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Editorial

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Experiencing ECVET – from practice to policy

The conference on 22 and 23 February 2012 in Brussels marked the end of the first series of pilot projects for ECVET. These eleven projects from the pioneer phase of ECVET started in 2009 and have now finalised their work. Just to remember: at that time the recommendation on ECVET was not even adopted by the Council. These projects therefore had the particular challenge to start working on a tool of which the framework did not yet formally exist. But, of course, a lot of preparatory work had already been done and the proposal for the recommendation including the technical specifications for ECVET had been put forward by the Commission already in April 2008.

A final conference is the occasion to celebrate the successes, but it is also the time to take stock and discuss the achievements, the difficulties, the lessons learned and the potential consequences for further policy strategy.

The initial objectives defined in this first call for projects to "**test and develop the credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET)**" were closely aligned to the agreed basic principles of such a credit system: **facilitate mobility by recognising learning outcomes acquired in another country and establish strong partnerships between the responsible awarding bodies**.

The partnerships which have been established in the projects have reached for most of them the goal of sustainability and will continue to cooperate after the end of the projects. A strong communal spirit has also been estab-

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lished among the projects with the external monitoring by GHK and the regular seminars, workshops, conferences organised. However, although competent bodies were involved in the projects, the real commitment from the national authorities was still not fully visible. The driving force currently appears to remain at the level of implementing bodies, like VET providers, mobility organisers or international enterprises with concrete needs linked to international exchanges.

Although ECVET has clear general principles, the devil lies – as often - in the details. Projects had to implement the technical specifications with the particular challenge that the different parts of such a system were meant to be "inseparable", i.e. the description of the qualifications in terms of units of learning outcomes (LO), the learning outcome transfer process (including evaluation, validation, recognition and capitalisation of LO), a method for a point system for LO, the design, implementation and conclusion of partnership agreements.

It is in relation to the "inseparability" that the projects faced the most difficulties. These technical difficulties mirror the differences in VET systems and a certain resistance to change. The observed tendency, to try to fit ECVET to remain in line with the existing VET system and philosophy, has shown to be an obstacle to a holistic implementation of ECVET in the pilot projects. As a conclusion, the pilot projects used ECVET as a toolbox, a kind of "à la carte" menu depending on the particular needs in a sector, in a country, in an organisation. In the end, the 11 projects found different approaches, chose different angles of ECVET but all succeeded in the primary goal to recognise the learning outcomes acquired in different settings.

The results of the pilot projects are therefore of high value for future policy design, particularly in view of the revision of the ECVET recommendation in 2014. The challenges to be mastered to be able to go the way from experimentation to broad implementation are

- To achieve that ECVET is used as a system, not as a toolbox, in order to fully exploit its potential when it comes to recognition and validation of acquired learning outcomes. The clarity in guidelines is particularly important for the future communication on ECVET and its broad implementation;
- To achieve real commitment at national authority level, especially in view of the close link to the EQF;
- To promote the quality assurance processes with the aim to improve mutual trust between the VET systems;
- To examine possible extensions of the concept of ECVET: should it only be limited to learning mobility or can it be extended to lifelong learning in general, such as the recognition of informal and non-formal learning outcomes, as is presently tested in the second wave of pilot projects. The relationship to ECTS is also an issue in this respect;
- Last but not least, to set up adequate support structures for advice and national implementation and discuss suitable funding schemes.

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FOCUS

Anette Curth (GHK), Daniela Ulĭcná (GHK), Karin Luomi-Messerer (3s) -
based on the final conference of ECVET pilot projects (22-23 February 2012 in Brussels)

Shared understanding of ECVET – Diversity of practical solutions

Lessons learnt from the ECVET pilot projects (2008-2012)

Daniela Uličná (GHK) and Karin Luomi-Messerer (3s) presented the results of the pilot projects

The ECVET Recommendation sets the conceptual basis for ECVET. It defines the main principles and processes in a general manner. The task of the ECVET pilot projects was to translate these concepts into the realities of their systems and institutions and make them operational. By doing so, the project partners familiarised themselves with the concepts defined in the ECVET Recommendation. They identified the elements of VET systems in which they operate which are convergent with the ECVET technical specifications and they also discussed the aspects of ECVET that question the existing practices. As a result of the testing, the partners in the different projects familiarised themselves with what ECVET is and broadened the understanding of this instrument. The projects designed a range of solutions and tools that can be used as well as further adapted and developed them to work with ECVET. They showed that the ECVET principles and concepts can be adjusted to different system-level conditions, but this also means that the concrete solutions put in place vary.

As it was presented by Riisto Raivio, Head of Section VET Policy at the European Commission, DG Education and Culture, during the final conference of the ECVET pilot projects (22-23 February 2012 in Brussels): '*We have a clear concept at European level, but we also have the diversity of realities in which this concept needs to be translated into activities*'.

The first generation of ECVET pilot projects, active between 2008 and 2011, were among the first transnational partnerships and initiatives to specifically test and experiment with the ECVET technical specifications. Therefore, they have a specific place in the context of ECVET development at European level. Their work is expected to inspire further piloting as well as implementation. Their results also feed into the European Commission's activities to support the use of ECVET – for example, the projects are frequently cited in European Guidance documents on ECVET, such as *Get to Know ECVET Better: Questions and Answers*[1] and *Using ECVET for geographical mobility*[2].

1 http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/ecvet/faq_en.pdf
2 http://www.ecvet-projects.eu/Documents/ECVET_Mobility_Web.pdf

The experience of these pilot projects shows that ECVET is a valuable instrument that will help to enhance mutual trust and understanding between VET systems and VET-providers across Europe. It will consequently enhance recognised mobility. It also has the potential to help increase the options for permeability between sectors and systems. The solutions developed by the pilot projects will feed into a toolbox of instruments for upcoming projects and initiatives.

This article summarises the discussions and results from the pilot projects' final conference.

Key messages of the pilot projects on the added value of ECVET

During the workshops held on the first day of the conference, the variety of approaches developed by the pilot projects was presented[3]. It became clear that the projects have succeeded in adapting ECVET to the different conditions in place in the Member States and finding solutions for a wide range of conditions, sectors and learning contexts.

The key messages conveyed about the added value of ECVET can be summarised as follows:

- ECVET can be used to facilitate the recognised mobility of learners;
- ECVET can also support permeability and sectoral mobility if the competent authorities in charge decide to use it for this purpose;
- ECVET is a technical framework that needs to be adjusted to the realities of those working with it. Actors beginning to use ECVET need to ask themselves questions such as:
  - » What do we want to achieve by using ECVET and what is the main aim of regular exchanges of students, permeability, etc.?
  - » How does ECVET fit into the national regulations in place?
  - » What are the features of our VET system(s) that support the use of ECVET and what aspects of ECVET are difficult to implement in the current system(s) in place?
- Consequently, there are different solutions to implementing ECVET which depend on the needs of the partnerships, their aims and objectives, but also the system level conditions;
- The learning outcomes approach is the core and the 'heart' of ECVET and will contribute to a common understanding and transparency between VET-systems in Europe. In the context of VET it is useful to ensure there is a clear link between learning outcomes and workplace activities and tasks, as this facilitates transnational understanding of the learning outcomes descriptions;
- Depending on the system, the concept of units can refer to clearly distinct parts of qualifications which are assessed and possibly certified separately, but it can also refer to 'mobility units' which are sets of learning outcomes grouped together so as to define the content of mobility periods. To work with 'mobility units' it is not required to define all qualifications in terms of units. In both cases, the use of units supports clarity about what a person has learnt abroad;
- The ECVET-related documentation (Memorandum of Understanding, Learning Agreement, Transcript of Records) is of high value to the quality assurance of a mobility period;
- Validation and recognition can take different forms – formative (recognition of time spent abroad and valorisation for individual learning pathways without exemption from final assessment) and summative (recognition of [units of] learning outcomes, awarding of units, exemption from final examination);
- ECVET points are understood and valued in systems that already use credit points. In other systems, the use of points is not seen as adding value to the process of credit transfer and recognition – the assessed learning outcomes are the core of 'credit'.

3 The presentations can be found on the ECVET pilot projects website: http://www.ecvet-projects.eu/Seminars/SeminarDetail.aspx?id=44

The French National Association for Training in the Automobile Sector (ANFA) as a sectoral body stated that an agreement on the Sector Qualification (CQP) of April 2011 allows for a module based approach to training and qualifications. Thus, the **ASSET project** had to ensure that the units designed for mobility correspond to the CQP modules used for the sector qualifications. Hence, in the **ASSET project,** the units assessed during mobility did not have to be reassessed during the final exam. It was found that the competences aimed at by CQP can be assessed by an institution recognised by the ANFA -in France or abroad.

For the Italian Ministry of Education, the motivation to engage in the **M.O.T.O. project** was to check the extent to which tools developed at national level are capable of supporting credit transfer in a transnational context. **M.O.T.O.** developed a flexible model for transferring units that was applied differently, according to the different national contexts: the Italian state-school student was awarded with national credit points to be included in his overall score at the final examination. In Finland and Iceland, each unit was attributed to national ECVET points. In Austria, the training period abroad and the well documented learning experience were accepted as part of the apprenticeship training.

Anja Schwarz underlined the fact that in Germany the focus on using ECVET was on supporting the transnational mobility of VET learners. The German legislation enables learners to spend a substantial part of their training abroad. However, the Chambers are responsible for ensuring the quality of training received abroad. Therefore, the **Association of German Chambers of Industry and Trade** sees ECVET as a tool to support the quality of mobility. This is due to the fact that the partners have to agree to: the learning outcomes before, a transparent assessment abroad and a clear agreement between the home and the host institution.

Using ECVET for the mobility of learners in initial VET: The point of view of competent institutions

A wide range of competent institutions participated as partners or leaders in the 11 ECVET pilot projects.

Note: In this article we use the word competent institutions to refer in particular to those institutions which are responsible for system-level features regarding the design and award of qualifications. Depending on the system set-up, VET providers can also be competent institutions using the ECVET definition[4]. Their point of view is discussed separately in the next section of this article.

Competent institutions are important partners for the implementation of ECVET. They are often responsible for designing qualifications and are ultimately in charge of recognising learning outcomes and awarding a qualification. They also define whether and under what conditions learning outcomes from abroad can be recognised and how. Hence, their commitment is important to help steer and design the further process of implementing ECVET.

The range of institutions holding these competences differ greatly across Europe. While in some countries the design and award of qualifications rests with federal or regional governmental institutions, in others, sectoral bodies may have taken over these functions, or VET-providers themselves may be entitled to recognise learning outcomes (and possibly even develop qualifications – for example, in continuous training for adults).

In two workshops four pilot projects presented the experience of testing ECVET from the point of view of competent institutions. The presentations were presented by two representatives of competent institutions who were involved in testing ECVET, not as project leaders, but in another capacity.

The first workshop addressed the question of how competent institutions can use ECVET to prepare a mobility phase of students – hence, how ECVET can be applied in the phase **'before mobility'**. Marie-Hélène Delobbe from the French National Association for Training in the Automobile services sector[5] presented the role of this body in the project ECVET-ASSET and the future intentions of this organisation (which designs and awards qualifications in the automobile services sector) in using ECVET. Her presentation was followed by that of Alfredo Menichelli from the Italian Ministry of Education who led the M.O.T.O. project. Among other things, he presented the complex interplay between competent authorities from VET systems with different approaches to centralisation or decentralisation. Anja Schwarz from the Association of German Chambers of Industry and Commerce[6] provided her observations on the approaches presented from the point of view of German enterprises and chamber organisations.

The second workshop addressed the question of how competent institutions can use ECVET to shape the phase **during and after the mobility** of students. Alain Bultot, who led the project OPIR while he was in the Cabinet of the Minister of Education of the French Speaking Community of Belgium, presented the project methodology and how it was used to inform an on-going reform of VET. As a sec-

4 'Competent institution' means an institution which is responsible for designing and awarding qualifications or recognising units or other functions linked to ECVET, such as the allocation of ECVET points to qualifications and units, assessment, validation and recognition of learning outcomes, under the rules and practices of participating countries.

5 Association nationale pour la formation automobile (ANFA)

6 Deutsche Industrie- und Handelskammertag (DIHK)

ond speaker, Michel Galloy from the regional education authority (rectorat) falling under the competence of the French Ministry of Education presented the work of the project VaLOGreg and explained how the regional dimension was relevant for the future development of ECVET. Päivi Niska, who represents the Finnish 'Rovaniemi Municipal Federation of Education' and the Lapland Vocational College, commented from the point of view of local actors. She also brought in the perspective of practitioners.

Throughout both workshops it became clear that the active involvement of competent institutions was a particular strength of the projects presented. Every project working with ECVET should invest the time to clearly identify the competent institutions in all partner countries and for all qualifications addressed. These institutions need to be involved in the partnership. This step needs to be undertaken in the phase before mobility.

This first step helps to identify the right partners to sign the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). In some countries the relevant institutions to sign the MoU included ministries; in others training providers. One project decided that, in order to reduce the complexity and the number of partners signing, it would be better to act as a network and apply the following rule: once the MoU is signed by several partners, it is considered to be applicable to the entire network.

Competent institutions are required to guarantee a certain national, regional or sectoral quality standard of training. They need to ensure that the training delivered abroad meets these quality standards and that the assessment methods are valid according to their own standards. ECVET was found to be a flexible instrument to support this. For instance, in a partnership agreement, the learning outcomes aimed at and criteria for assessment as pre-conditions for validation and recognition, can be defined.

When designing a validation and recognition process, the diversity of the existing processes across countries and systems needs to be taken into account. It is not possible to have one common process - hence, competent institutions should engage with their transnational counterparts in working out flexible solutions for validation and recognition.

Using ECVET for the mobility of students: Solutions and added value for VET providers

Many VET providers have been arranging student mobility for many years. Therefore, mobility and its arrangements are not new to them. VET-providers were mainly interested in how ECVET can improve some of their current processes that are connected to mobility. In using ECVET, VET providers were particularly interested in the recognition of mobility periods that this instrument is expected to facilitate.

In two workshops – one on the phase before and one on the phase during and after mobility – four pilot projects presented their work on what VET providers need to do during these three phases.

In the workshop dedicated to the phase before mobility, Thierry Joseph (FR), Espace Formation des Métiers et de l'Artisanat, from the project ECVET-ASSET and Christiane Eberhardt (DE), Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB), from CREDCHEM, presented their approaches to this phase. The solu-

The **OPIR** project highlighted that it is possible to identify relatively quickly, the commonalities between two or more systems based on the identification of key professional activities that are common to the qualifications/programmes of all the partners. Such key activity (or activities) is the basis for defining a unit of learning outcomes that the mobile learners will acquire abroad.

The project also emphasised the need to develop large network partnerships to avoid multiplicity of MoUs.

The project **VaLOGReg** (BE-fr, DE, LU, FR) had to address a great diversity of systemic conditions. While some of the partners in the project had unit-based qualifications, others did not. However, the project emphasised that providing that the competent institutions are willing and capable of recognising the assessment process of another institution and accepting the principle of transfer of learning outcomes, it is possible to experiment with ECVET.

The presentation also emphasised the need for competent authorities to be flexible and not to seek the full comparability of qualifications, but rather to look for compatibility of learning outcomes.

In her intervention, **Päivi Niska** emphasised the potential of using ECVET and the transnational mobility in particular, in order to individualise learning pathways. In Finland and in the ECVET-related initiatives she has been involved in, international mobility is seen as an opportunity for learners to learn something they would not have access to in their home country or institution; ECVET is a tool to recognise those learning outcomes.

The **ASSET project** considered the constraints of the mobility period when developing units of learning outcomes that learners would acquire abroad. All units had to be 'achievable' during a mobility of a few weeks.

Based on the shared learning outcomes descriptions, the project also developed a set of assessment criteria and a grid for each unit. This ensures that assessors will evaluate learners according to the same criteria across the partner institutions. The completed assessment grid is brought home by the learner and it is the basis for the validation and recognition of the unit.

In the **CREDCHEM project**, the teachers were very closely involved in the development of the units of learning outcomes. They tested the developed units themselves to ensure the content is user-friendly and the learning outcomes can be acquired in the planned time frame.

Maarit Saarenkylä from the Joint Authority of Education in Espoo region (Finland), emphasised that each network needs to find its own way, since the methods can differ significantly. Having been involved In the FINECVET initiative (see article on FINECVET on page 24-28), she emphasised that it is essential to agree on the full set of documentation before the students go abroad, entailing some work for the VET providers. However, the partners concluded that it pays off to invest this time, since creating mutual trust is a central element to developing sustainable partnerships.

In the **AEROVET project**, an assessment grid was developed to provide evaluators with the criteria to assess the units acquired during mobility.

The assessment was based on a qualitative-performance-scale. On completion of the mobility period, the partners from the host institution noted in the grid whether the learner carried out the tasks related to the given unit autonomously, under supervision, etc. On return, the responsible persons from the home institution can immediately examine the learning outcomes the learner practiced.

As a result of the **RECOMFOR project, the NETINVET network** of providers who deliver training in international trade has been established. The basis for arranging mobility is ECVET, more specifically, a core of reference units that are compatible with the national qualifications in the countries taking part.

Training providers benefit from a network approach as they have access to a range of potential partners who can offer placements. They also benefit from this approach as they no longer have to send an accompanying teacher with the group. They know the host institution is reliable and that they have a shared understanding of the given unit of learning outcomes that learners will study for.

tions found here were described by Maarit Saarenkylä from the Joint Authority of Education in Espoo region, OMNIA – an organisation taking part in the FINECVET initiative.

In the workshop dedicated to the phase **during and after mobility**, Andreas Saniter (DE), University of Bremen, from the project AEROVET and Sophie Salin (FR), Confédération française du commerce interentreprises (CGI), from RECOMFOR, presented their approaches to this phase. The solutions found were described by Neus Caufape, principal of INS Escola del Treball, a VET school in Lleida (Catalonia-Spain).

The practitioners in the workshop admitted that in the beginning, working with ECVET means additional effort. VET-providers are required to complete a certain amount of paperwork for the phase before mobility (identifying units, designing learning agreements). Achieving mutual trust and understanding is not always easy as the countries use different concepts and the system conditions also vary (e.g. do units exist in the system).

But they also emphasised that in the long run – if not already in the phase during and after mobility - this effort will pay off: due to the sound and thorough preparation of mobility periods and the documentation of the process, the quality is raised. The home institution has a better understanding of what leaners actually do and learn abroad. Once a network of partners has been set up, it becomes clearer which partner abroad can offer which unit of learning outcomes. When the mobility occurs in a company the VET provider partner institution can also support the process and advise the learner and the employer. There is thus no need for the home institution to send a teacher to the host institution because someone from the network will take care of the operations locally. Therefore, once the design of the ECVET-mobility phase is agreed between institutions, it can be repeated in upcoming years.

As an outcome of the RECOMFOR project, a network of institutions with experience in working with ECVET has been created, The 'NETINVET' network has developed a quality charter that members are required to sign[7]. The members also have to agree on a reference framework of learning outcomes and simple methods/tools of assessment. Having common tools (Learning Agreement, Transcript of Records, etc.) agreed among partners was said to facilitate mobility.

It is hence expected that in the long run the preparation phase will help to save time. The ECVET related documentation further contributes to the sustainability of the partnership and the mutual trust. All in all, it was recommended that partners should not focus on obstacles, but be flexible and focus on solutions.

Using ECVET for lifelong learning: Solutions and added value for the permeability between higher education and VET and the mobility of adults

ECVET is not only useful for young people in initial VET: several of the pilot projects tested ECVET for other target groups and addressed issues other than the transnational mobility of full time students. During the conference, two workshops focused on ECVET in the context of lifelong learning and on the mobility of adults.

7 More information: http://www.netinvet.eu/

The motivations for project partners to test ECVET for lifelong learning or for a target group other than young people in full-time VET, the methods put in place, the challenges and necessary conditions, were discussed and several recommendations for the future use of ECVET in this context were given.

The first workshop addressed specifically the **permeability between higher education and VET, as well as professional mobility across occupations in a certain sector**. Audrey Noble (FR), Fédération de la Plasturgie, presented the results of the project Be-TWIN, which aimed at facilitating ECVET and ECTS articulation for fostering vertical and geographical mobility a . Sophie Dunoyer de Segonzac (FR), Vocational Training Centre for Performing Arts Techniques (CFPTS), presented the outcomes of the project CAPE-SV, which aimed at fostering geographical and professional mobility in the performing arts sector. Comments were provided by Rolf Aslaksrud Kristiansen (NO), representing PERME-VET, a LEONARDO project coordinated by Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences that also focused on permeability between HE and VET.

In general, it was stated that there is high demand for testing ECVET in the context of lifelong learning and transition – between educational sectors, professions and countries. Furthermore, mobility is not only an issue for students, but it is also relevant to workers, professionals and adult learners. All three projects demonstrated that learning outcomes are a good way of facilitating transparency and permeability between institutions from different educational sectors. Learning outcomes were seen as a valid 'currency' that is valorised by higher education and VET, while credit points (and the quantification of credit) were seen as having less added value.

All three projects also showed that mutual trust between educational institutions is the biggest issue. Once trust can be established, recognition can be made possible. Establishing trust among employers and labour market representatives has been found to be a challenge; there is still a gap that needs to be bridged. The acceptance of prior learning in flexible pathways is still limited among employers.

The second workshop focused on **enhancing and valorising the professional mobility of adult learners**. Christian Sperle (DE) from the German Confederation of Skilled Crafts presented the results of the project SME Master Plus and Jos Noesen (LU) from the Ministère de l'Education nationale et de la Formation professionnelle presented the results of the project VaLOGReg. Comments were provided by Katrin Jaeser (DE), IBS - CEMES Institut GmbH, representing ESy-CQ, an ECVET pilot project which started in 2011 and also focuses on ECVET and adult learners.

The projects stated that ECVET is a good management tool to organise long-term and short-term mobility, although not all principles were found to be similarly convincing – again, the usefulness of points was questioned. The duration of mobility periods was said to be problematic. Units and modules of adult learning are often too comprehensive to fit into a mobility phase.

Moreover, adult learners have different demands than young learners in initial training; because of work obligations they cannot make long-term mobility possible. A work-life–balance needs to be granted, mobility, work and family need to be reconcilable.

Neus Caufape, principal of INS Escola del Treball (ES), mentioned that working with ECVET was found to be in the interest of the students in more than one way: not only does the recognition of a mobility period add significant value, it also changes students' perceptions and attitudes to mobility. Once they know their achievements abroad will be recognised back home, they pay more attention to their performance and take the learning content of the mobility experience more seriously.

The **project BE-TWIN** developed a double entry table that allows for better comparability of qualifications acquired through higher education (using ECTS) and VET (using ECVET) by detailing the learning outcomes and the learning activities (curriculum).

The matrix can be used from different entry points and is compatible with the specificities of higher education and VET.

The **CAPE-SV project** worked on supporting the professional and geographical mobility of technical staff in the performing arts sector. It aimed to develop tailor-made solutions for people with much individualised career paths.

Formal recognition was found to be more and more important for the sector of the performing arts. The partners developed a common system that helped to apply ECVET concepts to describe learning outcomes in a similar manner – aiming at facilitating transparency between Higher Education qualifications, VET qualifications and competences acquired via work experience, in order to allow for permeability and formal recognition.

The PERMEVET project aimed at testing a transnational and multilevel approach to permeability. **Rolf Kristiansen** (NO), coordinator of the project, emphasised that learning outcomes need to be in the focus when aiming at permeability between VET and HE and across countries. They can support the design of flexible and cost-effective learning pathways without overlaps. The main challenges are to reach mutual trust in assessments, procedures and outcomes as well as acceptance of qualifications structured in modules or units.

The **SME Master Plus project** responded to the needs of the growing number of skilled craft enterprises involved in foreign trade and commerce. This increase highlights a potentially growing demand for staff with international experience in the skilled crafts sector. It was found that learning outcomes are an excellent way of creating transparency between qualifications. However, establishing a common learning outcome matrix means additional efforts and intensive matching with international partners. Establishing a sustainable European network of training providers, that can grant mutual acceptance, is a condition for mobility of learners in this field.

The **project VaLOGReg** did not only aim at enabling the geographical mobility of learners, but also at facilitating and valorising the already existing mobility of learners and workers. The project found that compatibility of approaches is actually more important than comparability. A flexible process of developing the compatibility of qualifications by comparing learning outcomes was aimed at. The project examined the expectations of employers and the curricula of qualifications and found congruence of 90% of the learning outcomes in the qualifications of each participating European region.

The ESyCQ project is targeted towards adults in continuing training in certified qualifications/professions from the fields of commerce and IT. **Katrin Jäser** (DE), coordinator of the project, also pointed out that for identifying overlaps and facilitating recognition and credit transfer, learning outcomes descriptions as are crucial. She also emphasised the important role of valid assessment tools for facilitating professional mobility since learning outcomes are weighed differently in different professions.

Projects' contribution to ECVET implementation

The feedback from the participants at the conference showed that the outcomes of the projects' work are clearly regarded as progress in view of implementing ECVET.

The participants particularly welcomed that the projects succeeded in clarifying the ECVET concepts. The understanding of the full process of describing learning outcomes, defining units of learning outcomes, developing partnership documentation and facilitating assessment, validation and recognition, has improved significantly since 2008. It was equally highly appreciated that the projects succeeded in involving important stakeholders such as employers' organisations and associations, national VET-centres, national and regional authorities and VET providers – hence, it helped to raise awareness for ECVET and its added value among these stakeholders.

Moreover, the participants confirmed that the projects have shown how ECVET brings added value to learners' mobility. Here, the added value of the learning outcomes approach to facilitating transparency and mutual understanding was particularly emphasised. It was also noted that ECVET helps to enhance the quality assurance of students' mobility periods: the ECVET-procedures provide the basis for agreeing the content of mobility and they also set the basis for evaluating the contribution of mobility to one's knowledge, skills and competence.

Most participants were happy to see that there is not one unique way of working with ECVET. The diversity of solutions developed by the pilot projects convinced them that, as long as there is a shared understanding among the partners about the concept, custom-made solutions for a diversity of systems, situations and purposes, can be developed. In this context, the tools developed by the projects were seen as helpful to provide guidance in working with ECVET.[8]

Overall, the projects were regarded as 'trailblazers' who will make way for others to follow. ECVET moved from concept to reality in many countries and is being implemented on systemic level – for instance, in Finland (see the article on the FINECVET initiative in this issue of the ECVET Magazine or the initiative 'CPU Europe' in the French speaking community of Belgium - described in the last issue of the ECVET Magazine).Consequently, it can be stated that some of the pilot projects contributed to the modernisation and reform of education and training systems in specific countries.

The future use of pilot projects' results

Overall, the solutions developed by the pilot projects were seen as a good basis to build on. As a result of the projects' work, there is now a toolbox of solutions that can be transposed to other realities.

Several ideas on the future use of the pilot projects results were formulated:

- The results are a good basis to formulate recommendations for further ECVET implementation;
- The results can nurture the work of the national teams of ECVET experts;
- The solutions can inspire other fields of transfer of learning outcomes such as recognition in the field of non-formal and informal learning;
- The experiences should be transferred to other sectors, vocations and learning contexts;
- The projects have created models for future partnerships;

8 ECVET pilot projects toolbox: http://www.ecvet-projects.eu/ToolBox/Default.aspx

- Existing units should be available in a database (per sector or per context/ purpose) in order to avoid double work;
- The diversity of instruments in the toolbox is good, but a common standard should be developed – especially for the ECVET-related documentation (Learning Agreement, Terms of reference, Memorandum of Understanding, Quality Assurance);
- More sustainable networks should be built up;
- Better connections with EQAVET and EQF should be established.

Overall, it was stated that the results should be used to encourage and inspire new projects to continue the testing and development of ECVET to increase mobility and the quality of mobility.

Riisto Raivio, Head of Section VET Policy at the European Commission, DG Education and Culture

What results did the cooperation between the pilot projects bring about?

When the concept for the ECVET pilot projects was developed, the European Commission thought it helpful for the projects to work together. With support from the European Commission, exchange and cooperation between the projects was organised, a series of workshops and seminars were held and a common website was developed. 'At the beginning, not everybody was convinced of the added value of this kind of cooperation', Riisto Raivio from the European Commission recalled. But that notion changed and the projects quickly developed a very robust and prolific working relationship.

'The content of the conference has clearly demonstrated the value of this cooperation', said Mr Raivio. Throughout the conference, it has become clear that the projects and partnerships developed a common language among each other - based on learning outcomes. VET-providers and stakeholders established sustainable networks that other institutions, stakeholder and countries can now join.

'The European Commission is convinced that the projects have learned more because of that cooperation', Mr Raivio emphasised. 'Moreover, Europe has learned more because of their systematic cooperation,' and the ECVET exercise as a whole has gained speed and the 'ECVET Community of Practice' has grown significantly.

A common European framework and a diversity of solutions

Mr Raivio emphasised that the future development of ECVET will take place on two levels: on one hand, there will be development in practice. VET-providers and national stakeholders will implement several activities. 'This exercise will show that there that there are different ways to put ECVET in practice – and this is good, because it enables us to use ECVET under different circumstances and realities.'

On the other hand, there will be more European and transnational initiatives: national ECVET experts have been selected and they have just started their work, the NetECVET project,[9] a group of 14 National Agencies for the Lifelong Learning Programme, coordinated by the German National Agency, has been launched to support practitioners of transnational mobility who are beginning to work with ECVET, and the process of national implementation continues.[10] The initiatives, at a European level, will help to underline that, despite the diversity of possible solutions, it is important to maintain a common and shared understanding of ECVET and its technical specifications.

9 More information: http://netecvet.com/

10 CEDEFOP Report on the development of ECVET in Europe 2011. Working paper No. 14 http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/6114_en.pdf (see news section)

FOCUS

An article by Daniela Ulicnă (GHK Consulting) and Karin Luomi-Messerer (3s research laboratory)

Results of the 2008 ECVET pilot projects

1 Introduction

The ten pilot projects and one network project testing ECVET all tried to find solutions for the implementation of the technical specifications of ECVET: units of learning outcomes, transfer of units of learning outcomes, ECVET-documentation and ECVET points and partnerships. This article gives a synoptic overview on the results. It points out similarities in the methods and tools developed, but also mentions the differences in the pilot projects' approaches.

The article is also available - in a more detailed version that contains many concrete examples from the pilot projects – in the **brochure distributed at the final conference of the pilot projects.**

2 Units of learning outcomes

'Unit of learning outcomes' means a component of a qualification, consisting of a coherent set of knowledge, skills and competence, that can be assessed and validated.

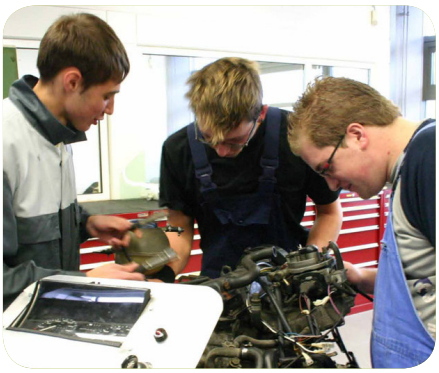
ECVET Recommendation

Most projects started by developing common matrixes for their approach to describe learning outcomes. Different procedures were applied. For example, in the learning outcomes matrices developed by the SME MASTER Plus project, learning outcomes are formulated in a holistic manner, whereas in other projects, such as RECOMFOR and N.E.T.WORK, described units in terms of knowledge, skills and competences.

As to the use of units of learning outcomes, the project partners were in different starting situations:

- In some countries and systems, units of learning outcomes are an integral part of VET qualifications. This is for example the case in Finland, France, Slovenia and Spain;

- In other countries, VET systems are being reformed to integrate the use of units, for example, in the French-speaking Community of Belgium or in Luxembourg;
- Other VET systems, such as the dual system in Germany or VET in Austria, do not design qualifications based on units and do not intend to introduce this principle into qualification design.



Obviously, depending on the system-level conditions, the use of units of learning outcomes as part of ECVET testing differed. However, the projects showed that these system-level features do not make the use of ECVET impossible between, for example, France, which uses units and Germany, which does not.

When it comes to the relationship between units that can be achieved through mobility and the national system, the projects showed that:

- Where units exist in the home system, it may be possible to achieve a full unit abroad and to gain recognition for it on return. However, the duration of mobility has to make this possible.
- When it is not possible to achieve the full unit abroad (due to time constraints or because the required theoretical knowledge is better taught in the students' mother tongue), several project partners enabled students to achieve part of an existing unit in the host institution.
- Many of the projects had project partners from systems where units do not exist as parts of qualifications. These projects identified 'mobility units', which bring together learning outcomes that are part of the qualification the person is preparing. Upon return, the achievement of these learning outcomes is validated, i.e. the learner does not have to repeat the learning activities. However, there is no certification or recognition of the unit in the form of exemption from a final assessment.

The ECVET pilot projects also needed to decide on how to group learning outcomes to create units. Overall, there is a clear tendency to use occupational activities or work tasks as a basis for identifying units, rather than the qualification standard or the curriculum.

The projects found different ways of relating the units to the qualifications in focus. Some projects developed units of learning outcomes as reference descriptions for the entire qualification. Others developed 'mobility units' that are linked to parts of a qualification only.

The project VaLOGReg used yet another approach, by putting emphasis on the identification of comparability regarding the description and the assessment of learning outcomes in one country and the acceptance of assessment by foreign partner institutions in the context of transnational mobility. Whether and how these learning outcomes are grouped into units is, according to this project, a matter for the respective VET systems.

3 Assessment

'Assessment of learning outcomes' means methods and processes used to establish the extent to which a learner has in fact attained particular knowledge, skills and competence.

ECVET Recommendation

In principle, credit transfer in ECVET is based on the fact that one institution accepts the assessment of learning outcomes made by another institution. The experience of ECVET pilot projects shows that, depending on the approach taken by the partner institutions, the implications of carrying out learners' assessment abroad will vary. In some examples, assessment during mobility can serve as a basis for the validation and recognition of units of learning outcomes when learners' credit is being transferred and accumulated. In these cases, the unit (or part of unit) of learning outcomes achieved abroad is not assessed again in the home institution (see also the section on validation and recognition). In other cases, the assessment has a formative role, which means the assessment makes learners' progress during mobility visible. The content of a mobility period is clarified and learners as well as their teachers or trainers have a good understanding of what the person achieved abroad.

Different assessment methods and procedures to be used in the framework of geographical mobility of learners were developed:

- In one project (ECVET ASSET), the project partners developed and described a common assessment method. In another project (OPIR), the project partners left the choice of methods for each training centre to define, however, they used the same assessment criteria and assessment grids;
- Also in other projects, the choice of assessment methods was left for the training centres to decide. The assessment was not necessarily guided by common agreed assessment criteria and indicators, but was based on the learning outcomes descriptions. The project partners were provided with templates to record the assessment in a transparent manner;
- Projects which used occupational activities or work processes as the basis for the definition of units of learning outcomes based their assessment methods and procedures on mastering certain work tasks. Assessment criteria related to the levels of performance expected (e.g. in the AEROVET project).

It was discovered that it is important to ensure that learners are being assessed fairly and against the same standards (not higher or lower) as if they were assessed in the home institution. Therefore, the ECVET pilot projects discussed and developed procedures for establishing mutual trust in the assessment that takes place abroad. These procedures involved mutual study visits of representatives from sending and hosting institutions beforehand or the development of common quality standards.

4 Validation and recognition

The projects explored the possibilities and procedures for validating and recognising (units of) learning outcomes achieved abroad. Their experiences clearly show that there is a different scope for validation and recognition depending on the rules in the home VET system. In particular, this depends on whether the home system enables:

- VET providers to recognise (units of) learning outcomes assessed abroad; or
- progressive accumulation of learning outcomes.

In some systems recognition, as understood in the ECVET context, seems to clash with existing regulations and the accumulation of learning outcomes (structured into units) is not possible. For example, this is the case in those systems where the award of a qualification is based on a final (holistic) exam and it is not possible to grant exemption for parts of this final exam based on the recognition of learning outcomes achieved abroad. In these cases, recognition does not take the form of an award of a unit or exemption from an assessment.

However, teachers and trainers are able to validate and recognise the progress learners' make while abroad and the mobility can still be fully integrated into the training pathway. As mentioned above, clear learning objectives can be set out for the mobility phase against which learners are assessed. Teachers and trainers in the home institution can use the results of the assessment as the basis for further developing the training pathway of the individual.

'Validation of learning outcomes' means the process of confirming that certain assessed learning outcomes achieved by a learner correspond to specific outcomes which may be required for a unit or a qualification.

'Recognition of learning outcomes' means the process of attesting officially achieved learning outcomes through the awarding of units or qualifications.

ECVET Recommendation

5 Documentation

Projects have developed and tested templates for ECVET-related documents, such as Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), Learning Agreements (LA), and Transcripts of Records. These documents are important elements for establishing mutual trust.

When working with ECVET in a partnership, it is important to clarify who needs to be involved in the development of the MoU and who needs to sign it. A wide range of contexts and situations were represented in the ECVET pilot projects:

- Several pilot projects included ministries as national level competent institutions. All these projects recognised that it would not be sustainable to expect MoUs to be signed at the level of ministries. The Italian partners in the M.O.T.O project involved regions in the signing of MoUs. In the OPIR project, the ministry was involved in the development of the MoU, but in the future this role will be delegated to providers.

A MoU is an agreement between competent institutions which sets the framework for credit transfer. It formalises the ECVET partnership by stating the mutual acceptance of the status and procedures of competent institutions involved. It also establishes partnerships' procedures for cooperation.

ECVET Questions & Answers

A Learning Agreement is an individualised document which sets out the conditions for a specific mobility period. It specifies, for a particular learner, which learning outcomes and units should be achieved together with the associated ECVET points.

The Learning Agreement also lays down that, if the learner achieves the expected learning outcomes and these are positively assessed by the 'hosting' institution, the 'home' institution will validate and recognise them as part of the requirements for a qualification. Therefore, the Learning Agreement constitutes a commitment to the learner that his/her achievement, if in line with the expectations, will be recognised.

ECVET Questions & Answers

The personal transcript is a record of learning achievements. It contains information on learners' assessed learning outcomes, units and ECVET points awarded. It also specifies the identity of the learner and the competent institution(s) that assessed, validated and recognised learners' credit.

ECVET Questions & Answers

- The competent institutions for master craftsperson qualifications are usually (national or regional) chambers. Thus, the chambers need to be involved in developing the MoU.
- In some countries training providers are considered to be competent institutions and can therefore conclude a MoU. For example, in the M.O.T.O. project, MoUs were concluded between training providers in Finland and Iceland.

Some projects decided to combine LA and the Transcript of Records in order to reduce the number of documents (e.g. SME MASTER Plus). In some cases, the EUROPASS mobility is used for recording the learning periods abroad as well as the learning outcomes achieved (e.g. in the CREDCHEM project). The project CAPE-SV (working on the conditions for mobility of professionals in the sector of performing arts) used types of evidence like portfolios containing concepts and references to prove the achievement of specific learning outcomes – reflecting common practices in the sector.

Many examples and templates for the ECVET-related documentation can be found in **the pilot projects' toolbox.**

6 ECVET points

'ECVET points' means a numerical representation of the overall weight of learning outcomes in a qualification and of the relative weight of units in relation to the qualification.

ECVET Recommendation

The ECVET pilot projects have discussed and partly tested the use of ECVET points in geographical mobility. Overall, it can be said that many projects believe that ECVET is possible without points and that points have little value, in particular in those VET systems which do not use them at national level. All projects emphasised the need to communicate that in ECVET, transfer is about learning outcomes (grouped in units) and not about points.

However, in systems where credit points are used at national level, for example in Finland, there is clear willingness to use the points and their added value within the national system is perceived. Obviously, ECVET points are only meaningful if they are allocated to all parts of a qualification and if learners or other actors can use the points to easily identify the part of the qualification that has already been achieved.

7 What was the main added value observed?

The following section outlines examples of concrete improvements that could be noted through using ECVET for students' mobility or lifelong learning.

- Allocating clear learning objectives to mobility periods

Most pilot projects would agree that the main added value of ECVET is related to the fact that it helps to clarify the concrete learning objectives of mobility periods. Where ECVET is used as part of a structured exchange of learners between partner institutions, it is a useful tool to develop an agreement between partner institutions over what a learner should achieve while abroad.

The definition of (units of) learning outcomes for mobility periods and their recording in a Learning Agreement support the learner as well as the host institution. The learner is informed of what s/he is expected to achieve while abroad. The host organisation, be it a training centre or a company, receives clear information on what the learner is expected to know and be able to do on their return to their home country.

- Integrating mobility into training pathways

The Learning Agreement defines what learning outcomes students are expected to acquire abroad. The assessment abroad and the recording of its result make it possible for learners to seamlessly build on what they learned abroad when they return. Teachers and trainers in the host institution receive reliable information on what the learner has mastered during his/her stay in the host institution and can plan learning activities which build on the newly acquired knowledge and skills. Thus, the mobility period becomes integrated into the training pathway.

The use of learning outcomes and their assessment also support the quality assurance of this process. For example, if a learner fails to reach the expected learning outcomes, home and host organisations can identify the reasons for that more easily: Were the learning activities provided abroad adequate? Were the learning outcomes specified and set at the appropriate level for the given learner? Did the assessor abroad understand correctly the level of performance expected?

- Supporting individualised approaches

As a result of the above, the use of ECVET supports pedagogies that enable flexibility in how learning is organised and adjusted to learners' progression and achievements. For instance, while a number of students are abroad, the rest of the class continue their learning in the home institution (or work-based context). If on return, the mobile learners are expected to have learnt exactly the same thing as their classmates without any acknowledgement of the difference, they will have little motivation to go abroad. Forms of recognition that acknowledge the progress made by the learner abroad are likely to be more encouraging.

- Putting emphasis on learning outcomes rather than the curriculum

ECVET enables the comparison of qualifications and learners' achievements. While curricula from different countries differ greatly, the expected outcomes are often highly comparable. In fact, all the projects identified transferable elements that can be achieved during learners' mobility.

The emphasis on learning outcomes was also appreciated by projects which were focusing on the use of ECVET in a lifelong learning perspective. Learning outcomes were at the core of the approach developed by the project Be-TWIN to enable transition between VET and higher education and vice-versa using ECVET and ECTS.

- Focusing on similarities and valorising differences

While most of the projects focused their work on identifying similarities between qualifications and supporting the transfer of learning outcomes that are convergent, a few also enabled the valorisation of differences. For example, the SME MASTER Plus project recognised that in certain cases future master crafts persons want to go abroad to learn about specific aspects that are not standard practice in their country or region. For example, bakers were interested in learning about other ways of preparing bread and dough.

8 Conclusions and lessons learnt

Beyond the conclusions and recommendations of each specific project, the following overall conclusions and lessons learnt can be formulated as a result of three years of ECVET testing and experimentation:

- ECVET is a tool to reach more tangible goals and its use and implementation is not an objective in its own right. That is why there is no 'one-way' of using the principles and technical specifications at the core of this instrument.
- There is no harm in developing different approaches, as long as the principles of learning outcomes, transparency, documentation and mutual recognition, including assessment and validation, are respected. The pilot projects show that if these principles are respected, very different VET systems (e.g. using units, not using units) can communicate and transfer what a learner has achieved abroad.
- It cannot be denied that using ECVET in geographical mobility is in the beginning connected with certain additional efforts for the organisations involved and they probably need to receive support and guidance in this initial phase. However, the experience already shows that these efforts pay off and become a lot easier as the mobility exchanges continue and trainers and teachers become familiar with the tools and concepts.

- The full added value of ECVET will become apparent in particular for learners who will take part in longer-term mobility. The minimum duration for learners to acquire a coherent set of learning outcomes that can be assessed and validated is several weeks.
- The experience from the ECVET pilot projects shows that not all ECVET principles could be implemented in practice in all VET systems. There are aspects of ECVET that are difficult to apply in certain contexts and some were even contested. For example, recognition does not always result in exemption from assessments, and the added value of ECVET points was questioned by the majority of project partners from systems that do not use points on a national level. However, these issues depend highly on the national and systemic context. Therefore, they should be discussed according to the VET-system in place - in order to ensure that 'lessons learnt' are put into perspective and the respective context of the key messages conveyed is clear.
- The progressive implementation of ECVET takes place in parallel to other processes: the development of qualifications frameworks, support of individualised pathways or the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. These reforms and developments of VET are also based on the use of learning outcomes and their assessment. As these core concepts are becoming better known and understood, the use of ECVET will become easier and more common.

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An article by Daniela Uličná (GHK Consulting)

What are the necessary conditions to implement ECVET?

Summary of the results of the second day of discussions during the final conference of ECVET pilot projects

> [Member States should] create the necessary conditions and adopt measures, as appropriate, so that as from 2012 – in accordance with national legislation and practice, and on the basis of trials and testing – it is possible for ECVET to be gradually applied to VET qualifications at all levels of the EQF, and used for the purpose of the transfer, recognition and accumulation of individuals' learning outcomes achieved in formal and, where appropriate, non-formal and informal contexts.

ECVET Recommendation[1]

The ECVET Recommendation states that as of 2012, Member States should create the necessary conditions to gradually start implementing ECVET. The work the ECVET pilot projects completed in the period 2008-2012 is expected to feed into this process. The testing of ECVET is designed to help Member States and stakeholders identify what these 'necessary conditions' are in their specific context. It is therefore understandable, that the second day of the final conference on the work of the ECVET pilot projects, focused on this more forward looking discussion - after having discussed the specific projects' outcomes on the first day. Beside the work undertaken by the pilot projects, the reflections on the 'necessary conditions' included the system level work conducted by Member States , the work of the ECVET Users' Group, as well as that of the second generation of pilot projects, focusing more on the national implementation of ECVET[2].

This article summarises the main issues raised during the conference with an objective to nurture the subsequent discussions and decisions.

Need for clear policy vision for ECVET at system level

Several interventions during the conference highlighted the fact that there was already demand for using ECVET. It from the VET providers who are interested in enhancing their international cooperation or from stakeholders who want to see more learner mobility in Europe, or from those who aim to support the recognition of individuals' prior learning achievements (be it achievements from formal learning or in other learning contexts). However, a clear policy framework is missing and countries have not yet clarified what it means in practice to use ECVET in their system: including the requirements and conditions.

1 http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2009:155:0011:0018:EN:PDF

2 See also the ECVET Magazine issues 6 and 7

The Cedefop presentation, based on the publication on ***ECVET Development in Europe 2011***[3], noted that:

> *While many VET systems demonstrate 'ECVET readiness', only a few Member States' representatives believe that their countries will be prepared to start implementation of ECVET soon.*

'ECVET readiness' means that Member States use learning outcomes, unitisation or modularisation of qualifications and this is complemented by the use of validation procedures. Furthermore, several countries already have credit systems in place or are developing their use in vocational education and training.[4]

Nevertheless, some countries have already made clear commitments to ECVET, for example: Finland, Belgium (French Speaking Community), and Latvia. The vision underpinning the use of ECVET in these countries differs greatly: while for example in Finland, the main driver is the internationalisation of VET and transnational mobility of learners, in Belgium (French Speaking Community), it is mainly about avoiding early school leaving and improving qualification completion. Others, like France and Malta, in the context of the second generation projects, are analysing the systemic conditions which facilitate or hinder ECVET implementation within their systems.

Until there is more clarity about system-level strategies to work with ECVET, bottom-up initiatives and the work of pilots will not be able to be mainstreamed due to the lack of clear references and 'ground rules' within a given system. As shown by the work of the pilot projects (see other articles in this issue), the ECVET Recommendation gives a very generic framework, but this can be interpreted differently, depending on the needs and system-level conditions. Therefore, certain top-down decisions will need to be made to bridge with the bottom-up initiatives.

Hélène Clark, Director, European Commission, DG Education and Culture

Emphasis on the quality of transnational mobility experience

Ms Alison Crabb from the European Commission, DG Education and Culture, presented the proposal for the future 'Erasmus for All' programme that is to replace the current Lifelong Learning Programme together with some other programmes (mainly Youth in Action, but also others). She also emphasised the ambitious benchmark for mobility that was agreed in December 2011. This states that as of 2020, at least 6% of people holding initial VET qualifications (aged 18-34) should have completed at least two weeks of mobility experiences (including work-placements)[5]. To echo this ambitious benchmark, the new programme is to fund more student mobility in VET than the current Lifelong Learning programme: the proposed budget could fund the mobility of 735 000 beneficiaries in VET[6] (while the figure is going to be below 500 000 for the period 2007-2013).

Alison Crabb, Deputy Head of Unit, European Commission, DG Education and Culture

3 Cedefop (2012) *ECVET Development in Europe 2011* http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/6114_en.pdf

4 Idem p.47-48

5 For more information see: Council conclusions on a benchmark for learning mobility http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/126380.pdf

6 For more information about the proposal see the Commission Communication *ERASMUS FOR ALL: The EU Programme for Education, Training, Youth and Sport:* http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus-for-all/doc/com_en.pdf

Richard Maniak, ECVET support team

Next to the numbers of learners, the Commission proposal also states that:

> *The main criterion for funding [of mobility] will be quality, demonstrated through educational content and teaching and learning methods,* ***recognition of learning outcomes****, linguistic and intercultural preparation, and improved arrangements within host organisations.*

This emphasis on the quality of mobility, including recognition, creates positive conditions for the implementation and use of ECVET within the new programme. Even though the extent to which this will be explicitly required or not (as it is the case for ECTS or similar credit systems in the Erasmus University Charter[7]), is not yet clear.

Reacting to this presentation, Richard Maniak from the French Ministry of Education, representing the ECVET Team at the conference, noted that one of the dangers of the future programme and the benchmark is that organisations are more likely to focus on numbers (to meet the benchmark) than on the quality. ECVET is most suitable for mobility which is of a longer duration and where learners can acquire a more substantial set of knowledge, skills and competence. Therefore, the new programme should also clearly strengthen mobility which is of longer duration.

Demand for structures that can support VET providers

ECVET is a novelty. Even though some features of ECVET are already present in some VET systems, the international dimension that ECVET brings is new for all. Christian Sperle, from the German Chambers of Crafts and the European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises, highlighted in his presentation the need for support structures that will accompany VET providers in working with ECVET. This point was echoed in several presentations on the first day in which presenters noted the need for system-specific advice and guidance on how to work with ECVET.

Peter Thiele, German Federal Ministry of Education

Such support structures are necessary for two reasons:

- On the one hand, they should avoid over-burdening teachers, trainers and assessors. They should explain the most efficient ways of working with ECVET to actors on the ground, so they do not have to reinvent the wheel each time a VET provider starts using ECVET;
- On the other hand, they support a certain minimum homogeneity and quality in the way in which ECVET is used and the concepts are understood. This does not mean promoting only one approach to using ECVET. Instead, it means ensuring that aspects, such as the descriptions of units of learning outcomes, are of good quality or that the learning agreements are clear.

As Peter Thiele from the German Federal Ministry of Education emphasised in the final panel discussion, it is good that there is a diversity of solutions, but we should not forget the core ECVET principles and the need to ensure that these are commonly understood and applied.

7 For more information see: http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus/doc/eucstandard_en.pdf

The question remains about who could be these advisors and how would they be funded. One solution is the national networks of ECVET experts, coordinated by the Lifelong Learning Programme Agencies that have recently begun to operate. In some countries, existing structures such as chambers already have the necessary expertise to support VET providers, on topics such as ECVET. Finally, as noted by Thierry Joseph - principal of a French VET school - during the final panel discussion, VET providers may need to support staff (possibly part time) working on mobility issues exclusively. This would be similar, though most likely on a smaller scale, to the role of the international centres/units in higher education institutions.

Finally, Anne Potters, from the Dutch National Agency for the Lifelong Learning Programme, also insisted on the need to communicate with and provide support to those who are to begin using ECVET. In this context she provided information about the work the Lifelong Learning Programme National Agencies are doing jointly in developing a toolbox and common templates to work with ECVET.

Carita Blomqvist, Finnish National Board of Education

Enhancing acceptance of differences

ECVET was designed to support credit transfer and recognition and hence to promote openness of VET systems, programmes and pathways. Openness is about accepting difference, noted Carita Blomqvist from the Finnish National Board of Education, during the final panel discussion. ECVET will only achieve its ultimate goal if the competent authorities as well as VET providers agree to recognise credit; even if the details of learning outcomes or qualifications from abroad are somewhat different. Ms Blomqvist reminded the participants that a valuable concept used in qualification recognition is that of substantial difference: unless there is substantial difference, it should be possible to recognise credit from abroad and that is what ECVET was designed for. ECVET has a number of elements that enable VET providers and competent institutions to ensure the quality of learning outcomes and assessment completed abroad. Therefore, ECVET can be used to individualise learning pathways and give new opportunities to mobile young people and adults.

Erik Hess, Policy Officer at the European Commission, DG Education and Culture, summarised the panel discussion by pointing out three levels to take the implementation process of ECVET forward:

- Stakeholders exploit the results from the ground with a view to feeding them systematically into the community of practice;
- Member states safeguard the institutional and political environment needed for the ECVET implementation; and
- The Commission boosts this work and develops further supportive instruments like guiding notes and templates via the established cooperation with the key players.

Erik Hess, Policy Officer at the European Commission, DG Education and Culture

FOCUS

An article by Anette Curth, GHK Consulting

Learning Outcomes of the FINECVET initiative:

Final Conference in Helsinki on 15 March 2012

The 'Finland-Estonia ECVET band': during an exchange project between three arts and music colleges from Finland and Estonia, the Soome Eesti ECVET Band has been founded. The band members are Finnish and Estonian students. In a transnational mobility project, the students had the chance to perform pop songs in folk arrangements with traditional Nordic instruments. ECVET has been found to be an excellent tool to organise the mobility phase and enable the recognition of the learning outcomes.

From the beginning, Finland has been at the forefront of the process of introducing ECVET in Europe. Under the title 'FINECVET 1-3', a broad range of strategies and initiatives have been launched at national level. ECVET was seen as a valuable tool to help Finland to improve its national policy regarding three main goals: achieve better recognition of prior learning in VET, promote the mobility of VET students and support the reform of the educational system.

A wide variety of national actors and stakeholders as well as international partners were involved in FINECVET. On 15 March, the outcomes of the FINECVET initiative were presented in a conference at the Finnish National Board of Education in Helsinki. As a result, after almost six years of testing and development, a strong commitment to implement ECVET at national level can be stated.

State of play in Finland

Finland has taken part in the Thematic Working Groups that developed and conceptualised ECVET from 2002 on. The FINECVET initiative was launched in three stages: after the first piloting phase (FINECVET I: 2004-2005), the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture issued a commitment to test and gradually implement ECVET. Two more FINECVET projects were implemented: FINECVET II (2006-2007) and FINECVET III (2009-2011).

The testing brought to light that the Finnish VET-system is basically ECVET-friendly. Several favourable conditions for the implementation of ECVET were identified:

- The VET system in Finland already works with units and modules;
- The VET system in Finland already works with learning outcomes;
- Credit points are used for upper secondary vocational qualifications;
- The system allows for the recognition of prior learning;
- Finnish VET-providers have the status as competent authorities and thus are able to issue certifications for the recognition of qualifications.

Nevertheless, several challenges have also been identified:

- There is no procedure for the allocation of ECVET credit points to competence based qualifications in place;

- Procedures to reach mutual understanding with qualification committees and transnational partners and for assessment and validation, had to be developed;
- Quality assurance criteria had to be developed;
- Information about ECVET had to be communicated to teachers and learners.

During the different phases of FINECVET, a wide range of actors and stakeholders (governmental institutions, VET-providers, qualification committees, employers and teachers) worked on practical solutions for the above mentioned questions.

As a result, the Ministry of Education and Culture decided in 2011 to implement ECVET in all Finnish VET qualifications as of 2014. The Ministry and the Finnish National Board of Education will issue revised requirements for vocational qualifications – based on learning outcomes – throughout 2012-2013. Statutes and regulations to VET-guidelines will be made consecutively.

As from 2014 on, all Finnish VET providers will use ECVET. To make this possible, a comprehensive action plan for the information and training of all stakeholders will be implemented.

FINECVET goals, objectives and lessons learnt

Hanna Autere, the Counsellor of Education who led FINECVET II and III at the Finnish National Board of Education, presented the main goals, objectives and 'learning outcomes' of FINECVET. The piloting phase comprised eight initial VET-qualifications, four further vocational qualifications and three specialist vocational qualifications from the sectors of **technology and transport, business and administration, social services and health and culture**. For these qualifications, units of learning outcomes were tested. Beyond that, the main objectives of the final FINECVET phase were to work on 'ECVET-proof' procedures for transnational mobility, with a focus on the ECVET-related documentation and aspects of quality assurance.

Hanna Autere listed the main lessons learnt:

- If a country wants to implement ECEVT on national level, the main added value needs to be clarified throughout the testing;
- Thus, pilot initiatives are necessary;
- A strong political commitment is needed;
- Cooperation between all stakeholders at all levels is necessary;
- The process has to be kept simple and understandable – a focus on the process and the learning outcomes is helpful to achieve this;
- The training of all stakeholders needs to be well planned and takes time;
- It might be useful if the NQF and the ECVET preparations were pursued at the same time and in coordination;
- The implementation should be taken forward step by step - it is not possible to achieve everything at once.

As a main outcome, a FINECVET handbook for VET providers and qualification committees was aimed to be developed. The 'FINECVET guide'[1] is now available (in the Finnish language and in Swedish and a version in English is forthcoming).

1 http://www.finecvet.fi/pages/images/stories/tiedostot/2012/987453_FINECVET-raportti_VERKKOON.pdf

The guide contains information on the concept and the process of ECVET mobility, on using ECVET in recognising learning outcomes assessed abroad, and on opportunities for ECVET in skills competitions. It also contains information about the relevant actors in ECVET, examples of templates for the ECVET related documentation and a glossary.

FINECVET success factors and learning outcomes

Throughout the conference, VET-institutions presented examples of the outcomes of several sub-projects of the FINECVET-initiative, together with their international partners.

ECVET before mobility and essential documentation:

Maarit Saarenkyla, International Coordinator at the Joint Authority of Education in Espoo Region, Omnia (FI) and Sasha Cimperman, International Coordinator in the Secondary School of Pharmacy, Cosmetics and Health Care (SI), took part in a sub-project that focused on the development of good practice for the ECVET documentation. They emphasised that it is essential to agree on the full set of documentation before the students go abroad – so the phase before mobility is very work-intensive. However, the partners concluded that it pays off to invest time particularly in preparing the Memorandum of Understanding. This document was seen as a general agreement between home and host institutions, which sets the basis for cooperation and lists the responsibilities of the partners. Specifically, partners should agree on what units will be used, how these units will be assessed, validated and recognised. Furthermore, it is important to point out who will assess the students and what status the person or institution has, for instance, is it a teacher, a trainer in a company or a representative of the competent institution. The assessment criteria should also be stated.

Another ECVET related document, the Learning Agreement for students, should precisely define the details of the on-the job learning period abroad. Since the content of these documents needs to be discussed between partners, fieldwork was seen as essential. Partners need to work together closely and get to know their respective manners of teaching, ways of working with students, methods of assessment, etc., to establish sustainable partnerships and mutual trust.

Examples of learning outcomes:

Susanna Vestling, International Coordinator from 'The Federation of Swedish Ostrobothnia for Education and Culture' (FI) and Ritva Saastamoinen, External Relations Manager in Helsinki Business College (FI), presented examples of how the FINECVET partners defined learning outcomes. The definitions can be based on the national qualification requirements since all vocational education and training in Finland is based on learning outcomes. Nevertheless, the terms: knowledge, skills and competence are not used in the National Requirements. Instead, the learning outcomes (Finnish targets of assessments) are defined as:

1. Mastering of work processes;
2. Mastering of tasks, working methods, tools and materials;
3. Mastering of knowledge that forms the foundation for work;

4. Life-long learning key competencies common to all qualifications. Hence, the learning outcomes – what the student has to master in relation to a specific work process – were specified according to the above mentioned criteria and described in terms of knowledge, skills and competences. Compatibility with EQF was also aimed at: the VET-qualifications in focus are foreseen to be placed on EQF level 4.

Cooperation between qualification authorities

In another sub–project of FINECVET, Juha-Ville Maekinen, a member of one of the Finnish Qualification Committees (FI) and Maaja-Katrin Kerem, Director of the Estonian Qualification Authority (EE), reported about the successful cooperation they have developed. Since there is a high degree of workers' mobility between the Finnish and Estonian labour market, a lesson learned is that it is important to implement cooperation between awarding bodies and competent institutions to define the ways of governing this practical field of ECVCET implementation.

In both countries, the qualification committees award 'competence' when talking about competence based qualifications. With regard to ECVET, both awarding bodies in both countries have to decide and define:

- the ways in which learning outcomes will be recognised in qualifications;
- the conditions for assessment methods and procedures;
- the quality assurance procedures of assessment, validation and recognition.

As a result, methods for the transfer and recognition of learning outcomes in the piloted qualification between both countries have been developed.

The Estonian partner emphasised that although in Estonia, ECVET is not implemented yet and the national strategies and policies are not clear, it was possible to develop and implement the transfer of learning outcomes. The subproject was regarded as very helpful; awarding bodies and employers' committees from both countries succeeded in establishing mutual trust and achieving real practical results in improving recognised mobility. They passed on the message that stakeholders do not need to wait until national policies are worked out in detail: it is possible to start working and achieve very valuable results on their own.

Finland also participated in M.O.T.O., a ECVET pilot project, that developed a recognition model to enhance the professional and geographical mobility of workers in the tourism and catering sector

Next steps

The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture and the Finnish National Board of Education share the responsibility for further implementation of ECVET in Finland. CIMO, the Finnish National Agency, will also support the process through information, guidance and funding. It has been decided that the implementation will start by using ECVET for the transnational mobility rather than for lifelong learning.

Mobility statistics show that the figures for mobility in higher education have grown steadily over the past years, while the figures for mobility in VET are fluctuating more: while 25.5% of university students and 13.1% of students in universities of applied sciences in 2010 spent a period of their studies abroad, only 11-12% of VET students took part in mobility. In European terms, this is a high number for VET, since most countries send an estimated 1-2% of their students in VET abroad, but in Finland the aim has already been set higher for many years.

Mika Saarinen, Head of Unit in CIMO, summed up the next steps regarding ECVET implementation:

- A new initiative for 2012-2013, implementing a group of ECVET experts has just been launched. Thirteen experts from a range of VET colleges and apprenticeship offices - most of them previously involved in FINECVET - will support the national implementation of ECVET in Finland in the next two years and will help to produce enhanced knowledge and understanding of ECVET among different players within VET. The experts – supported by stakeholders and decision makers - will carry out a number of activities like seminars and workshops, publish information and provide personal guidance and support.
- More mobility piloting actions are needed. It is aimed to establish closer links with those projects working with ECVET that have been funded by the European Leonardo programme on both national and European level. From 2013 onwards, the application forms for Leonardo funding will be amended to better suit the ECVET demand: the terminology and the questions will be adapted in order to match the terms and technical specifications mentioned in the ECVET recommendation.
- The new European program 'Erasmus for all' provides opportunities to continue with ECVET activities – the implementation of concrete mobility projects as well as the establishment of partnerships.

Concluding, Mika Saarinen stated that Finland went through several very extensive phases when executing FINECVET. Although the Finnish VET-system was found to be very ECVET-friendly from the beginning, FINECVET was necessary to develop and agree on functional procedures and measures that also work in cooperation with international partners.

Without FINECVET, Finland would not be where it is today: having reached a decision at the national level to start with the comprehensive implementation of ECVET.

More about FINECVET:

http://www.finecvet.fi

http://www.oph.fi/english

FINNISH NATIONAL
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What's New

Second report on 'The development of ECVET in Europe' available

In 2011, Cedefop has undertaken a second mapping of ECVET development in European Countries. The published report focuses on strategies for implementing the European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET) in Member States of the European Union, two countries of the European Economic Area (Liechtenstein and Norway) and two candidate countries (former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey).

The 2010 ECVET monitoring identified four factors supportive of ECVET implementation: policy decision; legal basis; technical and practical features; evaluation and feed-back loop. In the second report, the list of supportive factors needed for cultural change towards the learning outcomes approach is expanded: Interviewees from all countries emphasised that stakeholder need clarity on ECVET related matters - clear statements at ministerial levels and from major stakeholder organisations on the potential and added value of ECVET are required.

Another essential factor is the dissemination of the policy decision taken across education and training. Member States are found to be investing much in this aspect. They are organising events, setting up websites, and institutionalising ECVET by creating ECVET national coordination points.

The mapping is expected to be regularly updated. It can be downloaded from the CEDEFOP website: **http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/6114_en.pdf**

Assuring the quality of VET qualifications - The contribution of the EU tools (EQAVET, EQF, ECVET) to the definition and re-definition of learning outcomes based standards

Report on EQAVET-ECVET-EQF Joint Seminar
14-15 November 2011 in Bonn (DE) now available

In Europe, VET systems are currently undertaking efforts to ensure that VET qualifications meet the highest quality standards and maintain their relevance in rapidly changing economies. In many systems, the shift to learning outcomes is seen as an important facilitator of change.

EQAVET, EQF and ECVET, the tools on the European VET Agenda, all endorse the learning outcomes approach and aim to serve as reference frameworks to increase the quality, flexibility and transparency of VET qualifications in Europe. In order to enhance the coordination between these tools, the Secretariats of the three referring networks organised a joint seminar: 'Assuring the quality of VET qualifications – The contribution of EU tools to the definition and re-definition of learning outcomes based standards'.

The seminar was held on 14 and 15 November 2011 in Bonn and was hosted by the National Agency Education for Europe at the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training. The joint seminar provided a forum for national stakeholders involved in the development of learning outcomes standards to consider how to make best use of the tools and enhance co-operation in their implementation.

A report has now been published that presents key messages from the joint seminar and suggestions for future action - a need to focus on strategy planning for the coherent implementation of the tools was stated. Simplification, synergy and sustainability should be emphasised; co-operation and co-ordination based on issues of common interests should be pursued. A Commission proposal to organise a similar joint seminar in 2012 was welcomed.

The report on the EQAVET-ECVET-EQF Joint Seminar is available here: **http://www.eqavet.eu/gns/what-we-do/joint-seminar.aspx**

Increasing the relevance of education and training to the labour market - The role of the social partners in implementing European tools and principles

Joint Conference of Cedefop and the Social Partners - European Parliament, Brussels, 24 and 25 November 2011

In November 2011, Cedefop and the social partners jointly organised a conference to address the challenges involved in implementing the European tools and principles for education, training and learning. By providing an updated overview of developments, the conference allowed for a systematic discussion on how social partners can contribute to further strengthening the relevance and impact of these initiatives.

The event presented the tools and instruments in a broader European context of education and training and employment and this made clear that these initiatives cannot operate on their own but need to be linked to a wider policy strategy. This joint event offered a rare opportunity to go beyond the traditional group of European and national policy-makers, and discuss the role of employers and trade unions in implementing the tools and principles. .

More information can be found here: **http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/events/18446.aspx**

The ECVET Magazine is published five times per year and informs about the latest developments related to ECVET, the ECVET Network and the pilot projects.

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