

magazine

Keeping you informed about the European Credit System for Vocational Education & Training

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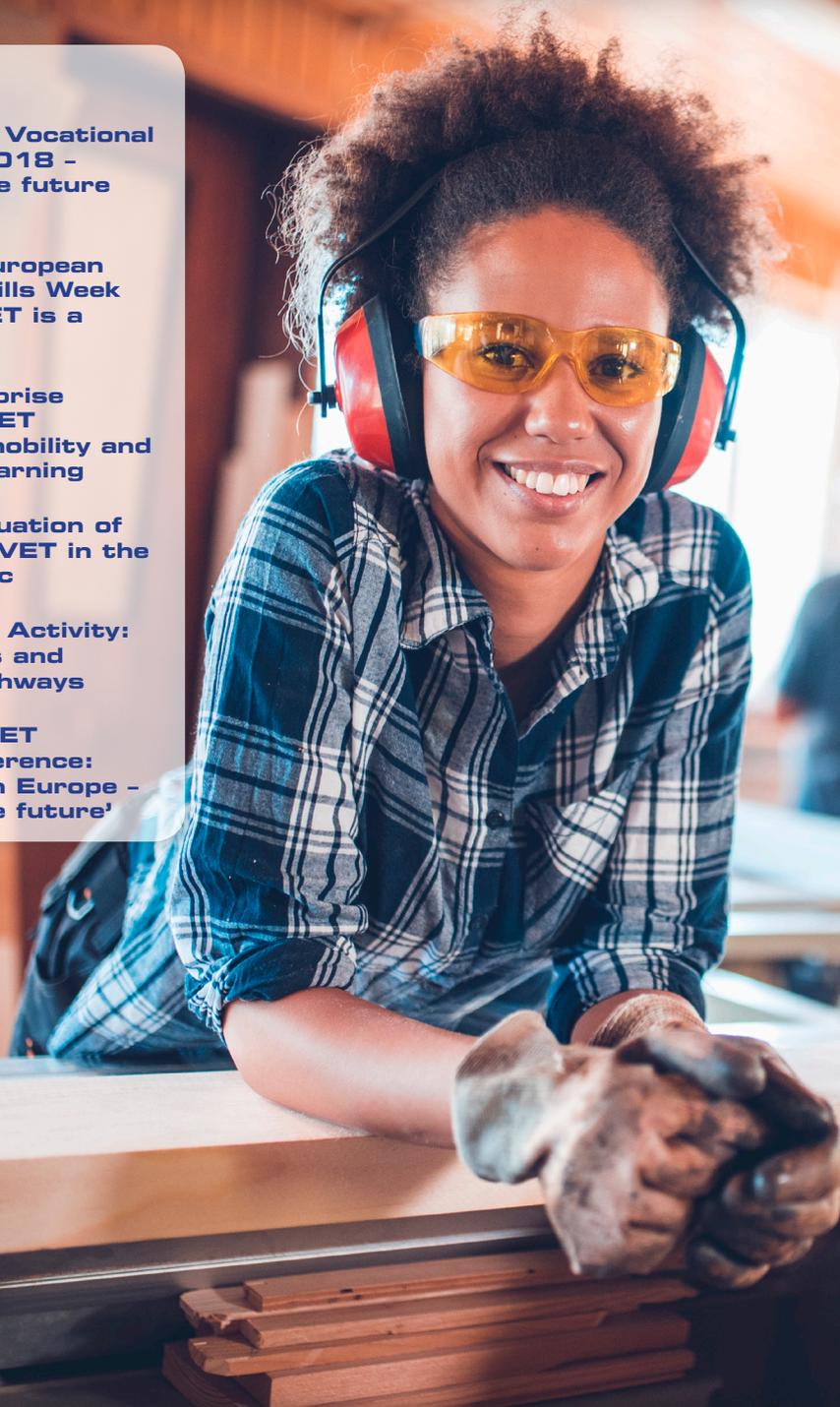
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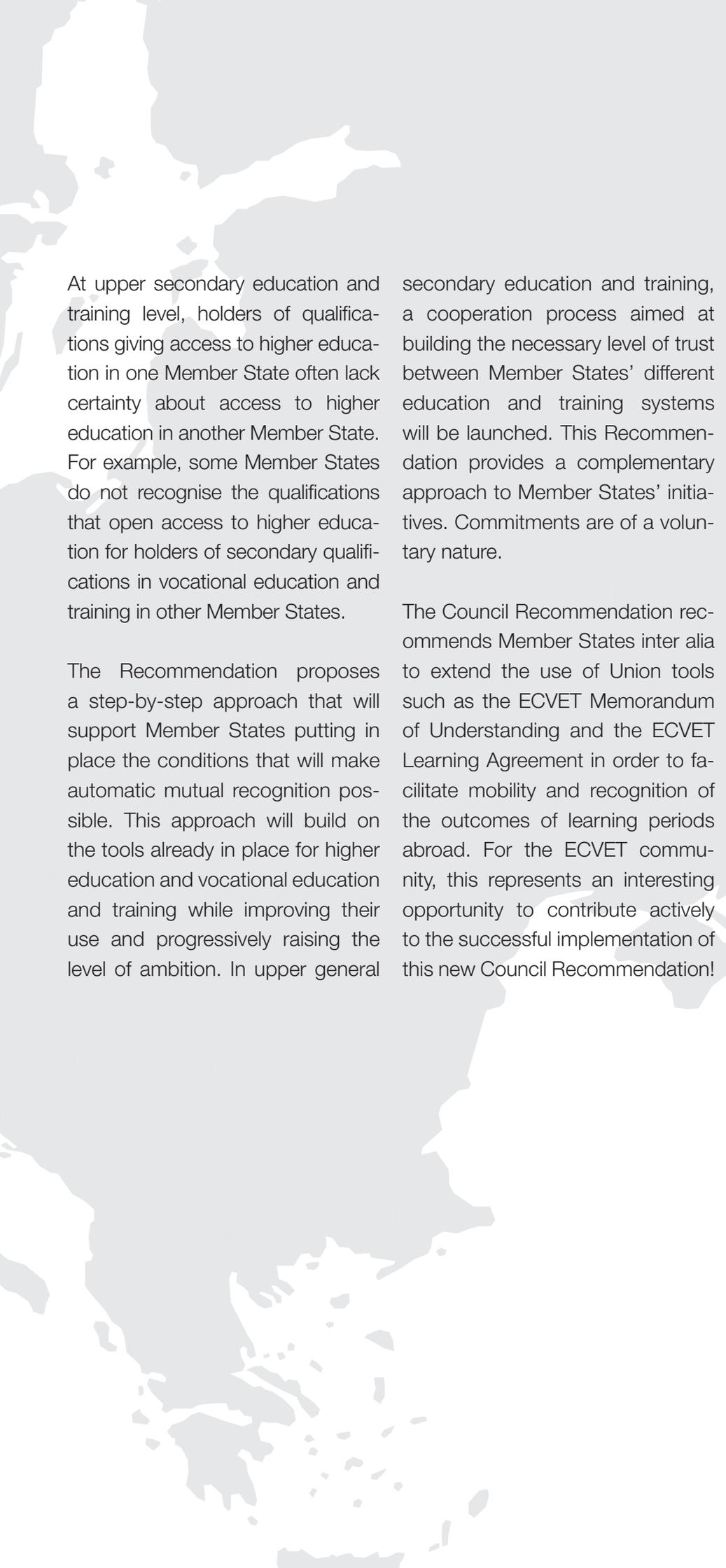
European Credit system for
Vocational Education & Training

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Editorialby the
European Commission**Koen Bois d'Enghien**

On 26 November 2018 the Council adopted the “*Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad*”. This initiative - relevant for the implementation of ECVET - fits within the broader policy goal of the creation of a European Education Area by 2025 in which learning, studying and carrying out research will not be hampered by borders. This initiative will include removing obstacles to the recognition of qualifications at both the level of upper secondary education and training as well as of higher education.

This new Recommendation underlines that learning mobility fosters competences which are crucial for active participation in society and the labour market. In an increasingly globalised context, it is important that students can make the best possible use of all learning opportunities across Europe. For this to happen, a qualification awarded by a competent authority in one Member State should be valid in any other Member State for the purpose of accessing further learning activities. The lack of mutual recognition of qualifications and study periods abroad is currently hampering mobility between EU Member States.



At upper secondary education and training level, holders of qualifications giving access to higher education in one Member State often lack certainty about access to higher education in another Member State. For example, some Member States do not recognise the qualifications that open access to higher education for holders of secondary qualifications in vocational education and training in other Member States.

The Recommendation proposes a step-by-step approach that will support Member States putting in place the conditions that will make automatic mutual recognition possible. This approach will build on the tools already in place for higher education and vocational education and training while improving their use and progressively raising the level of ambition. In upper general

secondary education and training, a cooperation process aimed at building the necessary level of trust between Member States' different education and training systems will be launched. This Recommendation provides a complementary approach to Member States' initiatives. Commitments are of a voluntary nature.

The Council Recommendation recommends Member States inter alia to extend the use of Union tools such as the ECVET Memorandum of Understanding and the ECVET Learning Agreement in order to facilitate mobility and recognition of the outcomes of learning periods abroad. For the ECVET community, this represents an interesting opportunity to contribute actively to the successful implementation of this new Council Recommendation!

Koen Bois d'Enghien

European Commission,
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Employment, Social Affairs
and Inclusion

Unit E3 - Vocational training,
Apprenticeships and Adult learning

The European Vocational Skills Week 2018 - addressing the future of VET

Jens Bjornavold, Senior Expert at Cedefop (Brussels office), and Anastasia Pouliou, Support Expert at Cedefop (Department for VET Systems and Institutions)

One of the main events during the **European Vocational Skills Week 2018** was the presentation of the findings of Cedefop's research on the **changing nature and role of VET in Europe**. The aim of this project has been to improve our understanding of how VET is changing in European Union countries (including Norway and Iceland). Over a three-year period (2016-18) the project analysed how vocational-oriented education and training has developed and changed in the past two decades (1995-2015) and, on this basis, pointed to the main challenges and opportunities facing the sector today and in the future.¹

The conference 'VET in Europe – taking stock and looking ahead' gathered more than 400 participants from Europe and beyond. Learners, policy-makers, practitioners and social partners actively engaged in a discussion on the challenges and opportunities facing European VET at a time of rapidly-changing demographics, technologies and labour markets.

Competing narratives

During the first day of the conference it was pointed out that two different VET stories are told in Europe today. There is a **negative narrative** where VET is seen as becoming increasingly marginalised and where the number of candidates attending initial vocational education and training is bound to decline. The perceived attractiveness of higher, academic-oriented education is seen as contributing to this decline, as is the perception that skills provided by VET seem to be less in need due to digitalisation and job polarisation. There is also a **positive narrative** where the work and practise orientation of VET is seen as crucial for the modernisation of all education and training. The expansion of vocationally-oriented education



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- 1 The work of the project is divided into six separate but interlinked themes:
- the changing definition and conceptualisation of VET;
 - the external drivers influencing VET developments;
 - the role of traditional VET at upper secondary level;
 - VET from a lifelong learning perspective;
 - the role of VET at higher education levels;
 - scenarios outlining alternative development paths for European VET in the 21st century.

and training at higher levels exemplifies this, as does the increasing attention to lifelong learning and the inclusion of adults in national VET systems. Conference participants were invited to reflect on these seemingly contradictory narratives in a series of thematic workshops.

The key questions asked were:

- Is initial VET under pressure today and what is the future of mid-level skills in the context of digitalisation and job polarisation?
- Which are the challenges for continuing VET in view of the challenges posed by job transitions and longer working lives?
- How can VET be governed so as to balance between change and stability?
- How is the tension between academic and vocational drift influencing VET at higher levels?
- How do we envisage VET learning in the 21st century and which are the challenges for pedagogies and learning methods?
- How can we advance European co-operation in VET?

VET scenarios 2035

The discussions on the above listed questions provided the basis for the second day of the conference where three scenarios for VET in 2035 were presented. These scenarios have not been designed to predict the future but rather to inspire and provoke a debate on how different strategies can influence VET structure, content and outcomes in the years to come. A main role of the scenarios is to alert policy makers to main trends and to support a reflection on the possible role of VET in the future.

The pluralist VET scenario – ‘Lifelong learning at the heart’

broadens our understanding and conception of what is meant by VET. The emphasis will be on vocationally and labour market-oriented learning at all levels and in all institutional settings. Vocationally-oriented learning will not be restricted to the institutions explicitly defined as VET-providers today, but form part of an integrated lifelong learning approach. Pluralist VET implies a redefinition of its overall position in the education and training system. The focus on VET as a separate and distinct sub-system will become less relevant as there is a greater need for connecting and combining different forms of learning. Blurring boundaries between VET and general education at the upper secondary level may point towards a tendency to combine vocational skills and general subjects. The focus will be on overall skills and competence developments, not on VET as a separate sector.

The distinctive VET scenario – ‘Occupational and professional competence at the heart’

seeks to strengthen the existing and dominant conception of VET as focussed on entry into occupations and professions. According to this scenario, VET’s position as a separate education and training sub-system with clearly defined providers and institutions is reaffirmed and strengthened. The visibility of the VET sector is seen as critical for ensuring parity of esteem with general education. As opposed to other education and training sub-systems, learning at workplaces is regarded as a key defining element of VET.

The special purpose (marginalised) VET scenario – ‘Job-oriented training at the heart’

narrows down the understanding and conception of VET. Its focus is on training for jobs and re-skilling and up-skilling for short and medium term labour market needs. VET’s position in the overall education and training system will be increasingly linked to continuing and further training in the labour market. Employability in its narrow sense is of key concern, as is the ability to respond to groups at risk. Employability in the broader sense, empowering people to develop in a lifelong learning perspective, is taken over by general education at all levels. This reduced role of VET reflects the effect of declining youth cohorts, which limits the ability of traditional VET to ‘compete’ with other education and training sectors.

The scenario approach was positively received by the participants in the conference and led to a lively debate during the event. There was a general agreement that the scenarios, while not predicting the future, point to critical dimensions to be considered when discussing the future role of VET in Europe, notably on:

- VET’s future purpose and role; and,
- the position VET is meant to have in relation to other policy areas and society at large.

Cedefop’s recently published **briefing note** ‘What future for vocational education and training in Europe?’ elaborates the three scenarios in some detail. The final version of the scenarios, also including the feedback received during the conference, will be published by Cedefop during spring 2019.

3rd Annual European Vocational Skills Week a success: VET is a first choice!

5-9 November 2018

ECVET Secretariat



Vienna

1800+
Events



2.400.000
People Participating

28
European Member States



45
Countries participating

600
Participants at main
event in Vienna



250
Pledges from stakeholders
to strengthen supply, quality
and/or image of apprentice-
ships from European Alliance
for Apprenticeships

#DiscoverYourTalent #EUVocationalSkills

**The European Vocational Skills Week 2019
will take place in Helsinki, Finland.**

ECVET Enterprise - testing ECVET principles in mobility and work-based learning

Līga Sičeva, Head of the EU Project department, Latvian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI)

In the transnational project 'ECVET Enterprise' four countries (Estonia, Finland, Latvia and Germany) worked together for two years to define groups of learning outcomes to use in mobility projects. Focus was on VET learners that go abroad for a period of work-based learning or an apprenticeship. 'ECVET Enterprise' was funded by the Erasmus+ programme and led by the Latvian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI).

Most mobile VET learners in Europe go abroad for a work placement in a company. It is broadly agreed that work placements, especially in another country, result in accelerated personal and professional development and thus help young people to take large leaps forward. What exactly a student learns during the work placement abroad, however, is not always sufficiently transparent and comparable to the learning pathway they follow at home. As opposed to school-based learning that is based on curricula, work-based learning does not necessarily follow a study plan. That makes it difficult to assess and evaluate. It can therefore be challenging to ensure the learning out-

comes from the work placement are recognised in the home country, and learning does not have to be repeated.

The project 'ECVET Enterprise' was set up to work on this issue by developing support for companies and VET providers organising VET learner mobility. Seven project partners from four countries (Estonia, Finland, Latvia and Germany) worked together from October 2016 to September 2018 with three main objectives:

- Develop a training methodology based on ECVET principles for transnational, work-based learner mobility projects;

- Develop open education resources about ECVET principles;
- Pilot and improve this methodology by involving two sides – VET schools and enterprises.

"A 5-day 'train the trainer' workshop for tutors from companies and professional education institutions was jointly developed by the project partners and piloted for their own staff. Extensive discussions ensued on how to better assess learning outcomes from work placements using the ECVET principles. After the pilot training, the partner countries organised nine long-term transnational learner mobility projects. Feedback on the testing and piloting of the ECVET tools and materials developed by the project was positive, but the partners concluded that a good understanding between all parties involved in learner mobility is key and communication needs to be enhanced and improved. This especially concerns international projects, where language gaps as well as different business environments play a role. Wider raising awareness of the ECVET principles among enterprises could also improve the readiness of companies to organise work placements that are beneficial for students in the short term as well as in the long term.



“Although ECVET has been encouraged already in 2009 as a voluntary activity, Member States implement it gradually, as the awareness of the need for educational institutions and entrepreneurs to cooperate in the long term is increasing”.

- Antra Meņģele, Head of the EU Education Programmes Department of The State Education Development Agency of the Republic of Latvia.

As a result of the project, bespoke five-day training materials are now available. There are tools and templates on the use of ECVET principles in mobility and work-based learning that address the needs of both companies and VET providers. The material is available in five languages: English, Estonian, Finnish, German and Latvian.

ECVET Enterprise also focused on innovative digital solutions to organise the process of sending students abroad. The project team developed open education resources for three target audiences - VET schools, enterprises and students - to ensure that all partners always have relevant information available throughout the project. The project team divided all information and material according to the three phases (before, during, and after the mobility/work-based learning phase) and included check lists on the necessary steps in each phase.



“The implementation of the project ECVET Enterprise from the beginning to the end was undertaken by the Latvian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI). The LCCI is generally satisfied with the results achieved. At the same time, this was a big challenge, as the vision of business and education representatives varies greatly from one country to another, so it was important to develop the right approach to transfer information to both academics and business people”

- Līga Sičeva, Head of the EU-Projects department of the Latvian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

At the end of the project, all partners had gained new and inspirational ideas on how to use the ECVET tools and principles. In addition, the discussions and joint experiences between companies and vocational educational technical schools that took place throughout the project proved to be an idea incubator on how to improve mobility programmes and work-based learning for students.

ECVET-Enterprise was implemented through the Erasmus+ programme from October 2016 to September 2018. Seven partners from Latvia, Finland, Estonia, and Germany worked together in the project: The Latvian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LV), Kuldīga Technology and Tourism Technical College (LV), the National Centre of Education of the Republic of Latvia (LV), Baltic Bright Ltd (LV), the German-Baltic Chamber of Commerce (DE), Tartu Vocational Education Centre (EE) and WinNova Länsirannikon Koulutus Oy Ltd (FI).

The project developed ‘Open Education Resources for ECVET’ that are available on the website: www.qualityplacements.eu. These resources can help mobility partners to use the learning outcomes based approach and other ECVET principles in assessment and validation of learning outcomes from work based learning and mobility.



Mid-term evaluation of the use of ECVET in the Czech Republic

Jaromír Coufalík, Member of the ECVET team of experts in Czech Republic, and Helena Slivková, National coordinator of the ECVET team of experts in Czech Republic

This evaluation aims to summarize the results achieved during the implementation of ECVET in mobility projects in the Czech Republic; to assess them, to identify their positive and negative aspects, and to propose plans for the implementation of ECVET as we go forward. This mid-term evaluation covers the period from 2014 – 2017.

ECVET was officially introduced in 2009, one year after 11 pilot projects designed to test ECVET principles in practice were launched. The Czech VET institutions were involved in three of these initial pilot projects. Participation in these pilot projects enabled Czech

VET institutions to obtain information on ECVET and created the conditions for the establishment of national bodies focused on supporting the implementation of ECVET. In 2012 the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports approved a strategic policy document on ECVET

implementation and established a national team of VET stakeholders to act as ECVET experts. The team was entrusted to the Centre for International Cooperation in Education, the Czech Republic National Agency for the Erasmus+ Programme.

Table: Use of ECVET in the Czech Erasmus+ mobility projects in period 2014-2017

Call	Number of submitted applications	Number of approved applications	Number of approved applications with ECVET	Share of approved applications with ECVET
				
2014	286	147	63	43 %
2015	311	122	92	75 %
2016	341	119	113	95 %
2017	334	136	134	99 %

Results

Results of the ECVET expert team work (see table above) show that together, with a wider application of ECVET, the quality of ECVET implementation and its benefits have been increasing.

In the next period until the end of 2020, the team plans to focus its work on the following objectives:

- increasing the quality of how learning outcomes are defined within the unit of learning outcomes;

- increasing the quality of learning outcome assessment, with the team continuing to analyse units and using these results to guide the unit authors;
- dealing with the relationship between qualifications of the National Register of Qualifications and the units of learning outcomes;
- expanding collaboration with employers when implementing ECVET, with the team further developing its rela-

- tionships with employer associations in important sectors and with providers of continuing vocational training;
- pursuing international collaboration, with team members continuing to participate in international seminars and other activities concerning ECVET;
- cooperating with European Commission bodies when planning ECVET review.

2014

In 2014, the expert team assessed all approved applications to determine how well the ECVET principles were applied. It was concluded that 20% of applications were very good from the point of view of the quality of the ECVET implementation; 60% were average, and 20% were assessed as poor quality. Therefore, the results showed that only one in five applications was successful in meeting the appropriate standard for implementing ECVET.

By 2014 the national ECVET expert team was focused on two main objectives. First, the team worked to raise awareness of ECVET among four main target groups: vocational education managers at the national and regional levels; headmasters and teachers from all types of VET schools; mobility project grant beneficiaries; and employers. Second, the team aimed not only to explain the basic ECVET principles, but also to provide practical advice on how to apply the ECVET principles in mobility projects. This included addressing how to prepare relevant documents such as units of learning outcomes, the Memorandum of Understanding, and Learning Agreements.

2015

In 2015, the team analysed learning outcomes units for the first time. The team found that the structure of the set of units from the point of view of 21 VET sectors was good; furthermore, the specification of the units' relationship to the levels of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) was clearly defined and a reasonable range of units were identified. However, the units frequently lacked specific information about related professional qualifications, and about 50% of the units had insufficient or too generalised expected learning outcomes. This analysis of learning outcomes units thus showed the ECVET experts where they would need to focus their efforts.

2016

In 2016, the team produced informational materials to further support the successful implementation of ECVET, in response to the results of a second analysis of the units of learning outcomes. This analysis confirmed the positive features of the quality of units (further expansion of the sector structure of the set of units, good identification of the levels of the EQF in units), while also identifying the negative characteristics of the quality of units and indicating where improvements were needed. The team published a brochure with examples of units of learning outcomes from various VET sectors. The brochure included examples of both high-quality units and units with deficiencies. These deficiencies were accompanied by recommendations on how they could be eliminated. The team also developed and published manuals on the procedures of assessment, validation and recognition of learning outcomes.

2016 can be regarded as the first year in which ECVET was successfully implemented in almost all international mobility projects. Domestic implementation of ECVET also increased. The quality of the implementation of the ECVET principles also increased, although it has not yet reached the desired level. There is still significant potential for growth in the use of ECVET outside the initial VET sector, particularly among employers.

2017

In 2017, the team organised seminars for grant applicants, grant beneficiaries and evaluators to present the ECVET principles and discuss experiences with using ECVET in mobility projects. This year, the most extensive analysis of units of learning outcomes so far was conducted. The analysis covered units of learning outcomes used in projects during 2016 and 2017. More than 800 units were analysed. The analysis allowed the team to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the quality of units of learning outcomes, and these results were used in the team's other activities. First, the team developed an innovative template for the unit of learning outcomes and the personal transcript. Second, the results of the analysis provided ideas for the conception of units of learning outcomes for long-term mobilities within the framework of the Erasmus PRO initiative.

Peer Learning Activity: ECVET, NQFs and Upskilling Pathways

18-19 September 2018, Glasgow, Scotland (UK)

Paul Guest (ECVET Secretariat)

This Peer Learning Activity (PLA) was dedicated to discussing links between *ECVET*, *National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs)* and the *Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways*. Specifically, the PLA aimed to explore how the use of ECVET principles and NQFs might support implementation of the *Upskilling Pathways Recommendation*, which aims to support low-skilled adults in the development of basic skills.

The PLA offered insights into how different countries have linked units and partial qualifications to NQFs. This includes approaches to measure the size of the qualification, such as the *Credit Rating System* employed in Scotland, and mechanisms for aligning units or partial qualifications with particular framework levels. Delegates were subsequently asked to consider the role this might play in supporting the delivery of flexible, tailored adult learning provision, as targeted by the *Upskilling Pathways* initiative.

The participating individuals and countries represented a broad range of learning environments including community-based, school-based programmes and employer-led provision. This enabled delegates to reflect on learning delivery in different contexts, and to explore good or transferable practice in the engagement and continuing support of adult learners.

Upskilling Pathways

In 2015 there were 64 million people - more than a quarter of the EU popu-



lation aged 25-64 - who had left initial education and training with at most a lower secondary education qualification. The **New Skills Agenda for Europe** confirms that by 2025 most job opportunities will require higher-level qualifications, with the advent of new and digital technologies further impacting on many existing jobs and professions. Low-skilled adults are also exposed to a higher incidence of poverty and social exclusion, which results

in poor health, lower levels of participation in democratic life and higher levels of crime. Recent research¹ suggests that if the number of low-skilled adults was reduced to 7%, it could gain aggregated economic benefits worth close to EUR 2000 billion.

The Council Recommendation on **Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults (2016)** calls for flexible learning pathways to

¹ *Investing in skills pays off: The economic and social cost of low-skilled adults in the EU*, Cedefop, 2017. <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/publications/5560>

allow all adults to acquire a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital competence as well as the knowledge, skills and competence to allow active participation in the labour market and in society. Upskilling Pathways provides support for low-skilled adults to develop their skills through a coherent pathway containing three interlinked steps:

Step 1: Skills Assessment (Skills Audit): enabling adults to identify existing skills as well as any need for upskilling.

Step 2: Tailored Training Offer: allowing adults to boost their literacy, numeracy and digital skills by means of a tailored offer of education and training.

Step 3: Validation and Recognition: providing adults with an opportunity to have their skills validated and recognised (including those skills acquired in step 2 as well as previously-acquired knowledge, skills and competence).

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework

The Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework (SCQF) is a voluntary life-long learning framework created in 2001. It was developed to help employers, learners and the wider public to understand the range of available Scottish qualifications; the relationship between different qualifications; how different types of qualifications support the development and utilisation of the skills of the workforce; and how Scottish qualifications relate to qualifications in other countries.

The SCQF has 12 levels which reflect the current Scottish education and training system. Each SCQF level has a set of *Level Descriptors* which provide a broad understanding of the expected attainment at every level. Level Descriptors are normally expressed in terms of the following five characteristics:

- knowledge and understanding;
- practice: applied knowledge and understanding;
- generic cognitive skills;
- communication, ICT and numeracy skills;
- autonomy, accountability and working with others.

The Credit Rating Process in Scotland is the process of allocating an SCQF Level and Credit Points to a qualification or learning programme. The focus of the credit rating process is on learning outcomes and on the arrangements for both learner achievement and learning outcomes assessment. Almost any qualification or learning programme has the potential to be credit rated and included on the SCQF provided that it meets the following criteria:

- it must have clear learning outcomes;
- it must have a minimum of 10 notional learning hours;
- it must have formal assessment that is recorded;
- it must have internal and external quality assurance.

The SCQF is hosted and managed by the SCQF Partnership (SCQFP), which maintains the quality and integrity of the SCQF, promotes and develops the SCQF as a tool to support lifelong learning, and develops and maintains relationships with other frameworks in the UK, Europe and internationally.

The Use of ECVET and NQFs to Support the Upskilling Pathways Implementation

The PLA provided an opportunity to consider different national qualification frameworks and landscapes, with specific examples provided from the host country (Scotland, UK) as well as Hungary, Ireland, Norway and Poland. Reflecting on the core principles of ECVET - specifically units of learning outcomes and mechanisms for transfer and accu-

mulation - and the goals and ambitions of the different NQFs, delegates considered if and how adult learners might be able to seek recognition for individual units or modules and accumulate or transfer these with a view to achieving a full qualification. Delegates also considered the benefits of linking units and partial qualifications to NQFs and factors that might inhibit the inclusion of units and partial qualifications onto NQFs. Discussions also centred on how ECVET principles might be used to facilitate implementation of the *Upskilling Pathways* initiative, and on the role that different national stakeholders need to play.

Benefits of Linking Units and Partial Qualifications to NQFs: Key Messages

There was a consensus that units and partial qualifications improve access to learning and thus help adult learners work towards full qualifications. Specifically, delegates felt that this was useful for supporting individuals returning to the labour market; allowing employed adults to undertake upskilling or continuing training and development; and supporting refugees and migrants to build on and actively progress learning and skills acquisition initiated in another country. Systems that rely on units and partial qualifications were also felt to positively address the issue of educational dropout, with learners encouraged to return to learning at any time.

Factors that might Inhibit the Inclusion of Units and Partial Qualifications onto NQFs: Key Messages

While flexible learning pathways were confirmed as important, delegates recognised the implications that this might have for quality assurance; namely with regard to maintaining confidence and trust in education and training systems and qualifications. Units and partial

qualifications were also recognised in terms of the additional assessment burden that this might provide for education and training providers, with a need for smaller institutions to balance the need for flexibility with financial and operational constraints. Transnational cooperation and the issue of partial qualifications was also felt to be particularly complex with terms such as credits, units and partial qualifications often having different meanings in different European countries. In this respect, the importance of a back-to-basics approach was highlighted, possibly referring simply to components or composite parts of qualifications and to the value of learning for the individual.

ECVET Principles and Implementation of the Upskilling Pathways Initiative: Key Messages

Delegates agreed on the importance of ECVET principles in supporting implementation of the *Upskilling Pathways* initiative. Reference was made to the value of learning outcomes being used as a common language to support the

validation, recognition, transfer and accumulation of learning achieved in different learning environments. The use of unit-based short courses was also felt to be a key enabler in improving access to learning including basic skills provision (literacy, numeracy, digital skills) for employed and unemployed adults. This was further exemplified during an onsite visit to *Glasgow Clyde College* where delegates were introduced to examples of specific short programme provision for adults.

Upskilling Pathways and the Role of Different National Stakeholders: Key Messages

A broad range of stakeholders was confirmed as having a role in the application of (one or more principles of) ECVET and in supporting implementation of the *Upskilling Pathways* initiative. Among these, frontline providers of basic skills training were recognised as a key stakeholder group, yet one which would probably have limited awareness of ECVET and how it might facilitate learning and skills development

and recognition. The role of guidance services was also felt to be crucial in supporting the delivery of more flexible learning programmes, allowing learners to more successfully navigate the range of available learning options. It was recognised that more should be done to actively engage with organisations working in the field of adult education. Many delegates cited the importance of effective partnership between adult and community learning providers, VET providers and public and private employment services with a view to enabling adult learners to access and progress in learning and employment.

The PLA was attended by 36 participants in total: 26 representatives from 15 countries: CZ, FI, FR, HU, IE, IT, LT, LV, MT, NL, NO, PL, SE, SK, UK. In addition, participants included representatives of Cedefop, the European Commission (DG EMPL) and the ECVET Secretariat. The presentations held at the PLA and the full PLA report can be downloaded from the ECVET Secretariat website: www.ecvet-secretariat.eu.

Austrian ECVET Experts Conference: 'Higher VET in Europe - Visions for the future'

22 November 2018, Vienna, Austria

Mariya Dzhengozova and Karin Luomi-Messerer, ECVET Secretariat

Since 2014 the Austrian National Agency for Erasmus+ Education in cooperation with the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education has organised a biennial conference for and with international ECVET experts. This year's conference was held in Vienna on 22 November and focused on higher VET in Europe (i.e. qualifications and programmes offered at EQF levels 5 to 8 which do not fall within the overarching qualifications framework of the European Higher Education Area). The conference attracted around 70 representatives from 13 European countries (Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Latvia, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Serbia, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey).

The conference was opened by **Stefan Zotti** (managing director of the OeAD GmbH) and **Klemens Riegler-Pickler** (head of the department for General Education and VET at the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research). Both highlighted that the conference aimed to share experiences with representatives from other countries on how higher VET is understood and to gain inspiration for national discussions on higher VET, especially its visibility and attractiveness.



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Higher VET in Europe

Karin Luomi-Messerer of the team of Austrian ECVET experts confirmed in her keynote presentation that there is no common understanding of higher VET across Europe. This finding was based on evidence from the Cedefop study *'The changing nature and role of vocational education and training in Europe'* as well as other studies conducted for Cedefop or the European

Commission. A great variety of higher VET offers can be identified in European countries: post-secondary or tertiary VET programmes offered in the formal system; qualifications acquired based on professional experience and skills examinations with a close link to the labour market; and higher level Continuing Vocational Educational

and Training (CVET) provided outside the formal education system. However, as qualifications from outside the formal system are often not yet included in the National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs) and therefore no level is assigned, it is not possible at this time to indicate the full extent of higher VET. Core characteristics of higher VET in-

clude the often rather poor image of VET that also refers to VET at higher levels as well as its purpose – mainly access to the labour market, the strong employer involvement in governance structures, and the focus on work-based learning and on applied knowledge. Finally, the challenges related to higher VET include the lack of visibility in statistics (e.g. ISCED – International Standard Classification of Education) and in the NQFs, the lack of permeability, the parity of esteem and awareness and understanding of the purposes and functions of higher VET. These challenges should be addressed, as the labour market is expected to require even more high-level vocational skills in the future.

Higher VET - Host Country Case Austria

Sabine Tritscher-Archan, member of the team of national ECVET experts in Austria focused in on Austrian higher VET offerings in her keynote address. She highlighted that ISCED does not capture the whole variety of national higher VET qualifications. Higher VET in Austria is very heterogeneous, with many providers and many programmes with different access requirements leading to many different qualifications. There are no shared elements such as qualifications/degrees or quality assurance standards and higher VET lacks public perception, appreciation, and visibility. Mrs Tritscher-Archan referred to the ‘European Guidelines on Quality Assurance in Higher VET’ (developed in the Erasmus+ project ‘QA HiVETnet’) that were created to enhance awareness of the significance of higher VET and to ensure a common approach to quality assurance. She further emphasized that the NQF implementation has triggered the discussion on higher VET in Austria but many questions are still open; for example, should EQF level 5 be included in the understand-



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ing of higher VET in Austria or is there a need to establish an umbrella brand ‘Higher VET’? If yes, how can we foster homogeneity among the diverse programmes and qualifications?

Higher VET - Country Cases

The country cases were presented in three workshops by high-level experts in their respective fields. The discussions were facilitated by the team of Austrian ECVET experts.

Switzerland

Miriam Shergold from Hotellerie Suisse presented the Swiss approach to higher VET that includes qualifications at EQF levels 5 to 8. She emphasised that the Swiss Professional Education is very unified, characterised by a regulated system with certificates and diplomas and agility, i.e. a capacity to respond quickly to changing labour demands. Although positive development trends (such as high employability of graduates) can be observed, there are still challenges to be addressed; for example, the number of professional education qualifications in proportion to those issued by universities of applied sciences and by teacher education has been declining since 2002.

Sweden

Anna Kahlson (Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education) stressed that Swedish higher VET (offering qualifications at EQF levels 5 and 6) is completely focused on supplying the skills required by the labour market. A distinctive feature is the flexibility of the system. Funding of higher VET programmes is based on a re-application every five years and applicants must provide evidence that there is a regional labour market need for the programme. In the re-application process, the success rate will be considered, as well as organisational and financial criteria and economic priorities set by the government. Although the current system is considered successful, there are outstanding questions; for instance, how to maintain good results and keep the system flexible when more and more providers and students are involved.

Netherlands

Karin van der Sanden from CINOP explained that the term “higher VET” is not used in the Netherlands but the NQF (which is implemented in connection with ECVET/ECTS and the validation of non-formal and informal learning) is open at all levels for VET qualifica-

tions that are not regulated by the Ministry of Education. To be included in the NQF, these qualifications must be written in terms of learning outcomes, be awarded based on a learning path independent summative assessment and be relevant for the labour market. Currently, there are 30 non-regulated qualifications included in the NQF at levels 5 to 7, of which 24 are allocated to EQF level 6.

The future of VET in the EU

The third keynote presentation was given by **Kinga Szebeni** (European Commission, DG Employment, VET, Apprenticeships and Adult Learning). It focused on the future of EU cooperation on VET policy framework and tools (including ECVET), EU financial resources to support VET policy (e.g. Erasmus+ programme) and policy initiatives such as the Platforms of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVE). Mrs Szebeni also briefly introduced the three scenarios on the future of VET in Europe (pluralistic, distinctive and marginalised) elaborated within the Cedefop project *'The Changing Nature and Role of VET in Europe'*. She explained that CoVE are meant as partnerships between educational institutions, employers and qualification authorities at national or transnational level which develop joint VET curricula based on anticipated future skills needs and/or supporting regional skills strategies. It was highlighted that CoVE could also include institutions offering higher VET.

Higher VET - Visions for the future

The following plenary discussion kicked off with a question about the main characteristics associated with higher VET. NQF was the most frequently mentioned association because the inclusion into NQFs is considered as crucial for enhancing visibility and transparency of higher VET qualifications.

Most participants agreed that there is a growing need of higher VET in their countries. While there was a general agreement that higher VET and higher education should complement each other, the question about how to overcome the traditional dichotomy and separation of these pathways was raised. It was acknowledged that there are bridges (possibilities for permeability between pathways), but they are often either not sufficiently used or are used in one direction only. Furthermore, while the 'merging' between higher VET and higher education by breaking down institutional barriers could be an option for some countries, for others this cannot be imagined because the two types of education are based on totally different structures. A change in perspective by shifting the focus on the learning outcomes of qualifications and their levels might help to establish parity of esteem.

There was no consensus about whether there is a need of 'branding' higher VET for specific programmes or for creating a common understanding across

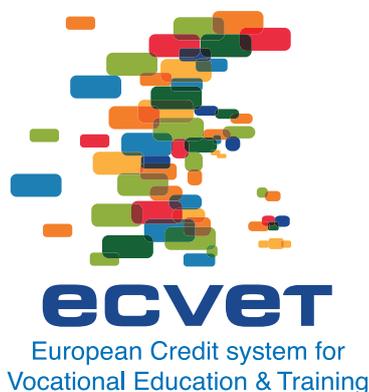
European countries. Some experts did not see the need for developing a new framework because higher VET offers are very diverse and the EQF already provides a reference framework also for higher VET. However, since not all NQFs are open to non-formal qualifications, some higher VET qualifications in these countries may not be covered through the EQF.

ECVET principles, particularly descriptions of qualifications in terms of learning outcomes and to a certain extent also the grouping of learning outcomes into units or modules, were considered as relevant for higher VET, although ECVET is usually not explicitly applied in this context.

Outlook

Eduard Staudecker from the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research concluded the event by highlighting the importance of the conference for developing an Austrian strategy related to higher VET. In Austria, the discussion on defining a common vision of what might be labelled higher VET has just started and therefore discussions of approaches and experiences with representatives of other countries are highly appreciated. The conference was considered as a starting point for the organisation of similar future events where the position of higher VET will be further discussed (nationally, but also at European level).

Did you know the ECVET Secretariat offers ECVET expert support?



What is ECVET expert support?

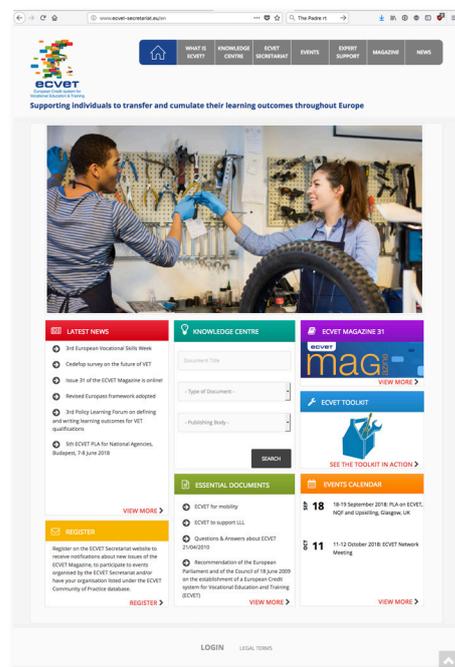
- The ECVET Secretariat works together with a network of experts across Europe to help you to discuss, understand and apply ECVET principles within the context of mobility and lifelong learning.
- This can include experts reviewing and providing comments on draft documents or attending and providing an active input into regional, national or project level conferences. For example, our experts have delivered presentations at national level conferences led by National Agencies and have attended and contributed to specific project meetings.

Who are the experts and how are they different to national ECVET experts?

- Our experts have a background in ECVET and VET policy on a European level for at least 5 years. They have in-depth knowledge of ECVET, mobility and other European tools (for instance EQF, EQAVET, Europass) and have worked with policymakers and project promoters for several years.
- The network of experts have an awareness of ECVET developments across several countries, and this can be really beneficial if you are running a European project.

What costs are involved and where can they travel?

- The support is completely free of charge and flexible around the needs of your organisation, your project's specific topic, or event topics. Our experts work with you to make sure that the experts can deliver support that is tailored to your needs.
- Our experts travel to wherever the help is needed. All costs are covered by the ECVET Secretariat.



Where can I find out more?

You can send an email to:
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For more information, visit: www.ecvet-secretariat.eu/en/expert-support



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