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Knowledge systems and vocational training policy in the regions. The case of two regional Observatories on Employment and Training: Rhône-Alpes vs Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur

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In the mid 1980s, following the first stages of the decentralisation process initiated in 1982, certain French administrative regions started acquiring tools for the observation of the training-employment relationship in order to prepare for their new responsibilities in the areas of education, training and economic development (cf. Desrosières 2008, ch. 11).² In 1987, the central government set out to give new impetus to training-employment forecasting along three lines:

- *macro-economic*, by entrusting the independent economic consulting firm BIPE with forecasting tools which had been developed by the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) for the elaboration of the national plan;
- *sectoral*, by giving the social partners the possibility of signing forecasting studies contracts for the investigation of changes in skills;
- *regional*, by encouraging the creation of Regional Observatories on Employment and Training (OREF) on the basis of various experiments already underway.

In so doing, the government reasserted its 'determination' to anticipate in order to take action (not without echoes of the Keynesian state inseparable from national statistics), but this was done in a way which remained compatible with the emergence of a decentralised state: by establishing a framework rather than laying down rules. A circular dated 16 February 1988 thus gave the OREFs a common goal – developing diagnostic and forecasting tools to be shared by the regional actors (Bertrand et al. 2003) – but the definition of the specific institutional form and methods was left up to the observatories themselves. Each French region thus came to choose the kind of information produced and the ways of using it in the context of regional employment and training policies (Pascaud 1993).

In the two regions under consideration here, the initiatives were quite distinct: in Rhône-Alpes, they took the form of an association, and in PACA, that of a structure within the Regional Council, although this was funded through the State-Region Planning contract. The implication of the OREFs in the specific regional histories of the training-employment relationship was all the more profound because the 1988 circular pragmatically tied their creation to the 'multi-annual contractualisation' of public policy (cf. Gaudin 1999), as well as

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² Unless otherwise indicated, the term 'region' is used to refer to the territorial authority rather than the geographical area itself, independent of institutional connections.

the ‘continuity of the transfer of authority over initial and continuing education and training to the Regional Councils (Brochier and Causse 1993).

These two observatories have thus been studied here from a socio-historical perspective (Thelan) in order to bring out the configurations of regional actors taking part in their creation and subsequent development. To what extent do interactions between those involved in the fields of employment and training (i.e., between organised ‘interest groups’ including the devolved state services, local authorities, social partners etc.) have an impact on the modes of production and use of the information produced and mobilised by the two OREFs under study? In the following presentation, we shall examine the changing content of the tools these OREFs develop in relation to the ‘mandates’ they take on and the autonomy they acquire in view of (possibly) gaining the status of expert institutions. Our hypothesis is that the statistical apparatus (Lascoumes and Le Galès 2005) of the regional training-employment relationship depends on an institutionalisation over the medium term, marked by technical innovations, the ‘sedimentation’ of numerous tools and the restructuring of their uses. Ultimately, we would maintain that the histories of these two observatories entail successive compromises between the heritage of the French-style ‘planning state’ of the 1960s and 1970s (Tanguy 2002) and the emergence of territorial expertise networks in the context of a decentralised state (Desrosières 1997). To shed light on these regional encounters between two statistics systems – training and employment – we shall examine the production of these observatories in terms of three subject fields: sectors and occupations, territories and individual pathways.

More broadly, our approach is based on an analytical framework which considers the regulation of public policy as the resultant of interactions between three determinant elements, namely institutions, ideas and interest groups – ‘the 3i’ (Théret 2000).³ The OREFs redefine their missions and activities in response to this interplay, while periodically coming up against difficulties of a technical, organisational or political nature. The periodisation varies somewhat between the two OREFs, but not enough to warrant separate treatments; we shall thus deal with each period in terms of both OREFs.

Box 1 *Approach and methods of investigation*

This interregional comparison draws on a study which is part of a larger programme on ‘Measurement Policies’ supported by France’s National Research Agency (ANR) and co-ordinated by Romuald Normand (‘Education and Policies’ mixed research unit, INRP and Université de Lyon 2), in relation with Jean-Louis Derouet (idem) and Martine Mespoulet (Université de Nantes). Three types of sources are used: transcriptions of semi-structured interviews lasting an average of two hours, both official and internal written documents and, less frequently, observation notes. The interviews were conducted with OREF staff but also members of the Regional Councils, the devolved state services (notably the local education authorities), other bodies producing expert information on employment and training in the regions (e.g., the regional INSEE offices) and the social partners. With regard to the written sources, we would like to thank the staff of the two OREFs and the training and employment departments of the PACA and Rhône-Alpes Regional Councils, who kindly gave us access to their archives.

FIRST PERIOD: THE FOUNDING, OR THE IMPRINT OF THE ORIGINAL CONTEXTS

Both OREFs have had to interact with state and regional institutions, but their activities got underway in very different social and political contexts. And the latter have subsequently been shaped by the OREFs’ own statistical production, which defines the

³ The term ‘regulation’ is used here in the sense of the definition provided by Jean-Pierre Gaudin: ‘The notion of regulation designates . . . the way of codifying legitimate rules or reconstructing them. This immediately brings to mind the corpus of legal decisions. But the idea of regulation has led more broadly to considering the elaboration of the rules as well, namely the social adjustments and compromises which make them acceptable’. *L’action publique, sociologie et politique* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po-Daloz, 2004), p. 193.

regional social situation as much as it reflects it (Desrosières, *ibid.*). Beyond a common partisan affiliation, the two regional executives have partly shaped their respective observatories to correspond to dissimilar political and social structures even if, in technical terms, they have privileged the same subject area, namely the activity sector.

The Regional Observatory on Occupations (ORM), phase 1: corporatism in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur (PACA) region (1988-1996)

In 1986 the ORM recruited its first senior researcher, with funding from the state, and took its place within the Regional Council. The latter favoured collaborations with the Regional Employers' Union (UPR) in order to gain better knowledge of employers' hiring decisions. The observatory's first activities ('workshops') thus aimed at determining the workforce training 'needs' of such and such a sector on the basis of demands coming from the legitimate representatives of the occupational branch(es), namely the company heads. The term used, 'occupations' (*métiers*), reflected a specific way of approaching the employment-training relationship, mainly from the standpoint of the (very) small enterprises, while the infra-regional territories were ignored. This approach was rooted in a political conception of training reduced to the acquisition of skills associated with occupations in the traditional, craft sense of the term. The Regional Council, headed by a majority composed of the classical right-wing political parties but also the far-right Front National (from 1986 to 1992), strongly promoted the development of apprenticeship leading to the traditional CAP (*certificat d'aptitude professionnelle*, vocational aptitude certificate), notwithstanding the fact that the vocational *baccalauréats* had just been created. This socio-political configuration was not without impact on the kind of instruments favoured: direct surveys of (small) employers in order to obtain information about their short- and medium-term needs and adapt the training programmes, and especially apprenticeship, to them as closely as possible. That said, the members of the observatory, backed up by state structures (DRTEFP, Regional Department of Labour, Employment and Vocational Training), subsequently singled out the technical limitations of this approach and re-legitimated studies based on official statistics.

The Rhône-Alpes Regional Observatory on Employment and Training (OREFRA), phase 1: a planning-oriented approach within the context of regional neo-corporatism (1988-1998)

At the time of its creation, the OREFRA sought to assume the role of an expert institution in the 'Super-Planner' style by quickly producing broad statistical overviews of the training-employment relationship in the line of earlier studies by the Planning Commission and INSEE (Affichard 1976). This model was inspired by several factors: the skills and experience of the OREFRA's first director (who came from the statistics department of the Lyons education authority); the economic situation in the Rhône-Alpes region, which, since it was fairly representative of the national economy, favoured the regional adaptation of tools for 'French-style' planning of the training-employment relationship; and the availability of a 'Human Resources Databank' (BDRH) combining skills and activity sectors, which thus ensured the technical feasibility of this industry-based approach to the training-employment relationship.

This planning orientation is reflected in the OREFRA's proposal to the social actors, made at the beginning of the 1990s, for the development of a common language which would facilitate their dialogue and co-operation. After numerous exchanges with representatives of the occupational branches, this language came to be based on a classification of occupational families associating training fields and employment specialisations. Such a substantive link reinforced the OREFRA's capacity for innovation, which was legitimated in turn by the fact that the results were appropriated by the economic and social actors as well. The focus on

occupational families was validated at national level by INSEE and the ANPE (National Employment Agency), as well as Céreq (Centre for Research on Education, Training and Employment) and the state-run education system. Through its database, the Observatory was quickly able to produce sector-based assessments of skills and, according to one of its members, as this activity became routine, it allowed ‘the OREF to remain autonomous (with its own research programme) while meeting specific outside requests without any considerable increase in its means’.

This technical capacity is significant within a regional political configuration which, in the area of vocational training, is an adaptation of traditional French-style tripartism: trade unions, employers’ organisations and the state (cf. Mériaux 1999). It is all the more valid to qualify this regional version as neo-corporatist (Schmitter and Lembruch 1979) given the outstanding quality of the social dialogue in the Rhône-Alpes region, which in this particular case led to creating the OREFRA in the form of an association including the two public authorities as well as the social partners. The assessments it produced by sector and/or occupational families easily allowed it to remain in phase with the political initiatives taken by the Regional Council from 1986 on. Within the framework of the first State-Region Planning Contract, the regional executive did its best to develop so-called ‘co-operative’ apprenticeship with work contracts, in the vocational and technical high schools as well as the polytechnics, through the creation of ‘apprentice training centres without walls’ run by the occupational branches at regional level (for a critical analysis, see Brochier et al. 1993). This institutional experience, along with the pioneering work on occupational families, indicates the force of the innovative, experimental stance assumed early on by the Rhône-Alpes Regional Council (Millon 1992) and adopted under the council’s impetus by many regional actors (see Jouve et al. 2001).

SECOND PERIOD: CONVERGENCE TOWARDS A REGIONALISED NEO-CORPORATIST REGULATION?

Since 1993, the regions’ privileged instrument has been the Regional Development Plan for Youth Vocational Training (PRDFPJ), which was extended to adult training in 2002. Its elaboration, piloted by the Regional Council, was based on a particularly complex tangle of concertations and negotiations. Defining the rules of the game at regional level never depends on the wishes of the Regional Council alone but results from multiple interactions with the economic and social ‘partners’ (industry-wide and in the occupational branches), the other territorial authorities, state representatives and even the European level, given the funding it is likely to contribute (Verdier and Vion 2005).

Since 1987 – even before the creation of the PRDFs – it has been possible for the regions, the state and the occupational branches to sign territorial objectives contracts with the idea of making a segmented training supply more coherent. As of 1993, this sector-based approach became crucial for harmonising the different training streams through a group of occupational branch contracts within the framework of the regional development plan.

This new institutional context enhanced the status of the OREF’s missions in two respects. First, given the social partners’ relative weakness at regional level (Jobert 2002), making shared knowledge available, in the form of sector-based diagnostics of the training-employment relationship, emerged as an indispensable resource for a developing social dialogue. In addition, the basic rules of these observatories, in the Rhône-Alpes case at least, reflected or anticipated the spirit of the joint regulation then in question. For the PRDFs advocating the shift from a supply-driven training logic towards the primacy of demand, however, the sector-based framework could not suffice: the heterogeneousness of the regional spaces themselves and the assertion of territorial identities around development plans, notably

with the emergence of new actors such as the ‘localities’ (*pays*) and communities of municipalities (*communautés de communes*), called for increasing expertise on the ‘territories of training and employment’. In addition, the PRDFs’ call for the collective regulation of training measures which had until then been strictly compartmentalised, such as school-based initial vocational training and apprenticeship, was gradually defining issues in terms of individual training pathways, labour-market entry and occupational mobility. Briefly stated, every PRDF was positioned in relation to three possible themes: occupational branches, territories and individuals, each of which amounted to the expression of a kind of demand with regard to training supplies. In practice, a regional standard has always expressed a subtle combination of these three approaches.

ORM, phase 2: supporting sector-based and territorial regulations and asserting its autonomy (1996-2004)

As of 1997, the ORM received a new institutional structure in the form of an association whose board of directors was composed of representatives of the state, the region and the social partners, all of whom were also involved in the elaboration and implementation of the PRDF. From that time on, the ORM did its best to become a recognised participant in regional expertise on employment and training. For its new director, this search for legitimacy constituted the best possible protection against the inevitable risks of political changeovers and the regular reappraisal of contracts between the region and the state. While the employers’ organisations had been dominant until then, the arrival of the trade-union representative at the head of the board of directors shifted the balance. In such a context, the technical approach to the training-employment relationship could only make sense if knowledge production fed the dynamics of concertation.

Notwithstanding pious declarations about the virtues of co-operation, the ORM remained confronted by institutional uncertainties arising from various circumstances:

- The state’s commitments were subject to instability because of new transfers of authority to the region, as well as the double representation of the central government (Ministries of Labour and Education, with the latter further divided into two local education authorities);
- The ‘social overhaul’ project promoted by the French employers’ confederation (MEDEF) at the end of the 1990s strained relations between employers and some trade unions;
- Because of the considerable weakness of its capacities for internal expertise, the Regional Council was tempted to make the ORM its own instrument.

In such a context, the regional observatory reinforced its institutional legitimacy through three main strategies: developing its capacities to analyse the training-employment relationship in the PACA region; systematically undertaking partnerships; and relying on locally available scientific expertise, all of which served to elaborate policy guidelines common to the different actors. The stakes were considerable, moreover, because at the end of the 1990s, as a member of the ORM has indicated, ‘unlike certain OREFs of the same generation, this one did not equip itself with a major “statistical database” system’ (Vial 2004).

Relying on national and academic expertise

Based in Marseilles since autumn 1992, the Centre d’études et de recherche sur les qualifications (Céreq), a national public institution responsible for the analysis of the training-employment relationship, has increasingly played the role of ‘mentor’ to the

ORM. This situation is connected to the involvement of Céreq's administration in the definition of the PACA's first PRDF in the mid 1990s, at a time when the expertise capacities of the OREF in its first phase proved insufficient relative to the technical demands created by the region's new responsibilities. This episode considerably reinforced the observatory, in both institutional and technical terms. The new line was symbolised by the appointment of a highly recognised Céreq researcher as the ORM's director. The ties maintained with his 'parent institution' favoured periodic transfers of experience and technical support. This was particularly crucial in a phase where the observatory was seeking to significantly expand its scope.

An advisory board was also set up; composed of specialists in the training-employment relationship, notably academics and researchers from the Aix-Marseille education and research cluster. The board was intended to mediate between requests formulated by political and social actors and the canons of sociological and economics research. Its president, the former director of the research laboratory hosting Céreq's associated centre for the PACA region, is quite clear about the aim of this mediation: 'Contrary to appearances and any temptation to set one's mind at ease, the figures do not speak for themselves. Their value is established by the questions raised and the hypotheses advanced as a result. It is this work alone – the so-called 'problematizing' – which lets us make the figures 'speak', intelligently and usefully'.⁴ Created in 1997, this board has played a key role in the definition and legitimisation of the ORM's activities; it provides the observatory's administration with an essential resource for dealing with institutional backers, namely legitimate knowledge.

Technical partnerships as a working rule

Its ambition to cover the major part of the regional space has encouraged the ORM to develop co-operative ventures. The best way of eliminating hesitations about the observatory's application of its technical capacities to additional research fields has precisely been to associate institutions and experts already interested in the study to be carried out. Covering a broad field within a limited time period, moreover, has required other collaborations, in the form of co-contracting, subcontracting or delegation. The recourse to partnerships thus became a necessity at the different stages of the ORM's activities:

- Constituting the database called for continuous concertation with the main producers of statistical sources such as INSEE, the local education authorities, the different units of the regional public employment office and others.
- In the production of studies and reports: the ORM's partners were associated upstream in the choice of topics to be treated and the use of the sources; technical montages associated other public contributors, such as Céreq's associated regional centre, or private ones, such as consulting firms.
- At the publication stage: joint writing and publishing of the findings were frequent in the different communications media.

Legitimisation through the 'industrialisation' of diagnostic capacities

The ORM set up a system – intended to be exhaustive – for covering four main aspects of the training-employment relationship: economic activity sectors, qualifications, territories and training-supply mechanisms. The commitment to exhaustiveness stemmed from the desire to anticipate actors' demands for information and even more, to help in constructing it.

⁴ Michel Arliaud, speech at the ORM General Assembly of 14 March 2003, p. 1.

The idea was thus to make its technical pre-eminence into a kind of institutional visibility capable of increasing its autonomy for defining its work programme and thus allowing it devote time to innovative activities intended to reinforce its legitimacy.

With the advisory board's ongoing assistance, this recognition was acquired through a subtle process combining constant prudence – making no pretence of monopoly – with the clarity of a dual role as an efficient provider on the statistical diagnostic 'market' and a forum for debate about good practices in the study of the training-employment relationship. Two areas of research are emblematic of this institutional trajectory; one has been strategic from the outset – the activity sectors – while the other was emerging – the regions. A technical prerequisite for achieving this ambition was the acquisition of reliable datasets which were as comprehensive as possible at a time when other observatories were already updating their data, to 'broaden the field of observation and experiment with new methodological approaches' (Vial 2004, p. 10). Through its innovative use of management software, the ORM had caught up by 2001, and with a greatly enlarged staff – four people in 1997, nearly a dozen at the beginning of the next decade – its accomplishments managed to equal its ambitions.

The sector-based approach: a tool for negotiation

The basic tool – the ORM's sector-based model – included indicators describing the number of jobs in each activity by skills level, age, gender, education and training level, conditions of employment and their weight in the employment areas. This tool was inseparable from an explicit desire to facilitate the 'dialogue between representatives of the occupational branches, the authorised joint collection bodies (OPCAs), the joint employment-training commissions and public authorities' by constituting a 'standard for setting up forward-looking observatories on occupations and skills at national or regional level'.

In fact, rather than seeking a monopoly, the ORM offered several kinds of help to occupational branches seeking to create regional observatories: provision of data on activity sectors, occupations and training programmes, methodological support, organisation of meetings between branches desiring to benefit from shared experiences and address industry-wide questions together. This technical partnership was aimed at maintaining coherence between the different sector-based forecasts by drawing on shared methodological guidelines. Paradoxically, the increased number of branch mechanisms has promoted the ORM's role as co-ordinating body. In addition, the growing mobility of wage-earners, and in particular the instability of the youth labour force, provides a de facto incentive for a regional, cross-sector approach. 'We know, for example, that young people are disappearing into other occupational branches; we'd like to have more detailed information on where they're going and – why not? – see if we can arrive at labour transfers' (branch representative).

The territorial approach as an alternative to 'matching'

Since the appointment of a director coming from Céreq, the ORM has been a hotbed of criticism addressed at the 'training-employment match' approach. Such criticism bears at once on the qualitative aspect of such a logic, aimed at 'matching' training and employment contents, and its quantitative aspect, which advocates strict control of the flows of those trained in function of labour demands. The development of a credible alternative proved difficult, however. As the decentralisation of training policies advanced, 'the growing social demand confronting training-employment expertise at territorial level' became a key issue (Vial 2004). In this respect, developing a 'territorial approach' was promising: it began with the identification of the 'skills-related issues within a labour-market area, an administrative *département* or region, or any other geographical area' (ibid.). On this basis, the break with matching involved taking into account a path dependency proper to each territory studied: the

quality of the living environment (which thus gives rise to positive migratory flows) and the proportion of seasonal jobs (the quality of which partly determines that of the tourism services) but also the ‘attachment to the territory’, which exerts a sharp influence on individual mobility zones. The production of territorial diagnostics (for each of the 22 employment areas) was aimed at meeting this demand for analysis.

The creation of such ‘information coverage’ was not free of tensions, notably with actors possessing recognised expertise capacities. Thus, in a sector as important for this region as construction and public works, most of the preliminary expertise for the 2004 tripartite branch agreement was ultimately carried out, under the aegis of the employers’ associations, by a consortium of public and private actors, although the ORM had proposed its candidacy with the backing of the Regional Council (Mériaux and Verdier 2006). Going beyond the sole activity of observation or the questionable recording of the companies’ skills ‘needs’ allowed the ORM to improve its relations with INSEE’s regional department: after a long period of cultural and technical distance, the two structures have come to be governed by the complementarity of their positions. This has been possible because of the technical quality of the partnerships, especially in the area of the analysis of occupational mobility, and in the resulting success of emblematic operations. The ORM’s gradual winning of institutional legitimacy was thus fed by the constant expansion of its capacities for intervention, in both quantitative and qualitative terms, combining highly detailed territorial investigation of local specificities with the use of employment and training zoning coming from national statistics – or in other words, a compromise (albeit an unstable one) between the industrialisation of its activity and networking (see Desrosières 1997).

OREFRA, phase 2: disillusionment with the regulation of interest groups through ‘ideas’ (1996-2000)

The OREFRA gradually came to be organised in a network structure:

- in the course of the methodological innovations it promoted, the OREFRA made the rigorous choice of setting up an ‘epistemological community’ (along with other OREFs and the statistics departments of the different ministries involved with the employment-training relationship), which is to say, a community developing a pragmatic approach to the training-employment relationship outside of matching;
- in phase with a specific configuration of political and social actors involved in a neo-corporatist type of regulation, it promoted the creation of a community of practices (diagnostics and forecasts).

Reinforcing its autonomy through innovations in methodology

At the instigation of its director, the OREFRA, in co-operation with Céreq’s associated regional centre, processed an extension of Céreq’s ‘Génération ‘98’ survey representing the school-to-work transition in the Rhône-Alpes region. Counter to the advice of the occupational branches, moreover, the observatory also undertook the development of a forecasting tool focused on the impact of demographic changes between 2000 and 2020. This extremely macro-economic study gained legitimacy through the support of the DRTEFP’s ‘Studies-Forecasting-Assessment-Statistics’ Unit (SEPES), INSEE and the Ministry of Education’s Forecasting Department (DEP). Nonetheless, the observatory’s success in the technical domain, which was also closely associated with the director himself, had the disadvantage of giving the social actors the impression that the regional observatory was above all a research body, removed from their ‘commonplace’ preoccupations of the moment.

Ideas too disconnected from the regulation of interest groups?

Beginning in the mid 1990s, however, the OREFRA also became involved in the introduction of the objectives contracts between state, region and occupational branches which were focused on training provision. In Rhône-Alpes, this procedure was based on the prior completion of branch-level Forecasting Studies Contracts (CEP). Through the efforts of the OREFRA, responsible for co-ordinating and running these forecasting activities, the Rhône-Alpes region funded forecasting diagnostics, as attested by the many sector-based CEPs (14 over the period of the 2 planning contracts; cf. the assessment study by the Geste and Amnyos consulting firms [2004]). This forecasting approach undeniably helped to mobilise the social partners and public authorities around a broader vision of the employment-training issues. Developing shared guidelines could not replace action, however, and the forecasting exercise proved unable to generate an operational vision through the Objectives Contracts. Before 2000, when the procedures were reevaluated, only one objectives contract had been signed, and in addition, it did not lead to any action plan. There are several interrelated reasons for these failed expectations:

- From an analytical standpoint, in most of the CEPs (with the exception of metallurgy, textiles and agriculture), the economic diagnostic was limited to an analysis of the productive fabric (number of companies, size, location) and salaried employees, while the approach to the markets, which is crucial for employment and skills forecasts, remained rather sketchy.
- Many branches were still badly structured and equipped; as a result, the state and the region lacked negotiating partners who were independent of the national representatives.
- The way the region was organised did not permit the reconciliation of the economic logic of assistance to companies on the one hand and the employment-training logic of the CEPs and objectives contracts on the other.

Nonetheless, the assessment of these contract-based approaches brought out two more positive elements which were to have an impact on the OREFRA's subsequent trajectory:

- The virtue of the territory: the most convincing CEPs were the most territorial, such as that of Courchevel, which suggested that the local level facilitated a global appreciation of both economic and employment-training approaches. This conclusion echoed the region's decision to set up Territorial Employment-Training Committees (CTEF).
- The quality of the social dialogue: for many CEP stakeholders, contractualisation allowed them to 'get beyond concertation as a pretext'. The collective learning process laid the foundations for the creation of a public interest group (GIP) intended to federate all the guidance networks, including the observatory.

This tension offers a good illustration of the distance between the sector-based logic of the Keynesian welfare state and the network architecture of the polycentric 'neoliberal' state already signalled by Desrosières (2003).

THIRD PERIOD: A SHARED OUTLOOK WITH RADICALLY DIFFERENT ORGANISATIONAL CHOICES (2003 –)

In terms of their action programmes for 2008 and 2009, the two OREFs seem to have fairly similar briefs. But since 2003-2004, these observatories have undergone significant transformations, owing to sharp path dependency relative to their previous trajectories. It is nonetheless possible to identify some common features which reflect economic and social changes extending far beyond the borders of the two regions concerned. These have tended to

reconfigure expertise mechanisms around (1) questions focused on education, training and employment pathways and (2) practices for assisting actors in the training-employment relationship to define their projects so as to make the expertise activity more effective.

Box 2 The missions of the two observatories (as of 2008)

The **ORM**'s responsibility for research and decision support is divided into different briefs:

Data collection: organisation of a regional employment-training database on the basis of co-operation agreements with the departments and bodies producing the information;

Studies: carrying out studies, commissioning studies from outside providers, assisting administrations and partners in the elaboration of terms and conditions;

Diagnostic and assessment: preparation and provision of diagnostic reports and assessment tools;

Organisation: participation in exchanges between administrations and concertations with social partners, technical organisation of partnerships, presentation of findings to decision-makers;

Publication: dissemination of regional studies in the 'employment-training' and 'equal opportunity' fields.

The **OREFRA**'s mission involves 'anticipating the consequences of economic transformations and changes in jobs and skills in the activity sectors; continuing to structure the employment and training information systems in view of the regional supervision of the training supply in accordance with the PRDF; providing the territories with tools and methods for analysing the training-employment relationship. Contributing to shared knowledge about training/job entry/occupational mobility trajectories. . . . The implementation of this mission takes place along the following lines: assuming technical leadership . . . Playing a role of assembler. . . . Providing technical support. . . Ensuring the dissemination of the research. . . .'

OREFRA, phase 3: the 'invisible' co-ordinator of public-policy networks

At first glance, the changes have been radical: 'The OREFRA has disappeared, so to speak. It doesn't even exist any more! The PRDF experts are the social partners or those who are active in the field. The OREFRA people are go-betweens and organisers' (PDRF official). In 2004, the OREFRA became a technical component within a new structure, the Rhône-Alpes Guidance Centre (PRAO), a public-interest group (GIP) jointly set up by the actors of the regional tripartite system, the region – the prime mover in this case – the state and the social partners (who obtained the status of founding stakeholders on the same footing as the public authorities). This agreement attests to a shared determination to federate the numerous public or joint structures which contribute to educational and vocational guidance. The idea was to counter a strong trend towards a logic of 'organised anarchy' (Cohen, March and Olsen, 1972) rendering public policy unintelligible; the region thus made the new structure an instrument for legitimating its own activity.

This network, which in turn federates twenty-one 'guidance networks and units', reflects a major line of regional policy, namely support for the construction of individual career paths through 'lifelong guidance' (CESR 2004) so as to make the itineraries more stable in the long run. This reorganisation was aimed at providing operational services to the actors of the training-employment relationship: 'relevant, readable information' for guidance professionals and 'support for decision-makers', notably within the context of the implementation of the new PRDF – the reason behind the OREFRA's participation. In addition, it was intended to broaden access to the accreditation of prior and experiential learning (*validation des acquis de l'expérience*, VAE, in French) and ultimately, to reach the general public. In fact, the institutional dismantling of the OREFRA has entailed neither the disappearance of this activity cluster nor a reduction of its capacities for action. The OREFRA, which provides assistance in the use of the statistical files, now develops its studies with the idea of improving the stakeholders' know-how. The presentation of the databases,

whether they are territorial, sector-based or focused on labour-market entry, always highlight the meaningful use which guidance professionals can make of them. The question, however, is whether this overlapping between the information functions of those involved in labour-market entry and an expertise mission prior to public decision-making actually produces a better linkage between knowledge and action.

Territorial instrumentation for clarifying individual and collective choices

The creation of the PRAO reflects a shift in regional policy on employment and training. Without overlooking the occupational branches, the regional public policy guideline places more emphasis on the building of individual career paths. Among the three key lines, the ‘overhauling of the Rhône-Alpes PRDF’ emphasises ‘territorialisation for greater efficiency and coherence of regional action’ and stresses that ‘the relevance of the interventions depends on the quality of the analysis of the issues to be addressed’ and not only the classic ‘mobilisation of the actors’. In this context, the PRAO-OREFRA has developed a highly detailed, functional approach to the territories: at the level of the twenty-seven areas within the region (as well as each of the administrative *départements* and the region itself), the database is structured around concrete questions aimed at allowing users to develop their own diagnostics.⁵ This combining of sectors, territories and occupations serves to bring out prospects for individuals. Addressed above all to local groups of actors, this setup formulates the results for a given territory in terms such as these: ‘The training potential is inferior to employment needs because [of] recruitment difficulties and high opportunity indicator / The training potential seems balanced relative to employment (analysis to be further refined by training programme)’. But insofar as appropriate information sources do not exist at regional level, the regional guideline’s increasing focus on individual support during labour-market entry calls for new methodological and statistical innovations in the short and medium term.

Increasing autonomy for the research function

The OREF mission within the PRAO has been extending its earlier studies in order to test an alternative to the job-matching approach. Without rejecting the idea of matching from the outset, the OREF put it to the test with a sophisticated statistical setup based on INSEE’s Employment survey. A first study, published in 2005, analysed the connections between the young people’s diplomas and their occupation five years later. Briefly stated, it showed that one-third of the young people worked in the occupational field ‘targeted’ by their training field, one-third in a related activity and one-third in an entirely different occupational field.⁶ At the end of 2007, a new study measured the degree of occupational mobility (each year, 13 % of the labour force, at national level and in the Rhône-Alpes region alike, change ‘occupations’, with considerable variations by age, diploma and gender). It also proposed a typology of occupation changes for eighty-four occupational families; this was based on three main categories of variables: mobility rates, career paths and the weight of promotions in occupational mobility (Longin 2007). For the authors, these findings confirm the conclusion already advanced in 2005: ‘The training-employment relationship has undergone profound changes over the past twenty years for both economic and societal reasons. The classic concept of “matching” training and employment is no longer relevant, apart from professions where entry is controlled (e.g., doctors) or subject to a competitive entrance examination (e.g.

⁵ ‘1. What is the present spectrum of jobs in your area, by activity sector and occupational field ? 2. What are the principal activities ? 3. How are jobs evolving ? 5. What are the occupational fields where recruitment is difficult ? 6. What are the exit flows from training : school based, apprenticeships, continuing training for young people or adults ? 7. Are training flows adapted to the needs of the job area? 8. What are the possible job opportunities for the individual’s training plan ?’ (see the PRAO site at www.prao.org).

⁶ See ‘Liens formations-métiers, regards croisés’ (Perspectives on training-occupation connections). *Les Dossiers de la Direction de l’évaluation et de la prospective* no. 158, Ministry of Education, Paris, 2005.

teachers). The training-employment relationship seems to be taking a new form: the “transferability of competences”⁷. These findings are rooted in the OREFRA’s cognitive evolution, as personified by the founding director, who held the post from 1991 to 2007: on the one hand, these are national studies which are thus aimed at general validity; on the other, they have been carried out within an expertise network associating national and regional actors. The drawback of this national recognition of the quality of the studies, however, is an underinvestment in the tools which come closest to the analyses of the training-employment relationship carried out by the Rhône-Alpes actors. In the words of one PRAO staff member, ‘The OREFRA is less of a trail-blazer now because it consistently reproduces the same data (from information provided by the Assedics [organisations in charge of unemployment payments] and so on’, with the result that its involvement in the preparation of preliminary diagnostics for regional policy negotiations has declined.

The weakening of a historic asset: expertise in the service of regulating contract-based public policy

Since it has become an expertise structure within a GIP, the observatory’s main role has been that of facilitating regional public action (see Salais 1998): it helps to organise meetings of the PRDF’s policymaking and technical structures (Steering committee, working group on Publics and Training, working group on Pathways, working group on Economic sectors, working group on Territorial logics).⁸ Similarly, while continuing to oversee the preparation of forecasting studies contracts (CEP) – notably for the occupational branches – it also draws up objectives contracts, with the aim of improving the link between knowledge and action, as recommended in the evaluation of these procedures carried out in 2005 (Amnyos Geste). The discussion process is as important as the subjects of the regulation process itself: ‘What’s involved is setting the pace, stimulating a negotiating dynamics by creating the conditions for regular, productive meetings between the partners’ (member of the PRAO’s board of directors representing the state).

The different interest groups are thus explicitly brought in line on the basis of regulation through expertise, which sets out the appropriate framework for a step-by-step approach to the medium-term problems revealed by the experts’ diagnostics. This process explains the OREFRA’s active, ongoing ‘mission’, from the diagnostic to the assessment of public policy contracts in the area of employment and training. The challenge is considerable, given that only seven objectives contracts have been signed in the occupational branches, compared to sixteen forecasting studies contracts. There is still a certain gap between the undeniable ability to generate debate and the difficulties of bringing the contractualisation process to completion, namely the determination of an effective plan of action. An approach which aims to link training, employment and economic development clearly comes up against serious institutional obstacles: within the Regional Council alone, such a project requires coordination between five departments, and thus five directors.

Such difficulties are perhaps one of the causes of the partial failure of the objectives contracts reform undertaken at the beginning of this decade. For the time being, the region’s desire to introduce a single contract signed by all the actors – economic development, employment and training – has met with the refusal of the employers’ organisations to sign joint agreements in the economic domain with the trade unions. That being the case, the OREF has left the field open for other institutional initiatives, such as the Observatory on Economic Changes, set up in November 2004 by the regional prefect, the president of the

⁷ *Les liens entre diplômés et métiers. Une nouvelle lecture de la relation formation-emploi.* Ministry of Education, Rhône-Alpes prefecture, Rhône-Alpes Regional Council and social partners, September 2004, p. 1.

⁸ Cf. www.prao.org.

Regional Council and the interministerial representative for economic transformations (MIME). Even if this partnership is ultimately not very efficient, it suggests that the OREFRA-PRAO approaches are not necessarily the most suitable for analysing the substantive issues of the crisis. More than ever before, it is necessary to adapt information sources and diagnostics to the increasingly fluid perimeters of economic problems and initiatives, such as the competitiveness clusters, but these all correspond less and less to the approach through occupational branches which accounts for a considerable share of the OREFRA's expertise and legitimacy.

ORM, phase 3: technical legitimacy and support for actors

The ORM has focused on the transformations of the training-employment-work relationship in terms of four processes: access to skills, job entry, changes in occupations and activity sectors, local development. On that basis, it has identified key issues for the regional employment and training actors to analyse. In 2008, these included precariousness, intermediate skills and occupational mobilities. In 2009, the observatory recommended labour-market pathways and transitions, as well as a procedural adaptation – in response to the crisis – aimed at reinforcing a twofold capacity for anticipating social transformations at regional level and reacting to the most acute social problems. In these different subject areas, moreover, the ORM now presents itself as the guardian of good procedures intended to define relevant questions for regional public policy: it is thus becoming the legitimate arena for discussion of all studies and surveys envisioned in the area of the training-employment relationship. It is also confirming a 'strategic turning point' which had gradually been getting underway in previous years. This involves the definition of protocols for providing actors with support in their different areas of intervention: territorial, sectoral or proper to one or several occupational groups. In sum, the ORM is constructing its present and future position as an 'expert services platform', with the participation and, if possible, the involvement of the institutional actors.

The emergence of pathways as the thematic priority

Apart from studies on the youth transition, the ORM has published little research dealing with occupational mobility. The most significant dates from November 2007, moreover, and appeared in the monthly newsletter of INSEE's Regional Department, *Sud INSEE l'essentiel*, under the title 'Occupational mobility: frequent but not always profitable'. The circumstances of this publication reflect the ORM's institutional position: in keeping with its role as 'assembler' and driving force, it legitimates itself through technical partnerships and above all, does not assume the role of advocate. In terms of content, while addressing the question of mobilities, this study refines one of the ORM's classic subject entries, that of business practices, combined with socioprofessional groups. The analysis of individual transition pathways functions as a pertinent indicator of the characteristic sectoral and occupational dynamics, combined with age and gender.

In future, the pathways themselves will occupy a growing place in the ORM's activity, beginning in 2009 with the processing of a regional extension of Céreq's Generation 2004 survey. Going further in this direction will probably require critical reflection on the sources of regional statistics: who is to provide them and with what legitimacy? The question is open.

Defining regional policy issues on the basis of 'good studies'

The two cases which follow are emblematic of the ORM's position. One concerns a labour-force category marked by job precariousness, the other, a sector marked by the issue of intermediate skills. The former, a study on seasonal employees in the tourism sector, was commissioned by the Regional Department of Labour, Employment and Vocational Training

(DRTEFP), two of its counterparts at *département* level (DDTEFP) and the ORM. Carried out by a consulting firm, it was published in the form of a summary written by a researcher at the observatory (Boyer 2005). With a view to linking research and public policy, the conclusions of the report take the form of recommendations (to cite only one example: ‘The public authorities, with the assistance of the employers’ representatives, could encourage the pooling of certain actions, notably for small enterprises, in order to improve the structuring of career pathways’).

The second study, on the metalworking industry, was similarly aimed at connecting analysis and the elaboration of action plans. Subcontracted to the sector itself and a consulting firm, it was closely supervised by a technical committee – led by the ORM – which defined the objectives and the survey approach, insofar as its members drew up the ‘interview guidelines [which] established the main lines of the questions to be posed’. This qualitative approach used data from three regional sources.⁹ The observations bring out a sharp disparity between, on the one hand, ‘the ideal profile of the person who would be recruited immediately by the metalworking companies . . . someone who is motivated, competent in the field of mechanical production. . . ’ and on the other, the fact that ‘the experienced persons competent in mechanical production are rare because they are sought by everyone; there are no longer enough graduates to meet the needs; . . . there seems to be a lack of motivation in a sector which doesn’t really attract young people’ (p. 73). The recommendations as a whole were intended to assist in the creation of a guideline for collective action aimed at anticipating the risk of a shortage of the human resources necessary for the companies’ development. Among others, we may cite, ‘Carrying out skills diagnostics for each company’ (ibid. p. 76) in order to involve the latter in a training effort ultimately intended to ‘Create a specific metalworking pool managed by the companies’ (p. 77), notably by setting up what are known as Employers’ Groups for Job Entry and Skilling (GEIQ) or Local Hiring-Training Units (CLEF).

Obtaining ‘missions’ in order to consolidate a reputation

Since the beginning of the decade, the ORM has established itself as an expert in the observation of categories targeted by public policy: the disabled (with the Fund for the Labour-Market Entry of Disabled Persons, AGEFIPH), young people (with the Regional Department for Youth and Sports, DRJS) and so on. It should be noted that these new activities most often take place within institutional partnerships which are prominently indicated in all the participants’ publications and public-relations materials: working with others and for others is a kind of implicit doctrine which motivates the observatory’s studies in a field that has become a priority in its own right and one that has in recent years, moreover, accounted for a rapid increase in staff size (16 persons at present).

Support services for anticipating and transmitting

In the context of an analysis of the territorial governance of employment and training, the ORM is making every effort to develop qualitative approaches for services intended to help public and private actors to define and implement their interventions. In the area of occupational skills, this constitutes a significant change for its researchers, who made little use of qualitative approaches in the past. Such an orientation calls for considerable

⁹ 1. *Repérage et analyse des tensions du marché de l’emploi – 1er semestre 2003*, a 2003 report on the identification and analysis of labour-market pressures by the regional public employment office (ANPE PACA); 2. the findings from two surveys carried out in 2003 and 2004 by the Employment Department of the Union of Metalworking Industries (UIMM) in Provence; 3. *Outils d’analyse – Panorama des métiers en PACA : Mécanique, travail des métaux*, a booklet on mechanics and metalworking in the ORM’s 2003 survey of occupational branches in the PACA region.

development of ties with other research activities, well beyond the inclusion of professors and researchers on its advisory board as has been the case for the past eleven years.

The preparatory study for the first regional plan for health and social services training programmes (which came under the responsibility of the regions in 2004) tests an approach – rather than a method – which would clearly define the employment-training relationship independently of any idea of matching. The preliminary diagnostic, conceived as a cross between a ‘statistical inventory and exchanges between partners in order to arrive at a shared understanding of the phenomena involved’, gave rise to the development of a ‘collective work tool’. The underlying aim is to get to actors to take into account the elements influencing the definition of the work activity, such as the nature of the demand for healthcare or social services, especially in view of changes in family lifestyles. A much more general conclusion deals with ‘observation skill’: ‘Observation skill has to be enriched with that of mediating between the experts who analyse training programmes, whatever these are, and the final decision-makers, in order to increase the pooling of training and employment networks on the territory’ (Vial 2007, p. 4). The knowledge thus produced is no longer a simple addendum to regulation but rather, its mainstay.

Conclusion

Within the context of a considerably expanded decentralisation of training in the course of their two decades of activity, the two OREFs have undergone profound changes. They have evolved from the model of the descriptive statistical report bringing together information on a single theme (i.e., an occupational branch or group, a territory) drawn from varied sources with little coordination, to that of the diagnostic bringing out strategic issues and leading to public-policy recommendations. These practices essentially draw on standardised statistical sources provided by INSEE and the ministerial statistics departments in the regions. The observatory’s distinctive role is precisely to give particular meaning to the information thus placed in perspective in order to explain or make known regional and local issues. At present, a new stage seems to be getting underway. It no longer suffices to prepare reports; it is necessary to accompany them with services permitting users to make use of these statistical ‘products’ in such a way that they give meaning to the local actors’ policies. The development of this link between the specific features of the project areas on the one hand and the general values conveyed by standardised statistics on the other entails a compromise between a dialogue based on proximity and possibilities for more far-ranging comparison. In other words, the ability to combine the use of official statistics and specific advice. The efficiency of this multidimensional service is determinant for establishing the observatories’ lasting institutional legitimacy. Such an evolution calls for several initiatives:

- The first is paradigmatic: it consists of escaping (by means other than simple denunciation) the hold of the planning model based on matching (Affichard 1983), which tends to be perpetuated by the observatories’ classic base, namely the industrial sectors (how to meet the needs of the companies concerned?). Two subject fields are drawn upon: territories and individual pathways. To a greater or lesser degree, both are aimed at developing an approach based on the prevention of employment risks, tied to economic changes in one case and to interruptions in individual pathways in the other;
- The second is technological: it entails the users’ involvement in the functioning of the database so that they construct a diagnostic based in part on their own observations from experience;

- The third is procedural: legitimate directions are determined not by prior instruction or acceptance of outside knowledge but by recourse to collective debate on both the validity of the projected studies or surveys and their conclusions.¹⁰

The ultimate impact of these approaches remains quite uncertain: Are the forums sufficiently open to the diversity of the actors? Isn't the pluralism largely confined, on the one hand, to the branch-level social partners and, on the other, to public actors who are often edgy about their prerogatives, for lack of sufficient confidence about their respective spheres of authority? The weight of neo-corporatism remains great, given its foothold in the joint approaches associated with the occupational branches. In addition, combining the issues proper to the training-employment relationship with preoccupations stemming from economic development will call for confronting major technical problems, in other words, the reconciling of standard statistics and the other, ad-hoc statistics required by bodies with specific parameters, such as those of a competitiveness cluster or a development project initiated by a community of municipalities (see Desrosières 2008c). Is there any solution other than the creation of a supply of statistical services sufficiently flexible to correspond to the time frames of the territorial or local projects? How might these providers and the official statisticians be connected? And last of all, can a single body respond to these different questions over time?

In spite of their common features, the paths taken by the two observatories are considerably different. In the case of the ORM, the original issue was getting away from the corporatist model, which was tied to a particular political situation. The second stage permitted the development of an ability to provide standardised information about the employment-training relationship and thus gain at least partial freedom from the ascendancy of the demand, through the development of a diagnostic capacity by territories, occupational branches and socioprofessional groups. For the time being, however, this observatory has little involvement in the regulation of regional policy, although it does exert some influence. The exteriority of its expertise provision places it in a legitimate position to organise discussion forums around all the projected regional studies and surveys on employment and training. This ability to provide methodological support for the actors in the analyses preceding decisions is a major resource which, should its success be confirmed, would give it the status of an expertise institution of indisputable legitimacy. From this standpoint, the OREFRA's longstanding involvement in the regulation of regional public policy would seem to make it an essential technical actor in every partnership. Today it seems weakened by a growing distance between a simple information function as a department of the regional guidance centre and the innovative studies which have more impact at national level than regionally. Will this institutionalisation of the observatory be reinforced now that the PRAO is supposed to address itself to a 'general public' composed of private individuals and employers?

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¹⁰ In point of fact, these changes suggest a local response to a general question 'raised by the diversity and technical complexity of these [statistical] tools and their social uses, [which] is to imagine and organise public spaces where their meaning and political impact can be debated' (Desrosières 2008b).

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