UNI-Europa
P&MS Symposium

Employability and adaptability of professional and managerial staff in the knowledge society

Summary report

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Introduction

During the second half of the 20th century the working world – particularly for qualified staff – has changed dramatically. First came the end of the era when employees spent their entire working lives with one company. This was replaced by a career spent in positions with several different companies. But this has also been succeeded to a large extent by a variety of different types of working relationships – temporary employment, self-employed work, dependent employment and so on. The tasks of unions have changed accordingly. In the past, the priority was to join forces to assert demands related to pay, working conditions, working hours etc. against employers. Today members expectations also emphasise support from unions to help them to successfully manage their working lives. Simon Petch, General Secretary of the British-Irish union Connect and president of the P&MS group at UNI-Europa, commented on this state of affairs at the opening of the symposium, “Employability and Adaptability of Professional and Managerial Staff in the Knowledge Society”, hosted by UNI-Europa in Brussels on March 10/11, 2003. In doing so, Petch formulated the task facing the symposium. This is a task which, in Petch's view, is crucial to the future existence of unions. This is because professionals and management staff work in the key areas for the future development of the economy.

Employability

What is employability, anyway? Gerhard Rohde, the head of the Business Services department (IBITS) at UNI, ran a Google search for „employability“ when preparing his introduction to the conference. The result: approximately 230,000 hits. By the time this report was written, the figure had increased to 254,000. Someone who wanted to spend just a minute looking at each page would have to spend nearly half a year without sleeping at all and eating in front of the monitor.

Rohde finds the definition of employability provided by the Conference Board of Canada short and to the point. It states that employability is comprised of “ ...the skills you need to enter, to stay in, and progress in the world of work.” It is also important to note that the meaning of this concept has undergone a transition that is at the same time a shift in perspective. Employability used to mean that a person was acceptable to an employer.

Among the skills that ensure employability Rohde includes basic qualifications such as the communication or problem-solving skills, personal skills such as the ability to take on responsibility, flexibility and continual learning, and the ability to work within a team.

A definition provided by the International Labour Organization (ILO), and quoted in Andrew Bibby’s background report for the conference, points in a similar direction: “Individuals are most employable when they have broad-based education and training, basic and portable high-level skills, including teamwork, problem solving, information and communication technology (ICT) and communication and language skills, learning to learn skills, and competencies to protect themselves and their colleagues against occupational hazards and diseases.”

However, people cannot secure the skills mentioned in this definition – as was possible just a few decades ago – by amassing a sort of educational fortune through schooling, vocational training or university studies which they could then feed on, in principle, over their entire working lives. Some of these skills – for instance the ones grouped under the heading “social skills” – only begin growing after long experience in life and the workplace. Other skills associated with specialized knowledge or the application of new technologies are subject to rapid change or extremely short half-lives due to external developments. Bibby reminded his listeners that a report submitted to the EU Commission in 2001 warned that 80 percent of today’s qualifications would become obsolete within 10 years, and 80 percent of the potential workforce had skills whose value had deteriorated. These facts alone strongly suggest that life-long learning is a decisive prerequisite for employability.

However, from an entrepreneur’s standpoint, life-long learning is not without alternatives. In general, knowledge is becoming increasingly fragmented, and fields of study are becoming increasingly specialized. One reaction to this trend is the spread of highly specialized courses at universities with a narrow focus on a specific field of study. At the same time, the half-life of knowledge is getting shorter, especially in scientific and technological fields. From the standpoint of companies, there are two possible responses. One consists of organizing life-long learning for employees, enabling them to keep pace with ongoing developments in their areas. Under the other approach they try to hire as many university graduates as possible so that – after a certain orientation period – the company can benefit from the newest available knowledge. The latter has been and is the approach taken in highly technology-driven professions – for instance in the IT industry. However, a consequence is that older employees – and, in this context, older means over 40 – are being forced out of the companies.

It is only logical that from the viewpoint of employees and their unions, only the first alternative – life-long learning – is worth considering. A prerequisite for this is the mastery of the learning skills mentioned in the definition along with broad fundamental knowledge. In view of the specialized course programmes now offered, learning techniques and fundamental knowledge – especially interdisciplinary knowledge – is neglected. In addition, the shorter degree courses now required in the European Union involve certain risks. The aim is to ensure that knowledge can be utilized as quickly as possible to ensure competitiveness. On the other hand, companies expect employees to display a high level of creativity, flexibility and communication skills, particularly in the context of modern work organization structures, so that they are capable of achieving certain goals on a path they develop themselves. For this purpose, specialized knowledge is a necessary, but not sufficient, prerequisite. Other skills – it is feared – will be taught even less than they have been in the past when degree programmes become shorter.

At the policy-making level, the EU commission has made life-long learning a priority. It is one of the pillars of employment policy. Andrew Bibby outlined this policy in his background report. He also recalled the Commission’s request to the social partners for active involvement in the development, promotion and utilization of opportunities for continuing education. This means creating or arranging educational opportunities, but also using the structures of the social partnership to define a framework for securing the role of life-long learning

within companies. One result was the signing in February 2002 of a joint declaration on steps toward the development of skills and qualifications.

The special needs of professional and managerial staff

The policy of the EU Commission and the joint paper by employers and unions apply to the workforce as a whole. In addition, Bibby points out in his background report that closer attention must be given to the needs of the specific needs of professional and managerial staff. A number of unions have conducted surveys of unionised and non-unionised staff in their areas of jurisdiction to study this issue. Andrew Bibby examined the results in his background report, and presented them again at the Brussels conference along with other activities with which unions have addressed the special situation of professional and managerial staff.

In summary, the interests of management staff and professionals are focused on career development, job search services – which a number of unions actively provide – access to continuing education and life-long learning and – linked to the final point – the establishment of professional contacts with other professionals and management staff working in the same area or with a similar status in terms of social or employment law. For instance, GPA, an Austrian union, offers Internet forums for IT specialists, employees in social services and also for freelancers or field service staff. Two other interests are a direct result of structural changes in the employment markets: some form of representation of the interests of freelancers, whose numbers are rapidly increasing, and support for employees who wish to use cross-border mobility to advance their careers.

Introducing these interests into discussions at the European level and asserting them there will require appropriate representation structures. This is not simply a question of bundling activities at the national level or harmonising national policies. Instead, the political framework requires adjustments or improvement and/or steps must be taken to prevent it from deteriorating. Bernadette Tesch-Segol of UNI-Europa described how this functions in Brussels and outlined the important tasks to be undertaken.

She explained that UNI-Europa has succeeded over the past three years in gaining recognition as a social partner – at least from EU institutions. That means that UNI-Europa has gained access to the European parliament, the EU Commission, the committees, etc. This makes it possible to work for the establishment of a European framework in which certain standards are defined with regard to employability and flexibility of professional and management staff – standards based on the European social model that has proven so successful for both sides – employers and employees. At present, however, this is not necessarily an assured outcome. There are definitely some who would like to use the eastern expansion of the European Union to convert it fully or partially into a sort of free trade zone in which social security systems and social protection would be sacrificed in favour of a neoliberal economic model.

In a similar context, Gerhard Rohde also warned of the danger of (deliberate) neoliberal misinterpretations. It is indeed necessary to make lifelong learning a central priority not only for union activities, but also in the relations between the social partners and in public policy. However, emphasized Rohde, collective

systems for ensuring job security and protection against unfair dismissal cannot be replaced by a system under which employees are responsible for ensuring that they have jobs. That also means that it is not enough to create systems for life-long learning. It is not just a matter of examining and regulating the supply side, he added. Employees must also be provided with incentives to make use of the available life-long learning systems. This demand is justified firstly because companies profit from the utilisation of skills in the working process, and secondly because they are also subject to social responsibilities.

APESMA - an example of life-long learning as a union task

Working for the employability of its members is a key policy priority of the Australian union APESMA (Association of Professional Engineers and Managers, Australia). John Vines, the chief executive of APESMA, who also serves as the President of the UNI World Professional and Managerial Staff Committee, explained his union's policy to the Brussels conference via video conference.

The interest of qualified employees in active career management, qualified training and life-long learning prompted APESMA to offer various educational programmes of its own. They include on-the job training in the form of short courses in highly diverse areas, certified courses in various management areas and masters degrees: Master of Business Administration (MBA) and Master of Technology in Product Management. In addition there is a Ph.D. programme in business administration. This course is offered in cooperation with Charles Sturt University as a distance learning programme. The MBA programme is highly successful, reported Vines. 20 percent of all Australian professional and management staff with MBA degrees obtained the title through APESMA. John Vines attributes the programmes' success to the fact that the qualifications acquired through them are transferable – in other words, not tied to a company – and at the same time take the needs of companies into account.

Other services offered by APESMA are industry profiles – trends within the sector, employer profiles, training opportunities, job offers, etc. So far they are available for the civil engineering sector, focussing on the engineering side of the industry, and the pharmaceutical industry. Additional profiles are in planning, for instance for the water supply sector, utilities, municipal administration – focussing in these sectors on engineering – natural sciences and architecture. In addition, individual members can access a so-called online logbook as an aid to career planning or, for instance, to plan their next career move by selecting training courses. This is intended as a tool for helping individuals ensure that their careers are sustainable.

John Vines sees this strict orientation toward the professional interests of members as the future of union work. Highlighting the difference as compared with conventional union activities is the fact that many professional and managerial staff are employed on the basis of 3–5 year contracts. They are not seen as conventional employees, but rather as contractors. To procure favourable contractual terms – and more favorable terms in the follow-up contract – professional and managerial staff must continually improve their qualifications. From this standpoint, the union's task is to support their members in these efforts. This also applies to professional and managerial staff who are

neither employed under limited contracts or as freelancers, but rather in conventional employment relationships, explained Vines.

Questions for the union of the future

John Vines' explanations of APESMA's vision of the union of the future did not immediately spark a debate, but had a noticeable impact on the subsequent discussions. This became clear in the discussion following Andrew Bibby's presentation of his background report. In the report, Bibby pointed out the changed conditions in the working world: "New forms of contractual relationship are developing, outside the traditional employer/employee contract on which so much employment legislation and social insurance protection is based. This includes, for example, agency working and corporate outsourcing to nominally independent freelance contractors. And even where the legal employer/employee relationship remains unchanged, the implicit contract between company and worker – by which an individual could expect to be offered security and reward in exchange for his or her corporate loyalty – has certainly changed. Increasingly, individuals are told to take responsibility for their own lives and careers, including the responsibility for ensuring that they constantly update their skills)."

Regardless of whether or not we see this as a positive trend, said Bibby, this form of individualisation happens to be a fact to which unions must react. Models of collective representation of employee interests are no longer adequate. Many services provided by unions to their members can be supplied by commercial agencies, and they are already doing so. These services range from consultation on employment contracts, issues related to health protection in the workplace, legal representation and advice to continuing education programmes. With increasing demand for services of this kind, even more commercial suppliers could discover the working world as a business segment and spot market opportunities. For this reason, concluded Bibby, unions must react and adopt an approach based strictly on members' needs.

A participant from the Swedish union SIF summed up the situation of the unions in a question: are we dealing with members or customers? Both, of course: representing the members' interests today also means treating them as customers. This has enormous consequences for union activities. There is no way of coping with the work – said a Scandinavian participant – if, for instance, in an organisation with 300,000 members and 500 full-time union staff members, each member phones once a month for a five-minute consultation. Consequently it is important when addressing consultation problems to learn from other service providers and to set up call centres, for instance. This, said Simon Petch, is very useful. His union has already set up a call center, and a quarter of the members are using it. However, added Petch, callers cannot be expected to spend 10 minutes navigating through a series of menus by pushing buttons before finally being put through to a human being. A further pitfall that unions must avoid, as another participant pointed out, is adopting the grim working conditions that usually prevail in call centres.

Another starting point for innovative union activity is intensified use of the Internet. The website should be the core of the union. It permits quick access to

information and enables members to discuss their experiences. This is important in two respects. It creates a virtual meeting place for members where they can engage in an exchange of views. The Swedish union SIF, for instance, has put this into practice. In view of the highly differentiated job profiles among professional and management staff, unions can offer little support on job-related concerns, but they can bring people together who are experts in their fields for discussions. The best place for doing so is the Internet. The function of unions is then more like that of a moderator. There are already many varieties of such union communication platforms. One conclusion of the discussion, however, was that they need to be expanded and made more systematic.

The other advantage of creating virtual meeting places is associated with the democratic consensus-building process. Unions have traditionally organised industrial sectors, industries, public-sector bodies or occupational groups. Communication occurred within the workplace. Either there or at specially arranged meetings – for instance at the union hall – the democratic consensus-building process took place. With the arrival of new forms of work and employment relationships, the classical communication opportunities are no longer available. There is no place where freelancers or teleworkers meet automatically. Consequently, a place must be made available to give them a chance to communicate. The best way of doing so is to set up a virtual meeting place in the Internet where communication and political consensus-building can take place. In this context, Andrew Bibby mentioned the model implemented by the Austrian union GPA. In the GPA it is possible to establish so-called interest groups if 200 members are in favour. When a group is constituted, it is also open to non-union members who wish to get involved. One of these interest groups is work@IT, in which IT experts from highly diverse sectors are active. The substance of the group's activities is not defined from above, but is determined by the members of the interest group themselves. They also elect their own representative to the federal forum, the union's highest decision-making body. All of this takes place essentially on the group's own website, which also offers information on training, help with employment contracts, income surveys and other services.

In view of the rapidly changing working world, especially for professional and management staff, makes the reorientation of union work a matter of survival, said Andrew Bibby. However, he added, he does not wish to plead for the dissolution of fundamental union principles.

This question was indirectly addressed during the discussion. For example, although there is an obvious need to modernise union work, especially in connection with professional and management staff, it is proving difficult to implement change within the organisations. This problem has to do with traditional structures and with approaches to work that have taken shape over decades, but also with the fear that fundamental union values such as solidarity will fall by the wayside if unions perform the task of making individual members fit for working life.

A glance at the history and origins of unions will dispel these misgivings. Unions were established to put an end to competition among workers. Their purpose was to prevent those whose existence depended on wage labour from being put under even more pressure by employers paying different wages or offering different conditions. The aim was thus to create conditions to organise the necessary sale of workers' labour as favourably as possible. Across broad

areas of working life, this principle still prevails and is reflected in collective agreements. Moreover, the world of highly qualified work is characterised by highly differentiated activities with constantly changing qualifications. To be able to sell their labour at the most favourable possible conditions under these circumstances, individuals need to be prepared in terms of their professional qualification – as individuals with the aid of their union. The situation in which all members receive help with their preparation has a great deal to do with solidarity. It eliminates the competitive situation in that there is demand for qualified work, and employers need skilled labour. Of course it is not fully eliminated. However, that was not the case in the past, either – from an individual's standpoint. Only one worker in twenty became a foreman. And unemployment, which also affects qualified employees, is not the result of union policies, but rather poor business policies, inadequacies in the policy framework, or simply mismanagement. In this context unions, as organisations, can raise their voices and exert pressure. They also have to do so – as an indirect form of representation of interests, so to speak. But this differs from union policy, which applies directly to the members.

Modernisation in practice

The changes that have occurred in practical union activities were illustrated by the short reports in which colleagues from a number of European unions presented projects in which they are involved. For example, Dario Campeotto of the Italian union CISL pointed out a very noticeable difference. Employers used to regard unions as opponents. Today – at least when it comes to training – they have become partners in a dialogue. An example of this development is the training project initiated jointly with employers by three large Italian unions. It is based on a study of the changes taking place in the work of qualified staff.

Training for professional and managerial staff almost always takes specific working conditions as a starting point. They find themselves facing the problem of intensifying demands on their performance and excessive working hours. At they same time they need certain knowledge and skills to meet the requirements of their executive positions. This is the starting point of the example provided by the Finnish service sector union PAM presented by Seija Virta from the PAM executive board. Professional and managerial staff learn in small courses how to present goals, delegate tasks, motivate their subordinates, accept feedback and modify the work accordingly. A further aim is to improve interaction skills and teamwork and improve the atmosphere within the workplace. The programme also includes stress management courses.

The Swedish union SIF has had similar experience, as reported by Jenny Tjernberg and Thomas Walberg. A questionnaire among the 60,000 professional and managerial staff organised in SIF revealed that the majority of them have the feeling that they are bad superiors. They attribute this to the fact that they lack both the necessary qualifications for this role and the time to obtain them, and also to the fact that they do not have the time to take a calm approach to leadership work within the company. The union has responded in two ways. First, it launched training courses on the topic of creative management qualities. Second, it utilised the data from the questionnaire for a recruitment campaign among professional and managerial staff.

In France, too, reported Jean-Paul Bouchet of CFDT, professional and managerial staff face the problem of excessive working hours and an increasing workload. And they are impacted even harder by the transformation of the working world because they not only face the consequences – like everyone else – but also have to implement the concrete changes within their companies. This requires leadership qualities and social skills. CFDT offers the required qualifications through training programmes.

The examples show that (to return to the question on the union of the future posed above) the aim is to prepare professional and management staff as individuals for their professions. Any claim that this runs counter to union solidarity is refuted by the mere fact that they want to develop leadership qualities that make working life more attractive for their subordinates, who are themselves often union members.

Another aspect of modernisation in union activities is the use of new media. An explicit goal of the project presented by Jean-Paul Bouchet was to experiment with continuing education through distance learning. Techniques used in the courses included teleconferences and e-mail. However, the evaluation took place in the form of a conference. And although traditional media such as brochures or teaching sessions in seminar rooms have by no means disappeared, distance learning – for instance at CISL – is making increasing use of CDs.

SIF offers an interesting observation in connection with the use of media. In a continuing education programme on the subject of career planning, approximately 260 participants took part in onsite courses, whereas 8000 joined the Internet version. Tele-learning exists in other countries, such as Italy. However, the intensive utilisation in Sweden is probably a record. SIF reported that in general, certain target groups of the union such as freelancers and students make very intensive use of the Internet. Union campaigns specifically targeting students can definitely not yet be taken for granted. SIF presents itself to students as an organisation that can provide them with competent support and advice on their future career paths, for instance in connection with income, continuing education or job searches. Virtual meeting places are available for students in the Internet – as they are for other target groups.

An issue outside the sphere of the renewal of union policy is the financing of continuing education. Jean-Paul Bouchet pointed out that, in principle, employers and employees are equally responsible for employability and therefore should share the associated financial responsibility. In practice, participants have to pay for their continuing education courses in Italy. The situation is much different in Finland, where the courses are free and the participants' travel expenses are even reimbursed. The costs are borne by the union. However – added Seija Virta – PAM is trying to through the collective bargaining process to get companies to pay for continuing education, since they profit from it.

What a modern workforce education policy must deliver

The examples from the unions showed that the traditional form of continuing education – seminar rooms with instructors – is largely a thing of the past. The standards that must be met by continuing education in the future – both in terms

of form and content – and the role the universities will play was the subject of a talk by Stuart Reid of Cambridge University. Addressing the delegates at the UNI-Europa conference, he presented the conclusions of his research and the demands resulting from them. Reid works at an external institute of the university that does research on continuing education, both from a theoretical perspective and as a provider of educational services.

Stuart Reid's arguments again start with the fact that an initial education at school followed by vocational training or university studies is not sufficient as a knowledge base for an entire working life. The occupational status thus achieved, and the title that goes with it – lawyer, nurse, engineer – are actually only a passport for entering working life. However, a passport expires after a few years and has to be renewed. It is thus crucial in the view of the structural transformation to engage in continual learning.

However, Reid believes that educational facilities are poorly adapted to the transformation. The decisive factor is non-formal learning that comes from the workplace through one's own experience there. Everyone has probably seen something of this kind at work: Informal communication at the lunch table leads to a useful solution to a work-related problem. This kind of experiential learning is vital. Alongside it, learning cannot consist merely of updating technical knowledge. It is also important to provide qualifications that are transferable to other areas. This includes actually learning how to learn, for instance.

Reid's observations are backed up by the results of a study he carried out with a colleague between 1997 and 2001 under the EU-sponsored Leonardo da Vinci programme. The aim was to determine how young engineers want to continue their education and what options are actually made available to them. The study surveyed young engineers with university degrees and no more than 10 years of working experience in six European countries – the UK, Italy, Germany, Norway, Spain and France. Their preferences centre on two non-formal learning methods, namely personal support in the form of coaching or mentoring at the workplace accompanied by informal discussions with colleagues, followed by professional training in the form of a post-graduate degree or short professional courses. They gave low marks to methods such as maintaining a training logbook and offsite training events (for more information: www.cpi.ac.uk/).

In view of these desires on the part of those concerned, universities also have a responsibility to function as institutions for continuing education. They have to undergo a transition from classical providers to partners. Today they carry out planning, develop curricula and then offer the results to potential students. Instead they have to gain access to the various networks and cooperate within them to develop training opportunities. Reid believes that the unions comprise a network of this kind. If the universities are linked to this network to cooperate on continuing education activities, then they can jointly develop educational projects that reach out to nearly the entire workforce within companies. Universities must also make greater use of new media, for instance by offering learning opportunities via Internet.

An additional task that universities must set for themselves, said Reid, is to address the question of certification. The new forms of learning must be certified to ensure that the associated training is recognised by other companies

or in other sectors. The demands for flexibility in working life must be matched by the development of flexible forms of certification.

Life-long learning in Singapore

The city state of Singapore has undergone impressive economic growth in recent decades. One reason for this success is seen in the combination of economic, technological and education policy. At the conference in Brussels, the country's ambassador presented the programmes and measures designed to enable the population to engage in life-long learning. [1]

A qualified workforce is a vital ingredient in Singapore's regional and global competitiveness. Starting with this observation, the country launched the Manpower 21 project in 1998. It includes a number of measures for shaping Singapore's transition to a knowledge society. For individuals, it involves a system of life-long learning with the goal of ensuring their employability. The system is based on cooperation among the government, employers, unions and social organisations. Manpower 21 takes a holistic approach, covering the entire spectrum of education and the development of qualifications. Specifically, it follows the following six strategies:

1. Integrated manpower planning. It is crucial for Singapore to assess future manpower needs. This includes the possibility of supplementing the domestic workforce with foreign workers if the need arises. To support this task, an inter-ministry council was set up at the government level within the Ministry of Manpower to head the planning process and coordinate measures related to workforce development.

2. The school for life-long learning. Starting with the fact that jobs for life are a thing of the past, a five-component framework was created: incentives to learn, infrastructure, a certification system for skill standard recognition, the supply of information, promotion of life-long learning.

3. Talent pool. As a small country, Singapore has always relied on foreign workers at all qualification levels. Since international competition for highly qualified staff is intense, Singapore tries to persuade locals working abroad to return and also recruits foreign specialists. For this purpose, an information system has been set up to provide information on jobs and career opportunities in Singapore.

4. Transforming the work environment. This means improving work organisation, comprehensive staff development plans and effective use of resources to motivate employees.

5. The Ministry of Manpower is making efforts in cooperation with the Economic Development Board to encourage world-class institutions in workforce training to set up operations in Singapore and work there.

6. The tripartite cooperation among government, employers and unions is an important cornerstone for Singapore's economic growth and social progress. A

[1] The example of Singapore hat been chosen since the first UNI P&MS World Conference for P&MS had been held there and the Minister for Technology had introduced the program Manpower21. Singapore's democracy is strictly controled by the authorities and freedom of speech and gatherings is restricted. *(see amnesty international, Annual Report, 2003).*

joint annual summit is held every year for consultation on issues related to workforce potential, to review the results achieved and discuss further steps to be taken.

The ambassador returned to Point 2 to discuss it in more detail. The school of life-long learning is a framework for education after leaving school, and is therefore an integral part of Singapore's education system. It is important that the people understand this system and can afford it. To ensure that this is the case, a workforce education fund was created in 1997 to provide support for in-company workforce education. In addition, there is the manpower development assistance scheme, which is providing funds of 200 million dollars over a five-year period to create educational infrastructure in industry. And finally, a fund for life-long learning, endowed with 5 billion dollars, has been set up to sponsor all initiatives relevant to life-long learning and to integrate this area into the national education system.

Alongside these general programmes, special support is provided to specific economic sectors, for instance IT and communication technology and the finance sector.

The Ministry of Manpower systematically gathers data on the economic development of the various sectors and the resulting qualification requirements and labour market trends. This information is made available to companies and to employees, and serves as a basis for decisions on continuing education programmes.

To ensure that investments in life-long learning actually pay off, the Singapore Learning Initiative was launched in 2000 to convince employers and employees of the need for life-long learning. Once a year, for instance, a Life-long Learning Festival takes place.

The Manpower 21 initiative is intended as an integral part of Singapore’s educational policy to foster continual learning. The aim is to ensure that employees remain employable and the economy remains competitive. Unions play an important role, for instance by identifying employees' needs with regard to continuing education and workforce development. They also reach workers with lower qualifications and can motivate them to take part in continuing education programmes. Union representatives were also involved in the establishment of an expert team in October 2002 to analyse the country’s economic development and make proposals for restructuring. The group completed its work in February 2003. Its recommendations prompted the government to increase the educational budget yet again.

The tripartite cooperation in Singapore has proven its worth, and also benefits the unions. The state-run Skills Redevelopment Programme has been placed under their stewardship. In 1998, 10,000 employees took part. In 2002, there were 39,000 participants. It covers 30 industries. By the end of 2002 more than 1700 companies were taking part in the programme.

Future tasks

What can the unions and UNI-Europa do to improve the employability of professional and managerial staff? This was the central question for the working groups, since even the best ideas are of little use if they are not implemented.

The unions are already quite busy in the area of life-long learning – as one of the conclusions of Working Group 2 stated – but more needs to be done to raise awareness among employers, policymakers and also the unions' own members. One effective means of doing so would be collective agreements.

Their importance was also emphasised in the other working groups. They pointed out that collective agreements could help carry the issue into the workplace. They observed that today life-long learning is usually a topic of discussion only in times of crisis – either for the company or for individual employees when it becomes obvious that their qualifications are no longer adequate. Another possibility is to include continuing education among the topics covered in annual staff assessments within companies that conduct them.

However, they hastened to add that by referring to collective agreements, they did not intend to suggest that this is the only possible way or that collective agreements could relieve unions of their responsibility. The APESMA example shows another possible path, with unions entering the market as a provider and working to provide members with continuing education opportunities. There are also successful tripartite models for continuing education. The various approaches can definitely be used as input for a best practice analysis.

To make this possible, UNI-Europa plans to expand its role as a an information exchange platform for best practices, said Gerhard Rohde, who summed up the priorities for future activities. In his summary he also presented approaches to the financing of continuing education and the outlined the scheduled timeframe.

In this context a participant in the discussion proposed the development of a points system to permit benchmarking among the various approaches.

A concern addressed by two working groups was the need to link life-long learning to other union policy issues. For instance, special support should be provided to women among professional and managerial staff. This is an important issue at present in the Nordic countries, reported Working Group 1. Working Group 2 underscored the need to include the concept of equal opportunities when addressing continuing education issues, especially regarding equal opportunities for men and women, for migrants and older employees.

All in all, summed up Gerhard Rohde, the symposium showed that UNI-Europa can and must play an important role in connection with the question of employability and adaptability. A (long-term) goal is to convince the EU Commission to make Europe a knowledge centre, similar to Singapore. However, this could also come about with the involvement of employers. The unions would be on board in any case.