



European Centre for the
Development of Vocational Training

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ENTERPRISE SURVEYS AS A TOOL FOR IDENTIFICATION OF SKILL NEEDS

Skillsnet expert workshop

21-22 June 2007, Bucharest, Romania

WORKSHOP SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The workshop was coorganised by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), within its network on early identification of skill needs 'Skillsnet', and by the National Labour Research Institute in Bucharest, with the support of Romanian Ministry of Education.

Participants: 30 experts from 13 Member States (Belgium, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, the United Kingdom) and several European institutions and organisations attended the workshop.

Background and objectives

The information deficit about future skill needs in Europe has been observed for a long time. Cedefop and other European organisations have been repeatedly approached with requests for information on this issue. The European labour market is becoming a reality but at the same time occupations, skills, competences and qualifications, which will be needed in the future, are not yet identified. The dynamics of change in the workplace implies that timely and reliable information is needed on how skill needs will develop in the coming years. Information regarding future skill needs in Europe is essential not only for employing organizations, but also for effective labour market policy making, both at national and at European level.

As a response, Cedefop and its network Skillsnet is developing a system for forecasting occupational skill needs in Europe. In order to improve knowledge base, it is necessary to support this quantitative data by other sources of information, and enterprise surveys might be one of the possible sources. There are many enterprise surveys relevant to the subject of identification of skill and training needs in the EU Member States (MS) but the results are not comparable. They differ greatly in their objectives, regularity, sample sizes and in questions

covered by the questionnaires. Thus, Cedefop/Skillsnet is launching a new initiative which aims at finding a common European approach to enterprise surveys as a tool for identification of skill needs and skill gaps.

The first workshop was organised within this new initiative which had the following main objectives:

- to map existing surveys at European level with the view of their potential usage for skill needs analysis,
- to compare and discuss questions used in the enterprise surveys in the EU MS with the view of their potential comparability and compatibility,
- to agree about future steps towards feasibility of a common approach to enterprise surveys to analyse skill needs at European cross-country level.

In the framework of this initiative MS' experts were invited to submit brief information on national enterprise surveys based on a template prepared by Cedefop's Skillsnet team. Answers from 16 MS were received: Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and England - the only part of the UK covered. These answers were compiled and summarised in a background document for the workshop which will be also available on the Skillsnet website soon.

The summary of available templates showed a very optimistic conclusion that, no matter how methods and objectives of enterprise surveys in individual MS differ, all countries expressed their willingness and preparedness to discuss and to look for possibilities to make their survey methodologies and results comparable to similar surveys in other countries. It is particularly important that even countries with a long-established tradition of enterprise surveys are ready to make some sacrifices of comparability over time at national level for the sake of comparability across Europe. It is therefore possible to conclude that the new initiative of Skillsnet aiming at finding a common European approach to enterprise surveys as a tool for identification of skill needs is timely and necessary.

Workshop summary

The workshop was officially opened by the Director General of the National Labour Research Institute and by Cedefop representatives together with the presentation of the workshop objectives and introduction to the workshop programme.

The workshop started with an overview of existing surveys at international and European level. Surveys of five different European and international institutions were presented: Continuing Vocational Training Survey (CVTS), Job Vacancy Statistics and Community Innovation Survey (all Eurostat), European PES Vacancy Monitor (DG Empl), Establishment survey (Dublin Foundation), Survey plans of OSHA (Bilbao), Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (OECD). The overview was not exhaustive but it showed which of the existing surveys (if any) could be used in the future for skill needs analysis.

In the next session, two examples of cross-country surveys were presented: The harmonised skill monitoring survey in the UK and Ireland, and the IZA International employer survey done in 2000 covering 4 European countries. The aim was to learn from previous similar attempts done on a smaller scale.

The next two sessions were devoted to short presentations of Member States' national surveys and followed by short discussions mainly on the country templates, major issues of concern, examples of questionnaires, etc. All 13 countries presented their national surveys (in several cases more than one survey). Participants also discussed the possibility to adjust national surveys - on voluntary basis - to achieve comparability across countries.

In the last session, a comparative summary of country surveys was presented and followed by discussion on possible options and solutions. The following alternatives have been suggested and arisen from the discussion:

- to modify or enrich enterprise surveys that already exist or are planned at European level (rather long-term solution);
- to adjust national surveys in selected (volunteering) countries to achieve comparability of results (subject to interest, support and funding from national and/or EU sources);
- to initiate an European-wide enterprise survey (again subject to interest, support and funding from national and/or EU sources).

Workshop conclusions

All participants agreed that the topic of using enterprise surveys for skill needs analysis is not only very interesting and important but also challenging. Several essential methodological and practical points were raised during the discussion.

The discussion also demonstrated a potential problem with enterprise surveys in many Member States: enterprises are exhausted by numerous surveys on different subjects, which has a negative impact on response rates. While there is no comparable cross-country enterprise survey on skill needs, it is necessary to be very clear about objectives and needs for this initiative. The benefits for individual countries and the final use of such data should also be clearly elucidated and documented. In addition to clear objectives it was also suggested to organise a brainstorming session to carefully select several core questions which can be included in the cross-country survey or in national surveys in a comparable manner. Furthermore, it was suggested to develop an inventory of common definitions, of concepts and approaches (skills, skill gaps, skill shortages, etc.) relying on extensive existing studies. It was proposed to explore and possibly to compare the results of available national surveys and sectoral or occupational surveys. This was suggested as one of topics for a follow-up workshop. Another suggestion was to look also at drivers for skill needs and the supply of skills rather than limiting the analysis to skill demand only.

Several experts expressed their recommendation that different approaches should be applied when it comes to skill needs analysis and that enterprise surveys need to be complemented by other sources of information. It was recommended to support interpretation of the results by focus groups, in-depth interviews, etc. It was noted that while enterprise surveys themselves might have limited reliability in terms of identification of *future* skill needs, regular surveys provide time series and therefore become a valuable source of information on trends and developments of skill requirements.

An important reservation concerned enterprises as such. Are companies actually able to identify future skill needs? They usually know what they need now but might have difficulties when looking into the future. However, there is a number of enterprises which regularly assess their future manpower and/or skill needs (according to CVTS2 there is 37 % such

companies out of all enterprises and half of all enterprises assess the skills and training needs of their employees). It was proposed to develop a follow-up analysis of such reliable and relevant enterprises of CVTS3 to get a clearer picture of the potential of enterprises as such. Conducting a questionnaire survey only among these enterprises could be a possible solution too.

Regarding the future steps, it was suggested to apply an 'open method of coordination' approach, which is used in case of many different national approaches and rests on soft mechanisms such as guidelines, benchmarks and sharing of best practices. The feasibility of such approach from the methodological point of view has to be verified.

However, it is crucial that all participating MS expressed their willingness and preparedness to discuss and to look for possibilities to make their results comparable to similar surveys in other countries. It was agreed that suggested alternatives are not mutually exclusive and that we can work simultaneously on several options. It is important to continue with this initiative and start with further steps.

Further steps

The following further steps will be taken:

- The Skillsnet coordination team will prepare a short concept paper to be discussed with experts either via written procedure (e-mail) or during the next expert workshop. The concept paper will provide clear identification of the objectives, value added and relevance of the initiative for the EU and individual MS, including the target group and final beneficiaries.
- The Skillsnet coordination team will examine different options how to complement national surveys with comparable data at cross-country level. The team will follow-up the interest and willingness of MS to have common approach and will look at possible ways to proceed further. The next expert workshop on this issue will be organised in 2008. Among other issues the workshop may focus on results of available national surveys and on identification of core questions for a common survey or for a common module of national surveys.

Workshop documents (agenda, list of participants, presentations and papers) will be available at Skillsnet webpage www.trainingvillage.gr/skillsnet by mid July 2007.