



CEDEFOP

European Centre
for the Development
of Vocational Training



Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme

**Information seminar for social partners
on the consolidated Study Visits for education and vocational
training specialists
Thessaloniki, 28-29 February 2008**

Background

This information seminar, organised by Cedefop, for the European social partners, focused on the consolidated Study Visits Programme for education and vocational training specialists. The main objective of the seminar, which was held at Cedefop's premises in Thessaloniki on 28 and 29 February 2008, was to show social partners the benefits they can draw from the programme. To raise awareness of how social partner needs can be best accommodated, National Agency representatives were also invited.

Thirty participants attended the seminar: 7 representatives of employers' organisations, 9 trade union representatives and 3 persons from the European Cross Industry Social Partner organisations. Also present were the European Commission (DG Education and Culture) and ten representatives of National Agencies, the bodies responsible for the implementation of the programme.

Discussions focused on ways to i) get the social partners more closely involved in the programme and ii) promote the study visits programme to the national and European social partners

The seminar

The speakers presented the different ways in which national and European social partners are involved in the programme. There were proposals on improving the themes on offer and on promoting the programme at all levels, in order to secure a proportionate participation of the social partners. To this end, the social partners' representatives also asked the European Commission to provide National Agencies with guidelines on how to work with the social partner organisations.

National agency representatives learned about the needs and expectations of the social partners and were made aware of the need to cooperate closely with their respective national social partner organisations.

During the seminar, the representatives of social partner organisations discussed ways of promoting the study visits programme in their own countries and across the EU.

Seminar participants formed two working groups, which held discussions on:

1. Ways to increase the involvement of social partners in the programme

There are several ways in which the Social Partners can get involved in Study Visits:

- As active participants
- As promoters/multipliers
- As hosts

It was generally agreed that Social Partners should encourage their staff to participate in Study Visits, and allow employees to take time off work for this purpose.

Participants drew attention to certain barriers to social partner participation. For many candidates, low language skills and low confidence in communicating in a foreign language is an obstacle to participation. The early application deadline is also a potentially discouraging, as many applicants find it difficult to plan one year ahead. Moreover, the application period is also too short: 2 months between the publication of the Catalogue and the deadline.

The social partners expressed a strong interest in helping select themes for the Study Visits, which they believe should be more closely related to current European and national issues. The following themes were singled out as particularly interesting:

- Recognition of informal learning
- Active citizenship
- Equal opportunities
- Access to the labour market
- The establishment of National Qualifications Frameworks

Themes that focus on specific sectors, such as transport, the food sector, agriculture etc., should also be considered.

There was agreement that links between National Agencies and social partners need to be strengthened. To this end, it is necessary to directly promote the study visits to national social partner representatives.

It was suggested that the Commission provide National Agencies with guidelines on how to involve representatives from Social Partner organisations in the Evaluation Committees/Selection Boards, in order to assess the submitted applications and award grants.

National Agencies spoke of their difficulty in identifying social partners who could either host or give a speech/presentation during a Study Visit.

2. Promotion of study visits within the social partners members in your country and at EU level

Participating in a study visit was shown to lead to a number of benefits, both for individuals and their organisations:

- better intercultural skills for participants;
- networking;
- potential partners for future projects;
- a broader knowledge of specific themes, which helps to strengthen the national social dialogue;
- knowledge about other systems.

As a promotional tool, a flyer should be developed describing the benefits to social partners of participating in study visits.

Social Partner organisations can disseminate during national congresses the knowledge acquired in study visits where they can invite National Agencies and previous participants to present information and experiences. This experience can also be shared through articles in social partners Newsletters and magazines.

Social Partners can use their networks and memberships in European umbrella organisations to raise awareness of Study Visits programme, and to encourage their members to take part in the programme.

Conclusions

Based on the outcomes of the discussion, Cedefop will follow the interest of the social partners through the formal channels (i.e. LLP Committee, European Commission) and its networks; develop promotional material for the VET target group and the social partners; invest in promotion and dissemination activities; and organise further seminars targeted to social partners. Cedefop will involve social partner representatives in redefining study visits themes, in line with the latest developments in education and training in the EU and the Member States, including themes on specific sectors.

The National Agencies will make use of some of the ideas and suggestions made during the seminar to increase the involvement of national social partners in the study visits programme.

Representatives of the European Cross Industry Social Partners will address a joint initiative to the European Commission, to be based on the outcomes of the seminar, for improving the framework conditions of the programme. The aim of the initiative is to encourage more vocational training specialists and social partners to take part in the Study Visits Programme.