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Transferable Skills in Malta: Challenges and Policy Recommendations

Manwel Debono
Centre for Labour Studies, University of Malta, Malta
manwel.debono@um.edu.mt

Abstract: Transferable skills are internationally acknowledged as an important tool to reduce the friction generated through skills mismatch between education and the labour market. This paper examines some challenging aspects of transferable skills that may reduce their effectiveness, such as their unclear definition and delineation, difficulties in translating policy into practice, and the challenge of convincing employers to invest in such skills. While over the years, elements of transferable skills were added to the Maltese educational curriculum, the country requires a comprehensive policy that tackles the barriers hindering the dissemination of transferable skills. This paper proposes the adoption of a comprehensive skills policy that includes a focus on demand and supply skills audit research, the revision and development of curriculum and teaching methods, the training of stakeholders, and quality assurance, assessment and recognition of transferable skills.

Keywords: Transferable skills; policy; challenges; education; Malta.

Introduction

There is international consensus around the need to promote transferable skills (International Labour Organization, 2007; European Commission, 2011). It is commonly held that transferable skills are demanded by employers and that their demand outstrips their supply (Hayward & Fernandez, 2004). Employers in Malta view transferable skills with ever-growing importance, sometimes more so than qualifications. The need for such skills is also felt by individuals who are increasingly likely to change their jobs several times during their lifespan. Besides, it is acknowledged that transferable skills may

facilitate employability not only across jobs and sectors, but also across countries (Ministry for Education & Employment, 2015).

The utility of transferable skills is related to the impossibility of perfectly aligning educational and training systems with the evolving labour market needs. Disruptive technologies, including digitisation, automation, and artificial intelligence, are among the strongest transformers of the labour market, affecting not only how work is done and who does it (Paulise, 2019), but also what work is done and when. Automation in particular is expected to fundamentally alter labour markets over the next decade (e.g. Rogers, 2018). An analysis of ten countries that account for about 60% of global GDP reveals that about one fifth of all workers could lose their job to automation by 2030 (McKinsey Global Institute, 2019). While technological advances are expected to eliminate some jobs, new jobs will also be created, especially in digital-intensive sectors (OECD, 2019). Besides, 60% of occupations already have at least 30% of constituent work activities that could be automated (McKinsey Global Institute, 2017). Digitisation is expected to impact more than 90% of organisations surveyed in 43 countries in the medium term (ManpowerGroup, 2016). Indeed, it is predicted that while most jobs will survive automation, the skills required to do them will change as technology becomes more sophisticated (Rogers, 2018). Many jobs are already experiencing 'skills instability' (Tripathi, 2019), where core skills required for a job are changing at a fast pace - "The life cycle of skills is shorter than ever and change is happening at an unprecedented scale" (ManpowerGroup, 2016, p.3). In view of these trends, transferable skills may reduce the friction developed through current skills mismatch and counteract our inability to predict future skills needs (Cornford, 2005).

While Malta does not have a comprehensive policy that tackles and promotes transferable skills, the international emphasis on transferable skills is increasingly being reflected in Malta's policy directions (e.g. Ministry for Education and Employment, 2015, 2016).

This paper investigates the complexity of transferable skills, highlighting their utility but also discussing some major challenges that they pose internationally and in the national context. On the basis of such discussion, this paper proposes a number of salient elements that should be included within a transferable skills policy for Malta.

The challenging nature of transferable skills

A sound discussion of transferable skills should be based on a clear and common understanding of the term. First, let us briefly focus on the concept of skills. Much has been written about the importance of such concept, equating it to the new 'global currency' in today's labour market, an elixir that is supposed to increase industries' competitiveness and result in positive work outcomes for individuals (e.g. Schleicher, 2012; Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2009). These positive results may well be true sometimes, but "skills do not automatically translate into higher incomes and high productivity" (Schleicher, 2012, p.43). Besides, if one ventures beyond a simplistic understanding of skills, it becomes apparent that as any widely used notion, "skill is an ambiguous concept in which its various meanings are often confused or inadequately defined" (Jary & Jary, 2000, p.554). However, a precise working definition of skill is important, as among others it affects the parameters that should be considered when discussing the notion and the results of any empirical research on skills. Thus, for the purpose of this paper, 'skill' is defined as the capacity acquired through training to carry out a task effectively. This definition of skill is narrower than 'competency' which may be defined as comprising skill, knowledge and attitudes (European Commission, 2018d). It also excludes other characteristics that are sometimes conflated with or mentioned in the context of skills, such as personality, attitudes (including motivation) and values (e.g. Watson, 2003).

This paper focuses on a particular category of skills, namely transferable skills. As the name implies, unlike vocational or technical skills, these skills are not tied to a specific task, occupation or employment sector. Transferable skills are meant to remain useful throughout the various career trajectories that one may embark upon. Other terms such as generic, soft, core, key, employability, essential (Cornford, 2005; Howieson, McKechnie, & Semple, 2012), cross-sectoral, transversal, or 21st century skills are at times used to label similar or overlapping groups of skills. Despite their resemblance, such terms are not identical. For example, transversal skills, a term which is sometimes used by the Maltese government, is more far-reaching than cross-sectoral skills that are relevant to specific occupations across several economic sectors, or sector-specific skills (or transferable technical skills) that are relevant to more than one occupation within a specific sector (European Commission, 2018e). Besides, certain terms might have particular connotations that affect the perceived status of the skills. For example, the term 'soft' skills tends to sound less crucial and more vague than 'hard' (or

more tangible) skills. The term employability skills has also been criticised from a social justice point of view, for putting too much responsibility of potential unemployment or other negative outcomes on the individual, while ignoring the roles of employers, governments and other influencing elements within the social structure (Howieson et al., 2012).

While there is no international consensus on the meaning or delineation of transferable skills, for the purpose of this paper, transferable skills are defined as:

> skills learned in one context… that are useful in another... They are skills that all types of study, work and career have in common and they can serve as a bridge from study to work and from one career to another. (European Science Foundation, ESF, 2009, p.4).

As the definition implies, these skills are not specific to any particular job or academic discipline and may be used in different situations or work settings (in line with United Nations, Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, International Bureau of Education, 2013).

What to include or exclude from the list of transferable skills is perhaps more problematic than the definition. There exist different frameworks that define and categorise skills that may be used profitably in diverse jobs and work settings. For example, the European Commission has identified the following skills required to deal with the changing labour market, namely: basic skills (including literacy and numeracy), transversal skills, entrepreneurial skills, and digital skills (European Commission, 2018b). A review of literature by Voogt and Pareja Roblin (2010) concludes that the different frameworks appear to converge on a common set of 21st century skills consisting of collaboration, communication, ICT/digital literacy, and social/cultural competencies, while the majority of frameworks also mention creativity, critical thinking and problem solving. On the other hand, the OECD (2012) groups the 17 transferable skills listed by ESF (2009) into six general categories, namely: interpersonal skills, organisational skills, research competencies, cognitive abilities, communication skills, and enterprise skills. Thus, while the general idea of what transferable skills are is rather clear, the detailed list of what this concept includes might vary throughout different studies and policies.

International and national research indicates that transferable skills may not have the same level of utility in all economic sectors. While generic skills may be particularly important in filling white collar (such as administrative, secretarial jobs) or pink collar jobs (such as personal services or sales), they may not be particularly relevant for employers who seek to fill skilled trade jobs requiring technical or craft skills (Hayward & Fernandez, 2004). Even within the white or pink collar occupations, different occupations may emphasise some transferable skills over others. For instance, sales occupations require communication skills, but not planning which is important in managerial occupations, or higher levels of literacy which are important in professional occupations (Dickerson & Green, 2002, in Hayward & Fernandez, 2004). As another example, the ability to establish and nurture partnerships with workers in other professions or disciplines is a particularly important transferable skill for workers in the field of complex automation systems, which often requires collaboration with workers in other disciplines (Cosman, 2016). The rise of digitisation and related technologies is expected to increase the need for particular transferable skills such as creativity, emotional intelligence and cognitive flexibility (ManpowerGroup, 2016; Rogers, 2018).

Cornford (2005) argues that "policy makers' conceptions of generic skill far outrun the realistic possibilities and need to be reined in to achievable reality" (p.26). The author observes that relevant policy documents in the UK tend to fail in translating abstract rhetoric into practical educational and work outcomes. International literature shows that transfer of learning is an important topic that merits much more research (Lobato, 2006). Cornford (2005) contends that the effective transfer of learning is not a straightforward issue which policies might seem to imply, and its implementation is fraught with difficulties. Some of these difficulties may derive from the fact that so-called transferable skills may require considerable "variations in form and application in different enterprises, and concomitant difficulty in easily teaching/training to achieve these variations" (Statz, 1996 in Cornford, 2005, p.34). In other words, these skills need to be taught in such a way to enable leaners to modify them to different situations. Learners need to know the distinguishing characteristics of such skills and need to be trained to use them in diverse settings; learners might need to rethink the way they conceptualise skills in order to increase the skills' transferability. The effective transfer of learning from education to work settings also requires the collaboration of employers and managers who need to support the practice of such skills to

ensure their improvement and retention, and to have realistic expectations of the outcomes of such skills.

Cornford (2005) argues that there exists insufficient understanding of the process of skill transfer, and highlights two related aspects that lead to this confusion, namely framing and classification. Framing consists of the scope of the skill and its constituent elements. Classification is the process that structures such skills and makes them manageable. An "identification of all the skills, attributes and factors likely to lead to effective performance in every conceivable occupational area is a hugely ambitious task" (Cornford, 2005, p.36). A thorough analysis of the challenges arising when framing and classifying transferable skills goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is important to emphasise that such aspects need to be indicated in policy and strategy documents, and eventually they should form an integral part of the development and implementation of training programmes. Needless to say, programme developers and educators need to be adequately trained themselves in order to develop and deliver skills that are really transferable.

While employers stress the importance of transferable skills (e.g. Jobsplus & National Commission for Further and Higher Education, NCHFE, 2017), they are often unwilling to pay for them. Hayward and Fernandez (2004) explain this paradox by referring to the relative market power of the employer and the employee. If the employees' skills are totally general in nature, employees have all the market power as they may easily find other employment elsewhere, and may thus command higher wages. On the other hand, when employees' skills are totally specific to the needs of the employer, the latter has all the market power as employees would hardly find another job if they decide to quit their current employment. In between these two extremes, there is the middle ground in which the skills to be learnt are partly general and partly specific in nature. "Since both parties benefit in this case, both parties have an incentive to invest in the acquisition of the skill and the cost of the investment can be shared between them" (Hayward & Fernandez, 2004, p.125). However, the authors still conclude that the level of investment of each party in such training might not be as high as the total returns, assuming that each party's level of investment is based on their own returns only. In this scenario, the overall investment in such skills might be less than optimal, thus prompting the need for government to intervene and facilitate such training. In summary, in line with the logic of Hayward and Fernandez (2004), it might be useful to package the teaching of transferable skills

together with job specific skills, and to involve the government to facilitate the learning of transferable skills by employees.

The need for transferable skills in Malta

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 the inevitable conflicting ideas, assumptions, definitions, goals, agendas and efforts. There is insufficient coordination among stakeholders and ineffective use of the limited resources of the country. The lack of a comprehensive economic plan for Malta that could shed some light on future skills needs, places more urgency on the development of a transferable skills policy.

Malta has enjoyed an unprecedented period of economic growth, registering a real GDP growth of 6.7% in 2018 (European Commission, 2019). This economic success has been attributed to a "structural shift towards a fast growing, internationally-oriented services sector" (European Commission. 2019). A gradual decline in the manufacturing sector has been replaced by the expansion of services subsectors such as tourism, finance, and iGaming. This economic growth is leading to a shortage of skilled human resources which, according to the Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry (MCCEI) is the most important challenge that business in Malta are facing (Costa, 2018). Similarly, a Eurobarometer survey (European Commission, 2018c) places Malta among the EU countries in which availability of adequate skills is a major obstacle for companies to expand. Indeed, about a third of companies in Malta, especially in healthcare, finance and ICT, experience constraining labour shortages (European Commission, 2018a).

It is apparent that there is a greater demand for workers than are currently available in Malta. This is resulting in growing numbers of foreign workers

coming to Malta. At the same time, it is also apparent that employers do not just face a problem of insufficient job applicants, but also insufficient job applicants with the right skills. Apart from attracting foreign labour in Malta, more effort needs to be carried out to improve the employability of the existing people in the country. The need to boost the skills of the Maltese population to fill in high quality job vacancies in Malta was also recently (undiplomatically) expressed by the then Maltese Prime Minister (Caruana, 2019).

The notion of transferable skills is especially important in the context of small states like Malta, where people are obliged to develop what Sultana (2010) calls 'chameleon careers'. Due to the limited human resources, lack of economies of scale and the quickly changing labour market needs, individuals can hardly build their expertise in just one field and need to be generalists (while sometimes claiming expertise in different fields). Government departments within small states need to perform the range of tasks required in larger countries, inevitably resulting in multi-functionality, in which a single individual or department has to manage a range of functions that in larger countries would be managed by specialised staff (Sultana, 2010). Transferable skills are particularly useful to assist workers in such a scenario.

A study carried out among a representative sample of 671 employers across the various economic sectors in Malta revealed that the top ten skills considered as most important by employers consist of oral communication, team working, English language, customer handling, problem solving, multi-tasking, planning and organising, written communication, basic computer literacy/using ICT, and literacy (Jobsplus & NCHFE, 2017). On the other hand, a report on skill gaps in the financial services industry found that the most significant skill deficiencies in hard-to-fill vacancies are management, language, communication, problem solving, and customer handling (MFSA, 2015). A skills audit in the ICT sector (eSkills Malta Foundation, 2017) revealed that a significant proportion of Maltese candidates and recruits displayed deficiencies in soft skills/employability skills and professional development. Concern was also expressed with regard to English language competencies. Besides, companies also demand candidates with problem solving, administration, sales, and project management skills, among others (eSkills Malta Foundation, 2017). Most (if not all) of these skills required by employers in Malta fit well under the umbrella of transferable skills.

Barriers impeding the development of transferable skills in Malta

The brief discussion on Malta's economic context and related labour market needs makes the case for promoting transferable skills in the country. However, a number of barriers are blocking the proliferation and uptake of transferable skills. This section examines some of the most salient ones, 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 (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 (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 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 among our children is still low (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2016). Indeed, 15-year olds continue to perform below the EU average (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). However, the way in which this general objective is intended to be carried out is yet unclear.

"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.

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).

Policy recommendations

In view of the above-mentioned challenges and as a means of strengthening the transferable skills required by the Maltese labour market, the government should adopt a comprehensive transferable skills policy which aligns together the work that has or is being done in this field and boosts the provision and uptake of such skills. This paper does not intend to focus on the governance of such policy or the detailed aspects of its content or process. However, it suggests the following four categories of policy directions that would add value to such policy and make it more effective.

Demand and supply skills audit research

Skills-audit research needs to be carried out regularly in all of the important employment sectors in Malta, including both established and emerging ones, in order to better understand the required transferable skills that have the most potential for intra- and inter-sectoral transferability. Such research needs to take into account the various relevant demographic and organisational aspects. Research should also examine whether the skills required by employers are being utilised in practice. Taking into consideration contemporary work trends (such as deskilling and digitisation among others), to what extent is the rhetoric about the importance of skills, including transferable skills, reflected at the workplace? Research also needs to be carried out about the supply side of the equation, to identify the transferable skills of different groups of people such as young persons, NEETS, graduates, older persons, persons with difficult social backgrounds, persons with

disabilities, and migrants. If it is not practical to set up a new permanent structure to carry out such research, other avenues need to be explored, such as the utilisation of existing resources and the collaboration between established entities. The results of such research should be shared in an adequate form and in a timely manner with all the stakeholders, including policy makers, educational authorities, educators, employment and recruitment agencies, and employers.

Revision and development of curricula and teaching methods

Curricula that focus on transferable skills throughout the whole educational system, from compulsory to post-secondary and tertiary education, should be examined, amended or if necessary, developed. According to the Ministry for Education and Employment (2016, p.6), "in secondary schools all students will have compulsory lessons in key competences". The successful integration of transferable skills across the curricula at secondary level "will inevitably entail a paradigm shift in certain curricula, processes, assessments, pedagogy and methodology" (The Working Group, 2017, p.153). In line with The Working Group's (2017) suggestion, Matriculation and Advanced syllabi should be revised or rewritten to focus more on the required transferable skills. The teaching of such skills should not be limited to compulsory education. Post-secondary and tertiary educational institutions should focus more on transferable skills. Additional training in transferable skills (such as computing, customer care, health and safety, and management) should also be promoted within apprenticeship programmes, in line with the requests of employers and apprentices (Jobsplus, 2004). A working group involving the various stakeholders should be established to determine how transferable skills can be integrated within the learning outcomes and assessment frameworks of educational institutions at post-secondary level (in line with The Working Group, 2017).

Teaching methods need to be revised in order to facilitate the acquisition of transferable skills. The new learning methods should also be integrated in the Open Education Resources and the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) currently being promoted "to redesign and deliver accessible, competency-based curriculum content" (The Working Group, 2017).

Training of stakeholders

Subject developers, educators, examiners and other stakeholders should be trained to adopt and impart transferable skills effectively, taking into consideration the challenges mentioned in this paper. Training units could be

identified or set up to carry out such tasks at different educational levels. Strengthening the focus on transferable skills within the National Diploma in Teaching Adults offered by the Directorate for Lifelong Learning, could be one way of sensitising adult educators about the importance of such skills.

Employers should be encouraged to invest more resources in imparting training of transferable skills to their employees, perhaps by combining such training with more job specific training, as mentioned earlier in this paper. The government also needs to play a more active role in the promotion of relevant training programmes by allocating financial incentives to employers through Malta Enterprise among others. The European Social Fund should be tapped to facilitate the training of transferable skills. Existing schemes such as the Investing in Skills scheme (Ministry for Finance, 2018) could also be considered to be used towards this aim.

Different social groups need to be taught the most required transferable skills according to their needs. Existing training programmes and schemes for specific social groups (such as those carried out by Jobsplus) need to be audited in order to ensure their effectiveness. Programmes that have proved to be effective in teaching employability skills need to be sustained. The teaching of transferable skills to vulnerable and marginalised groups should be prioritised as a means towards their greater social integration and contribution. There needs to be a focus on poorly educated employees lacking basic skills (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2015). More language and culture skills courses need to be organised to facilitate the integration of foreigners living in Malta. Voluntary work schemes, such as the Youth Voluntary Work Scheme (Ministry for Finance, 2016) should also be used as a means of acquiring and improving transferable skills while giving a contribution to society. Collaboration with local councils, social partners and NGOs would ensure that different social groups are reached.

Quality assurance, assessment and recognition

Adequate quality assurance mechanisms should be developed to ensure the effective inclusion of transferable skills across all levels of educational institutions. The NCFHE, as the regulator of the provision of education in Malta beyond compulsory schooling, needs to be given additional resources to build both its human resources and its technical capacity (in line with Ministry for Finance, 2016), in order to facilitate the development of a solid quality assurance unit that carries out regular monitoring of educational providers.

The learning of transferable skills should be assessed at all educational levels. Such assessment increases the skills' perceived importance and may result in greater learning. When transferable skills cannot be assessed through traditional pen and pencil examinations, the competent authorities should identify and develop other assessment methods for this purpose.

Many individuals have particular transferable skills that they might not value and that employers might not recognise since they are not certified. The NCHFE needs to develop mechanisms to recognise (validate, accredit and certify) transferable skills learned through non-formal and informal training. While the Commission is doing considerable work in relation to the validation of informal and non-formal learning, insufficient attention appears to have be given to transferable skills to-date. The government also needs to ensure that different types of skills-recognition systems (such as the national occupational standards being developed in the tourism sector, and the Skill Card used in construction) and matching systems (such as the "virtual matching tool" of Jobsplus) include the relevant transferable skills.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the concept and utility of transferable skills in the Maltese context. While various efforts meant to promote transferable skills were carried out over the years, these were never guided by a unifying transferable skills policy. This paper sheds light on a number of challenging aspects relating to the definition, policy development and effective implementation of transferable skills. It concludes by proposing the adoption of a comprehensive transferable skills policy that includes a number of aspects meant to facilitate the dissemination of effective transferable skills within and outside the formal educational system.

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