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Gender issues in the setting of standards for training of trainers ⁽¹⁾⁽²⁾

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1. Introduction

This paper is based on the project ‘Genderqual – Gender and qualification: transcending gendered features of key qualifications for improving options for career choice and enhancing human resource potential’. The project is funded by the EU fifth framework research programme and coordinated by BIAT, University of Flensburg, Germany, comprising partners from the UK, Portugal, Greece and Finland. Although the project is still in progress, the paper tries to draw conclusions for including new aspects in the training of trainers. It introduces some considerations outside the work programme of the project in order to focus on setting standards for training trainers. Especially on continuing vocational training, it includes outcomes of the Leonardo da Vinci surveys and analyses project ‘Tacitkey - Tacit forms of key competences for changing employment opportunities’, also coordinated by BIAT, University of Flensburg, comprising partners from the UK, Portugal and Greece.

2. The gendered structure of the labour market

The labour market in all countries of Europe has been and is still very much structured according to gender. We are dealing here only with occupations to which VET and CVT, in the usual meaning, apply, and not professions based on an academic degree. For these ‘middle-level’ occupations there is still a rather strong separation between those taken up mostly by women (‘female occupations’) and those taken up mostly by men (‘male occupations’). Only in a minority

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of occupations is the number of men and women employed similar. There is ample statistical evidence that, especially in technical occupations, such as electricians', mostly men are employed, whilst women work more in business-related areas and in the field of personal services, such as hairdressing. These differences have again been established in the European project 'Gender and qualification'. While this situation has not changed in many occupational areas, there are cases where the number of women and men has become more similar. For instance, in accountancy (again on the semi-professional level), the number of women has clearly risen. Cases where men enter 'female occupations' seem to be considerably rarer.

In addition, participation of women in gainful employment is still lower overall than men although it has increased strongly during the past three decades. In this respect, there are important differences between European countries, partly due to the degree to which part-time work is implemented in which many more (middle-aged) women than men participate. Caring for children is largely responsible for interruptions in occupational careers. Men do not participate in domestic chores nearly as much as women, which impairs the latter's opportunity to carry on with gainful employment. For young people before child rearing, participation in gainful employment is nowadays more or less equal and - apart from people still attending university - almost reaches 100 %, in all countries of Europe.

With respect to career advancement in 'middle level' occupations, the proportion of men in higher positions is larger. An example is the retail business. While in many areas, shop assistants are mostly female (many of whom have completed an apprenticeship), supervisors are often male. Again one reason seems to be the interruption of women's occupational careers due to family tasks.

Part-time work and fewer promotions lead to significantly lower average wages for women, about 30 % lower than men (again for 'middle level' occupations), and little affected by national conditions. Another reason is that wages for many 'male occupations' are still higher than those for 'female occupations' even if these can be viewed as being on the same level. This may be based on the historical cultural assumption that women earn money as a complement to the income of the main breadwinner, the husband. (It should be noted that for working class families this was in the past only partly reality.)

As a consequence, cultural and historical backgrounds influence the significance attributed to gainful employment for females and males, from a social and psychological point of view, where even now it is still higher for males, although this seems to be changing. This may influence the attitude of women and men towards training.

The value attributed to 'typical' male and female gainful work still appears to be different in the public view too. The public debate is centred around claims that a 'feminisation' of work is occurring in middle and lower level jobs which reduces the importance of physical strength to the extent that what is perceived as 'typical' male social behaviour is now believed to be a disadvantage for many jobs. These changes impair traditional cultural sources of male identity, as has been observed particularly for young workers of the lower classes, and preparing these young men for jobs in a changing cultural environment appears to be an important task for trainers.

3. Reasons for the gendered structure of the labour market

The reasons for the gendered structure of the labour market are manifold. We are not going to enter here into the 'nature/nurture' debate. Even if one does not employ the approach of 'radical

social constructivism' commonly-used in the humanities, it is obvious that the meanings attributed to 'male' and 'female' especially with respect to public roles, and in the world of work in particular, are strongly dependent on historical and cultural circumstances.

The specific features attributed to the two sexes with regard to their suitability for special occupations appear to be to a great degree socially constructed, as can be seen from cultural and historical studies. The resulting gendered division of labour largely determines the way the labour market is structured. With respect to psychological features, however, it is important to note that there is never a clear distinction between 'female' and 'male', not even a clear socially constructed separation. From many empirical analyses it is well known that these psychological features overlap to a rather high degree.

From a more pragmatic point of view, reasons for the gendered structure of the labour market can be divided into two main areas.

There are *direct societal influences*. Most important are gender-specific practices of recruitment. In this area, historical traditions and cultural prejudices play the most significant part, and it is here where the most direct influence could be exerted. Furthermore, the 'culture of the workplace' is gender specific, probably even more so than individual behaviour patterns, due to traditional expectations and an effect of self-amplifying of gendered features.

To analyse these differences is part of the work in progress of the research project mentioned above. In any case, even if prejudices are of great influence these perceptions often guide young people to take up occupations according to their sex.

On the other hand, *personal 'self-images'*, the perceptions of how somebody believes themselves to be – or believes they should be – influence the types of occupations young people apply for. Because these self-images, another point of analysis of the project, are gendered the choice of occupation is rather strongly related to the two sexes. Self-images are also influenced by societal expectations, particularly those of parents, teachers, peers and, later, trainers. These differences tend to lead to a process of self-amplification as well.

Both reasons are also important for 'climbing the career ladder' as far as possible for the 'middle-level' occupations we are talking about. This is of special importance for continuing vocational training which is related to advancement in the job.

The reasons mentioned above also determine the kind of jobs women wishing to re-enter the labour market after a 'family phase' apply and are recruited. Very often these 'women returners' are viewed by employers as unqualified because they have been out of gainful work for a shorter or longer period. Women too often think of themselves as not being apt for gainful work although they have often proved to be very able in managing the varying daily tasks of a family household. This is an outcome of the Leonardo da Vinci project 'Tacitkey', and of additional analyses.

4. Transcending gendered features of gainful work

There are consequences of this situation of the labour market with regard to two points, economy and individual life:

it can be assumed that the allocation of jobs according to gender does not mirror people's actual capabilities. This means that this allocation is not functional for a well-run economy. For economic competitiveness, which is proclaimed nowadays as more or less the most important aim it is

necessary to transcend these gender barriers. They prove to be especially inadequate in the modernisation of work processes to achieve higher efficiency. This may be a reason to open up technical occupations to women much more than before. If more (young) people get the opportunity to choose a career which fits them best they will be able to contribute in the most efficient way to economic success. This in turn is expected to be very valuable for a flourishing society even if one does not adhere to the idea that everything in society should be governed by economic criteria;

from the individual's point of view, to enter a job one is not happy with may impair personal well-being because occupational success is less probable. Because professional development in work is regarded as a major source of personal fulfilment and growth, this is another very important reason for transcending gender barriers in gainful work. If the options for career choice are enlarged, this will enhance suitable choices for employees, and particularly trainees. This should contribute to more job satisfaction and to a more favourable state of society, particularly in supporting the identity of people in a world of rapid change.

These arguments apply to both sexes so opportunities should be improved for everybody to lead a more agreeable life.

For the individual reasons given, it does not seem sensible to guide young persons into specific areas of occupations simply to achieve a balance in the numbers of women and men. As an example, model schemes are being implemented in various countries to open up better job opportunities for young women in technical occupations. This is without doubt very useful for women interested in this field whose possibilities to work there had been rather low before. But when it comes to guiding young women into mechanical production, for instance, it should be borne in mind that labour market conditions have worsened there, due to more automatic production. There is always the danger of misdirecting young people. The aim should be, therefore, to enhance the *options for choice* of occupations.

Because the interests of young people regarding areas of occupation are not as gendered as actual opportunities, there are strong arguments for reducing gender segregation in the labour market.

5. Gendered features of vocational education and training (VET) and continuing vocational training (CVT)

Because the labour market is still strongly gendered, the same applies to VET and CVT systems as they are rather closely geared to the labour market although there is a difference between more market-driven and more supply-oriented educational systems. Historical and cultural backgrounds have influenced, and are still influencing, the emergence of gendered qualification systems and strategies. In supply-oriented qualification systems, these appear sometimes to be more structured according to gender not only because the demands of the labour market influence their features, but also perceptions of what *should* be male or female exert an additional influence. Educational systems are inherently conservative as they are designed so that the young generation acquires the attitudes and values of their parents. Contrary to what is often claimed, it may be assumed that the challenges of the future are not adequately perceived by teachers and trainers, particularly in the realm of emotions.

The gendered features, and their development, to be analysed in VET are:

1. competences,

2. attitude and values

of the trainees, in relation to the training system. Of course, students already display these features when entering VET, largely due to socialisation as outlined before in the context of ‘social construction of gender’. But it may be presumed that the VET system accentuates these gendered features.

We need to look at the competences (or abilities or capabilities) of people – here one recognises a well-known language problem as regards translation of the different concepts used in various European countries into ‘European English’. Competences can be divided into:

1. subject-related competences (knowledge but also skills);
2. key competences which are more generally applicable.

In ‘key competences’ – again the language problem – we do not refer to the simpler ‘core skills’ such as literacy or numeracy, but rather to a model developed in the ‘Tacitkey’ project. Accordingly key competences are a combination of:

1. methodological competences (problem solving, decision-making, analysing situations);
2. social competences (cooperating, communicating effectively, managing conflicts, negotiating);
3. learning competences (self-learning, using experience in new situations, interpreting situations);
4. practice-oriented competences which are content-related but can be easily adapted to other tasks (‘transferability of competences’).

It is assumed that subject-related competences, including transferable content-related competences, are not influenced very much by gender aspects. This may be the reason why many trainers state that they do not perceive significant gendered features in the actual training process. But it can be presumed, and this is the hypothesis of the project ‘Gender and Qualification’, that the other key competences presented above display gendered features. To put it simply, decision-making is often thought to be more a male feature while managing conflicts is supposed to be more a female ability. Even if these are prejudices, they aggravate gendered features of training and it is here that trainers could play an important part.

A fifth aspect included in the ”starfish model” of key competences in the ‘Tacitkey’ project, is represented by attitudes and values. They are dealt with separately here because they seem to be the most important features influencing gender-specific training.

Attitudes and values are deeply imbedded in the personality of trainees and, equally important, trainers. As they appear to be personal traits which are the most gendered, it can be assumed that VET particularly exaggerates gendered attitudes and values, **although connected with key competences**. Again, trainers have a significant role to play. By treating male and female students differently, even if they are unaware of so doing, they may increase gender differences by applying gender stereotypes. So, unintentionally, they reinforce gendered features of training and influence the trainee’s self-images and motivation. This could mean that many trainees do not do as well in training as they could because they think the chosen occupation does not fit with their self-image. By telling their peers about it they may also further influence the career choice of others.

Similar considerations apply to CVT, where it could be even more important to take gendered features into account because trainees are adults and may be more influenced by experiences gained earlier in the labour market.

6. The role of trainers in transcending gendered features of VET and CVT

As has been argued above, individual options for career choice should be improved in all European countries, at the same time enhancing the human resource potential of society. Although labour market structures are influenced mostly by more general circumstances VET and CVT can play a significant part here. Therefore gender issues in VET and CVT should be taken into account much more than before. The aim should be to design VET and CVT systems and practices to overcome unbalanced conditions with regard to gender. These systems could contribute, for both sexes, to improve employability and also prepare for situations of occupational change, both being favourable for individuals and the economy, and thus improve societal conditions on the whole.

Perhaps the most important single agents are trainers. Their influence on improving qualification strategies for both sexes can be seen in:

1. general behaviour,
2. attitudes and values,
3. concrete training practices.

As far as general behaviour is concerned, there are indications that many trainers are not aware of the gender issue in their training tasks. This is of course a major impediment, so one main objective of improving the training of trainers should be to provide trainers with learning situations to become aware of gender issues in training from the outset.

Because it is not possible to change attitudes and values from 'outside', it is important to give trainers the opportunity to rethink their perceptions of gender features. The considerations presented above may give some hints on what kind of ideas should be included: to design VET and CVT practices which provide both sexes with (key) competences with which they are not so far equipped; as far as possible this should also include trainees' attitudes and values. Of course it will be adequate to use concrete examples, as is also done in the project 'Gender and Qualification'. In addition, gender awareness training should play a part in the day-to-day tasks of every concrete training measure.

With respect to concrete training practices it should be considered that training, VET and CVT, (nearly) always takes place in communities of practice (Lave, Wenger). Social interaction is of high importance and is where trainers can exert considerable influence on training success by taking gender differences into account. They should try to construct training situations, especially on social interaction, which have the potential to diminish these differences.

Especially in CVT it should be mentioned that, according to the outcomes of the 'Tacitkey' project, the two sexes seem to apply partly different strategies in the approach to situations of occupational change which may have an impact on performance in the labour market. Because women frequently interrupt their careers they tend to be more prepared for change. This can have negative consequences for them because they are more used to being 'thrown around' the labour market, which may lead to their being content with nearly any kind of job. Here CVT should contribute to enhancing self-confidence and self-esteem.

On the other hand, they may have already gained competences and attitudes which enable them to 'make the best of it', that is to act proactively and self-reliantly in preparing to change occupation and also in looking for a better job than before. In this case, in communities of practice of CVT, men could learn from women about more open attitudes and improving their options by developing more readiness to change. This may be especially important for male manual workers made redundant and having to look for jobs in new occupational areas, due to a shift of the economy towards the services sector.

Both cases taken together, communities of practice in CVT where trainers are aware of gender issues could lead to higher employability for both sexes. It is not passive adaptation to labour market conditions which is at issue, but rather an independent and self-confident way of dealing with new challenges.

7. Conclusion: Consequences for European standards for training the trainers

The improvement of training of trainers with regard to gender issues relates to

1. their awareness of gender issues,
2. changing their attitudes and values,
3. their contributing to training in communities of practice where gender barriers are going to be overcome.

All these are capabilities which can be only partly translated into competences, meaning outcomes of learning which could be measured in a rather objective and reliable way.

Therefore, a more curriculum-based approach to training trainers has to be chosen where the validity of the opportunities for learning, with respect to the mentioned objectives of learning, is of highest significance. With regard to gender issues, as in other cases of 'soft skills', standards may not be directly related to measurable competences. The sections most adequate may be the ones on assessing the needs of trainees, on determining the objectives of training (from an individual and a societal point of view) and on general criteria for designing training in communities of practice.

Because gender barriers tend to impede both individual career options of women and men, and societal human resource development, it is important to include gender issues in the training of trainers. These should also be taken up when defining standards, in the way outlined above. Because the problems described are important for all European countries an opportunity exists to define common European curricular aims for training trainers. For this, a common European understanding of the conditions for gender segregation in the respective VET/CVT systems should be achieved by way of mutual learning.