

Hanne Randle and Richard Cooney, guest editors

This special issue of the Swedish journal *Arbetsmarknad & Arbetsliv* (in English: *Labour Market & Working Life*) is based on papers which were presented at the Third Conference of Training, Employability and Employment, at Karlstad University in June 2009. The conference attracted about 50 participants, both researchers and practitioners from Australia, France, Norway, Poland, Sweden and the UK, presenting 27 papers from research and practice. The first CTEE conference was held in London in June 2002 and the second was held in Prato, Italy in 2005.

The journal includes contributions from practitioners and researchers and describes interesting examples from Sweden, France and the UK based on the joint theme to develop a deeper understanding of the concept of employability.

The first article is written by the Swedish researchers Andreas Fejes PhD at Linköping University and Gun Berglund PhD from Umeå University. The article describes how employees in the municipal health care service takes on the responsibility to develop employable skills through their participation in government funded skills enhancement programs. The paper describes the concept of employability and how it relates to describing unemployment as a lack of employable skills, and as a concept which is used to legitimate unemployment, where the responsibility of sustaining employable skills has been moved to the individual and at the same time disguising the structural causes on the labour market. In their article they describe how the official rhetoric about employability is understood as individual responsibility by individuals undergoing education and training. The authors show how the concept previously was linked to

describe a person's relation to the labour market. Since the eighties the concept of employability has changed and emphasises individual preconditions and responsibility to develop their knowledge and skills. The changed meaning of employability describes individuals' participation on the labour market at the present and in the future. The article presents case study results based on 30 interviews with employees who took part in the training program *Steps for Skills*, where they could acquire qualification equivalent to licensed practical nurses. With this qualification the employees were eligible to apply for permanent employment contracts in the municipal health care service for elderly. The interviews show that the employees take

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on great responsibilities to acquire certificates through education and training as a measure to develop employable skills and qualifications. The option is to decline participation in the courses provided by the employer and to endure the threat of losing their employment contract. The authors conclude that this study shows that employees have internalised the official rhetorics of employability and consequently take responsible actions to maintain their employability as a measure to handle the uncertainty on the labour market.

Bert Clough, research and strategy manager at Unionlearn in the UK, which is a branch at the TUC (Trades Union Congress), presents in the second article how trade unions in the UK have been involved in developing new systems for education and training for their members. The article shows how union learning representatives, reps (ULRs), in the UK play an important role, at workplace level, to promote learning, based on the ideas of lifelong learning, for specific target groups in the article defined as “hard to reach learners”. Bert Clough also shows that the union learning reps are impacting on the trade union organisation as they attract younger people to take on union roles. The article gives an introduction to “the birth” of the trade union role as union learning reps and also describes how the role is a result of the labour politics emphasising education and training for the work force in the UK. Since the Employment Act in 2002 the union learning reps acquired statutory rights to promote learning for their members at workplace level. Since then the trade unions have trained 24 000 ULRs to work with issues such as; analyse employees’ training needs, provide information and guidance on training, promote the value of training, organise training and consult with employers around learning issues. Many ULRs have also developed learning agreements at workplace level and developed learning centres where they can promote their activities. Clough shows in his article that the statutory right does not give the ULRs any rights to negotiate collective bargaining about learning, and that one third of the ULRs still experience a lack of support from local managers, as they fail to receive financial support for carrying out their duties as ULRs. Nevertheless, TUC train about 4 300 union reps in the tasks of ULRs each year and many ULRs are successful in setting up learning agreements for their members, by negotiating with company managers. This article brings up interesting aspects of the trade unions and their role in shaping the employees’ skills. Should trade unions be involved in promoting learning for their members as a means to develop employable skills? In Sweden the trade unions have been involved in developing vocational education and training for decades, but they have not yet reached the same level in their assignment as the ULRs in the UK – to develop a unique assignment where they can devote their time and effort to promote skills enhancement and training. In the UK the ULRs have been able to develop opportunities for training for

employees, who lack basic qualifications in literacy and numeracy, as the ULRs can access state funds for training. This article is important as it shows that trade unions are important players when it comes to developing employability among their members.

The third article is written by Patrick Conjard and Emmanuelle Saint-Genis, both project managers at the French National Agency for the Improvement of the Working Conditions (ANACT) in Lyon, France. They present how intermediary organisations can be involved in developing methods for experiential knowledge transmission to sustain skills in organisations and from the perspective of improving working conditions. Their article is built on experiences from government funded projects. They start off by presenting a theoretical introduction to experiential knowledge transmission – where reflection combined with action are keys to learning. The authors describe the process as a relation between a mentor and a mentee. Not all work practices should be transferred to newcomers as the knowledge of many “older workers” is obsolete due to the technological development. Therefore, the selection of the mentors is vital for the outcomes of the experiential knowledge transmission. Their study shows that many mentors were about 40 years of age. The article presents four methodological principles for successful experiential knowledge transmission in practice. These four principles mean to identify certain aspects of the experiential knowledge transmission, such as; transferring does not mean cloning; it means doing something together, to identify the work situation and finally to analyse critical components of know how in each situation. As the authors have the ambition to view experiential knowledge transmission from the perspective of working conditions, they present how newcomers can learn safe work practices from “older” workers. Reading safety instructions is not enough to learn safe work routines, it requires that newcomers understand the meaning of work safety and how it relates to the practicalities of work. The work situation plays an important role for successful experiential knowledge transmission. When the transmission is based on real life situations it is possible to isolate pedagogical situations which are useful for learning, and they can be simulated to develop pedagogical situations or specific situations which can be used for reflection and analysis. The article presents valuable ideas of how to deal with the situation on the labour market, when valuable or vital skills must be transferred from old workers to the next generation of workers.

The last contribution in the journal is an article by Ann Pegg PhD, a researcher at Open University in the UK. She presents a study where local employers and students at Open University view the concept of employability differently, even though the local employers were linked to the students as their employers and financiers. Her research question is to investigate to what extent employers

are involved in shaping the curriculum of the students' courses as a means to develop employable skills. The idea is based on the assumption that employers should influence the activities in higher education in order to shorten the students' path from their studies to employment by developing the curriculum in higher education to better match employers' needs. Her research is based on an initiative called *graduate@work*, where students take part in distance and part time courses at Open University and their employers pay for their training. The funding aims to promote higher education among younger people and to develop employable skills. There are about one million people taking part in distance learning in the UK. Ann Pegg's research shows that the employers view the possibility of financing employee training as a measure to recruit knowledgeable employees, more than as a measure to acquire workers with employable skills. Therefore the contents in the training programs are not expected to lead to a better capacity to carry out work related duties. Instead the employers value the opportunity to provide training opportunities for their employees as a measure to attract employees. The students, on the other hand, view the opportunities for training as a measure to develop employable skills for the future, as a means to strengthen their position on the future labour market – even if it means that they have to move to another region to be able to find work. However, they find the generic courses useful for their work even if there is no direct link to their work tasks and the students are prepared to put in the effort to study even though they know they will not be able to use their acquired qualifications to change their present career. Her article shows that even though employers and employees have different understandings of employability, the employers' motives to finance or to take part in education and training are based on how they view the situation in the local labour market from a short or longer term perspective.

Altogether the four articles present different perspectives and contents to the concept of employability. The articles discuss how European policies are framing national policies for education and training, and continues to discuss how the rhetorics of employability can be understood at single workplaces and by employees and how it relates to workplaces in the context of experiential knowledge transmission.