

New Perspectives for Learning - Briefing Paper 12

Training the long-term unemployed

Context of the Research

Bringing the long-term unemployed back into employment through training is an ongoing policy of many governments. However, little is known on the effectiveness of labour market oriented training for the long-term unemployed.

Focusing primarily at the micro-economic level, this project has addressed the question of what works and what does not work in terms of the training the long-term unemployed. It has looked at the organisational, curricular and instructional characteristics of training programmes - that might make one type of training programme more effective compared to another training programme. Studies were conducted in Belgium, Denmark, England, Greece, Ireland, The Netherlands and Norway.

Key Conclusions

Some broad conclusions were drawn from the study:

1. Vocational education and training, and certainly (continuing) vocational training for either the unemployed or employed people, differs substantially between countries. Attempting to classify training activities and training measures in order to establish comparable data is a very difficult undertaking.
2. Some countries do have a clear record or register of what training is provided and by which organisations. Other countries do not know the total population of training schemes and initiatives or can only 'construct' a population overview with great difficulties.
3. The following results were gathered from former trainees from the training courses:
 - a) A large percentage of former trainees found a job - 44% claimed to have found their jobs during the course and 29% stayed on with the employer where they did their work experience. 71% said they had retained their original jobs, but out of those who had lost their jobs the majority (82%) had started looking for another job and 63% had succeeded.
 - b) However, less than half were convinced that the training was necessary to obtain their particular jobs and believed there was a mismatch between the training they received and the job they obtained.

- c) The main reasons former trainees enrolled on the course were to increase chances in the labour market and because of the course content. The combination of theory and practise, job-related subjects, general subjects and practical training were considered as useful. Job search skills were considered to be less useful than the other aspects.
 - d) The trainees were on average relatively more highly educated than expected, the drop-out rates were low and the main reason for trainees leaving was because they had found jobs. This indicated there had been some form of selection process.
4. There were some surprising findings affecting drop-out rates: -
- a) The provision of guidance and counselling increases drop-out rates, however less guidance and counselling at both enrolment and transition stages also increased drop-out rates.
 - b) Job search training throughout the course decreases the chances of finding a job, but at the end it improves chances.
 - c) The closer that practical training is to real work experience, the higher the chance that the trainee will not finish the course.
 - d) Greater flexibility of the curriculum increases drop-out rates.
 - e) Less selective training organisations have higher drop-out rates.
5. Psychological barriers, such as fear of failure, a negative self-image or fatalism, may also discourage further participation in training. These barriers may also lead to self-selection and bring about a situation where only the most motivated enrol for training. In contrast, good training can promote a growth in self-esteem and self-confidence.
6. In the short term, direct employment could be considered as the best strategy of getting back into the labour process, as training can be a postponement of obtaining gainful employment or even a barrier.
7. Some economic researchers believe that the level of training is too low, the scope is too narrow and too focused on getting people back into employment without taking into account the long-term employment perspectives of the training provided. Training is often too focused towards specific vacancies that exist within certain enterprises or that are expected to arise in the short-term.
8. There are also concerns that the long-term unemployed (who have found work in favourable economic conditions) will be the first to be made redundant when economic growth declines or turns into a recession.

9. There is a dilemma to be faced in designing labour market measures for the long-term unemployed. If labour market measures intend to promote the re-entry of long-term unemployed in gainful employment (with the prospect of employment in the long run and even the prospect of continuing training in the context of employment), the initial investment needed for training these unemployed should be substantial. At the same time the least qualified long-term unemployed are often confronted with multiple problems and do not (necessarily) give priority to training.
10. It was found that the 'retrospective' research approach used in this study was not a very appropriate way of collecting reliable data for drawing conclusions. It was too costly to retrace former trainees long after they have left a training programme and resulted in the additional risk of producing skewed samples.

Key Recommendations

The study made the following recommendations:-

1. Improvements are required in identifying the various training initiatives for long-term unemployed in some European countries.
2. This will also require reaching a consensus in national definitions of unemployment particularly relating to being unemployed and taking a training course as a result of being unemployed.
3. There is a need for further and more effective research into vocational training and specifically 'why' one method is effective compared to another method.
Therefore: -
 - a) A more thorough classification of different training measures is required before selecting the cases/courses to be studied.
 - b) Longitudinal research over 4-5 years should be adopted in order to help draw conclusions of the possible effects of training in the longer run.
 - c) For the development and elaboration of joint comparative research in the field of (initial and continuing) vocational education and training and human resource development, a stronger focus on the specific problems and challenges encountered in performing such comparative research in these fields is necessary. International comparative research should go beyond such descriptive studies and rather try to provide social scientific explanations for phenomena in education and training and for differences between countries in these fields.

- d) There is a need to examine what happens to the unemployed who do not gain access to the training that they applied for as well as those that were accepted on a training course.
 - e) A greater understanding of the type of training that is needed to bring the least qualified up to the level of skills required for entry to the labour market.
 - f) Therefore, a basic understanding is needed of the size and structure of the group of least qualified with respect to the reasons why they have become unemployed e.g. due to major economic restructuring (decline in particular economic sectors) or due to obsolescence of skills or due to an overall lack of education and training (or insufficient quality of the education and training received). Such differentiations could be helpful, in setting out training strategies and designing particular training programmes.
 - g) Some 'experimentation' is required to find out which design is most suitable for a particular target group. The importance of the social aspect of training needs to be considered.
4. Research is also needed into the macro effects of training and whether investment in training from an economic point of view is a good investment.

Further Information

The full title of project is "The effectiveness of labour market oriented training for the long-term unemployed" (1999).

[Full report](#), [Abstract](#), [Summary](#) [Partner details](#)

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