

**Country specific thematic analysis of
continuing vocational training on the basis of CVTS2
and modelling of CVT-structures
(CVTS2 revisited)**

Phase 3 / Work package 12

**The Training Cheque¹ - a new Instrument for the
Promotion of the Continuing Vocational Training in SMEs
in the German Federal State of North Rhine-Westphalia**

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¹ For more detailed information see www.gib.nrw.de and <http://www.mags.nrw.de/arbeit/qualifikation/bildungsscheck/index.html>

1.0 Introduction

In order to promote continuing vocational training in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW)², the federal state government introduced in January 2006 the "training cheque programme NRW", which intends to offer enterprises and employees counselling and financial support for the implementation of continuing vocational training. There are two main target groups that can receive training cheques:

- SMEs - this is called the enterprise application route.
- Individual employees in SMEs- this is called the **individual application route**.

A special focus of the training cheque programme is to promote the training participation of the unskilled and semi-skilled, migrants and older employees. The use of the training cheque requires an obligatory counselling by the consultation centres. The consultation centres are officially approved training institutions, which are obliged to give neutral training advice. The realisation of the programme uses the available know-how of the consultation centres already existing in North Rhine-Westphalia. An additional consultation network of institutions has not been established. Thus, using the already existing training infrastructure in NRW, it was not necessary to establish new bureaucratic implementation structures.

Enterprises and employees in SMEs can apply for the training cheques. Subsidised by the training cheques are participant events. 50 percent (at a maximum of 750 €) of the continuing vocational training fees are co-financed by NRW with means of the European Social Fund (ESF). Within the framework of the ESF co-financed labour market policy of NRW a total of 20 Mio. € will be available in 2006 and 2007³. The federal state of NRW does not supply any additional financial contributions. It is the first federal state that introduced this form of training subsidy in Germany.

The training cheque is distributed by officially approved consultation centres, which are obliged to give neutral advice. The training cheque programme aims at improving the competitive capacity of SMEs and employability of employees. However, this subsidy will not be delivered directly: if a training course is booked, half of the participation fees has to be paid by the participant or his employer and the other half will be paid by the training cheque.

Instruments like training accounts or training cheques are already used and tested in other European countries. In Belgium training cheques are already used for some years (1998 - Wallonia region; 2002 - Flanders). In Belgium a training cheque has a value of 30 €. Enterprises have to pay half of this amount. An employer can buy a maximum of 200 training cheques per year. Employees who use the training cheques have the right of continued wage pay. The training cheques aim to promote the continuing vocational training in particular in SMEs. In the Austrian federal state of Styria, training cheques are used since the middle of the 1990s. Three forms of training cheques are used: training cheques for founders of enterprises, for apprentices and for the acquisition of particular qualifications. In the United Kingdom pilot experiments were cancelled, because the abuse of the promotional instrument was too large and there did not exist any institutionalised form of quality control.⁴

² North Rhine-Westphalia has over 18 million inhabitants, contributes about 22% of Germany's gross domestic product.

³ The Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs of NRW plans to apply for a continuation of the ESF contribution for 2008.

⁴ Winfried Heidemann, Individuelle Bildungskonten: Ein Baustein zur Finanzierung lebensbegleitenden Lernens. Entwicklungen und Erfahrungen in Österreich, Großbritannien, Schweden und den Niederlanden. Düsseldorf 2001

Although the training cheque programme is intensively monitored, an external evaluation of the training cheque programme is planned for 2007. In order to assess some sketchy programme results, the BIBB identified some crucial points of the training cheque programme and discussed these points by means of telephone interviews with some experts responsible for the implementation⁵ and monitoring of the programme⁶ as well as some consultants of the consultation centres.⁷

2.0. Background of the NRW training cheque programme

According to the latest Eurobarometer (2006)⁸ 62 percent of the German population aged 15-64 totally agrees with the statement that "regular training improves one's job opportunities". Furthermore, the statement concerning the effectiveness of regular training in getting more people into work and staying at work longer ranks with 50 percent also high. However, according to the Eurobarometer, only 23 percent of the German population participated during the preceding 12 months in any training course. These participation rates are also confirmed by the German continuing training survey (Berichtssystem Weiterbildung IX = BSW IX).⁹ This survey shows that in Germany continuing vocational training participation even decreased from 29 percent in 2000 to 26 percent in 2003: this means, that about 1,4 million people in the age group 19-64 did not follow continuing vocational training anymore. Furthermore, the data (1999) of the European continuing vocational training survey (CVTS2) show, that continuing vocational training in Germany ranks only average. Continuing vocational training of German enterprises is characterised by the fact, that they offer training courses just above average to relatively few employees (especially training for high-skilled employees and enterprise management), training courses are short-run ad hoc adaptation measures and in addition are expensive. However, also in this case the comparatively poor performance of continuing vocational training in enterprises does not correspond with the attitudes of German enterprises relating to the importance of lifelong learning. The CVTS2 extra survey (2000) shows, that only 20 percent of enterprises restrict their continuing vocational training to enterprise related aims. 80 percent of the enterprises see the importance of lifelong learning. Thus, international and nation-wide surveys show, that Germany is a country, where enterprises and the German population see the importance of continuing vocational training; reality, however, shows a comparatively poor performance of continuing vocational training in international perspective. In contrast to the larger enterprises SMEs¹⁰ and their employees invest even much less in continuing vocational training.

The training cheque programme promotes continuing vocational training for SMEs with less than 250 employees and also combines this with objectives of the overall labour market policy:

⁵ The BIBB interviewed Mr. Loss of the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs of NRW and one of the initiators and coordinators of the training cheque programme.

⁶ The BIBB interviewed Mr. Muth of the support organisation G.I.B. (Organisation for Innovative Employment Promotion) and responsible for the monitoring of the training cheque programme.

⁷ The BIBB interviewed two consultants: Mrs. Vandenesch of the Chamber of Commerce and Trade in the Cologne/Bonn region and Mr. Dolle, working in a training centre of the Chamber of Handicrafts in Arnsberg.

⁸ European Commission, European Employment and Social Policy - Special Eurobarometer 261, Brussels 2006.

⁹ Federal Ministry of Education and Research (ed.), Berichtssystem Weiterbildung IX. Integrierter Gesamtbericht zur Weiterbildungssituation in Deutschland. Bonn / Berlin 2006

¹⁰ Categorisation of SMEs: a) Micro enterprises are enterprises with fewer than 10 employees, b) small enterprises are enterprises with fewer than 50 employees and c) medium-sized enterprises are enterprises with fewer than 250 employees.

- Improvement in-company and industry-wide employability
- Promotion of lifelong learning
- Stimulation of in-company and private training investments
- Reducing continuing training disparities
- Strengthening of the competitiveness of SMEs

2.1. *Training budget cuts*

The NRW federal state government sets with the introduction of training cheques new accents in promoting continuing vocational training. However, the introduction of the training cheques programme occurs in a time where the federal state government cuts since 2003 drastically the financing of adult education and training. The federal state government plans a further drastic cut of the adult education and training expenses for 2007. This means, that the federal state subsidies relating to the NRW continuing training law¹¹ will be cut by another 18 Mio. € - a decrease of 18 percent in comparison to the 2006 budget. The cuts realised in the preceding period 2003-2006 already amounted to 20 percent. The adult education and training infrastructure of NRW consisting of 138 adult education centres and 420 other training providers is confronted with a budget cut of 42 Mio. €. These cuts do not only affect the training institutions of the employer organisations as well as of the trade unions and the adult education centres, but also the training institutions of the churches, of the welfare organisations, of the sport organisations as well as many other small training providers. The federal state government promised to equalise these cuts with means of the European Social Fund (ESF). However, the ESF means are not an appropriate substitute for the decreasing financial means, which are offered through the federal state continuing education law. So helpful this financial support for projects is, so little these ESF means can replace the institutional promotion based on the federal state continuing education law. ESF means are not a substitute for institutional financing, because ESF means:

- are project-specific,
- have a time-limit,
- have project-based objectives and
- need a co-financing of 50 percent.

The political opposition parties (SPD and the Green party), the trade unions as well as the training providers declared unanimously, that the training cheques cannot equal these drastic budget cuts. They oppose the enacted shift of the institutional promotion of continuing education and training to a more project based promotion.

3.0. *Training cheque programme*

The training cheque programme is based on a good preparation of the programme itself by the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs of NRW (MAGS). Especially the organisational structure and the implementation procedures are to be mentioned here. In short we will mention here some of the prime features, which seem to underpin the successful implementation of the training cheque instrument so far in influencing the promotion of continuing vocational training for SMEs and their employees.

The main political aim of the training cheque programme is the promotion of continuing vocational training in SMEs and their employees. There are two main target groups that can receive training cheques: SMEs and their employees. It has been decided to link the allocation

¹¹ Weiterbildungsgesetz NRW

of training cheques to an obligatory consultation by already existing regional consultation centres. The training cheque programme can use in this way the available training market know-how of the consultation centres. The initiators of the training cheque programme mention explicitly the promotion of the regional cooperation between the consultation centres. The main organisational aim of the selected procedure was to guarantee the quality of the consultations without having a (new) bureaucratic organisational structure. Whereby the training programme especially focuses on those employee groups, which are not used to training: e.g. the unskilled and semi-skilled, migrants as well as older employees. It is of prime importance, that the training cheque can only be issued after an intensive obligatory consultation by the consultation centres. Consultants and enterprises or employees agree upon three possible training providers. The information collected during the consultations is laid down in electronic consultation records and training cheques. This is also a very important source for the monitoring, steering and fine tuning of the programme. In the following, we will describe the main features of the training cheque programme in more detail.

3.1. Target groups of the training cheques

There are two main target groups that can receive training cheques:

- SMEs - can apply for the training cheques in order to support the training of their employees. This is called the **enterprise application route**.
- Individual employees in SMEs - who are residents in NRW - can use the training cheque. This is called the **individual application route**.

The enterprise and individual application route support on the one hand in the context of personnel policies the qualification of the employees and on the other hand individual employees can use the training cheques for their individual training needs. It is not necessary that the individual training be bound to the current work place. The training cheque instrument is targeted to all employee groups in SMEs, provided that they did not participate in training the previous year. However, the programme is especially developed for those employee groups, which are not used to training.

Target group: enterprises

The target group consists of enterprises situated in NRW with a maximum of 250 employees. Institutions of churches, public institutions and foundations can apply for training cheques, too. However, in contrast the public service (federal institutions, federal state institutions and other public service organisations) cannot use training cheques.

Target group: employees

The target group in general consists of employees covered by the social security system. Employees, who participated in the preceding year in continuing vocational training measures initiated by enterprises, cannot apply for training cheques. Employees eligible for training cheques are:

- Wage earners,
- Persons, who work in enterprises und who are according to national labour rules to be seen as employees,
- Persons with short-time working contracts,
- Employees with maternity leave,
- Unpaid family workers,
- Owners of enterprises during the first five years after enterprise foundation.

The following employees groups are exempt from the use of training cheques:

- Only employees can apply for training cheques not enterprise owners, except for owners of enterprises in the first five years after founding the enterprise.
- Freelancers, who employ employees covered by the social security system, are employers.
- Apprentices
- 1 €-job employees, registered unemployed, social benefit receivers and employees of staff support companies (Transfergesellschaften).

3.2. *Organisational Structure*

For several reasons it has been decided to link the allocation of training cheques to an obligatory consultation. The training cheque programme stresses the central role of the consultation centres for a successful implementation of the training cheque instrument. Only this training advice can guarantee that target groups can be reached effectively. The realisation of the programme uses the available know-how of the consultation centres already existing in North Rhine-Westphalia. An additional consultation network has not been established. The consultation centres in NRW are e.g. the chambers, institutions for economic development, adult education institutions or in some regions training networks. The consultation centres must suffice the qualitative requirements defined by the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs. They have to employ qualified consultants. The selection process of the consultation centres was organised by the regional agencies.¹² According to size of the regions up to 17 consultation centres per region were selected. 200 consultation centres are now active in NRW. Regular meetings between the regional consultation centres, coordinated by the regional agencies, take place. Besides the clarification of concrete questions to contents and results of consultations, also the regional marketing of the training cheques is coordinated as well as the implementation of a procedure to further the trans regional training markets. The G.I.B. (Organisation for Innovative Employment Promotion)¹³ supports the federal state of NRW in implementing the training cheque programme. Central to this is the support of the consultation centres. The G.I.B. offers to the consultation centres training seminars as well as possibilities for exchanging experiences. The G.I.B. also participates in the regional meetings of the consultation centres.

3.3. *Main activities of the consultation centres*

The consultation centres advise the individual employees and enterprises and in cooperation with these target groups define the contents of the training cheques. The consultation centres clarify the training needs of SMEs and their employees and the conditions for the financial support and they help with the selection of adequate continuing vocational training offers and training providers. For their advice the consultations centres receive 40€ per consultation of

¹² Since September 2004 the NRW government established 16 regional agencies. These regional agencies are intermediate institutions between the NRW administration and the regions. The main task of these regional agencies is the integration of the regional economic, labour market and technology policy. They promote the establishment of regional networks between the regional actors. Other tasks are counselling, co-ordination and information.

¹³ G.I.B. is a federal state counselling organisation. About 60 experts work on the conceptual development, counselling, implementation and controlling of labour policy programmes and projects. G.I.B. takes the part of an interface between the federal state and the regions, between programme providers and project implementers, between the state and the different actors working in the municipalities, providing organisations, companies and private labour market service providers. G.I.B.'s key objective is the promotion of employment in North-Rhine Westphalia.

an enterprise and 20€ per consultation of an individual employee. Most consultation centres do not employ extra personnel for this consultation work.

3.4. Selection of the training offers and training providers

For their consultation the consultation centres should use the NRW web-based training database.¹⁴ With approx. 70.000 training courses, which are continuously updated, this database is the most important source of information about training courses in NRW. Next to that, the consultation centres also use other regional training databases and the database KURS of the Public Employment Services. The training offers and training courses listed in the NRW training database do not automatically fit to the sponsoring requirements of the training cheque programme. Even training providers not listed (yet) in the database can participate in the training cheque programme if they fit the training cheque programme requirements. The training cheque programme coordinators developed a comprehensive operational guideline for the training providers. This operational guideline supports the handling of the training cheques.

3.5. Training courses

The training cheque programme subsidises training offers, which in general improve work skills and which provide new knowledge and new competences. Training subjects subsidised by the training cheque programme are e.g.:

- Improvement of handicraft skills or administrative competences
- Learning of languages
- Improvement of teamwork
- Improvement of computer knowledge
- Conflict management

Continuing vocational training offers not supported by the training cheque programme are e.g.:

- Specific job related instructions: e.g. induction training, machine instructions, product training or coaching. The consultation centre has to check if qualifications are relevant to the general labour market and are not only useful for the enterprises of the employee;
- Obtaining legally required qualifications, which the enterprises has to fulfil by law;
- Training offers, which are subsidised by other training-programmes (AFBG/ "Meister - BAFÖG");
- Obtaining a driving licence as well as training courses in the field of artistic or sport activities etc.

3.6. Accreditation and certification of training providers

The training cheque programme defines several conditions for approving training providers. The training cheque programme does not use an accreditation/certification procedure for training providers developed specially for the training cheque programme. Of course consultation centres have to use criteria for checking the quality of training providers. The selection procedure should include, wherever possible, already existing quality standards. The consultation centres do not check the quality of training providers if:

1. a general recognition based on legal regulation exists
 - recognition according to § 15 continuing vocational training law of NRW,

¹⁴ See www.weiterbildung.in.nrw.de

- recognition based on distance learning law or
 - other state recognitions.
2. training providers can document a systematic instrument of quality assurance and development, e.g.:
- certification according to accreditation for training providers decree (Anerkennungs- und Zulassungsverordnung Weiterbildung = AZWV),
 - certification according to ISO 9000ff, EFQM, LQW 2 or Certqua.¹⁵

It can be assumed that one of the above mentioned criteria will be applicable to most training providers participating in the training cheque programme. Nevertheless some locally known providers will not fall under the conditions in points 1 and 2. For these providers, the consultation centres should make a quality judgement according to some additional criteria.

The consultation performed by the consultation centres should in any case be neutral. Each training cheque should mention three different training providers and training providers should have an intensive contact with the consultation centres.

3.7. Consultation procedure

The consultation centres have the following procedural tasks:

- in cooperation with the enterprises and the individual employees to find and agree upon training subjects, continuing vocational training offers as well as suitable training providers,
- to propose three providers
- to enter this data into the respective training cheques,
- hand the training cheques over to the enterprises and/or employees,
- inform regularly the public facility agencies (Versorgungsämter)¹⁶ - which are paying the training cheques - about the distribution of the training cheques (consultation records).

The enterprises and employees for their part have to:

- confirm the consultation on the training cheque,
- confirm the number of employees of the enterprise,
- confirm that employees did not participate in the previous year to continuing vocational training initiated by the enterprise.

3.8. Consultants

In order to support the consultations an operational guideline has been developed. The main items of the operational guideline are a description of possible contents of the consultation for the individual as well as the enterprise application routes and practical references for to the completion of the training cheques and the consultation record. Based on the experiences

¹⁵ These are different quality management systems. E.g. ISO 9000ff primarily focused on external surveys, while EFQM on internal survey and LQW is a mixture of both. Certqua is a special management system for the training sector.

¹⁶ The public facility administration of NRW (Versorgungsverwaltung), which is responsible e.g. for the implementation of labour market and social policy programmes of the federal state government of NRW consists of nine regional public facility agencies (Aachen, Bielefeld, Dortmund, Düsseldorf, Duisburg, Essen, Gelsenkirchen, Cologne and Soest).

from the consultation centres the operational guideline will be regularly updated. Regular information and training meetings are held for the consultants of the consultation centres. The G.I.B. organises these meetings in the respective regions during the entire duration of the training cheque programme.

3.9. Reimbursement

The reimbursement is 50 percent of the participation and examination fees with a maximum of 750 € per training cheque. Training cheques do not reimburse travel and subsistence costs, costs for training materials and meals. The enterprises or individual employees submit the training cheque to a training provider and pay 50 percent of the participation and examination fees. The training provider sends the training cheque to the regional public facility agency (Versorgungsamt). Additional to the training cheques and other necessary documents, the training providers also have to submit a training report.

3.10. Approval procedure

A main feature of the implementation of the training cheque is that it does not incorporate much bureaucratic efforts from enterprises and employees.

The approval procedure for the training cheques is as follows:

- application of employees and enterprises to a regional public facility agency (Versorgungsamt)
- application to approve and reimburse 50 percent of the training course fee (a maximum of 750 € per training cheque)
- submitting the training cheque and additional documents (e.g. size of enterprise testimony, testimony of non-participation of employees in the previous year)
- prerequisites for approval, e.g. the training courses already started

Training providers are not obliged to accept the training cheque. Main tasks of the training providers are to check;

- whether the training cheque was submitted within the period of validity entered on the training cheque,
- whether the person who submits the training cheque is identical with the person entered on the training cheque (training cheques are strictly personal and not transferable),
- whether the total training costs and the own funds are in line with the training cheque,
- organise and realise the training.

The training course can begin, independently of a still missing approval by the public facility agency (Versorgungsamt). There are no financial losses for the training providers in the early breaking off of training, non attendance or failing examinations. Training providers will receive the 50 % of training fees in any case.

4.0. Monitoring, implementation and the use of the training cheque program

4.1. Monitoring

Same as other ESF co-financed regional programmes an intensive monitoring procedure is introduced, which is on the one hand used for the internal steering of the training cheque programmes and on the other hand for a regular EU-reporting. Because of a time lag between the approval and the handing in of the training cheques, information about the real use of the

training cheques comes in later. Therefore an electronic consultation record and an electronic training cheque procedure are introduced, which is also used for the steering and assessing of the training cheque programme. Furthermore, the institute which organises the monitoring of the programme (G.I.B.) implements regular surveys of the consultation centres in order to guarantee a prompt control of the instrument. These surveys are also used to supervise the quality of the training.

4.2. Implementation

The implementation phase of the training cheque programmes was characterised by intensive central and decentralised information campaigns. In a starting press conference the training cheque programme was introduced on 13.01.2006. An information leaflet, which introduced the training cheque programme was sent by the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs to 600 relevant addresses. Furthermore, regional press conferences were held. In total 250.000 information leaflets for distribution were sent to the 200 consultation centres. A survey in June 2006 shows, that this intensive information campaign has been very successful. Two fifths of the enterprises knew at that time already about the existence of the training cheque programme. The widespread distribution was especially done by the chambers of commerce and sectoral organisations. In general, the probability to know about the training cheque programme increases with the size of enterprises. Half of the enterprises with 50 to 250 employees are aware of the existence of the training cheque programme. Even the larger enterprises with 250 and more employees - although they cannot use training cheques - know about the existence of the programme. Knowledge about the existence of the programme is not so widespread among micro and small enterprises: less than 30 percent of the enterprises with two to 19 employees know about this promotional instrument. Quite clear differences can be noted if one considers the single economic sectors. While in “wood, paper and publishing” as well as the “building” sector knowledge about the existence of the programme reaches more than 40 percent, knowledge about this promotional instrument (just 20 percent) is lesser in the economic sectors “banks and insurances”, “hotels, restaurants” and “communication and transport”.

4.3. The use of the training cheques

Already in the first phase of the programme a positive resonance of this new promotional instrument can be noted. The first two preliminary surveys (February/March 2006) already showed, that at that time 3.000 training cheques were issued to enterprises and employees. At the end of April 2006 13.535 training cheques were issued: 9.903 to enterprises and 3.632 to employees. At the end of October 2006 figure had risen to 50.000 training cheques. About 70 percent of these training cheques were distributed via the enterprise application route.

Since April 2006 both the number of the realised consultations and also the number of the issued training cheques showed an increase of 20 percent. In spite of the summer school vacations - a slowing down was expected - this increase continued. At the end of July around 12.000 consultations since the start of the promotional instrument were realised - around 4.800 enterprise consultations and 7.400 employee consultations.

The use of the promotional instrument training cheque is different in the respective federal state regions. This of course has to do with different economic structures in these regions, e.g. different structure of enterprises regarding size and economic sectors.

Although the present data are currently yet not representative for the entire programme, they show already some interesting developments. The training check programme as such is

clearly more successful than envisaged by the NRW Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs. The maximum amount of 750 € per training cheque was until now mostly not used: on average around 330 € per training cheque. A preliminary monitoring shows that general continuing vocational training subjects are predominant. Especially organisational changes in enterprises as well as changes in the work organisation and thus the need for adapting the skills of employees triggers continuing vocational training. Especially training in the field of extra-functional qualifications is important here. Training subjects are e.g. project management, quality management, communication and presentation, rhetoric courses, conflict management, personnel management, working time management.

5.0. Concluding remarks

The monitoring data is used for internal steering and fine tuning of the training cheque programme. The monitoring data delivers already interesting data relating to the implementation and use of training cheques. In the next months special surveys will analyse the use of the training cheques by the SMEs and the participation of unskilled and older as well as migrant employees in the training cheque programme. A comprehensive external evaluation of the training cheque programme is planned for 2007. Thus, more comprehensive evaluation data is not yet available. In order to assess some preliminary programme results, the BIBB identified some crucial points of the training cheque programme and discussed these points by means of a telephone interview with some experts¹⁷ responsible for the implementation and monitoring of the programme as well as some consultants of the consultation centres.

In the following we will shortly discuss some of these crucial features of the training cheque programme.

1. The training cheque programme seems to be very successful so far. It performs much better than the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Affairs of NRW expected. The interviewed initiator/coordinator of the programme mentioned, that it could be a problem to finance the programme with the available ESF financial means until end of 2007.
2. The success of the programme seems to be based on a good preparation of the programme itself by the Ministry and the G.I.B. Especially the organisational structure and the implementation procedures are to be mentioned here. The main aim was to guarantee the quality of the consultations without having a bureaucratic organisational structure. It is of prime importance, that the training cheque can only be issued after an intensive consultation by the consultation centres. The information collected during the consultations is laid down in electronic consultation records and training cheques. This is a very important source for the monitoring, steering and fine tuning of the programme.
3. One of the main aims of the programme is also to integrate the micro and small enterprises into the programme. The results are different in the regions. The preliminary NRW wide data taken from the programme monitoring shows that especially application via the enterprise application route does not cover the micro and small enterprises. Employees who ask for a consultation via the individual application route however are more often employed in micro and small enterprises.
4. Another aim of the programme is to promote especially the training participation of the unskilled and semi-skilled as well as older employees. Here also the results of the

¹⁷ See footnotes 5, 6 and 7.

regions seem to be different. However, NRW wide data is not yet available. The interviewed programme coordinator mentioned that a future fine tuning of the programme will especially concentrate on the participation increase of these employee groups.

5. A problem could be that the training is basically training in the form of training courses. Such a “schoolish” form of training, however, does mostly not correspond with the training habits of unskilled and semi-skilled. The coming evaluation of the programme will especially analyse the possibilities of supporting also more “informal” forms of learning. However, this presupposes a more intensive cooperation between training providers and enterprises in the region.
6. The regular regional meetings of the consultation centres are very important and function well. Especially, the discussion about the practical implementation of the programme on the regional level is important here. An underlying aim of the programme is also to initiate regional training networks where networks do not exist, and to support regional networking in regions with already existing networks. All the interviewed experts mentioned that the regional meetings of the consultation centres do promote the regional coordination of consultation centres and training providers.

6.0. Outlook

The training cheque programme was introduced in January 2006. In 2006 and 2007 20 Mio. Euros in total will be invested for co-financing. This is financed by means of the ESF. The federal state of NRW does not supply any additional contributions.

The first programme year was successful, the measure was accepted by the target groups and a high number of training cheques was issued to enterprises and employees - much higher than expected.

The crucial feature of the programme - this is mainly responsible for its success so far - is the obligatory consultation of the enterprises and employees by the regional consultation centres. The consultation centres reduce the bureaucratic burden for the enterprises and employees and help them to find the adequate provider/training course.

At the moment a more comprehensive analysis of the impact is not possible, however, the external evaluation, which is on its way, will give a comprehensive picture of the effectiveness and efficiency of this measure (probably autumn 2007), e.g. if also unskilled, older and migrant employees will be integrated successfully. The evaluation results will be used to improve the programme in future. Another question, which cannot be answered at the moment, is, if training cheques are replacing investments of enterprises for training, which they would have made anyway.