

Traineeship as vocational training in Catalonia: between the law, the actors and the market

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SUMMARY

In-company training undertaken by vocational students can be a very good opportunity to acquire skills; but it is also a very delicate process. The author, who examined the traineeships of students in formal vocational training in Catalonia as part of his doctoral thesis in economics, understands skills acquisition as an interactive process between the law, the behaviour of the different actors (trainees, schools and companies) and the pressure exerted by the labour market. This article describes skills acquisition in Catalonia and backs its description with quantitative and qualitative data allowing a better understanding of the interaction between the various factors and actors.

Key words

Economics of education, work based training, quality of training, school enterprise relationship, trainee's attitude, internal and external labour market

Chapter 1: Introduction

For students, the particular interest of in-company traineeships lies in their position between the education system and the production system.

In a doctoral economics thesis presented in September 2003 (cf. Mària, 2003), we examined the situation students face in the course of traineeships undertaken within formal vocational training in Catalonia with a dual objective in mind: one, to *analyse* the process of acquiring skills by examining the interaction between the law, the behaviour of the actors and the pressure exerted by the market; and two, to *evaluate* how efficiently Catalanian traineeships help students acquire skills.

Vocational training in Spain and in Catalonia has been changing steadily since 1990, when the Organic Law on the General Regulation of the Education System (LOGSE) was passed. This law changed the content of courses and established compulsory traineeship periods for students in companies and other workplaces. Mandatory training now also included a module called 'Training in the workplace', introduced in vocational training

programmes, which consisted of the preparation, execution and evaluation of practical training in workplaces.

When *analysing* the functioning of workplace training in Catalonia *in terms of learning skills* ⁽¹⁾, we found that a new *law* (LOGSE) triggered a process which introduced traineeships or modified the way they were implemented. This led to various training outcomes, including repercussions on the *behaviour of the actors* involved in training (mainly trainees, vocational training centres and workplaces), and on the *labour market situation* for vocational training certificate holders.

The *evaluation* of the efficiency of this mechanism was carried out using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. The qualitative data primarily came from a *pioneering analysis of the official census of individual traineeship contracts signed by trainees, schools and companies*. However, this accumulated qualitative data did not permit us to completely understand or adequately evaluate the process of skills learning. That is why we generated more qualitative data, mainly through three *case studies* in which we interviewed groups of students and teachers in three Catalan vocational training centres.

In this article, we will focus on *describing the interaction between the law, the behaviour of the actors and the pressure of the market in relation to the process through which the students acquire skills* during their traineeships. Through this description, we obtained quantitative and qualitative data which we used to evaluate the efficiency of workplace-based training in Catalonia.

As a part of our objective, in the next section (Part 2) we will describe the Catalan traineeship model in its *legal and institutional form*. Part 3 presents *the behaviour of the leading actors* involved in traineeships on the basis of the data we obtained from the census of individual contracts and the three case studies. In Part 4 we outline *the role of the market* as one of the main elements influencing the training outcomes of traineeships in Catalan vocational training. In Part 5 we present some conclusions on the interaction between the law, the actors and the market, and the mechanisms used to enhance the training content of traineeships.

Chapter 2: Law and institutions

The first piece of the puzzle, which enables us to understand the process of acquiring skills during traineeships in Catalonia, consists of the legisla-

⁽¹⁾ There are several objectives for traineeships during in-school vocational training: getting integrated in the work process, trying out the subject, extending the work curriculum, and learning skills. We have especially stressed the last objective because labour markets in developed countries view workers' skills as essential predictors of their long-term employability.

tion and institutions regulating this educational activity. Its main aspects are the following.

- a) The student signs a traineeship *contract* with the company and with his educational establishment; he is not given a work contract and, in principle, does not receive any remuneration from the company.
- b) There is a minimum period for the *duration of the traineeship* which is set for each vocational training certificate. It is possible to get the total or partial validation of these periods, and there is also the possibility of extending traineeships beyond the mandatory minimum requirement through voluntary extensions. Thus, the duration of the work experience can vary considerably and this can have repercussions on how skills are transferred and acquired. In principle, the less time the trainee spends in the company, the less time he or she has for learning; but an over-extension of the traineeship period can mean that the trainee ends up doing routine work.
- c) The procedures for *standard* traineeship periods (the most common type) include daily alternance between classroom learning and practical training in the company. This alternance improves learning by linking the theory taught in school with company practice. It is also possible to undertake this practical training during an *intensive* period at the end of the school-based modules.
- d) The traineeship is guided by two tutors, one from the school and one from the company. These tutors are key actors in the learning process. The law does not oblige the company tutor to be qualified as a trainer, but the Education Administration of Catalonia does offer various *voluntary* types of training courses for tutors.
- e) The school tutor and the company tutor agree, before the traineeship starts, on a *plan of activities* based on the official plan of training activities for this subject in the vocational training programme. The official plan of activities for a given certificate includes a section devoted to work socialisation skills (common to all vocational training certificates) and another section dealing with technical skills (specific for each certificate). Despite this, the official plan of training activities is not mandatory: rather, it is intended to provide *orientation* as the content of the traineeship is partly the outcome of mutual agreement between the trainee and the two tutors.

The Catalanian Administration has set up a number of institutions which reinforce the influence of the law. These institutions are grouped under the heading 'Programa E+E - Escuela –Empresa (Programme S + C – School – Company)'. This 'Programa E+E', introduced in 1995, consists of a group of units and arrangements to support schools, trainees and companies in implementing a traineeship. The programme is the result of an agreement between the Education Administration and the Catalanian Chambers of Commerce, in which both parties agree to share information (through an integrated database which also enables the virtual signing of contracts) and to establish various types of training for school and company tutors.

Chapter 3: The behaviour of the actors

Now that we have given a brief description of the laws and the institutions, we will move on to a description of the behaviour of the main actors in workplace-based training in Catalonia: the vocational training centres, the trainees themselves and the workplaces. Let us recall that we are examining patterns of behaviour in terms of their contribution to one of the main objectives of workplace training, namely, *skills acquisition*.

In the academic years 2000-2001 and 2001-2002 workplace training in Catalonia covered some 25 000 vocational training students in over 350 educational establishments, who undertook traineeships in some 13 000 workplaces (most of them enterprises) (cf. Mària, 2003, p. 119, 143, 147).

Within each group of actors (schools, trainees, workplaces) one can observe patterns of motivation and behaviour which are highly varied in terms of skill acquisition. Our analysis of individual traineeship contracts and the case study carried out in three vocational training centres in Catalonia enable us to present a systematic picture of these patterns of behaviour in the following sections.

The behaviour of the educational establishments

In the educational establishment, the main person involved in a traineeship is the school tutor. This tutor responds in varying degrees to the function assigned to him or her by law. The school tutors we interviewed ⁽²⁾ had no hesitation *a priori* in sending the students to the companies, though for various reasons they exempted some students from traineeships. In Catalonia as a whole, accreditation of the total time for workplace training amounts to a considerable volume as can be seen in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. shows the percentage of enrolled vocational training students who have spent *some time* in traineeship or, in other words, the percentage of students who did not get total exemption from traineeships. Thus,

Table 3.1. **Traineeship coverage for vocational training students in Catalonia Courses from 1997-98 to 2001-02**

Academic course	Coverage (%)
1997-1998	68.78
1998-1999	68.26
1999-2000	66.98
2000-2001	63.32
2001-2002	62.03

Source: Mària (2003: 122); calculation based on student census

⁽²⁾ In Mària (2003: 162-211) there is a study (mainly qualitative) of how traineeships function in three vocational training centres in Catalonia. This study included discussion groups with teachers who manage the traineeships.

in 2001-2002 almost 4 out of 10 students obtained *total* accreditation for their traineeships. Partial accreditation (completing 50% of the minimum mandatory period) was achieved by 2 out of 6 students who did not get total accreditation. This means that the mandatory period is achieved by 4 out of 10 trainees (cf. Mària, 2003, p. 126).

Our case study shows that some tutors credit more time than that stipulated by the legislator. This is explained by a combination of two factors: first, the tutors feel out of their depth as they now have to manage so many new traineeships; secondly, they find that some of the traineeship contracts with the companies have not been well negotiated and the students are treated as cheap, low-skilled labour⁽³⁾.

On the whole, establishments running *voluntary* traineeship schemes before LOGSE was adopted have lower operating costs and cooperate with companies which offer the most efficient traineeships.

The involvement of the students

The students who go in for work-based experience are faced with different situations and adopt different attitudes. We can identify two major groups of students (cf. Mària, 2003, pp. 205-207):

- a) Students who have not previously worked. These students accept the challenge of this traineeship with less insistence on the acquisition of technical skills because they are 'just starting to work' (*socialisation in the workplace*) and this is enough motivation for them.
- b) Students who already have work experience. In general, they are older than the first group, and are willing not to ask for total accreditation except if they think this job is interesting because it could lead to future employment, or if they are acquiring many *technical skills*.

In all cases, the training content of the traineeship partly depends on the student's attitude during this period. A student interested in learning will ask an employee to teach her more or to give her additional tasks after she has completed the initial traineeship period, or else urge the school tutor to persuade the company to impart new skills. Other students are only interested in 'getting through the traineeship'; they are inclined to accept a convenient job in a company close to their homes or with less exacting tasks.

⁽³⁾ In order to avoid this misuse, the Administration has limited the maximum periods of work experience. These periods are sometimes less than the customary work experience periods in some school establishments which already had work experience schemes before LOGSE. Thus, a period of transition is required to convince the companies that they should take in students and continue taking them even if it is only for a short period.

Table 3.2. **Types of workplace receiving vocational training students for traineeships.**

Course 2001-2002	
TYPE OF CENTRE	% CENTRES
Individual companies and self-employed persons	25.52
Companies with limited liability	35.35
Public limited companies	20.93
Cooperatives and agricultural societies	2.25
Foundations and associations	8.68
Public sector	5.45
Others	1.82
TOTAL	100.00

Source: Mària (2003: 147)

The behaviour of the workplace

We found that companies in Catalonia were generally very interested in attracting trainees. But not all companies interested in *attracting* students were also interested in *transferring skills* to the students during their traineeships.

The extent of the companies' readiness to train becomes clear when we analyse the data (see Table 3.2.) from companies receiving students for traineeships.

It should be noted that, in Spain, individual companies, self-employed persons and companies with limited liability (the first two boxes in the table) are mainly SMEs. Table 3.2. thus shows that eight out of ten workplaces are enterprises and that of these, two are relatively large (public limited companies) and six are SMEs (companies with limited liability and individual entrepreneurs). But when it comes to transferring skills to trainees, SMEs face one great difficulty: they lack adequate structures to organise training in terms of the needs of both trainees and employees (cf. Mària, 2003, pp. 153-154). In many cases they do not complete the official plan of activities (orientation for training) nor do they allocate permanent or well-trained tutors.

Yet the case study showed that some SMEs do offer interesting training to trainees. For instance, some offer informal training by other employees at times when these employees have less work – that is, they become unofficial tutors. Other companies try to extend the traineeship and gradually give trainees more difficult tasks, provided the trainees respond positively ⁽⁴⁾.

(4) The theory underlying this behaviour which we observed is to be found in LÉNÉ (2002: 101ss).

Chapter 4: The role of the market

Why, then, do the companies handle skills transfer to trainees so differently? To some extent, the internal structure of the company and its relations with other firms in the sector conditions its behaviour towards trainees (cf. Léné, 2000). But in the case of Catalonia we thought it especially relevant to analyse how the labour market affects companies providing training.

Our explanation for the influence of the labour market on the behaviour of the enterprises is the concept of the *semi-external labour market* (cf. Mària, 2003, p. 78). The semi-external labour market for an enterprise consists of a group of persons who have been trained for specific jobs in the company (they are 'half in') but have no work contract with the firm (they are 'half out'). Workplace training which does not permit remuneration for the students enables the company to generate a semi-external labour market at very low cost (i.e. the cost of teaching activities and the cost of any errors committed by the trainees). This type of market enables the employer to overcome labour shortages or replace staff on leave at short notice. Alternatively, they may acquire quickly productive new staff by recruiting a trainee at the end of the traineeship.

When workers are in short supply, employers tend to internalise the semi-external market by offering work contracts to trainees who demonstrate that they have acquired the skills necessary for the job. When labour supply is less tight the employer can take in trainees without offering work contracts.

The figures we received for Catalonia on the labour market for vocational training students or certificate holders show that we are now entering a period of shortage. The data on the number of students enrolled for vocational training (see Table 4.1.) shows a considerable decline between the early and late 1990s.

Table 4.1. **Trends in the number of enrolled students for vocational training in Catalonia**

Course	No of enrolled students
1991-1992	160 663
1992-1993	160 730
1993-1994	165 641
1994-1995	157 489
1995-1996	142 112
1996-1997	122 306
1997-1998	104 988
1998-1999	79 263
1999-2000	64 250
2000-2001	60 589
2001-2002	62 332

Source: Mària (2003: 116)

Table 4.2. Enterprises having difficulty in finding candidates for jobs, by sectors. June 1999 to June 2001

Sector	% of enterprises with difficulties
Industrial	42.3
Construction	42.9
Sales services	31.6
Non-sales services	20.1
Total	33.1

Source: Observatori de la formació (2002: 255-257)

Table 4.1. shows a significant decline in the number of students enrolled in formal vocational training: in the 2001-02 course they amount to 38.8% of those enrolled in the 1991-92 course. This decline is due both to reduced age cohorts and to a greater proportion of youths entering university.

On the other hand, a survey carried out in Catalonian companies between June 1999 and June 2001 shows that about a third of these companies having trouble recruiting workers. Table 4.2. presents the relevant figures.

Table 4.2. indicates that the labour market today shows clear symptoms of shortage and noticeable bottlenecks in the industrial and construction sectors.

The decline in the number of students enrolled in vocational training and the tight labour market imply an *increase in the bargaining capacity of the students and the educational establishments* when asking companies to receive trainees. According to the evidence we obtained from the case study, bargaining – when it is done - takes the following form: students who feel their traineeship is not effective exert pressure on the company to change it by threatening to abandon the contract and complete their traineeships in another company. School tutors act as mediators in the conflict, and support trainees vis-à-vis the company. But trainees and educational establishments do not always exploit the negotiating potential they have, either because a given trainee is not interested in learning, or because a given vocational training establishment is not interested in broadening its contacts with companies, being a ‘captive’ of the few enterprises which take in its students ⁽⁵⁾.

To conclude, in Catalonia the *semi-external labour market* is becoming a matter of necessity for some companies and the schools’ and trainees’ bargaining capacity (which however does not always lead to better training!) is often exercised.

⁽⁵⁾ In the case study we found that some of the more talented trainees were being trained in subjects related to industry, a sector with major bottlenecks in Catalonia, as we saw in Table 4.2. Trainees are received with eagerness by companies which are genuinely interested in teaching them. Companies even provide illegal financial remuneration and offer jobs at the completion of the traineeship. (Cf. Mària (2003: 174, 185, 192, and Chapter 6 passim).

Chapter 5: Conclusion

We have explained how skills are acquired in workplace training in Catalonia, by *analysing* the confluence of three factors: the law and institutions; the behaviour of the actors; and the pressure exerted by the market.

From this *analysis* we conclude that the relative weakness of the law is sometimes compensated for by the behaviour of the actors. Some traineeships offering good training are the result of conscientious and well-directed interaction between educational establishments, trainees and companies. But as the Catalan enterprises receiving trainees do not always have the facilities or the desire to offer training, the initiative generally comes from the students and the schools. *What the law does not demand and what the enterprises do not concede spontaneously, can be demanded by the students and the schools thanks to labour market developments.* The labour market for holders of vocational training certificate is now undergoing a period of short supply. This means that companies are induced to offer proper training, facilities and even work contracts at the end of the traineeship.

With respect to our *evaluation* of the Catalan model of how skills are acquired via work-based experience (the evaluation to which we referred in the introduction to this article), the results of our examination indicate that it is of *average effectiveness* (cf. Mària (2003, pp. 223-224). Though planned training activities are not entirely fulfilled (especially with regard to technical skills), many students do learn a great deal during their periods of work.

We believe that if trainees are to acquire skills more effectively, the Administration (which is responsible for the proper application of the law, including setting stricter requirements for companies) on the one hand, and schools and trainees (who should exert pressure on company tutors during traineeships) on the other, need to work together. On the whole, the outcome of this dual pressure is positive both for the students and the companies. Traineeships are an opportunity for companies to develop and refine the learning resources inherent in their production process. In this connection, vocational training centres can develop into excellent travelling companions, helping the company achieve its goals.

The dynamic training resources of traineeships have a skilling potential for the workforce, and at the same time can help raise the productivity of companies – a goal we would do well to heed. ■

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