

Training & Employment

n° 99 May-June 2012

Occupations and skills observatories: tools for shaping the future

Occupations and skills observatories produce tools that can be used by industries, firms and employees. The various actors in vocational training regard them as playing an important role. This being so, their position is in need of strengthening; more specifically, their profile needs to be raised and their value better understood.

work
qualifications
individuals
forecasting
training
labour market entry
careers
occupations

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In 2011, there were 126 registered occupations and skills observatories (OSOs) in France. Their function is to help in anticipating the skill requirements of firms and employees and to provide the social partners with information that can be used in developing training policies in individual sectors and industries.

This large number of OSOs was set up in successive waves (see box on page 3) as part of a process initiated by the social partners at industry level. Two important phases in this process should be singled out. The first is the conclusion of the national inter-industry agreement of 5 December 2003 on employee access to training throughout the working life, which encouraged the social partners at industry level to set up this type of organisation. Their value in making career trajectories more secure was subsequently reaffirmed in the inter-industry agreement of 5 October 2009 on the development of lifelong vocational training. This agreement also encouraged the observatories to extend the scope of their operations and to work in synergy with each other.

Until now, what has been missing is a general overview of these observatories, which have become firmly institutionalised. Such a conspectus is now available in the form of an appraisal of their functioning and work

conducted by Céreq at the request of the social partners (see box page 4).

Newly established organisations in a highly fragmented socio-occupational landscape

The gradual establishment of the 126 OSOs is testament to the vitality of collective bargaining and the dynamic set in motion by the inter-industry agreement of 2003. Only 11% of the observatories were in existence before this agreement, such as those in automobile services, retailing, IT, engineering, consulting and advisory services, etc. Their proliferation was concentrated into the next three years: three quarters of the OSOs were set up by industry agreements between 2004 and 2006 and the rest (14%) from 2007 onwards. Thus in 2010, at the time of the survey, the average and median age of the observatories was 4 years, with three quarters having been in operation less than 5 years.

Their socio-occupational fields of references reflect the fragmentation of occupational sectors in France. While some observatories cover several occupational sectors (up to 17 national collective agreements in the case of Observia, the occupations and skills observatory for certain sectors of the food industry), eight out of ten cover a

Céreq's Recommendations

Encourage exchanges of practices and strengthen and standardise the observation and forecasting tools and methods used by the OSOs.

Box 1 • What is an occupations and skills observatory?

Although the social partners at inter-industry level have chosen not to define precisely how these organisations should function (status, remit, funding etc.), the terms of the national inter-industry agreement of 5 December 2003 do set out the general criteria for identifying an occupations and skills observatory (OSO).

- Joint governance

OSOs are established either by contract or (industry-level) collective agreement on the initiative of the social partners in the industry in question. The industry-level agreement must specify the observatory's remit and funding arrangements. Thus the production and/or management of surveys and analyses can be assigned, whether formally or otherwise, to another observatory or to a jointly administered industry organisation (OPCA).

OSOs are administered jointly by the social partners. The composition of the management committee is laid down in the industry-level agreement.

- A specific field of reference

First, the thematic field of reference: work, employment, training.

Second, the institutional field of references: at least one occupational sector, as defined in the collective bargaining system; the sphere of competence may be national, regional or local.

- 'Active monitoring organisations'

An OSO's primary purpose or function is to help firms anticipate their skill requirements more precisely, to support employees in mapping out their career paths and of course to equip the various actors in an industry with the tools to draw up their employment and training policy. Thus their output is intended for practical use by industry actors. Moreover, they are required to adopt a long-term approach. Thus compared with consultants commissioned to produce forecasts, OMOs are 'permanent' organisations.

OPMQ • *Observatoire prospectif des métiers et des qualifications* • *Occupations and Skills Observatories (OSOs)*

OPCA • *Organisme paritaire collecteur agréé* • *Authorised joint collection bodies set up to collect, pool and redistribute employers' training levies*

CPNE • *Commission paritaire nationale pour l'emploi* • *National Joint Commissions for Employment (NJCEs)*

CPNFP • *Comité paritaire national pour la formation professionnelle* • *National Joint Committee for Vocational Training*

CCN • *Convention collective nationale* • *National Collective Agreements (NCAs)*

ANI • *Accord national interprofessionnel* • *The National Inter-Industry Agreement*

●●● single sector (see diagram on page 3). In particular, the breakdown by firms and jobs shows that half of the OSOs cover a relatively restricted field (fewer than 2,000 firms and 42,000 jobs).

Although the space in which OSOs operate turns out to be highly atomised, the situations of individual observatories vary considerably. According to those in charge of them, their fields of reference may vary from ten firms to more than 450,000 depending on the sector in question and from fewer than 1,000 jobs to 1.5 million.

On the eve of the reform of the OPCAs (organismes paritaires collecteurs agréés, the authorised joint collection bodies set up to collect, pool and redistribute employers' training levies), the OSOs' occupational fields of reference covered 39 OPCAs. In 23 cases, the occupational field of reference linked one OPCA to one observatory. In 13 cases, each OPCA covered at least two observatories. Quite logically, the two inter-industry OPCAs covered the largest number of observatories: Agefos PME was in first position with 27 observatories, ahead of Opcalia with 10 observatories. A number of sector-based OPCAs, such as Uniformation (9), Afdas (7), OPCA transport (6) and Habitat formation (6), were also linked with a fairly large number of observatories. Finally, construction and public works constituted an exception,

since the sector's three OPCAs (Bâtiment, Opc Travaux publics, FAF SAB) were linked with a single observatory.

'Operational units' lacking visibility

Like the CPNEs (commissions paritaires nationales pour l'emploi, joint national employment commissions), the occupations and skills observatories are established by collective agreement (see box opposite), although this does not always mean that they have their own independent legal or even physical existence. Thus OSOs tend to be defined in terms of the tasks assigned to them, which usually consist of a series of specific projects, rather than as operational entities with their own dedicated teams. With a few exceptions (9 %), the observatories do not have their own separate legal identity: the vast majority of them are described as 'jointly managed bodies' that form part of either an OPCA (42%) or an employers' organisation (20 %). This organisational structure provides them with the technical, logistical and human support essential to their functioning, particularly in the light of the limited human resources available to them. Indeed, half of the observatories employ just one person, and even then not on a full-time basis (half of the observatories operate with one person working half-time at most). Fewer than 20% of the observatories have a dedicated team (more than one FTE and up to 5 FTEs). This characteristic reflects the distinction between 'contracting body' and 'project manager', but it must obviously also be viewed in the context of the financial resources available to the OSOs. The overall sums are low, with half of the OSOs having an annual budget of less than 50,000 euros. Here too, however, individual situations vary considerably, ranging from the total absence of any dedicated budget at all to a budget of 2 million euros allocated to one observatory in 2010. There is a direct parallel with the scope of their occupational field of reference, since 80% of their budgets comes from activities in the field of professional development.

On the basis of these data, three modes of operation can be identified, depending on the time at which the observatories were established. Those set up before the 2003 agreement have an independent legal status, a dedicated team and a budget of at least 250,000 euros; those established just after the 2003 agreement employ one or two people (one FTE) and have budgets of at least 90,000 euros; finally, those founded since 2008 have limited human and financial resources (1/10 of an FTE and fewer than 35,000 euros). In practice, observatories in this latter group operate in one of two ways: either as working groups set up within a joint industry body or with the support of a project manager in the research department of an OPCA working for several observatories.

A tool at the service of industry actors

Although they operate in a variety of different ways, OSOs are very similar in terms of their activity and output.

Surveys and analyses are the common denominator, since these are activities undertaken by two out of three observatories (63 %), regardless of their mode of operation. When an OSO undertakes only one type of work, priority is given to surveys and analyses. Nevertheless, the range of themes is very extensive and includes, by order of mentions: industry reports, occupation surveys, forward-looking jobs and skills management, training, recruitment needs, forecasting, age management, certification schemes, equality at work, etc.

The next activity in order of importance is the production of statistical databases (59%) and the mapping/listing of occupations (56 %). Projects of this kind, which make it possible to build up a panoramic overview of the field, give structure to the observatories' activity when they are set up. The ad hoc surveys carried out by the observatories themselves constitute their initial source of data (43% of mentions), making them producers of original, 'custom-made' data.

Beyond improving knowledge of the jobs and occupations in a given industry, the observatories' work is markedly operational in nature. After all, it is their role to embrace a dynamic of change and to support firms as they implement change. In three quarters of cases, the observatories' output serves as a basis for drawing up recommendations and in half of cases it is the basis for formulating actions and tools. These tools are essentially intended for use by firms and workers in the industry in question. They are more informative than normative and in some cases may be specific plans or measures. They include everything relating to the publication and circulation of job factsheets, lists of training programmes, etc. Specifically HR tools are also developed and made available; they cover a range of different areas, such as recruitment, training, support for internal or external mobility, performance appraisal interviews, support for forward-looking jobs and skills management, etc.

A number of measures are also targeted specifically at young people (information on particular industries and their occupations, on initial training programmes and on block-release training programmes, whether in the form of apprenticeships or the so-called 'contrats de professionnalisation', for young people without qualifications or who have been unemployed for some time).

Box 2 • The threefold filiation of occupations and skills observatories

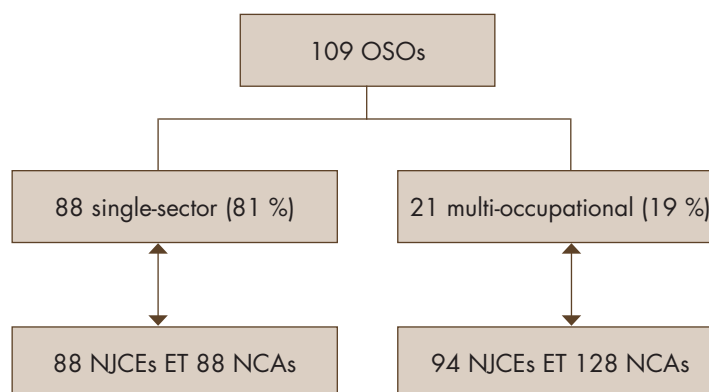
The tendency to establish occupations and skills laboratories must be viewed in the context of the long-term dynamics that characterise the structuring of the jobs and skills monitoring function at the level of the occupational group. This tendency is situated at the intersection of three dimensions that have shaped the development of employment and training policy for more than half a century.

The first dimension is the governance of employment and training policies, which is characterised by the involvement of an increasingly diverse range of actors and ever greater devolvement of responsibility, albeit in a non-linear way, to employers' organisations and trade unions. It was through the joint national employment commissions in particular, which were first set up in 1969, that the individual occupational sector gradually became the basic point of reference in the development and implementation of employment and training policies, a process driven largely by the 1991 occupational agreement. Thus the other agreements of the same type that have structured the vocational training landscape over the last 40 years have led to the development of very extensive negotiations on these topics at sector level.

The second dimension is the gradual equipping of the actors with the necessary tools and instruments. Thus the mechanisms for observing and analysing the relationship between training and employment were constructed and clustered together as close as possible to the decision-making levels. At regional level, the establishment of the regional employment and training observatories (OREFs) followed a dynamic that tracked the deconcentration and then the decentralisation of vocational training policies over 30 years. Similarly, at national level, observatories for some occupational sectors were set up as early as the 1990s and acted as forerunners for the OSOs now being established on a widespread basis.

The last dimension is the incorporation and entrenchment of the employment and training forecasting function at the level of the occupational sectors. It was the state that initiated this long-term trend. The post-war economic planning system gave way in the 1980s to a forward-looking approach based in part on a strengthening of dialogue between the social partners. As far as vocational training is concerned, the state, with its policy of social dialogue, helped the occupational sectors from 1988 onwards to equip themselves with the diagnostic tools required to anticipate more precisely the demand for skills from firms and the economically active population. In 1993, the contracts for forward-looking surveys became contracts for forecasting studies, but it was not until the 2003 national inter-industry agreement that permanent arrangements became institutionalised at the sectoral level, replacing the ad hoc arrangements that had prevailed until then.

Single-sector and multi-occupational OSOs



OSOs: Occupations and Skills Observatories

NJCEs: National Joint Commissions for Employment

NCAs: National Collective Agreements

Source : enquête Céreq.

Box 3 • A survey commissioned by the observatories and certifications committee of the CPNFP (Comité Paritaire National pour la Formation Professionnelle/National Joint Committee for Vocational Training)

The principal task of the representatives of the social partners sitting on the CPNFP's observatories and certifications committee is to encourage observatories to develop and share tools. To assist them in this task, they commissioned Céreq to produce a report on the OSOs. Carried out in 2010, the survey took place in two stages.

In the first stage, a register was compiled of all the OSOs set up since 2003, that is all those whose establishment was stipulated in an industry-level collective agreement. The contact details of these observatories and of those in charge of them were then obtained by means of a telephone campaign targeting various actors in the industries in question (mainly the OPCAs and/or professional organisations). The information thus obtained constituted the initial database used to produce the register.

In the second stage, a report was compiled on the OSOs' operations and work. It was based on a survey of the heads of all the observatories listed previously. The questionnaires were designed in close collaboration with the members of the observatories and certifications committee. The methodology adopted for gathering the information was twofold:

- a telephone survey, the aim of which was to gather information about the observatories' functioning, the diffusion of their work, the partnerships established, the difficulties encountered and their hopes and expectations;
- a self-administered Internet survey, the aim of which was to compile a list of the projects completed by the observatories: databases, surveys, studies, forecasts, tools and action plans.

The data-gathering stage concluded with a relatively high response rate of 86% for the telephone survey (109 OSOs of the 126 listed) and 68% for the Internet survey (86 OSOs).

Half of observatories say they have carried out or initiated forecasts

In contrast to the other types of work (surveys and analyses, statistical databases, introductions to occupations), the probability of observatories undertaking forecasting studies is all the greater the more expertise (established for five years or more and completion of several surveys and analyses), human resources (\geq one FTE), funding (\geq budget of 250,000 euros) and databases (statistics and occupations) they have accumulated.

These studies are mainly of two kinds: occupation surveys, many of which include a section on the future of the occupation in question and a forecast of the likely skill requirements; actual forecasting studies, which relate to the industry in question and are intended to identify the factors impacting on it and its occupations in the medium term, with or without socio-economic scenarios and with or without projections of employment levels, retirements and recruitment needs.

Observatories subjected to conflicting demands

The OSOs are in an unusual position, caught up as they are in the tension between a mode of governance based on

joint management and their mission to produce knowledge and analyses for use in their industry. The 'production of shared diagnoses' causes difficulties, as 83% of observatory heads noted. These difficulties affect both the observatories' work (access to company data, for example) and their functioning (funding, management, monitoring of activity).

It would seem perfectly natural, therefore, that the expectations articulated by observatory heads were inextricably institutional and operational. The survey was conducted immediately before the reform of the OPCAs was implemented and observatory heads were unanimous in calling for the future of their organisations to be clarified. Their other priorities were raising the profile of the observatories and their work and gaining greater recognition of their value, both to firms and employees in the various industries, to the social partners, to national public organisations (including the SPE) and even to the general public. This would require a real communication campaign, at both sectoral and inter-industry level. Finally, the survey revealed a strong desire for the observatories to work in synergy with each other, reflecting both a frequently expressed feeling of isolation and the need to share results, tools and methods. ■

ETP • *Équivalent temps plein* • *Full-time equivalent*

GPEC • *Gestion prévisionnelle des emplois et des compétences* • *Forward-looking jobs and skills management*

SPE • *Service public de l'emploi* • *Public Employment Service*

Further reading

Annuaire des observatoires prospectifs des métiers et des qualifications, A. d'Agostino, A. Delanoë, Céreq/CPNFP, 2011.

État des lieux des observatoires prospectifs des métiers et des qualifications, A. d'Agostino, A. Delanoë, J. Machado, Céreq/CPNFP, 2011.

Quelle prospective pour les métiers de demain ? L'apport des observatoires de branche, Commissariat général du Plan, Paris, La Documentation française, 2005.

www.cereq.fr

T&E n° 99 • May-June 2012

Newsletter on employment and training research from Céreq

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ISSN 1156 2366

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2nd trimester 2012

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