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Instruments to connect VET systems within the European Union

1 The European Union and its tools and regulations in education and training

The European Union (EU) is “a unique economic and political partnership between 28 European countries that together cover much of the continent” (EU 2013); a further five states have the status of so-called candidate countries. Approximately 500 million people (thus approximately 7.3 % of the world population) live in an area of 4.38 million km², that features 24 different official languages. One of the EU's specific characteristics is the diversity and variety of its people, countries and systems.

The EU is based on the rule of law. Every action taken by the EU is founded on treaties that have been approved voluntarily and democratically by all EU countries. The treaties are negotiated and agreed by all the EU Member States and then ratified by their parliaments or by referendum. In general, the EU Member States retain all powers not explicitly handed to the European Union: in some areas the EU enjoys *exclusive competence* (e.g. the customs union or the common commercial policy); in other areas the EU and its Member States *share the competence* to legislate. And there is a third category of policy areas in which the EU can only co-ordinate, support and supplement member state action but cannot enact legislation with the aim of harmonising national laws (European Commission 2012). Within this category (“*supporting competence*”) we also find “**education, youth, sport and vocational training**”. According to the principle of subsidiarity there are no common EU laws for education and training that go before national law.

The so-called recommendations are the “strongest” means of EU legislation in education to set up rules and goals. In contrary to regulations, directives and decisions, recommendations are not binding for the Member States. They are negotiated and voted on according to the appropriate procedure and although they lack legal force they do bear political weight (EU 2013, EC 2012). Recommendations have been set by the Council and by the European Parliament for the EQF, ECVET, EQAVET and for the validation of non-formal and informal learning to which this paper will refer below.

To summarize the competencies and responsibilities in education and training: each Member State is responsible for the organisation of its education and training systems and the content of teaching programmes. The Union's role is to contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action.

2 The growing importance of Vocational Education and Training

Both education and training *and* science have long been neglected policy areas in the EU. Only at the beginning of the new millennium and the change to a knowledge-based society did the relevant EU institutions realise that education and science had become crucial for economic growth and welfare. In March 2000 in **Lisbon**, the European Council set a target for making the EU the most competitive and most dynamic knowledge-based economic area in the world – an economic area capable of achieving lasting economic growth developing more and better jobs and greater social cohesion. As we all know, this goal has not been achieved, but the Lisbon Strategy contributed outstanding impetus to EU education and training policies. It defined knowledge and innovation as the EU's most valuable assets, particularly in light of increasing global competition and it pointed out – for the first time with such clarity – that both general and vocational education are an integral part of this strategy.

In 2002, the **Copenhagen Process** established political priorities for the achievement of the Lisbon Strategy in vocational education and training. It defined four priorities:

- strengthening of the European dimension in vocational education and training
- improvement of transparency, information and counselling (European curriculum vitae, diploma supplements, Europass, uniform European framework for foreign language learning)
- recognition of competences and qualifications, including non-formal and informal learning
- cooperation in the field of quality assurance

(EC Education and Training 2013; Gramlinger et al. 2011).

These priorities are reflected in the set of transparency instruments that have been put on track as one of the consequences of the Copenhagen Process. EU Member States and the European Commission followed these goals rigorously and strengthened co-operation in 2009 through the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ("ET 2020"), a follow-up to the earlier Education and Training 2010 work programme launched in 2001.

While in the past general and higher education always played a highly relevant role in education policy and discussions, vocational education and training (VET) took on only a minor role the thinking being that it offered less good job and promotion opportunities (e.g. the topic of one of the four ENQA-VET working groups was “making VET more attractive”). However, in the European discussion over the last one or two years, the situation has started to slowly change, not least because work based learning, apprenticeship training and forms of the dual system appear to offer a solution to high (youth) unemployment and the search for quality education and training.

The EU began in 1999 with higher education and the **Bologna Process**, seeking to establish a European Higher Education Area. Its main objective is to ensure more comparable, compatible and coherent systems of higher education in Europe. It is not restricted to European coun-

tries at this moment in time 47 countries are members. The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (**ECTS**) allows for the transfer of learning experiences between different institutions, greater student mobility and more flexible routes to gain degrees (EC DG EAC 2013). ECTS was already initiated in 1989 with an EU-funded project and can now be regarded as a stable pillar of the Bologna Process, although it has also been subject to a lot of criticism. In 2000, the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (**ENQA**) was established to promote European cooperation in the field of quality assurance (QA) in higher education. In 2004, it was transformed into the **European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education**, but its acronym remained the same (ENQA). Since then, ENQA's mission has been to contribute significantly to the maintenance and enhancement of the quality of European higher education at a high level, and to act as a major driving force for the development of quality assurance across all the Bologna signatory countries (www.enqa.eu).

These developments, efforts and structures in higher education have been taken as models for VET (although it has to be said: compared to VET – both national and international or EU-wide – higher education is really easy to handle because the structures are far more similar and comparable): with ENQA as model, a voluntary network named ENQA-VET (European Network for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training) was built; ECVET is to be in line with ECTS. Only the EQF would comprise both vocational and general and higher education.

To support the Copenhagen Process the European Commission installed, in addition to a coordinating steering group, three working groups for the topics “transparency”, “quality assurance” and “credit points system”. The process started in 2002 in Copenhagen – to raise the transparency and efficiency of the European VET systems through closer cooperation of the Member States and the European Commission – was reviewed and prolonged every two years. With bi-annual follow-up conferences in Maastricht (2004), Helsinki (2006), Bordeaux (2008) and Bruges (2010) the strategy was continued and with varying foci specified. Visible outcomes are, inter alia, the Recommendations for the EQF (2008), for ECVET and EQAVET (2009) and the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012).

3 A European set of frameworks, tools and instruments

Today one can read official EU websites online stating: “Better vocational education is vital if Europe is to respond adequately to its challenges of global competition, high numbers of low-skilled workers and young unemployed, and ageing populations.”

(http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/vet_en.htm, 20-09-2013)

This clear “confession” of the importance of VET is one of the outcomes of the work carried out over the last ten years (see chapter 2). Under the topic “*mobility and lifelong learning instruments*” are listed a number of instruments that should “help make qualifications, experiences and skills better appreciated and easier to recognise throughout the EU” (ibid). Due to limited space and the need to focus on TVET, this paper will *not* go into details of

- the **European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System** (ECTS – provides a common basis to recognize higher education study periods abroad):

http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/ects_en.htm)

- the **Diploma Supplement** (DS - accompanies a higher education diploma, provides a standardized description of the common basis for recognizing higher education study periods abroad): http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/ds_en.htm

- the **European Framework of Key Competences** (a tool for policy-makers across the EU that identifies the fundamental skills people need to lead successful lives in today's world):

http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/key_en.htm

From these five presented instruments we will only briefly touch upon Europass at the beginning and concentrate on EQF, ECTS, EQAVET and the validation of non-formal and informal learning and their interrelation.

3.1 Europass

Europass is a European Union initiative, started in 2004, to increase the transparency of qualifications and mobility of citizens in Europe. It aims to be a "Lifelong Learning Portfolio" of documents containing the descriptions of all learning achievements, official qualifications, work experience, skills and competences, acquired over time, along with the related documentation. The goal is to make a person's skills and qualifications clearly understood throughout Europe.

There are five Europass documents: two of them, the **Europass CV** (1) and the **Europass Language Passport** (2) are available through the online portal <http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu> is in 26 languages and can be completed via an interactive tool. Since December 2012 the CV can be accompanied by the **European Skills Passport**, a folder assembling together Europass and other documents attesting qualifications and skills.

The remaining three documents are **Europass Mobility** (3) which records a learning experience abroad, such as an academic exchange or a stage in a company; the **Diploma Supplement** (4), describing the nature, level, context, content and status of any higher education courses that an individual has successfully completed in a standardised way; and finally the **Europass Certificate Supplement** (5), explaining vocational training certificates in terms of skills and abilities, enabling employers to appreciate better what their holders are capable of. All five share a common brand name and logo (see http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/europass_en.htm, <http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu> and EU Parliament and Council 2004).

3.2 EQF

In the first follow-up conference of the Copenhagen Process in Maastricht (2004) the so-called Maastricht Communiqué was adopted. The core content was the agreement to develop a European Qualifications Framework (EQF) as well as a European credit point system for

vocational education and training (ECVET). On 23rd April 2008 the European Parliament and Council adopted the recommendation on the establishment of **the European Qualifications Framework** for lifelong learning (EU Parliament and Council 2008).

The EQF is, without question, the centre-point of all the instruments introduced, aiming to establish a common reference framework as a translation device between different qualification systems and their levels. This framework comprises **general, higher and vocational education and training**, and should lead to much improved transparency, comparability and portability of citizens' qualifications (e.g. diplomas, certificates etc.)

The EQF recommends that each level of qualification should, in principle, be attainable by means of a variety of educational and career paths. This should foster lifelong learning and increase the employability, mobility and social integration of workers and learners. The recommendation should also facilitate building bridges between formal, non-formal and informal learning. The EQF neither replaces nor defines national qualification systems and/or qualifications. It does not describe any particular qualifications or individual competences, but describes the eight EQF levels via descriptors for the three categories "knowledge", "skills" and "competences" (see Annex II of the Recommendation). These eight reference levels build the core of the EQF, describing what a learner knows, understands and is able to do – the so-called **learning outcomes**. Levels of national qualifications will be placed at one of the central reference levels, ranging from basic (Level 1) to advanced (Level 8). This will enable far easier comparison between national qualifications and also help ensure people do not have to repeat their learning if they move to another country. This approach shifts the focus from the traditional system that emphasised on 'learning inputs', such as the length of a learning experience, or type of institution. Parts of the relevant literature speak of a "paradigm shift" from a learning *input* to a learning *outcomes* approach.

The EQF initiative is closely related to the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF EHEA). "The two meta-frameworks have been developed through different, but coordinated processes and with some differences in their objectives, nevertheless each is compatible with the other." (European Commission 2011, 14)

Although there is a great deal of discussion in Europe and abroad (especially on the classification to the 8 levels) the EQF is being implemented all over the continent. An EQF national coordination point has been designated in each country. An EQF advisory group brings together representatives from national authorities and other stakeholders at a European level to help with the implementation of the framework. Its work is augmented by the EU-wide Learning Outcomes Group which supports debate and peer learning on relevant issues. Most Member States are developing their own National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) based on learning outcomes. Several countries (such as Ireland, Malta, the United Kingdom, France and the Czech Republic) already have one in force (http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/eqf_en.htm; <http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/>).

Cedefop's mapping of NQF developments showed that in October 2012, 29 countries (out of 36: 27 EU MS, 3 EEA countries, 5 candidate countries and Switzerland) are developing/have

designed NQFs for lifelong learning, covering all levels and types of qualifications; 21 NQFs have been formally adopted; 26 countries have proposed an 8-level framework, others with 5, 7, 9, 10 or 12 levels; all countries have introduced learning outcomes-based level descriptors. To list a few more interesting details: NQFs are seen as key instruments in achieving the link to EQF; NQFs are accepted by all countries as communication and transparency tools - making the existing qualifications system more transparent and clarifying relationships between qualifications; some countries regard their frameworks as tools to support reform; the objectives of the frameworks change as they mature (Cedefop 2013; Bjornavold 2012).

3.3 ECVET

The Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council on the establishment of a **European Credit Transfer System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)**, officially adopted in May 2009, aims to facilitate the recognition, validation and accumulation of learning outcomes of individuals on their way to acquiring a qualification (EU Parliament and Council 2009a). Thus, the general understanding of learning outcomes of citizens, their transparency, cross-border mobility and portability between and if necessary within member countries in a borderless area of lifelong learning is to be improved, as well as the mobility and portability of qualifications at national level between different areas of the economy and within the labour market. In ECVET, an individual's learning outcomes are assessed and validated to transfer credits from one qualification system to another or from one learning "pathway" to another.

ECVET aims to offer a method for how to recognize, validate and accumulate the learning outcomes of a single learner (it is addressed directly to the individual), while EQF is a reference framework for qualifications at system level; the two instruments are complementary and both refer to the need to consider quality assurance measures and concepts in implementing the instrument.

Cedefop stated after two monitoring reports in 2010 and 2011 that "EU Member States have started implementing ECVET" and that "there was a widespread feeling among ECVET working groups and officials (...) that common guidelines are needed to support the strategy formulation and peer learning" (Cedefop 2012, 1). "The necessary conditions for ECVET address two major concerns relating to implementation of ECVET: the development of a sense of ownership among all stakeholders and the need for a quality-based approach to the award of qualifications and validation of learning outcomes." (Cedefop 2012, 21).

The European Commission set up a European ECVET users' group and a European ECVET network. Several projects focusing on the development and promotion of ECVET are being developed in different sectors (including automobile service, chemistry, tourism, and international trade). (Cedefop – 2010, 5 – speaks of a key role that is given to projects and project partnerships and the widespread strategy of "learning by working in projects".) A network of LLP National Agencies created "NETECVET" (www.netecvet.com) with the aim to exploiting the Leonardo and LLP project results and to develop a toolbox to foster the transnational

mobility of learners. A good deal of information is to be found online at the ECVET Pilot projects website (www.ecvet-projects.eu) and at the portal of the ECVET Team (www.ecvet-team.eu).

3.4 EQAVET

It is not by chance that the Recommendation on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) was adopted on the same day as the ECVET recommendation (see above). EQAVET and ECVET have been developed in parallel, both with the clear goal of supporting the implementation of the EQF: “The Framework should therefore support the implementation of the EQF, in particular the quality of the certification of learning outcomes. It should also support the implementation of other European instruments, such as the European Credit System for VET, and the Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning” (EU Parliament and Council 2009b, 3). EQAVET is a reference instrument, supporting the Member States in continuously promoting and monitoring the improvement of their VET systems through common European references. Among the main goals are the improvement of the quality of VET and the creation of transparency and consistency as well as mutual trust among the Member States. The EQAVET recommendation comprises a quality assurance and improvement cycle, which encompasses the areas of planning, implementing, evaluating and reviewing. It is supported by common quality criteria and descriptors and indicators (EU Parliament and Council 2009b).

EQAVET respects the autonomy of national governments and is a voluntary system to be used by public authorities and other bodies involved in quality assurance. It should be implemented both at system as well as at provider level. It does not prescribe a certain quality assurance system or concept, but provides common principles, quality criteria, descriptors and indicators, which can be useful in supporting the assessment and improvement of existing systems and the existing programmes in the area of VET. Member States are encouraged to use the framework, and develop a national approach in improving quality assurance systems that involves all relevant stakeholders. This approach should include the establishment of national reference points for quality assurance, as well as active participation in the relevant European-level network (see www.eqavet.eu).

Quality assurance can be seen as a cross-section topic. Both in the Lisbon Strategy and in the Copenhagen Process quality and quality assurance play a crucial role for reaching the goals set. “Mutual trust” among systems and Member States need a basis – and a reliable quality assurance system should provide this basis.

3.5 Validation of non-formal and informal learning

Identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning is a theme that can be found via all the tools described above. European countries are increasingly emphasising the need to recognise the full range of an individual’s knowledge, skills and competences – those

acquired, not only at school, university or other education and training institutions, but also outside the formal system.

As early as in 2004 “Draft Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning” were published (Council of the EU 2004). In 2009 Cedefop published the “European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning” as a practical tool, providing expert advice to be applied on a purely voluntary basis (Cedefop 2009). In this publication ten “fundamental principles underpinning validation can be found: “(1) Validation must be voluntary. (2) The privacy of individuals should be respected. (3) Equal access and fair treatment should be guaranteed. (4) Stakeholders should be involved in establishing systems for validation. (5) Systems should contain mechanisms for the guidance and counselling of individuals. (6) Systems should be underpinned by quality assurance. (7) The process, procedures and criteria for validation must be fair, transparent and underpinned by quality assurance. (8) Systems should respect the legitimate interests of stakeholders and seek balanced participation. (9) The process of validation must be impartial and avoid conflicts of interest. (10) The professional competences of those who carry out assessments must be assured” (Cedefop 2009, 70).

Finally, in 2012, the Council of the European Union adopted the Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning in which the EU Member States are asked to have in place, no later than 2018, arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning (Council of the EU 2012).

3.6 The interrelation of these instruments

As already stated above, the EQF is at the centre of the development and implementation of the various instruments discussed in this paper with a special one. being developed not only for VET but also for general and higher education. ECVET and EQAVET are closely connected, both supporting and complementing the EQF Recommendation. Regarding learning outcomes (which are the core of the EQF), non-formal and informal learning outcomes are to be treated as formal ones – an ambitious goal for all these instruments. As formulated in Paragraph (14) in the EQF Recommendation: “This Recommendation should contribute to modernising education and training systems, the interrelationship of education, training and employment and building bridges between formal, non-formal and informal learning, leading also to the validation of learning outcomes acquired through experience.” (EU Parliament and Council 2008, 2). Transparency and mutual trust are two underlying principles both in the EQF and the ECVET Recommendation. Quality assurance principles and systems are to build the basis for mutual trust and transparency and with EQAVET there is now a framework for all quality assurance systems aiming to support the development of the other tools as shown in figure 1.

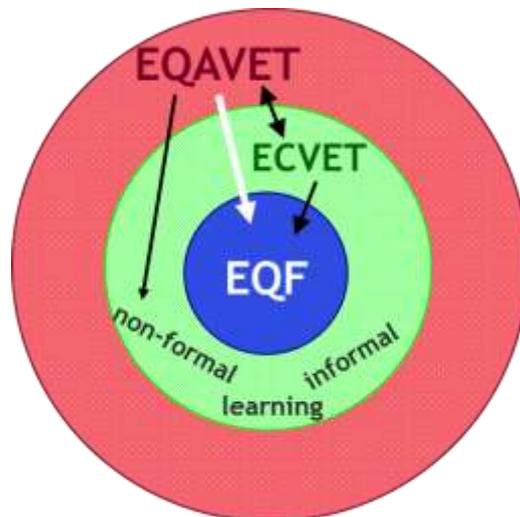


Figure 1: The relationship of four transparency instruments

4 Conclusions or: What can be learned from the development of the EU instruments?

A process started more than ten years ago is now “somewhere in the middle” – nobody can really tell where we are or when, if and how it will be finished. But this process, slow in starting and long lasting has brought changes we can only now begin to realize: learning outcomes have become an important point of reference all over Europe; not only formal, but non-formal and informal learning outcomes are becoming increasingly relevant; the different VET systems are becoming better connected and more easily comparable; and transparency and quality assurance have become a recurring topic on the agenda.

Looking back, it could appear to have been a strategically planned and well-prepared process. But I am quite sure this has not been the case and but very few people - if any - had a clear idea (and this idea could well differ from the status quo of today). Already five years ago Bjornavold & Le Mouillour (2009, 27) wrote: “Debate has largely focused on separate initiatives and failed to address how these may interact and could create synergies.” Only today, both in the European Commission and in most of the national governments and responsible ministries, the various instruments that have been dealt with by different people (often in different departments) are being set in relation to each other, to make it an interrelated whole.

The conclusion of an EQF-ECVET-EQAVET seminar at the end of 2011 begins as follows: “Modernising systems of long and valued tradition takes time as beliefs, norms, cultures and behaviours are challenged. Change is unsettling and tends to be resisted as individuals fear the loss of what is known when the gains are not yet visible.” (EQAVET 2012, 21).

Here are a few of the **lessons learned** from the work on implementing new EU tools:

A more co-ordinated approach: developing and implementing different tools and instruments in parallel with only little communication, exchange, learning from each other and so on will create a lot of difficulties and (unnecessary) problems.

Simplification and synergy: reduce complexity in explaining what new tools mean and what the concrete benefits can be – both at a national and international level. Sometimes it is better to do one thing after the other than everything simultaneously. Cooperation and synergy have to be strengthened at all levels.

Capacity building: There is a need for capacity building at all levels. Teachers, trainers and instructors require continuing professional development to manage change.

Monitoring and review processes: this is not only important for comparing the plan and the achieved status quo to make necessary adjustments; but also for the communication of progress and the possibility of learning from each other is vital and necessary.

Sustainability: to maintain confidence and momentum and provide the essential support and guidance, strong EU co-operation and guidance *and* ownership of the MS is necessary. “Whilst it was agreed that much was being done, there was also a clear need to do more, and do it better, for example: better coordination at EU and national levels; better representation in developments at EU level (social partners, sector associations, all Member States with special arrangements for large and federalised countries); better synergy (cross-sector projects, broader based ‘communities of practice’); better and earlier monitoring, analysis, evaluation and dissemination; better responses to unintended consequences; better assessment of the time needed for change and realistic timescales; better information and guidance; better use of EU funds and projects to support developments” (EQAVET 2012, 23).

At the end we will have to answer the question: have the citizens benefitted from this work or not?

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