

Middle-aged people with Soviet-era university education in the lifelong learning environment of the transition period

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Summary

The author was inspired to write this article by the initial results of the international survey measuring adults' literacy and numeracy skills and problem-solving skills in technology-rich environments. The survey revealed that the „problem-solving skills in technology-rich environments in Estonia are below average compared to other participating countries” (Halapuu & Valk, 2013, p. 37). A significant „contribution” to Estonia's low result was made by middle-aged and elderly university-educated people, whose „all skills were below the average of the participating countries” (Halapuu & Valk, 2013, p. 69).

The qualitative research conducted by the author reaches similar results, but the conclusions relying on the results of the research are based on the analysis of the culture of the transition period in Estonia, the policies of lifelong learning and the discontinuity in the trajectories of the generation's lifespan.

The article deals with the renewal of cultural capital of specialists with Soviet-era university education born at the end of the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s, during the transition era, based on the results of 12 qualitative interviews conducted in 2011. The researched group represents the generation of professionals who were strongly tied to the labour market prior to the transition period and whose important resource for success was their specialised university education that had good prospects to become the favourable seed capital in the transition period (Helemäe et al., 2000).

In the article, the renewal of cultural capital through participation in job-related continuing education and retraining is observed. In addition, it deals with the different ways and results of acquiring the basic skills of the transition period (e.g., English and computer skills).

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Cultural capital is analysed based on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and its relationship with economic capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 2003). According to Bourdieu, educational institutions, above all institutions of higher education, were among the key factors for the reproduction of social space of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2003). As in the Soviet Union, the classical economic capital (private property) was missing, Bourdieu's „principle of distinction" operated here between the owners of cultural capital rather than economic (Bourdieu, 2003). Soviet-era higher education could be regarded as an opportunity for social distinction from agents with lower cultural capital. Bourdieu's classical distinction factors and resources in different field hierarchies (Bourdieu, 2003) can be observed in post-socialist countries starting from the transition period together with the emergence of market economy.

The transition culture of the 1990s (Kennedy, 2002), the globalisation process and ICT development (Bell, 1999; Castells, 2000; Perez, 2002) activated new functions and resources in the Bourdieuan cultural field (Bourdieu, 1984). Knowledge accumulation and information processing functions of the network society (Castells, 2000) went beyond Bourdieu's classical cultural field, blending with both the social and the economic field. „Lifelong learning", the new education paradigm that started to spread more extensively from the mid-1990s, added the combined effect of the working world and the education system to the reproduction field of cultural capital. (Centeno, 2011; Rubenson, 2004).

In the study, the interviewees' Soviet-time knowledge (formal education) and their readiness to restart learning during the transition period are considered as forms of cultural capital; the existing and newly acquired qualification as cultural assets and the lifelong learning environments of the transition period (continuing education and retraining courses) as institutions.

The author follows the interviewees' participation in the cultural field chronologically during different stages in the economic and political transformations of the transition period in Estonia from 1988 to 2008 (Lauristin & Vihalemm, 2009). In connection with the transition period, as a specificity of post-socialist transition, the key concept „discontinuity" is used, which in the Estonian society means „lack of continuity on the political, social, cultural and empirical scale" (Kõresaar, 2005, p. 69).

The radical reforms of the early 1990s cut off mainly the developing „life course trajectory" (Elder & Shanahan, 2006) of the young adult generation. At the beginning of the transition period the research group belonged to the generation of young adults (22–40 years) (Sugarman, 2001).

The main research questions were the following:

- What were the possibilities for the renewal of cultural capital in the transition period?
- What kind of cultural capital was produced by the new opportunities of self-development?
- What were the learning attitudes and motivation like?
- How did the renewal of the cultural capital influence the career paths in the transition period?

The applied research method was semi-structured, or more precisely, episodic interview. In the course of 12 interviews conducted, data on the participation of interviewees in lifelong learning during the transition period were collected. With regard to the categories of the analysis, the focus was laid on the experiences described in the transcribed interviews in which learning-related situations were revealed, and the related career changes. Interviewees primarily remembered the connections between their studies and their work career, and to a lesser extent, 'learning as the process of transforming experiences' (Jarvis, 2007).

The sample choice criteria included age (born between 1955 and 1964) and university education acquired in the field of technology, agriculture, and social sciences-humanities during the Soviet period before the beginning of transition. By the beginning of the transition period the respondents had an average of 3–5 years of working experience.

Research results describe relationships between professional continuing education with career paths, the learning attitudes of different learner types and the results of acquiring primary basic skills (e.g., foreign language, computer).

Results of the research show that today's middle-aged generation with Soviet-era university education managed to remain actively engaged in employment during the transition period owing to participation in lifelong learning. Adaptation to changes was also significantly influenced by active interest in learning and good professional skills acquired in the Soviet period.

A comparison of different learner types shows that strong cultural capital can become a development trap unless it is constantly renewed. Compared to professional skills, the interviewees were not able to acquire basic transition skills (e.g., foreign language, computer skills) at a level that would provide them with competitive advantage in the digital world.

Results of the study allow to conclude that the relatively low level of info-technological skills of university-educated middle-aged Estonian people does not result only from their limited possibilities to use ICT devices at

work and home, modest participation in computer courses, lack of time and cost of the courses, as indicated in initial PIAAC results (Halapuu & Valk, 2013). The causes for the low-level basic skills of middle-aged university-educated people lie to a large extent in the transition culture (Kennedy, 2002; Lauristin & Vihalemm, 2009), lifelong learning policies (Centeno, 2011; Quane, 2008; Rubenson, 2004) and the discontinuity in the „life course trajectory” (Elder & Shanahan, 2006) of this generation at the beginning of the 1990s.

Keywords: post-socialist transition period, lifelong learning, learner types, life span, basic skills