

Continuing vocational education and training (CVET) for the unemployed and others at risk of labour market exclusion

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Abstract

The paper deals with the findings of recent studies on the issue of CVET (continuing vocational education and training) for the unemployed and others at risk of social exclusion.

Apart from summarizing recent research findings it focuses on the effectiveness of active labour market policy programmes as well as so-called "black box issues": Questions that have not been dealt with yet but which are supposed to have a more or less important impact on the effectiveness of programmes and measures.

Finally, recommendations for policy and research conclude the line of reasoning.

1. Summary

The learning and knowledge society means an exponential growth rate of knowledge, the introduction of increasingly faster transformations of technologies and working environments, and a demand for workers to obtain higher qualifications, including social, cultural, complex and general cognitive competences, along with advanced competences in specialized fields.

Continuing vocational education and training (CVET) is part of lifelong learning and contributes to the aim of employability as well as to the requirements of a learning and knowledge society. Thus, it helps to develop and preserve human resources which cannot be wasted in a society which is said to need innovation, social cohesion, and economic growth. Moreover, fostering human resources is believed to absorb at least some demographic developments and protects individuals from unemployment. Especially for the unemployed and others vulnerable to exclusion in the labour market, CVET has the function of bridging the gap between a lack of qualifications and (re)obtaining employment.

Against this background, I would like to address the question of what are reliable and validated research findings related to training for the unemployed, and more precisely, what is validated, what are the main findings and recommendations for policy and practice, and where are blind spots within this field of research?

The following findings are part of a study carried out on behalf of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP). This study mainly aimed

at identifying the main research fields in CVET and was based on a theoretical approach. The main aims were

to identify sub-themes of theme no. 5 of CEDEFOP’s KMS (Knowledge Management Systems) which is CVET – continuing vocational education and training

- to identify research material related to CVET,
- to identify main research findings and recommendations for policy, practice and research, and
- to identify blind spots within this field of research.

Although it was one of the aims at the onset of the study, we did not include empirical data concerning training programmes or evaluations of measures, mainly because there are no overall data available on vocational training for disadvantaged target groups.

2. Theoretical background and overall context

It is difficult to present a detailed picture of the different forms of CVET offered within the Member States, not only because data are neither consistent nor complete, but also because there is no consensual definition of CVET. Therefore, it makes sense to use a broad definition of CVET in order to cover the most important specific national characteristics. The OECD defines CET – Continuing Education and Training – as all kinds of general and job-related education and training organised, financed, or sponsored by authorities, provided by employers or self-financed. This definition includes training courses on the job as well as off the job, and courses for adults leading to educational qualification. Moreover, we often found a distinction between CVET and training. Whilst CVET was mainly used in terms of vocational educational and training for the employed, the same kind of training for the unemployed and others at risk of exclusion from the labour market was reduced to the term “training”. There are two reasons why we did not adopt this differentiation:

1. We concentrated on some specific subpopulations of all potential workers i.e., unemployed and others at risk of labour market exclusion.
2. Whilst some training programmes aim at special target groups, others are for both unemployed and employed or serve as preventive measures for unemployment.

Thus, a differentiation between CVET and training in a narrow sense was neither necessary nor possible for our study, although we are aware of the smooth transitions that do exist. Moreover, we are aware that a theoretical differentiation between the two terms might be helpful to better distinguish between the overall functions and objectives of CVET. These can be described as follows:

Functions	Objectives
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<i>adaptation</i> to the changing challenges of labour markets, e.g., new technologies	to <i>promote personal development</i> , self-confidence, identification and self-realisation
<i>innovation</i> by upgrading skills by means of CVET, mostly enterprises activities	to <i>raise economic efficiency</i> , productivity and profitability, individual earnings, and national income
<i>promotion</i> by upgrading skills for vocational career, mostly for qualified and employed people	to <i>prevent the obsolescence of skills</i>
<i>catching up</i> in the case of inadequate qualifications; mainly measures for special target groups or to provide basic qualifications	to <i>alleviate specific problems</i> of high-risk groups such as the poorly educated, women, older employees, workers in precarious jobs, school leavers
<i>curative or compensatory function</i> aimed at a re-orientation of skills or the provision of missing qualifications within the context of social and labour market policies	to <i>meet the demands of social and democratic development</i> within European societies
<i>preventive or cumulative function</i> for individuals who want to acquire skills to stay employed or to upgrade their vocational position	to enhance cultural participation and social competence

Table 1: Overall functions and objectives of CVET

Against this background, the importance of training for the unemployed and those at risk of unemployment becomes apparent: The overall change that can be detected and which is the main reason for the need for CVET for all (employed, unemployed, and those at risk of labour market exclusion) is the structural change of labour markets and, thus, the decreasing demand for low-skilled work. However, the mechanisms behind this decrease are still being discussed controversially. Basically, there are two factors which lead to a decreasing demand for low-skilled workers:

- An upskilling effect whereby technological evolution results in falling demand for the lower skilled.
- A deskilling effect by which new technologies reduce skills needed to perform a certain task because technology itself takes over several decisions.

Furthermore, there is a structural change from employment in industrial sectors towards the service sector, which may also result in increasing unemployment. Moreover, the duration of training in general (that means for employed as well as for unemployed) has fallen in countries where unemployment is increasing. Finally, competition from low-wage countries can be observed. This effect is becoming apparent in two areas:

- European companies are shifting their production to low-wage countries, where low skilled work is even cheaper than low-skilled work in Europe or,
- they are shifting their production to low-wage countries where the highly skilled receive much lower wages than the highly skilled workers in European countries.

Whilst it is clear that these effects do exist, it remains unclear to what extent they are responsible for a decreasing demand for low-skilled work.

3. Research findings

The existence of structural changes of the labour market is generally accepted, but many of the issues in depth analysed concerning CVET for the unemployed are very controversial. I will start with those that are regarded as validated.

3.1. What we know for sure...

To find out who is affected by unemployment, or at risk of unemployment, and who receives training, it is not enough to have a look at the official unemployment statistics, because such a definition would be too narrow: To be unemployed in that sense includes only those who have been working for a certain time. This does not include early school-leavers, or those re-entering the labour market. Furthermore, there are target groups who have smaller chances of finding work; if they receive a job it is often difficult to retain it, as these jobs are often marginal ones and characterized by low wages, poor working conditions, employment insecurity, and lack of social protection. These findings are true if we use the unemployment statistics as basic concept to find out who is affected by unemployment.

Another concept to find out who is affected by unemployment is the one of employability. This concept increasingly provides the basis for defining and measuring unemployment, as it facilitates a distinction between different levels and kinds of unemployment, and concentrates on the ability to be trained instead of concentrating on certificates and previous times of employment. Its disadvantage is – as NICAISE and BOLLENS (1998: 121) described it: “there is the risk that the responsibility for difficult employability will be placed entirely upon the individual.”

The concept of employability allows a deeper and more precise identification of groups that are affected by either unemployment or the risk of unemployment. Those groups are:

- Low skilled (lower secondary education)
- Long-term unemployed
- Handicapped
- Single parents
- Older workers and older job seekers
- Job-seekers re-entering the labour market

- Welfare benefits recipients.

Amongst these groups, mutual overlapping of these categories is possible and the accumulation of these disadvantages means an increase of unemployment risk. For all these groups, it is widely accepted that being at risk of labour market exclusion usually corresponds to inadequate, incomplete, or obsolete qualifications and skills (see BRANDSMA 1997; CEDEFOP 2004; EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2000b; ILO 2003).

This leads to the question of who receives training. Whilst the number of groups that should receive training is high, many of the disadvantaged are unlikely to participate in training, due to several reasons:

- Employment trap: When unemployment or social benefits are relatively high compared to expected earnings from work, job-seekers may not be motivated to look actively for a job and/or for training (see OECD 1996: 25ff.).
- In many countries (e.g. the UK or Germany) accessibility of training programmes is linked to a certain minimum length of employment. This means that job-seekers have to have worked for a certain time and under certain conditions (e.g. with a contract) and they have to be registered as unemployed to be allowed to participate in training (see Descy/ Tessaring 2001; OECD 1999; OECD 2003).
- When analysing the participants' structure in CVET for the unemployed and those at risk of labour market exclusion, one can find an over-representation of male, better qualified, non-married, childless, younger and short-term job seekers. This finding is not only true for an overall survey of training programmes but it can also be observed within programmes which are specifically aimed at target groups such as older workers or the long-term unemployed (see BRANDSMA 1997; CEDEFOP 2004; EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2000A; EUROPEAN TRAINING FOUNDATION 2003).

3.2. ... and what we don't

Whilst there is consensus on these issues I would like to focus now on some that are controversial, uncertain, or of unknown importance. These are the motivation to participate, guidance and counselling, the cooperation between actors, and the effectiveness of training.

With respect to the motivation to participate in training, several studies have shown that there are a number of barriers that hinder job seekers from participating in training. Paradoxically, the more disadvantaged and unskilled job seekers are, the less motivated and the less unlikely they are to take part in training measures (see BRANDSMA 1997; NICAISE/BOLLENS 1997). The most important reasons for this behaviour seems to be:

- The uncertainty about potential benefits
- The fear of failure, a negative self-image and the threat of exclusion
- The lack of connections between training and the job seekers' needs
- An attitude which gives priority to work and not to training and

- Lack of orientation about job-seekers' needs: Obviously, an older, male, long-term unemployed needs vocational training that is different from that needed by a young, short-term unemployed mother.

Another issue is guidance and counselling. The issue of training special target groups and their motivation to participate in training is often linked with the issue of guidance and counselling. The main concept is to provide vocational training but also to regain appropriate work attitudes, a problem which is often underestimated. VRANKEN and FRANS (2001:142) have pointed out that job-seekers often need much time to become used to things such as “sticking to time schedules, meeting strict requirements, integration into a team, accepting authority, and concentrating on one task for a longer time”.

But guidance and counselling also have to take into account problems outside the work situation. Individual plans leading to labour market reintegration are useless unless they do not take into account factors such as inadequate childcare, bad housing conditions, or insufficient health care.

The issue of cooperation and coordination is often raised, but there are only few studies analysing it. The common focus lies in strengthening and analysing the co-operation and co-ordination schemes established among labour market actors at regional, national, and supranational levels to implement and institutionalise new labour market arrangements, as part of CVET, for a more effective qualification matching.

It is agreed that professional coordinators can influence the phase of consensus building between all actors. Thus, labour market mediation by representatives of professional agencies should be fostered, as well as network building amongst all actors, especially at the local level. If networking is used as a form of coordination (e.g. to identify skill needs), hierarchical forms of coordination seem to guarantee more reliable answers for implementing policies aimed at a proactive qualification matching as found in a German study (see Rouault/ Oschmiansky/ Schömann 2001). Yet, a basic problem remains unsolved: Most trainings are offered by providers which act as an independent training centre. As there are rarely any connections with specific enterprises, trainings often lack labour market orientation. Thus, strengthening cooperation and coordination should not only build bridges between policy and providers but also between enterprises, research, policy makers and providers.

All these issues culminate in the effectiveness of training, which is regarded as one of the most important topics related to CVET for the unemployed. The impact of training and thereby its effectiveness usually is measured in terms of the labour market status of participants after training, i.e., whether the participants find work or remain unemployed. Yet, it remains unclear how many of the job seekers would have this work without training. Thus, control groups are being observed to estimate effects of training (so called counterfactual case). Although it is generally accepted that measuring the impact of training in term of labour market reintegration neglects other training effects in addition to the labour market position after training, we used the “impact” of training in a narrow sense and obtained the following results:

<i>Programme</i>	<i>Appears to help</i>	<i>Appears not to help</i>	<i>General observations</i>
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Formal classroom training	Women re-entrants	Prime-age men and older workers with low initial education.	Courses should be based on strong labour market relevance or signal 'high' quality. Programmes should be kept small in scale.
Training on-the-job	Women re-entrants; single mothers	Prime-age men	Must directly meet labour market needs. Necessary to establish strong links with local employers, but this increases the risk of displacement.
Job-search assistance (job clubs, individual counselling, etc.)	Most unemployed but especially women and single parents		Must be combined with increased monitoring of the unemployed and enforcement of work tests.
Re-employment bonuses	Most adult unemployed		Requires careful monitoring and control of both recipients and their former employers.
Special youth measures (training, employment subsidies, direct job creation measures)		Disadvantaged youths	Youths need a combination of programmes targeted at their specific labour market needs and family support. Early interventions and adult mentors are likely to be most effective. Need to deal with inappropriate work attitudes.
Subsidies to employment especially: [Aid to unemployed who start enterprises	Long-term unemployed; Women re-entrants Men (below 40, relatively better educated)		Require careful targeting and adequate controls to maximise net employment gains and social benefits, but trade-off with employer take-up. Only works for a small subpopulation.]
Direct job creation	Severely disadvantaged labour market groups	Most adult unemployed	Typically provides few long-term benefits and usually implies marginal jobs.

Table 2: Research findings of evaluation literature. Adopted from Martin (2000), based on evaluation results by Fay (1996); Friedlander et al. (1997); Grubb (1995); HRDC (1997); Lerman (1997); OECD (1993); US Department of Labor (1995).

These findings show that most of the common measures such as training, guidance, and counselling cannot be regarded as effective – as long as they are not combined with monitoring the job-seekers which also includes work tests.¹ Furthermore, there is no measure working for all. We know what appears to work for particular disadvantaged groups. For example, formal classroom training and on-the-job-training helps

¹ “Work tests” or “jobseeking tests” must be taken in some countries/regions to show that the unemployed are a) available for work, b) actively seeking work, and c) capable of work (i.e. not sick). These tests usually have to be taken weekly and aim at enhancing the job-seekers employability. They included steps such as verbal or written applications for employment, to appear to be in a position to offer employment, to look for information on job vacancies from, to seek specialist advice to improve one’s prospects of finding work, or drawing up a curriculum vitae.

women re-entering the labour market whilst it appears not to help older and male job-seekers. Furthermore, a mixture of activation measures including good management of public employment services seems to be most effective.

What can be deduced from recent research literature and as shown in the table is that we know what works for particular disadvantaged groups. However, it remains unclear why some measures work for some groups and not for others.

4. Recommendations for policy, practice and research

Although many unanswered questions remain, there is also a number of recommendations that can be drawn from the findings. I would like to begin with those that aim at practice and are more content-related.

CVET should always build on the capabilities and levels of existing knowledge and confidence of the participants. If these levels are too low, the result may be a demotivation or even drop-out. If they are too high, the same might be the case and the provision is a waste of resources. Furthermore, many training programmes are too short, especially those aiming at basic skills such as literacy and numeracy. But the focus on basic skills may also include the promotion of learner-centred strategies and practices, especially through the use of ICTs.

Second, formal qualification, recognition and certification of informally acquired skills should be fostered, as this may influence both motivation and whether or not the job-seeker finds work.

Third, CVET should be linked with labour market needs. It should not only aim at basic skills and formal qualification but also correspond to labour market requirements.

Furthermore, guidance and counselling should be improved. Research has shown that labour market reintegration of job seekers often needs an individual plan in which a realistic path towards work is planned. In such plans, vocational training is only one issue amongst many others.

But what is needed first of all in this context is long-term and reliable monitoring of CVET quality and direct involvement of employers and social partners in the design of measures (OK/ TERGEIST 2003; ROUAULT/ OSCHIMANSKY/ SCHÖMANN 2001).

With regard to those recommendations that aim more at research, there remains a bundle of what NICAISE and BOLLENS (2001: 151) have called “black box issues”. For example, little is known about the impact of quality and training of trainers and other actors such as the staff of training providers. This is an issue that should be taken into account when designing new training measures (see MARTIN/GRUBB 2000; RYAN 2001).

Designing and implementing new projects and measures is a topic that receives frequent criticism, as it is still unclear which approaches and proceedings work best when developing trainings. Furthermore, there is consensus that content-related aspects have an enormous impact on the effectiveness of training measures and participants’ employability (see HRDC 1997; OBSERVATORY OF EUROPEAN SMEs 2003). Yet it is unclear what exactly this impact is like: Issues such as training methods, training site conditions and the curriculum are rarely evaluated. To sum up, we still do

not know for sure what works for whom – and for whom it does not. In this context, it might be helpful to draw attention to the question why a measure is working – or why not. Answering this question might also bridge the gap between theory and practice. The same is true for the question of the impact of early intervention compared to late intervention (i.e. after job seekers have become unemployed) or the impact of new or alternative forms of learning and training. Answering these questions might also speed up the development of new curricula.

In the area of evaluation methodology, new methods have been developed or improved. However, it remains unclear which ones are adequate (see MARTIN/ GRUBB 2000; MARTIN 2000). Similar findings are available for the causes of disadvantage, i.e. for the basic question of what hinders people from participating in the labour market and what are the results of the paradigm shift from personal development towards employability and economic efficiency? In this context, mechanisms of accessibility of the labour market have to be analysed and a better understanding of the structures of the daily life of job-seekers is needed. To find out more about this background, more comparable, reliable, and adequate data samples are needed.

Finally, with regard to recommendations on cooperation between all actors, many pieces of advice can be found concerning strengthening the cooperation between policy, practice, and research the core of which is to guarantee a coherent supply of CVET and to improve the job-seekers' situation sustainably (see EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2002; EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2003; IRISH PRESIDENCY CONFERENCE GROUP 2004; OK/TERGEIST 2003; ROUAULT/ OSCHMIANSKY/ SCHÖMANN 2001). Whilst these recommendations often include demands for increasing financial incentives, it might be helpful to not only meet this demand but also to improve institutional arrangements for CVET by tapping the full potential of existing financial and human resources.

Establishing and improving coordination schemes may also foster a more structural involvement of employee representatives and the social partners at various levels of discourse and negotiation related to CVET. But strengthening European cooperation also means fostering transparency, modularisation, comparability, transferability, recognition of competencies and certificates, networks and basic understanding of key concepts. Finally, all these issues make a contribution to a better linking between general and vocational education, between initial and continuing education and they thus promote lifelong learning.

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