



CONCLUSIONS OF THE INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP INNOVATION AND LEARNING IN ENTERPRISES

Thessaloniki, 10-11 November 2011

The Cedefop workshop **Innovation and Learning in Enterprises** took place in Thessaloniki, Greece, on 10-11 November 2011. The aim of this workshop was to discuss and to open new perspectives on innovation and learning in enterprises, and to validate and complement the results of the ongoing Cedefop study *Adult learning in the workplace: Skill development to promote innovation in enterprises* within this broader context. This paper summarises the key messages of the event and highlights some issues that were raised in the discussions. All background material for this workshop (agenda, presentations, background paper, questions to be addressed) is available on the website (<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/events/18740.aspx>).

KEY MESSAGES FROM THE EVENT

1. Validation of the Cedefop study

Adult learning in the workplace: Skill development to promote innovation in enterprises

The event suggests that ...

...the theme of the study and the questions addressed with the study are highly important. There is a need for research and policy action in this field. The role that VET and learning-conducive working environments play for fostering the innovative capacity of enterprises is often neglected. The study contributes to raising awareness and filling existing gaps.

...the theoretical framework that is used in the study is adequate. A key strength of the methodological approach is the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods and the use of data from different levels (country – enterprise – individuals).

...as regards the analysis of the country-data, it is important to control for the GDP. To get better insights when calculating relationships between work-based learning and innovation and in order to control for the different economic structures, it is suggested that the GDP could be broken down by sectors (or by other relevant variables).

...using data from the AES, the CVTS and the EWCS on the country-level of the study, and collecting data on learning ourselves is good, but it has to be borne in mind that measuring education, training and learning in its various forms is very difficult and challenging.

...the use of data from the Innovation Union Scoreboard seems appropriate as it is a well-established tool. There might be, however, certain limitations of the Scoreboard that need to be addressed when interpreting the results. The existing criticisms concerning the Innovation Union Scoreboard need to be considered (see e.g. the following point on Norway).

...Norway seems to score too low, and its position in the cluster “Moderates” seems inadequate. A possible reason is that the indicators may not fit all countries equally well, and that Norway may be a special case. An explanation could be that the structure of the economy/sectors (Norway: nature/resource intensive enterprises) plays a crucial role. The study needs to take up the discussions that are currently going on concerning this topic, and provide a closer look, especially for Norway.

...it might be problematic that the interviews were conducted ex-post – i.e. after the programmes and projects started. There is, for example, a chance that the results submitted by the respondents were influenced by the aims of the programmes or projects. This point was to a certain extent anticipated. The interview questions were designed in a manner in which it would have been difficult to match the ‘before’ and ‘after’ answers. Further, the preliminary results suggest that this was not a problem. However, this point has to be addressed critically and explained in the study.

...the terms / concepts ‘innovation’ and ‘learning’ need to be defined more thoroughly.

...we need to look closer at the details of the programmes and projects and their (perceived) impacts / outcomes. Which kind of input results in what kind of output in the enterprises, in terms of learning and innovative capacity/innovation? What kind of learning is addressed when using these programmes and projects? Which input-factors are relevant?

...we need to point out that we are looking only at “perceived” outcomes of learning and innovation.

...for policy makers, it is important to outline what works why and in which circumstances. It is good that good practices are shown. Important are also their success factors.

...as a spin-off of the study, further regression analyses could be conducted; e.g.: dummies could be introduced to explore the link between learning and innovation in more detail.

...Eurofound’s European Company Survey (ECS) could be taken into account to include another perspective.

...context factors, e.g. the history and tradition of VET, learning cultures, etc., are important and need to be taken into account. This importance is acknowledged, but due to the scope of the project, context factors can be considered only to a certain extent. Especially in the case studies, context factors will be well covered.

...there might be a lot to learn from programmes and projects that have not been successful. The case studies should also include such examples.

...the study gives a good overview of existing programmes and projects that link innovation and skill development in enterprises in the different EU member states. This is a valuable outcome, especially for policy makers, both on national and EU-level.

2. Areas of further research

The event suggests that ...

...instead of seeing innovation as a final result, it would be interesting to take a process-perspective and to look more closely at the innovation process in enterprises, e.g. the generation of ideas-phase and the exploitation of ideas-phase. What kind of learning is involved in each stage of the innovation process? How can the different phases be fostered with learning?

...the concept 'absorptive capacity' that is used in the study seems very valuable. The absorptive capacity gives us insights into how an enterprise may exploit new ideas and learning. It seems worth to explore this concept in more detail, e.g.: How do we measure this capacity? Which (other) factors contribute to it? How to develop it?

...customers and clients as well as the relation / interaction between them and the enterprises play an important role as regards innovation and learning, especially in certain sectors. This needs to be explored further.

...age and education level of employees play a role in innovation and workplace learning. This could be explored further.

...it might be particularly interesting to analyse start-ups as regards learning and innovation. It can be assumed that they differ considerably from other enterprises.

...networks seem to play an important role when it comes to innovation. Further research is needed in this regard. Crucial questions are, for example: Which role do networks play? Which function do they have when it comes to innovation? Which role do they play for learning? How can we create creative networks that develop innovation and workplace learning?

...it needs to be considered: should we fund innovation or rather concentrate on how to enhance knowledge-sharing between enterprises?

...we should think how we can create a language that is understandable for enterprises when discussing workplace learning. The field is very complex and to some extent very theoretical.

...indicators of (formal or non-formal) CVET often concentrate on attendance, not on learning outcomes. Also, it is not measured how the learning outcomes are spread within the company to employees not taking part in CVET.

...many workers resist change/innovation/reorganisation. This may be linked to their perception or identity as a worker/employee. This is an area that warrants more research. When we look at learning and innovation, it might also be worthwhile to take their identity as learners into account (e.g.: do they perceive themselves as learners?), and see how they are linked.

...it is worth exploring whether we can make any links from our topics of discussion to the present economic crisis.

...further research is needed: What kind of training enhances innovation? How do we promote skills development on the individual level in enterprises to stimulate innovation? Which role do “new” forms of learning play (e.g. social media)?

...SMEs do not participate much in the programmes. Why? How can this be improved? Which role do single entry points play?

...we should look at innovation activities outside publicly funded programmes as well. Publicly-funded programmes are useful, but many innovation activities go on outside such programmes.

...we should investigate the role of higher education institutions, especially partnerships between higher education, enterprises and VET, for innovation. Higher education systems are changing.

...we should look at VET and innovation from various angles: How can VET prepare its learners for innovation (e.g. which competences should be fostered), and how can VET be a partner for innovation?

...as researchers and practitioners we have a responsibility towards more interdisciplinary/transversal/integrated approaches that link innovation, workplace learning and organisational development. More interdisciplinary research is needed. There should also be more dialogue between quantitative and qualitative research.

Further information

For further information, please contact the Cedefop experts:

Alexandra Dehmel
Cedefop
PO Box 22427
55102 Thessaloniki, GREECE
Tel. 30-2310-490-123
Email alexandra.dehmel@cedefop.europa.eu

Grethe Haugoy
Cedefop
PO Box 22427
55102 Thessaloniki, GREECE
Tel. 30-2310-490-055
Email grethe.haugoy@cedefop.europa.eu