

# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



## Making Capabilities Work - WorkAble

An EU funded research project exploring how to enable young people to act as capable citizens in the European labour markets

Ongoing

DECEMBER 2011

### INTRODUCTION

#### Fostering competences and skills to help the EU out of the crisis

Competences and skills for Europe 2020

High quality education, research, innovation, jobs and a highly skilled and competent workforce are essential for growth and competitiveness. This is fully recognized by Europe 2020, the EU strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, and its flagship initiatives such as "an agenda for new skills and jobs", "Innovation union" and "youth on the move".

Transitions from an industrial, mass production and mass consumption economy to a knowledge based economy put people at the centre of modernisation and investment. The fulfilment of young people's potential is especially understood to be the prerequisite for Europe's future prosperity. **Enabling all young people to achieve their potential** is a political must. High quality education and training, successful labour market integration as well as active citizenship are keys to this. Traditional ways of human capital investment have to be broadened and developed in order to realize a capability-enhancing approach.

Job insecurity

This new approach is needed considering the current circumstances: the worst financial and economic crisis since the 1930s which has brought considerable income and job insecurity. In most European countries unemployment has increased alongside poverty. Jobs have become scarce, and young people without adequate competencies are excluded from the labour market.

Young people are excluded from the labour market

It is in this context that **WorkAble** contributes by providing knowledge on how to enable young people to succeed in European labour markets in order to achieve one of the Europe 2020 targets (75% of the population aged 20-64 should be employed by 2020). **WorkAble** suggests that the capability to adapt

### Need for new set of “key skills”

to constant changes is key for participating both in the labour market and in society. The possibility to continuously update skills is needed to succeed in the labour market. While technical and functional skills and knowledge remain important, the development, harbouring and nourishment of new sets of “key skills” of future workers are urgently needed. These skills also include “societal” abilities like communication, cooperation, creativity etc., which facilitate a more problem-solving approach towards valuable work.

### Adapting policies

In consequence, it becomes inevitable to adapt policies in education, job-training methods, as well as the range and sorts of supplementary vocational services on offer to young people with problems finding a job.

Assessment and measurement tools, of both the structure and the number of key sets of skills, are urgently needed in order to determine where and how to apply these changes in policy. One very well known tool for the examination of key skills and other factors that play an important role in an individual’s ability to find good jobs is the Human Capital Approach. This approach envisages education and qualifications as instrumental to the increase of economic productivity.

### The economy-based Human Capital Approach is not sufficient anymore

However, the shift towards a new set of “key skills” has increased in both speed and strength during the last couple of years and new problems for the future of modern society, such as demographic change, have become more and more pressing. It therefore seems that “narrow tools” - such as the Human Capital Approach - for the assessment and measurement of the key sets of skills alone, no longer seem to be sufficient to match current requirements. This is particularly the case as these new forms of labour rely more and more on the mobilisation of individual abilities that go beyond a mere summing up of technical knowledge and education in general. Above all one important key element of society today seems to be **the capability to adapt to constant change** and this means at the same time having the ability of making serious life-decisions not only more frequently but also more and more individually on the basis of the most **self-valued choices**. In other words **being one’s own agent** and therefore **being able to actively participate in society** has become more and more important in order to grow into fully functional members of society. This means that people need to be given more freedom to make choices and to participate. – Citizens must have **the ability and the freedom to participate and choose**. Society and state institutions have a role to play in this respect: they are called to foster the conditions for such real participation and freedom to choose for all European citizens.

### Enhancing capabilities beyond technical knowledge

### Capability Approach - education beyond Human Capital Approach

The role of freedom of participation and empowerment and the role of good governance with regards to promoting employability is at the core of the **Capability Approach (CA)**. This approach was first empirically implemented by the Nobel prize winning economist Amartya Sen and further developed by the philosopher Martha Nussbaum. Above all, the Capability Approach focuses on the restrictive effects of basic economic and educational inequalities and the nega-

### Suggesting new avenues for policy-making

tive effects of passing down these inequalities between generations in respect to individual freedom and the general development of society.

Hence the “Capability Approach” does not only restrict itself to examining education and the role of government-driven policies in promoting economic factors of development: it also investigates **the normative component of meeting the requirements for becoming a fully accepted and capable member of civil society.**

### Enhancing the capabilities/ real freedom to choose

In contrast to most conventional approaches, the CA opens a new and much needed research agenda both for the investigation and assessment of current developments in the fields of welfare and education. In addition, it suggests new avenues for policy-making that aim not only at increasing efficiency or balancing public budgets, but also at **enhancing an individual’s capabilities and real freedom to choose.**

### Mapping the problem

This WorkAble policy brief focuses on the findings from the mapping of vocational and labour-market policies in the 9 countries investigated in the project: Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The research teams analysed how national educational systems integrate the labour-market requirements of a knowledge-based economy; they considered the issue of civic engagement and participation in community life at large; and they assessed the concern for a good work-life balance. Each partner identified those people who fail in the standard routes of education and transition to employment and the reasons for their problems; described how various educational regimes cope with them; analysed the provisions for school leavers, ‘dropouts’ and people having problems entering the labour market; and made valuable additions to the knowledge base for the debates about educational regimes.

## KEY OBSERVATIONS

### Who fails in the standard routes?

People who fail in the standard routes of education and transition to employment are found to be largely similar in all countries investigated. They are more likely to be:

- Young people with parents of **low educational background** and young people from a **low social class** or manual working class.
- Young people from a **migrant background**.
- Young people with actual or ascribed **non-conformist behaviours**.
- The major target group sometimes, but not always, includes young people with **physical or mental disabilities**.

### How are the failures tackled in the different systems?

Generally, there are four major tasks in all systems:

- to **compensate for failures** of the educational system;
- to **improve the employability** of the young people;
- to **improve the transition into vocational educational training (VET)**; and
- to **avoid “social exclusion”**.

The order of priority of these tasks depends on the general orientations and strategies of the different systems: publicly provided systems (e.g. France, Sweden, Denmark) or “dual systems” (e.g. Germany, Switzerland, Austria), which combine on-the-job training in terms of apprenticeships in a company with vocational and technical education and training in school or further education systems.

### Two possible strategies ...

With respect to the focus on education there are typically two sets of strategies.

#### The first strategy : “Back to the main road”

The first set of strategies (most typically in Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Denmark) tries to bring young people “back to the main road” of the educational and vocational systems. The second set of strategies tries to create “new” or “alternative roads” (France, Italy, United Kingdom, Poland, Switzerland, Austria, Germany). However, the problem with the second set of strategies might be that the “alternative roads” are sometimes barely acknowledged and/or have a lower real or perceived quality than the “main road” of education.

#### The second strategy: Create “new/alternative roads”

Thus there is a certain measure of correspondence between the publicly provided systems and the strategies to bring young people “back” to the “educational main” road.

A second axis of differentiation between the systems reflects the composition of the strategic and operational significance of national, regional or local levels as well as the convergence of these levels. Whereas some countries have a centralized educational system (e.g. Sweden, France), others tend to develop a multi-level approach (e.g. Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Italy).

Depending on the prioritizing of the tasks and their general orientations, educational and labour market policies aim at compensating for different system failures.

### Enhancing choice and social equality

Even though system failures apparently play a role, the general strategy seems to be the attempt to adapt people to (labour) market demands rather than the other way round. With respect to individualized solutions, the policies vary in the degree to which they conceptualize qualifications as public goods and to which they stress the rights, opportunities and responsibilities of companies or the duties and responsibilities of the individual young people.

In particular, those regimes which stress the latter, i.e. individual responsibility tend to ascribe a comparatively high significance to aspects of “moral education”, i.e. to “secondary virtues”, work ethics etc. (e.g. Poland, Switzerland).

Regimes that stress the rights and opportunities of young people and the responsibilities of companies are typically oriented towards **enhancing both the choice of the young people and an idea of social equality**. At a macro or systemic level, France, Denmark and Sweden are certainly countries that get closer to such a capability-friendly approach. In dual systems (Germany, Austria, Switzerland), having to cope with a decline in companies providing vocational education, attempts to enhance significant choice seem to be more and more restricted.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS

### European, national and local level

At this stage of the project, recommendations for policy making are orientated towards changing understandings of concepts when taking into account the Capability Approach. The project addresses European policy strategies as well as national and regional ones. With its special focus on recent EU initiatives to tackle early school leaving as a priority target of the Europe 2020 Agenda, WorkAble's research outcomes may well be of interest to the policy approaches within the three pillars of prevention, intervention and compensation.

The Capability Approach understands public policies and institutional arrangements as important social conversion factors which may enable or hinder people to convert resources into (for the individual person) valuable functions and provide a mediating space which influences their capabilities in terms of their real freedoms and their autonomy.

- **Promote a more encompassing view of skills** as opposed to a narrow, one-sided view of human capital and take into account the consequences of this enlarged view of skills when framing policy, programmes and their monitoring tools. This would for example prevent an exclusive focus on work or being a worker. As a consequence, skills that are not recognized in the labour market should also be integrated.
- **Enhance education to reduce and prevent poverty.** Education - including post school training and education - is a matter of social justice, which should secure the capability to participate and the chance for human flourishing.
- **Empowerment to fulfil self-valued choices should be considered as the central scope of educational policies.** Lifelong Learning Strategies should be framed alongside tailor-made, non-standardized measures. This will create real chances for young people to choose their own measures of success and adapt to their individual circumstances.

- **Foster more soft skills in contrast to the skills most needed in the labour market at a particular point in time.** Education does not coincide with an understanding of short term development of the labour market. There is a need for soft skills such as the ability to adapt.
- **Develop bridges all along the educational paths:** they avoid early selection or fragmentation and guarantee interconnections between the different life cycles and life-long learning stages.
- **Privilege long-term training as opposed to short-term training.** Avoid purely supply-side oriented approaches with regard to drop-outs; also, look at social and environmental conversion factors.
- **Pay attention to factors related to culture, worldviews,** as well as to differentials in terms of available material resources.
- **Modern life-long learning concepts need to be complemented by a strong involvement of concerned stakeholders through participatory means** (including local agents and young beneficiaries) and adequate forms of representation (elected bodies, ombudsmen etc.).
- **Promote the intrinsic value of education** rather than the instrumental value of education to empower the capabilities for education, capabilities for voice and capabilities for work. Empower the capacities to make use of positive freedom.

## RESEARCH PARAMETERS AND DESIGN OF THE PROJECT

### Objectives

“Making Capabilities Work” (WorkAble) scrutinises strategies to **enhance the social sustainability and economic competitiveness of Europe by strengthening the capabilities of young people** to actively shape their personal and working lives in knowledge societies and cope with today’s economic, cultural, demographic and technological challenges.

WorkAble surveys whether and how the match between young people’s supply of skills and competencies and changing labour-market needs is sustained and secured, while simultaneously broadening their options for living in and actively shaping European knowledge societies. It explores how educational strategies are implemented and assesses whether they enable young people to convert knowledge, skills and competencies into capabilities to function as fully participating active citizens.

### Methods

Bridging quantitative and qualitative methods, WorkAble will assess the potential of innovative European strategies for dealing with local labour-market demands and regional inequalities. Adopting a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, it will systematically analyse **whether and how young people are**

enabled to participate in working life and society.

### Theoretical Approach

Applying the **Capabilities Approach** as a common heuristic framework, 13 partners from different disciplines (educational science, sociology, economics, political studies and social work) in 10 European countries collaborate closely in a multidimensional research process.

### Research design

WorkAble follows a three-phase research design:

- 1) A comparative institutional mapping and analysis of vocational and labour-market policies in all educational regimes;
- 2) Case studies to reconstruct the conceptions, aspirations and practices of local actors implementing educational and training programmes; and
- 3) Quantitative secondary analyses of national and European longitudinal data revealing how effectively these strategies enhance economic performance and close the capability gap for young people.

## PROJECT IDENTITY

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**Funding scheme**

Funded under the 7th Framework Programme for Research of the European Union, Specific Programme "Cooperation" - Socio-economic Sciences and Humanities.

**Budget**

2.264.789,00 €

**Project Website**

<http://www.workable-eu.org/>



**Duration**

November 2009 – October 2012 (36 months)

**Related websites**

Marie Curie ITN EduWel - Education as Welfare  
Enhancing opportunities for socially vulnerable youth in Europe:  
<http://www.eduwel-eu.org>

Bielefeld Center for Education and Capability Research:  
<http://www.bca-research.net>

International NRW Research School Education and Capabilities:  
<http://www.educap.de/home>

CAPRIGHT project:  
<http://www.capright.eu>

Human Development and Capability Association:  
<http://www.capabilityapproach.com/index.php>

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**For further reading**

Publications in the frame of the project and beyond are available on the project website  
<http://www.workable-eu.org/publications>  
and under “list of project-related publications”