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## Imaginative solution to lifelong learning



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In today's rapidly changing economy, workers need to upgrade their skills constantly. Such continuous lifelong learning is essential to ensure Europeans have the complex problem-solving skills needed to remain employable and for companies to remain competitive. Backed by some of Europe's top universities, an EU-funded project has launched a free online course to teach these skills. Registration for the first course, which starts on 8 October 2014, is underway.

As EU countries start to exit the financial crisis, unemployment remains high. Getting more people into work requires Europe to boost its R&D capacity, innovativeness, competitiveness and sustainability. And one powerful tool for doing so is effective investment in training and education, especially lifelong learning.

EU-funded project [LLIGHT'IN'EUROPE](#) [2] has identified the skills individuals, enterprises and governments should invest in for lifelong learning. Through its research the project is showing that lifelong learning, which focuses on skills such as complex problem-solving, is likely to make enterprises and individuals more innovative, more competitive, and ultimately better off.

"We have an accelerated need to be learning new skills, particularly skills that have a value in the labour market," says project coordinator Peer Ederer, a professor of human capital, growth and innovation at Germany's Zeppelin University. "It is, therefore, really important to find out what kind of skills are valued by the labour market and what are the best learning approaches to those skills."

He adds: "It is not enough to go to school and learn just anything, we need tools to identify what kind of skills are most valuable."

## Capitalising on complex problem-solving

Made up of a consortium of nine EU universities, several supporting partners and one Chinese university, the project defined and classified the various lifelong learning categories and skills. It is also developing an innovative approach to measuring human capital. This focuses on complex problem-solving skills (CPS) and its impact on innovation abilities, employability and wages.

“CPS means that when you encounter a condition or situation to which you don’t yet know the solution, you need to find a discovery process for how to deal with it,” says Ederer. If a company decides to introduce a new product, for example, the marketing department needs to find ways to sell it and the production department needs to find new ways to produce it.

“We have directly tested the level of these skills among almost a thousand people in around 30 different organisations in Europe, Argentina and South Africa,” he explains. “We found that CPS are the kind of skills which, if people can develop or maintain them, will improve their income prospects and employability in the labour market.”

## Training the mind

Although intelligence is essentially the cognitive ability to solve problems, a widely accepted view is that it is basically innate and cannot be developed much. However, when it comes to CPS, LLLIGHT'IN'EUROPE has compiled a substantial body of evidence to suggest that it can be acquired.

“Judging by the evidence we have accumulated, it is highly plausible that CPS can be trained ... it’s a skill rather than a form of intelligence which is not trainable,” maintains Ederer.

To demonstrate that CPS is learnable and to help people acquire it, the project has launched a massive open online course (MOOC), called [‘Solution and Innovation Skills’](#) [3], which is an open-source training tool available to all. The first course starts on 8 October. Registration is underway.

“This autumn we will run the first instalment of the MOOC. It will allow people from around Europe and the world to learn about this skill and even accumulate university credits for it,” says Ederer.

The MOOC is divided into several modules, including orientation and exploration (creativity, collaboration, leadership and problem identification), learning and application (CPS processes, lifelong learning and change management), entrepreneurship and ‘intrapreneurship’ (identifying opportunities, technology management and dilemma structures), and value creation (return to skills, complexity value and innovativeness).

Ederer adds that most of the investment for lifelong learning will have to come from individuals and the private sector but, if channelled efficiently, the outcome will be well worth it. EU and national governments can help by putting in place the right conditions for such investment.

The project aims to enhance the efficiency of lifelong learning investments in order to improve the rate of return, “so that Europe gets more bang for its buck”, Ederer stresses.

“Skills can be imparted at all ages, and this is valuable at almost every age. The rate of return declines as you get older, because learning takes longer and the period during which you can recover your investment becomes shorter, but there’s still enough return to justify it,” he concludes.

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