

The Provincial Councils are all behind Vocational Training

Despite the fact that they do not have any direct responsibilities, the Provincial Councils in the three historical provinces have made their presence felt, with their support, in the development of Vocational Training. We have spoken with the provincial councillors in charge of this in Alava, Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa to find out at first hand their view of Vocational Training and the activity plans that their departments are preparing.

Carlos Samaniego

Councillor for Economic Promotion and Innovation Management for Alava Provincial Council

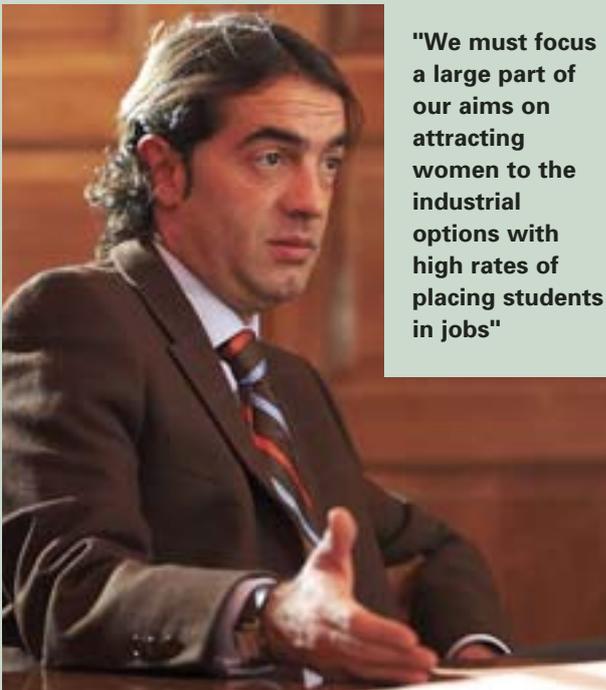
"We consider V.T. to be a strategic factor in the industrial development of Alava"

In his office at Alava Provincial Council, Carlos Samaniego, Deputy-leader of the Council and Councillor for Economic Promotion and Innovation Management, shows us the publication "Alava for investment", that Alava Provincial Council uses to try and find new investors. The publication highlights Alava's four trump cards: "Strategic location, logistical potential, quality of life...and prestigious vocational training". We spoke about this vocational training with the provincial councillor.

- The Provincial Council was a pioneer in promoting Vocational Training. What do you remember about the role of the Council at the beginning?

- The work that Vocational Training centres are carrying out in the historical province of Alava is proving to be essential for improving our working population's qualifications and for providing a top-quality response to the demands of the world of business.

Since 1997, Alava Provincial Council has been signing agreements to collaborate with Vocational Training centre associations in the Basque Country (IKASLAN and HETEL), and with the Caja Vital Kutxa savings bank to make it possible to carry out cam-



"We must focus a large part of our aims on attracting women to the industrial options with high rates of placing students in jobs"

paigns to support and promote V.T. in Alava. Through these campaigns all the students who are finishing Compulsory Secondary Education and A-levels are given a guide/book that aims to provide advice about all the Basic and Advanced Training Cycles offered in Alava. This information is also available on the web page, www.fp-alava.es. We should point out that in this campaign we have aimed to lay special emphasis on raising awareness to encourage women to choose training specialities that have traditionally been considered to be only for men and that are very much in demand in Alava. It is also worth pointing out that this campaign received the Emakunde Award in 2001 in its advertising section.

We have also been collaborating for years with centres to develop the international side of training for V.T. students by funding work experience abroad (Leonardo grants). We are also collaborating in the "Urrats Bat" project to encourage new business projects among young students that might result in the creation and launching of businesses.

- What other aspects would you stress in the history of the provincial Council's collaboration with Vocational Training Centres?

- Probably as a result of the size of our province, V.T. centres in Alava are in permanent contact with the world of business in Alava and have first-hand knowledge of the needs and demands of our businessmen to improve the working population's qualifications. Alava Provincial Council is aware of this situation and has made these centres the main beneficiaries of the funding provided in aid programmes for training.

- The Provincial Council is supporting Vocational Training centres in their updating process with new information technologies. How is it doing this?

- Alava Provincial Council has taken an active part in the creation and technological development of various V.T. centres in Alava, which at the present time can be described as being at the forefront in the spreading of new technologies and which have management models (EFQM) that are making excellent progress. As a result since 1999, Alava Provincial Council has allocated more than 5.5 million Euros for investment in equipment for training in V.T. centres in Alava.

Furthermore, since 1999 Alava Provincial Council has financed more than 600 courses organised by V.T. centres that have been aimed at recycling the working population or at occupational training courses and the Provincial Council has allocated more than 3 million Euros to these. A high percentage of these training activities have been aimed at introducing new technologies. V.T. centres have also taken an active part in the ADAPT@ initiative that is financed by Alava Provincial Council, the Caja Vital Kutxa savings bank and the European Social Fund, to make it easier for workers to adapt to new information and knowledge technologies.

- What would you highlight about the work that your department is currently doing with regard to V.T.?

Probably the close, continuous relationship that exists between the different centres and the Department of Economic Affairs, which enables us to exchange information on a permanent basis and to discover at first-hand the specific demands and needs of centres. We also need to stress that in 2004 Alava Provincial Council formed part of the Basque V.T. Council where the

Basque V.T. Plan was approved for the period 2004-2007 with some very ambitious challenges.

- What importance does the Provincial Council give to Vocational Training?

- Levels of business and economic development are closely related to people's training. As a result, it plays a vital role in regional economies, where the workforce's qualifications level represents a significant trump card when it comes to attracting investment. Economic activity in our province is mainly industrial although this is supplemented by commerce, the Civil Service, construction and company services. In this context, the work being done at V.T. centres in Alava is proving to be essential for improving the qualifications of our working population and for providing a top-quality response to the demands of the world of business. Alava Provincial Council is aware of this situation so support for Vocational Training is an important referent when it comes to preparing the budget and we allocate a significant amount of the budgetary credits that we have to V.T.

- What direction do you think that changes in Vocational Training will take in the future?

- Knowledge is becoming the great productive force in our century, as it is only through this that the gigantic amount of available information that now exists can be turned into something valuable. This knowledge is not restricted to academic or technical information, but includes the inseparable relationship between thought, feeling and action that exists in people. Our education systems have been structured to pass on technical knowledge, that is, to train industrial workers. However if we want to be active agents in the construction of a new society we must go one step further. We need our workers to acquire new information and interpretation possibilities and to progress and develop on their own; that is, they should be self-productive.

As a result of this we are faced with a new education model. Education has gone from being focused on the person who teaches (teacher) to focus on the person who learns (the student). So the teacher's job is being transformed from merely passing on knowledge to being a guide in the learning process that provides resources and offers opportunities so that students can become self-productive. We feel that V.T. must develop teaching methods to ensure that permanent learning is continuous all throughout people's lives. In this context the use of communication and information technologies will be an important referent in the field of learning (e-learning) and work.

- What plans does your department have for the future of Vocational Training?

- As far as Alava Provincial Council is concerned, we consider V.T. to be a strategic factor in the industrial development of Alava and a commitment to the future, so we will be continuing to support it as far as our budgetary funds allow us to. Nevertheless we feel that all the agents involved in training must focus a large part of our aims on attracting women to the industrial options with high rates of placing students in jobs. Now that we have managed to make V.T. synonymous with employability, we must encourage people to decide on specialities that match the demands of business more closely, when they come to choose a training option.

Julio Artetxe

Bizkaia Provincial Councillor for Employment and Training

"The main challenge is getting women to take V.T. industrial courses"

Encouraging girls to take the industrial options in Vocational Training is one of the main concerns of Julio Artetxe, Bizkaia Provincial Councillor for Employment and Training.



"Vocational Training is a very important way of instilling the culture of setting up businesses"

- The provincial Council was a pioneer in promoting Vocational Training. What do you remember about the role of your institution at the beginning?

- I think that at the time when the Provincial Council of Bizkaia began to take part in promoting Vocational Training, we needed to put in a lot of hard work, because V.T. was the poor relation of education. There is no doubt that it started out from an extremely negative situation in comparison with secondary school education. In that period Vocational Training was considered to be a second-class solution for people who were said to be no good at studying. I think that all the hard work that public institutions were able to put in, regardless of the degree of responsibility that they may have had, was important. Fortunately, we did give it this boost; we joined forces with others and basically together with the efforts of the people who worked in the field of V.T. itself, we have managed to make Vocational Training what it is today: just another option, but an option that helps young people to find employment much more than secondary school education does, apart from the fact that it is now an ordinary route to get into University. The percentage of students that go on to University from Vocational Training centres is quite high. We have noted that Vocational Training studies are a significant factor when students decide to set up their own business. It is a very important way of instilling an enterprise culture and of setting up businesses.

- What other aspects would you stress in the history of the provincial Council's collaboration with Vocational Training Centres?

- I think that the important thing is collaboration in itself. The administrative structure that we have in this country is complex enough to cause dysfunctions. The basic thing is for there to be collaboration between the institutions and the agents who are involved in Vocational Training. From the Provincial Council's perspective, I think that if we were encroaching upon the areas of responsibility of other institutions, we would be duplicating efforts and devoting financial resources to something that would make very little sense, and as a result, we would be handling things in the wrong way. However, as long as we are able to work together, basically with the Department of Education of the Basque Government, but also in certain areas with local bodies and with the people working in V.T. in Bizkaia, and as long as we can achieve this degree of cooperation, then we will all be doing a good job.

- The Provincial Council is supporting Vocational Training centres in their updating process with new information technologies. How is it doing this?

– We agree with the various associations that we have in Bizkaia in the field of Vocational Training that the participation of the Provincial Council should be in providing support for incorporating equipment and infrastructure in centres, as well as in bringing ourselves up to date as far as the use of new technologies is concerned, not only in the centres themselves, to make these technologies available to students, but also by training teachers in new technologies, for their own benefit and so they can pass on this knowledge to their students.

- What would you highlight about the work that your department is currently doing regarding V.T.?

– In 1999, in Bizkaia we had an unemployment rate of approximately 19%. On the Left Bank, it was over 30%, and as far as youth unemployment was concerned, it was over 50%. This is a social tragedy. Five years later, we find that the unemployment rate in Bizkaia is 8.3%, almost one point below the average in the Euro Area. Male unemployment has a considerably more presentable percentage rate, although, our female employment rate is still a little high.

Perhaps the main challenge that we face at the moment in Bizkaia as far as Vocational Training is concerned, and a very particular concern of this department, is for us to be able to get women to study technical V.T. courses, especially the ones connected with industrial activities. A high proportion of students on these courses find jobs. In some of them students find jobs even before finishing their studies. These are sectors in which male unemployment is fairly close to structural, technical unemployment. Although society has been able to place women on advance technical courses, for the moment we have been unable to encourage women to break down the absurd barriers that to a very large extent prevent them from studying on basic level technical courses. We have commissioned a study to see how we can ensure from this department that these obstacles are removed and that women can take part in V.T in the industrial sphere. We have taken the first step. Women dressed as welders or carrying out control tasks with a measuring device have played the leading roles in the first few advertisements in this department's "Find your opportunity" campaign.

- What importance does the Provincial Council give to Vocational Training?

– When we took responsibility for this department, one of the first things that we considered and that we were very happy to take on and share was the concern to reach a total degree of collaboration as far as Vocational Training is concerned. At the time when it was made public that I was going to take on the Department of Employment and Training, even before I was officially appointed to the post, the first people that I met were from Vocational Training. I usually say that it was foreseen that I had to do something in the field of Vocational Training. I already come here with this concern. We have got together with practically everyone who works in Vocational Training in Bizkaia and we have conveyed to them how keen we are to give a significant boost to Vocational Training and to work with them very closely. As long as we are able to collaborate with Ikaslan in this case, as they are the people most involved in this field, and with other institutions, I think that we will be able to ensure that Vocational Training will improve even more than it has done in the last few years.

- What direction do you think that changes in Vocational Training will take in the future?

– It seems to be obvious that incorporating new technologies is going to have significant repercussions in Vocational Training studies, but we shouldn't forget either about more traditional technical studies, to be precise, those courses connected with industry. We often have the idea that we are moving towards a tertiary society based on services, but the industrial sector is still there. This is also a sector that, despite the delicate situation we are currently in, is a vital channel for finding work in Bizkaia.

The main change that I would like to have in Vocational Training in Bizkaia would be to really get women to study on traditional

industrial courses. I think that this is a process that cannot be stopped. Another problem is that we need to be able to help to make the working environment as favourable as possible for the inclusion of women.

- What plans does your department have for the future of Vocational Training?

– Without needing to pay anyone any complements, the people in the Basque Government Department of Education who work in V.T. are people who are extremely committed to Vocational Training. The truth is that they have done a commendable job, when you see things from the outside. We are really keen to work together and we have had meetings with them to try and find areas where we can collaborate. The associations that work in the field of Vocational Training in Bizkaia unanimously agree that our funding must be used to buy equipment and incorporate new technologies in training centres.

Joaquín Villa

Gipuzkoa Provincial Councillor for Innovation and the Knowledge Society

"Vocational Training is one of the defining features of the new Gipuzkoa"

Joaquín Villa, provincial councillor for Innovation and the Knowledge Society, feels proud to be the heir of Gipuzkoa Provincial Council's commitment to Vocational Training. "There is a past and a present –he says– that enable us to lay the foundations for the goal of structural collaboration in the future, that doesn't depend on the situation at a particular time".

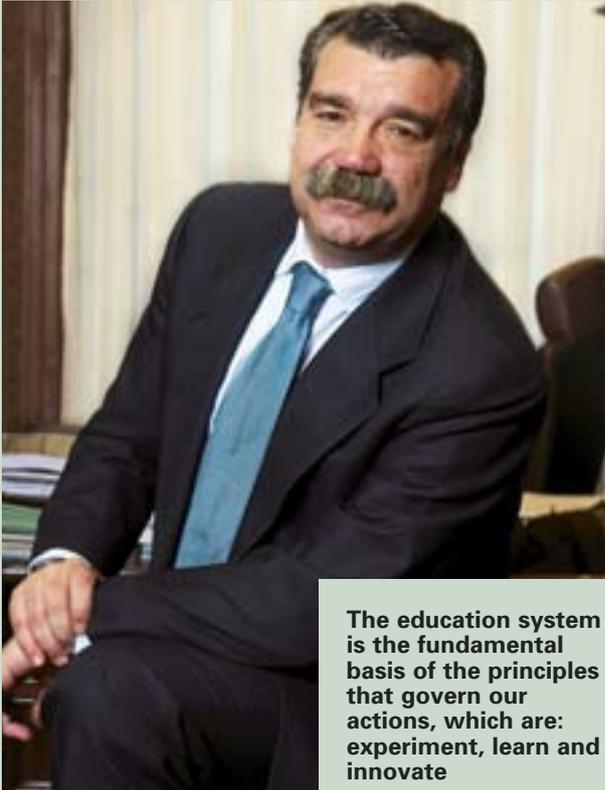
- The provincial Council was a pioneer in promoting Vocational Training. What do you remember about the role of your institution at the beginning?

– I proudly remember that period as I think that the course of action we took and the boost we gave to V.T. is a reflection of what genuine political activity and social commitment is. This was a time with weak points and dangers: the lack of prestige that V.T. suffered from; the gulf between the reality of the situation in education and the needs of businesses; and funding and facilities clearly in need of improvement. We understood the strategic importance of V.T. for personal development, for the competitive economic fabric and for the development and social cohesion of Gipuzkoa, and we took advantage of the opportunity provided by the financial aid we received due to the fact that we had recently joined what is now the European Union.

This reflection process led to the launching of a comprehensive policy with prospects of continuity, led by Imanol Murua in co-ordination with the Basque Government (Education), that promoted teacher-training, the provision of the very-latest equipment, and the establishment of links between schools and their socio-economic environment; but in which the schools themselves would play the leading role. In other words, the Provincial Council, taking advantage of its ability to promote this policy, was firstly able to appreciate the importance of V.T. to define a better Gipuzkoa, and secondly, was able to help and facilitate, with specific policies, to design the virtuous circle that V.T. is currently in. Since then I think that Gipuzkoa Provincial Council has always been associated with the re-launching of V.T.

- What other aspects would you stress in the history of the provincial Council's collaboration with Vocational Training Centres?

– The aspect that I would particularly like to emphasise is the very fact that collaboration takes place within a long-term perspective. This collaboration is based on shared aims, mutual



The education system is the fundamental basis of the principles that govern our actions, which are: experiment, learn and innovate

trust and a capacity for work, and has been reinforced as new policies and measures have been designed and put into practice. There is a past and a present that enable us to lay the foundations to achieve the goal of structural collaboration for the future, that doesn't depend on the situation at a particular time.

- The Provincial Council is supporting Vocational Training centres in their updating process with new information technologies. How is it doing this?

– The Provincial Council has defined a clear commitment to the development of the information and knowledge society, not only through the ordinary activities of each department but also through a specific commitment consisting of the initiative known as eGIPUZKOA. Here at the Department for Innovation and the Knowledge Society, in coordination with the Department of Education of the Basque Government, we are supporting the integration of new technologies into the education system. In order to do this, under an agreement that we call eGELA we have been carrying out an initiative that consists of teacher-training, the provision of basic digital infrastructure (basically, connectivity), the setting up of a digital classroom in each school, and the development of pedagogical services in the intensive use of CIT that improve learning processes and provide support for collaborative dynamics in a virtual community between schools and teachers. This is an approach that goes beyond an updating process in the so-called NCIT's. It aims to make it easier to integrate V.T. into the Information and Knowledge Society, where obviously, CIT plays an essential role, not just because of its provision, but because of the changes that it involves in the role played by teachers, pedagogical methodologies, access to new information, access to new people, companies and bodies that use training, the personalisation of training processes, etc.

- What would you highlight about the work that your department is currently doing regarding V.T.?

– This new department would like to update, and if possible, improve the commitment to V.T. that the Provincial Council made in its day. In view of the new period we are facing, this commitment requires new rules and measures, but is based on a successful history of collaboration. So we want V.T. to continue to be one of the exceptional agents in the development of life-long training policies as a core element that enables us to design an innovative Gipuzkoa: as an innovation and knowledge-based province. In order to achieve this, the education system

is the fundamental basis of the principles that govern our actions, which are: experiment, learn and innovate.

So we are going to continue working along these lines to achieve the following to ensure that citizens play a leading role in all this; a specific model for life-long training that acts as a driving force for change; the use of CITs as information and communication tools in the education process to encourage a change in the model; the development of advanced management organisations; the promotion of a spirit favouring the creation of businesses; and an education/training sphere that promotes a business culture that encourages risk-taking, creativity and innovation.

- What importance does the Provincial Council give to Vocational Training?

– V.T. is one of the defining features of Gipuzkoa, and especially of the new Gipuzkoa, insofar as on the basis of its own efforts in the sphere of education it has been able to integrate the development of people, the development of professional skills and the development of society, with models based on quality and a commitment to its socio-economic social environment in a training system that has been able to integrate education and employability.

- What direction do you think that changes in Vocational Training will take in the future?

– There are a great many wide-ranging challenges that V.T. must face up to. To achieve the aims we have set is going to require the determination and commitment of the educational community itself (families, students and teachers), the Department of Education, companies, bodies and institutions. However, from this department's point of view we think that these changes must be directed towards creating a basic network to promote life-long learning (initial, occupational and continuous training); to promote employability and to get the unemployed into jobs; to use a gender-based approach to achieve equality between women and men in education, in employment and in society; to accept its function as a promoter of an enterprising culture and business spirit; to acquire advanced productive equipment for didactic uses; to integrate Communication and Information Technology in teaching/learning processes (teacher-training, provision of infrastructure and specific equipment, promotion of pedagogical products/resources); to ensure that permanent innovation and public-private partnerships are its defining characteristics, and that it is a reference in European and international circles.

- What plans does your department have for the future of Vocational Training?

– The aim of this Provincial Council and this department is quite clear: an innovative Gipuzkoa. As far as Vocational Training is concerned, this means turning V.T. into a basic network to promote life-long learning. We need to combine the interests of people (personal development), businesses (competitiveness) and society (social cohesion). Or, to express this in terms of the European Union, we need to improve the quality and effectiveness of education and training systems, to make it easier for everyone to gain access to education and training systems, and to open up our education and training systems to the outside world.

The Basque Country sets up a mechanism for the recognition of Skills



■ Imanol López Lacalle

Quality Agency Manager

The first few points that we are going to consider in this article may seem reiterative, but nevertheless, they are still extremely important and, you could say they represent the leitmotiv of many of the measures and innovations that are being carried out in the field of Vocational Training in the Basque Country. Sure enough, there is a lot of talk about the competitiveness required in production processes for goods and services, the rapid technological changes that are taking place, the new methods of organising production, globalisation, outsourcing to low-wage countries by companies, etc. These aforementioned concepts and others that we have not mentioned, correspond to a palpable situation, that, furthermore, is creating a world that is in a state of permanent, dramatic change. This is why in the last few months, the media have been talking all the time about the important boost that the economies of certain countries in the Far East, mainly China, are undergoing, the sharp increase in the price of steel, and the rise in the price of oil, as these are factors that may slow down European growth. On the other hand, the expansion of the European Union that has taken place this same year is creating economic uncertainty in the countries that already formed part of it.

We cannot ignore these elements that are a characteristic feature of this moment in time. In view of the challenges that we face in a situation like the one we have just described, the leaders of the member states of the EU produced the, now famous, Lisbon Declaration of 2000, in which they advocated the need to "turn ourselves into the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable growth, to increasingly create more and better jobs, and to achieve all this while maintaining a high level of social cohesion". Later came the Barcelona Declaration of 2002 which set the aim of making European training and education systems a world-wide reference point for quality by 2010 and finally, the Copenhagen Declaration established common criteria and principles for all member countries concerning: the **quality** of Vocational Training, permanent **guidance**, the **transparency** of levels of competence and qualifications, and spoke of a **credit transfer** system for Vocational Training. The Copenhagen Declaration also considered the need to establish certain common principles for the **VALIDATION OF TYPES OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING AND WORK EXPERIENCE**. We have stressed this final resolution because this is the very subject that we are going to deal with in this article.

1. TOWARDS A SYSTEM OF ASSESSMENT AND RECOGNITION OF PROFESSIONAL SKILLS.

The aim of qualifications systems that must identify the needs for professional skills to get jobs in the different productive sectors and point out ways to acquire these skills is to provide an effective response to the need for society to be increasingly more competent in a professional sense and more cohesive. Skills Assessment and Recognition Systems fall within the framework of a qualifications system that provides a degree of coherence to training processes and makes possible life-long learning, tailored as closely as possible to meet the needs for the production of goods and services.

The European Commission, before the aforementioned Copenhagen Declaration, had been recommending EU member countries to introduce Skills Recognition Systems. The aim of these systems is none other than to launch certain mechanisms that enable people to show the levels of competence that they have acquired through non-formal learning and work experience, so that these can be officially recognised. In order to do this, administrations need to establish certain devices to check these people's professional skills against certain defined standards that meet current needs in productive sectors.

The first European country to set up a Skills Recognition System was the United Kingdom who did so in the late 1980s. In Great Britain, up to the present time, about two million and a half people have passed through this system. Later on, Norway, Finland, France and Holland have followed the steps taken by the UK and have set up recognition systems.

The experience of thousands of active people who have passed through these mechanisms in these countries has shown that the fact that someone has their skills officially recognised and certified is a factor that highly motivates them to improve their professional skills and is a stimulus for life-long learning. The principal task of these systems is, as a result, to recognise people's level of competence in order to encourage their motivation to acquire more and better skills.

2. THE MECHANISM FOR THE RECOGNITION OF SKILLS IN THE BASQUE COUNTRY.

The Autonomous Community of the Basque Country has been the first Autonomous Community in Spain that has decided to set up a Skills Recognition System on the initiative of the Junior Department for Vocational Training and Life-long Learning, to comply with one of the provisions in the Basque Vocational Training Plan approved in 1997.

The organisation that has the job of launching and monitoring the tasks of the Mechanism for the Assessment and Recognition of Skills in the Basque Country is the Basque Agency for the Assessment of Skills and Quality in Vocational Training. The Agency, after several years of research and having compared on the spot the various recognition systems that are operating in Europe, has designed an assessment and recognition model that aims to assess people's levels of competence in a highly personalised, flexible manner. A framework has been established in which, through certain simple procedures, specific tests are carried out for each person who are then given advice on their professional progress and shown the most suitable ways to complete their training.

The recognition of levels of competence will be carried out by what we call the Skills Recognition Mechanism which is defined as an operating structure, whose procedures aim to assess the professional skills that the active population have acquired through work experience and non-formal learning, and certain resources are used for this purpose such as: information, advice-guidance and contrasting services or skills tests, authorised information staff and consultants and the evaluators who make up the assessment teams.

This mechanism has already been set up with the publication of the norms that regulate it (Decree 70/2004, of the 27th of April and the Resolution of the Deputy Minister for Vocational Training and Life-long learning through which the conditions, methodology and procedure are established to take the tests to attain the qualifications of Technician and Advanced Technician through the Skills Assessment and Recognition Mechanism), the selection

and training of about a hundred teachers and experts who have to act as consultants and evaluators, the training of information staff, the preparation of tools to facilitate and simplify assessment (Evidence Guides and Self-assessment Test) and the opening of the registration period for people interested in getting their levels of competence recognised.

3. PROCEDURE FOR ASSESSING AND RECOGNISING SKILLS.

The Skills Recognition System in the Basque Country, as we have already pointed out, is a pioneer in Spain, and is going to be set up gradually, bearing in mind that the mechanism is being introduced for the first time and that it is complex to deal with. Although it is true that we did try out our recognition mechanism model and we were able to experiment with it, with highly satisfactory results in the experiment carried out in 2003 in the ERA Project, we think that the experience of permanently setting it up, will be useful for learning many things and for improving the procedures. We have started out with seven training cycles that can be recognised, and we hope that within a year this list might increase substantially.

We have said that the procedures designed in our Mechanism are personalised and flexible so that they can satisfy everyone's conditions and specific circumstances. Assessment and recognition is carried out in three stages that we will now briefly mention:

• Information.

First of all people are informed about the conditions, the professional references for their corresponding qualification and the procedure that has to be carried out. Once they have been informed about this, they then register or matriculate as long as they meet the required conditions.

• Advice.

At this stage people are provided with personalised advice, through interviews with a professional from the sector in the Vocational Training centre that they have been allocated to during the information phase. This advice aims to ensure that people, through self-assessment exercises and by producing a dossier, are able to provide proof of the levels of competence that they consider to be relevant.

• Contrasting or testing levels of competence.

Once the advice stage is over, bearing in mind the levels of competence that people have shown during the advice stage, they then take certain professional competence tests, designed in a personalised way, that might take place at a Vocational Training centre or in their workplace. The certification process will end, where appropriate, with the presentation of a training plan to the candidates that matches their interests.

4. AS AN EPILOGUE.

I would not wish to finish this article without mentioning some of the special characteristics of our Mechanism. We could list several but I would like to highlight four that, in our opinion, are very important. First of all, we have decided that in most cases, people should take real tests to establish their degree of competence. In the French system, which is called "Validation des Aquis de L'Expérience", for the field of National Education Diplomas, they rarely perform tests of skills. However, in our case, we think that in this way **we can guarantee the validity** of the assessment process, which is one of the characteristics or prime requirements in the assessment of skills.

Secondly, in order to **guarantee the reliability and homogeneous nature of the assessment process**, we do not leave the judgement on competence in the hands of centres that have been officially authorised for this, like they do in Britain; what we do is to leave the decision-taking ability in the hands of an assessment team of five people among whom there will always be an expert from the relevant productive sector.

Thirdly, in our procedure, the **training plan** plays a significant role, as does the guidance provided for people so that, after undergoing the recognition process, they can improve their professional skills, and where appropriate, even obtain a diploma or qualification.

Finally, two unusual aspects of our system are, on the one hand, the **Evidence Guides** prepared by our assessment teams, which are tools to streamline professional references in order to facilitate and simplify assessment, and on the other hand, the fact that **Self-assessment tests** are taken using computers which is an important factor for collecting evidence and optimising assessment times.

We are convinced that the establishment of a Skills Recognition Mechanism in the Basque Country will standardise our system of qualifications and will make it possible to improve the professional qualifications of our active population as it will enable many people to gain access to training and skills recognition, which is a vital combination in our knowledge society. The people playing the leading role in maintaining the structure of the mechanism are the Vocational Training Centres with their information services, their teachers and the productive experts in our businesses. The Basque Agency for the Assessment of Skills and Quality in Vocational Training asks them all to work as hard as they can and at the same time offers them its help and open availability to accept any suggestions that might lead us to improve the procedures to ensure that the Skills Recognition Mechanism is a key tool in the efficient running and success of Vocational Training in the Basque Country.



A Businesswoman at the age of 24

Oihana Garmendia, a 24-year-old ex-Vocational Training student from Bergara, has set up her own business with support from the Urrats Bat programme. She designs and manufactures moulds, and also produces pieces through plastic injection.



At the Hotel and Catering School in Leioa they use plastic spoons, with the sizes that are used in modern cuisine for small tasting sessions. The spoons have been designed, moulded and manufactured in Bergara, at Oihana Garmendia's company.

So who is Oihana Garmendia? Well, she's a 24 year-old girl with enterprising spirit. Oihana studied on the Advanced Cycle in Plastics and Rubber at the Miguel Altuna Institute in Bergara, her hometown. Three years ago she finished her studies and worked for a year at the company, Matz-Erreka.

When her contract came to an end, an idea began to take shape that had been running around in her head for months. In a sector like plastic injection, would it be possible for a girl like her to set up her own business... or was this just an illusion?

"I had heard something about the Urrats Bat project and I went along to the institute to find out what it was about –Oihana says–. It was a unique opportunity: they give you a lot of help, they let you use the centre's facilities and you also have the support of a teacher. I had to present the project".

A Business culture

So she did, and had the good fortune that her proposal was to be the one chosen from those that were presented at the Miguel Altuna. The Bergara institute forms part of the centres attached to the Urrats Bat programme, with which the departments of Employment and Education of the Basque Government, and of the Provincial Councils, in this case, Gipuzkoa Provincial Council, aim to promote a business spirit among students who finish their Vocational Training studies.

As Fernando Otaño, director of studies at the Miguel Altuna Institute explains, "the main aim is to create a business spirit among students who are finishing their studies; so that they are not just going to look for work but also consider the possibility of setting up their own business".

For five years now, all the students in their last year at the centre have been having talks and training courses to suggest to them, from a pragmatic viewpoint, that they can also create their own jobs. "At first – Otaño acknowledges– they found it really hard to grasp this idea. They imagined huge companies and even considering setting up one was just too much for them. They now know about other experiences and they are starting to see this as a possibility".

These are experiences such as the four business projects, (they choose one each year) that are up and running at the Institute in Bergara thanks to the Urrats Bat programme. The management of buildings, the manufacture of aluminium items for shelves and the installation of renewable energy systems are the areas that the other three companies are involved in.

"We think that the programme is not only worthwhile for those students who use it in practice to set up their own businesses. It's all about promoting a 'business culture' that in the long term will help to spread an enterprising spirit. Maybe later on, after working at the company, some students will consider doing this", Fernando Otaño points out.

High speed

Oihana Garmendia's business project has been changing and maturing since she had her initial idea. At first, her business was only going to be involved in plastic injection. However, the financial and market research carried out by Saiolan as part of the support provided by Urrats Bat offered a new perspective. "It came to the conclusion that it would not be profitable with only injection into plastics and that it would be a better idea to offer the entire process, that is, designing and manufacturing the moulds, as well as carrying out the injection process. And that is what we have done," the young businesswoman explains.

The first steps were aimed at rounding off Oihana's training, as she had studied Chemistry but didn't know the mechanical fundamentals of how to manufacture moulds. Supervised by her teacher Begoña Gómez, her tutor and "co-worker sharing her fatigue" at the new company, the youngster learned to design moulds using the computer programs, Autocad and Solid Works, and to manufacture moulds assisted by the modern machinery, with high-speed injection, in the Miguel Altuna centre.

After this, through contacts that the institute itself had, the first orders arrived. Plastic plugs for two companies in Vitoria that make aluminium profiles, ASK and Alu-Stock, plastic buffers for the scaffolding at Plaiber (Bergara), the special spoons for the Hotel and Catering School in Leioa,... "The pace I work at is relentless. Almost every day I work non-stop from 8 in the morning to 6 in the evening", the young woman points out.

The next step

She knows that she has to make the most of the opportunity to pave the way in a complex sector. "I am really learning a lot and, although it's difficult, I feel that I am gradually becoming a businesswoman. Trying to find customers is difficult and up to now they have come to us through the school. At the moment, I have to reinvest everything. The aim in the end is to no longer need to depend on the school, but this is a step that I think is still a long way off because this project needs some very expensive technology and right now it couldn't work without the machinery and support of the centre".

Otaño admits that, "of the four business projects that we have supported, this is the one that is going to have most problems getting out of the centre, because of its characteristics".

At the moment, Oihana Garmendia, 24 years of age, is pleased that she is carving out a future for herself and overcoming certain prejudices among her customers, who sometimes doubt whether a business of this type is going to meet the fixed deadlines.

During our conversation, Oihana mentions her fears about how globalisation might affect the Basque plastic injection sector: a problem that puts her on a level with other businessmen.