



Employers' surveys as a tool for identification of skill needs

**Skillsnet expert workshop
22-23 May 2008, Paris, France**

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' in cooperation with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Participants: in total 35 experts in the field from 18 Member States (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Spain and the United Kingdom) and several international and European institutions and organisations attended the workshop.

Background and objectives

The workshop took place in the framework of the new Cedefop initiative which explores feasibility and efficiency of employers surveys as a tool for identification of skill needs. The workshop was a follow up of the 1st workshop which took place in Bucharest in 2007 and discussed the potential use of existing surveys at European level for skill needs analysis and compared and discussed methods and approaches used in enterprise surveys in EU Member States.

The following three options for future work steps were identified in Bucharest:

- modification of existing employers' surveys at European level by including questions on skill needs,
- adjustment of national surveys in selected countries to achieve comparability of results,
- launching a European Employers' Skills Survey (EESS) specifically aimed at identification of skill needs.

It was agreed that suggested alternatives are not mutually exclusive and that we can work simultaneously on several options.

Specific objectives of the workshop in Paris were the following:

- to discuss proposals for future general approach and specific steps;
- to identify core questions on skill needs for a common European survey and/or for a common module of national surveys;
- to discuss available national surveys' results related to the core questions, including the extensive experience of some OECD countries outside of Europe;

- to propose specific future steps for a further follow up.

In the framework of this workshop MS' experts were invited to submit a selection of the most important questions from the national questionnaires related to identification of skill needs (based on a template prepared by Cedefop's Skillsnet team).

Workshop summary

The workshop was officially opened by the Head of Employment Analysis and Policy Division, Employment, Labour and Social Affairs directorate in OECD and by Cedefop representatives together with the presentation of the workshop objectives and introduction to the workshop programme.

The workshop started with a presentation of the conceptual outline for the employers' skill survey initiative which was prepared by the Skillsnet team following the Bucharest workshop discussion. The objective of the outline is to assist future development of the new initiative, identifying its objectives, benefits for the EU and individual MS, target group and beneficiaries.

In the next session, several examples of surveys from outside Europe were presented: surveys of Bureau of Labour Statistics in the US together with O*NET database and World Bank experience with company surveys covering international World Bank enterprise survey and skills survey done in Kazakhstan. OECD provided update on the Job Requirement Approach Module of PIAAC.

The next session dealt with an update on two European initiatives: Continuing Vocational Training Survey (CVTS) and European PES Vacancy Monitor (DG Empl) and provided information about their potential use for skill needs analysis.

The next two sessions were devoted to national questions regarded as most important for identification of skill needs. A short introduction provided overview of country responses to Cedefop's template and results of an attempt to compare selected questions related to skill needs across EU Member States. It was followed by short presentation of selected core questions by country experts and discussion.

In the last session, the Skillsnet team summarized the discussion and provided an outline of further steps to be taken.

Workshop conclusions

The discussion in Paris brought about a number of useful conclusions and raised many questions for further feasibility work and discussions with MS experts. It was pointed out that the workshop was held in the framework of preparation of the feasibility study on employers surveys. The forthcoming feasibility study is expected to reassess the three options keeping in mind the achieved conclusions in the prior work. It is also expected to refine objectives of an eventual European Employers Skills Survey (EESS), its sample, periodicity, and propose a questionnaire or a number of core questions which could later be used beyond EESS through national cooperation and harmonization efforts. The feasibility study is expected to tackle all issues, questions and concerns and to take into account all the materials (templates on methods and core questions filled by national experts, individual questionnaires) which have been made available since the start of the initiative. The feasibility study team may equally approach MS experts for verification of certain questions and views to make sure that all opinions are taken into account.

The discussion in Paris unanimously reconfirmed that Skillsnet's efforts in the field of identification of skill needs do not intend to pursue manpower planning. Instead it was widely recognized that the labour market intelligence is a valuable foundation for strategic decisions and policy making which may help individuals, MS and Europe as a whole to boost their economic development, innovation and competitiveness.

It was clearly demonstrated and acknowledged that comparability of national survey results in their current layout is not possible and such illusions on methods should not be falsely

raised and nourished. The idea of launching EESS has been widely supported as the most (and in the prevailing opinion the only) feasible way to collect robust and comparable information at European scale. At the same time it was mentioned that the inclusion of questions into national surveys formulated in a comparable way should not be totally excluded at this stage and may be further explored as a parallel to EESS option. In any case two important and interrelated issues were repeatedly mentioned during the workshop: first, a Europe-wide survey should only be undertaken when a primary objective is clearly identified; second, such a survey should not repeat any questions which are already covered and should therefore only complement other existing initiatives at European and international level and by those means cover the information gaps.

The following suggestions were discussed in detail:

Although many country experts identified difficult-to-fill vacancies and related skill issues as core questions for a survey, it was agreed that these should be left to be further tackled by the DG Empl and Eurostat in their vacancy monitoring and surveying data collection initiatives. Skillsnet should solely act as a complementary source when it comes to vacancies.

Matching employers and employees surveys were pointed out as a valuable approach which may shed the light on skill needs in a more objective manner. It has to be verified whether the Job Requirement Approach module of the OECD PIAAC survey will be a sufficient source of information which could be then used in complex analyses alongside with the employers' survey. Alternatively a softer and more flexible approach of focus groups and expert panels could be sought to cover the employees perspective.

The workshop participants briefly discussed some imperfections of the European Labour Force Survey (small sample, insufficient level of detail in the questionnaire etc.) and the subsequent information deficit for the mid-term forecasting of occupational skill needs in Europe¹. It was suggested that skills composition of occupations (occupation / skill matrix) and utilization of skills in the workplace should therefore become a primary objective of the EESS. Methodologically it may be more useful to measure skill needs by asking about functional areas (instead of occupations) and tasks performed in specific jobs (rather than skills).

The US BLS survey 'Occupational Employment Statistics' was discussed as a useful example. It was however pointed out that the US survey is extremely resource consuming and is performed by a well developed institutional structure at federal and state levels. Furthermore, voices were raised that in a longer run development of the LFS should also be seen as an option to tackle what could be covered by this running survey, if the sample and the questionnaire are extended. Furthermore, if the EESS eventually focuses on the current composition of occupations, it remains unclear how within-occupational changes in the task (read - skill and competence) composition could be tracked and how newly emerging or hybrid occupations could be identified. In the US this information is complemented by the O*NET which has no alternative in Europe.

The skill needs emerge in a certain context and therefore it was recognized that contextual questions cannot be avoided in employers' surveys. To the contrary, they in fact may be seen as the key drivers of change in the skill needs. Innovation, productivity and competitiveness therefore should be measured alongside the skill needs identification. Other important issues that provide useful information on skill needs are e.g. data on wages and on migrant workers. However, given the sensitivity of the information and the complexity of such data collection, it is imperative to verify whether these data collection could be developed in other surveys and added for the skill needs analyses.

An agreement was broadly reached that skill gaps and skill needs should become a primary objective of the survey. Skill needs could be covered by different means by an employer. It could be done by skills provision (different types of training and coaching), by recruitment, or by internal restructuring to minimize the consequences of skill shortages. It is important to

¹ Project of Cedefop's Skillsnet which is run in parallel. It provides first pan-European forecast of skill needs and works currently on skill supply forecast (results will be available early 2009). More information is available at Skillsnet website (www.trainingvillage.gr/skillsnet) under the section Forecasting.

find a way to measure in a robust and comparative way companies' skill needs themselves and avoid concentrating on ways they are tackled unless those reveal the information on specific need areas (specific field of training repeatedly provided or certain qualifications and competences sought among job applicants).

It was finally agreed that although the EESS survey is seen as the most feasible and useful solution, the identification of skill needs at European level should be seen as a wider European objective where Cedefop and Skillsnet have an important role to play. With such an approach, launching EESS should go hand in hand with active discussions with all relevant European and MS stakeholders about the improvement of the quality and the coverage of existing data collection. Cedefop in cooperation with national experts may also develop a set of guidelines and questions which could then be used either at EU level or in existing MS surveys².

All in all the participants of the workshop enjoyed a very cooperative atmosphere and enthusiastically supported the new employers' survey initiative. Cedefop thanked OECD for a very efficient co-organisation of the workshop and welcomed offers from the group members for hosting and co-organising the next workshop in early 2009.

Further steps

The following further steps will be taken:

- The feasibility study will be launched shortly. It is expected to use all the materials (templates on methods and core questions filled by national experts, individual questionnaires) which have been made available since the start of the initiative and to tackle all issues, questions and concerns.
- The next expert workshop will be organised in late 2008 – early 2009. It will focus on the results of the feasibility study and on approach to be taken in the future.

Workshop documents (agenda, list of participants, presentations and papers) are available at Skillsnet webpage www.trainingvillage.gr/skillsnet (in section Events, for members only).

² Jean-Louis Zanda even kindly suggested to pilot 2-3 carefully selected questions in the forthcoming French survey in autumn 2008.