, numeracy and computer literacy, research ability, propensity to cooperation, inter-personal skills, imagination, creativity, etc. (Aspin 2001). In accordance with that a more comprehensive understanding of lifelong learning should be adopted. It allows to present this concept from the point of view of its main features (Lifelong 2004 : 1):

- A systematic view - the lifelong learning framework perceives the demand for, and the supply of, learning opportunities, as part of a connected system covering the whole lifecycle and comprising all forms of formal and informal learning.
- Centrality of the learner - it means a shift of attention from a supply side focus, for example on formal institutional arrangements for learning, to the demand side of meeting learner needs.
- Motivation to learn - is perceived as a very important thing in the process of learning throughout life and requires the ability of self-paced and self-directed learning.
- Multiple objectives of education policy - it allows to recognize at least several goals of education such as personal development, knowledge development, social or cultural objectives which may certainly change during the lifetime.

Due to such a comprehensive approach to lifelong learning it is worth looking at the distinction between formal and non-formal learning. The first one, is usually interpreted as learning that occurs within an organized and structured context (formal education, in-company training) and may lead to a formal recognition an example of which are diplomas or

certificates (Colardyn 2001: 9). Non-formal learning, in turn, is embedded in planned activities that are not explicitly designed as learning but that contain an important learning element (e.g. quality management or accidental learning that appears at the workplace).

The lifelong learning seems to be a vehicle for social change and transformation. It means education resulting from integration of formal, non-formal and informal education in order to create ability for continuous lifelong development without which the process of life quality improvement is difficult to achieve. Promotion of the idea of lifelong learning is very important for developing general capabilities and skills which are vital in case of workers' performance in their tackling of precise job responsibilities and adjusting to new tasks. Because of serious deficiencies in skills and competencies which are observed in many of the EU-27 countries, there is an urgent necessity to improve the existing educational attainment results and promote the idea of participation in formal education and non-formal learning through lifespan.

The causes of growing importance of lifelong learning in modern economy

It is commonly known that lifelong learning has become a central part of educational policy discourse since 1990s. Globalization and technological progress which take part in the fast-changing knowledge economy mean that people continuously need to upgrade their skills throughout their adult lives to cope with modern life. It is often alleged that lifelong learning has social and economic aims and purposes. For this reason, it is worth analyzing the causes of growing interest in lifelong learning in the majority of countries which have ambitions to be the most competitive in the world. In general, many factors of different nature cause a growing importance of lifelong learning. The most significant among them are such as (Toner 2011: 36); (Qualifications 2007: 2) :

- Growing importance of knowledge which is currently perceived as one of the main source of economic growth. Education and training play a key role in improving the quality of economic and social life. Furthermore, it is believed that the competitiveness of national economies depends heavily on societies' capacity to encourage and facilitate lifelong learning.
- The processes of intensifying competition and globalization which cause that countries should invest more in intellectual capital. In view of OECD and European Union higher workforce skills and associated investment in product, process and organizational innovation are a strategic response to this rising competition.
- Rapid technological and social changes require higher level skills and competences. As a consequence of the raising demand for higher level skills, many nations experience labour

shortages across a broad range of occupations that typically require university or other post-school qualifications. Together with the ICT development, a rising demand for higher level technical skills is observed. For the above mentioned reason matching education and training to the needs of the labour market with a systematic capacity to respond to change is one of the main purpose of lifelong learning.

- Adverse demographic tendencies an expression of which is the increasing number of people of retirement age in the majority of developed countries. Declining population levels and the process of aging societies may impede long-run economic growth. In order to keep older workers productively engaged, they must upgrade their skills and competences because flexibility during one's whole professional life turns out to be required.
- Changing patterns of consumer demand, especially the move towards more design intensive, higher quality and customized products and services, is argued to require higher level skills in the production and delivery of these goods.

Taking everything into account, it has to be said that lifelong learning plays a very important role in modern economy. Moreover, it is getting obvious that in order to respond to the current financial and jobs crises and also better adopt labour markets from the long-term perspective, a greater attention must be paid to different forms of education and training. Otherwise, the process of socioeconomic convergence of EU-27 countries can be seriously hampered.

The implementation of concept of lifelong learning in Poland

Available cross-country comparative information confirms that Poland is lagging behind most other OECD countries, taking into consideration its educational attainment. In spite of the rise in enrolment at the tertiary level from around 400 000 students in 1991 to around 2 million in 2006, the quality of education and its inappropriate structure, in which the humanities dominate, leaves much to be desired (SMEs 2010: 71). Apart from that the relatively low expenditure on education per pupil against the most developed countries in the world and the inappropriate structure of financing, dominated by public sector, have a negative influence on the results obtained not only in education but also in the field of research and development on which economic growth in long-term depends. Moreover, many statistics show that post-formal education and training in Poland is even weaker than the formal education system. It turns out that the idea of lifelong learning is not still very popular among Polish society. A specific paradox in case of Poles, that are perceived as one of the most entrepreneurial nations is low awareness of necessity of lifelong learning. Unfortunately,

statistics prove that the share of adult Poles in the system of permanent education remains relatively low. Generally speaking, adult participation in education and training in Poland seems to be low compared to the EU-27 countries. One of the serious weaknesses of Polish human resources attributes is the relatively low share of the population aged 25 to 64 participating in lifelong learning. It was only 5,1% in 2009 and significantly less compared to the average of EU-27 (10,2%).

Table 1

Lifelong learning (adult participation in education and training, aged 25-64)

Specification	Poland	EU-15	EU-27
Total:	in %		
2003	4,4	9,8	8,5
2004	5,0	10,7	9,3
2005	4,9	11,3	9,8
2006	4,7	11,2	9,7
2007	5,1	10,9	9,5
2008	4,7	10,8	9,4
2009	4,7	10,8	9,3

Source: Labour Force Survey in Poland. II Quarter 2010, Central Statistical Office, Warsaw 2010, p 87.

Adult participation in education and training is positively correlated with a country's level of economic development as measured by GDP per capita (Global 2009 :63). It means, as a rule, that the more prosperous the country, the higher the participation rates. Regarding this tendency, the large differences in participation rates are also observed in EU-27. According to the EU benchmark the Scandinavian countries and the UK belong to the best performers, reaching rates of 20-30%. The data put Belgium, Germany, Ireland, France, Cyprus, Latvia, Estonia in the next group, with participation rates around 7-8% while the Czech Republic, Lithuania or Poland are at 5-6% participation rate. The poorest results obtained such countries as Bulgaria, Greece and Romania which have recorded little or no progress since 2000 (Progress 2008: 26). To sum up, only five countries such as Sweden, the UK, Denmark, Norway and Iceland have reached very high performance in lifelong learning participation so far. On average, less than 10% of adults in the EU participate in lifelong learning. It reflects a continuous progress, but it is still too slow, because in accordance with the revised Lisbon Strategy at least 12,5% of the adult should have participated in lifelong learning by 2010.

It is commonly known that Polish economy is not as advance as other EU countries in the process of building the knowledge based economy. If the number of scientists and engineers in population is taken into account, it can be said that Poland obtained the level of

5,5% in 2006, whereas in case of Belgium, Ireland, or Sweden it was adequately: 7,9%; 6,8%; 6,5% (EU-27: 2008). Furthermore, when proportion of persons working in high- and medium-high technology manufacturing and knowledge-intensive services sectors in Poland is analyzed, the results are also very similar. Generally speaking, employment in the previous discussed sectors in Poland in 2006 was about 5,1%, while the average EU-27 was 6,6% (Europe 2009: 485). However, the experts from the National Academy of Science estimate that 250-300 thousands of new work posts in the coming years will be created in knowledge-intensive sectors (Polska 2009: 221). The access to them will be only reserved for people who are concentrated on permanent knowledge development. In view of rapid technological and social changes both flexible and eager for further learning workers, regardless of their age, are undoubtedly to be desired. In the context of necessity to force the process of modernization of Polish economy ahead in order to be more competitive and manage to catch up with the EU-15 countries, considering their socioeconomic development, lifelong learning gives a real chance for achieving these goals. From this point of view stressing the importance of lifelong learning and overcoming an aversion to it, seems to be a key matter.

Conclusions

The lack of qualified labour and deficiencies in knowledge and management competences are currently perceived as one of the basic weaknesses in Poland's human resource base. Statistics indicate that participation in adult education in Poland is twice lower than the average of EU-27. The factors discouraging stronger interest in lifelong education include exhaustive work and a relatively low level of economic activity after 55 years of age. That is why, strengthening both formal and continuing adult education systems is a matter of great importance. The necessity of strengthening the human resource quality in Poland is clearly recognized in the National Development Strategy which is in accordance with the Lisbon Strategy. One of its main goals is making Europe a more attractive place to invest and work. The second priority area says about significance of knowledge and innovation for growth, the third one pays crucial attention to the necessity of creating more and better jobs, while the last one is aimed at promoting eco-innovation and energy efficiency through better technologies (Andriessen, Stam 2008). Taking everything into consideration, it is worth stressing that future technological progress and improvement in the life quality would not be possible without the ability of permanent learning.

Going with the times, the idea of lifelong learning which consists of formal, informal and incidental education processes is getting more important in Poland. Undesirable factors such as the process of ageing population, technological and structural changes or ecological

threats which came into view as a consequence of rapid economic growth, issue also a challenge for Polish society. It seems to be obvious that further development of Polish economy heavily depends on entrepreneurship, flexibility and creativity of well-educated society. To make the idea of lifelong learning more popular in Polish society, the changes in human attitudes and value system are needed. Moreover, the implementation of this concept must be supported by effective institutional framework. Encouraging people to lifelong learning is the main aim of the undertaken policy focusing on such kind of issues as: increased flexibility and responsiveness, motivating young people to learn, linking education and work, facilitating open access to qualifications, etc (Qualifications 2007:4). Briefly, success in the implementation of the idea of lifelong learning in Poland can not only improve the human resources quality but, first of all, facilitate the process of socioeconomic convergence.

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