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Identifying interactions between global and local developments: the Observatory for the detection of skill and training needs in the Barcelona region

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The project presented in this article ⁽¹⁾ defines the content and methods for identifying vocational training needs in the Barcelona region from a standpoint different from, and critical of, the ‘technocratic’ methods that have long dominated the monitoring of labour market and training trends. This project is linked with other international initiatives.

The theoretical framework is a skill-oriented adjustment model of the kind being used increasingly in human resource management at all levels by business, industry and government bodies.

The project’s methodology takes into account both global and local developments and aims to create a permanent instrument for identifying and monitoring skill needs and skills availability in a given region. It uses a pragmatic approach of regulation and adjustment underpinned by partnerships.

⁽¹⁾ The project was commissioned by the Vocational Training Board of Barcelona, the GRET (*Grup de Recerca sobre Educació i Treball*) of the Autonomous University of Barcelona in an international partnership with Tom Leney (University of London and QCA) and Guy Ourliac (University of Toulouse and ARGOS) to develop an *ad hoc* methodology. Part of this document has been published by CEREQ: Planas, J. et al., 2001.

1. Project objectives

Our society is becoming increasingly complex and the speed of change is accelerating. Consequently information, such as that concerning long-term skill requirements, is not entirely reliable. In addition, the structures of organisations concerned with information on the availability of, and demand for, education and training within a given territory, and their policies, are extremely complex.

It follows, therefore, that any instrument for detecting skill and training needs in a large urban area must be designed to reduce uncertainty and underpin decision-making, rather than offer ready-made solutions. The present project defines the content and methods for identifying vocational training needs in the Barcelona region from a standpoint different from, and critical of, the 'technocratic' methods that have long dominated the monitoring of labour market and training trends.

The objective of the project, which is linked with other international initiatives, is to create a system providing information on the demand for vocational training in the Barcelona region and the extent and quality of its provision. Its aim is to encourage debate as to who should participate and who should decide on vocational training matters. It should also provide suitable information and analysis for decision-making on how to develop vocational training.

The theoretical framework is a skill-oriented adjustment model of the kind used increasingly in human resource management at all levels by business, industry and government bodies, one of its underlying assumptions being that the labour market is skill-oriented. Skills can be acquired in different ways and at different periods in an individual's life. They change in the course of time and are governed by the requirements of technology and the organisation of production processes, which in turn are influenced by globalisation and by the particular environmental and historical features of a given territory. The process of adjusting workers' skills to the requirements of business and industry takes place in a market responsive to 'signals' such as certificates of competence. Skills are, however, becoming increasingly varied and cannot easily be captured in educational certificates. Some signals are especially important for a given territory or sector of industry where they are consequently more highly rated.

The project's methodology takes into account both global and local developments and aims to create a permanent instrument for identifying and monitoring skill needs and availability in a given region. It will use a pragmatic

approach of regulation and adjustment underpinned by partnerships.

The aims of this project are as follows:

- (a) to provide a system of quantitative and qualitative information concerning availability of and demand for vocational training in the Barcelona region that is linked to, or associated with, international initiatives;
- (b) to encourage discussion within decision-making bodies in VET and summarise the results;
- (c) to provide contrasting data and analyses for decision making about the development of vocational training.

2. Theoretical framework

The traditional, more 'technocratic' model of manpower forecasting has three main disadvantages:

- (a) inadequate information on training demand, which increases as the time horizon grows longer;
- (b) the fact that individuals do not choose training exclusively on the basis of market needs nor do they wish to do so;
- (c) the inability of the training and education systems to adapt to training types and time frames that firms prefer.

The proposal is for a skill-based adjustment model of the kind being used increasingly in human resource management at all levels by business, industry and government bodies. It is based on the following assumptions:

- (a) the labour market is currently oriented towards the skills of the labour force;
- (b) there are different means and occasions in an individual's life that could be more or less convenient and effective for attaining different types of skills;
- (c) skills are not acquired in a single training space, whether at school or otherwise, nor at a single period in an individual's life;
- (d) the skills needed to perform certain nominally stable jobs, such as that of waiter or secretary, alter fairly rapidly over time without regard to the cycles of an individual's working life;
- (e) the demand for skills is governed by the requirements of technology and the organisation of production processes, which in turn are increasingly influenced by globalisation and by the particular environmental and historical features of a given region;
- (f) adjusting worker skills to the requirements of business and industry takes place in a market, which is increasingly sensitive to 'signals' as to

- individual skill, where formal qualifications continue to be of great importance, especially as filters, but which is also influenced by other kinds of skill-related signals difficult to capture in a formal qualification;
- (g) regardless of their specialist denomination, formal qualifications also – some would say especially – testify to key skills such as learning or communication skills that are useful in a wide variety of fields, allow for greater job mobility and make employment more flexible by overcoming the rigidities of one-to-one correspondence of the formal qualification to the actual job requirements;
 - (h) a number of these signals carry particular weight in a given territory or sector of industry and thus take on special importance in the skills market.

The skill-based approach creates a positive link between initial training and lifelong learning, both in the course of a single occupational career or of one that is interrupted. It sees training as a form of accumulation (every skill is useful in building a career) and rejects the idea of training as a contingent activity.

The skill-based approach makes it possible to relate and recognise different types of training and skills acquired over the course of a person's working life. Far from viewing the three vocational training subsystems (formal, work-based and continuing) as being in competition, the skill-based approach makes it easier to relate them to one another. In fact, the technocratic approach places the three systems in a relationship of hierarchical dependence while the skill-based approach brings them together.

The skill-based approach is not so bold as to promise the ideal solution, in the form of specific training to meet perceived skill needs. It simply affirms that relationships can exist between social bodies and employers and those involved in providing training (trainers and training bodies) and that it can assist in realising overall strategies aimed at major adjustments. While less ambitious, this promise demands certain changes in mentality to view things from the standpoint of skills, with the agents participating in choosing strategies for adjustment between social training requirements and firms' skill requirements.

To summarise: the adjustment model expresses the response of firms to uncertainty in the face of technological change and the difficulties of long-term economic forecasting. Flexibility and competitiveness are necessary basic values.

3. Methodological criteria

Before going into specific detail on the various aspects of the methodology to be developed it is perhaps appropriate to define the methodological criteria underlying the proposal.

(a) **Setting the analysis squarely within evolving trends**

One of the principal challenges confronting those responsible for deciding on training needs is the time-shift between availability and demand. This is why the method needs to include a number of elements enabling future trends in terms of likely scenarios, including, on occasion, a region's existing development strategies.

(b) **Complexity should be reduced but distortion avoided**

Another obstacle to be overcome by decision-makers is the complex relationship between training and employment and the labour market.

Reducing this complexity does not, however, mean over-simplifying and distorting. Nor does it allow a crisis management approach, dealing with problems only when they become urgent. Whatever the case, reducing complexity is a methodological imperative. The frequently heard statement that 'It is all highly complex' merely serves as an excuse for not taking a decision or rejecting any solution as inadequate. Reducing the complexity of a process is an intermediate step in weighing up and opposing common directions.

(c) **Use the term vocational training in its most widely understood sense**

Regarding the labour market as skill-based implies that there is not just one solution to a training need and that one cannot identify vocational training exclusively in terms of one of its methods or subsystems. We must instead use the whole range available in order to choose the most appropriate model, considering factors such as time, target audience, firms' customs and practices, and so on.

Adopting at least one broader concept of vocational training can help to avoid falling into the trap of the closed approach, i.e. defending the point of view that there is a predefined, independent subsystem for each of the skills required.

(d) Construct a permanent system

Identifying training needs – the requirements of the local economy, of firms in general, for ensuring employment for young people, enabling unemployed adults to return to work etc. – is not possible if the search is conducted using a technocratic parameter such as we have defined. This complex subject makes it necessary to relate sociological, political and institutional factors of which we are not sufficiently informed and which change too rapidly; a quick decision cannot offer a pertinent and lasting solution.

The most suitable instrument, therefore, is a permanent system capable of reacting to changes in circumstances, problems, institutions, statistics and the like. Moreover, the continuity of such a system will also provide all those involved in conducting the analysis and taking decisions with the skills and experience necessary to take action in areas of complexity.

(e) Adopt a pragmatic approach to regulation/adjustment

Employment forecasts, whether for the market as a whole or for a particular sector of activity or geographical region, are dependent on a number of factors that limit the forecasting horizon to the shorter or medium term. The contents of future jobs, and hence the qualifications and skills needed to perform them, are similarly uncertain. Uncertainty as to numbers, nature and content of jobs increases.

Training systems often have to readjust to meet the needs of the economy, firms or populations. However, they also, especially at the initial training level, suffer from considerable inertia, limited scope for development and a limited ability to respond to new needs.

Decisions concerning training will frequently produce their effects after the time for which training needs have been forecast. By the time the 'regulated' vocational training system and the universities turn out the first batches of those with the supposedly widely sought-after qualifications, employers will already have taken on other workers or graduates with suitable substitute qualifications. Difficulties are aggravated when the system is so hidebound that it goes on 'producing' people with qualifications for which the market has little demand.

It would seem that any decision concerning vocational training solves one problem at the expense of creating another for the future, hence the need to devise a form of management for vocational training systems that is sufficiently adaptable to permit frequent corrective action.

Persons responsible for taking decisions for a given region, therefore, must be prepared constantly to review and revise their systems. Only an approach that combines knowledge of the situation and of likely

developments in the nearer and more distant future, alongside keen awareness of the impact of alternative policies, will enable needs to be met as they arise.

(f) Forge partnerships

Nowadays no institution, occupational or professional organisation or forecasting or planning body is in a position to determine training requirements on its own, regardless of time horizon. While none has all the facts at its disposal, each has some elements relevant to forecasting the general economic situation, growth in a given sector of industry, important changes, management of human resources, means of accessing jobs etc.

Available data, whether obtained from statistical sources, based on estimates or qualitative research, is widely scattered and diverse. Often the information is contradictory because statistics are out of date, estimates exaggerated or statements made by those who are too involved or influenced by the interests of firms, trainers, students etc. to be objective.

A system involving partnership or association should improve access to quantitative and qualitative labour market data.

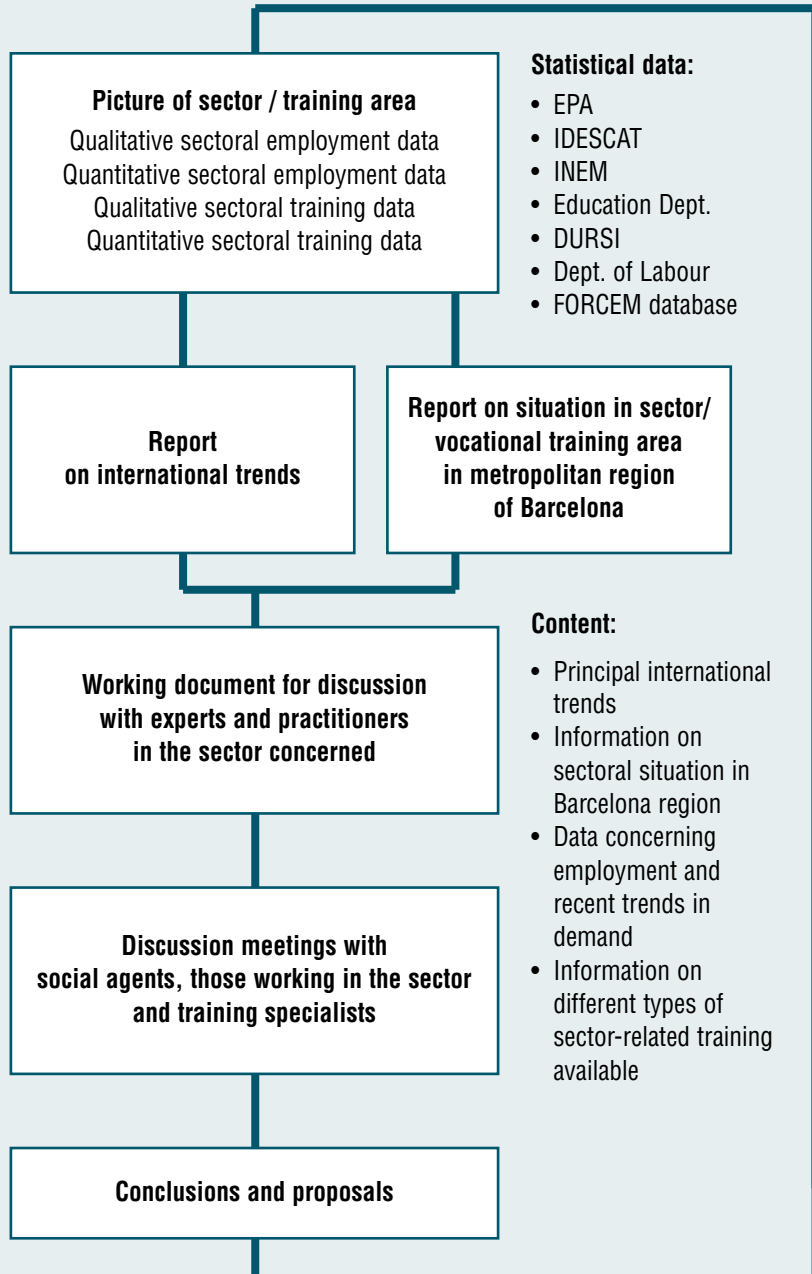
If it is to function well, this method will need to use secondary data to which access is guaranteed through a stable partnership network. Information concerning training and work generally comes from a variety of unconnected sources. Partnership will enable isolation and ignorance to be overcome.

(g) Equip those concerned with the necessary tools

With a complex approach of this kind it is not enough to find the necessary experts or partners for the task. They must be provided with the tools they need. No matter how skilled or willing the group is furnishing the data on which to base decisions, they will do better if they have the appropriate tools at their disposal. These will have various functions. First, they will be of symbolic importance in the sense that the partners will see that they are being taken seriously and that the client, where it is a local authority, is prepared to invest to strengthen their cooperation. That is to say, that this is not merely a case of 'nominal consultation' but of genuine collaboration.

Second, the tools will ensure a consistent methodological framework. If cooperation takes place in a clear and stable context one is more likely to be able to rely on collaboration from partners representing the various sectors concerned.

Third, they will constitute an important source of information, not simply by virtue of the information they generate but also because obtaining valid statistical information will ensure a focus on essential points and avoid

Figure 1. **Method diagram**

discussions on different perceptions of subject-matter for which objective data is available. The existence of statistical information restricts the scope for dogmatic generalisations that are often exaggerated and lead to time-wasting.

(h) Define the territory in terms of residence, training and employment

Defining a territory in which to ascertain the degree of match between skill requirements and available training means defining a territory that is closed in the sense of including the places of residence, employment and training for a stable population. In other words, the territory must include the bulk of those living in the area and working and undergoing training there.

(i) Define the areas of work/training (comparing availability and demand)

Two criteria must be applied when defining the work/training areas. The first is to identify them, as Guy Ourliac (in the third part of the publication by Planas et al., 2001) states, with the large body of knowledge and hence with the content of training and its associated tasks. The second is a pragmatic criterion linking the sources of statistical information under different headings. Combining the two criteria leads us to propose using the occupational families of the vocational training subsystems as the basis for defining training/work areas, working with relevant equivalencies and differences.

4. A proposal: 'glocal' European network for the identification of skill needs

The Barcelona experiment is not, of course, the only one to adopt a 'glocal' approach combining global sectoral trends in industry with specific local trends in skill and training requirements. The Barcelona project has already benefited from an international partnership with London and Toulouse.

Similar experiments are being conducted in other countries of the European Union with whom research problems, methods and experience are shared. We propose that whoever should or could do so, assist in the setting up a 'glocal European network for the identification of skill needs' linking the existing experiments in a network and setting up the relevant technical support systems.

5. References

- Planas, J. et al. Méthodologie visant à la détection des besoins de compétences et de formation professionnelle pour la Région de Barcelone. In *La décentralisation de la formation professionnelle en France: quels changements dans la conduite de l'action publique? Thème 4: rôle et statut des outils et de l'évaluation politiques*. Grenoble: CEREQ/CERAT, 2001.