

CURRENT DEMANDS AND FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES: "LEARNING AND WORKING"

The economic base of most European countries is shifting: changing from a reliance on industry and traditional manufacturing to more knowledge-intensive and technology-orientated means of production. The effects of this change are profound and include new demands, opportunities and challenges for employers and employees alike. For employers there is the need for constant adaptation and the ability to remain flexible and competitive; for employees, there is the requirement to possess skills of relevance in the new economy – to constantly learn and adapt.

These wider changes present a wide range of opportunities for firms and employees able to meet the challenges posed; they also present possible threats – especially to those involved in the declining sectors of the economy and the regions that host them. For the individual it is important to be equipped with a basic qualification and a positive attitude towards lifelong learning; yet in the Netherlands 26% of the labour force does not have a basic qualification and further learning opportunities are dominated by the already highly skilled. The result is that – especially in areas and sectors affected by restructuring - people are left out from the labour market and face poverty and social exclusion.

These issues have been well understood for a long time in European economies and EQUAL has been at the forefront in terms of exploring and developing possible solutions. However, currently these issues have been given a new twist by favourable economic conditions. In contrast to the previous years, the Netherlands has currently a strong economy, high rates of employment and a 'tight' labour market. Employers therefore need employable people immediately - there is far less time for training and long trajectories to follow before actually getting a person 'on the job'. This 'work-first' approach currently dominates and therefore less focus is put on training and learning and consequently, on obtaining qualifications. Perhaps, ironically, the current buoyant state of the economy means that longer-term challenges may be exacerbated, and that people most in need of improving their skills base will be overlooked.

However, the Dutch policy community are very aware of this potential problem and for several years now 'Dual Trajectories' has been the slogan in the Dutch labour market and education policy. It means that searching for work or employment must be combined with learning or training that leads to a qualification relevant to the labour market. In 2005 a special Directorate was set up from the Ministries of Education, Culture and Science and of Social Affairs and Employment to stimulate regional networks and dual trajectories. Again, EQUAL is very much a part of this agenda and the Dutch National Thematic Network (NTN) – '*Learning and Working*' - is very active in terms of developing dual trajectories for the most disadvantaged groups in the labour market. Against the context of the economic conditions described above, and the reduced focus on learning and training, this is not an easy task!

'Learning and Working' is a continuation of the network established during the first round of the EQUAL programme - building upon its successes, but operating in very different labour market conditions. Dirk Duijzer, chair of the NTN says: "*We have all this experience in working with the projects from the first round [of EQUAL] to build upon, so we can focus on specific problems which are a little deeper and which can be aggravated by the changing labour market conditions*".

The aim of '*Learning and Working*' is to ensure that, even though the current emphasis is on hiring people as quickly as possible, the most disadvantaged people are not missing out on opportunities for learning while they are either employed or unemployed. Also, as employers are looking for some less traditional skills, it became clear to the Network that the concept of developing social capital – which is central to many EQUAL projects - might be of interest to national Government.

THINK LOCAL... ACT GLOBAL?

The *'Learning and Working'* Network has ten members, representing a wide variety of stakeholders, ranging from those who are involved in day-to-day practice to representatives at policy level from the ministries of Social Affairs and Education, Culture and Science. In contrast to the Network from the first round of EQUAL, this Network was involved at the start of the round two projects, and even participated in their selection. To facilitate the exchange of good practices, *'Learning and Working'* organise twice yearly meetings, which all projects and policy makers are invited to attend.

Besides these exchange meetings, the Network organises events known as 'diner pensant'^[1]. These events have proved to be an excellent way to spark thinking on specific issues and to develop joint strategies for disseminating innovative practices.

It is clearly an ambition of the Network to make broad changes and to have influence on national policy. However, there is also an emphasis on very local practice – to promote the transfer of good practices from one neighbourhood to another. Again, this aim has to be seen within the context of the changed political environment in the Netherlands in which local authorities are given more freedom than before. This desire to achieve local solutions has been emphasised to all the projects covered by the *'Learning and Working'*, which is why projects typically work so closely together with local schools, the voluntary sector and local authorities working in specific neighbourhoods.

Another reason for the local focus of the Network is that often local authorities do not have the space or time to learn from other parts of the country experiencing the same difficulties. This is an area where the *'Learning and Working'* Network certainly adds value to its projects - as one member of the Network, Silvio van Gool, remarked during a visit to a project in Emmen: "*In Southern Limburg the same social problems surrounding restructuring can be seen as in Emmen, but they have been able to revive the labour market and search for partnerships with regions across the border. Is this something that Emmen could do as well?*"



NTN members visiting the users of MyPortfolioOnLine

The coordinators of one of the projects in the Network – *'My Portfolio Online'* – also indicated that the Network has been helpful to them in terms of getting some of the messages from their project across, especially to other local authorities and organisations tackling similar problems. In fact, seeking more innovative ways and new contexts for applying previously developed solutions has become a key aspect of the Network's activities.

In focusing on local practice and the wider policy lessons that can be drawn from it, the *'Learning and Working'* Network is already starting to produce some impressive results. Indeed, because of their involvement in the wider ministry action plan on "Learning and Working" they have gained immediate access to representatives in the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the Ministry of Social Affairs... watch this space!

THE 'BUDDY' SYSTEM

Like other similar networks, *'Learning and Working'* is grappling with the challenge of organising its members and projects most effectively. In order to address this challenge, members have grouped their 32 projects into five 'clusters' - but this time not according to a specific theme. The Network wanted to go beyond the traditional subject divisions in order to push projects to look beyond the boundaries of their own work and develop a broader vision of learning and working. There are several good reasons for this. Firstly, they expect projects with similar themes to get in to contact with one another 'naturally', whereas those with different focuses might need a little push to get to know each other! Secondly, experience suggests that making the specific issue or target group the centre of attention makes a focus on solutions less achievable as they often fail to take account of the wider context. And that's exactly what the *'Learning and Working'* tries to achieve: solutions that fit several target groups as well as several neighbourhoods at the same time.

Each cluster of projects within the Network is accompanied by two Network members known as their 'buddies'. During their development each project within a cluster will be visited once or twice by their respective buddies. During these visits the project's activities can be discussed and - more importantly - demonstrated. The Network therefore functions as a valuable source of information for each project and at the same time it increases the project's involvement with policy makers. This is also the ideal way to give projects the opportunity to indicate what they consider the major policy 'bottlenecks' to be.

The buddy system benefits the Network and the projects, but it also benefits the people that EQUAL is working to support. During a buddy visit to the *My Portfolio Online* project, one of the beneficiaries of the project explained: *"I'm so excited that somebody from the ministry is here to see the websites that we're building. I'm happy that a person like me, who is unemployed, can show her that we are able to do something and that we are capable of contributing to our neighbourhood."*

This 'live' demonstration works indeed in both ways. Dirk Duijzer, chair of the Network, said during the visit: *"It is good to see for us what is happening on the ground, what these people are actually getting out from the projects, how it changes their lives and makes them want to learn more. It also pushes us, Network members, to make sure such projects are continued beyond EQUAL, because the last thing we want is for these people to yet again face disappointment. And it is really up to us to translate these good practices into a political language"*. The buddy system clearly supports Dirk's ambition and helps to bring the reality of often hidden problems to the surface.

The '*Learning and Working*' Network faces a difficult issue; yet - through a combination of good local practice, high ambitions and practical methods such as the buddy system – it is well placed to make progress in tackling the difficult balance between the worlds of work and learning.

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[1] The '*diner pensant*' were organised in the first NTN and are meetings involving a wide variety of stakeholders. The aim is to develop strategies for mainstreaming the good practices developed by the projects. During these meetings practical problems and focus points are pushed forward by having beneficiaries illustrating the issues they are coping with.