New Perspectives for Learning - Briefing Paper 25

Competence Evaluation and Training for Europe

Context of the Research

Skill shortages and gaps in citizen's skills are considered to be constraining the drive towards European competitiveness and social cohesion. The European Union White Paper on Education and Training is aimed at addressing this issue. One of its objectives is to create a European Skills Accreditation System. This aims to set up permanent and accessible skill accreditation mechanisms that will allow individuals to validate their knowledge however it has been acquired, on the basis of standardised frameworks of competencies, using personal 'smart cards' (credit-card like skills cards).

This project addressed these issues by focusing on: -

- Developing appropriate and effective taxonomies to define the domains of skilled performance.
- Identifying methods of auditing skills that can provide meaningful assessments of 'skills gaps' at the European level, as well as at the local level.
- Facilitating an understanding of what forms of training are appropriate in addressing skills gaps, particularly for excluded groups.
- Promoting an understanding of the ways in which skills can be represented, so that they are intelligible to both workers and employers.
- Exploring new institutional arrangements to promote collaboration between relevant actors (government, companies, trades unions etc.) on skills definition and accreditation.

Key Conclusions

The following conclusions were reached: -

1. Levels of labour mobility within the European Union have historically been consistently low in general.

2. In-migration to the EU from 'external' countries has consistently run at a far higher level than inter-EU migration.

3. Migration and labour mobility is inherently 'localised' in nature.

4. There is no evidence that these patterns will change dramatically over the foreseeable future and that the mass diffusion of smartcard technologies will precipitate dramatic changes to these patterns.

5. Employers are far more interested in how 'soft' skills and competences (such as 'personality', 'experience' and 'cross-job skills') are represented than in how formal qualifications are accredited and 'cross-walked' across different European occupational and skills classification systems.

6. Companies (particularly those involved in the rapidly-evolving 'knowledge industries') have a real need for skills that facilitate 'just-in-time' learning, the development and utilisation of 'organisational memory', and the incorporation of client feedback.

7. The relationship between skills and social exclusion is complex: training is but one element (albeit an important aspect) of this relationship, and there is a need for a more comprehensive (and more contextualised) set of tools to support skills development for socially excluded groups.

8. Developments in Internet-based technologies and interactive knowledge bases have significantly outstripped those in smart-card technologies, leaving the latter as a narrow, specialised technological metaphor.

Key Results

As a consequence of the conclusions the project produced the following results: -

1. A range of enabling technologies were utilised to promote the foundation of a "European Skills Development Network" based on the following five scenarios of use: -

    a) Support for Migrant Workers.

    b) 'New Jobs for Old' - Tools for Inter-regional partnerships.

    c) 'New Opportunities for the Long Term Unemployed' - Public Employment Service support tools.

    d) 'Human Resources Developer' - Valorising the Company Asset Base.

    e) 'The Mobile Citizen' - Cross Border Electronic Credentials Authentication tool.

2. These scenarios incorporate key target user groups in typical settings that exemplify problems of 'skills gaps' affecting labour mobility and economic competitiveness in the European Union.

3. Services known as the 'COMPETE toolkit' were developed and validated for the five "scenarios of use". They consisted of: -

   a) Elicitation tools, to help users define their specific skills needs.

   b) Diagnostic tools that make sense of the elicitation data (for example to conduct skills audits).

   c) Representation tools to make the diagnostic outcomes meaningful (for example to produce a 'skills profile').

   d) Decision analysis and support tools (for example to help users make a choice between job options).

   e) A Data Warehouse, containing data on jobs, labour market information, on-line assessment systems and skills data.

   f) User profiling and data mining tools, to match user needs to the information contained in the warehouse

4. With the help of this toolkit, users will be able to:

   a) Carry out a 'skills audit' for an individual, company or local area.

   b) De-construct and re-construct the skills, competences and knowledge associated with a particular occupational profile with reference to a common European skills 'content model'.

   c) Obtain the latest information on evolving skills and skills gaps particularly in the new 'knowledge industries'.

   d) Check the authenticity, and 'value', - on-line - of their own or 'third party' qualifications, and references, obtained anywhere in the EU.

   e) Obtain information on available jobs, available employees and training opportunities, customised to a particular 'user profile'.

   f) For companies, match available skills to new business opportunities and customer needs by virtue of 'just in time' skills assessments and 'organisational memory' tools

Key Recommendation

1. There is a need to establish a European Skills Development Network (E*NET) in order to market the toolkit services towards the various scenarios of use.

Further Information

Full title of the project - "Competence Evaluation and Training in Europe" with the final report completed in January 2001

Full report, Abstract, Summary Partner details

This project is now being taken forward under the EC 'e-TEN' Programme. The new project is called 'COMPETENT and will market validate the outputs of 'Competence Evaluation and Training for Europe' in three scenarios of use:

    i) large organisations
    ii) a EURES cross-border network in Saarbruchen
    iii) support for migrant workers in Athens.

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