

POLICIES IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (VET) IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract:

The world has realized that the economic success of the states are directly determined by the quality of their education systems and that the most effective factor of production is human capital expressed in knowledge, skills, creative abilities and moral qualities of individuals in society.

The specialists consider that in the economy of the 21st century the education system became a priority branch of production, being regarded as an occupational field, as a profitable investment sphere. This conception concerning the mission of education will dominate the educational policy of most countries in the world in the next period.

Improving the quality of the education and training systems is one of the core components of the cooperation between Member States by creating academic networks, study visits and partnerships. The communication from the Commission of the European Communities emphasizes the role of universities and research programs in the Europe of knowledge.

The cooperation regarding the policies in the education and training field began with the adoption of the White Paper on education and training "Teaching and learning-Towards a Learning Society", by which the European Union defines itself as moving toward a learning society based on acquiring new knowledge and lifelong learning.

Keywords: education, policies on quality education, quality culture, Learning Society

A new impetus for European cooperation in Vocational Education and Training to support the Europe 2020 strategy

1. INTRODUCTION

The quality of human capital is crucial for Europe's success. The Europe 2020 Strategy puts a strong emphasis on education and training to promote "smart, sustainable and inclusive growth". Europe 2020 seeks to enhance the attractiveness of vocational education and training (VET) and maps out its potential with respect to the Flagship Initiatives "An Agenda for new skills and jobs" and "Youth on the Move", including its Youth employment framework.

VET must play a dual role: as a tool to help meet Europe's immediate and future skills needs; and, in parallel, to reduce the social impact of and facilitate recovery from the crisis. These twin challenges call for urgent reforms. The case for better skills development (the term "skill" subsumes knowledge, skills and competences as defined in the European Qualifications Framework) in Europe is even more urgent in the light of the global race for talent and rapid development of Education and Training (E&T) systems in emerging economies such as China, Brazil or India. Forecasts of future skills needs show a greater demand for medium and high level qualifications up to 2020 (according to the forecasting of future skills needs up to 2020 carried out by Cedefop in February 2010, there will be 15,6 millions new jobs in the EU for tertiary graduates and 3,7 million new jobs for secondary level graduates. In contrast, there will be a decline of 12 million jobs for those with no or low qualifications). The continuing ICT-driven evolution of products and processes, coupled with the need for a low-carbon economy as well as population ageing will mean that jobs and social structures will change: education and training, including VET, must adapt accordingly. **Initial vocational education and training (IVET)** must equip young learners with skills directly relevant to evolving labour markets, such as e-skills (COM-2007 "e-Skills for the 21st

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Century"- it is forecasted that within five years 90% of jobs will require ICT skills), and highly developed key competences; such as digital and media literacy to achieve digital competence; it has a particular role to play in addressing Europe's high youth unemployment. In addition, as the traditional life sequence of "training-work-retirement" will be modified with mid-life changes of careers and occupations, adults must be able to update their skills and competences through **continuing vocational education and training (CVET)**. The Experts Report on New Skills for New Jobs contains a series of recommendations for both parts of VET systems.

VET has also a responsibility to respond to broader societal challenges, particularly to promote social inclusion. Empowering all people of working age to participate in economic and social life through accessible and equitable training opportunities is crucial.

Greening our economy offers new jobs and they require new skills. The VET systems should be adapted to ensure that the workforce can adjust their skills to the labour-market needs of an environmentally sustainable economy founded on competence-based training concepts.

VET in Europe covers diverse national systems, rooted in their specific economic and social environments. IVET is normally part of upper secondary education (the average proportion of students enrolled in VET at upper secondary level -ISCED level 3- in the EU was 51.5%, with wide differences of 13% in Cyprus to 77% in Austria) but includes also tertiary level (called 'Fachhochschulen', 'universities of applied sciences' or 'vocational colleges' in many countries). According to the Commission study on VET pathways, across the EU approximately 13% of students are enrolled in tertiary VET and around 10% of working population holds a post-secondary non-tertiary education degree. CVET includes a range of vocationally-oriented training provided by a variety of training providers. IVET takes place within relatively regulated frameworks while CVET is often unregulated. What is common is that all are facing challenges, all need to be modernised.

Article 166 of the Treaty on the Functioning of European Union states that the "*Union shall implement a vocational training policy which shall support and supplement the action of the Member States...*". The Copenhagen process launched in 2002 has supported the Member States in modernising VET systems. It has boosted the development of the learning outcomes approach, the lifelong learning perspective and has supported the development of common reference tools (Europass, European Qualifications Framework - EQF, European Credit System for VET – ECVET and European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training – EQAVET).

2. A NEW IMPETUS FOR VET

Vocational education and training in Europe by 2020 should contribute to both excellence and equity in EU lifelong learning systems and thereby to the Europe 2020 objectives of smart and inclusive growth, with:

- *IVET as an attractive learning option with high relevance to labour market needs and pathways to higher education,*
- *easily accessible CVET for people in different life situations facilitating skills development and career changes,*
- *flexible systems based on the recognition of learning outcomes, including diplomas, and supporting individual learning pathways,*
- *adequate support for those at a disadvantage, and*
- *cross-border mobility as an integral part of VET practices.*

This Chapter outlines key elements to be taken up in the re-launch of the Copenhagen process. It draws on the four priorities of the Strategic framework for

European cooperation in education and training up to 2020 - lifelong learning and mobility, quality and efficiency, equity and active citizenship and innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship. It includes also an aspect of international cooperation in the area of VET.

2.1. A key role of VET in lifelong learning and mobility

As the structure of the European population shifts and as mid-career changes become more frequent, the need for constant upgrading of skills increases and with it the relative importance of CVET. Therefore, access to training opportunities at different levels should be maximised. This may imply substantial changes in how, when and by whom VET provision is organised, delivered and financed.

Flexible access to training and qualifications

There appears to be a need for greater flexibility regarding how learning outcomes are acquired, how they are assessed and how they lead to qualifications.

Employers' role in the provision of CVET is increasing and, as change accelerates, they must provide their employees with opportunities for intensive periods of training. Traditional initial training providers such as VET schools might need to introduce flexible "à la carte" CVET concepts for heterogeneous groups of learners. Higher education institutions will probably need to open up to the provision of CVET, offering customer-oriented training adapted to the needs of employees and employers, particularly micro and small businesses. Flexible access to training will have to be combined with flexible work organisation and labour market arrangements. A specific challenge will be to reconcile work, learning and family in order to increase a participation of women.

Validation of non-formal and informal learning (European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning-Cedefop 2009 are a direct outcome of the Copenhagen process) provides pathways for up-skilling and reintegration of people to the labour market. The adoption of an outcomes-based approach for vocational qualifications, as promoted by the EQF and ECVET, is key to achieving this: it must become embedded in all parts of the E&T system.

The general trend to "up-skilling" has implications for the relationship between VET and higher education (HE). Contributing to the Europe 2020 headline target of boosting the share of tertiary graduates to 40%, genuinely open pathways between VET and HE have to be ensured as well as tertiary VET should be strongly supported. Comprehensive national qualifications frameworks referenced to the EQF will help the permeability between VET and HE: the highest levels of qualifications frameworks should cover both sectors, with strong convergence between ECTS and ECVET systems.

Lifelong learning opportunities in both initial and continuing VET must be coupled with guidance and counselling services to facilitate transitions from training to employment and between jobs. Guidance from public employment services must work in a close cooperation with guidance provided by E&T systems. Both young and adults have to be empowered to master transitions through the development of career management skills. Guidance should be redirected from a "testing" to a "tasting" approach, providing young people with an opportunity to get acquainted with different vocational trades and career possibilities. Specific attention should be paid to the issue of gender equality to encourage young people to consider occupations beyond traditional gender profiles.

Strategic approach to mobility in VET

There appears to be an urgent need to strengthen the transnational mobility for learning purposes in the area of VET, in particular in initial vocational training including apprentices. Mobility can help to overcome language barriers as well as to develop self-confidence, adaptability, a sense of responsibility, employability and intercultural competence. The Europe 2020 Strategy and its Youth on the Move initiative underline the

value of learning mobility and propose that its benefits should be made more available to all young people. In line with it, new innovative approaches should be explored on how mobility in VET, particularly of apprentices, can be strengthened.

Periods of study or training in other countries need to become a normal part of vocational training pathways, both for learners and VET professionals. Foreign languages in VET programmes are of particular importance in this context. Recognition of the mobility training experience has to be ensured through the use of ECVET. Training Placements in Enterprises face the particular challenge of involving businesses, generally SME, in the process. Based on the results of pilot project Mobility for apprentices, appropriate mobility support structures run by the networks of competent VET stakeholders should be set up to this end. "Virtual mobility" through the use of ICT (e-learning) should be promoted to complement physical mobility. Given the particular challenges which exist within VET, the proposed benchmark on mobility being developed within the OMC for E&T should set an ambitious target specifically for VET.

The modernisation of VET systems for lifelong learning and mobility will require a strong involvement and commitment of all stakeholders. Public authorities at all levels play different but crucial roles. Social partners should be supported to play their part in the organisation, provision and financing of training, but should also play an active role in promoting and facilitating mobility. Individuals need to be motivated to engage in mobility and to take up lifelong learning through efficient and sustainable financing tools and schemes (e.g. training vouchers, individual learning accounts, training funds and others).

The key actions in VET to support lifelong learning and mobility should focus on:

- *flexible "à la carte" concepts to maximise the access to continuing VET delivered by employers, traditional training providers and higher education institutions and coupled with appropriate financial incentives;*

- *genuinely open pathways from VET to HE and development of tertiary VET programmes;*

- *high degree of validation of non-formal and informal learning;*

- *integrated guidance and counselling services to facilitate transitions and learning and career choices;*

- *by 2020, systematic use of EQF, ECVET and Europass aimed at transparency of qualifications and portability of learning outcomes;*

- *transnational mobility strategies at the level of VET providers facilitated by appropriate mobility support structures.*

2.2. Increasing attractiveness and excellence of VET through quality and efficiency

The attractiveness and excellence of VET depends on multiple factors. For an individual, attractiveness depends on short and long-term outcomes in terms of easy school-to-work transition, demand for specific professions (according to Manpower "Hot jobs 2009" analysis, the current skills shortages are reported mostly in traditional craft trades-carpenters, welders, plumbers), wage levels and career prospects. From an overall perspective, the attractiveness of VET depends on its quality and efficiency, high standards of teachers and trainers, relevance to labour market needs and the pathways it opens to further learning without dead-ends, including at tertiary level.

Implementing quality assurance in VET

While the importance of quality assurance is generally recognised, the establishment of a quality assurance policy and of a "quality culture" in VET appears not to be achieved yet. The recently adopted European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQAVET) outlines an agenda for **quality** in both initial and continuing VET. It increases transparency and helps build mutual trust between national VET systems. At European level, the

cooperation between national reference points for quality assurance (QANRPs) will be ensured through the EQAVET network. At national level, arrangements will be needed to set a framework for quality assurance, including support activities to training providers in order to guarantee the implementation and commitment at all levels.

Evolving roles of teachers and trainers

The role of teachers and trainers is crucial in the modernisation of VET with a special focus on how they are recruited, their professional development and status in society. The changes announced for future presents new challenges for both teachers and trainers in VET (Cedefop, Finnish National Board of Education-2009: Competence Framework for VET professions), involving new pedagogies, curriculum design, quality assurance, management and administrative tasks.

There is a convergence in the roles of teachers and trainers: a trainer in a work-based setting will need more pedagogical competences and must play a supportive and mentoring role; while a teacher in a school will need, like a trainer, a good understanding of work practices. This convergence should be reflected in policies for recruitment and continuing development of skills and competences, which should be validated and reflected in their career status.

Professional excellence combined with well developed key competences

The focus on key competences is becoming an urgent priority also in vocational education and training (Council Conclusions 11.05.2010 on competences supporting lifelong learning and the new skills new jobs initiative). Key competences are the foundation for lifelong learning and success in individuals' careers and professions. The development of key competences has to continue beyond compulsory education, in both initial and continuing VET. At the same time, rapid technological change implies constant improvement of "hard" professional/vocational skills (the EU is hampered by a shortage of ICT skills and could lack the skills to fill as many as 700 000 IT jobs by 2015 – chapter 2.6 COM "A Digital Agenda for Europe"). The challenge is to achieve the best possible combination of vocational skills and key competences both to a high standard.

In order to maximise the relevance of VET provision to labour market needs, use of different forms of work-based learning should be strengthened. Research indicates that work-based learning tends to increase employment opportunities in early working life. Work-based learning also facilitates the development of the learning outcomes approach in VET with the shift towards competence-based learning, competence-based qualifications and assessments (skills demonstrations). Therefore, employers should be encouraged to maximise the offer of apprenticeship and traineeship placements.

Efficiency and labour market relevance through partnerships

As highlighted in the Europe 2020 Strategy, partnerships between stakeholders in VET and in particularly the involvement of social partners in the design, organisation, delivery and financing of VET are a prerequisite to **efficiency** and relevance to labour market needs. In many countries these partnerships take the form of skills councils (a Commission study on Sector Councils on Employment and Skills at EU level), which are involved in monitoring labour markets, development of skills profiles, curricula, certification and others.

The labour market relevance of VET can be strengthened by the development of forward planning tools to match skills and jobs (Expert Group Report on New Skills for New Jobs -2010). Based on such matching, VET providers in cooperation with local labour market representatives should be able to adapt curricula accordingly to reflect skills shortages, surpluses, skills gaps or obsolescence. Improvements of methodologies are needed to make anticipation tools coherent and comparable, including the development of

a common system of classifications for skills, competences and occupations based on learning outcomes.

The key actions to improve the quality and efficiency of initial and continuing VET should aim at:

- *implementing quality assurance systems at national level, as recommended by EQAVET framework;*
- *developing a competence framework for teachers and trainers in initial and continuing VET;*
- *providing the workforce with high quality labour market relevant vocational skills by increased use of different forms of work-based learning;*
- *strengthening the development of key competences to ensure the adaptability and flexibility of learners and workers;*
- *making VET provision more responsive to evolving labour market needs based on forward planning tools in cooperation with social partners and public employment services.*

2.3. Equity and active citizenship

Education and training plays a major role in promoting equity, social inclusion and active citizenship. Social exclusion of the low-skilled, learners from a migrant background, the unemployed and those with special educational needs is often the result of cumulating elements such as low formal qualification and the lack of basic skills and transversal competences. Education and training can be important forces to counter social exclusion; VET systems have a particularly important role to play (Council Conclusions 11.05.2010 on the social dimension of education and training).

Inclusive VET for inclusive growth

Reducing the share of early school leavers to 10% in both general education and VET is one of the headline targets of the Europe 2020 Strategy. Examples from some countries with high quality training provisions including apprenticeship schemes show that there is a potential for VET to provide drop-outs with an option for getting back to learning. Use of non-classroom, work-based learning with close links to the local labour market and integrating non-formal and informal learning can provide an attractive alternative for learners who are less academically oriented.

VET adapted to the individual needs of learners is important for increasing inclusiveness. The training offer should be made more flexible and modularised and should offer individualised learning pathways. Such approaches are more effective when the training is a part of a mainstream VET and not structured as specific courses for target groups. However, integration of some groups, such as disabled people or people from migrant backgrounds, might require additional support, for instance validation of non-formal and informal learning and specific language courses for migrants.

The more VET is fully integrated into the overall E&T system, the more it can play a significant role for social equity. Developing the level of excellence in VET, opening pathways from VET to higher education and strengthening tertiary VET programmes can raise expectations for VET students and provide pathways for upward social mobility.

All this needs to be supported by accessible and targeted guidance services, providing additional support at key transition points for learners at risk of underachievement. Furthermore, there is a need to constantly monitor the employment rates of VET learners, in particular of those belonging to groups at risk, including data on the socio-economic profile of learners and of dropout rates in VET (as described in indicators 5 and 6 of the EQAVET Recommendation).

The more vocational education and training goes beyond the pure labour market aspect, the more it will promote equity. VET can support both development of people's professional and social identities and their sense of belonging to communities of practice. This contributes to social capital, trust and integration in societies. Key competences for active citizenship can be developed through curricula, participative working methods, through learners' participation in decision making and through partnerships between VET providers, local communities and civil society organisations.

Initial VET can contribute significantly to combat drop outs, improve educational equity and promote upward social mobility of groups at risk by:

- *Providing high quality training focused on work-based learning adapted to individual needs;*

- *pathways from VET to HE accessible to groups at risk;*

- *appropriate "tracer systems" to monitor the employment rates of VET students, in particular of those belonging to groups at risk.*

Continuing VET is particularly well placed to increase the labour market participation of groups at risk through:

- *flexible and modularised individual learning pathways;*

- *work-based learning focused on the acquisition of key competences;*

- *guidance services and validation of prior learning, particularly for migrants in order to facilitate their integration into society.*

With a view to development of the key competences for active citizenship:

- *partnerships between VET providers, local communities, civil society organisations, parents and learners should be strengthened.*

2.4. Innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship

As stressed in the Europe 2020 Strategy, E&T systems should focus their curricula on creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship. In order to fulfil its role, vocational education and training has to reflect changes in the economy and in society.

A vision of fostering **creativity and innovation** is needed that focuses on individuals within modernised, excellent and high quality VET systems. VET providers, in partnership with authorities and enterprises, should foster creativity and an innovation-conducive framework which encourages risk-taking and experimentation.

VET providers should use experience-based learning and expose learners to non-routine work and non-typical situations. There appears to be a need to promote active learning in both work and school-based VET and give individuals the opportunity to control and develop their own learning, also through the use of innovative, creative and tailored made ICT tools, including e-learning, to improve the access to and flexibility of training.

At the same time, education for **entrepreneurship**, meaning a sense of initiative, ability to turn ideas into practice, creativity and self-confidence, should be encouraged and accessible to all VET students, across all curricula and fields of study (Expert Group Report on Entrepreneurship in VET-2009). It should build awareness of self-employment as a career option and train them to start one's own business. Entrepreneurship must become a normal part of the competence framework of teachers and trainers. At European level, different initiatives, such as the creation of networks, the Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs pilot project, exchanges of educators and entrepreneurs to promote entrepreneurship as well as good practices in the field of entrepreneurship education should be supported and further developed.

VET can support creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship of learners by:

- *providing experience-based and active learning to promote the acquisition of e-skills, a risk-taking culture, initiative, curiosity, intrinsic motivation and the critical thinking of individuals;*
- *including entrepreneurship in the competence framework of VET teachers and trainers.*

2.5. International cooperation in the area of VET

EU policy on VET should be a subject for further policy dialogue and mutual learning with the international community, including both third countries and relevant international organisations.

Structured cooperation could be launched with Neighbourhood countries and further extended with Enlargement countries with the support of ETF which has proven its value-added in supporting the development of VET curricula and quality teaching methodologies in these countries. The European common reference tools and the policy approaches provide an important reference for the modernisation of VET systems in partner countries, including for those involved in accession to the EU. This cooperation has potential to contribute to trans-national collaboration, regional development, an improved management of legal mobility and to combat illegal migration.

Cooperation could further be fostered with OECD, UNESCO (specifically with UNEVOC) and ILO in the research activities and evidence-based policy making in the area of VET (cooperation on PIAAC).

3. A NEW AGENDA FOR EUROPEAN COOPERATION IN VET

European cooperation in VET so far has been successful, particularly in the establishment of a number of EU common tools to enhance transparency and portability of qualifications. However, the agenda set in Europe 2020 clearly calls for a much bolder approach to reforms of VET systems. The Commission therefore calls on EU Ministers in charge of VET and European Social Partners: to endorse an ambitious VET modernisation agenda, to define concrete deliverables for the next decade and to make a strong commitment to its implementation within the Europe 2020 national reform programmes.

The next will be the time for delivery, starting with a rapid implementation of the EU common reference tools, such as EQF, ECVET, Europass and EQAVET. The Member States have the prime role, in partnership with social partners and involving, regional and local authorities, vocational providers, teachers and trainers as well as learners at all levels. At the European level the existing platforms such as Directors General for Vocational Training (DGVT) and Advisory Committee for Vocational Training (ACVT) as well as relevant EU programmes will be used to support the design and delivery of agreed actions. In addition, as called for in the Europe 2020 Strategy, social partners at European level should develop their own initiatives to contribute to the attractiveness of VET.

The Community instruments play a crucial role to support both modernisation agenda and mobility in VET. The Leonardo da Vinci Programme has supported more than 600 000 training placements for young people, 110 000 exchanges of VET teachers and trainers and 2000 innovative projects.

The governance of the re-launched Copenhagen process shall be coherent with the framework of the Open Method of Coordination in Education and Training and linked to the Europe 2020 Strategy taking into account the profile of the European Union as a global actor. Evidence-based policy making will continue to be supported through the research, expertise and analysis of Cedefop and ETF as well as statistical evidences provided by Eurostat.

Conclusions

Promoting adult learning

Why is it needed?

More adult learning can help Europe overcome the economic crisis, meet the need for new skills, and keep its ageing workforce productive. Learning is also essential for social inclusion and active citizenship. These days, people cannot just rely on the skills they acquired at school to last them till the end of their working life.

The participation of adults in learning varies significantly between EU countries: from 1.4% to 31.6% (2012 figures), and the overall trend is that numbers are stagnating. Participation rates are especially disappointing for low-skilled and older adults. Action at European level will increase knowledge about successful policies, provide support, and enable a better exchange of experiences between countries.

What has been done so far?

To support policy developments:

- EU countries have set a target for adult learning: by 2020, 15% of adults aged 25-64 should be taking part. In 2012, average participation was 9% and only 5 EU countries had reached the target rate;
- The Commission publishes indicators and data on the current situation in member countries, reports on progress in implementing policies and proposes new policy;
- The Commission facilitates exchange of good practice and peer learning on policies in the Education and Training 2020 work programme, working groups English, and networks on dedicated themes have been convened for limited periods;
- The Commission has commissioned studies that bring evidence and data to support more effective policies.

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