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EU tools for education and training: a key for success

edited by Mara Brugia and Lisa Rustico

The beginnings of policy making related to the recognition of qualifications go back to 1957 and the signature of the Treaty of Rome which established the basis of the European Economic Community. It was linked to the creation of the common market and the freedom of establishment and practice of activities as self-employed persons. The practice of the regulated professions across countries required “the mutual recognition of diplomas, certificates and other evidence of formal qualifications” (Treaty of Rome, art. 57). Though the Treaty only made reference to the recognition of migrants’ qualifications acquired in one Member State with the view to exercising a regulated profession in another Member state, it was the first time that professional geographical mobility was associated with the necessity of having the qualifications recognised from the State of origin in the host country. Also in 1975, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) was established as an Agency of the European Union in the area of vocational training. One of the main missions established in its Founding Regulations was related to the “mutual recognition of certificates and other documents attesting completion of vocational training” through approximation of standards of vocational training (Founding regulations, 1975) and support of common policies. At that time, vocational training entered under the scope of the employment policies and under Community powers and only in 1992 it was transferred under the scope of educational policies. In this context, the Centre’s mission was related to facilitating the free movement of workers within the Community, and it did not cover the recognition of qualifications for the self-employed which entered the scope of the internal market and services policies. The Centre has been ever since a think tank and has been providing expertise to the European Commission, Member States and social partners in developing and implementing VET policies. After the Treaty of Rome, the Maastricht Treaty (1992), which included education and training issues under Community policies, underlined in art. 126 the need to recognise academic diplomas and study periods abroad thus bringing under the spotlight the educational geographical mo-

bility of students and teachers as one further reason why recognition of diplomas needed to be pursued and achieved. Though the treaty refers only to the academic recognition of diplomas, in art. 127 it encourages mobility of instructors and trainees in VET without linking it to the concept of recognition of professional qualifications. This link will be explicitly made with the launching of the Lisbon process in 2000. Following the Maastricht Treaty, the issue of recognition of qualifications was transferred under the scope of the education policies, thus evolving and enlarging its targets beyond the recognition of the regulated professions which remained a separate strand in policy making (i.e. under the responsibility of DG Internal Markets and Services). From an educational perspective, the issue was relevant since it facilitated geographical mobility of workers in general, students, trainees, teachers and trainers. Its relevance was enriched later with new dimensions brought to light by the Lisbon agenda, which also reinforces another goal related to qualifications: transparency. Launched in 1998 on the occasion of the European Forum on the transparency of professional qualifications, transparency has become together with recognition the major goals related to qualifications in the Lisbon process.

With the Lisbon European Council of 2000 and the subsequent Lisbon strategy, one of the main three components related to the education and training for living and working in the knowledge society was “increased transparency of qualifications” (*Presidency Conclusions*, Lisbon Euro-

pean Council 23 and 24 March 2000, in *www.europarl.europa.eu*). The strategy associates ‘transparency of qualifications’ to building the knowledge society, and improving the quality of employment as it is directly linked to provision of the right skills for the labour market in a context of rapid change triggered by globalisation and the challenges of a new knowledge-driven economy. The role of vocation education and training was formally recognised as one of the main drivers of economic and social development. The targets were to foster mobility of students and teachers through “greater transparency in the recognition of qualifications and periods of study and training” and to develop a common European format for “curricula vitae to be understood on a voluntary basis in order to facilitate mobility by helping the assessment of knowledge acquired both by education and training establishments and by employers” (*Presidency Conclusions*, cit.). The Lisbon strategy marks the beginning of coherent policy cooperation on the way to achieving transparency and recognition of qualifications and the introduction of the Open Method of Co-ordination (OMC) as a working tool at the European level. Policy making in the educational field makes use of this intergovernmental means of governance in the EU and is based on voluntary cooperation of its member states. Furthermore, the educational objectives related to the recognition and transparency of qualifications were pursued through new policy-making mechanisms and tools. While the recognition of regulated professions has been

covered at European level by Directives which impose legally binding obligations on Member States’ authorities, the much more recent educational policy developments leading to the transparency, comparability, transferability and recognition of qualifications is a voluntary process led by Member States under the coordination of the EU. They make the object of Recommendations and do not apply to the mutual recognition of qualifications in the area of regulated professions. Within the Lisbon strategy, the Copenhagen process, launched in 2002 by the European Ministers of VET and the European Commission, defined four priorities for VET to contribute to the achievement of the strategy’s overall objectives and targets. Two of the priorities regard transparency, information and guidance on the one hand and recognition of competences and qualifications, on the other. The first implies implementing the tools and networks to make qualifications easier to be understood on the European labour market and it is linked to the first European tool – Europass. The latter expressed the necessity of

Bollettino Adapt

The *Bollettino Adapt*, produced in collaboration with the Marco Biagi Centre for International and Comparative Studies, consists of two series of electronic newsletters providing updated information on labour and industrial relations issues, and on issues related to the health and safety at work. There are two types of newsletter: *Bollettino ordinario* and *Bollettino speciale*.

creating “reference levels, common principles for certification and common measures, including a credit transfer system for vocational education and training” to promote “transparency, comparability, transferability and recognition of competences and/or qualifications, between different countries and at different levels” (Council 2003, p. 4). This brings into light a new approach in the process of making qualifications transferable and recognisable: the normative approach implying the adoption of reforms and regulations at the national level, though on a voluntary basis under the OMC. The purpose of making qualifications transparent gains new dimensions related to the concept of lifelong learning and to the new learning processes. Educational systems need to become more open to increase progression or vertical mobility, allow permeability between education systems and learning pathways, and recognise learning acquired in informal and non-formal contexts. Two more tools were thus created to facilitate this: the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET). The two tools are expected to improve transparency, comparability and transferability (transfer and accumulation) of qualifications and learning by introducing a common European reference framework for national qualifications systems; by defining qualifications based on learning outcomes – “statements of what an individual knows, understands or is able to do at the end of a learning process” (EC, 2006) as opposed to the traditional input-based approach to qualifica-

tions – purely based on duration, location and teaching methods; and by introducing the concept of units of learning outcomes designed to transfer credits between qualifications and VET systems. While EQF aims to increase transparency, comparability and transferability of acquired qualifications, the ECVET system supports transfer, recognition and accumulation of learning outcomes of individuals on their way to achieving a qualification. While the Copenhagen declaration marks the starting point in the creation and development of EQF and ECVET, Europass is the result of a work started in 1998 by the European Commission and Cedefop with the creation of the European Forum on the transparency of professional qualifications which introduced for the first time the concept of transparency related to qualifications. The forum brought together social partners with representatives of national training authorities around the issue of transparency (e.g. make content of professional qualifications easier to understand) to promote mobility, stimulate dialogue on existing initiatives, instruments and institutions, encourage the implementation of existing political solutions and consider new initiatives. The work of the Forum resulted in the development of the European CV and the Certificate Supplement and a network of National Reference Points for Vocational Qualifications. After its evaluation by the Directors Generals for vocational training in 2002, the forum was replaced by a technical working group mandated by the Copenhagen declaration to increase “transparency in voca-

tional education and training through the implementation and rationalisation of information tools and networks, including the integration of existing instruments such as the European CV, certificate and diploma supplements, the common European framework of reference for languages and the Europass Training into one single framework” (Copenhagen, 2002). The Europass Recommendation (European Commission, *Maastricht Communiqué on the Future Priorities of Enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training (VET) (Review of the Copenhagen Declaration of 30 November 2002)*, 2004, in www.ec.europa.eu) was adopted by the European Parliament and Council in 2004 and remains one of the main pillars of the Copenhagen process as confirmed by the Education Ministers’ communiqués monitoring its progress every two years (i.e. Maastricht, 2004; Helsinki, 2006 and Bordeaux, 2008). Since 1998 until present, Cedefop has had a central role going from the development of Europass from scratch to its implementation and management (for further information, please see article on Europass). Following the Copenhagen declaration, a mandate was given to a working group to explore possible options for the design, implementation and development of a credit transfer system for VET. A Technical Working Group (TWG) was created in November 2002 and its members, experts nominated by the participating countries and social partners, put together the basis of an ECVET system. In its interim report of November 2004 (European Commission, *European*

credit system for VET (ECVET). Technical specifications (Report of the credit transfer technical working group), 2005, in www.ec.europa.eu), the TWG, with Cedefop's support, elaborated the principles and essential rules for the implementation of ECVET which were presented at the Directors General meeting in Maastricht in 2004. On this basis, the Maastricht Communiqué reinforces the importance of the further development and implementation of ECVET. The need for its further development was reinforced also in the 2006 Helsinki and 2008 Bordeaux Communiqués. The Commission conducted a public consultation from November 2006 to March 2007, the results of which were discussed in a conference in Munich in June 2007. Formal proposal from the Commission on the ECVET system (i.e. the principles, reference framework and the conditions for the implementation of ECVET) was issued in April 2008. In parallel to the work of the TWG, and following the recommendation of the Maastricht Communiqué (2004) to develop an open and flexible European qualifications framework, the Commission developed the EQF with advice from Cedefop and from numerous experts on qualifications, systems of qualifications and qualifications frameworks. EQF is based on eight reference levels and introduces a learning outcomes approach to describe qualifications which facilitates understanding of what a learner can actually do at the end of the learning process and it is learner-centred. In July 2005, the blueprint for an EQF was presented and the European Commission initiated an exten-

sive EU-wide consultation process on the proposal at the informal meeting of European Education ministers in London. The process involved a wide range of stakeholders including social partners, education providers and policy makers and ended in December 2005. During the Austrian Council Presidency, the results of this consultation were presented and discussed at a conference in Budapest on 27-28 February 2006 (EC, 2006). A small team of experts was then commissioned to adapt the descriptors of the reference levels. This adaptation was finalized in the summer of 2006 by a Technical Working Group, which consisted of representatives from the member states and the European social partner organizations. It led to the establishment of a final content and structure of the framework that fed the formal proposal from the Commission on the EQF of September 2006 "to create a common reference framework which should serve as a translation device between different qualifications systems and their levels" (EC, 2006). The final recommendations on the establishment of EQF (EC, 2008) and ECVET (EC, 2009) were adopted by the Parliament and Council on 23 April 2008 and 18 June 2009, respectively. According to these recommendations, Member States are invited to relate their national qualifications frameworks to EQF by 2010 and to adopt measures so that all qualification diplomas, certificates and Europass documents contain a clear reference to the EQF level by means of the national framework by 2012. The recommendation on ECVET sets 2012 as starting date for the

gradual implementation of ECVET (for further information, please see articles on EQF and ECVET). ECVET will complement and build on concepts and principles with the EQF as the former uses the latter as the reference level for qualifications. Last but not least, the Europass documents will refer to the EQF levels and the credit points forming the qualifications and/or qualification units. According to Cedefop's last policy report, *Continuity, Consolidation and Change* (2009), while EQF is largely accepted and Member States are committed to referencing their qualifications to it, ECVET is in its testing phase and will need time to be implemented at national level. Nevertheless, as the Bordeaux Communiqué (2008) shows, work should be continued in developing and implementing the tools by means of pilot projects and appropriate methods with Community support and funding and with the active involvement of all stakeholders.

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Dossier Adapt

Since September 2006, the *Dossier* has provided in-depth reports on topical issues relating to the labour market, the application of collective agreements, and recent legislative changes. It also includes comment, articles and research reports by Adapt researchers and by external experts on matters of particular national and international importance.

The European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

A tool to describe and compare qualifications

by *Loukas Zahilas*

The aim of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is to make it easier for citizens to compare and understand the content and level of qualifications across national, sectoral and institutional borders. This will make it possible for individuals to combine and build on learning from different institutions and countries, thus facilitating mobility of learners and workers. Referring to a Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council (adopted in April 2008, OJ C 111), the EQF is based on the voluntary cooperation of members states. The success of the initiative thus fully depends on countries finding it useful and adding real value at national level.

Two main deadlines – 2010 and 2012

Two main deadlines have been set for the EQF. Firstly, countries are invited to refer their national qualifications levels to the EQF by 2010 – where appropriate by developing national qualifications frameworks (NQFs). As of September 2009, 27 countries have stated that they will complete this process by 2011. Although slightly behind target, this shows that a critical mass of countries are serious about the EQF. Secondly, from 2012, countries are invited to introduce a reference to the EQF levels in all individual certificates and di-

plomas awarded at national level. This second target is important as it will make the EQF visible to individual citizens and thus establish it as a key reference to all holders and users (for example employers) of certificates and diploma in Europe.

The core of the framework

The EQF is designed to be a comprehensive framework encompassing all sub-systems of education and training (general and adult education, vocational education and training as well as higher education). The main structure of the EQF is defined by eight levels covering the entire span of qualifications from those achieved at the end of compulsory education to those awarded at the highest level of academic and professional or vocational education and training. These eight levels are described in terms of learning outcomes, defined as what an individual is expected to know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a learning process. Each level differentiates between knowledge, skills and competence (understood as autonomy and responsibility). This makes it possible to define the level of a qualification according to its content, not to its institutional belonging. This is exemplified by vocational qualifications which traditionally have been placed at a lower level than aca-

demical qualifications. The acceptance of the EQF may lead to a situation where Academic Bachelors and Master Craftsmen are being placed at the same level – the first emphasising high level theoretical knowledge, the second high level practical skills. The EQF thus breaks with the traditional approach where certificates and diploma are compared (and valued) according to the duration of the education and training process and the location of the awarding institution. This shift to learning outcomes thus gives priority to the content and profile of certificates and diploma, reducing the weight given to the duration and location of the learning process. In line with the above, the EQF also underlines the need to develop arrangements for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The learning outcomes approach is seen as a precondition for this and further emphasises the need to focus on the actual knowledge, skills and competence held by individuals.

National qualifications frameworks

The EQF has acted as a catalyst for the development and implementation of National Qualifications Frameworks in Europe. While very few countries had implemented – or even considered – this approach prior to 2005, the situation today is very

different. All EU and EEA countries are currently working actively on the development and implementation of national frameworks. While the number of countries having fully implemented a NQF is still low (UK, France, Ireland, Malta), this situation is about to change radically in the next few years. The NQFs are gradually turning into important instruments for reform of national education and training systems, notably emphasising the need for transparent and permeable systems allowing citizens to pursue lifelong learning in a smooth way.

Since 2007 Cedefop, in close cooperation with the European Commission – DG Education and Culture – has put a lot of effort to produce updated information on the state of play of developments in National Qualifications Frameworks. The increasing importance attributed to the NQFs has made it necessary to provide a regular and more in-depth overview of developments in this field.

Cedefop's recent report – *The development of national qualifications frameworks in Europe* – provides updated information on the development and implementation of NQFs in Europe, and tries to better understand how they influence the implementation of the EQF as well as how they contribute to national developments and lifelong learning reforms. The ongoing developments of National Qualifications Frameworks across Europe can be seen as an effort to improve and strengthen the national level,

in particular by increasing transparency and clarifying relations between levels and types of qualifications.

The EQF defines the level of a qualification according to its content, not to its institutional belonging

As shown in Cedefop's report, the introduction of NQFs in Europe is progressing rapidly but is facing various challenges. First, NQFs are mainly seen as instruments

for national reforms with the fundamental objective of promoting lifelong learning by reducing barriers between institutions and sub-sectors of education and training. This vision requires a renegotiation of the relationships between qualifications and qualifications levels and could have an impact on existing interests and divisions of responsibilities between the main stakeholders. The platform for dialogue provided by the NQFs could bring conflicts to the surface and this should be seen as a sign of strength. Second, the learning outcomes approach is broadly endorsed as a basis for NQF developments. The main NQFs objectives identified at national level (transparency, improved access and progression in education and training, increased link between education and the labour market, platform for cooperation and dialogue) very much depend on a systematic definition and description of qualifications and qualifications levels in terms of learning outcomes. The risk of a 'pro-forma' shift to learning outcomes would undermine the mutual trust between countries as well as transparency.

Third, there are several examples of qualifications awarded outside the existing formal systems, for

example by enterprises, sectors and professional organisations. The question raised is whether NQFs can be used to include these non traditional qualifications and what this implies in terms of requirements to transparency, mutual trust and quality assurance.

The way the above challenges are addressed will play a key role for the future success of NQFs.

The impact of the EQF worldwide

The EQF has attracted attention all over the world. Many countries see the approach as promising and relevant. Following an international conference organised by the European Training Foundation, the Commission and Cedefop (gathering more than 70 countries in January 2009), a dialogue involving partners from all continents will start later this year. The aim is to see whether the EQF approach can serve as basis for broader international comparison of qualifications.

The role of Cedefop

Cedefop has actively supported the European Commission and the member states in developing – and now implementing – the framework. Cedefop sees the EQF as a key instrument in pursuing European cooperation in education and training and in promoting national qualifications arrangements offering real opportunities for lifelong learning. From Cedefop's point of view it is of particular importance that the EQF, and the corresponding NQFs, makes it possible to ad-

dress the question of parity of esteem between vocational and academic qualifications. The EQF makes it clear that Vocational qualifications are not only to be found at lower levels, VET belongs at all levels, including level eight. If the EQF can en-

compass such a shift in perspective, it will have served its purpose well.

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The European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

A valuable chance for Italy to mirror and improve its education and vocational system

by *Elisabetta Perulli*

The mobility of learners and workers in Europe is strictly linked to the opportunity of travelling with a complete and valuable set of recognised competences and qualifications. In order to meet the European citizens' demand of belonging to a real learning and working community and to break also this kind of barriers within the EU, on April 23rd 2008 the European Parliament and Council adopted the EQF Recommendation – European Qualifications Framework (EQF). It will work as a kind of translation device to make national qualifications more transparent and understandable across Europe, promoting citizens mobility between countries and facilitating their lifelong learning. Primarily the EQF Recommendation engages the EU countries to relate their qualifications to the EQF by 2010 and to ensure that all new qualifications issued from 2012 carry a reference to the appropriate EQF lev-

el. The EQF represents a unique opportunity for the Italian education and training system as it is a valuable chance to mirror, renovate and represent in a European and integrated way the structure and outcomes of our complex system. The most relevant issues placed by the EQF are:

- the clear connection of every qualification to one of the eight reference levels stated for the Framework;
- the coherent description of each qualification in 'learning outcomes' (what a learner knows, understands and is able to do);
- the presence of a quality assurance device.

All these requirements recall the need of a clear and agreed qualification standard set and a certification system at the national level; this system would be useful also in order to promote the validation

of non-formal and informal learning, as the EQF Recommendation enhances.

The aim of establishing a national qualifications and certifications framework has been for several years the focus of a wide-ranging reform initiative and an important issue for national institutions, namely the Ministry of Labour, Health and Social Policies and Ministry of Education, University and Research. Political process started in 2003. Since then, these institutions have been working in defining a new structure at the national level to renew the link to labour market's needs and to improve the integration between the different systems on the basis of professional standards. But in Italy (as in many others in Europe) this ambitious aim implies a long and often laborious debate between national institutions (Ministry of Labour and Ministry of Education and University) and the Regions (which are exclusively competent on vocational training qualification according to Constitution Title V). This ongoing debate concerns many aspects: the process of implementation, e.g. the architecture and tools of the national qualification system (standards and devises), the governance of the processes, the tasks and responsibilities. The effects of the law that reformed Title V of the Constitution (2001) made this process even more complicated as Regions are now working to establish their own regional qualifications systems. This reform, combined with the autonomy of several stakeholders

(autonomy of the regional authorities in regulating training; autonomy of universities and schools; autonomy of the enterprises in offering 'qualifications' in the workplace, etc.) created a difficult situation to manage. Nevertheless all these institutions, as well as the other stakeholders involved, are aware of the fundamental importance of a national system that should constitute the 'real infrastructure' for different educational and labour market policies able to guarantee at the same time flexibility and recognised value of the certification.

A National Committee (*Tavolo nazionale*) promoted by the Ministry of Labour in 2006, and involving representatives from the Ministry of Education, University and Research, Regions and social partners, recently played a key role in pushing this debate forward but the final goal is still far. Two economic and professional areas were mapped and a testing phase in the tourism and mechanical sector has been successfully carried out. The results

were positive; the applied methodology worked and the partnership with the social partners was very fruitful. The learning outcomes approach has been adopted and tested. Nevertheless, the results of these processes need to be discussed at the methodological and political level with different stakeholders to agree on common guidelines.

Meanwhile the different systems (school, university and vocational training) are providing their own reform actions following the EQF Recommendation (learning outcomes, quality assurance), but a coherent and common integrated Italian framework is not available at the moment.

In 2008 Isfol has been designated as national coordination point (NCP) by the Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Education in order to pilot and support the referencing process of Italy to EQF. A technical group is currently working in order to plan actions aimed at referencing the Italian qualifications systems to the EQF by the given deadlines

(2010) and to carry on networking with other European countries in order to guarantee the transparency and consistency of the correlation between our system and the EQF levels. In the next months, a draft of the Referencing Report will be submitted to a public consultation process in order to achieve the maximum of dissemination and expectantly agreement. However, the most relevant and hopeful element in this forthcoming process, that will end in 2010, is the capacity of our institutions and stakeholders to coordinate and dialogue in order to transform the present delay of our country in a good opportunity to share a common representation of a lifelong learning system, and to reflect on its real effectiveness in responding to the concrete changing needs of our learners, youth and workers, as well as of our whole 'country knowledge community'.

Elisabetta Perulli
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Europass: making learning outcomes visible to foster mobility of citizens

by Philippe Tissot

Europass is an initiative that provides a direct service to European citizens, helping them make their skills, competences and qualifications more easily understood on the labour market or in education and training. This makes it easier for citizens to move throughout Europe to study or work. Europass, based on a decision of the European Parlia-

ment and the Council, is managed by the European Commission with the support of Cedefop, who developed – and maintains – the Europass website.

Mobility and transparency: what are we talking about?

Mobility is defined as the ability

of an individual to move and adapt to a new occupational environment. Mobility can be geographical or 'functional' (a move to a new post in a company or to a new occupation). Mobility enables individuals to acquire new skills and thus to increase their employability.

Transparency refers to the degree of visibility and legibility of

qualifications, of their content and value on the national or international labour market and in the education and training systems. Making skills and qualifications more transparent make them easier to understand and appreciate, namely by employers.

The need to promote mobility in Europe

Two recent official EU documents underline that mobility is a key priority for the European Union:

- the *Council Conclusions on the professional and geographical mobility of the workforce and the free movement of workers within the European Union* of 9 March 2009 invite Member States to implement a strategy to foster movement of citizens and remove obstacles to mobility;
- the *Green Paper – Promoting the learning mobility of young people* of 8 July 2009 stresses that transnational mobility is one of the fundamental ways in which young people can acquire new skills.

Although the free movement of persons is a fundamental right of EU citizens, the mobility is still low in the European Union and has not drastically changed for 30 years, except for students.

Mobility of students has increased over the last 20 years. The Erasmus programme proved to be a decisive incitation: in 2006/2007, 159,324 students left their home country to study abroad in the framework of Erasmus, compared to 3,244 in 1987/1988, when the programme was launched. Still, less than 10% of learners at any level

spend some part of their learning pathway in another European country.

Mobility of workers remains extremely limited:

- *job to job mobility*: workers in the EU stay in the same job for an average of 10.6 years, compared to 6.7 years in the USA;
- *geographical mobility*: approximately 1.5% of EU-25 citizens live and work in a different Member State from their country of origin a proportion that has hardly changed for the last 30 years;
- *cross-border commuting* between Member States (with no residence change) remains quite low: only 0.2% of the EU-15 working population commutes between Member States.

The obstacles to mobility

More and more citizens are tempted to move abroad to study or find a job, to find a better quality of life or to follow their family. Also, mobility is likely to offer job opportunities in specific sectors (ICT, health care, tourism). Nevertheless, obstacles to mobility still exist, for example:

- insufficient information on opportunities (exchange programmes, incentives, access to job vacancies);
- language skills, necessary to study or work in a foreign country;
- lack of international strategy to bring assistance to potential candidates to mobility;
- lack of communities of practice for placement organisers;
- legal and administrative barriers;
- lack of recognition for knowledge and skills acquired abroad.

Europass, a lever to mobility

Europass supports European citizens' mobility by helping them better communicate knowledge, skills and competences acquired – in their country or abroad – through education, training or work experience as well as in informal settings.

Europass consists of five documents. Two are completed directly by individual citizens in 26 languages (European Union, candidate countries and European Economic Area) on the Europass website, managed and hosted by Cedefop on behalf of the European Commission:

- the *Curriculum Vitae* gives an overview of personal skills including those acquired outside formal settings – on the job or during leisure time; it can be completed online in 26 languages using tutorials;
- the *Language Passport* is a self-assessment tool for language skills using the standardised levels developed by the Council of Europe; it can be completed online in 26 languages using tutorials.

The other three documents are released to citizens who achieve specific learning experiences:

- the *Europass Mobility* is a standard template for the record of learning outcomes acquired during a stay in another European country (education or training, job or placement). The Europass Mobility is completed by the organisations involved in the country of origin and in the host country. Issued under the control of the National Europass Centres, it facilitates the validation of learning outcomes in the country of origin;
- the *Certificate Supplement* de-

scribes the content of VET certificates (title of the qualification, skills acquired, occupations accessible, entry requirements, level of the qualification, certification and accreditation, organisation of studies, access to the next level of education or training, international agreements on mutual recognition, legal basis).

The Europass documents support and increase European people mobility

Certificate supplements can be downloaded from online national inventories. By attaching the certificate supplement corresponding to their qualification, job seekers can give a clear picture of their skills and competences, in their country and abroad;

- the *Diploma Supplement* lists the achievements of holders of diploma or degrees (level, topics and grades). It also describes the content of the qualification and the structure of the national higher education. The diploma supplement is issued free of charge by higher education institutions. It facilitates mutual recognition of qualifications and lead to greater transparency of degrees.

Cedefop's contribution to Europass

Cedefop developed – and maintains – a multilingual web resource, bringing to the project:

- *content expertise*: Cedefop helped draft the Europass documents and web pages, in cooperation with the Commission;
- *linguistic support*: Cedefop financed and monitored the translation of the Europass tools into 26 languages;

- *information technology expertise*: Cedefop defined the technical specifications of the project and continues to monitor web resources.

Cedefop also pays special attention to user comments to continually improve the quality of the service, in cooperation with the European Commission.

Europass in figures

The on-line services have proven particularly successful: since February 2005, when Europass was launched, the Europass website was visited 18 million times, with 6 million curricula vitae completed online and another 8 million CV templates downloaded. The other documents cannot reach such figures, as they only concern specific groups. However, it is worth indicating that over 200 thousand Europass Mobility documents have been issued to record mobility experiences. For many recipients, namely young trainees, this was the first document describing their skills.

20 countries have set up a national inventory of Certificate supplements, and hundreds of thousands of young people who obtained their certificate have also received this supplement.

The impact of Europass

The usefulness of Europass is reflected by the constant increase in the use of the Europass documents. An evaluation survey conducted by the European Com-

mission in 2007 showed that there is a high level of satisfaction from users with respect to the Europass documents. Over 25% of users consider that Europass has helped them to a very large or to a large extent to gain access to learning and employment opportunities. 15% of respondents report that Europass helped them to change job or location. If we consider that 6 million people created a Europass CV online and 8 million downloaded the CV templates between February 2005 and September 2009, Europass could have directly helped over 2 million individuals in their mobility experience. Further impact is to be expected as Europass becomes more widely known.

The Europass documents also facilitate the exchange of information about qualifications between organisations and sectors. In particular, the Europass Certificate Supplement is proving a major support for the implementation of a recent major initiative, the European Qualification Framework. Web services facilitate the interoperability of the Europass CV with the information systems of employment services, universities, businesses.

The future of Europass

To increase the use of Europass, the Commission, Cedefop and the national Europass Centres will work together to:

- *develop the CV and self assessment service*, further supporting citizens in their effort to identify and describe their skills, no matter how they have acquired them;
- *enhance coherence and com-*

plementarity with the other EU tools by linking Europass with other tools such as EQF and ECVET (see other articles in this issue);

- facilitate access of Europass to

vulnerable groups (elderly workers, the lower qualified) by improving the user-friendliness of the Europass website;

- strengthen cooperation with stakeholders (sectoral organisa-

tions, universities, guidance and job centres) by information and dissemination actions.

Philippe Tissot

Cedefop Senior Expert

A modern tool for Vocational Education and Training. The European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)

by *Isabelle Le Mouillour*

Introduction

In 2002, the Copenhagen Council Resolution and the ensuing Declaration of the European Ministers of VET on the *Promotion of Enhanced European Cooperation in VET* were the fundamental acts giving birth to the Copenhagen Process, the European strategy to improve the performance, quality and attractiveness of VET. The communiqué of Maastricht (2004) gave priority to ECVET stressing the importance of testing and implementing such a European instrument. This strong concern has been since taken on board by the Helsinki (2006) and the Bordeaux Communiqués (2008). The latter stresses upon implementation of ECVET and puts an emphasis on continuity further developing ECVET and building ECVET/EQF related networks. It also strongly advocates the learning outcomes approach and the need to establish links with Europass and the validation processes. ECVET is developing in a context of greater interest for

VET as contributor to human capital building capacity at national and European level as well as to the European education and labour area. ECVET belongs to a set of European tools which are now in a consolidating phase (as mentioned in the Bordeaux communiqué, 2008) and which – most importantly – share common approaches based upon learning outcomes (especially with EQF, see the article by Loukas Zahilas in this issue), transparency and documentation of the learning achievements (especially as ECVET and Europass should be combined to allow for individuals to bring evidence on their learning paths, see the article by Philippe Tissot in this issue). On 18 June 2009 the European Parliament and the Council signed the recommendation on the establishment of a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET). ECVET aims at promot-

ing learners mobility, implementation of lifelong, development of mutual trust and cooperation between VET providers in Europe (*Official Journal of the European Union*, 2009). This article presents the main elements of the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training and addresses the issue of its implementation. The last part deals with coming challenges and the next steps of ECVET development.

What is ECVET?

The European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) has been continuously developed since the decision stated in the Copenhagen Declaration (30 November 2002) to develop a system of credit transfer for vocational education and training to promote transparency, comparability, transferability

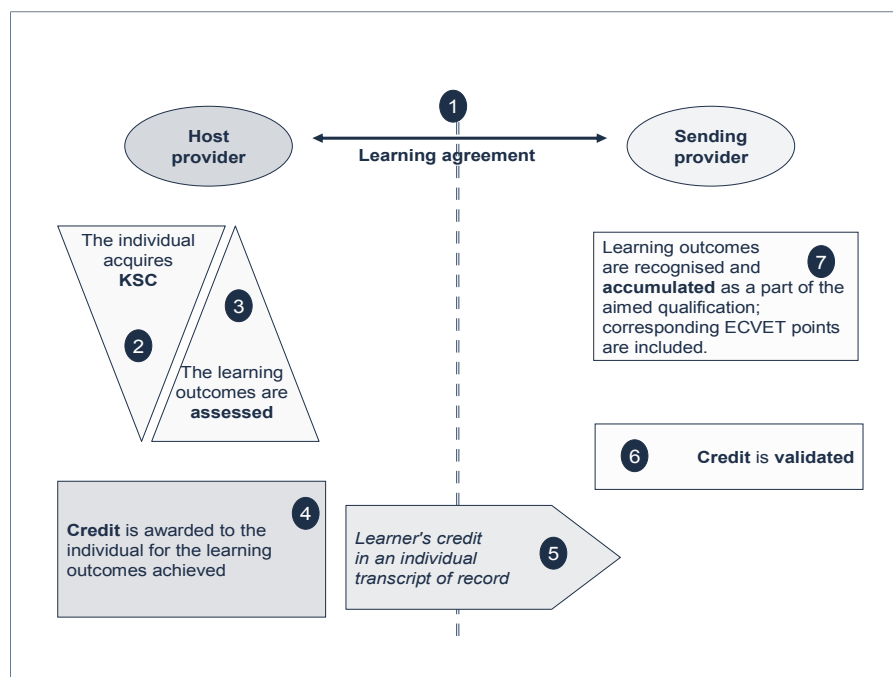
ECVET contributes to human capital building capacity at National and European level

and recognition of competence and/or qualifications, between different countries and at different levels. In 2006/2007 the ECVET proposal based upon the contributions of national experts, social partner representatives, the European Commission and Cedefop (as members of the technical working group) has been submitted to a Europe-wide consultation which led to the 2009 European Recommendation on ECVET. The core of ECVET is the description of qualifications in terms of learning outcomes (based upon the categories set within the EQF: knowledge, skills and competence). Organised in units, these learning outcomes can be transferred and accumulated towards qualifications. While existing credit systems usually refer largely to learning input (notional learning time, duration or workload), ECVET introduces learning outcomes as the basis for the award of credits and – eventually – of a qualification. For many education and training institutions this represents a new and innovative approach, forcing them to consider whether alternative learning forms can result in outcomes equivalent (although not similar) to those coming out of their own study programmes.

The ECVET transfer and accumulation processes (as presented in figure) rest on two main elements:

- Units of learning outcomes. They are “components of a qualification, consisting of a coherent set of knowledge, skills and competence that can be assessed and validated” (*Official Journal of the European Union*, 2009). A unit can be specific to a single qualification or common to dif-

Transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes



ferent qualifications. The ECVET points allow for a numerical assessment of the relative value of each unit to the full qualification;

- Credits for learning outcomes or credits. A credit is “a set of learning outcomes of an individual which have been assessed and which can be accumulated towards a qualification or transferred to other learning programmes or qualifications” (*Official Journal of the European Union*, 2009). This could lead to exemption of part of the study programmes or equivalences. The implementation and further development of ECVET as proposed at European level are depending on the characteristics of national or regional education and training contexts. For instance on the issue of recognition and validation of learning outcomes, procedures for validation of learning outcomes are increasingly developing but vary very much across Member States since the adoption of common

European principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning in 2004 (see J. Bjørnåvold, I. Le Mouillour, *La validation des acquis d'apprentissage en Europe: un sujet d'actualité*, in *Actualité de la Formation Permanente*, 2008, n. 212, 75-83). Building upon a learning outcomes approach, ECVET is giving a central role to qualifications; qualifications are the reference for any transfer or accumulation arrangements and agreements, they might vary in their size (an indication of which is given by the total number of ECVET points allocated to the qualification), they might vary in the amount of units they contain. The learning outcomes are the link between occupational standards and educational standards (for definitions, Cedefop, *Terminology of vocational training policy. A selection of 100 key terms*, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg, 2008, to be published).

They also fulfil different functions ranging from introducing a common language within the education and training community (thus allowing for a better understanding and readability of qualifications) to clarifying the relationships between different forms and contexts of learning. They –

The core of ECVET is the description of qualifications in terms of learning outcomes

at the same time – raise discussion on the input-based perspective to education, training and qualifications purely based on location, duration and/or teaching methods and call for dialogue on the relevance and quality of qualifications (Cedefop, *The shift to learning outcomes. Policies and practices in Europe*, Cedefop Reference Series, 2009, n. 72).

The implementation of ECVET involves a large range of stakeholders operating in the VET and qualifications systems such as competent authorities, awarding bodies, assessment board, training providers etc. These stakeholders fulfil different roles and assume different functions in the ECVET process (designing the qualifications in units of learning outcomes, allocating ECVET points, carrying out assessment of learning outcomes, awarding credits, validating the learning outcomes, organising mobility and transfer of credit, etc.). The diversity of the VET and qualifications systems in Europe, the various stage of development in the field of validation and the difficulties of implementing mobility in VET call for the further important aspect of ECVET: the partnerships or cooperative aspects of ECVET. It might be, for

instance, that a VET school provider from one Member State will enter a partnership with a regional ministry from another

Member State as both might be in charge of awarding qualifications in their respective countries. For this purpose, the ECVET recommendation suggests the

stakeholders to conclude a Memorandum of Understanding to define their framework of cooperation and networking. The mobile learner and the involved two partner VET providers should conclude a learning agreement which describes the training provision and the content of the mobility in terms of learning outcomes. The learner will receive a personal transcript detailing the assessed learning outcomes, units and ECVET points awarded. It can be envisaged to combine or use the Europass documents as personal transcript.

The meaning of tests and pilots

Many expectations are linked with ECVET such as further development of intra-European mobility, more significant development of individualised career and learning paths, better recognition of informal and non-formal learning, better transparency and mutual trust between education systems, increasing participation rates to VET motivation for lifelong learning (Bordeaux communiqué; Cedefop, *Continuity, consolidation and change. Towards a European era of vocational education and training*, Cedefop

Reference Series, 2009, n. 73). The ECVET process does not start from scratch but builds on a significant amount of experience gained over many years (also preceding the Copenhagen declaration in 2002) in Belgium [Flemish Community], Denmark, Sweden, Spain or Scotland. As the work on ECVET has moved on, further national developments have been triggered, for example in Finland (FINECVET) and in Germany (DECVET). The new qualifications framework for England and Northern Ireland (Qualifications and Credit Framework, QCF) strengthens the role of credit transfer, an approach largely followed by the Scottish Credit and Qualifications framework (SCQF) and Welsh framework. Luxemburg, Belgium [Walloon Community] and Latvia are furthermore updating their national regulations in order to accommodate credit transfer and accumulation. With the ECVET Recommendation (2009) the European Parliament and the Council recommend the Member States to “create the necessary conditions and adopt measures so that as from 2012 it is possible for ECVET to be gradually applied to VET qualifications at all levels of the EQF and used for [...] transfer, recognition and accumulation of individuals’ learning outcomes achieved in formal and [...] non-formal and informal contexts” at the same time it endorses the European Commission to support Member States [...] by facilitating testing, cooperation, mutual learning, promotion” (*Official journal*, 155/13-14). Two main contexts for ECVET implementation are emerging on the one side the use

of ECVET in an international context of mobility for VET learners and on the other side the use of ECVET in national context as a tool for progression and permeability between the subsystems of a given VET system (G. Fietz, I. Le Mouillour, T. Reglin, *Study on the implementation and development*

of an ECVET system for initial vocational education and training, www.ec.europa.eu/education, 2007). Many countries are looking at ways of introducing credit transfer processes (and thus flexibility) into the qualifications systems. Among the Member States, the initiatives are aiming at:

- introduce a credit system in VET reform (Iceland, Luxembourg, Slovenia) or study its feasibility for future introduction considering ECVET (the Czech Republic, Germany, Finland);
- analyse legal and organisational status quo of VET options regarding their ECVET readiness (Austria);
- develop or update related national legislation (Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Slovenia);
- introduce credits in new curricula (Hungary);
- develop procedures for collection, transfer and recognition of learning outcomes and skills (the Czech Republic, Germany);
- transfer credits considering the proposed ECVET;
- introduce and recognise partial qualifications (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Spain) (Cedefop, *Continuity, consolidation and change. Towards a European era of vocational education and training*, cit.).

ECVET supports mutual trust in the European VET area

Besides introducing ECVET in national or regional contexts, a lot of innovative activities and testing are taking place within the framework of the Leonardo da Vinci programme. For instance the 2003-2006 project ECTS for Chemistry worker already tested the ECVET approach. Projects

have been already running in previous years on issues linked with ECVET such as Cominter (International trade, FR), Vocational Qualification Transfer System (VQTS, AT), Securitas Mare (Crowd and crisis management for seafarers, SE), Europlastic (Advanced technician in plastic industries, FR) or MAP:ECVET (Medical assistant profession, DE). They are positioned in initial and further vocational education and training. Their objectives have been to develop occupational, assessment and/or certification standards which include methodology for defining the learning outcomes (following the EQF dimensions) and modular curricula, while positioning themselves as accreditation organisations for VET providers or training programmes in relation to those standards in the countries concerned.

Testing and piloting is part of the ECVET European process especially as the Recommendation sets the date of 18 June 2014 for “if necessary a review and adaptation of this [ECVET] recommendation” (*Official Journal*, 2009) on the basis of the results of trials and testing. The ECVET testing phase (2009-2012) can be seen as an effort to link the Euro-

pean and the national levels, establishing a feedback loop between practice, research and policy-making, thus moving from meta-level European principles to concrete and operation practices at local level. In that context 12 pilot projects started their work. They are projects characterised by the involvement of institutions and stakeholders competent in the fields of VET and qualifications, a sectoral approach (hairdressing, automation, live performing arts, automobile services, floristry, tourism, chemistry, commerce, aeronautics, and fitness) and a close articulation with associated mobility projects. The European pilot projects includes approaches focusing on regions with important cross-border mobility, adult education and training in sectors where mobility is important, economic sectors where internationalisation is very present (e.g. automobile industry) and SMEs with strong requirements for transversal skills (European Commission, Cedefop, *ECVET: From Principles to Practice. Synthesis Report*, Paris, 4-5 December 2008, in www.cedefop.europa.eu).

Conclusions

Qualifications systems are increasingly a bridge between education system and labour market, the learning outcomes approach has undoubtedly contributed to an increased awareness of this aspect in the European education and training area. The impact of ECVET on the European VET area can be characterised by an increase or settlement of mutual trust based upon sustained coop-

eration and voluntary participation to ECVET. From an institutional viewpoint this is sustained by increasing efforts in terms of documentation, readability and visibility of VET programmes and qualifications for all stakeholders in the European VET area. As mentioned in the ECVET Rec-

Establishing a European ECVET network and an ECVET users' group

ommendation, the European Commission is in charge of monitoring the implementation process and possibly including a revision of ECVET four years after its adoption. Parts of the further ECVET developments are the European pilot projects and the setting of a governance structure. The coordination of the European ECVET process will be institutionalised – starting 2010 – by establishing a European ECVET Network and an ECVET users' group. Both aim at developing a European innovation circle for ECVET, at enabling peer learning and coherence of the cooperation process for the implementation of ECVET. Cedefop will be involved and further develop its expertise and monitoring on the ECVET developments. For the time being, the European Commission with Cedefop and national stakeholders is finalising a users' guide for ECVET testing which shall be presented during the European Commission/Cedefop conference on ECVET and EQARF mid November 2009. Implementing ECVET does not require a radical change to rationales of existing VET and qualifications systems as all of them have a certain level of ECVET readiness. This is de-

finied by indicators linked to the tools technical specifications, flexibility of training pathways, autonomy of training providers

and openness to mobility. Bringing the European credit system for VET (ECVET) to maturity still requires substantial work and investment (Cedefop, *Continuity, consolidation and change. Towards a European era of vocational education and training*, cit.). It is meanwhile evident that credit systems and qualifications frameworks do bring transparency on the offer of qualifications within a qualifications system, and as the same time reveal the multitude of qualifications and their diversity. It becomes increasingly important to interlink the European tools for education and training to facilitate access to education for learners and improve the understanding of qualifications by all stakeholders within a given national system or across borders (T. Dunkel, I. Le Mouillour, *Qualifikationsrahmen und Credit-Systeme: Ein Baustein für die Bildung in Europa*, in *European Journal of Vocational Training*, 2007, n. 42/43). A new Cedefop study on Europass, ECVET and EQF for documentation, validation and certification of learning outcomes shall focus on the Europass Certificate Supplement and Europass Mobility for the purpose of documenting, validating and certifying learning outcomes with reference to ECVET and EQF. Putting lifelong learning in reality implies to reflect upon the links between ECVET and ECTS (the credit system in

use in higher education) for this purpose several research activities will be launched at European level.

Since 2003 Cedefop has been strongly involved in the European ECVET project, closely cooperating with the European Commission. Its contribution includes scientific analysis on the conceptual basis and implementation of ECVET as well as the organisation of peer learning events and expert workshops.

Information and documentation of those activities are available at:

<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/News/search.asp?keyw=267>.

Cedefop has opened as early as in 2003 a *Virtual Community on European Qualifications Framework – Credit Transfer In VET* to provide an opportunity to interested professionals and the wider expert public to accompany the European process on both issues by disseminating information and enabling an increasing co-operation between representatives of Member States.

The Virtual Community on European Qualifications Framework – Credit Transfer In VET is open to members at:

<http://communities.cedefop.europa.eu/credittransfer-efq>.

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EQARF: development and steps

by Maria Teresa Cortese

The European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF) allows EU Member States to promote and monitor the progress of their national Vocational Education Training systems.

This is one of the measures promoted by the European Commission to sustain the continuous improvement of quality and management of the tools for education and training systems in Europe, such as EUROPASS, the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), and the European System of Credits for VET (EC-VET).

The European Parliament, in the Advice proposal on quality in VET, as suggested by the Helsinki Communiqué (2006), sets its goal to adopt and implement a model for quality and indicators (cf. *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training, 2009/C 155/01*).

Since 2005, Quality Assurance has been implemented also at a national level in EU Member States by means of the active participation of national representatives of Education and Training Ministries in the European Network of Quality Assurance in VET (ENQA-VET). In Italy, the Ministry of Education set up a national Centre for Quality assurance within the National Centre for Workers' Training (Isfol), in 2006.

The European Quality Assurance

Reference Framework conforms to the principle of subsidiarity.

In this connection, it does not replace existing national systems, but it allows for European co-operation in VET and provides Member States and relevant stakeholders with common transnational references, in order to monitor, develop, and improve quality in VET systems.

In short, Member States are invited to:

- use and develop, on a voluntary basis, the *European Quality Assurance Reference Framework-EQARF* for VET, the quality criteria, the reference indicators listed in the attachment 1 and 2 of the Recommendation; promote the application of the *European Quality Assurance Reference Framework* at a national level and implement a culture of improving quality at all VET levels;

- define within 24 months from June 2009 a national approach for the implementation of the *European Quality Assurance Reference Framework* for VET as a reference point for the development of principles, quality criteria, indicators, guidelines and common tools for improving quality at a national, regional and local level, involving social partners and relevant stakeholders;

- actively participate to the initiatives of the European Network for Quality, in order to promote the development of principles, quality criteria, reference indicators and common instruments for the improvement of the quality of the systems of education and

professional development at a national, regional and local level;

- appoint a centre of national reference for quality assurance in VET coordinating the competent Bodies of this field and associating social partners and the relevant stakeholders at national and regional level, providing an active support to the creation of the work program of the European Network of Quality, and adopting substantial initiatives to promote the development of *European Quality Assurance Reference Framework*;

- reexamine every four years the process of implementation of the Recommendation within the future strategic framework of the European co-operation, on the basis of the criteria defined in the *European Quality Assurance Reference Framework* in co-operation with the European Commission and the Member States.

The *European Quality Assurance Reference Framework* requires, therefore, a systemic approach to quality that explicitly stresses the role of the actors and the way they interact. In this connection, the framework foresees monitoring procedures of the results in VET, using measurement systems that allow to thoroughly examine and improve VET systems and single training institutions.

The Recommendation defines a set of indicators of quality for VET systems, aimed at facilitating the evaluation, monitoring and improvement of the quality of the systems and/or of the pro-

viders of VET which will be developed, thanks to European co-operation on a bi-lateral or multi-lateral basis (between government, social actors and VET institutions).

Notably, indicators can serve as an instrument for evaluation, and for any cognitive, analytical or decisional process. Furthermore, the use of the indicators is now

considered, at international level, the main instrument to detect factual information to assess VET systems. Finally, indicators facilitate comparisons between different educational systems, geographic areas, and school institutions.

Working on quality assurance should ease the modernization of VET systems, and provide coun-

tries with reliable benchmarks for possible political initiatives in the field of education and training and professional development.

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European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)

A resource yet to be discovered

by Raffaella Di Toma

Admirable aims and purposes

The impression given when talking about the ECTS is that of something strictly technical and departmental, reserved for the few experts in the field who, for personal or professional reasons, find themselves dealing with this strange abbreviation. The ECTS is actually more than that.

This system was developed during the ‘Bologna Process’, initiated in 1999 by the European Ministers for Higher Education in their Declaration dedicated to a European Higher Education Area, and based on the awareness that, “a Europe of knowledge is now recognized as an irreplaceable factor for social and human growth and as an indispensable component to consolidate and enrich European citizenship, capable of giving its citizens the necessary competences to face the challenges of the new millennium, together with an awareness of shared values and

belonging to a common social and cultural space”.

This is why facilitating mobility is one of the main goals to be achieved with the creation of a European Higher Education Area, as Ministers have confirmed in their several Declarations (Prague 2001, Berlin 2003, Bergen 2005 and London 2007 Communiqués) and once again at their last meeting in Louvain-la-Neuve (Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, 2009).

Ministers have stressed the importance of the ECTS in facilitating student mobility and international curriculum development. They have noted that the ECTS is increasingly becoming a generalised basis for national credit systems and they have encouraged further progress of this kind with the goal that the ECTS becomes not only a transfer but also an accumulation system, to be applied consistently as it develops within the emerging European Higher Education Area.

The Bologna Process is leading to greater compatibility and comparability of the systems of higher education across Europe, making it easier for learners to be mobile and for institutions to attract students and scholars from other continents. Ministers have also emphasized the importance of the teaching mission of higher education institutions and the necessity for ongoing curricular reform geared toward the development of learning outcomes, calling upon each country to increase mobility, to ensure its high quality and to diversify its types and scope. In 2020, at least 20% of those graduating in the European Higher Education Area should have had a study or training period abroad.

The ECTS is promoted by the European Commission, which on numerous occasions has acknowledged the importance of mobility and encouraged national systems to carry on with the goals of the Bologna Process.

According to the Commission, universities play the basic role of reaching the Lisbon objectives, as a driving force behind the new standards based on knowledge – that is, teaching, research and innovation.

Higher education in Europe is characterized by a wide range of languages and systems which must be maintained. At the same time, it is essential to guarantee a sufficient level of compatibility among the different national legislations so as to offer their citizens new possibilities of choice and mobility. The reciprocal recognition of qualifications and competences requires a minimal organizational framework at a European level to provide common standards and reference points (Communication of the European Commission, *Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon Strategy*, 2005).

Moreover, the development and

acknowledgement of learning, ability and competence of European citizens is fundamental to the individual development, competition, employment and social unity of the Community. This is why it is necessary to develop a European framework for qualifications which is open and flexible, based on transparency and reciprocal trust, as an instrument of reference to compare the qualification levels of different systems and promote both learning and equal opportunities within societies based on knowledge in addition to a further integration of the European job market, while still respecting the rich diversity of each individual country's higher education system. This is possible thanks to the adoption of an approach based on learning results which defines and describes qualifications and the promotion of the validity of non formal and informal learning (Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council

of the European Union, April 2008).

This is the background that has moved reform projects which have been developed in many European countries, with the aim of adopting a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, utilizing a system essentially based on three main cycles of studies, undergraduate and graduate, and the establishment of a system of credits as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility.

And this is the background of the ECTS, a learner-centred system which aims to increase the transparency of grades and learning processes.

The long journey toward practice

In practice, the ECTS was born in 1989 within the Erasmus programme, in order to facilitate the recognition of study periods un-

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dertaken abroad and adopted by higher education institutions voluntarily. Over time it has developed into one of the cornerstones of the Bologna Process, as a tool to make teaching and learning more transparent and to facilitate the recognition of studies (formal, non-formal and informal). The system is used across Europe for credit transfer (student mobility) and credit accumulation (learning paths towards a degree), enabling students to collect credits for learning achieved through higher education.

It also informs curriculum design and quality assurance. It aims to facilitate planning, evaluation, recognition and validation of qualifications and units of learning as well as student mobility.

The European Commission is helping universities to expand the use of the ECTS through the provision of guidance materials, such as 'ECTS key features' and 'ECTS Users' Guide'.

The first document gives an overview of the main points of ECTS, relating to a learner-centred credit system, learning outcomes, levels and level descriptors, credits and workload.

ECTS credits are based on the workload students need in order to achieve expected grades. Learning outcomes describe what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to do after a successful process of learning; they relate to level descriptors in national and European qualification frameworks. Workload indicates the time students typically need to complete all learning activities (such as

lectures, seminars, projects, practical work, self-study and examinations) required to achieve the expected grades, one credit corresponding to 25 to 30 hours of work.

Moreover, the ECTS credits can be allocated to qualifications or study curricula as well as to their components, such as course units, modules or laboratory work, with a number of credits depending on their weight, that is, on the workload students need to achieve grades in a formal context.

Credits are awarded to individual students that have completed the learning activities required after a successful assessment of the achieved learning outcomes. Credits may be accumulated in order to obtain a qualification, as decided by the degree-awarding institution. It is important to note that credits awarded in one programme may also be transferred to another programme offered by the same or by another institution, if the degree-awarding institution recognizes the credits. In order for this to work, partner institutions should agree in advance on the recognition of periods of study abroad. Credit transfer and accumulation are facilitated by the use of the ECTS key documents, such as the 'Course Catalogue', 'Student Application Form', 'Learning Agreement and Transcript of Records'.

The ECTS Users' Guide 2009 offers numerous indications and information for putting the aims of the system into practice, supplying the main documents and forming a valid support for all those who are interested, from

students to teachers and administrative staff.

This is a good start. Then there is the need to act and put the proposals into practice.

Because the ECTS works on voluntary behaviors, on the basis of the recognition of decisions which remain the responsibility of the competent authorities: professors involved in student exchange, university admission officers, recognition advisory centres or employers, proposals need to be put into practice within the individual legislation of member countries of the Bologna Process, in each university, in each course and for each student.

The Bologna Promoters group of experts, established to boost these aims, is carrying out the task of informing and motivating the various countries. It is not enough to stop here, however.

In order to achieve the final aims agreed to and declared on various occasions by the Ministers of Higher Education of the member countries, the development and implementation of the ECTS system cannot remain, as so often happens, exclusive property of 'experts', even within the same university or individual educational and administrative structures, left to the responsiveness and willingness of the single professor or administrator. The key to success of the ECTS system and therefore to efficient student mobility throughout Europe must be found starting from a new general cultural attitude which places the actual interests of the students at the centre of attention, and thus in the formation of educational paths such as in the acknowledgement of foreign study experience, and not the requirements linked to educational

ECTS facilitates student mobility and international curriculum development

organization. Not forgetting however, the sharing of these aims and the instruments adopted with those who must assess the knowledge and competence acquired by the students, that is, in the first place, the future potential employers, who could find themselves disoriented by a little or unknown system of certification of learning, in spite of very good intentions.

The present state of development and implementation of the ECTS tends to underline how increasingly it is becoming not only an instrument of mobility, but one of curricula design, strongly influenced by having a learner-centred vision as objective – be-

ing more responsive to the expected results, or rather, respectful of the needs of the educational organization and of the individual teachers.

The remaining obstacle seems to be, basically, of a cultural nature, linked to the difficulty in completely understanding the opportunities offered by the educational autonomy of the university department developed in the reforms to national education systems and to the capacity to design curricula based on a truly flexible educational organization conceived in the interests of the students. This difficulty involves as much the educational structures and individual professors as

the administrative bodies which have to give the necessary technical support to encourage mobility.

On the other hand, it seems to affect students much less. When adequately informed, they prove to be much more interested and capable for example, of drawing up an individual curriculum vitae following a period of studying abroad, suitably assessed and integrated into their own personal educational history.

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ECVET and mobility

by *Eliana Bellezza*

EU Member States and the European Commission are working to develop an innovative system aimed at facilitating validation, accumulation and recognition of learning outcomes. *The European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training* is a key solution to cast light on transnational mobility for vocational education and training students. Mobility for learning and lifelong learning and formal, non-formal and informal learning outcomes' validation, are common priorities in the EU policy area of education and training. The development of ECVET began in 2002 after the Copenhagen process kicked off; at a European level, *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a*

European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET), has been issued recently (PE-CONS 3747/08 of 17 April 2009). ECVET is an instrument provided to increase VET qualifications' transparency and recognition in different training systems, and to give European workers the same professional opportunities. There are a number of European tools pursuing the same goals: the *European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) in higher education* (see R. Di Toma, *infra*) *Europass* (see P. Tissot, *infra*), the *European Quality Charter of Mobility* and the *European Qualification Framework for lifelong learning (EQF)* (see L. Zahilas, *infra*). Transparency and recognition of competences and qualifications are very important

in the field of VET and further education. The underpinning idea promoted by the European Commission is that only a properly validated high-level certification can facilitate transnational mobility for workers and learners, matching skills supply and demand in the European labour market. If transparent, transferable and certifiable skills and competences are a valuable passport for European workers' mobility and portability in the EU. ECVET aims at improving comparability and compatibility between different national vocational education and training systems and qualifications. The ECVET framework, which should be implemented on a voluntary basis by the EU Member States by 2012, should help interpreting different professional

qualifications using the credit system. How could ECVET meet workers' mobility demand? According to European documentation, transnational mobility is curbed by 4 different obstacles, which are not connected: legal and administrative burdens; social, cultural and practical factors; the lack of a recognized European perspective in terms of career path; obstacles to workers' inter-sectoral mobility. These points, summarized and described in the 2001 Mobility Agenda (Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, *A Mobility strategy for the European Research Area*, COM(2001)331 final of 20 June 2001), are some of the most important reasons of increasing youth unemployment rates in Europe. Recent studies confirm that young people living with their parents are unemployed for

a longer time than independent ones (G. Martin, *A portrait of the youth labour market in 13 countries, 1980-2007*, in *Monthly Labour Review*, July 2009). ECVET system could support young people employability and help them create their own learning and professional pathway, enhancing transparency and recognition of formal, non-formal, and informal learning outcomes. ECVET also develops cooperation between users (workers) with a view to enhancing the quality and attractiveness of VET training systems and careers education. Main advantages for those involved into ECVET system are the opportunity to transfer knowledge from a National Qualifications system to a foreign one, and to capitalize individual learning and vocational training. Mobility does not only mean moving to another country but it also regarded as the ability

to transfer skills and knowledge from one learning or working context to another. In this connection, it is necessary to encourage a recognition system for qualifications, skills validation mechanisms and a strong dialogue between governments, social actors and educational institutions. An effective development of partnerships between institutions, VET providers and other relevant stakeholders could help to build mutual trust and facilitate the implementation of ECVET system in Europe. Social dialogue between VET actors and competent institutions is the main instrument to award, transfer and validate qualifications, and recognize learning units or award credits for achieved learning outcomes.

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The coloured picture of National Qualifications Frameworks in Europe

by *Lisa Rustico*

European push for international comparability and national pull for reform: this is the perspective of the European Qualifications Framework at a national level. Not only does it increase qualifications transparency and flexibility in Europe. But it also offers a chance to national education and training system to adapt their structure and functioning to European reform processes. Considering the balance of these drivers pulling from opposite directions, it is difficult to reach a

consistent conclusion. On the one hand, National Qualifications Frameworks' development has evolved in a heterogeneous, multispeed and fragmented way: a puzzling situation which puts into question the achievement of a common European VET area. This is partially due to the effects of public policy Europeanization in so many different countries. In other words, national politics always reflect the social, political, institutional and cultural context of a country, consequently af-

fecting the way European policies are implemented at the domestic level.

On the other hand, the EQF has thus far demonstrated EU countries are about to realize a European area for vocational education and training. Member States – and also third countries – are riding the wave of the EQF development to kick off and orientate national systems' reforms. The impact is relevant if we consider that this process has inevitably changed internal govern-

NQFs development in 32 European countries (December 2008)

Limited progress	Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece, The Netherlands, Cyprus
In progress	Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Latvia Lithuania, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey
Developed	France (2002), Ireland (2003), Malta (2007), UK (4 NQFs), Czech Republic*

* Framework adopted, implementation ongoing

ance equilibriums, giving prominence to the European dimension. Therefore, it seems that common trust and mutual agreements among countries have led to a true European approach in education and training.

This is not the only achievement the EQF has brought about. Working with the learning outcomes alphabet – described in terms of knowledge, skills and competences – the EQF contributes to spread awareness and reflection upon the peer value of all education and training experiences. If we look at what learners can demonstrate they know and can do, we are not interested in how, where, when and through which qualifications they achieved them. This, in turn, calls for parity of esteem among all levels of qualifications, paving the way not only to tight links between VET and higher education; but also to a groundbreaking idea of the link between education and training and labour, based on integration, more than on division. As a result, learning is recognized in all its forms (formal, non formal and informal), and this should ease access, flexibility and progression among educational and training pathways, in a country and among countries in Europe.

In order to achieve such aims, the Communication of the Euro-

pean Commission of 23rd April 2008 adopting the EQF encourages a strong commitment by all 32 countries participating in the 2010 Education and training program. Two deadlines have been set: firstly, countries have to develop a national qualification system referencing to the EQF by 2010. Secondly, by 2012 all new qualifications, learning certificates and Europass documents should be explicitly linked to the EQF.

Although 2010 is just 3 months away, not all countries have complied with the EU guidelines. Some results have been achieved as far as the three highest EQF levels are concerned: in Bergen 2005 and London 2007 countries committed themselves to develop national qualifications frameworks for higher education. Yet, countries are now broadening their systems to all qualifications across learning education and training sectors. Cedefop has clustered countries into 3 groups according to their NQFs development (Cedefop, *Continuity, consolidation and change*, 2008, in *Boll. Adapt*, 2009, n. 16).

Yet, emerging National Qualifications frameworks are not the same in all countries. Once again, Cedefop helps to understand the diverse European NQFs picture, by clustering countries by different types of qualifica-

tions frameworks. Many of them are defined only for some education and training sectors, such as general education, VET, higher education, although there is not a clear link between such different sector frameworks. This is the situation in Spain, Hungary and The Netherlands. Differently, Denmark, Estonia and Scotland have formally bridged different sectoral education and training frameworks by different sets of descriptors. Finally, Ireland is the only country where real integration between a national qualifications framework and the EQF has been achieved. The country has developed common indicators for all education and training sectors, which integrate and link all qualifications to a single national framework. In June 2009, Ireland published its national report: *Referencing of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF)*. The report provides the steps, procedures, criteria and methods leading the country to reference its 10 levels qualifications system to the 8 levels of the EQF. A thorough work has been done to create mutual understanding and trust among qualifications issuing bodies that have all agreed upon and followed up the process started by the European Commission with the EQF Recommendation.

In Italy, instead, a National Qualifications Framework does not exist, although the current education and training system's structure could be easily referred to the EQF. A number of obstacles have been faced in the attempt to associate descriptors – with the language of learning outcomes –

referring qualifications to each of the 8 levels of the EQF. This may be the case of lacking information and awareness about the benefits of such a conceptual and practical shift. Moreover, difficulties mostly arose from VET qualifications, which in Italy are under the entire responsibility of the regions. Differences among decentralized VET systems have, therefore, additionally hampered the creation of an Italian NQF.

There are a number of factors that have hindered a successful development of NQFs and their links to the EQF. It mainly deals with the need of further work for mutual trust: this gap is due to weak legislative frameworks, scarce information among partners, stakeholders and teachers, lack of consensus, hulking control, and bureaucratic mechanisms. Most of countries have experienced problems in spreading information and awareness, and therefore in raising involvement among NQFs users at various governance levels.

Hence, Cedefop assumes countries could better develop national frameworks for all qualifications if they strengthen cooperation in three main areas (Cedefop, Continuity, consolidation and change, 2008, in *Boll.*

Adapt, 2009, n. 16). The first one is “defining and developing learning outcomes-based qualifications”, on the basis of shared methods, projects and experiences. Secondly, existing tools for comparability and transparency of qualifications should be further developed and strengthened; for example, Europass potential is not entirely achieved, despite representing a valid template for common approaches in describing qualifications. Finally, theoretical work for clarifying terms, not only among countries but also within a national system, is needed to allow for mutual understanding and trust in the EU. These steps could lead users and stakeholders to appreciate real benefits of national qualifications frameworks, to be linked to the EQF: among the others, mobility, recognition, transparency, career progression and flexibility. Education and training institutions, on their side, may take advantage of fulfilling NQFs since the latter could give evidence and improve the functioning of already existing systems. Finally, NQFs may help to describe standards, which in many countries are considered to be a prerequisite for effective and functioning education and training supply.

Apart from a domestic perspective, it is important to bear in mind the European approach underpinning NQFs development: they represent a vehicle for mutual trust in a European VET area. Challenges are even bigger, since they relate to the meaning of education and training itself. EQF and NQFs hide the potential of a revolution for employability in Europe: they assume people interact with the labour market for what they prove they know and they can do (learning outcomes). This means better matching between skills and labour demand and supply, and all the other benefits we mentioned above. This also means a new right for EU citizens: we are indeed moving from the right to education and training, to the right to learning, in whatever context, setting, time and place. The most important thing is that people be motivated, skilled and adequately equipped to realize their dreams, attitudes, needs, in other words to realize themselves responsibly, in the ever-changing labour market.

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