Thematic working group on professional development of VET trainers
Peer Learning Event

‘Support to trainers competence development in small and medium-sized enterprises’
28-30 October 2013, Strasbourg, France/Offenburg, Germany

BACKGROUND NOTE

Objectives
The peer learning activity (PLA) of the Thematic working group (TWG) on professional development of VET trainers (1) aims to improve the understanding of policies and practice that support the quality of training in enterprises through the development and updating of in-company trainers’ competences with the specific focus on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

The participants will review and discuss:

(a) specificities and challenges of competence development in SMEs, role and tasks of their trainers;
(b) opportunities for competence and professional development for in-company trainers and those responsible for competence development of employees (provided by the state, sectors, professional associations, training providers);
(c) examples of support measures to training and trainers in SMEs.

1. Role of SMEs in Europe: general context

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are defined officially by the EU as those with fewer than 250 employees. Furthermore, their annual turnover may not exceed €50 million, or their annual balance sheet exceeds €43 million. For statistical purposes, SMEs are divided into three categories according to their size:

- micro-enterprises - fewer than 10 employees,
- small enterprises - 10 - 49 employees,

Small and medium-sized enterprises are the most important form of business organisation in all countries of Europe; they represent 99.7% of all enterprises, employ 93% of the workforce and account for two-thirds of the gross value added. Furthermore, most SMEs are in fact micro enterprises (92.5%) that alone employ around one-third of the European workforce (Eurostat, 2013a). SMEs are also an important source of new jobs; 85% of net

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(1) The TWG is working towards collecting good practice and developing guiding principles on the changing roles, competences and professional development of trainers in VET, as indicated in the Bruges Communiqué (Council of the European Union; European Commission, 2010).
new jobs in the EU between 2002 and 2010 were created by SMEs (European Commission; EIM Business and Policy Research, 2012).

Table 1. SMEs in Europe - Annual enterprise statistics by size class, data 2010

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<th>SMEs</th>
<th>Micro</th>
<th>Small</th>
<th>Medium</th>
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<tr>
<td>Number of enterprises</td>
<td>21,731,303</td>
<td>20,154,303</td>
<td>1,355,000</td>
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<td>Share in total</td>
<td>99.68%</td>
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<td>Persons employed</td>
<td>89,586,900</td>
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<td>27,230,700</td>
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<td>Share in total</td>
<td>67.46%</td>
<td>29.85%</td>
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<td>Value added (EUR Millions)</td>
<td>3,422,300.20</td>
<td>1,261,663.40</td>
<td>1,080,760.90</td>
<td>1,079,875.90</td>
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<td>Share in total</td>
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<td>21.22%</td>
<td>18.17%</td>
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<td>42.34%</td>
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The role of SMEs varies by country and by sector.

In Cyprus, Estonia, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain, the SMEs employ more than three quarters of the workforce (the EU-27 average is 67.5%), while Finland, France, Germany, Slovakia and the UK show high shares of employment in large enterprises.

Sectors, particularly dominated by micro enterprises (as a share of total employment), include real estate, hotels and restaurants, motor trade, retail trade and repair and construction. Small enterprises strongly contribute to the workforce in sectors such as metal products, machinery and equipment, construction, wood and wood products and motor trade. Medium-sized enterprises are strong employers in manufacturing sectors, particularly in the production of rubber and plastics, textiles, pulp, paper and paper products and clothing (European Commission; ORSEU, 2009).

SMEs gained greater policy attention that takes into account their capacity to contribute to economic prosperity and growth through combining tradition with innovation, finding niches for business, creating employment, developing new products and services as well as through socially responsible attitude. SMEs also play an important role in developing their local communities. Even in the economic downturn SMEs retained their position as the backbone of the European economy; however, the difficult economic environment poses increased challenges to them (European Commission; Ecorys, 2012) and makes them depend heavily on external support mechanisms and policies.

In 2000, the European Council called upon the Member States and the Commission to take action to support and encourage small enterprises (the European Charter for Small enterprises). In 2008, the Small Business Act for Europe (SBA) was adopted to establish a comprehensive policy framework for the EU and the Member States and mainstream SME-friendly policies throughout Europe (European Commission, 2008). The ‘Think small first’ principle is put forward to make the SME dimension an integral part of all EU policy-making, including social, health, employment and education and training.

As one of its fundamental principles, the SBA invited the Member States to promote the upgrading of skills in SMEs and all forms of innovation (European Commission, 2008). In the area of education and training, the European Commission called on educational and training institutions to open up to provide customer-oriented continuing education and training (CVET) adapted to the needs of employers and employees, in particular in micro and small enterprises (European Commission, 2010).
However, there is still a gap between the ‘Think small first’ principle and its application both in EU cooperation and in national support structures (European Commission and FBH, 2011). The specific needs of SMEs are often neglected when developing and providing vocational training, supporting skill development and stimulating lifelong learning. Of course, SMEs can benefit from general measures but they need special support and, in most cases, guidance to overcome the barriers set by their size.

2. Training in SMEs

It should be noted that the existing information and knowledge as regards employees’ vocational qualifications and skills in SMEs and especially micro enterprises are limited.

According to official statistics (Eurostat, 2013b), two-thirds of small enterprises (63%) provide training to their employees, which is, nevertheless, less by approximately one-third than large companies (93%). A similar difference applies to companies providing CVET courses internally (50% versus 85%) while the difference in providing external CVET is not so big (see Annex for more details). One fourth of SMEs provide apprenticeship (type) initial vocational training (Eurostat, 2013b).

In terms of participation rates, on average in the EU, a slightly higher proportion of employees in large enterprises (49%) took part in training than in medium (45%) and small (46%) enterprises (Eurostat, 2013b). There are differences in the participation rates between the countries, with the Nordic countries showing highest rates and Southern and Central European countries the lowest.

It should be borne in mind that official statistics only partly reflects the reality of training in SMEs who already carry out a good deal of it but face a number of challenges, especially for engaging in formal training activities. For example, trained employees often leave for better paid positions in large companies while the company bears the cost of training. Workplace learning is by far the main form of training in SMEs, especially, micro and small ones (brown, 2005; Cedefop, 2009, 2010a; OECD, 2013).

Fast adaptability to new demands and environments, including the need to acquire the right sets of skills fast is vital for SMEs, with the availability of skilled staff being a major challenge. SMEs (as well as large companies) engage in training their staff driven by:

(a) external to business requirements and challenges (technological, regulatory, demographic, social);

(b) the need to increase internal capacity to adapt and change (developing new products);

(c) customer demands challenging the existing sets of skills, need for more client-oriented skills;

(d) employees’ will for lifelong learning and need to keep skilled employees in the company.

In improving their skill base, SMEs (and especially micro enterprises) face external and internal organisational (not possible to send employees for longer training) as well as financial (training is resource-intensive activity) barriers. The difficulty to identify, assess and formulate their competence and training needs is one of the main obstacles that often prevent SME owners from taking systematic approaches to training and competence development (OECD, 2013). This is the area where most support in terms of resources and structures is required.
Skill gaps are usually identified by external experts and bodies, for example, development agencies or sector organisations. This exercise should be then supported by help in developing a training plan and, possibly, in its implementation.

In **Portugal**, Portuguese Business Association - Chamber of Commerce and Industry (**Associação Empresarial de Portugal, Câmara de Comércio e Indústria**, AEP) implements an **SME training programme** that targets micro and SMEs, placing a strong emphasis on diagnosing the training needs of companies rather than promoting existing programmes. The programme aims at raising competitiveness and competences of both SME owners and workforce. It includes needs assessment, building a development plan, consulting and guidance, in-company training and a social responsibility project, made up for each company. The programme supports a network promoting a culture of lifelong learning. The programme is financed by the government and EU funds. The programme received positive feedback from companies for the relevance of the provided training.

In **Iceland**, a concept of a **Training Planner** was developed by the **Starfafi Vocational training Fund** to aid SMEs in finding relevant training for their staff to increase competitiveness. The Training Planner is an external HR consultant lent to a company from a large training provider. He/she works with the company to assess training and learning needs, examine the competences needed for the jobs, designs a tailored programme and learning activities for the company. The cost of the consultancy can be shared by the provider and the company. The training provider has the overall responsibility for the implementation of the training programme. The Icelandic experience shows that such training plans serve a solid basis for in situ training that is relevant both to the company and employees. To share the experience, a transfer of innovation project, **Training Planner**, was developed by Icelandic, Austrian and Spanish providers (Study visit group report, 2010).

Facing a need for certain skills and competences, first, companies (even micro) discuss and deal with it internally, trying to find an in-house solution and, if possible, increase their in-house training (half of enterprises) at the very point of need. Most SMEs rely on spontaneous and intuitive actions and use in-house training as an option rather than on drawing up competence development plans (European Commission and FBH, 2011).

Apart from increasing in-house training (half of enterprises in European Commission and FBH, 2011), the following options are used:

- **(a)** recruiting workers with the appropriate sets of skills; it should be noted though that usually SMEs experience difficulties in attracting and recruiting such persons, especially young employees, due to skills not matching the job profiles and very high wage expectations. Some companies cannot even find people to train.

- **(b)** encouraging external vocational training;

- **(c)** turning to providing internal initial VET (IVET), for example, taking in apprentices or trainees and using it as screening for potential employees.

SMEs use both formal and informal training (**KISA – knowledge intensive service activities**) as ways of acquiring the right skills. However, they report better learning outcomes from informal activities (OECD, 2013). Informal training is more appealing to SME due to the minimal cost and time efficiency; it takes place on the job, does not distract the employee from work and builds their hands-on experience.

Measures to support training in SMEs need to take into account the companies’ perceptions of the role of various players.
Training providers (public and private) play an important role in supporting skill development in SMEs as they are the first to whom SMEs tend to turn, having identified their skills/competence needs (either internally or with external support). However, there are issues to consider:

(a) SMEs rarely get to taking part directly in defining the content of training and designing training programmes. As a result, training programmes and methods available on the market are often unsuitable for SMEs size and needs.

(b) Another factor that makes them unsuitable for SMEs is that traditional training programmes provided by VET institutions tend to handle skills separately (work process, managerial, teamwork) while SMEs have the need not only for individual skills but rather for skills bundles. They cannot afford to work in functional divided areas and rely instead on transversal skills; the right combination of skills is crucial for their functioning and productivity.

(c) Many training providers indicate company needs as the main driver for developing their training offer. This leads to believe that there is a will on both sides but there is certainly a need for better cooperation mechanisms to allow SMEs to advise training providers on what they need rather than training providers telling them what they have on offer.

(d) SMEs often opt for private training providers as they are able to provide more customised training and flexible provision but they also tend to be more costly, which has impact on training budgets. Private training providers are important players and policies can be reflected upon how to cooperate/involve them better in SME related policies.

Business and professional organisations (chambers, associations, and unions) help identify training needs for the sector but they can be better involved in information campaigns on the benefits of training to the companies and in providing guidance to SMEs. The link and association with business organisations is seen as important but it is not part of everyday practice as regards provision of training. For example, SMEs contact these organisations for training only after training providers and suppliers/manufacturers in their supply chain. Some studies point to the fact that chambers are more important players than trade unions in the interaction with SMEs as trade unions often do not exist in SMEs.

In the Czech Republic, most consultancies that provide training and coaching to companies are SMEs themselves and often lack training and funding opportunities. The Association of management trainers and consultants (ATKM), developed a series of projects (financed from the ESF) to upgrade the competences of training consultants working with SMEs and to support networking and CPD of trainers in the country. Modules for the advanced training of trainers were designed and implemented in the Czech language (innovation). Some of the topics included the use of interactive training methods, the use of ICT, transition from training to consultancy, providing personal training, coaching, etc. Trainers were themselves actively involved in the design, delivery and evaluation of training (Cedefop, 2010b).

Some studies point to the fact that there is already an awareness of the importance of forward skill planning within companies and the relevance of a systemic approach is increasing. Successful companies with explicit commitment to learning and development are characterised by the following:

(a) learning is embedded in their everyday activities;
(b) learning occurs in collaborative resolution of identified problems;
(c) allowing access to formal education and training;
(d) workers recognise their responsibility to update their skills;
(e) learning from colleagues is explicitly encouraged and facilitated (Brown, 2005).

SMEs also see potential in working together in strategic networks with other companies that facilitate access to resources; provide for sharing information, exchanging knowledge, advice, developing ideas and learning from each other’s experiences (Brown, 2005; Cedefop, 2005, 2009; European Commission and FBH, 2011).

Networking through associations, chambers of commerce and with other companies is not often utilised by SMEs, but also offers a forum to exchange ideas and experiences. Similarly, clustering with other companies is not often utilised, but provides associations with working groups, committees and trade associations. The collaboration between companies and organisations within the region provides opportunities for all involved, which not only promotes competence development but also provides a framework for innovation (OECD, 2013).

In Germany, more than two-thirds of young people in the dual system receive their IVET in SMEs. But often, SMEs do not have capacity to provide the full range of training. To assist them in doing so, the Vocational Training Act or the Crafts and Trades Regulation Code provide for inter-company support. Inter-company vocational training centres (überbetriebliche Berufsbildungsstätten, ÜBS) support companies by providing complementary training to the in-company one, keeping training in line with the technological, environmental, economic and societal developments, ensuring quality of IVET through employing qualified trainers and cooperation between the learning venues. The centres also conduct training for business owners, managers, women entrepreneurs. The centres are supported with long-term public funding. Up to now, more than 1,000 training centres and 27 competence centres have been created.

In Ireland, Skillnets (funded from the National Training Fund through the Department of Education and Skills) fund groups of companies in the same region/sector, and with similar training needs, through training networks that deliver subsidised training to Irish businesses. Member companies, and their employees, are directly involved in the identification, design, delivery and evaluation of training. Companies can request the exact training their staff need and the training can be delivered at a time and a location that suits member companies. Each network employs a network manager to work with member companies ensuring the training is enterprise-led and sector/area specific. Skillnets promotes networking events which foster co-operation and collaboration between enterprises.

Networking within supply chain led by a large company is another effective way of motivating SMEs that are much readier to take part in an initiative explicitly approbated by a major customer than when they are approached directly by providers of education and training. Participation of large manufacturers in networks was a powerful initial hook for SMEs to engage in learning and training (Brown, 2005).

A case study from the aerospace sector in the UK describes how the aerospace supply chain learning network was set up to provide opportunities for collaborative learning and knowledge development across organisations and companies involved in the supply chain. The intention was to train 'change agents' in each of the companies who would then be...
responsible for learning, development and process improvement in their own organisations. The lead company persuaded their suppliers to identify key individuals with central responsibility for shopfloor innovation in supply management. These people, nominated as ‘change agents’, also followed a course on Stimulating Competitiveness in Supply Chains. They were invited to a series of one week, intensive workshops at the lead company, led by the engineering tutor together with help from the learning support tutor. The tutor role involved providing advice, guidance and information and supporting all aspects of learning.

There were obvious advantages to the lead that saw rapid benefits in terms of the cost, quality and delivery performance of suppliers. There were also competitive advantages for all the companies in the network (Brown, 2005).

3. Trainers in SMEs

As little as is known about training in SMEs, even less information is available about those with the training role and capacity in SMEs and especially in micro enterprises.

However, support to competence development of trainers in SMEs at policy level is needed to involve more SMEs in providing:

(a) apprenticeships and work placements for students in IVET, the more so within the implementation of the European Alliance for Apprenticeships. SMEs can help equip the young with the skills needed for the labour market but they have limited resources, which need to be enhanced with public support measures.

(b) training to people in employment within the EU and national strategies for lifelong learning, employability and skills for jobs.

There is hardly space for a division of labour that would allow the role of an in-company trainer to emerge, especially in micro and small enterprises. This does not mean that the in-company trainer’s function is absent. In fact, training in small firms is provided by various actors and in this context, there are two groups of employees:

(a) the comparatively small group of in-company trainers who perform training tasks as the major part of their occupational role;

(b) the comparatively large group of employees, including owners, whose occupational role includes a particular training-related function (owner, general manager, supervisor, skilled worker). Mentoring is another important technique for new employees, which assists with knowledge building, understanding job content, develops company focus and provides assistance if required (OEC, 2013).

In addition, non-formal training is provided by external trainers, technology providers, business partners or sector business organisations.

Owners are key to training and competence development in SMEs but they rarely approach it strategically with a long-term thinking. Often they develop an annual training plan in cooperation with their line officers. They participate in external courses themselves and subsequently pass on the new knowledge and experiences to their employees. In many cases, when external training is not affordable, the owners decides to cover by themselves skill and competence deficit and assume the role of trainers; however, they usually have little or no formal expertise as trainers. Therefore, SME owners and their family members should be the most important target group for training activities, followed by managerial staff (Cedefop, 2009) as investment in their development can result in more training at the
lower levels in company. This is a sort of a ‘cascade model’ most frequent in relatively small firms (Cedefop, 2009).

The owner needs at least three groups of competences:

(a) good entrepreneurial skills to monitor changes and convert them into business;
(b) solid managerial skills to run the business effectively;
(c) strong craftsmanship skills to supply customer-oriented products and services (European Commission and FBH, 2011).

Another important challenge that SMEs will face in the coming years is business transfer as an estimated 6 million small business owners (one-third of EU entrepreneurs) will retire over the next ten years (European Commission, 2008). Support measures will be needed at the same level as for start-ups to keep these businesses for Europe. As new owners will need to be trained, this can be a good opportunity to increase their awareness and capacity for systemic competence development in their companies.

Training or competence development function can also be organised internally, for instance by an employee who is entrusted with the role of identifying the need for training and skills development in the company and who can make suggestions for applicable solutions. In particular, due to the limited personnel and financial resources of many SMEs, this new role of ‘enabler’ or ‘counsellor’ or ‘tutor’ is an interesting solution for implementing a continuous and on-going practice of HR and skills development policies. But it is crucial that the person entrusted with this role be prepared sufficiently and trained for the ‘enabling’ role (European Commission; ORSEU, 2009).

The importance of skills to work with other employees and train them is seen as increasing in importance in the future (construction sector in European Commission and FBH, 2011).

Various legislative provisions, EU, national and local approaches, programmes, initiatives and projects have been elaborated and piloted for people in charge of training and skills development in SMEs. Approaches, if any, vary from country to country and across sectors but the overall picture points to rather fragmented and project-based initiatives, very often with limited potential for sustainability (with the exception of few countries). Thus, the palette of questions regarding the training needs and successful approaches towards developing the skills competences of training staff in SMEs remains open and worth further policy attention, research and cooperation among the stakeholders.

In Germany, trainers in companies should be registered by the company with the competent body as a trainer responsible for training. Responsible trainers can also be company owners and master craftsmen. One of the elements in the master craftsman (‘Meister’) exam assesses the ability of the “Meister” to conduct training. At national level the Skilled Crafts Act stipulates that if the entrepreneur does not possess the respective skills to organise and conduct training in his/her company, he/she needs to ensure trainers who can deliver training for the staff. Trainers’ pedagogical competences are proven by the AEVO exam (the Ordinance on the Trainers Aptitude).

In the UK, since 2010 Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), locally based bodies of employers, local authorities and education and training providers create local strategies for training and identify areas for growth. Sector Skills Councils, sectoral employer bodies, develop training priorities and programmes for organisations in their sectors, that include
training of SMEs staff, managers and owners for their training functions. There are no such programmes at the national level.

In France, the Confederation of SMEs (CGPME) mandated its intermediary body AGEFA-PME to support the provision of apprenticeships in small enterprises. A web-service portal and methodological toolbox for apprentices and tutors advises the SMEs on providing apprenticeships, including information on apprenticeship tax credit and regional aids and on the value of apprenticeships to SMEs.

4. Key issues

Based on the above, policy interventions can be beneficial in the following fields:

(a) SMEs depend very much on external support mechanisms and SME-friendly environments. Support to training and trainers should be linked to a broader context of support to SMEs, including provision of organisational support and professional counselling for companies. Skills and competence development in SMEs should be explored and supported with a broader way of thinking, well beyond the formal training perspective. Developing the training capacity of companies can be considered as part incentives to SMEs (both financial and non-financial), for example, as a way to involve them in providing apprenticeship places.

(b) The following policy options and suggestions can be considered:

- collaboration/partnerships between SMEs and training providers, creating relevant structures;
- information, awareness and up-to-date advice (impact, benefits of training) to SMEs owners, managers, employees from all players (government agencies, business organisations, trade unions, training providers);
- promoting training culture in SMEs; train middle management.

(c) Effort to support training and training capacity in SMEs could focus on:

- measuring and demonstrating benefits and returns on investment in training;
- identifying and anticipating skill needs;
- communicating skill needs;
- translating skill needs into training programmes.

(d) It should be acknowledged that skills development is a resource intensive activity; hence, policy interventions could focus on areas that offer SMEs a way to systematise their training practices.

(e) Most of the drivers are market-initiated and companies need and do react to market needs quickest of all; therefore, public measures to support training by SMEs should consider providing flexible solutions and ensuring quick provision of the necessary competences.

(f) Focusing largely upon participation in formal CVET as regards SMEs has severe limits. Participation in a wider range of work-related activities needs to be considered. Since in small companies a great amount of learning takes place through work experience and informal learning, there should be a way for employees to go through a validation process for the skills they developed in this way (Council of the European Union, 2012). Through documentation and validation of learning
outcomes, typical SME entrepreneurs could be encouraged to upgrade their performance as ‘trainers’ too.

There is a need for formal training organisations and providers to understand better the importance of informal training for SMEs and the potential that exists to develop a pathway for informal skills to be recognised by qualifications. This process will require a greater role to be played by industry and employee organisations to transmit and integrate SME views. It would also require opening up of the education systems to address training needs that go beyond the formal education sector. And last but not least the whole SMEs sector would benefit from a synchronised approach between education and economic policies, especially in competence development of training staff.

5. Discussion/exploration questions

(1) Is training of employees in SMEs a matter of concern/part of policy agenda in your country? Is it reflected in any strategy/legal act/ national programme? Is there a specific reference in the strategies/legal acts/programmes to training of training staff or managers and owners in SMEs?

(2) What support measures are implemented based on the legislation or strategies:

- for training in SMEs,
- for training of training staff, owners and managers in SMEs?

(3) What measures to involve more SMEs in providing apprenticeships take place in your country? Do they include providing training or other support to apprentice tutors or to any other staff in companies?

(4) What measures exist at other levels to support training and training staff and management in SMEs (for example, projects at national or sectoral levels to support SMEs’ competence development capacity)?

6. Bibliography


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<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
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<th>Percentage of all enterprises providing CVT courses</th>
<th>Enterprises providing any other form of training as % of all enterprises - Any type of other forms of CVT</th>
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