Soft Skills for Young Adults: Circuit In The Formal, Non-Formal and Informal Models

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Abstract Adult learning for skill acquisition, employability, professional development and self-sustenance are key issues in the current globalised and dynamic knowledge economy. Smooth and successful transition from school to work for young adults means that there is an appreciable match between skills acquired in the school and skills required in the labour market. Continuous adult learning, soft and transversal skills development are necessary for this transition. With background lessons from the winter school, this paper focuses on comparative approach to different types of soft skills in the circuit of formal, non-formal and informal models of adult learning. Various areas in the circuit, different positions and definitions are examined within the context of adult education professionalization. The paper concludes with implications for future practices in adult education profession, and especially for soft skills development among entry-level young adults in the labour market.

Keywords: Soft skills, employability, formal, non-formal, informal, youths, graduates

1. INTRODUCTION

The on-going globalisation in education has further echoed the significance of adult and lifelong learning at the international front. The advent of information powered society and of knowledge economy is transforming the demands of labour market, and subsequently educational policies, practices and professionalization. Such economy is based on creating, evaluating, and

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trading knowledge; labour cost is less important and traditional economic concepts such as scarcity of resources and economies of scale become more unpopular (Hendarmana & Tjakraatmadja, 2012). All aspects of lives have been altered, courtesy of technological innovation and advancement in adult learning. Electronic literacy and information resources, rather than material resources, are now critical to both human and organisational survival. New technologies are introduced on continuous basis and skills now deteriorate very fast due to rapid technological change and increasing globalization (Karabchuk, & Shevchuk, 2014: 74).

These fundamental societal changes have transformed societies from industrial into post-industrial societies in which "continuous knowledge acquisition" plays a leading role in economic growth and wealth creation (Bois-Reymond, 2003). Consequently among adult learners, adult education providers and professionals, there has been heightened interests on what learning should be (what should be the content of learning), what skills should be acquired (generic or technical), in what contexts (in formal, non-formal or informal) and within what duration (terminal/time-bound or lifelong). The reality for young adult entering the labour market is factual: there is now urgent need for more flexibility for companies when creating job titles, more frequent developments in labour activity, modifications of workers responsibilities within the company and even within the economic sector as a whole (Batalla-Busquets, & Pacheco-Bernal, 2013). Continuous skill acquisitions of general nature become more important to both organisations and youngsters in the labour market.

In addition to technical, subject and discipline-related skills (hard skills), social behaviour, soft and other transversal skills are in high demand by employers of labour as complementary skills to hard skills. Soft skills refer to behavioral competencies, interpersonal skills, people-centered learning skills or personal attributes that enhance an individual's interactions, job performance and career prospects (Onabamiro, Onuka & Oyekanmi, 2014: Durowoju & Onuka, 2014) and are considered the most sought-after skills in labour market of today's knowledge society (Durowoju & Onuka, 2014: 608). Unfortunately, these skills are seriously lacking in labour market (Pitan & Adedeji, 2012: 90) because the curricular framework of many Higher Education institutions (HEi) still focus more on subject-related knowledge with less practical training that focuses on acquisition of soft skills for employability of young graduates (Cinque, 2013; Giovannucci, & Cinque, 2013; Haselberger, Oberhuemer, Perez, Cinque, Capasso, 2012). The study programmes of most universities in Europe and especially in Africa are still rooted in traditional scientific learning methods and little attention is given to

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soft and complementary skills. In the words of Giovannucci, & Cinque, (2013) many employers in the United States and Europe often claim that university graduates are well prepared in their disciplines but lack general and transversal competencies such as communication, teamwork, work ethics and leadership (p.31). This lamentation is more intense in Africa (Aworanti, 2014; Durowoju & Onuka, 2014; Pitan & Adedeji, 2012). Citing many documents issued by the EU and other human resources experts, Giovannucci, & Cinque (2013) posit that soft skills are closely connected with employability, particularly for young people entering the labour market.

Although since the Bologna Declaration in 2009 (Cinque, 2013; Haselberger, et al, 2012), there has been remarkable efforts, among adult education providers and practitioners, towards embedding the contents of soft skills in the curricular design and didactics in European Higher Education Area (EHEA), people are still losing jobs because of shortfalls in required skills. Across the globe, about 202 million people were unemployed in 2013, an increase of 5 million compared with the year before (ILO, 2014). This global unemployment is more pervasive in the East Asia and South Asia regions, which together represent more than 45 per cent of additional jobseekers, followed by Sub-Saharan Africa (p.10). Resulting from these continued trends, global attention has been shifted to HE institutions to correct the trending mismatches between skills and jobs (Cinque, 2013). The notion is that companies need a more skilled workforce and opportunities should be given to young people to develop soft skills, such as entrepreneurial skills, coping skills (i.e. the capacity to deal with a problem in a creative way) learning to learn and other skills that will help university students to make a successful transition from full-time education to entering the labour market (Cinque, 2013). Are the outcomes of learning activities, leading to effective acquisition of soft skills, limited to classroom activities, given its generic, transversal and complementary nature? As a component of lifelong learning outcome, which has to do with acquisition of self-reliant skills, occupational competence and active citizenship, the circuit within which soft skills can be acquired spans beyond the formal HE institutions.

2. SOFT SKILLS DEFINED

In the knowledge economy where information services is more pervasive than manufacturing activities, new social relations and workplace practices have evolve as a result of increasing use of new digital technologies, especially among young people. Such practices create re-conceptions of key skills, not defined from a systems level, but from the everyday lives of people in the societies (Binkley, Erstad, Herman, Raizen, Ripley, & Rumble, 2010). Telling

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people to mention the particular skills for successful working life would generate a wide variety of responses because skills and abilities which are important to one person may not be as important to another. The differences according to Kechagias, (2011) may arise from occupation (e.g., corporate executive vs. assembly line worker), lifestyle (e.g., head of a large household vs. single person with no dependents), society and culture (e.g., industrialized vs. agrarian) or from differences in the dominant technologies of production and associated ways in which work is organized (p.27). This shows the various ways, contexts and purposes for which soft skills are perceived and conceptualized.

In the field of Education and Human Resources Development, scholars and researchers have attempted to define and address various issues of soft skills and employability of young adults entering their first job in the labour market. Many of them recognize the need to identify generalizable skills and abilities necessary to better prepare people for success in a changing and globalized economy. Attention is therefore drawn to the emerging belief that traditional notions of "basic skills", such as literacy and numeracy, are insufficient for success in the workplace (Kechagias, et al, 2011). The skills which are necessary for success in today's workplace and society are more 'social' than 'technical'. They include interpersonal skills, team spirit, communication skills, and cultural awareness; continue self-directed learning, adaptability, among others. All these are described as 'soft skills', a concept distinct from, but complementing 'hard skills' (Durowoju & Onuka, 2014; Onabamiro, Onuka & Oyekanmi, 2014; Cinque, 2013; Aworanti, 2012; Haselberger, et al, 2011; Binkley, et al, 2010: Schulz, 2008: 147).

In the diverse ways of perceiving and conceptualising soft skills, phrases that have been used include personality traits, business acumen, and occupational behaviour, generic skills, practical skills, marketable or employable skills, applied skills, core skills, key competencies, to mention a few. In general, defining soft skills depends very much on the contexts and the perceived needs of individuals and organizations. This is why soft skills are better described than defined. They are social skills and personal attributes in people that are required to complement hard skills because they are occupational requirements for success in any job and several other activities in the society (Aworanti, 2012). Hard skills are basically the technical know-how on subject-related areas of a particular profession, job or undertaking. Soft skills refer to the cluster of personality traits, social graces, facility with language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that mark people to varying degrees (Aworanti, 2012; Schulz, 2008: 147). They represent a dynamic combination of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills as well

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as ethical values that help people to adapt and behave positively so that they can deal effectively with the challenges of their professional and everyday life (Giovannucci, & Cinque 2013; Cinque, 2013; Haselberger, et al, 2011).

Considering the diverse and generic nature of soft skills, it is apt to identify and define it from the contexts which tilt away from the formal world of work. In the socio-cultural contexts, soft skills are construed as skills needed for successful living and learning in everyday lives of people across different range of cultural and national settings in the society. Soft skills are therefore referred to as 'life skills', which, according to Haselberger, et al, (2011) and Binkley, et al, (2010) are skills or abilities individuals need in order to achieve success in life, within the context of their socio-cultural milieu, through adaptation to, shaping of, and selection of environments. In their perspective, people's adjustment skill (adaptation) is necessary after using analytical skills in shaping social conditions. Where social condition is unbearable people opt to select from alternative social relations, work setting or environment. In the words of Haselberger, et al, (2011) when neither adaptation nor shaping leads to a successful interaction with the social environment, individuals can use life skills to select a new environment, such as when a person decides to change workplaces, move to a new location, or become friends with a new group of people (p.27). Soft skills are personal characteristics and qualities an individual possess which enable him to relate well with people in any context and any form: be it family, workplace, religious setting, or the society at large. Soft skills as life skills include such socio-cultural skills or cultural and self-awareness, emotional alertness and intelligence, flexibility, ethical awareness, stress awareness and management, life balance ability, multilingual skills (ability to speak different languages), resilience, emotional maturity, to mention a few.

After extensive comparative analysis and brainstorming in the CGW8 of the 2016 Wurzburg Winter School, the participants came up with a new definition of soft skills. It was defined as 'social toolkits for success in everyday life in different contexts'. By this, soft skills are construed to mean a 'social box' containing varieties of skills, competencies, talents and aptitudes (social tools) that one can select from and use for success as occasions may demand. We consider framework of categorising the skills as we refer to them as 'tools'. Using the perspective of Binkley (2010), the toolkit includes *tools for thinking* (creativity and innovation; critical thinking, problem solving, decision making; learning to learn metacognition), *tools for working* (communication; collaboration such as teamwork; information literacy which includes research on sources, evidence, biases, etc; and ICT literacy), and *tools for living in the world* (citizenship – local and global; life and career; personal & social

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responsibility – including cultural awareness and competence). They are useful in every facet of life: employment, family life, cultural setting, politics, religion, education, leadership, tech-world, to mention a few.

In the information-powered and knowledge economy, soft skills are life jacket in the flight of life. Since skills must lead to success in life and there are many skills, talents, and abilities that are not appropriate for all social conditions or environments, even though they may involve sophisticated intellectual processes, it means that not all academic abilities are necessarily life skills, nor are all life skills likely to be taught in formal school systems (Haselberger, et al, 2011). A large majority of soft skills are better derived from the non-formal and informal learning environment.

3. THE TRILOGY OF FORMAL, NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL EDUCATION

The transition from industrial to post-industrial society brought new waves of things which require new ways of living, learning and working. Like infants in a society who need some forms of socialisation process, people in the current serviced-based and information-powered society need to be initiated and integrated to the new waves of things through the process of socialisation. Apart from schools, other agencies of socialisation are family, peer group, religions institutions, mass media, and community members (Amon, Shamai, & Ilatov, 2008). With the wider nature of adult learning for soft skills acquisition, school alone cannot help adult learners meet with their learning needs in terms of skill acquisition, professional development and especially in transiting from studying to working. The mode with which adult and continuing professional education is built has resultantly been categorised into strands of formal (the recognised university system), non-formal (learning and training which take place outside specialised educational institutions) and informal (extension of learning in everyday life), that weave together.

In this trilogy, *formal education* is that which is provided by established education and training institution set up or sponsored by the state for those express purpose (Tight, 2002). As Dib (1988), puts it, formal education corresponds to a systematic, organized education model, structured and administered according to a given set of laws and norms, presenting a rather rigid curriculum as regards objectives, content and methodology. It is learning through a programme of instruction of rigid curriculum in educational institutions, adult training centres or in the workplaces, which is generally recognised in a qualification or a certificate (Cameron, & Harrison, 2012). It is characterized by a learning process named, "presential education" (Sarramona,

in Dib, 1988) with necessity for involvement of the teacher, the students and the institution which corresponds to the education process normally adopted in conventional schools and universities (Dib, 1988).

While formal education has long been popular, the notion of non-formal and informal education came to prominence during the 1960s and 1970s in international discussions on education (Tight, 2002). *Non-formal education* include all organised systematic, learning activities carried out outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population, adult and children (Tight, 2002: 72). In non-formal mode of education, learning activities are organised with flexible curricula and methodology, which allows for easy accommodation of learners' needs and interest as the driving force. In non-formal education, the timing is in line with learner's learning pace and ability. According to Dib (1988), the adopted strategy for learning through non-formal mode does not require student attendance, it decreases the contacts between teacher and student and most activities take place outside the institution - as for instance, home reading and correspondence studies. Non-formal education is organized by different agencies for a particular target group in a given population, especially adults outside the framework of formal school systems with a view to provide selected types of skills (Cameron, & Harrison, 2012: 111). Any agency, institution or body that provides educational programmes like agricultural extension and farmer training programme, adult literacy programmes, vocational or occupational skill acquisition programmes of artisanship, youth clubs with educational purposes, various community programmes of instruction in health, nutrition, family planning, and cooperatives (Tight, 2002: 72). Football academies and Islamic learning centres are other examples of non-formal institutions of learning.

The third in the trilogy, *informal education,* is learning through experience of everyday living. It involves unconscious, unplanned, unorganised and incidental learning process through which knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights are gained from daily life experiences and exposure to the environment (Cameron, & Harrison, 2012: 111). Such learning occurs from interactions with family, friends, and neighbours, colleagues, from the market places, the library and the mass media. Citing Coombs and Ahmed, (1974) Tight (2002) has the following to say about informal learning:

> *"…the lifelong learning process by which every individual acquires and accumulates knowledge skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment- at home, at work, at play: from the example and attitudes of family and friends; from travel, reading*

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newspaper and books; or by listening to the radio or viewing films or television. Generally, informal education is unorganised, unsystematic and even unintentional at times, yet it accounts for the great built of any person's total lifetime learning- including that of even a highly 'schooled' person (p.73).

There is a close connection between Bandura's *Social Learning Theory* and the discourse about informal education and training.

4. SOFT SKILLS IN THE FORMAL MODE

In the formal mode, soft skills come from three basic categories: the formal courses, in the hidden curriculum and in internship. In the *formal courses*, teaching activities organised in formal school systems are carried out by teachers, and tutors guided by a formal pre-determined curriculum. Example of soft skills which can be acquired through regular classroom activities includes communication skills, presentation skills, carried out in periodic seminar presentation of term paper or research work by students. Learners tend to gain some soft skills like critical and analytical thinking in writing and presenting term paper or research theses. In the Univerzita Carlova, Czech Republic for example, there are formal courses on soft skills for Masters Students, which include problem-solving skills, communication and public speaking and so on. These activities are embedded in regular courses or carried out in independent courses.

Apart from this there are other soft skills which are considered as *hidden in the curriculum* content of the formal schooling system. Hidden curriculum is the non-academic outcome of schooling. It is the socialization process of schooling which contains some instructions/lessons that are learned in formal schools but which are neither openly intended nor explicitly stated in the syllabus. According to Drebeen, cited in Kentli, (2009) through hidden curriculum, students encounter the norms of schools that will prepare them to involve in the life of public sphere(s). These norms are 'independence', 'achievement', 'universalism', and 'specificity' and these norms are required to teach them in order to collaborate with modern industrial society (p. 83). In the university system, at convocation ceremonies for example, Faculty Deans present certificates to graduates and say that they (the graduands) have been found worthy in *character* and *learning*. It appears that this 'character education' is hidden in the university curriculum and it is under this node that students are able to learn and develop certain skills for everyday life. During group classwork or assignments, learners are able to develop team spirit, ability to accommodate differences and demonstrate collegiate abilities. Leadership

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abilities are also demonstrated and learned by whoever emerges as group leader or co-ordinator. Other soft skills like time management, punctuality, self-awareness, stress awareness, etc., are skills that formal school systems enforce on individual students during the didactics. In the comparative analyses of the Winter School, soft skills were found in the hidden curriculum of universities in the seven countries (Serbia, India, Malaysia, Czech Republic, Germany, Portugal and Nigeria).

Soft skills are also acquired through *internship programmes* which are major components of formal school curriculum. Learners are subjected to some on-the-job training by placing them in a temporary position in companies, industries whose activities are in line with the subject field of the student. By this, learners get real life exposure to and acquire not just the practical or hard skills, but also their necessary soft and complementary skills which are generic and transversal.

5. SOFT SKILLS IN THE NON-FORMAL MODE

In the non-formal mode, soft skills acquisition has two categories: the first category are training and education provided through mini-curriculum, short programmes like seminars, workshops, conferences to enhance the development of skills for employment and everyday living. Such other pre-planned but purposive programmes as round tables, events, conferences, books presentations, meetings with professionals, art and creativity labs, charity work and social activities, peer tutoring and internal cooperation, international exchanges, attribution of tasks and responsibilities (Cinque, 2013) all belong to the first category of non-formal mode of training for soft skills development among young adults. Training in a specific organisational environment, among company staff or within a social group, for instance, represent an 'immersive' experience and the opportunity to enhance/ develop the soft skills connected to different areas: creativity/innovation, adaptability to change, management skills, analytical skills etc. (Cinque, 2013)

In the second category, soft skills are developed by attending organised special agencies like *Career Service Centres* who offer young graduates an integrated living and learning experience where the line between formal and informal learning is blurred. Using different modules for different soft skills needed by individuals, these centres, at times, collaborate with companies, and or universities to design mini-curricula that focus on different soft skills areas. These include leadership and self-empowerment, communication, teamwork (including conflict management, negotiation, and management skills), creativity/innovation, critical thinking, problem solving (Cinque, 2013).

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6. SOFT SKILLS IN THE INFORMAL MODE

In the informal mode, soft skills acquisition is more general than the formal and non-formal mode because it comes from everyday life activities of a person either as a member of a group or as individuals. Formal and non-formal activities are supplemented by various learning opportunities outside the classroom, ranging from casual conversations to formal dinners and talks where students actively engage with distinguished visitors and interesting speakers (Cinque, 2013).

The informal mode of acquiring soft skills therefore has two basic categories: first, *as an individual,* there are certain distinctive characteristics, personal traits, and emotional intelligence, peculiar to individuals which are necessary for successful workplace participation. The individual develops this overtime through personal discovery of self and continuous effort towards personal development in skills and competencies. Some occupational behaviour like respect for colleagues, assertiveness, mental alertness, among others are, most of the time, products of personal learning. Second, soft skills are developed through *everyday living in the society.* In this category, soft skill development is pursued through various socio-cultural activities. In his social learning theory, Albert Bandura (1972) postulates learning to be a cognitive process that takes place in a social context and can occur purely through observation or direct instruction, even in the absence of motor reproduction or direct reinforcement as in the formal and informal mode. Individuals develop social skills form observing friends and family, attending churches and or participating in community activities and social gatherings. The informal mode of soft skills acquisition, in summary, is characteristically incidental and spontaneous, not pre-planned and no specialised agencies host the teaching, accept agents of socialisations.

7. IMPLICATION FOR PROFESSIONALIZATION IN ADULT AND LIFELONG EDUCATION

The reality in today's labour market means that the learning and preparation of young people is not only in the formal, but also more in the non-formal and informal settings. Given the contemporary needs of adult learners, in response to the demands from the labour market, the scope of Adult Education Professionals is experiencing major transformations. Today, the professional identity of the adult educator varies: it spans from being a university professor to trainer to human resource developer, K-12 educator, consultant, community manager and so on. To achieve both a quantitative expansion and a qualitative improvement for adult learners and to design learning activities capable of

instilling soft and transversal skills in young adults, well qualified and experienced staff are needed to give professional supports in adult learning. Continuing professional development of adult learning professional is a critical component of quality assurance in adult education (Sava, 2011). For continuing professional development, it is more important for practitioners and providers of adult and lifelong learning to begin reflecting about the work which they do (in what special area are they regarded as experts or professionals and why?); in what context do they do it (formal, non-formal or informal); what methods and strategies do they employ and why; and how are they qualified to do it. In other words, there is need to clarify and identify the 'competency profile' of adult learning professionals

In addition to these, there is need for changes in the didactics across formal and non-formal modes of adult learning, in particular. Didactics across each of these modes demand specific professional competences, bearing implications on the need for 'continuous' process of professionalization among adult and lifelong educators. For instance, in the formal mode, an adult educator, ought to engage effectively in inter-personal skills during the learning process, embedded in the curriculum. Similarly, in the non-formal modes, an adult educator ought to be an effective trainer-cum-counsellor for the young adult learner.

In the informal mode, where acquisition of skills is subject to each individual and their social abilities, professional adult educators need to come up with frameworks or approaches by which learning through everyday life can be enhanced and shaped towards specific soft skills development among young adults. It may be an instruction given in the formal or non-formal setting which is carried out in the informal life. Whatever it would be, it is a serious challenge to professionalism in adult education to situate their areas of expertise in a specific mode. In what mode of education (formal, non-formal or informal) an adult educator is a professional?

In bridging the gap between skills acquired in schools and skills required in workplaces, professional practices in adult education need to be adjusted: synergetic and collaborative efforts between adult educators and employers of labour need to be enhanced.

In sum, each of these roles of the adult educator, embrace different goals and values, contributing transformations in the domain of adult and lifelong education.

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The transition from agriculture and manufacturing centric to service sector led economy has led to a paradigmatic shift into the socio-economic condition of the human life. Such a shift, demands new ways of thinking, learning and living while emphasising continuous learning for young adults and continuing professional development for adult educators.

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Soft skills development has become a new mantra, for one's survival in this competitive environment. In this paper, we have examined the type and process of skill acquisition across formal, in-formal and non-formal modes. Comparative examination of the types and process across these modes are examined with reference to cases from Europe (Czech Republic, Germany, Serbia, Portugal), Malaysia, Nigeria and India. Critical perspectives from the comparative study, has resulted in providing a new definition of soft skills as 'social toolkits for success in everyday life in different contexts'. The paper points out the need for a 'new' professional i.e., an adult educator having multivariate skills in engaging with the 'new' adult learner, in the emerging 'new' economic context. It has become imperative for clarifying and identifying the 'competency profile' of adult learning professionals

With growing demand for soft skills development particularly for young adults, adult and lifelong education needs to endorse some of the following recommendations:

- Industry-academia collaborations to engage in demand-supply of 'soft-skills' needed for the labour market. Further, develop public-private partnerships in establishing soft skills development centres enabling better access for young adult learners.
- Establishing Career Service Centres (in line with some of the European countries), particularly, in the developing world, given huge number of young adult learners to guide them to acquire soft skills for employment.
- Promotion of entrepreneurship skills among young adult learners, across formal modes particularly the developing economies and professionalise the soft skill delivery in the process in the non-formal and in-formal modes.
- Provide opportunities to learn inter-personal and social skills within formal education circuit.
- Creation of awareness among young adult learners of acquiring soft skills from their routine engagement with the family and society, seldom discussed in the formal and non-formal mode of learning.
- Developing frameworks or strategies by which learning through everyday life can be enhanced and shaped towards specific soft skills development among young adults

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