



Education and Culture

Leonardo da Vinci
Pilot projects

Summary of Focus Groups

A common Framework for Professional Development of Trainers in Europe.

A perspective from findings of the Focus Groups

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1. Introduction

Introduction

In order to see how training practitioners would react to the idea and characteristics of a common Framework for Professional Development of Trainers in Europe (CPDFW), the TT-Plus partnership have decided to organize in the different participating countries a *focus group* with training practitioners and other training professionals (as VET researchers, for instance). This activity was considered very important for the success of the TT-Plus project once it essentially concerns professional development of trainers in Europe. Focus groups are used to collect opinions and individuals' perspectives about a same topic. So, *focus groups* allow to get information about participants' views and experiences, their likes and dislikes about a specific topic. They are also helpful to get feedback on issues from a variety of stakeholders.

Focus groups can be seen as a social research method through which several individuals get together and are, simultaneously and systematically, questioned about one or several issues. The questioning is facilitated by a moderator, usually the researcher, who poses to the group several questions related to his/her hypothesis in order to test them or to get new insights, opinions and thoughts. In order to reach the intended purpose, the *focus group* has to be composed by individuals who are closed related to the issues which are supposed to be discussed.

A *focus group* should be composed by a small group of individuals, from 6 to 10, although sometimes could go until 15. In addition to be individuals close related to the issues to be discussed, they must be carefully chosen taking into consideration that they represent different perspectives about the subject under investigation. Furthermore, selection of the individuals should also take into account a possible balance in terms of gender, age, or other relevant characteristic concerning the issues under discussion. This way of selecting the individuals for the group is very important concerning validity and fiability of results.

For the purpose to reach more fiable results, the *focus group* should meet in a non-threatening location and convene according to a carefully planned discussion. For those reasons, the researcher usually includes with the invitation a brief overview of the general issues to be discussed in the *focus group*. However, individuals should also be informed that they do not need to make a special preparation for the discussion. That is, participants should be informed they will not be requested to relate data of the theme under analysis; they will only be asked to disclose their personal and genuine opinions about the subject or issue which will be maintained anonymous.

The discussion activity should be conducted by a skilled facilitator who should focus the group interaction around predetermined questions usually close related to the research questions. The *focus group* moderator must ensure equal and strong participation of all participants and should be aware that he/she needs to be objective, good listener and persuasive. Additionally, he or she should be sensitive to participants' feelings and be aware of the possible future consequences. The moderator should be able to maintain timekeeping in track and have a good arbitrating role. Furthermore, he or she also needs to have the competences for developing a rapport with group participants.

The *focus groups* conducted by all partner have included different kind of training professionals, namely trainers, training researchers, experts from public training support structures, representatives from training regional authorities and from social partner organizations.

Relevance of a European CPDFW for organization, trainers and training teams

The existence of a European CPDFW to guide the continuing professional development (CPD) of trainers was, in general, considered relevant not only for trainers' organizations but fundamentally for the CPD of the trainers themselves and for CPD of training teams. However, some training experts and practitioners have considered that the CPDFW is not very relevant for organizations since them, in most cases, are only interested in hiring trainers based on their reputation, leaving accreditation of their own professional development up to them. So, the potentially greatest value a common Framework for Professional Development of Trainers in Europe is for individual trainers and, probably, for their professional associations.

It covers most of practical aspects of the training contexts, realities, and practices and, it raises questions concerning the importance of the trainers' CPD for Human Resource development, in general, and for the development of "trainers' qualification standards", in particular. Defining "qualification standards" of a trainer assumes a particular importance for professionalization of the training activity itself making it more attractive and, as a consequence, raises status of trainers. In this line of reasoning, some experts have considered that anything is better than having *no system at all* once relevant standards to be compared with may be a more credible situation concerning professional development of trainers. In addition, this is consistent with experience of some sectors like, for example, the medical professional panel model. Anyway, the CPDFW has to have a "real" value for the training sector, mainly for professional development of trainers, avoiding being just a charter or a list of competences.

In some countries, the existence of a European CPDFW was considered highly relevant for trainers' organizations when those organizations were aware of the importance that trainers' CPD has for the Development of its Human Resources in general with consequences in company productivity. This appears to be true because, in the countries where formal training of trainers system exists, those systems are not able to keep up with changes in terms of new roles and responsibilities that recently trainers have acquired. In addition, in those same countries, the systems of training of trainers have not been concerned about the growing importance of individual's lifelong acquisition of skills made either in the context of work or in other contexts and by using ICT for their CPD through strategies such as "e-learning" and "b-learning."

A European CPDFW was also considered to be relevant when training organizations and teams and trainers are aware of the importance of improving quality of the training delivery for company and trainers competitiveness in the market. This is also true when trainers are concerned with their performance and the role it could play in a competitive world. However, the CPDFW may be less relevant to a very specialized training organizations because clients are most interested in the specific subjects the organization is able to train in than in the question of how trainers get their professional development and if they are certified or not. Of course, concerning this issue, a contradiction can be seen in relation to a very competitive world in which we are in; certified training companies according to certain and accepted standards will be more credible than others, and, as consequence, be more looked for by clients.

Concerning the public or private nature of the organization, the CPDFW does not present any feature which may require or advise to use a different implementation and operation in the public and private sectors. However, given the characteristics of the two types of organization, implementation of the CPDFW may be carried out differently. For example, in the public sector it could be introduced by a regulatory norm while in the private sector there will probably be the need for raising managers' awareness for the role of CPD of trainers in the productivity and competitiveness of enterprises.

In summary, it can be said that a common Framework for Professional Development of Trainers in Europe (CPDFW) was consensually considered relevant mainly for individual trainers' CPD. However, some reserves were put concerning the format for the CPDFW. Concerning training organizations, mainly the very specialized ones, most of the experts participating in the *focus groups*, have put some reserves concerning relevance given the clients' interests be more oriented to the training content they are looking for.

Almost all of participants in the *focus groups* conducted have considered that the existence of an accepted common Framework for Professional Development of Trainers in Europe will facilitate trainers' mobility within EU members.

Issues around the continuing professional development of trainers

Continuing professional development of trainers is as much relevant as it is for any other professional occupation. This is true because everyone needs to be permanent and professionally updated if they want their performance be effective and competitive in the labour market. The question becomes how trainers may pursue their continuing professional development? Do they need a CPDFW to guide their professional development? Do they prefer a continuing training programme specifically developed taking into consideration their professional development needs? Do they need an academic degree (BS, BA, MSc, MA, and even PhD or DA) specifically developed concerning training issues and strategies to continue their updating? Answers to those questions had varied very much among participants in the various *focus groups*. For instance, some *focus group* participants argue that trainers should be judged by their peers and on reputation and their ability to design and deliver training not on qualifications dreamed up and implemented by bureaucrats, university staff and researchers! In addition, there is a huge variation in quality of the courses that are on offer. That reaction comes fundamentally from situations in which courses are delivered by the universities which have very little relevance to the private sector. This seems to be natural since the situation in each participant country is very different. In some countries, being a trainer requests to be certified by a Public Body. The trainer's certification is got by taking an initial certified training course delivered by an accredited training entity. In addition, a trainer to keep his/her condition of being a trainer needs to systematically maintain his/her training activity and deliver, in a period of 5 years, a certain amount of training hours. In some other countries, that type of certification is not needed. So, according to results from the *focus groups*, something has to be done in order to have high quality trainers. Nowadays some people who are considering themselves as trainers do not have pedagogic or andragogic competences to facilitate learning of others. Anyway, it should be pointed out that, in terms of what those people do, they have the legitimacy for calling themselves as trainers. In addition, the role that prior formal and informal learning, and networking and partnership, as well, play in the professional development of any individual should also not be forgotten. The question is how the system, or better, the market, in general, and clients, in particular, know how good they are at delivering training or facilitating learning of others. So, it appears important the existence of a way or strategy (system, standards, referential list of indicators or patterns or standards) of describing how

good is a trainer. That is, some sort of referential of indicators or standards is needed to assure that trainers are fit-for-purpose. But this idea brings with itself the “competence” issue. For some participants, the competence approach is too simplistic and by definition must be based on the idea of what COMPETENT means. Being competent may either mean that everything is reduced to the level of lowest common denominator or imply that particular characteristics are reflected on the training activity. Besides, there is a strong distinction, in terms of skills, competences and learning strategies between trainers and facilitators, which should be recognized, and facilitators often go under the banner heading of trainers. Recognizing prior learning and non-formal and informal learning Importance of networking and partnership

All of those above issues guide to the question “Should trainer become a regulated profession or occupation?” There is not a consensus on that issue. Some participants have the opinion that trainers should, like a teacher, constitute a regulated profession but others argue that a trainer is an expert in some subject who have pedagogic / andragogic competences in order to be able to facilitate learning of others. In this line of thinking, most of trainers are part-time trainers because they have other occupation. However, this issue does not contradict the need for a way or strategy to assure that trainers are fit-for-purpose.

Promoting, disseminating and applying the CPDFW

In general, the *focus group* participants are not only interested in promoting and applying the CPDFW on an individual basis, using it as a guide for their own professional development but they are also available to promote it in their own organisations and share it with other colleagues. However, the way they would apply varies from individual to individual and organization to organization depending on the existing features and conditions.

Some barriers and obstacles in applying the CPDFW in organizations may appear since it will constitute an innovation and may be seen a threat to some individuals in the organization. For instance, SMEs’ managers, mainly those whose companies have less than 10 employees (micro-businesses), are not aware or do not believe in the role training plays in business competitiveness. Concerning public entities, some responsible may pose difficulties for CPD of staff in which is included people who conduct training offerings.

In all participating countries, the *focus group* participants have identified a set of organizations which may be interested to participate in applying and further develop the CPDFW. Among those organizations are Trainers Associations, Unions, and Public Bodies responsible for training certification and accreditation, Chambers of Trade, Commerce and

Industry, Colleges of Further Education, Professional bodies for training and teaching sector, Public Sector Organizations with Training Departments, Municipalities, Private Training Companies, Universities and other Higher Education Institutions among others.

The approach to European cooperation for Professional Development of Trainers

Most of the *focus groups* participants have agreed that to promote European cooperation for Professional Development of Trainers a universal model is needed. So, taking this aspect into consideration, the CPDFW could be a very good instrument to promote and reach that cooperation. However, while the model shows evidence of commitment to a staff development process, it appears do not guarantee quality of the trainer.

In some countries, training in the private sector training is far better than in public sector education. In others, that situation is not so visible. So, the question is how the CPDFW may be used to transport the high standards of the one sector to another? Should the CDPFW have considered different commitments for private and public sector rather than different commitments for different "levels"?

The number of levels should reflect the reality. i.e., different types of trainers do different things, and, in consequence, need different types and amounts of professional development. For that reason, the fact that the model may be scaled up or down appears to be a good feature. Anyway, those characteristics should be further analysed. Although the idea that many people are "trainers" in different situations may be considered good, one should not forgot that there is still big differences in terms of training between a person who coaches another person for a few minutes at a time and the top level trainer / facilitator who runs a 5 day residential course for top managers!

European cooperation for trainers' CPD may also be analysed taking into consideration the two main approaches already created to create European frameworks:

1. The input-oriented approach of the Bologna process for creating common degree structures in higher education, and
2. The outcome-oriented approach of the Copenhagen process for relating contextually different vocational qualifications to a common meta-frame (with common levels and performance criteria).

In addition, two corollary approaches were mentioned regarding the integration of "teachers and trainers" into such frameworks:

1. The European Commission approach to develop common principles for teacher education;

2. The approach of certain Cedefop-funded studies that try to develop common European competence requirements for different training-related professions or functions.

In the light of those approaches German managers were very critical given the hierarchic orientation of the designed European qualification frameworks. One of the reasons for that is because those approaches do not consider the development of verbal and communicative competences in the context of *vocational* and *professional* learning careers. However, concerning the proposed CPDFW managers appear to be general and highly consensual. Managers' position related to CPDFW might be due to the fact that they could be seen as part of the current practice. However, they do not appear to be challenging to any particular direction.

The interviewed German experts were much less critical concerning the European approaches, particularly the one which has been applied to Higher Education, the Bologna Process. Concerning the commitment-based framework they do not show any disagreement probably because they were already aware of other similar initiatives launched to promote cooperation different parties that are involved in VET development.

Fundamental ideas for developing and implementing a CPDFW

Based on all interviews, a set of ideas that the CPDFW should carry could be drawn. Those are:

1. The FRAMEWORK designation was not well accepted by some *focus groups*, mainly by those conducted in non-native English speaking countries. The reason for this is strictly based on the meaning of the word in the different languages. Um of the *Focus Group* has proposed to use the designation of "Referential Guide";
2. The CPDFW should be permanently open given there is not perfect or complete FWs. Weaknesses and strengths will only be detected during its implementation;
3. The CPDFW should have an open and orientation nature to trainers;
4. The CPDFW should be flexible by nature;
5. The CPDFW should be accessible to all trainers;
6. The CPDFW should be used for accreditation of the training companies;
7. The CPDFW should be used for Certification of trainers;
8. The CPDFW should be used to promote Mobility of trainers between EU member states;
9. The CPDFW should consider trainer's experience (measured in number of training hours given);

10. The CPDFW should integrate evaluation ratings given by trainees;
11. The CPDFW should integrate trainers' self-evaluation;
12. List of competences and skills should be avoided, but inclusion of "clusters" of essential competences and skills would be highly relevant;
13. The CPDFW should facilitate trainers' professionalization;
14. The CPDFW should recognize prior non-formal and informal learning and Importance of networking and partnership as well;
15. The CPDFW should first be implemented as a pilot in some organizations.

Final Considerations

It could be said that the CPDFW will be a good guiding tool for trainers' CDP. However, in order to reach that aim, it is necessary to take into consideration all the suggestion made in the previous point and taking into consideration some of threats it may be exposed to.

Implementation of the CPDFW is very important for Professional Development of trainers, in particular, and for the Development of Human Resources, in general. Firstly, because the systems for training of trainers were not able to keep up with changes both in terms of new roles and in terms of responsibilities that recently the trainers have acquired.

Secondly, because the systems of training of trainers have not been concerned about the growing importance of individual's acquisition of skills through lifelong made either in the context of work or in other contexts less formal and with the use of new information and communication technologies that enable the professional development through strategies such as "e-learning" and "b-learning."

In this sense, the development and implementation of a European Framework for the Continuing Professional Development of Trainers with an intercultural nature and, of course, flexible, will create opportunities for better and more professional development of trainers in European countries and, moreover, would facilitate the mobility of RH, in general, and trainers in particular. The arguments in favour of the use of a European Framework for the Continuing Professional Development of Trainers above referred are relevant both for Trainers and Training Team, and for the Organization as a whole. However, the participants were not unanimous in considering greater relevance for the Organization and for the Individual.

Some people may be tempted to convert things which are not related with professional development and make a list of non existing professional

activity relevant for professional development. It will be not good to systematically substitute written things for hands-on activities. Interaction is fundamental for professional development as a trainer and for this reason training in action is absolutely crucial for the CPDFW. So, it is important and needed to have an Authority Body with professional credibility to supervise and monitor the implementation of the CPDFW. In addition, this Authority Body has to be accredited to do so. It is also important that the Authority Body has people whose expertise is recognized by the applicant. For this reason, it is also crucial that the CPDFW includes a peer appraisal in order to avoid that evidence to be only judge by a panel of "assessors".