



## Challenges in Implementing Transferable Skills in Malta

### **ABSTRACT**

Transferable skills are internationally acknowledged as an important tool to reduce the friction generated through skills mismatch between education and the labour market. While over the years, the notion of transferable skills has gained ground both within and outside the formal educational system in Malta, the country lacks a comprehensive policy that unites and guides the promotion of such skills. This paper examines some challenges in implementing transferable skills in Malta.

### **INTRODUCTION**

There is international consensus around the need to promote transferable skills (International Labour Organization, 2007; European Commission, 2011). Several educational and employment policies in Malta include references to transferable or similar types of skills (e.g. Ministry for Education and Employment, 2014, 2015; The Working Group on the Future of Post-Secondary Education, 2017). Such inclusion in policies since the 1990s has facilitated the incorporation of elements of transferable skills into educational curricula in Malta. In recent years, in line with trends in other developed countries (Cornford, 2005), transferable (or similar) skills gradually increased in importance within Malta's economy through the growing awareness of their utility by both employers and employees. However, no policy focusing specifically or comprehensively on transferable skills exists in Malta. This means that there is no holistic vision in the effort to promote transferable skills, resulting in conflicting ideas, assumptions, definitions, goals, agendas and efforts. This paper discusses

some major challenges impeding the proliferation and uptake of transferable skills grouped under three categories, namely: ongoing research; transferable skills within formal education, and; transferable skills outside the educational system.

### **ONGOING RESEARCH**

There is a need for reliable and up-to-date information about skills demand and supply in Malta. Very few national skills audit studies have been carried out (Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry, MCCEI, 2014). The most comprehensive recent study is the “National Employee Skills Survey” (Jobsplus & NCHFE, 2017) which shed light on transferable skills required by employers. While the list of skills mentioned is generally similar to international ones, the level of importance of specific skills might be different due to the particular characteristics of the country and its economy. In line with international findings (Hayward & Fernandez, 2004), a number of factors such as the size of the organisation may affect the type of the most required generic skills. For example, unlike the overall trend in Malta, medium-sized companies consider written communication and problem-solving as the most important transferable skills (Jobsplus & NCHFE, 2017).

The little existing research on transferable skills in Malta tends to focus on the demand side, that is, on the needs of employers, while leaving out the supply side. However, knowing which transferable skills are important for employers (sometimes described as the skills that make vacancies more difficult to fill, or the employees' skills that are in most need of improvement), does not shed light on the availability of specific transferable skills within the population. Identifying the specific transferable skills required by particular groups of people would lead to better targeted training interventions.

On the other hand, understanding which groups of people are more likely to hold specific transferable skills could lead to more effective recruitment strategies. For example, the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (2012) revealed that inactive women tend to possess transferable characteristics such as responsibility, reliability, and general communication skills, but tend to have moderate levels of English proficiency, while lacking numeracy and creativity skills. Inactive women tend to be proficient in teamwork, time management, customer handling, problem solving and general ICT skills, but are often weak in project management and entrepreneurial skills among others. The scarcity of research about skills is made worse by government decisions to keep some potentially useful reports under lock and key. A case

in point is the Human Resources Strategy for Gozo based on an analysis of human resources supply and demand that was carried out in 2012.

The need is felt to monitor transferable skills requirements and supply. However, due to the lack of economies of scale and limited financial resources among others, organising a permanent monitoring system of skills is difficult and might not be viable. For instance, a recent attempt to set up a Skills Bank to monitor the skills possessed by young persons was shelved due to its impracticality (Ministry for Finance, 2016).

### **TRANSFERABLE SKILLS WITHIN FORMAL EDUCATION**

Transferable skills need to be taught consistently and ideally from an early age in order to be assimilated by individuals. It has been argued that “frameworks of twenty-first century skills have attained a central role in school development and curriculum changes all over the world” (Ahonen & Kinnunen, 2015, p. 395). They have been promoted under different names by stakeholders such as academics, employers and policy makers in various countries at least since the 1970s (e.g. Howieson et al. 2012). The growing use of resource-based learning within formal education requires (and at the same time has the potential of cultivating) transferable skills critical for living and working in the digital era, such as critical thinking, problem solving, and self-direction (Hill & Hannafin, 2001).

However, while generic skills appear to have been widely recognised in curricula, the main emphasis in standards and assessment is still on the traditional “hard” skills and “hard” factual knowledge<sup>2</sup> (Ahonen & Kinnunen, 2015). In line with this observation, Voogt and Pareja Roblin (2010) point out that there is “a large emphasis on the need for and the definition of 21st century skills, whereas only a few frameworks explicitly deal with more practical issues related to...[their] implementation and assessment” (p.i). According to these authors, the positioning of transferable skills within existing curricula might be one of the most complex and controversial issues relating to their implementation.

The situation in the Maltese compulsory educational system might be more challenging than the international trends mentioned above. The Working Group (2017) asserted that there is little recognition of such skills in the curriculum. The re-writing of the Personal and Social Development (PSD) subject to include career education (now called Personal, Social and

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2 Hard skills are job-specific or technical skills. Hard knowledge is factual, uncontested knowledge.

Career Development) is a step in the right direction. The change in name was accompanied by a renewed emphasis on transferable skills. However, Malta has a rather traditional educational system that does not thoroughly promote such skills. Besides, the overall rate of basic skills attainment<sup>3</sup> (in subjects such as Maltese, English and science) among young students in Malta is still low (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2016). Indeed, 15-year olds continue to perform below the EU average in science and in reading (European Commission, 2017). The government appears to acknowledge this challenge and as part of the ongoing educational policy improvements, the 'My Journey reform' proposes that all students are exposed to and learn key competences and behavioural skills (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2016).

"Adult learning is increasingly associated with entrepreneurship, human skills development and the processes that enhance people's skills and make them more employable, including continuing professional development (CPD) and the acquisition of soft and communications skills" (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2015, p.9). It has been argued that "formation at post-secondary level should be holistic, and not exclusively academically- and exam-oriented" (The Working Group, 2017, p. 10). However, beyond these positive policy signals, the situation in practice is unclear. The level of acquisition of transferable skills in post-secondary and tertiary educational institutions in Malta is unknown and is likely to vary considerably not only from one institution to another, but also from one course to another within the same institution. The friction caused by the mismatch between the skills learnt within the formal educational system and the job requirements can never be totally eliminated. However, in cases of a 'formal' mismatch, graduates could still be able to adequately fill many roles with the help of effective transferable skills and their ability to learn new knowledge and skills through CPD. Indeed, employers in Malta sometimes give more importance to the level of qualification rather than the subject studied, acting upon the assumption that students who reach certain academic requirements are of better quality (Jobsplus, 2015). While this practice is based on the implicit assumption that such graduates have relevant transferable skills, the extent to which this practice is effective and sustainable is unclear.

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3 Basic skills are the essential skills required to function properly in society.

## **TRANSFERABLE SKILLS OUTSIDE THE FORMAL EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM**

While it is essential to stimulate the educational system to focus more on transferable skills, this approach cannot reach all citizens as most adults are outside the formal educational system. Indeed, Malta has one of the highest early school leaving rates, a relatively low tertiary educational attainment rate, and insufficient participation of low-skilled adults in lifelong learning when compared to other EU countries (Eurostat, 2019; Ministry for Education and Employment, 2016). Besides, transferable skills learned during formal education require to be refreshed and upgraded over time. It is also relevant to point out that in line with the situation abroad (Hayward & Fernandez, 2004), employers in Malta tend to provide training in job specific rather than transferable skills, despite acknowledging that employees require more transferable skills (Jobsplus & NCHFE, 2017). Different reasons might contribute to this situation, such as the fear that transferable skills may facilitate employees in quitting their job. Indeed, according to the Malta Employers Association (MEA), the country currently has an 'employees' market' in which the increasing facility of employees to switch jobs is causing employers to hesitate to train their employees, out of fear of losing them to other employers (Costa, 2019). One should also point out that training is not distributed evenly across employees. For example, Eurostat (2019) data indicates that educational level, gender and size of organisation are all related to the amount of training one receives at work.

On the other hand, it is assumed that many adults develop or at least improve some transferable skills throughout their work and life experiences. However, such skills are not formally recognized. It has been noted that "the skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours that people acquire in day-to-day experiences outside formal education are valued by employers, and yet are not necessarily recognised as 'valuable' since they often lack accreditation in the form of acquired, legally-regulated certificates" (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2015, p.9). This situation inevitably increases the level of friction between the demand and supply of transferable skills.

Malta is experiencing social tensions deriving from the weakening of traditional values, a growing culture of self-indulgence, increasing population density, and multiculturalism derived from the rising number of foreign workers. These social challenges find their way into workplaces and have been noted by employers who highlighted the growing employees' unrealistic work expectations, lack of discipline and diligence, culture of entitlement

and opportunism, and deteriorating work ethic (e.g. MCCEI, 2014; MEA, 2015). Employers have also voiced their concern that despite the increasing need for English language proficiency, “the excellent command of written and verbal English as well as the ability of commanding a foreign language which has traditionally provided Malta with an added edge over competing countries is being forfeited” (MCCEI, 2014). Thus, despite the growing number of workers with post-secondary and tertiary qualifications, employers feel that workers’ basic skills are declining. One should also emphasise that transferable skills, including digital literacy, are increasingly being required not only to perform work well, but also to have access to the labour market, for example by searching online for vacancies and filling in application forms (Targeted News Service, 2013).

## CONCLUSION

This brief paper sheds light on a number of challenging aspects relating to the effective implementation of transferable skills in Malta. Such challenges need to be taken into consideration in the eventual design of a transferable skills policy that would unify and direct efforts meant to promote transferable skills in the country.

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