

Chapter 3

New Skills for New Jobs: Work Agency as a Necessary Condition for Successful Lifelong Learning

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3.1 Introduction

In the last 20–50 years, the world has been experiencing a range of economic and social developments that have had crucial impacts on labour markets, the world of work and life in general (e.g. Billett 2009; Green 2007). Educational policy in Europe focuses on the support of lifelong learning in order to cope with these developments. This chapter discusses the concept of work agency which is an educational approach explaining fostering and hindering influences on lifelong learning. The concept is construed as individual level construct; however, this decision for a specific analytic perspective does not neglect its interrelatedness with situational and social conditions. Before explaining work agency in detail, this chapter will lay out three crucial economic and social developments and their effects on the “new” jobs in the European labour market as well as on the associated “new” skills employees have to hold.

First of all, a major shift in the general economic structure of the most of the western countries could be observed. Whereas the primary and secondary sectors have been constantly shrinking, the tertiary and quaternary economic sectors have been growing. Along with these developments, the demand for manual work has been decreasing in favour of the so-called knowledge work (CEDEFOP 2010). Consequently, the unemployment rate of low-skilled workers has been constantly higher than for better-skilled individuals (OECD 2012a). This employment gap has further increased in the face of economic crises. Low-skilled workers have been especially likely to lose their jobs due to recent economic recessions (OECD 2012b). But even in employment, low-skilled workers are financially worse off compared to their better-skilled counterparts. A large income gap can especially be observed

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between employees with and without postsecondary education (OECD 2012a). Hence, pursuing higher educational levels as well as acquiring skills for new jobs in the tertiary and quaternary sector adds significantly to the individual economic welfare in the long run.

Second, the combination of exponentially growing and rapidly accumulating technological knowledge with a high level of global competition leads to steadily decreasing product and process life cycles (Green 2007). Consequently, work is becoming less routine, and employees need a higher capability to adapt to new work processes including new work-related tools (Billett 2009). Work-related change can therefore be characterised as a rule rather than an exception. It is therefore no surprise that employers prefer employees that are able to adapt to these and other unforeseen developments (CEDEFOP 2010). For individuals, it takes a combination of a certain amount of flexibility and the willingness and capacity for learning to manage substantial changes.

Third, traditional paternalistic employer-employee relationships that guaranteed individuals long-term employment contracts with one single employer are less and less common (Fugate et al. 2004; Hall 1996). Such organisational careers where the psychological contract between employer and employee ensured the exchange of commitment and hard work on the employee side for job security and a reward structure on the employer side (Cullinane and Dundon 2006) have been replaced with a more “protean”-type career model (Hall 1996, 2002). Individuals nowadays need to self-manage their careers within their current organisations and at the labour market in general (Battilana and D’Aunno 2009). Although this might open up opportunities for some employees, especially for low-skilled workers, the loss of such a psychological contract might bring serious threats. For example, on the background of current economic instabilities, many employers hire new personnel only on short-term basis. Other employers even tend to subcontract their personnel using labour leasing agencies (OECD 2012a). For employees, both strategies result in precarious employment conditions, frequent job changes and/or high job insecurities.

The briefly outlined developments describe the range of possible features that characterise the so-called “new” jobs of the new millennium. A common issue of those megatrends is a constantly growing uncertainty regarding work conditions and prospective employment situations. These uncertainties require employees to continuously develop their work-related knowledge, skills and competences. In order to secure current employment and to open up new employment opportunities, employees cannot only rely on their competences and on their qualifications obtained in their initial vocational education. They are rather requested to engage in lifelong learning endeavours that allow ongoing employability under the changing requirements of the labour market. Although desirable from the employee point of view, such learning opportunities might not always be automatically offered and arranged by the employer or external institutions (Strategy Group 2011). It therefore takes both the motivation and the capacity of the employee to actively seek out learning opportunities. Individuals have to engage in certain self-management behaviours that allow them to cope with ambiguous situations. They have to be able

to make decisions at any life stage that allow them to exert control over their professional work-life courses. Individuals have to develop appropriate identities that ensure them independence from concrete conditions of current developments. This may not only comprise lifelong learning activities but also the bottom-up development or transformation of work practices and work conditions.

This chapter aims at introducing the concept of *work agency*, which covers the personal capacity to cope with the stated challenges. The concept describes on an individual level the prerequisites to cope with the challenges described above. This contribution is based on the following line of thought: The second paragraph develops the understanding of work agency as well as conceptualises and defines the concept. Then, the third paragraph links this understanding of work agency with the issue of lifelong learning, in order to argue how work agency contributes to the development of expertise and, thus, to the “new” skills the European agenda claims for the “new” jobs at the European labour markets. The chapter ends with the development of a research agenda for educational research.

3.2 Work Agency

From an educational science perspective, it is important that individuals develop qualities to face the upcoming challenges connected to ambiguous and uncertain developments. Such qualities comprise the individual competences to ensure them independence from concrete conditions of current employment and to apply self-directed vocational flexibility and mobility through lifelong learning. Individuals need not only to be able to seize available opportunities potentially leading to further personal development but also to actively shape current work conditions. This way, individuals are not only reacting to change but rather deliberately initiate change from the bottom-up. In the following discussion, the capacity to make such work-related decisions and to act on these choices will be comprised in the concept *work agency*.

The idea of *agency* is not an entirely new one. Its roots can at least be traced back to Kant’s idea of enlightenment (cf. Ecclestone 2007) and the historical debate about determinism versus free will (cf. Wehmeyer 2004). In general terms, agency is connected to the idea that human beings are indeed in possession of a free will and that they use this will to make decisions and choices regarding their own lives (Wehmeyer 2001). They are perceived as self-determined agents that have the fundamental capacity to take initiatives, to control and to willingly change their life situations as well as to resist external forces (Eteläpelto et al. 2012).

In the last decades, the agency concept has been widely used in different research disciplines with a broad variety of meanings and interpretations. However, there is no well-established and widely shared understanding of this concept. Based on their research, Eteläpelto et al. (2012) could identify four different lines of theoretical discussions on agency. Within the *social sciences* agency mainly comprises intentional and goal-directed processes at the individual level (e.g. Giddens 1984).

The concept is often implicitly or explicitly used as a notion of human freedom or individual volition within a given social structure (Hitlin and Elder 2007). Agency concerns the initiation of human actions. It can be understood as the self's executive function to make choices, take responsibilities and exert control over the environment (Baumeister 1999; Gecas 2003). Research in organisational behaviour, for example, discusses agency in the concepts about self-started behaviour at work (e.g. personal initiative and job crafting behaviour; e.g. Bindl and Parker 2010; Frese and Fay 2001; Wrzesniewski and Dutton 2001). In contrast, the *post-structural* discussion is strongly rooted in social-constructionist ideas. In radical post-structural discussions, agency is almost exclusively manifested at discursive and collective levels. Agency is a social rather than an individual phenomenon. More intermediate post-structural notions on the other hand see agency as "a key mediating category through which the inter-connections between cultural and economic forces, identity formations and social structures can be examined" (McNay 2004, p. 177). In subject-oriented *sociocultural* discourses on the concept, individuals are understood as agentic actors within a social world. Agency is strongly related to subject's professional identities and subjectivities (e.g. Holland et al. 2003; Billett 2006). Those might be manifested as decisions to participate in or rejections of certain practices (e.g. Billett 2004). The focus of the *life course and identity* discussion on the other hand lies on choices and actions that influence individuals' life courses. Agency describes the active construction of one's own life course within the given historical and social circumstances (e.g. Gecas 2003; Elder 1995). Prototypical examples for agency in this discussion are decisions concerning the transition from one educational stage to another or vocational and career-related choices.

In our understanding agency comprises the general capacity and disposition to make intentional choices, to initiate actions based on these choices and to exercise control over the self and the environment (see for similar conceptualisations Eteläpelto et al. 2012; Martin 2004; Watkin 2005). In order to exercise agency, individuals have to set personal goals, to decide to pursue those goals and to show commitment and willingness as well as resilience to actually reach those goals in cases of drawbacks and obstacles. Such individuals perceive the locus of control within themselves (Rotter 1966). Hence, they have a self-concept of being an active individual with opportunities to influence their own development and to tune environmental components in favour of their own goals. The opposite of agency would be a rather reactive behaviour. Instead of trying to make intentional choices that lead to the engagement in self-started activities, individuals practising this passive or undeveloped agency tend to react and comply with external forces and conditions. Such individuals may either not have the capacity to make intentional choices or do not succeed to act on their choices. In either way, such individuals are highly dependent on other people and experience themselves being non-effective on their own development and environment in comparison to causal agents that have control over their lives.

It might be clear that individuals cannot be characterised as either fully agentic or completely reactive. The proposed dichotomy between *developed* and *undeveloped*

agency is only used for analytical reasons to separate different qualities of agency. Both categories should be understood as ideal end points of a continuum with many possible manifestations between them.

It can be assumed that human beings have a natural propensity to exercise developed agency because they either have the need to experience causation and control (deCharms 1968) or the need to be self-determining (Deci 1980; Deci and Ryan 1985). Both needs describe a basic human urge to be a cause of one's own actions. However, not all individuals are able to satisfy those needs in the same way and to the same extent. The reasons for this might interdependently be found in situational and/or individual factors.

Any kind of agency is always at least somehow bounded by opportunities and constraints defined by the environment and the situation in which the individual tries to act (Evans 2007; Silbereisen et al. 2007). To give an example, consider a school dropout that decides to take up his educational trajectory by enrolling at a university at a certain point after leaving school. Usually this will not be possible since universities demand certain entry requirements that the described individual cannot provide. However, the same individual may have the opportunity to obtain such requirements through evening classes. After having acquired the necessary qualifications, the individual is consequently free to pursue his/her initial aim. This example should have illustrated that agency cannot be understood as the freedom to act in an unrestrained way, regardless of social and structural circumstances. External conditions and circumstances always inherit the potential to enable and also constrain the exercise of agency. One can also say that agency is always at least somehow partially socioculturally mediated (Ahearn 2001; Hitlin and Elder 2007).

Although the social structure both constraints and enables human actions to a certain point, behaviour is not a simple function of social and physical conditions. Different individuals interpret external factors in particular ways based on their prior experience. Such a perception of concrete circumstances then affects the human goal-setting process and the motivation to pursue those goals. Both the anticipated outcome of an action and the expected consequences of these outcomes are taken into account into the decision whether to act or not to act (Vroom 1964). Although to a certain point externally defined, the expectation about outcomes and consequences depends also on the individual's beliefs about his/her personal capacity to influence the results of his/her own actions. The actual decision to engage in certain activities that ought to reach certain goals is highly dependent on the belief that one is personally capable of the intended actions (Bandura 1982, 2001). Such self-efficacy beliefs affect the perception of external factors and subjectively define whether they are construed to enable or constrain planned actions.

Whether an individual develops high or low self-efficacy beliefs in a certain domain depends on biographical incidents (Gecas 2003). Individuals that could experience situations where they caused actions and where the consequences of those actions lead to desired outcomes are more likely to have higher self-efficacy beliefs than individuals who could not make such experiences. On the other hand, frequent experiences of failures can easily lead to low self-efficacy beliefs

(Bandura 1977, 1997). This, for example, explains why some people are reluctant to engage in formal learning settings. Although they might experience the need to update their competences in a certain domain, they believe that they are not capable to do so because of negative school or similar experiences (Brookfield 2006). However, low self-efficacy beliefs may also result of not being able to exercise agency in the past. If an individual is constantly deprived of being a cause in certain situations, he/she might learn to be helpless under similar circumstances (Seligman 1972). In extreme cases, individuals learn to be passive and reactive rather than to exercise any kind of agency. In either way, low self-efficacy beliefs and learned helplessness lead to situations where individuals fail to exercise agency even though the opportunities for agentic actions are widely present.

Although self-efficacy is often conceptualised as general belief, there is many evidence that the beliefs of being capable to act and to reach goals differ between tasks and domains for single individuals (e.g. Bandura 1997; McAvay et al. 1996; Skaalvik and Skaalvik 2004). This might be best explained through the individuals' prior biography and his/her past opportunities to successfully exercise agency in certain life domains (e.g. work, education, love life).

Based on this insight, one can argue that individuals with the general capacity and prosperity to exercise agency direct their agentic energy towards certain domains. This agency channelling depends upon the perception of current opportunities and/or constraining factors for agentic actions as well as past domain-specific experiences. An individual, for example, might not show any kind of agency at work but acts highly agentic as the trainer of a local sports team in his/her leisure time. The agentic engagement in such voluntary work might be chosen over the work life because past external conditions did not allow exercising agency in the workplace. In such a case, he/she appears unlikely to develop work-related self-efficacy beliefs. On the other hand, the voluntary work might have allowed a range of agentic actions that led to the development of self-efficacy beliefs as well as a certain kind of individual fulfilment.

Within a certain domain, individuals may exercise agency in a wide range of concrete actions. What kinds of agency expressions are finally exercised will depend upon domain-specific individual goal orientations as well as possible opportunities or constraints. It is therefore indispensable for any empirical investigation on agency to explicitly define the domain of analysis as well as the type of agency expression that the study wants to focus on. In order to stimulate further empirical research, the discussion on agency will now be limited to agentic actions concerning the domain of work.

The concept *work agency* can be understood as a facet of agency that is directed towards the individual's working life. Thus, agentic individuals are causal agents that deliberately affect both their own work-related life trajectories and/or the general conditions of their work environment. Exercising agency at work or in relationship to work-related affairs is a fundamental precondition to manage the challenges connected to the economic and social developments outlined at the beginning. Although work agency can be manifested in different ways, we will now constrain our analyses on two relevant expressions of agency that are deeply connected

with lifelong learning as well as the handling of work-related uncertainties. In order to concretise our understanding of both expressions, the following examples shall be used for illustrative purposes.

The first example is a car mechanic that just started to work for a new employer. In her previous employment, a tight reward system was introduced that ultimately lead to reduced repair quality. At first, she tried to address this matter to her employer but did not succeed. For her, high quality standards are highly important because they are necessary requirement for the passengers' safety. Since she could not change the situation at her old employer, she decided to look for a new job that complies better with her work philosophy. Apart from the better employee-employer fit, she perceives her new job as a new challenge with high learning potentials. She constantly uses every opportunity to repair cars with problems yet unknown to her. She both wants to further develop her skills and also to be better prepared for new situations where her skills are needed. The second example is about a teacher working in a school for mentally and physically handicapped children. She constantly reflects about the current and future situation of the students and is especially concerned about possible employment chances that follow compulsory education. In order to improve the employment chance of her protégés, she deliberately looks for well-suited training material. A role player game simulating application processes and early employment years met her criteria, and she started to use it at her school. For every student cohort, she invests a lot of her spare time to organise and prepare this role player game. Usually, the games are a big success in terms of preparing students for the time after school as well as student satisfaction during the activity. Although she does not get the recognition of her supervisors and colleagues she would like to get, she launches the game again every new year.

Both cases can be used to illustrate two analytical separate but not fully disjunct expressions of work agency. The two analytical categories refer to the goal orientation of exercising agency: There is work agency that is predominately oriented towards outcomes on the individual level. Such *individual-oriented work agency* can best be described as making a difference in or for the self. Individuals exercising this kind of work agency pursue a personal curriculum at work. In our example, the car mechanic might best fall into this category. The agentic action is mainly directed at the improvement of the own person-environment fit by either changing individual or situational characteristics. Typical expressions for this kind of developed work agency is the deliberate engagement in learning and development activities as well as a strive to shape one's own career trajectory. Individuals that exercise an undeveloped work agency, on the other hand, tend to comply with existing career pattern that are externally provided or they accept other's definition of self and role. In comparison, the other orientation of work agency comprises actions directed towards changing the situation of others or towards making differences to current work practices (*externally oriented agency*). It is not the individual himself/herself that is the focus of change and improvements but rather situational characteristics. In our examples, the teacher might be an instance for this kind of behaviour. Individuals express this kind of work agency by addressing tensions in work practice, by creating new work practices and/or by the transformation of already existing work practices.

Table 3.1 Conceptualisation of both dimensions of agency

Orientation	Developed	Undeveloped
<i>Individual-oriented agency</i>	Intentional activity to make a difference in or for the self, e.g.: Deliberately pursue learning and development activities Shaping one's own career Improving the person-environment fit	Tendency to: Comply with existing career patterns Accept other's definitions of self and role Accept given work conditions
<i>Externally oriented agency</i>	Intentional activity to make a difference in the current work practice, e.g.: Develop or transform work practices Create new work practices Address tensions in work practices	Tendency to: Overlook tensions in work practices Protect existing work practices even if problems are obvious

Less agentic individuals, for instance, tend to overlook tensions in work practices by not addressing them. Table 3.1 summarises the conceptualisation of both expressions of work agency in combination with the earlier introduced categories of developed and undeveloped agency.

3.3 Lifelong Learning and Its Interdependence with Work Agency

Education and lifelong learning are indispensable contributions to individuals' access to labour markets, to economic growth and competitiveness and to social cohesion in Europe. In times of permanent change, top-down-oriented educational policy cannot be sufficient and must be complemented by bottom-up educational activities. The concept of work agency describes individuals' capacity to make intentional choices and to act on these choices in ways that make a difference in their professional lives. Such an understanding of agency comprises individual skills, attitudes and beliefs which generates individual independence from concrete workplace conditions. Maintaining competent agency implies strategies of advancing and renewing an individual's skills and competencies. This requires individuals at their workplaces to enrol in knowledge cultures and disciplines. Work life is understood as participation in a community which enables individuals to advance knowledge and skills to be able to raise crucial questions, identify opportunities and engage in learning activities.

In general, lifelong learning describes the economic demand and the political invitation for learning that comprises all phases of the human lifespan (European Commission 2000). It implies that learning does explicitly not end with the completion of compulsory education or the achievement of a professional qualification. Learning must not only be perceived as a means to enter the labour market. Work or nonwork-related learning has to continue to assure both the long-term

employability of individuals and their social and cultural participation. Learning is hereby not restricted to educational settings provided by educational institutions like community colleges or training suppliers. It rather also includes learning through the participation and reflection in day-to-day activities at the workplace or the family life (Fischer 2000).

A key feature of lifelong learning described by the OECD (2004) is the motivation to learn. After finishing compulsory education, the further development of skills and knowledge requires both a certain desire and willingness for learning and progression. Apart from few legal obligations in some professions (e.g. teaching, law, medicine), the participation in institutionalised learning programmes is usually not mandatory. The same applies for the utilisation of less institutionalised learning opportunities. Professional magazines, for example, might be available at workplaces, but employees are usually not formally required to read them. It is therefore absolutely necessary that individuals build up intentions to seize available learning opportunities or to initiate conditions that open up new learning potentials. These intentions have then to be translated into appropriate actions that allow skill and knowledge development.

Work agency can therefore be understood as a necessary precondition for successful work-related and nonwork-related lifelong learning. Individuals have to make choices regarding their learning and to act on these choices in order to create and pursue a personal learning curriculum. A passive approach to lifelong learning entails the risk to slow down or to actually stop professional development processes. Especially for low-qualified employees, corporate organisations seem to be reluctant to provide training and development opportunities in an adequate extent (Asplund and Salverda 2004). Thus, especially those kinds of employees are at risk for not being able to adequately handle work-related changes that result out of the megatrends described in the first paragraph. Without taking an active approach towards lifelong learning by proactively demanding learning opportunities, certain employees end up being excluded from further professional development and therefore lose their employability in the long term.

However, even when learning opportunities are provided by the employer, a passive approach may lead to the instrumentalisation of learning processes. By relying only on learning opportunities that are readily available and/or somehow compulsory, individuals give up the control of their professional development. Consequently, learning programmes will not always meet individuals' concrete needs. Rather contrary, organisations will use the provision of learning opportunities to pursue an agenda that is directed towards corporate objectives that may not always overlap with the goals of their employees. Ashton (2004), for instance, reports that companies use trainings not for professional development and educational purposes. The main reason behind the company's training efforts was to increase staff flexibility in order to guarantee that internal vacancies can be filled up on very short notice. In the long run, such human resource development strategies can systematically be used to make personnel redundant (Bratton and Gold 1999). Training and development programmes may also be used to reproduce and to reinforce hierarchical inequalities at the workplace. Employees at lower levels of the organisational hierarchy tend to gain access only to training that aims at skills and knowledge which are directly

applicable in their current workplace. Training on knowledge that can be generalised and transferred between different workplaces and organisations, on the other hand, is often reserved for employees on higher hierarchical levels (Rainbird 2000).

In general, individuals only exercising an undeveloped agency are restricted to a smaller variety of learning opportunities in comparison to more agentic individuals. Although the access to learning experiences is often limited, Bryson et al. (2006) found evidence that employees could create development opportunities by taking initiative in otherwise rather restrictive work environments. The described employees proactively asked and sought out for both on-the-job learning affordances and institutionalised training opportunities which are usually not automatically provided to them. Other workers used their leisure time to deliberately engage in activities that provided positive spill overs to their daily work activities. In a similar manner, Evans et al. (2004) as well as Evans and Kersh (2006) report about employees that did not wait till their employer provided further training. These employees rather took a chance to proactively negotiate with their employers in order to get access to further learning opportunities. Both studies showed that an active approach to one's own professional development can open up new learning potentials that would not be available without exercising work agency. Employees have to deliberately invest time and energy into their professional development. Without making active choices to show a certain commitment and resilience, their extended access to new learning opportunities would be limited or in the worst case not exist at all.

Exercising work agency may not only be important in terms of increasing the variety of learning opportunities that individuals have access to. Research on expertise shows that individual-oriented agency is also strongly connected to the quality of development processes. Extensive experience is a necessary requirement for expertise development in all kind of domains (Gruber 2001). However, not all individuals that spent the same time span engaging with activities of their domain eventually reach expert status (Ericsson 2006). The plain engagement in routine and mundane activities that are already well known and mastered to a certain point has only very restricted learning potential. In order to further improve particular aspects of performance, individuals have to engage in activities that are still outside their current performance. Such activities range from new tasks that have not been mastered yet to activities that help to understand why past actions did not lead to outcomes that have been expected. Ericsson et al. (1993) describe this kind of behaviour in the concept deliberate practice. Central characteristics are for those activities that they have usually not perceived as something pleasant but rather wearisome and unpleasant. Consequently, individuals have to actively decide to engage in these kinds of activities and to show willingness and resilience to successfully pursue them. Again, this is the core of individual-oriented agency as defined in the second section.

So far, the discussion has been predominately focussed on the relationship of individual-oriented agency with certain aspects of lifelong learning. Although not that obvious, exercising externally oriented agency can also be connected to lifelong learning processes of the agentic individual as well as related others (e.g. colleagues, subordinates).

Vähäsantanen et al. (2009) studied vocational teachers visiting the workplaces of their students during a workplace learning programme. Apart from supporting the workplace learning process of their students, teachers were also responsible to assist

organisational staff acting as trainers in the workplace. However, many teachers perceived the practitioners seeing them to be rather incompetent in terms of their daily work routines. For some teachers, this led them to be only passive observers that are not allowed to criticise or question current workplace practices. On the contrary, other teachers showed a more extensive agentic approach by actively indicating improper work routines using their own professional knowledge. This way, exercising agency started learning processes for all participants and eventually led to improved work practices.

Rainbird et al. (2004) report about a female supervisor in cleaning work showing extensive individual-oriented agency that later on led to agentic actions on a more collective level. The woman managed to get a supervisor position in order to obtain more job autonomy and to make her job more interesting. Using the new position, she introduced a new system to assign workers to units and developed new routines to organise work in general. Furthermore, she used her supervision duties to teach others correct cleaning methods. The reported case shows that a new job position that was established through the exercise of individual-oriented agency opened up opportunities for externally oriented agency. By exercising this externally oriented agency, the supervisor did not only change current practices but also stimulated the learning of her subordinates.

In a study on hospital cleaning staff, Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) describe a group of very agentic cleaners. Members of this group perceived their work tasks as a critical part of the patients healing process. Based on this interpretation, the cleaners discretionarily tried to time their regular cleaning in order to avoid disturbance of care procedures carried out by medical staff. They furthermore deliberately added new tasks that were outside their formal job description. They showed visitors around or cheered up patients by talking to them. Again, the described cleaners exercised externally oriented agency and managed to change both their own and other's current practices. However, successfully establishing the targeted results of such job crafting requires significant analyses of work procedures in general and work tasks of other employees. In other terms, the agentic cleaners had to establish work-related knowledge that surpassed the knowledge that is usually required to do cleaning job.

Summarising this understanding of work agency, it should have become obvious that agency is construed in a sense that it mediates and shapes individuals' capabilities to be successful in developing a self-directed, self-responsible career and life path during their work life and beyond. This implies that the exercise of work agency not only refers to the creation of learning opportunities. It implies further that the exercise of agency also results in the realisation of learning experiences after creating opportunities. Such an understanding of agency raises various research options for empirical investigations.

3.4 Research Agenda

In order to develop research further, a multi-perspective research approach appears appropriate. Literature on agency and lifelong learning represents different paradigmatic and methodological approaches which yet are not well connected to each

other (e.g. for research on agency; Eteläpelto et al. 2012). The proposed research agenda suggests investigating effects of individual as well as social influences on the exercise of agency and how the concept is related to engagement in formal, flexible and instant learning processes. The agenda also proposes to investigate how lifelong learning investments are related to the development of work agency and how they contribute to growth and competitiveness. Such a research programme requires the application of different paradigms and research methods. The comparison of findings among these approaches will provide strong empirical evidence (1) on how best to support the development of work agency, (2) on its effects on lifelong learning and (3) on how agentic lifelong learning affects societal and economic outcomes. The different paradigmatic and methodological approaches can be distinguished as follows.

3.4.1 Large-Scale Approach

The core of such an approach is focusing on the developmental trends of the effectiveness of lifelong learning activities in Europe from the point of view of work careers, employment and productivity. The top-down implemented educational systems and policies of different European countries differ in many respects. This reflects partly deeper differences in the societies and economic structures as well as demographic features of the populations. Studies also show that the economic impact of education varies in different EU countries (e.g. Temple 2001). Such research aims at analysing educational trajectories on different levels of education and in different sectors, dropout rates, exclusion, transition periods (from education to work, from one workplace to another and from work back into the educational system), social well-being, gender and work career and employment rate. Demographic data of different countries could be used as important basis for the detailed analyses of the efficacy of lifelong learning, e.g. follow-up and secondary analyses of the database of the Hungarian Educational Longitudinal Project (HELP). There are data of the educational achievements of ca. 4,000 students for the first eight grades of primary school. Their future expectations and career plans may be connected to their educational history. Similar data exists for 3,000 students for their high-school career (grades 8–12). Comparable databases exist or are being currently build in various European countries (e.g. NEPS in Germany; Blossfeld et al. 2011) and could be object of a large-scale approach. Those analyses would reveal how exactly and which types of lifelong learning policies are most conducive to innovation, competitiveness and growth. Furthermore, more individual-based analyses could concentrate on the identification of individual variables that explain agentic participation in lifelong learning.

3.4.2 Cognitive Approach

Applying a cognitive approach means to operationalise singular variables for empirical measurement. The cognitive research approach focuses on the mental states and individual perceptions of working life; data collection will comprise questionnaires and interviews. Within the cognitive research approach, following selection of variables would be appropriate objects of investigation of the development as well as the effects of work agency:

- *Individual self-perception.* The Self-Determination Theory of Motivation (Deci and Ryan 1985) can be considered as a crucial indicator of the agentic self-perception of individuals. The experience of autonomy, competence and social embedding enables individuals to perceive themselves as subject of their work and learning biography (Harteis et al. 2004; Ryan and Deci 2000).
- *Behavioural aspects of agency.* Instead of just focussing on individuals' perception of their agentic nature, measurements about the individual expressions of work agency are indispensable. At this time, no explicit questionnaires on work agency exist. However, an adaption of the job crafting scale (Tims et al. 2012) could be used to measure individual-oriented work agency.
- *External conditions.* A crucial issue of external conditions is shaped by the workplace environment and its opportunities and restrictions for individual agentic work behaviour. There are questionnaires available for grasping employees' opportunities for participation and responsible work behaviour (Festner et al. 2007; Harteis 2012).
- *Individual biography.* We have argued that past experiences affect the individual's capacity to exercise agency (Sect. 3.2). As prior learning is an important individual influence on each learning process, investigations of emotional experiences particularly regarding learning success and failures (Cannon and Edmondson 2001; Harteis et al. 2008), domain experience and expertise (i.e. procedural knowledge, routines, intuition) appear appropriate (e.g. Boshuizen et al. 2004; Gijbels et al. 2010; Harteis and Billett 2013).
- *Internal aspirations.* Internal aspirations (e.g. short- and long-term objectives) should be grasped in order to comprehend the subjects' educational and occupational career, their biography and their further ambitions in these areas. In addition, measurements indicating subjects' self-efficacy (Bandura 1997) and epistemic beliefs (Schraw et al. 2002; Harteis et al. 2010) are strongly connected to goal-setting processes and should therefore also be collected.
- *Effects on individual level.* Interviews can reveal subjects' creativity and flexibility in working contexts, can grasp issues of well-being by covering happiness and can finally discuss individual perceptions of labour market access (i.e. appropriate work alternatives and perception of competition). Questionnaires could be used to measure subjects' job satisfaction (Brayfield and Rothe 1951). Those measurements could be used to explain both the development and the effects of work agency.

- *Effects on social (i.e. company or societal) level.* Interviews will cover the subjects' view on the labour market situation and will explore the big issues of societal being, as they are equality (e.g. discrimination experiences), welfare (e.g. work-life balance) and social cohesion (e.g. participation on societal events).

3.4.3 *Relational Approach*

The relational approach of investigation focuses on the question how work agency is developed and sustained collaboratively in everyday practices in different and shifting organisational settings. Project work might be an appropriate kind of work organisation for analysing interindividual relations. In the global knowledge, economy knowledge-intensive work has become a key factor (Sect. 3.1) and is increasingly organised as project work (Ettliger 2003; Midler 1995; Lindkvist 2004). Project work takes different forms within stable and dynamic contexts (Grabher 2003). One common feature, however, is that project work demands work agency as people collaborate in shifting context, around shifting tasks and within different organisations. To establish and maintain work relationships, necessary competencies include making one's own competence relevant for the tasks at hand and learning from others, as well as to identify competencies critical for the performance of the team. Several studies have pointed to the need for such competencies (Eklund et al. 2010; Guile 2011; Ó Riain 2000). Research has also shown that knowledge-intensive project work presupposes collective as much as individual modes of activity (Guile 2010; Børte and Nerland 2010). However, little is known about how project work and its related demands differ between stable and dynamic contexts or about how these competencies are oriented to, developed and sustained.

To fill this gap, research is necessary to follow the question (a) how specific organisational settings support or discourage the development of work agency, (b) how work agency is developed and sustained within different organisational boundaries through collaboration and (c) how work agency facilitates individuals' and groups' capacities to evolve and/or transform professional and workplace practice. Such research attempts to contribute to identifying critical competencies and their support mechanisms that may enhance individuals' employability and organisations' competitiveness in a global knowledge economy.

3.4.4 *Ethnographic Approach*

This approach presupposes that human beings have different kinds of relations to the world representing (1) discursive, (2) practical and (3) embodied levels (e.g. Archer 2003). These have all been taken into account when addressing how work agency is practised in the sociocultural and material conditions of the workplace. These kinds of studies can be conducted within an *ethnographic framework*

(Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). An ethnographic approach is necessary for the elaboration of work-community social processes, including current work practices, power relations and dominating discourses, plus the subject positions available in the workplace. At the initial stage of the ethnographic data collection, research shall focus on these contextual conditions, since one needs to have a comprehensive view of the sociocultural contexts before suggesting any interventions. A *longitudinal strategy* will be needed for collecting data on dynamic processes and on the influences of interventions. After the first intervention, previous data will be utilised at each stage in the planning of subsequent interventions. Collin et al. (2010) – for example – developed a method of collective ethnography within the hospital context.

Since the data is mainly qualitative in nature, the validity and credibility of analysis will be enhanced through *researcher and methods triangulation*. Researcher triangulation means that at all stages of the analysis, at least two researchers will collaborate in conducting the data analysis (Patton 2002). Methods triangulation implies that different aspects of the phenomenon and contexts will be taken into account in putting together different data sets (from observations and interviews). Methods triangulation is used to increase the internal validity of data analysis and to create a multilevel understanding of the phenomenon investigated.

3.5 Summary

This contribution introduced the concept work agency. Work agency has been defined as the general capacity and disposition to make intentional choices, to initiate actions based on these choices and to exercise control over the self and the environment in relation to work-related matters. It has been made clear that the exercise of work agency is indispensably related to lifelong learning as well as the general capacity to manage uncertainties in the context of work. Since (empirical) research on work agency and its relationship to lifelong learning is still scarce, a possible research agenda was set up. The proposed research agenda takes stock of recent research activities on professional VET and lifelong learning in European contexts and implies a considerable progress beyond the state of the art:

- Maintaining competent work agency implies the individual to find, develop and adopt strategies of advancing and renewing specific skills and competencies. The enrolment in knowledge cultures and disciplines or vocations, hereby, is an important requirement for competence-oriented work agency. Participating in communities enables individuals to advance their knowledge and skills to express a critical personality, to identify chances and opportunities and finally to get socially engaged in an explorative manner.
- Contemporary societal and economic developments prepare the ground and circumstances for the creation of highly professional jobs for which nowadays no institutional graduation or apprenticeship programme exists. Research, therefore, should address the importance of lifelong formal, non-formal and informal

learning for adequately preparing individuals for these new jobs' demands. Ensuring the individual's capability to identify and start such a new job is an important task and contribution for sustaining employability and better jobs in the twenty-first century.

- There are diverse requirements for vocational, occupational and professional transformations across varying industry and service sectors or lines. Whereas in some areas transformation is necessary as the industry goes down (e.g. coal mining), other areas transform due to general societal, macroeconomic or environmental changes (e.g. increase of relevance in vocational education and training, teacher education and workplaces in the logistic area).

To sum up, researching the concept of work agency has the potential to enhance a progress beyond the state of the art in scientific as well as in practical respects. The parallel application of different theoretical and methodological approaches on a commonly shared research issue, the comparison of findings and their merging are extraordinary ways of conducting research. One reason is that this procedure demands a critical mass of research resources which are difficult to provide on national levels. Another reason is that scientific discourses of professional and work-related learning often remain within their own paradigmatic community (Harteis and Billett 2008). The proposed agenda transcends these paradigmatic borders. Furthermore, it allows developing educational interventions for all protagonists of societal outcomes: workforce (employees), employers, stakeholders and politicians. By that, the agenda focuses crucial topics raised in the new EU Framework Programme Horizon 2020 (European Commission 2011).

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