INTRODUCTION

The labour competency approach has been spreading in the Latin American and Caribbean region since the second half of the 1990s. It is to the birth of this idea that we can trace the extraordinary capacity of the vocational training institutions in the region to acquire, accumulate, transform and apply useful knowledge in the development of training programmes.

This conceptual and practical progress in vocational training has also been made possible by a large number of experiences and applications of the new concepts, and by discussions and achievements on questions like the connection between education and work, support for the philosophy of lifelong learning, the recognition of competencies, and other matters which have to do with the development of human talent in the countries in the region. These subjects have now been consolidated in ILO Recommendation 195 concerning human resources development. What this new Recommendation does is bring together many areas which have been part of the progress in training in such a way that it became the framework in which this book was written.

One outstanding event in the dissemination of the competencies approach was the International Seminar on Training and the Standardisation of Competencies in Guanajuato, Mexico, which was held in May 1996 and was jointly organised by the CONOCER, Cinterfor and the ILO. María Angélica Ducci of the ILO, in her concluding remarks at the seminar, gave a clear account of the extraordinary diversity of experiences all over the world which were presented to almost the whole of the training community, comprising institutions and ministries of labour and education from the Latin American region.

She also emphasised the importance of understanding and adopting a new approach to the transformations taking place in the world of work, and she underlined the importance of dialogue between social partners, governments, employers, workers and educators for innovation in their institutions and national arrangements for training.

Seven years have passed since that seminar, and it could be regarded as a starting point. The Mexicans, with that typical generosity they are famous for, opened the door of the region to a new experience in which they were ready to
take the lead. The Mexican government had signed free trade treaties, and this great challenge to the nation’s competitiveness spurred them on to commit themselves to a programme of modernising technical education and training.

Today there is no doubt that the chain reaction that was initiated by that experience had a lot to do with the development and innovation taking place in the field of training in the region. All the countries in Latin America, with their different national preoccupations and with great variety in the initiatives and actors involved, have not only felt the impact of new technologies in the organization and distribution of work, but have also registered the need to innovate and modernise their educational practices and the methodologies used in adjusting to the new realities.

It was clear to all in the 1980s that there was a need to modernise training, and many institutions came in for considerable criticism because in no way were they responsive to the demands for training that were being formulated in the economic sphere. Their methods for preparing occupational profiles, and their very good work in designing curricula which had lasted for decades, turned out to be obsolete in the face of the rapid changes taking place in work techniques and the way that work was organised.

It was at that time that the competency approach first made available to institutions a new way of approaching the definition of programmes, the recognition of knowledge, and the harmonisation of the training offer at different levels and from various sources. Since 1996 a number of training institutions have taken it upon themselves to update their programmes and to prepare other new ones using processes oriented by labour competency.

Over time, other institutions which had kept up to date noted the advantages which could be derived from focusing training on results rather than on tasks, and also noted the impact of this focus on developing people’s competencies and on recognising the importance of basic competencies and flexibility which is implicit in a number of aspects including modular design.

The orientation towards labour competency has generated considerable debate which, fortunately, is still going on. Competency-based training involves entrepreneurs and workers in the task of establishing content and programmes, and this capacity to generate dialogue has also promoted discussion and the exchange of ideas. Subjects like the participation of workers in the definition of competencies and the setting up of personnel management models inspired in competencies were, and still are, areas for analysis and negotiation.

Although this discussion about the application of the labour competency approach has not yet come to a conclusion, what has come into being in the region in recent years is a veritable critical mass of knowledge and good practices
to do with training and its relation to subjects like productivity, employment and income.

Now, seven years on, this book gives a perspective on the application of this approach, and presents a compilation of experiences not from outside the region but solely from Latin America and the Caribbean.

A number of training institutions in this region have been incorporating the competencies approach at different rhythms but always with a clear orientation towards improving pertinence and quality, that is to say, in an effort to strengthen themselves as institutions. Many ministries of labour have adopted the competencies approach in the execution of their active employment and training policies. The competencies approach is the core element in the guidelines and content of technical education programmes oriented by ministries of education. Various projects with international backing that are geared to promoting training and the development of sector productivity have embraced the competencies approach as an effective formula for attaining tangible results in training. More recently, national education policies in various countries have been painstakingly designed to create an educational model which develops the philosophy of lifelong learning.

This book was written with the valuable support of the Skills and Employability Departament of the ILO. It gives an overview of the rich panorama in the region today. Obviously it is not an attempt to reflect the whole spectrum of the enormous amount of knowledge and experiences that have accumulated, certainly many experiences have not been included, but it is an initial effort to present the current situation of our information using a systematic approach, which in this case involves three different perspectives.

The first of these is the trend towards organising national training frameworks, genuine systems of national reference for all levels of competencies, along with the definition of areas of performance and mechanisms to allow mobility, both upward and lateral, in these structures. This is an effort which many countries in Europe have begun, and already there are a number of national and sector examples in Latin America.

The second perspective examines the increasing interest in key competencies, that is to say competencies which allow people to perform in a wide range of labour areas. These competencies are sometimes associated with basic education and sometimes with personal characteristics. In this book they are called key competencies, but in the literature they are variously described as basic competencies or generic competencies.

The third perspective focuses on the development of procedures for recognising and certifying labour competencies. It should be pointed out that the
concern with giving formal recognition to capacities acquired from experience pre-dates the arrival of the competencies approach. As long ago as 1975, Cinterfor/ILO ran a project centred on occupational certification to make programmes more effective and to stimulate people to learn in the workplace.

What this book gives the reader is a descriptive account of these three perspectives on the progress of the labour competencies focus in the region. The author would like to acknowledge the support he received from the Skills and Employability Department, and from each and every one of the information sources he consulted.