

New Perspectives for Learning - Briefing Paper 45

Gender and Qualifications

Context of the Research

Increasingly, the European workforce needs to become more flexible in order to meet the demands of an aging population in some regions, and for the continuous changes in skills requirements. Traditionally, men dominate some types of work and women dominate others. This, in itself is tending to reduce workforce flexibility and create skills shortages that might be reduced, if gender was not considered a barrier to entry. In addition, gender can also impede both individual career options of women and men and has implications for human resource development. As well as addressing equal opportunities issues, vocational education and training systems need to aim to provide the skills for the workforce that enables both sexes to have the competences that don't restrict individuals according to their gender.

This project investigated the impact of gender segregation of European labour markets on vocational education and training, with specific consideration to key or core competencies and qualifications. The project addressed differences between women and men in terms of the further development of gender specific key competencies or in terms of their existing sets of key competencies in situations of occupational change.

Research was carried out in various European countries each representing a particular cultural and societal context - the United Kingdom for a market-oriented society; Germany - the strongly structured labour market in central Europe; Portugal - the strong modernisation of southern European countries; Greece - a society that still values highly traditional characteristics and Finland - representing the Nordic welfare state.

The project identified how both sexes could be supported in acquiring key competences, normally associated with the opposite gender, during initial and continuing vocational education and training throughout working life. This enables individuals to follow occupational pathways that best suits them, thus strengthening their individual autonomy. This also has the potential impact of enhancing the quality of existing human resources, which is good for the economy and society as a whole.

Key Conclusions

1. In spite of the different industrialisation and societal developments the differences between countries was much smaller than expected.
2. In particular, the positive action of the Nordic welfare state does not lead to significantly different results, compared to southern Europe.

3. Nor did the existence of a market-oriented economy or a strongly regulated labour market and vocational and educational system, show a significant difference, to influence the outcomes to a remarkable degree.
4. Viewed from different perspectives a model of key competences related to gender differences was developed:
 - Societal perspective: societal influences, taking into account also possibilities to counteract them;
 - Occupational perspective: improving opportunities for gainful employment in view of conditions of the current labour market;
 - Activity related perspective: managing complex and often multiple requirements, time-management, decision-making;
 - Subjective perspective: cognitive and emotional striving for self-actualisation and happiness.
5. It appears to be advisable to further mutual learning of boys and girls in order to broaden the scope of their key competences, perhaps also in mixed courses which encompass both, male and female dominated occupations.
6. Most features of “gendered key competences” expose a very large area of overlapping between the two sexes.
7. Women and men often have rather different predominant expectations with regard to their self-actualisation in their future occupational life.
8. Gender segregation in the labour market has not been considerably reduced during the last decades, as far as “typical” male and female occupations – like electricians and nursery nurses – are concerned.
9. Most people seem to be quite happy with the state of affairs. One may attribute this attitude in part to a “gender blindness” or “gender tiredness” in view of the many proactive programmes recently.
10. Valuable insights were gained from considering “exceptional” cases i.e. men working or being trained as nursery nurses and women in the occupational field of electricians: -
 - Most “exceptional” young people had developed non-typical interests during their childhood - particularly self-competences.
 - These were further developed during their training as female electricians and male nursery nurses.
 - They were also sometimes treated differently as compared to their counterparts from the opposite sex.

- Trainers thought that female electrician trainees are tidier and more industrious than men, but they also sometimes thought them to be not so keen with respect to logical thinking and technological creativity. However, female trainees feel they were accepted.
 - Exceptional people felt that they had to overcome rather strong reservations and sometimes prejudices on the part of employers and colleagues, but also of family and friends.
11. A lot of young people leave an atypical training at an early stage because they find learning and working environments insupportable, through a mixture of attitudes and conditions encountered. However those people, who succeed appear to be more conscious about their occupational choice and thus sometimes more engaged. That is, they make use of their additional key competences, especially regarding their personal development, and that this enhances their occupational career, showing they have “gender autonomy”.
12. Dealing with occupational change depends very strongly on the motivation for that. This can be more due to external circumstances, like being laid off or removal due to marriage, necessity to re-enter the labour market after a family phase (for our sample: only women) or adapting work conditions to support elderly parents. On the other hand, inner motivation can arise from the wish to improve one’s work situation, either looking for work which is better paid or which is more intrinsically rewarding and creative.

Key Recommendations

1. The main efforts should be focused towards encouraging “gender autonomy” in vocational education and training and continuous vocational training rather than trying to equalise the numbers of people from either sex in each occupation.
2. Activities to strengthen and support gender autonomy should be through developing the “self competences” that create individual autonomy. With regard to occupational life the ability to pursue individual autonomy is sometimes called “competence to ‘shape’ one’s own occupational biography”.
3. Everyone regardless of gender should be given the opportunity to shape one’s career path according to individual preferences, as far as possible.
4. To further gender autonomy individuals should: -
 - Be encouraged to further develop relevant key competences, particularly self competences connected to self-assurance, that is
 - To try to become aware of one’s own key competences beyond usual prejudices.

- To call in question the conventional perceptions of what is a male or female occupation.
 - To dare to make “atypical” occupational choices.
 - To develop perseverance in order not to give up at an early stage of an atypical career.
6. Vocational education and training systems and recruitment practices need to focus more on providing encouragement for all people, instead of reinforcing barriers, e.g. through recruitment practices according to gender stereotypes.
 7. It is particularly important to support people of either gender who intend or have decided to choose an occupation that is atypical for their sex.
 8. In vocational education and training including training in companies this means having to:
 - Counteract gender blindness and gender tiredness, as this is a major barrier for the “exceptional cases”.
 - Provide opportunities to work in gender-mixed classes,
 - Provide mentoring by people who have themselves made an atypical choice,
 - Be aware of prejudices regarding gender-“typical” key competences.
 5. Teachers, trainers and personnel managers, through continuous professional development need to be made more aware of how to support and encourage gender autonomy.
 6. In addition, wages need to be set according to gender equity. There is also a need for provision of childcare and appropriate parental leave.

Further Information

The full title of the project is: “Gender and Qualification. Transcending gendered features of key qualifications for improving options for career choice and enhancing human resource potential”. The final report was completed in March 2002.

The project web site at: http://www.biat.uni-flensburg.de/biat.www/projekte/genderqual/genderqual_eng.HTM

[State of Art report](#), [Full report](#), [Abstract](#), [Summary](#) [Partner details](#)

Key Publications

- Evans, K., Hodkinson, P., Unwin, L. (Eds.) (2002): Learning and the Workplace. London: Kogan
- Figueira, Eduardo (Ed.) (2002): "Género e Qualificação. A questão das competências-chave associadas ao género na escolha da carreira profissional." In: Economia e Sociologia. Évora: Estudos Superiores de Évora, 2002
- Heikkinen, Anja (4/2001): Turha, ärsyttävä ja arka aihe. In: Journal Aikuiskasvatus 4/2001
- Heikkinen, Anja (4/2001): Onko osaamisella sukupuoli? In: Journal Aikuiskasvatus 4/2001
- Heikkinen, Anja (2002): Gender and the transforming adult education theory and practice. In: Dybbroe, B., Ollagnier, E. (Eds.) (2002): Gender and adult education. University of Roskilde
- Heikkinen, Anja et al. (forthcoming): Ammattikasvatuksen femininiteetit ja maskiniteetit muutoksessa
- Kampmeier, Anke S. (1/2002): 1st Common Report. Part 1: Gendered key qualifications – employment practices and self images. Part 2: Effects of career choice against common gender structures on the development of key qualifications. University of Flensburg
- Kampmeier, Anke S. (2/2002): 2nd Common Report. Career Changes and Gender. University of Flensburg
- Kampmeier, Anke S. / Wigger, Anke (7/2002): 3rd Common Report. Recommendations for transcending gender barriers in the European VET system. University of Flensburg
- Kampmeier, Anke S. (Ed.) (2003): Gender and Qualification. Final Report. University of Flensburg

Research Institutions

- Institute for Vocational Education and Training University of Flensburg, Germany
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