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Mobility in the 21st Century Europe: Challenging Factors

Mobility has helped young generations to understand and appreciate diversity on the *old continent* as a unifying rather than a divisive factor. It is an undeniable fact that for centuries, Europe lived at war with itself. Whether wars were in the name of God or the Sovereign or the Fatherland, Europeans fought over territory, ideology, religion, politics and greed. Two twentieth century world wars fought primarily on European soil, built walls of prejudices, intolerance and mistrust among entire populations culminated by the building of the Berlin Wall that divided Europe into two antagonist blocks.

The creation of a European Union (out of the European Coal and Steel Community) and Perestroika or Glasnost were two milestones in European history that brought prosperity, peace and development across many parts of Europe. With a United Nations firmly established and a Council of Europe determined to bridge the divides between people and cultures, the Europe of the 21st Century is the result of dialogue, communication, cooperation and confidence-building measures that secured territorial integrity, sovereignty and mobility of goods and human capital between small and big European Nation States.

The latter value, mobility, is at the heart of a European project ROI-MOB (return on investment through VET mobility) which the partner consortium led by IFOA has conducted under the scientific supervision of the University of Padua through a survey among learners, schools, companies and stakeholders at local, national and European level. When measuring the return on investment of European mobility, the project explored how the movement of human capital across Europe has added value to a better understanding of cooperation and confidence-building at an individual, corporate and group level.

In measuring the benefits and the negative impacts of mobility on participants, it is undoubtedly interesting to note that as a principle of education, mobility is an opportunity to establish a better Europe for future generations. Technology is progressing rapidly and becoming an influential factor in our lives. Aviation has made it easier to move from one country to another – from one continent to another. Travel has revealed new political, cultural, social and economic realities that in the

past were impossible to understand and achieve. Travel has broadened the mind of millions of people across Europe. And through travel we have realised that there is richness in diversity; that people have common values, aspirations and needs; that ideologies, religions, value systems have more in common than we ever expected.

In exploring this new reality, mobility has gradually become an educational tool *par excellence*! With the EU programme ERASMUS and later ERASMUS+, learners, teachers, workers and other stakeholders have the chance to learn from other systems, cultures and modes of living and working. This sharing of knowledge and experiences has revolutionised the way we think, act and speak. With information technology dominating our lives, the world has truly become a small village in which happenings everywhere have negative or positive impacts on everyone. Exchanges have improved personal skills, professional competences, raised social expectations and forged new relationships at various levels of human interaction. In one word, mobility has changed the face of the Europe of the 21st century! On the one hand we have the privilege of interacting in real-time and across cultures and on the other we may grow sceptic about this openness that could threaten security of our jobs, our values and the traditions that have held societies together.

It is for this purpose that if we want a valuable return on investment through mobility then we have to ensure that mobility becomes a principle of education that cuts across all sectors, all disciplines, all learning processes and all qualifications. Technology has made it easy for all to be mentally mobile through smart phones, internet and computers. However, this is not enough. Virtual reality is computer-generated but not real. Education, the way Jean Jacques Rousseau interpreted it sought to underline the fact that nature (the real world) plays a fundamental role in educating the child. Later on Emmanuel Kant sought to focus the attention of policy-makers on the value of reason as a determining factor that distinguishes the man from any other living creature.

Today, the use of reason and the context of nature have a different connotation and a challenging impact on the learning process. While robotics and artificial intelligence are centre-stage in Industry 4.0, human intelligence and natural reason are increasingly becoming the new paradigm to guarantee that humans remain human and machines remain mechanical objects at the service of human beings.

In this context, vocational education and training has a platform which few other sectors in education can offer. Vocational and professional education and training (VPET or TVET) has at its foundation, work-based learning. Most of the qualifications in VPET are industry-driven but backed by a structured process to learn basic skills, attitudes and behaviours that most employers seek in their employees. In this sense, it is a holistic approach to learning. It aspires to create wise-hands; persons who can synergise their mental and physical faculties in harmony with each other. In doing so, experiencing different cultures and working and learning experiences adds enormous value to a person's formation. It is therefore imperative that mobility should permeate all learning processes and that it

becomes a compulsory requisite for acquiring a qualification. People who have had experiences in other cultures and systems are more open-minded, tolerant and respect diversity and accommodate change. These are the new values in the labour market of today and more importantly those of tomorrow.

In work environments in which machines will probably supersede human capital, openness to change, to learning new knowledge, skills and competences will increasingly become the only way to secure a job, experience upward career moves and a quality of life during and after the working years. Mobility is therefore the key for survival in a world dominated by technology, change, innovation and a constant cry for sustainability. Teachers, learners, employers, policy-makers, researchers and decision-makers are duty bound to embrace mobility as a value-added tool for competitiveness, productivity and service provision across all sectors of society.

ROI-MOB is therefore an eye-opener for policy makers. It reveals that investing in mobility is advancing human capital to a higher level of social and economic participation and securing human values in the use of technology and a more serene co-existence with artificial intelligence. Nothing is more valuable, creative, unpredictable and innovate than human interaction. Mobility provides a wider spectrum of diversity when engaged in such activities. It is this engagement that will make living in the next decades more humane. The biggest challenge to human beings will be artificial intelligence that is phenomenally much more mobile than human being themselves. Balancing this phenomenon with an education enriched by mobility and hands-on experiences among human being is a challenge which needs to be addressed sooner rather than later.

It is therefore of great comfort to witness that an old education institution such as the prestigious medieval University of Padua (1222), my own alma mater, is in the forefront in exploring how the phenomenon of mobility will impact Europe as a political entity and Europeans as makers of their own future. The study which has had the contribution of IFOA, EfVET and other organisations is a wake-up call for action and implementation of measures to give learners and workers the chance to experience learning and working in real diverse cultural environments and systems.

The European winds of change of the post-war period and the late 1980s continue to bring new hopes for an enhanced *common European home.*

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