THE MAGNET PROJECT: LIFELONG LEARNING AND MIGRANT ENTREPRENEURSHIP SUPPORT

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INTRODUCTION

Motivated by recent reports indicating migrant entrepreneurship\(^1\) as a driver for growth and integration, the partners of the MAGNET consortium have explored the applications of lifelong learning schemes that may help reduce the socio-economic marginalisation of self-employed migrants across Europe. In fact, the lack of language skills, intra- and inter-ethnic social capital, and work experience in the host country contributes to their exclusion from the labour market as much as the lengthy bureaucratic procedures for residency entitlements and the major limitations to accessing finances (Faustmann, Filipova-Rivers & Skrivanek. 2018).

Given the absence of EU regulation specific to migrant entrepreneurship, public institutions, whether at the national or European level, are often incapable of providing adequate support to self-employed migrants. Besides, so far, most academic research on migrant entrepreneurship has barely focussed on the role of private support organisations and their increasing socio-economic impact on migrant communities. Conversely, the work of the MAGNET consortium starts from the assumption that fostering the exchange of information, knowledge, experience, and instruments of migrant entrepreneurship support between educational institutions and organisations operating in the field has become fundamental (Filipova-Rivers, Marree & Hanna Wieten 2019).

This paper presents exploratory research centred on the case study analysis of the MAGNET project\(^2\), which aims to provide a provisional answer to the question that prompted its creation: how can migrant entrepreneurship benefit from lifelong learning strategies?

The background section includes an overview of the lifelong learning strategies implemented at the EU level and a short account of the recent impact of migrant entrepreneurship on the European markets, both of which are primarily based on secondary sources. The three main case study sections present the MAGNET project’s outputs: 1) the Network for Practitioners; 2) the Migrant Entrepreneurship Academy – MEA; and 3) the Open Toolkit. Their examination consists of a comprehensive qualitative analysis of the three thematic network forum reports, the focus group discussions, and the additional documents provided by the consortium.

BACKGROUND AND EXPLORATORY WORK

EU Lifelong Learning Strategies

Motivated by progress towards the European Single Market and by the risks as well as opportunities presented by globalisation and new information technologies, there has been an increasing interest in lifelong learning within the EU since the early 1990s (Dehemel, 2006). Under Jacques Delors, the European Commission sought to reach an understanding amongst the member states with regards to a new development model for the EU by

\(^1\) This paper adopts the definition of migrant entrepreneur provided by the MAGNET consortium: a person with migrant background in effective control of a social venture or commercial undertaking for more than one client.

\(^2\) Because the project is currently entering the final phase, the analysis is based on its partial results.

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championing lifelong learning as the catalyst of a changing society. However, following the widespread agreement on the Strategy for Lifelong Learning an emblematic discursive shift away from social integration led to the adoption of a neo-liberal approach to LLL, putting the emphasis on individual responsibility and human capital (Volles 2014).

Therefore, up until the 2008 economic crisis, lifelong learning policies and programmes were modelled after the Lisbon Strategy, which aimed to turn the EU into the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010. In this context, the Commission’s agenda and political discourse centred on LLL’s contributions to individual employability and, indirectly, to sustainable growth, competitiveness, and innovation. Besides, the non-economic objectives of lifelong learning – e.g. personal fulfilment, social inclusion, active citizenship – were increasingly sidelined by the promotion of entrepreneurial know-how (Arvanitis & Mikelatou, 2017).

Ultimately, throughout the last decade, LLL has often proven a flexible policy tool for the continuous development of the workforce’s skills through vocational schemes fostering entrepreneurship, labour mobility, and adaptability. Nonetheless, particularly since the recent upsurge of migration flows and political radicalisation across Europe, policymakers have progressively pushed for a paradigm shift in the EU’s lifelong learning strategy (Council and the Commission, 2015). For these critics LLL may, in fact, become more effective in reducing marginalisation when articulated into policies and programmes whose neoliberal features are matched with an inclusive perspective fostering civic and political awareness as much as intercultural competencies (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2018).

**Migrant Entrepreneurship across Europe**

Despite facilitating intra-EU mobility, the establishment of the Schengen Area brought along strict border controls and visa regulations limiting immigration by third-country nationals (Castles, De Haas & Miller, 2014). While envisioning the unification of the EU market, its member states have, in fact, triggered the increase of irregular humanitarian, family, and labour migration from non-European countries by progressively imposing restrictive policies (Czaika & Hobolth, 2016). This pattern has become even more evident in recent years, whereby the arrival of more than a million asylum-seekers in 2015 has proven a major policy concern within the EU. Notably, these refugees and migrants have faced considerable obstacles while attempting to integrate into new communities and their labour markets: institutional racism, widespread discrimination, the ethnic segmentation of the job market, low qualifications, and de-qualification.

In later years, establishing business and social enterprises has become the key strategy adopted by third-country nationals to overcome barriers within certain labour sectors. Reports suggest that migrant entrepreneurship has not only proven one of the driving forces for the growth and diversification of national and regional economies, but also contributed to reduce social tensions and financial inequalities across Europe (Baycan-Levent & Nijkamp, 2009). Nonetheless, self-employed migrants still face heterogeneous challenges: lower income levels than employed migrants, high sectoral unemployment rates, and widespread informalisation of labour.

Indeed, migrant entrepreneurs tend to lack economic resources, political rights and social capital, as much as entrepreneurial, legal, and linguistic skills. However, they are further penalised by ineffective training and integration programmes which often can neither provide the facilities, logistics and security, nor do they involve local stakeholders who may help them to set up their activities (Faustmann, Filipova-Rivers & Skrivanek 2018). Public institutions, whether at the national or European level, are often incapable of offering adequate support to self-employed migrants. The absence of EU regulation specific to migrant entrepreneurship is as much an obstacle as the governmental focus on the promotion of technical and
managerial competencies through lifelong learning schemes. In fact, the primary objective of most training and integration programmes administered by public bodies and aimed at newcomers remains the enhancement of their individual employability and human capital (Garcés-Mascareñas & Penninx 2016). Migrant entrepreneurship support organisations do provide vocational courses and mentoring activities meant to develop migrants’ skills and expertise, which would help them establish their own social and commercial enterprises. However, it is increasingly the case that their educational and support programmes include psycho-social, cultural, and political components deemed necessary for the integration and economic empowerment of vulnerable groups (Filipova-Rivers, Marree & Wieten, 2019).

LIFELONG LEARNING AND THE MAGNET PROJECT

It has been argued that the social and cultural capital of self-employed migrants may contribute to socio-economic integration and entrepreneurial success as much as their economic capital (Faustmann, Filipova-Rivers & Skrivanek, 2018; Piracha, Tani & Vaira-Lucero, 2014). Migrant entrepreneurship support organisations, therefore, ought to advocate for the creation, further development and broad dissemination of support schemes that would empower migrants with cultural, social, and economic resources. The MAGNET consortium’s efforts to realise this very objective have resulted in the implementation of an integrated lifelong learning project, which has produced three main outputs:

1) The Network for Practitioners promotes the continuing professional development of transnational, national, and regional communities of organizations and institutions interested in migrant entrepreneurship support.

2) The Migrant Entrepreneurship Academy is a university-level programme for continuing education aiming to bridge the gap between entrepreneurship education and practical support programmes.

3) The Open Toolkit is a collection of tested, hands-on learning tools and training methodologies identified as good practice for practitioners in the migrant entrepreneurship domain.

Network for Practitioners

The MAGNET consortium itself can be considered the nucleus of the Network for Practitioners from which the regional, national, and transnational communities of practice have originated. Each partner established one such community by involving regional and national stakeholders as well as other partners of COSME consortia in order to encourage the exchange of information, knowledge, experience, and instruments of migrant entrepreneurship support (MAGNET Consortium, forthcoming).

This, in turn, allowed for a wide-ranging participation in the transnational thematic network forums held in Krems (Faustmann, Filipova-Rivers & Skrivanek, 2018), Amsterdam (Filipova-Rivers, Marree & Wieten, 2019), and Barcelona (Bankowska, Filipova-Rivers & Lalia, 2019).

Overall, the local NGOs and public institutions partaking in the network meetings drew attention to five areas where educational and training programmes for migrant entrepreneurship support organisations could effectively improve their coordination and mentoring schemes:

3 Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Poland, Spain, The Netherlands, United Kingdom.
Social capital and networking

- Promote the exchange of inter/transcultural competencies with local stakeholders – e.g. academic, business, public institutions – by involving them in migrant entrepreneurship support programmes;
- Focus on the local level of integration by addressing common barriers to social inclusion, fostering a structural welcome culture, and supporting the expansion of migrants’ political rights.

Entrepreneurial Competencies

- Adopt a flexible and user-centred approach to encouraging migrant entrepreneurs to develop their own skills, become role models, and help build social and professional networks;
- Mentoring can include formal and informal social learning methods tailored to the needs of the individual more than academic and requalification programmes.

Continuous and Targeted Support

- Distinguish between different target groups depending on their migration status, country of origin, financial resources, gender, and other factors that would require specific support;
- Psycho-social support and joint reflections on the social and political barriers faced throughout their lives can deeply empower all migrants.
- Continuous techno-managerial support following the establishment of an enterprise is often necessary.

Coordination and Centralisation of Information

- Foster the coordination of grassroots and social enterprise-led support to improve the exchange of legal and commercial information valuable to migrant entrepreneurs;
- Lobby the EU institutions and national governments to establish a coordinated scheme for the requalification and formal recognition of newcomers’ skills.

Access to Finance

- Promote the experience sharing and peer-exchange between local microfinance institutions, credit unions and support organisations for migrants;
- Jointly advocate for the creation of institutional systems for the provision of financial products to migrants at both the national and European level.

Ultimately, the Network acknowledges the necessity of implementing profound and urgent Europe-wide modifications to integration schemes and training programmes relevant for newcomers, people with migrant backgrounds, and the support organisations themselves.

Migrant Entrepreneurship Academy

The Magnet Entrepreneurship Academy responds to the MAGNET project’s commitment to disseminate knowledge on migrant entrepreneurship support across Europe by involving HE institutions and organisations operating in the field.

MEA brings academics and practitioners together in a train-the-trainer scheme, which combines scientific research and best practice methods to bridge the gap between
entrepreneurship education and practical support programmes (MAGNET Consortium 2018). Its target group consists of key change agents (Faustman & Seiler 2018):

Direct beneficiaries
- Organisations active in the fields of migrant integration and entrepreneurship support;
- Future migrant entrepreneurship support organisations;
- Staff members, trainers, consultants, educators, lecturers;
- Various public stakeholders.

Indirect beneficiaries
- (Potential / future) migrant entrepreneurs;
- Migrant communities at large.

Participants in the MEA can learn from each other and get mutual guidance and advice especially during the peer-learning university course ‘Migrant Entrepreneurship Support CP’ accredited by the Danube University in Krems. It is offered over two semesters (15 ECTS) and consists of three face-to-face modules – three days each – in Krems, Berlin and Warsaw, complemented with e-learning activities. Its delivery is entrusted to lecturers and trainers with years of experience in the field of migrant entrepreneurship support, intercultural and business training, and migration and integration management.

Other than the final written practical project report, the participants must complete six learning modules (MAGNET Consortium, 2019):

1) Introduction to migration in Europe;
2) Migrant-specific aspects of entrepreneurship support;
3) Business support;
4) Business infrastructure;
5) Entrepreneurial competence evaluation;
6) Reflection peer groups.

Overall, the MEA intends to prepare its students for several tasks, such as:
- Supporting migrant people in the development of entrepreneurial competencies, financial strategies, and business plans;
- Identifying the needs and characteristics of their target groups in order to structure adequate support measures (e.g. learning activities, networking, political lobbying, etc.);
- Establishing mentor-mentee relationships based on continuous psycho-social and techno-managerial support.

The content of the course currently provided by the Migrant Entrepreneurship Academy largely represents the formalisation of some of the good practice developed by the participants in the regional, national, and transnational networks of practitioners. In fact, its interdisciplinary focus is reflected in the integration of the social, political, and business dimensions of migrant entrepreneurship support into a coherent training scheme.

Open Toolkit

The first version of the Open Toolkit is the result of a mutual learning process guided by the MAGNET consortium’s methodology for good practice in migrant entrepreneurship support. The tools produced are practical training resources that can be implemented in and adapted to a local setting beyond the context of a single organisation. The MAGNET partners select and define good practices through cross-tool comparison in peer-to-peer review groups after

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4 Its pilot phase began in September 2019.
scanning for tools from any specialist organisation operating in the field. A clear taxonomy helps the consortium members to structure and present each tool by specifying its intended outcomes, target audience, and content material. The respective ‘how to guide’ describes the functions of the tool, while additional case studies further illustrate its contextual application and potential impact (MAGNET Consortium, 2018a).

Presently, the Open Toolkit contains a set of ten tools collated by the members of the consortium. MAGNET plans to aggregate an additional set of fifteen tools5 sourced both from its partners and from other consortia funded by the COSME programme. Overall, the Open Toolkit focuses on four key aspects of migrant entrepreneurship support (MAGNET Consortium, 2019a):

- The pre-incubation phase of the business or social enterprise;
- Legal literacy and consultation;
- Financial literacy and consultation;
- Mentor training.

Unlike the other outputs, the current version of the Open Toolkit allows the practitioners to improve primarily their technical and managerial know-how. Nonetheless, the increasing emphasis placed by the communities of practice on the social and political components of migrant entrepreneurship support may orient the development of the new tools.

CONCLUSIONS

The MAGNET project redefines the scope of migrant entrepreneurship support by implementing an integrated lifelong learning scheme, which involves local NGOs and migrant communities as well as public and educational institutions. Overall, the case study analysis suggests that both the consortium and external stakeholders deem social capital development, political networking and entrepreneurial know-how as key dimensions of migrant entrepreneurship support. Besides, the mentoring and training activities for self-employed migrants prove more effective when incorporating continuous psycho-social and business support.

Despite the limitations posed by the project’s partial results, the examination of its impact on the domain of migrant entrepreneurship support vis-à-vis the ongoing paradigm shift in the lifelong learning policy field leads to the elaboration of the following working hypothesis:

Lifelong learning strategies can improve migrant entrepreneurship, and thus reduce marginalisation, by promoting comprehensive integration programmes and support schemes, whose educational focus on social inclusion and critical citizenship is interdependent with, but not subordinate to, the enhancement of entrepreneurial competencies.

This conceptual framework disallows human capital theory as the fundamental tenet behind the lifelong learning policies and programmes implemented across the EU for the better part of the last two decades. Nonetheless, it indicates an additional path for contributing to current research on Lifelong Learning strategies modelled after more holistic approaches (Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2018).

5 The new version of the Open Toolkit is expected to be published in March 2020.
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