

**Education and vocational training, a mainstream solution for all groups
across all Member states?**

Jean-Claude Barbier
Directeur de recherche CNRS
Centre d'études de l'emploi
Noisy le Grand (France)
Jean-Claude.Barbier@mail.enpc.fr

Abstract

Presentation to the conference
Impulses for European Employment Policy, Impulses for Germany
BMWA, Berlin
8. December 2003

Introduction:

In the context of the European Employment Strategy, in parallel with the broad consensus over work as a mainstream solution for all social problems, training and/or education also tend to be seen as a mainstream insurance against risks of being (or becoming) 'unemployable' and an insurance to enjoying access to high quality jobs.

From the individuals' point of view, there is ample evidence that better qualifications protect from unemployment. From a macroeconomic perspective, it is also clear that higher skill levels of the workforce go hand in hand with better overall performances and also have positive impact on social capital.

Yet, because of the wide diversity of Member States' institutional contexts, societal choices and values, it is not easy to compare specific strategies in education and training, and even more difficult to compare their outcomes.

Overall objectives designed by the considerable body of EU level guidelines are fairly clear. They nevertheless raise many questions as to the compatibility of these various objectives when translated into national policies. Whereas the EES certainly has to remain of a general substance for allowing the coordination of extensive national diversity within the common framework, it also crucially rests on the provision of adequate comparative information.

In this respect, drawing from the French case in the comparative context, I will concentrate on two specific groups (the young and the unemployed). This analysis will suggest that investing in richer comparison and exchange could enhance the actual adequateness of implementation of the overarching EU level objectives.

Education and training for the young: lessons from France for comparing Member States' performances

1 - Across the EU, a considerable variation exists in the present situation of the young, in terms of their labour market participation, their employment and unemployment rates and their participation to higher education and to vocational training.

Such diversity is the result of long-term historical legacies, choices and agreements struck by social actors at national level. These are marked by different 'welfare regimes', different 'activation regimes' and different distributions of employment and labour market participation according to gender and age. These patterns are rather stable and only slowly change over time. The determining factors for these changes are very complex: to take an increasing part in the changes, EES objectives have to be enriched.

2 – In a comparative perspective, the situation of the French young demonstrates that necessity; with respect to education and training, it has been marked by many factors over the last decades:

- the search by the young (and their families) for an 'insurance' against unemployment, but also against the low quality of entry jobs for the young (and often their precariousness)

- the predominance of initial training in the qualification process (and the relatively marginal role of qualifications acquired later during the employment career)
- the important role played by ‘general education’, which is often advocated in the context of allowing active citizenship and personal development, and not only employment-related benefits¹.

Except for relatively short periods (late 80s, late 90s), this has happened in the context of comparatively low job creation in France. French economists have criticized the ‘naïve’ view that ‘matching training or education outputs’ with ‘the needs of firms’ could be a ‘miracle solution’ because they have argued that whereas human capital strategies are indispensable, they cannot substitute for the absence of growth and job creation.

Moreover, recent developments have shown that: (i) precisely because of the context of scarce job creation, there has been a process of ‘competences under-utilisation’, which in the French case is seen in terms of ‘status downgrading’ (*déclassement*) and might be considered in other countries as ‘overeducation’; (ii) at the same time, the overall level of education of the French young seems to have reached a certain ‘ceiling’, which is well illustrated by the failure and the subsequent revision of the once fixed target of 80% for the new generations to achieving a qualification with the ‘*baccalauréat*’.

3 – Questions for comparing national strategies

The French case illustrates the limitations of indicators such as the ‘basic secondary education for the 22 year olds’ of the present EES guideline 4.

The pattern presently displayed by Denmark and Sweden seems to demonstrate that a combination of high rates of participation to the labour market (and not only in minor jobs) is compatible with high rates of participation to higher education.

On the contrary, in countries like France (and mostly Italy and Spain) a contradiction seems to exist between entering the labour market early and the chances of achieving high quality education or vocational training.

Does not this situation observed in this specific context lead to enhancing an opposition between ‘work first’ strategies and ‘social investment’ ones? This leads to choices, trade offs, or even contradictions which are difficult to sort out.

The EES appears as lacking adequate information, indicators and exchange in the field of comparing circumstances where it is possible to combine high levels of participation to education and training and high levels of participation to the labour market. Evidence also seems inadequate as to the outcomes in terms of transitions and careers of investing in education and training, at an individual level.

The unemployed: training versus other active labour market programmes (ALMP)?

1 – Within the EU, the role of training programmes among the whole range of ALMP for the unemployed displays a great diversity.

¹ This seems consistent with the manifold objectives presented in the Commission’s communication on lifelong learning.

2 – Important questions are not answered as to what could be the most effective types of balance or trade offs in privileging ‘training measures’ over other forms of active programmes.

In the context of the EES, available data show limitations: the Eurostat-managed base on labour market policies provides only incomplete comparative information. Moreover, the main guideline (2c) in the previous EES² also has provided limited information, as was explained in the 2002 Joint Employment Report. Most Member States have certainly reached the 20% target, but it is difficult to assess what is the substantial content of these 20%. The Joint Employment Report stresses that “the different national contexts determine the effectiveness of the measures implemented” (2002, p. 57).

3 – In the case of France, there has been a constant and gradual decrease of unemployed participants to training programmes among the total of labour market programmes’ participants, from 18.5% in 1993, to a little over 8% in 2002. This is the result of new strategies in French employment policies³. However, some measures combine both training and subsidies.

On its part, the 2003 National Action Plan of the United Kingdom clearly advocates a priority of job search. The 2003 Danish National Action Plan also seems to downplay the priority of jobtraining.

4 – More information and evaluation data is necessary for an adequate assessment of training programmes within the EES.

Conclusion

Available comparative data show that training and education cannot easily be seen as a mainstream solution for the unemployed and the young.

In the context of the overarching EU level objectives, there certainly remains considerable work to do to increase EES’s impact.

A key question is to increase the comparability and complexity of data. There is a necessity of new research and new indicators to specify the objectives, the groups, the contexts and integrate their assessment in a common EU level benchmarking. Another imperative especially lies in the capacity of producing more information about the careers and employment trajectories of the unemployed and the young.

² ‘to promote measures for unemployed and inactive people to acquire and upgrade skills, including IT and communication skills, thereby facilitating their access to the labour market and reducing skill gaps (...) fix a target for active measures involving education, training and similar measures offered to the unemployed thereby aiming gradually achieving the average of the three most advanced Member States, and at least 20%’.

³ These figures do not take into account the increasing amount of expenditure devoted to the compensation of decreasing social contributions.