

## New skills for the printing industry appeal for new approaches in education

Luk Bouters

Recently the EU authorised, often in close collaboration with Intergraf<sup>1</sup>, a number of studies to diagnose the European printing industry, especially its competitiveness and prospects to respond to its recent structural and technological challenges.<sup>2</sup>

In this article the author highlights the main findings of two recent reports commissioned by the European Commission. The first one, *Investing in the Future of Jobs and Skills (2009)*, was initiated to ensure a better match between the supply of skills and the demand of the labour market for qualified manpower. It provides a methodology to improve the capacity of the EU Member States to assess and anticipate future skills need of employers and employees in the print media industry. The second report, *New Skills for New Jobs: Action Now (2010)* presents and expands on a set of recommendations of an expert group to build stronger bridges between the world of education and training and the world of industry. It outlines and recommends a set of actions to ensure that workers acquire the skills required. Particular attention in the article is paid to the major findings and their implications for higher education specialised in media production and management. The article will conclude with some personal reflections on some of the issues tackled.

### Investing in the Future of Jobs and Skills Context

The first report<sup>3</sup> is part of a series of sixteen sector studies, all based on a methodological framework initially developed by Maria Joao Rodrigues (2007)<sup>4</sup> and commissioned under the European Community Programme for Employment and Social Responsibility – PROGRESS (2007-2013). The study analyses sectoral trends and developments combining desk research and expert information to present a number of options and recommendations to tackle future skills and knowledge needs in the publishing and printing sector. By adopting a common uniform methodology for all sixteen sectors, the total study allows policy makers to adopt human resources management strategies and to devise mechanisms for better and more effective interaction between innova-

tion, skills development and job creation. Obviously, this study – as so many others before and after – should be placed against the background of the EU's attempts to sharpen up the competitiveness of the European industry (the Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs- 2008).

### Content

The actual report features three major parts followed by a series of recommendations. Part I provides a thoughtful and concise overview of the sector with its current developments and trends. This serves as a basis for Part II, where this statistical data are probed and drawn on to construct four possible future scenarios for the printing and publishing sector and their implications for the desired competences in the various job functions. In the third part, the report

describes the main strategic options to meet the skills and knowledge needs identified. The report concludes with a set of recommendations for policy makers, sector representatives and education and training institutes. These conclusions and advices were discussed during a final workshop with representation from the social partners, the industry and other experts.

### Recommendations

Most of the recommendations are addressed principally to vocational education and training programmes and aim at changes at the national rather than the international level. Clearly, the foremost important recommendation for all education and training institutions is to keep up with the changes in skills needs. This does not limit itself to the technological developments, but f.i. also refers to the management of an ageing and shrinking workforce, the changes in consumption patterns and customer demands, the emergence of new business models, etc. The convergence of technologies and markets make inter- and multidisciplinary competences a key asset to adapt promptly to these changes. Soft skills (languages, (self-) management skills, problem solving skills, an inclination to life long learning and innovation, entrepreneurship, etc.) will increasingly gain importance for all job functions but especially so for high skilled professions, although different technical skills remain indispensable. Emerging competences of higher skilled jobs will attach greater importance to how to learn, how to communicate, how interact with colleagues, customers, etc., and how to adapt to the changing environments in addition to continuous performance in high quality education.

Due to the prevalence of SME's in the sector with their limited resources for upskilling and retraining of their staff, training facilities will have to be sought externally. Some recommendations therefore call for more flexible and less formal training forms, f.i. by promoting e-learning and modularisation, and support the establishment of regional training networks in order to

make the latest equipment available to a larger group of training providers. A better flow of information between the industry and the training institutions on new skills and knowledge needs, should bridge the existing and future gaps and should steer career and training guidance for employees.

### Some remarks

Most (if not all) of these recommendations singled out in 2007 elicit a 'déjà vu'-effect. The major benefit of this list of recommendations, therefore, lies in the very fact that they are grouped and, based on recent data and experience, underscore again the same points of attention and possible avenues. The production context for print media companies has since the time of the study not improved and the problems identified remain the same illustrating herewith the inability of the sector to pursue collective action plans. The latter is mainly due to the fact that the sector consist mainly of relatively small companies. In the end, the Executive Summary<sup>5</sup> petitions for collaboration and joint actions by all stakeholders in order to address the future skills and knowledge needs and to agree on and implement a package of feasible solutions. With little or no supplementary resources at the national levels to finance such a venture, it remains doubtful whether this colloquial language will be sufficient to meet this noble appeal at all levels intended. This is especially so when recommendations such as modularisation, e-learning packages or individual career guidance require considerable additional (human) resources that are presently not there.

### New Skills for New Jobs: Action Now Context

'New skills for New Jobs'<sup>6</sup> is a EU policy initiative to achieve a better match between labour market needs and available skills. In 2009 a group of experts was asked to provide independent advice on how to proceed and accomplish the EU's future 2020 strategy.

<sup>1</sup> Intergraf represents 23 national printing federations in 20 countries in Europe. Intergraf's main task is to promote and protect the interests of the printing and related industries, working with the European Institutions, and to enhance the sector's competitiveness through lobbying, informing and networking. For more information see <http://www.intergraf.eu/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Home>

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Competitiveness of the European Graphic Industry, Intergraf- European Commission, 2007, 160p. The future of the European print industry – In our own hands. What the industry says, EU, 2010, 90 p. Toolkit for the future of the European print industry – in our own hands. Restructuring your toolkit to make it happen, EU, 2010, 64 p.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/pubdocs/2009/86/en/1/EF0986EN.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Rodrigues, M.J. (2007) "Innovation, Skills and Jobs. Pilot project to Develop a European Foresight Methodology to Identify Emergent Jobs and Their Skills Needs".

<sup>5</sup> Investing in the Future of Jobs and Skills. Scenarios, implications and options in anticipation of future skills and knowledge needs. Executive Summary Printing and Publishing, May 2009, p.13

<sup>6</sup> New Skills for New Jobs: Action Now. A report by the Expert Group on New Skills for New Jobs prepared for the European Commission, 2010, p.33

## Content

The second report principally focuses on the desired key actions to ensure that a qualified work force is in place to meet the requirements of tomorrow's labour market and to cope with the challenges of global competition. This will necessitate a better anticipation of skills needs in order to better align skills demand and supply. Better formal and informal education is believed to be the right answer. For this purpose four major, complementary streams of recommendations were developed. The authors make it clear from the outset: future prosperity will depend greatly on how successful Europe will be in broadening and raising skills levels of its future workforce. The central role of education and training institutes and the prerequisite of increased investment in education to achieve this ambition is crystal-clear.

## Recommendations

In the report a number of the key actions are identified:

1. Provide the right incentives to upgrade and better use skills for individuals and employers
2. Bring the worlds of education, training and work closer together.
3. Develop the right mix of skills.
4. Better anticipate future skills needs.

These recommendations contain valuable and interesting policy views and advices. Take the first group of recommendations where the report pleads in favour of better defining curricular standards, including the learning outcomes<sup>7</sup>, and the various mechanisms of quality assessment and evaluation deployed in an educational context.

The second recommendation calls for a more substantial and intensive relationship between skills providers and employers in order to ensure that people get the right and most needed qualifications and understand from the very start what is expected from them at the end of the learning route. To this end, a European qualifications framework, including outcome-based

qualifications, should be developed. These learning outcomes should be based on labour market needs analyses and its introduction should be supported by appropriate pedagogy and assessment methods. This process requires the commitment of all, foremost the political leaders, and needs to be carried out by all stakeholders including educational institutes, employer's organisations and trade unions. These key recommendations end with a call to open up the learning groups to include a larger audience, e.g. vulnerable groups and adults with or without prior work experience.

The third recommendations stresses the need for soft and more generic competences in addition to the technical skills inherent to a specific function. Apart from e-skills and digital fluency, higher education should embed key enabling competences such as creativity, innovation, entrepreneurship and citizenship. To monitor this process, education providers require quantitative targets. This endeavour asks for an appropriate learning environment involving consistency between the learning outcome, the assessment, the methodology applied and the teaching corps deployed. Obviously, this novel paradigm of practice-oriented curricula might entail a review of the present teachers' education curricula to ensure education professionals come with the appropriate skills and practical experience.

The last cluster of recommendations gives attention to the development of early warning and matching systems to better anticipate future skills needs. Aggregating national and supra-national intelligence through various surveys, will be key to develop measuring tools to pinpoint and foresee skill gaps, shortages, surpluses, over- and under-education, etc. Through the development of comprehensive tracking systems, the learners' success on the labour market can be monitored and the delivery capacity of educational institutions assessed.

## Some final reflections

In closing, this report contains a great number of 'mind squeezers' and challenges (although some might interpret them as provocative thoughts).



**Luk Bouters**

Department of Graphical and digital media, Artevelde University College Ghent, Industrieweg 232, 9040 Ghent, Belgium

luk.bouters@artelveldehs.be

Clearly, both reports and many others, are offshoots of government policy and industrial pressure to put their interest before that of academic freedom, aiming at bringing it in line with more economic concerns and preoccupations (see the Lisbon goals of our knowledge society). Additionally, calls for increased exchangeability will rouse fear for boring uniformity and un-sound sameness. Similarly, harmonisation to encourage exchange of students or to allow a better recognition of competence portfolio's across the border, might inflame feelings of cultural impoverishment or reduction of academic autonomy. Still, some recommendations are worthwhile considering and should encourage all stakeholders to play an active role in their implementation, f.i. defining the learning outcomes of an(y) education process in keeping with the European Qualification Framework (EQF) holds advantages for all. Hence, all stakeholders would do better to assist in their formulation and take a proactive approach to ensure their preoccupations and expectations receive due attention. Doubtlessly, clearly defined learning outcomes enable government and education providers to ascertain whether there is congruency or discrepancy between the courses readily available and the required skills. Additionally, when the learning output is preliminarily defined, it allows educational institutions to conceive and implement more consistent and focused learning routes. At the same time, the enrolling student knows from the start what he can expect to master at the end and why the programme is designed as it is. Based on these learning outcomes, the employer knows exactly what he can expect from a graduate at EFQ 6 or EFQ 7-level. Anyhow, if education is committed to solving issues inherent to change (and talking about the print media sector is tantamount to talking about change), it will have to take up its societal responsibility and agree on a framework enabling young and old(er) people to play their expected role in future society. Many will agree on the fact that building skills is the essence of education and jointly defining the learning outcomes are a consequence of this. The crucial question therefore will be to determine how critical managerial, interpersonal, IT- and customer management, technical and research skills should be and what should outweigh the other at what time

during the educational route. For this, the world of education and the world of work should realise there is only one globe and one globalising society in which they play complementary roles. Not hard selection or exclusion will be the prime message, but upskilling and retraining in addition to more formal competence-building. From the above, it should be clear that all stakeholders should assemble to discuss the findings of the report. Better though would be if student representation and the educational institutions are not only actively involved in the surveys but also solicited to participate in any follow-up.

In conclusion, the reports reviewed definitely have some merit as they provide analyses and recommendations on quantitative and qualitative trends in employment and skills in the printing and publishing sector. Some key questions, however, remain open and await an answer:

- What about other sectors involved in media production and management? Are they similarly affected by the present context and economic pressure?
- Will this kind of sectoral research be a one shot affair or will it be repeated on a regular basis? After all we are dealing here with trends in skills and these will evolve in keeping with technology, customer demand and the market.
- Will the educational institutions be called upon to participate in the debate of skills anticipation and assist in the formulation of recommendations for policy makers? If so, how should this be done?
- Will sufficient financial resources be allocated to implement the recommendations and policies adopted?

There is an instant need for a platform, a forum allowing more structural exchange and discussions between the social partners and the educational institutions. These kind of reports are very instrumental and a useful tool to buttress these discussions but they will need a regular update in order to remain up-to-the-minute in this fast changing society of ours. Surely, the jury is still out on its findings...

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<sup>7</sup> Learning outcomes are defined in the report as 'what an individual knows, is able to do and/or understands after having completed a learning process'. (o.c. p.23)