

**IPS Roundtable on
“Lifelong Learning: Lessons from Europe”,
Speaker: Jørn Skovsgaard, Senior Adviser, Ministry of Education, Denmark**

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In his presentation, Mr Jørn Skovsgaard made the point that the key competences required for a knowledge-based society are the abilities to act autonomously, use tools (language, symbols, technology, etc) interactively, and interact (relate well and manage and resolve conflicts) in socially and culturally diverse groups. It requires communicative, analytical and interpersonal skills.

Internationally, the trend in education is to move from a focus on developing “skills” to developing “competencies”, and from a “curriculum”-based pedagogy to a “didactics”-based one. The latter engages the mind of the students by making learning meaningful to them. This pedagogical approach is process-oriented rather than result-oriented; it seeks to develop capabilities rather than skills; dialogues and feedback are preferred over tests and exams. However, the didactics-based approach also has its weaknesses: the diverse quality of teaching; training of basic skills is under-motivated; low expectations are set, which may lead to underachievement; and finally, the neglect of more talented students in favour of weaker learners.

Mr Skovsgaard highlighted that the Danish education system accommodates individuals in an open and inclusive learning environment, as opposed to the uniform concept of the traditional teacher-centred classroom situation. The learning process starts at pre-school where children develop their own learning pace through play and free interaction before they are taken through more structured yet adaptive and learner-centred didactics. Initial vocational training and education are based on theory in schools and practical sessions in workshops.

According to Mr Skovsgaard, the Danish system also focuses on competencies rather than skills. There is a focus on students being able to apply what they have learned which would allow one to acquire new knowledge and be trained for new skills easily. The education system is flexible. First, education is for all. Adults of all ages are given many opportunities to pursue an upper secondary or vocational education. Second, different paths taken in one’s education could lead to the same job. Opportunities for all adults to acquire relevant skills and qualifications are available. One valued outcome of the education system is that everyone took responsibility for his or her career. A combination of personality and commitment motivates people to get the training they need. These factors give the Danish labour market tremendous flexibility.

A unique feature of the Danish system was that the state, employers and unions have become partners in matters concerning education, said Mr Skovsgaard. Funds have been set up for education and the government has decided to match, by a 1:1 ratio, funding the labour movement allocates for education. Danish employers are also increasingly adopting educating and training staff in their codes of ethical conduct and as part of their corporate social responsibility.

Two examples of how to achieve high mobility in the labour market and the reallocation of human resources were provided. First, when workers are made redundant due to a mismatch of required skills in the midst of economic or organisation restructuring, a training or learning facility was set up in cooperation with vocational and training centres to retrain these workers with the new and

relevant skills. Second, financial accounts were allocated to workers for upgrading or re-training courses, allowing them to work in different industries.

During the discussion, participants asked what could be done to encourage and sustain lifelong learning, especially for older people. Mr Skovsgaard had two suggestions. First, the education system could encourage adults to take on further pursuits in education by inculcating a positive attitude towards learning or by nurturing them when young through a didactic approach in education. Children have to be taught to like learning before they would learn more. Education has to be fun and engaging. He also noted that adults did not like to be taught like children. In adult education, expectations and the level of competence of the adults had to be established so as to achieve the desired outcomes of the courses undertaken.

Second, the government and organisations could make the pursuit of further education easier by setting up government-funded adult learning centres and implementing flexible work schemes which allow delayed retirement and more opportunities for learning, suggested Mr Skovsgaard. Arrangements could also be made to have training workshops and enrichment classes held at the workplace. In Denmark, the People's Enlightenment Act 1990 permits state funding for adult citizens to actively form learning groups useful in the workforce.

Participants also asked about the flexibility of the Danish education system, whether a person who took the path of an adult vocational education could enter mainstream education. Mr Skovsgaard said that qualifications acquired from the adult education centres in Denmark allow them to enter mainstream education. The education system would consider a person's work experience and previous qualifications attained as pre-requisites for a course of study.

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Notes taken by Chua Chun Ser, IPS Research Assistant.

