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Work-related training and workplace learning: Nordic perspectives and European comparisons

Work-related training and non-formal and informal workplace learning are increasingly being recognised as a key to lifelong learning and to realising the potential for skills development. Globalisation, technology change with further digitalisation, together with demographic change and climate changes are transforming the world of work. These impact not only the development of new skills and due skills needs, as well as skills imbalances, but also forms of organizing work (ILO/OECD, 2018). Supranational organisations, such as The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), International Labour Organization (ILO) and European Union (EU), have developed strategies (e.g. OECD Skills Strategy and EU's New Skills Agenda for Europe) for skills development and the future of work, and these are being reflected in national skills strategies. As pointed out in the report, *Global Skills Trends, Training Needs and Lifelong Learning Strategies for the Future of Work* (2018), prepared by the ILO and OECD for the G20 Employment Working Group meeting in June 2018, the changing world of work poses a huge challenge on traditional education and training systems and calls for new approaches to lifelong learning.

As training institutions are struggling with rethinking and renewing their long-held practices and modus operandi, employers have realized not only the benefits but also the necessity of promoting continuous learning and skills development in the context of work and at the workplace. Work-related training and non-formal and informal workplace learning have many advantages compared to skills development provided in training institutes. They are highly relevant to the individual and the employer, an issue considered important for the quest of raising participation rates in adult learning (ILO, 2011). This has potential to make learning and skills development very effective, because on-the-job training and learning often takes place as learning by doing, allowing for new knowledge and skills to be practised immediately. The practical aspects of learning have been found to be particularly important for workers with low levels of formal education (Brown & Bimrose, 2018). A further benefit is the easy access this form of learning provides for further skills development for all employees, particularly to low-skilled workers. Indeed, workplaces are potentially the most democratic arena for development of job-related skills, knowledge and attitudes, highlighting employers' role as a major provider of learning opportunities. Related to the latter, workplace learning has also potential to serve a broader social purpose, promoting a more inclusive learning society. The issue of continuous skills development has become closely connected to the risk of new social inequalities (Blossfield, Kilpi-Jakonen, Vono de Vilhena, & Buchholz, 2014; Cedefop, 2015; OECD, 2013), but also to maintaining existing inequalities. Research shows that access to and participation learning-rich forms of work can counteract development of social equality (Lundvall & Rasmussen, 2016). Interestingly for this special issue, in the Nordic countries and the Netherlands, where access to workplace learning is more generally equal than in most other countries (yet, not fully equal there either), and shop-floor workers get more responsibility at the workplace, the income distribution has also been shown to be more equal (Lundvall & Rasmussen, 2016). Finally, the level of access to workplace learning has also been related to innovation performance of enterprises. The successful innovation performance in the Nordic countries reflects a strong approach, which recognizes employees' capacity to learn as an essential part of their economic performance, and which builds on unintended or intentionally

fostered learning taking place in the context of work, as employees respond to ongoing questions, changes, challenges, and problems that emerge (Kans et al., 2016; Lundvall & Rasmussen, 2016).

This special issue is born out of collaboration between two large research projects, *Barriers and drivers regarding adult education, skills acquisition and innovative activity* (BRAIN) and *Skills development for realizing the workforce competence reserve* (SkillsREAL). The projects were financed by the Research Council of Norway, but both included an international group of researchers. These projects also had other commonalities. The focus of research in both were on relationships between learning, skills and competences, exemplified in the work setting, and both used data primarily, but not only, from PIAAC – the OECD survey *Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies* (OECD, 2013). The main difference between the projects was their target group: SkillsREAL concentrated on young adults, immigrants and older adults, while BRAIN focused on the working population more generally. The articles in this special issue explore work-related training and workplace learning in the Nordic countries, comparing findings across these countries, and with several other European nations.

Most of the articles take the issue of participation in work-related training and workplace learning as a point of departure. In international comparison, the Nordic countries, together with the Netherlands, feature comparatively high average levels of participation in various forms of adult education and training (AET) in general, and in non-formal learning in particular (Desjardins, 2017). Besides patterns and levels of participation, the factors related to drivers and barriers to participation, as well as participation of different sub-populations, have been investigated. PIAAC data are unique in that it allows to analyse adults' cognitive skills and various background aspects related to skills development and learning participation and their relationships, and to compare these relations across various sub-populations, for example, with regard to immigrant background, age, and prior education, as well as between countries. By displaying these various aspects of work-related training and workplace learning, the articles contribute to advancing our knowledge on some of the key issues in current workplaces on employment and employability, as well as to some extent on relevant policies. Five of the six articles use PIAAC data, whereas one paper has a more theoretical and overarching perspective on workplace learning and on what the research based on PIAAC data has contributed to advance our understanding on this topic.

The article by Liv Anne Støren and Pål Børing raises questions concerning participation *rates* versus training *intensity*, the last measured as duration of training. Do the high participation rates in some countries, like the Nordic countries, conceal that in these countries the intensity of training, i.e. the number of days in non-formal training is not higher, but possibly lower, than in countries where the participation rates are lower? Likewise, one expectation was that high participation rates among highly educated persons may conceal that many of these individuals participate in rather short courses. The article investigates how the total amount of non-formal training is related to individual, as well as workplace characteristics. The findings were contrary to the expectations mentioned above that were underlying the purpose of the analyses.

Differences in demand for adult education and training and variations in barriers to participation are explored in the article by Elisabeth Hovdhaugen and Vibeke Opheim. The article compares the Nordic countries and the Netherlands, which have high participation rates, with a group of countries with lower participation rates. The findings indicate mainly similarities in patterns across countries with high and low participation rates, but also some differences. In general, demand for AET was strongly associated with the individuals' educational level, in countries both with high and with low participation rates. Further, the structure and level of barriers also prove to be quite similar across the two groups of countries, and the countries with low AET participation rate do not have a higher proportion of individuals reporting that they experience barriers to AET participation. Hence, the main difference is that countries with low participation rates do have a substantially higher proportion of individuals who do not engage in AET. This finding points to the possibility that a country's AET participation rate may be seen as

a general indicator of AET motivation in the country, and less of an indication that there are barriers to participation.

The Nordic countries feature comparatively high average levels of proficiency in numeracy as measured in PIAAC (OECD, 2013). The third article by Liv Anne Støren, Kjersti Lundetræ and Pål Børing examines how numeracy skills vary between employed persons in European countries, comparing three Nordic countries with four other Western European countries. The main focus is on individuals' work situation, exploring the extent to which good working conditions, including among other things employer supported training, might facilitate skills maintenance or skills acquisition. According to the findings, varying job characteristics explain a large part of the variation in skills, when controlling for education level, age, gender, parental education level and industrial sector. The findings indicate that educational level and job characteristics have the same statistical impact on the skills variation. With reference to the 'between country' differences, variations in job characteristics had a larger impact, compared to the role of variation in education levels.

The article by Tarja Tikkanen and Kari Nissinen is targeted on one of the vulnerable groups in the current labour market, low-educated mature-aged employees. The study explored to what extent a range of factors, commonly found to relate to participation in job-related lifelong learning, applied to participation of this particular sub-population, and to what extent they were similar or different across the four Nordic countries from where PIAAC data were available (Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden). Not unexpectedly, findings showed that average participation rate was low, 32–39%, compared to the well-educated counterparts of the target group. The drivers of participation appeared more similar than different across the countries. Those with higher income, more frequent skills use at work, working in public sector and being females, *ceteris paribus*, were more likely to participate in lifelong learning in all countries. Interestingly, age did not have an impact on participation, other things being equal. This suggests that the Nordic policies and measures have succeeded in helping atypical learners and vulnerable groups to overcome various situational and institutional barriers.

The next article by Liv Anne Støren and Pål Børing focuses on another vulnerable sub-population, adults with immigrant background, exploring its relationship with participation rate in non-formal job-related training. The initial hypothesis was that immigrants have fewer training opportunities than non-immigrants, and that this is particularly pronounced for non-Western immigrants. However, the findings indicate that the differences in participation rate by immigrant background are relatively small, in all Nordic countries except Finland. Still, the immigrants receive less employer-sponsored training than non-immigrants. Thus, the results indicate a high demand for training among immigrants.

The last article by Dorothy Sutherland Olsen and Tarja Tikkanen takes a different perspective to workplace learning, exploring it in the light of recent research on the topic and the contribution of PIAAC data to advancing our knowledge on workplace learning. The first part of the study analyses the main topics and trends emerging from recent research on workplace learning, and how peer-reviewed publications, based on data from the PIAAC, have contributed to this field of research. Very few PIAAC-based studies turned out to relate to workplace learning, making drawing conclusions difficult. Regardless of the apparent limited use of the data by researchers in the field, PIAAC seems to have contributed to new knowledge on the relationship between the development of information processing skills, in particular problem-solving, and technology-rich environments. Furthermore, availability of the PIAAC data seems to have stimulated to and strengthened of the international, comparative research perspective to workplace learning.

Overall, the articles present a picture with similarities and differences in the patterns of participation in skills development in the Nordic countries. This picture shows that access to workplace learning is still limited in these countries, as well as in the Netherlands, among those who are most in need of boosting their skills, although these countries are scoring comparatively high when it comes to participation in non-formal training. However, while evidence of positive

outcomes is also apparent, it is vital that the governments, also in the Nordic countries, maintain and further develop the policies and targeted measures for skills development among the most vulnerable groups in working life and beyond. Compared to other European countries with much lower participation rates in AET, similarities are found considering the patterns of participation. This refers to, for example, the distribution of the duration of training, as well as to the barriers to participate in training. The principal difference between the low- and high-performing countries seems to be based on the prevalence of training opportunities, where the employed persons are simply offered work-related non-formal training to a lesser extent in the low-performing countries than in the high-performing countries.

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