Methodological challenges and choices when identifying EU related training needs of Estonian public service

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Summary

Increasing the knowledge and skills of the civil servants working with the European Union institutions and policies is of high importance, as their competence is a main source of country's successful representation at the EU level. The reforms of the EU determined in the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 and the EU enlargement rounds in 2007 and 2013 have increased the need for a systematic approach to the EU related competence and training in public sector even further. The need for well-targeted EU related training has even wider resonance in countries with less experience in administrative capacity building (e.g. the Central and Eastern European Countries) as well as in small EU member states. For example, in Estonia the public administration system was built in the beginning of the 1990s and central co-ordination of the system was lacking basically until mid-2000s. Accordingly, the local officialdom is characterised by the inconsistency of the public administration reform strategies and centrally co-ordinated activities, relatively limited experience of international co-operation and state officials working in their current institutions over a relatively short period of time.

Similarly, the Estonian Presidency of the European Council in 2018 is posing a significant upcoming challenge, as instead of the 500 persons currently directly related to the EU decision-making process, 1,300 civil servants will be preparing the positions, making statements, co-ordinating activities, and negotiating inside the EU as well as representing the EU in the international arena.

The current study focuses on the possible amendments into the methods used in the analysis of the EU related training needs in Estonia during the

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period 2002–2013, based on methodological shortcoming highlighted by theoretical models of the training needs assessment.

In Estonia, in total three surveys were conducted to identify the training needs in the public sector. First of them was conducted in 2002 by ESKO Training and Consultancy, the second in 2008 by the European Collage of the University of Tartu and the third in 2013 by PRAXIS. Based on the surveys conducted in 2002 and 2008, the EU related officials' training strategies respectively for the periods 2003–2005 and 2008–2012 were formulated. The survey conducted in 2014 creates the framework of the training strategy for the new period of five years, i.e. from 2013 to 2017.

All three surveys conducted in Estonia to determine the EU related training needs of local EU-officialdom were focused on the respondents' self-assessments of their current knowledge and training needs and the knowledge and training needs of their colleagues. Based on theoretical models one could assume that, as the respondents might not know what their level of knowledge is, it is very likely that they do not assess their training needs adequately either, and thus, intentionally or unintentionally, tend to over or underestimate their knowledge. At the same time, two of the surveys have not assessed the occurrence of the over and underestimation of their knowledge, skills and competencies.

The foundations as well as the results of the surveys conducted in Estonia will be analysed from the methodological point of view, and the possible amendments into the current methods used in the analysis of the EU related training needs will be suggested to improve the quality of the information received from the surveys. With regard to similar research conducted earlier (Kumpikaitė & Šiugždinienė, 2008; Meyer-Sahling, 2011; Talts & Tuisk, 2000), the current article highlights the methodological aspects in relation to the identification of the training needs rather than describes the surveys in detail. The identification and measurement of the training needs is of key importance among other stages of training, i.e. formulation of the instructional objectives, design and implementation of training programmes, and assessment of the results. Representing the initial phase of the training cycle, the training needs assessment creates a foundation for improving the existing expertise as well as expanding the range of skills available in the workforce.

According to current research, when selecting the methods for the analysis of the EU related training needs as well as conducting the surveys, one should pay attention on the scope of the training needs' identification process (including everybody having similar understanding of the terminology), the avoidance of the expected answers on the 'dangerous' questions as well as ambiguous or misleading scales; and the avoidance of the Dunning-Kruger effect.

Firstly, the training needs' identification should be focused on assessing the current knowledge/skills/ training needs in particular areas. The questions in style of „how important is the topic on a broad basis", etc. should be avoided. Also, unless a longstanding, stable and widespread meaning pertains to non-numeric grades in a specific culture, numeric values of the assessment should be preferred instead of the criteria such as 'good', 'very good'. It would likewise be crucial to include an EU related knowledge quiz or test to the official part of the survey questionnaire. Secondly, to prevent the misidentification of the training needs, the situations were training is a priority and the situations where training is not a priority, should be identified, as well as the „expected answers" should be avoided. Should the respondents as well as the persons responsible for drawing up a survey assume that the sponsor of the survey would expect that the knowledge as well as the competencies of the respondent are at the highest possible level, the respondents could be afraid to admit that they need training. For example, in the survey conducted in 2008, the respondents clearly admitted that they have given expected answers (e.g. as extracted from the interviews „I can't discredit our ministry", „should I as well as the majority of my colleagues admit that we need training, it might negatively impact our salaries as well as the perspectives to be promoted in the future"). Thirdly, the inadequate self-assessment of the respondents is also related to the hypothesis expressed and confirmed in the academic literature that, unless special attention is dedicated to avoid the problem, it is likely that some of the respondents do not assess their training needs adequately (called as „the Dunning-Kruger effect"). Also the results of the survey conducted in Estonia in 2008 proved that those who had less experience and were on lower positions, tended to assess themselves as knowing more than their colleagues; whereas those who had been attending more than five EU related trainings in the past twelve months claimed they needed training in most of the topics. At the same time, they succeeded in the test.

This leads us to a situation where the well-targeted strategy to overcome the lack of knowledge/skills/competencies will not be produced. Thus, self-assessment should be combined with a variety of other instruments and techniques. Therefore, as perhaps the most easily applicable option, the authors of the present article suggest to include an EU related knowledge quiz to the official part of the survey questionnaire in order to minimise the risks of over and underestimation of the knowledge and skills.

To conclude, relying only on a single method may provide an inaccurate picture of the actual training needs in the public sector. Various levels, methods and approaches definitely contribute to the availability of comprehensive information on the actual and necessary levels of knowledge, skills and competencies among individuals. Although it would likewise be crucial to include an EU related knowledge examination to the official part of the survey questionnaire, it should consist of two parts: a) the subjective self-assessment of the respondents' level of knowledge and, b) multiple-choice questions designed to match the topics under observation in the first part of the survey. Interviews with key officials would be indicative as well, as they would allow to study the challenges and to contextualise the current situation in a country's representation and standing in the affairs of the EU.

Keywords: training, public sector, methodology, Dunning-Kruger effect