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Beyond Senior Education – The Silent Revolution Towards Cross Generational Learning in Europe

In this article we explore the challenges of learning in later life, in particular inter-generational or cross generational learning for the future. Looking to the policy of the European Union (EU), in particular to lifelong learning, we see how the notion for intergenerational and intercultural learning has been embedded more and more into policy. The question is if this makes sense, or better: how will it make sense? Senior education is transforming in intergenerational learning – intergenerational learning becomes more and more intercultural learning as well. Therefore lifelong learning should be intergenerational and intercultural learning.

1. Europe – an intergenerational and intercultural society

Europe is a complex diversity and the European population is significantly changing. Birth-rates have fallen or are falling sharply, as women have fewer children, if any at all, with a first or only child born at a much older age (cf. Leney 2005). Life expectancy is rising or has already risen equally dramatically. A static or falling population, on average much older, expects to live long after retirement. The “baby boom” generation after the 2nd World War adds further to the changing age balance. With a larger older population the relative size of younger age groups decreases.

These figures are not new, they are well-known, but more interesting are the following questions which are rising: What might be the future impact of demographic changes on adult education systems and institutions? How can and do countries address these changes? What opportunities and challenges do they bring? These are relevant research questions – however, they require systematic study and cannot be discussed in one single article. Therefore, this article will primarily focus on the dilemma which many policymakers are struggling with: do we need specific pathways of learning for the increasing 55+group or do we need more shared learning centers for young and old. Intergenerational learning and intercultural learning are nowadays claimed as important issues. However, the key question is: How can this actual interest make the learning process itself more cross generational and cross cultural? This is important because there are more dimensions than old and young, black and white, native inhabitants and migrants.

Looking to Europe we can identify several educational landscapes and different learning cultures. Europe is faced by different (national) priorities and we can (cf.

Karl/Friedrich 2007) notice a wide variety in tempo of changes. There is diversity between member states in financial and material resources. There are major differences between governments in financial supporting adult education and even which ministries are involved differs per country. It is not easy to understand their role and influence of the different departments. For example the role of the Ministry for Education, the role of the Ministry for Social Affairs, the role of the Ministry for Youth and Family, the role of the Ministry for Integration Affairs. Who is leading, who is following, who is collaborating and who is delaying?

In this complex diversity it is very fascinating and interesting in which way the expected impact of the demographical changes in adult education will be influenced by different generations and different groups of migrants.

On 28–29 April 2008, during the Slovenian Presidency Conference *Intergenerational Solidarity for Cohesive and Sustainable Societies* at Brdo in Slovenia, conclusions have been made as:

- The perception of people aged above 50, 60 or 70 needs to change: Ageing is still too often perceived as a problem because the potential of older people for society is overlooked. Longer, healthier lives mean that people can stay active longer. Right now, most of the baby boomers are still fit and healthy. They are better educated and trained than previous cohorts. In short, they represent a resourceful and large group in our societies. This enormous potential should not be wasted.
- The older a society becomes, the more important it is to invest in youth. The success of the young generation determines a society's ability to support those older people who depend on the help of others. The problems of high youth unemployment, too many early school-leavers, and job insecurity faced by younger people have to be tackled. Vladimir Špidla, EU Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, said:

We also need to pay special attention to the intermediate ("sandwich") generation which takes care of the youngest and oldest members of society. These caring obligations can represent a considerable burden, mostly shouldered by women. The quality of life of all generations depends on the availability of quality care services for children and dependent older people. Let us also remember that bringing old and young in opposition to each other is rather short-sighted and ignores the notion of the life cycle – or the basic fact that we do not remain young forever.

Moreover, a delicate question is: where would we draw the border between old and young? This border shifts over time in the self-perception of individuals – and in the collective awareness as more and more people reach the age of 60 or 70 in perfect health. However, in political respect this definition-question can have major consequences also in financial perspective, as we have seen in the pension reforms.

2. EU-policy

The EU cannot shape the relations between generations directly. The main instruments of intergenerational solidarity are controlled by the member states, which are notably responsible for pension systems and the provision of adequate health and long-term care. But the EU can encourage discussions on these common challenges and organize an exchange of good practice at European level, as is done through the Open Method of Coordination in the area of social protection and social inclusion.

The Lisbon agreement set a target for increasing the participation rate for older workers (aged 50 to 64) in the labour market. It identifies lifelong learning as having a contribution to play, not least through improving older peoples' skills and adaptability. The EU has agreed ambitious targets for increasing the active involvement of older workers in the labour market:

- 50 percent of the EU population in the 55–64 age group should be in employment by 2010.
- Progressive increase of about five years in the effective average age at which people stop working by 2010, resulting in an average retirement age of 64.

However, a study for the European Commission (cf. 2006) shows that despite EU and national government commitment to participation in continuing training, this declines sharply with older workers. According to the Labour Force Survey (cf. Eurostat 2003) 14 percent of 25–29 year olds participate in education and training, compared with 8 percent of 40–44 year olds and just over 4 percent of 55–65 year olds. According to the same source, between 1999 and 2002 a significant 1 percent increase (4.7% to 5.7%) in the participation in training of 55–64 year olds took place in the EU15, during a period when the overall increase for employed people was 0.2 percent. This remains far below agreed European targets.

The need for older people to update and adapt their skills is a serious challenge, particularly since they tend to have fewer formal qualifications than younger workers and take up training less. In many countries more than 20 percent of 55–64 year-olds lack an upper secondary qualification, in 17 countries more than 40 percent (see fig. 1).

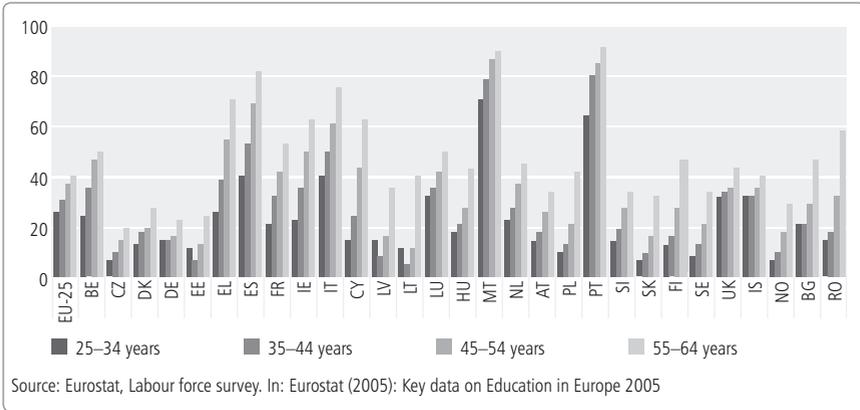


Figure 1: Less than upper secondary education qualification by age group (2002)

Participation rates decrease significantly with age (from 50 percent for 25–34 years old to 30 percent for the age group 55–64). If younger people are more involved in any kind of learning, it is certainly partly because they are still in the formal education system. The highest differences between these two groups are seen in Malta (64%), Cyprus (33%), France (29%), Estonia and Poland (25%) and Belgium (24%). On the contrary, Slovenia shows a little difference (8%) and Austria even an increase in participation over the age.

Participation of 55+ in any kind of learning activity (formal, non-formal or informal) is rather high in Austria, Slovenia, Luxemburg, Slovakia and the Scandinavian countries (see fig. 2).

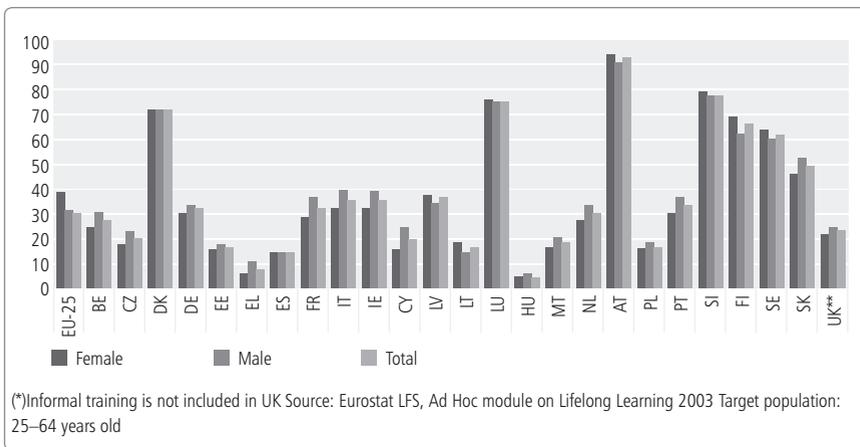


Figure 2: Participation rate 55–64 years old in any kind of learning (2005)

These figures are used by the EU for justifying more investment in adult learning concerning several Communications (cf. 2006; cf. 2007)

3. The need for learning in later life

In order to flourish, older people need the essential skills which underpin society such as language, literacy and numeracy. Familiarity in the use of information and communications technology is also of increasing importance. It is essential to ensure that older people's skills are appropriate to staying active and meeting the functional demands of life in our society. In the knowledge-based society, the functional literacy of all generations is of vital importance. However this is an area of low priority in most Member States where the aspirations of and the needs for older people in respect to continuing learning are not always fully understood. Moreover, functional illiteracy is generally greater among older people than in other age groups.

In an ageing society a vision about education in later life is needed. In many countries, education systems have not yet started to address the emerging educational needs of older people, including those who are retired. The growing number of retired people in Europe should also be regarded as a potential source of instructors and trainers for adult learning. Their knowledge and skills should be assessed and courses in teaching skills should be offered.

We live in an increasingly knowledge-based society with an ageing population and a more intensely competitive global economy. It is therefore vitally important that older people continue to learn, keep up with and adapt to change so that they will not to be excluded from society. Member states must work to include older people, as easy and accessible as possible. User-friendly technologies can assist older people in carrying out daily activities such as those involved in living independently, managing their assets, monitoring their health, creating and maintaining social networks, facilitating access to goods and services, participating in work or voluntary activities and better ensuring their safety. It is important to ensure that the provision of goods, technological applications and services are user friendly, accessible, affordable and appropriate technological applications and services. One has to create incentives to encourage older people to use them. Older people's needs have to be mainstreamed into consumer goods and services.

Investment through the provision of learning and training opportunities is needed for older migrants, in particular for older migrant women with a poor educational background. Such opportunities can contribute to their better integration into society and the labour market. The availability of adult learning at an older age can help ensure that processes of integration and can take place in a way that is beneficial to both migrants and the host country. Most new migrants have major needs in terms of language and cultural understanding, in particular those who are older and who may be most vulnerable to social exclusion.

One challenge for adult learning is to support the integration of migrants into society and the economy and to make the most of their competences and educational experiences acquired prior to migration. This should include expanding adult learning opportunities in relation to linguistic, social and cultural integration, developing appropriate and effective teaching and promoting more intercultural learning, regardless of the age of the immigrant.

The issue of intergenerational fairness and conflict raises the question: Are the old living at the expense of the young or the young at the expense of the old? In fact the really young and the really old live at the expense of the economically active working generation (cf. Lein/Tremmel 2000). But as far as intergenerational fairness is concerned, less important than how burdens and benefits are distributed at any moment in each individual's life is how they add up in total; in other words, whether age cohorts fare differently. Important issues and differences in demography and in adult education responses in different parts of Europe include such issues as separate or integrated provision for the older and elderly, the use of intergenerational learning, and incentives to keep older adults in the workforce.

Intergenerational programmes build on the positive resources that different generations have to offer each other and are an effective way to address such key priorities as building active communities, promoting citizenship, regenerating neighbourhoods and addressing inequality.

Intercultural competence was recently included in the list of European Key Competencies (cf. European Commission 2005). It can be described as the competence that “embraces knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes which make it possible to cope with cultural variety at cognitive, emotional and psychomotor levels” (Fischer 2005). The complete set of key competences is important for future European citizens in their working and social life: communication in foreign languages, digital competence, and learning to learn for older adults as well as migrants to be active citizens. 54–65 year olds have to maintain these competences, and for younger generations there will be serious problems of exclusion if they do not. The second and third generation of migrants combined intercultural and intergenerational learning. They developed new identities – being a German Turk for example – and a new career based on well-developed intercultural competence.

The European Commission (cf. 2006) describes the challenge for adult learning systems as two-fold:

- To ensure a longer working life, there is a need for up-skilling and increasing life-long learning opportunities for older workers. It is widely acknowledged that in order to keep older workers employable, investment is needed throughout the life cycle and should be supported by government, professional bodies and sectors. Special attention should be given to those entering their mid career.
- An expansion of learning provision for retired people is needed (including for instance increasing participation of mature students in higher education), as people

are reaching retirement in better physical and mental health, and post-retirement life expectancy is extending. Learning should be an integral part of this new phase in their lives. In its recent Communication on universities the Commission invited universities to “be more open to provide courses for students at a later stage of their life cycle”. Such provisions will have a vital role in keeping retired people in touch with their social environment. In many countries education systems have not yet started to address the emerging needs of this group of citizens, who also have enormous potential in terms of what they can contribute to the learning of others. Moreover, the growing numbers of retired people in Europe should be regarded as a potential source of educators and trainers for adult learning.

In the framework of the European Lifelong Learning Programme (LLL) and its predecessors we can see that since 1995 regularly projects focused on learning in later life have been accepted and granted. We have found a selection of examples of good practices: in 1995–2008 13 projects supported by the Grundtvig part of the LLL. This list is not exhaustive.

- travel and exchange 3x,
- active citizenship 3x,
- recognition of voluntary work 1x,
- training volunteers as mentor 1x,
- training seniors as assistant in IT 2x,
- volunteers in education for the old and dementia suffering 1x.

So, obviously there is a link between adult learning in later life, positive images about ageing and participation of senior citizens in society, and several of these projects are intergenerational as well. This link is supported by the priority for intergenerational learning as set by the Call for Proposals in the LLL. Changing demography, especially ageing and migration into and within the EU are making big new demands on national and EU policy.

4. Need for focus points

Adult education must adapt and contribute to meet the new needs that arise. The key question is how to do this. Extra attention and positive discrimination action towards senior citizens – like the experiences with the Senior Euro Pass (cf. Midwinter 1997) – are not only positive and include often also stigmatising effects. The focus on intergenerational might be more effective; however, general actions only will underestimate the special needs of different generations. A focus on senior citizens and a focus on intergenerational learning, side by side, might be better. Each focus point creates its own image and future perspective, both together they are creating a broader dimension with more impact and effects. From the perspective of EU policy a third focus

point needs to be the labour market development (cf. Chiva/Manthorpe 2009) – it might be interesting how life course policy and intergenerational learning are coming closer and closer.

5. Focus on senior citizens

One focus is the changing role of the seniors in society. Older people are a large and growing section of the EU's population. The scale of this demographic transition is ensuring that the crucial issue of societal ageing is beginning to take centre stage in European political debate. To date these discussions have tended to work with an homogenous notion of older age and have neglected the reality that people aged 50 years and above form a very diverse group characterized by a range of factors, only one of which is their age. As the older population continues to expand, this diversity among its constituents will further increase. Policies which use age as a determining factor are thus in urgent need of adaptation.

This makes it necessary to work with a homogenous notion of older age, using broad characterizations such as “older people, the elderly and the baby-boomers”. These have neglected the reality that older people aged 50 and over make up a very diverse section of the population characterized by a range of factors, and only one is their age (cf. Kolland 2005). Alongside differences such as those linked to gender, health and wealth, one aspect of this increased diversity is linked to the immigration of ethnic and national minorities everywhere in Europe over successive generations who now form part of the EU's ageing populations. In many member states, large groups of people from ethnic minorities are moving into older age. Policy makers still need to come to terms with this new phenomenon in order to meet the specific needs of this group of older people (cf. Bergold/Knopf/Mörchen 1999).

Silently the context of demographic ageing seems to have changed the negative narrative about older people being a growing burden to society, but due to the actual financial and economic crisis we see this stereotype unfortunately often repeated: ageing seen as a demographic time-bomb. It is common for commentary on ageing to focus negatively on the challenges this poses to the age structure of the labour force, to old age dependency ratios and to the high costs of pensions and health care provision (cf. Reday-Mulvey 2005).

However, such negative perceptions fail to acknowledge the enormous cultural, social and professional resource represented by older people. Their ongoing contribution to society, often in an unpaid capacity, is too often overlooked and should be recognized (cf. Penninx 1996; Klercq 2006). Their potential for wider involvement and contribution is left unexplored because of limited opportunities being made available to older people by policy makers who rely on easy stereotypes and pre-conceptions. Nevertheless, more and more we have seen a new approach: starting with empowerment and activation into real participation of senior citizens in society (cf. Klercq/

Zwart 2009). The same tendencies can be identified in adult education: from the early focus on older adults as participants in learning processes nowadays the role of older adults as helpers in learning processes is more emphasized (cf. Midwinter 1997). Senior expertise is nowadays more valued. A senior has expertise based on earlier life and work experience and (s)he should not have to prove him/herself liberated from competitive performance appraisal standards. From a certain age qualification is not longer interesting, wide and rich experience is hot stuff now.

More and more the common model of ageing means that the elderly are seen as potential of senior citizens, as a source of knowledge, competence and experience. This so called competence model definitively has overcome the deficit model, the model of dependency and also the activation and the empowerment model (cf. Veelken 2000).

In the paradigm shift between old and new stereotypes the question can rise: what is won and what is lost? Yes, we see more good examples of senior citizens participation in society. Yes, we see more vital older persons in marketing campaigns for consumers. Yes, we see more age neutral products which are very useful particularly for the elderly, but at the other hand the participation ideology has been bolted into *granny goes wild* trends. A new market seems to be explored as *sex with granny* with regard to so called erotic websites. There is even *pole dance granny*, the newest storm to hit You Tube on the internet which asks the pertinent question: „Ever wonder what happens to those who love to dance, but get too old to stand up on their own?“ The shadow side of this participation of senior citizens in society seems to be that we have also all special respect for the elderly.

6. Focus on intergenerational learning

The other focus point is intergenerational learning. The new Intergenerational learning started in the 1960s in the US as a reconstruction of traditional forms of intergenerational family learning. In 1960s and during the past 50 years professionals in human service fields concerned with the well-being of children, youth and older adults have been systematically reporting on the impact of a changing society on these generations. Gerontologists reported on the status of older adults, their increase in numbers, the emphasis on early retirement, the change of life expectancy, the change in their roles in the family and in the community, the geographic separation from their families, and their lack of adequate support systems. Child and adolescent development professionals reported on the status of children and youth: inadequate child care and lack of appropriate support systems for young children and an increase in school dropout, gang involvement, drug abuse and teen pregnancy for school-age children and youth. These reports prompted discussions among human service field providers for both generations on the common social issues affecting these two populations. They also resulted in the development of spontaneous programmes that could address some issues of the young and the old.

Intergenerational programmes – the emerging concept – would promote sharing of skills, knowledge, or experience between the old and the young; and would provide ongoing and planned interactions designed to benefit both populations (cf. Ventura-Merkel/Lidoff 1983). Intergenerational programmes are based on developmental and historical evidence that positive mutually beneficial effects do occur as a result of interactions among older and younger persons. Though traditionally these benefits occur among elder and younger family members the idea was that they can also occur between non biologically linked older and younger persons. The challenge to the intergenerational movement, therefore, is: how can intergenerational programmes replicate the positive outcomes of familial intergenerational exchange, without linking older and younger persons biologically?

In this new kind of intergenerational learning we can identify three major types of programmes (cf. McCrea/Smith 1997):

- older adults serving children or youth,
- children or youth serving older adults,
- children or youth and older adults serving others.

This useful organizational scheme does contain one possible area of confusion, which may require some clarification. Sorting programmes according to the population served might appear to contradict one of the basic assumptions of the intergenerational field, which is that both older and younger age groups derive mutual benefits from their participation in such programmes. Even accepting this basic defining characteristic, however, it is usually possible to examine an intergenerational programme and determine a basic direction of service. Typically in such programmes members of one age group provide a service, and members of the other age group are recipients of that service. The positive intergenerational outcomes realised by the members of the providing age group might be seen as secondary, but to programme designers they are no less important than those that accrue to the recipients.

In Europe, in the 1990s, a more sociology based approach was established, the concept of the more-generation-society (cf. Klercq 1996). This concept underlines that mid 20th century it was the first time in human history that more than three generations have to live together and have to share knowledge, experience, resources. Simultaneously this period was characterized by large generation gaps and conflicts – expressed in deficient communication between younger and older generations. The concept of the more-generation-society is not based on old family traditions like the US experience. But on the opposite it shows that generation is a new lifestyle and life experience based concept. This concept, based on Weber (cf. 1921; cf. 1972) and Mannheim (cf. 1928; cf. 1978) was established in a climate that policy makers started to pay more attention to the ageing society: 1993 as the European Year of Older People and Solidarity between Generations; 1997 as the European Year of equal opportunities for all.

In 1998 professionals from US and Europe met each other and established in 1999 the International Consortium for Intergenerational Programmes (ICIP). The objectives of ICIP – that had its most recent conference in Singapore 2010 – are to:

- promote the importance of intergenerational initiatives as agents for social change,
- support and promote intergenerational approaches to programmes, practices, public policy and research worldwide,
- provide a collective voice and networking mechanism to connect intergenerational practitioners and researchers across the globe,
- encourage a systematic approach for the understanding how intergenerational programmes and practices work.

Ten years later, on this already mentioned Slovenian Presidency Conference at Brdo in Slovenia, the outcome is that our societies will have to make better use of the potential of all generations; the society has to provide chances for all to develop their full potential, and to do so, social policies have to be modernised, as sketched out in the Commission's Renewed social agenda: Opportunities, access and solidarity in 21st century.

7. Future focus on the labour market

In the EU policy on lifelong learning nowadays is a major shift to learning in relation to employability on the labour market. This effects also learning in later life: leisure learning is more and more seen as a luxury where the pensioner has to pay for himself, but acknowledge of (professional) competencies is seen as a good instrument to stay active on the labour market. The education system is seen as responsible for the transition of low educated into higher educated people, and business life is seen responsible for increasing the level of personal performance appraisal of employees and/or entrepreneurs. A good example is the Leonardo da Vinci project Intergenerational Portfolio Management (IPM). IPM has been developed as human resource instrument to encourage older nurses and retain them in the hospital setting, using and capitalising on their rich experience. It is a process for the development of a portfolio of knowledge, skills and competencies produced in partnerships between more experienced and less experienced workers, mostly older and younger ones. The method combines aspects of validation of prior experiential learning, mentoring, portfolio development and elements of positive age-related human resource management. IPM, piloted in hospitals in four countries (Austria, Greece, the Czech Republic and United Kingdom), aims to change perceptions and practices with regard to age and to prepare workers for the prospect of working longer, to encourage internal and external mobility and participation in continuing training at mid-career bases on prior acquired competencies and skills.

These pilots have pointed out that employers have discovered the benefits of IPM. The participating hospitals, nursing homes and care centers mentioned as benefits:

- promotes cooperation between the staff members,
- creates a better image of the management team,
- provides a method to overcome “burnout” of staff,
- staff felt “flattered” and valued by participating in the project,
- enables improved knowledge of skills and abilities of staff identifies the training needs of nurses and health care assistants,
- improves the working environment and thus has a direct impact on patient care.

From this perspective it is interesting to look to future labour market developments as well. In 2030 we might expect that 40 percent of the population will be younger than 50, and 60 percent will be older.

Everybody, young and old, will probably work in a diversity of work agreements. There will be fewer inhabitants in some areas, but people will need each other more than ever. Collaboration between generations will be necessary to survive. In the work space management, leadership and communication will go hand to hand and finally be mixed. Flexible working will be the major standard: people will be active in older age as entrepreneur or as a free lance professional, individually acting in networks. Everyone needs to be as flexible and employable as possible. Talent management will be a must, too.

Vinke (cf. 2010) tried to imagine what this could mean for several generations. The generation born between 1940–1955 will be between 75 and 90 years of age. It will be a challenge for them to give the floor to others while keeping themselves involved as well. Generation X, born between 1955–1970 and still hard workers now, will be between 60 and 75 and has the challenge to avoid burn outs, to explore and practice new competencies. Generation Y, born between 1970–1985 and between 45 and 60 in 2030 has the challenge to avoid the dilemma of making difficult choices and has to struggle daily routine. This generation needs a wide experience horizon. The youngster from now, born between 1985–2000 will be 30 up to 45 and need to transform their emotional instability and refind the contact with reality. The young worker in 2030, born in 2000–2015, will be the new linking pin between generations when they succeed in recognition of the power of older generations and when they are able to create challenge for teamwork out of daily choices. And the still to be born generation might be the new innovators; but therefore they need patience and must be able to value older solutions. In this prophecy you can read the content of future intercultural learning processes cross the generations. This may not be the scope of the policymakers from today, but let’s be careful: more attention in policy often means less scope in practice. And less attention in policy creates often more opportunities in reality. In this respect this new direction towards participation in the labour market might be the basis for a new learning module which will be extra relevant about some years in the future.

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