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Area B/MB/LZAH

## **The European Social Partners Conference on the European Credit Transfer system for Vocational Education and Training**

Cedefop, Thessaloniki 12-13 February 2007

The European Social Partners Conference on the ECVET, co-organised by Cedefop and the German social partners BDA<sup>1</sup> and DGB<sup>2</sup> and held in Thessaloniki on 12 and 13 February 2007, was intended to support the consultation process by offering social partners and others stakeholders a forum to discuss the main issues raised by the ECVET.

The conference gathered 93 participants from 24 European countries. They included representatives of European and national social partner organisations, and ministerial and training bodies; the European Commission; Cedefop and the ETF.

### **The conference context - The ECVET proposal**

#### *Main principles*

Among the priorities set jointly by the EU Member States, the candidate and EEA countries, the European social partners and the Commission in Copenhagen and in Maastricht in 2002 and 2004 was to develop the European Qualifications Framework and the European Credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET).

The purpose of this is to make it possible for professional qualifications and competences acquired in one country to be understood, transferred and recognised by other countries. The ECVET is meant to operate in tandem with the EQF: together, they shall allow all national and sectoral qualifications and competences to be evaluated, compared and converted.

#### *How will the ECVET work?*

The ECVET describes qualifications in terms of learning outcomes, and measures them as units of learning outcomes. A unit is a set of knowledge, skills, and competences which constitute part of a qualification, and is defined as such by the body responsible for the qualification.

The ECVET process involves two bodies or institutions. The first assesses the learning outcomes achieved<sup>3</sup> and awards credits to the learners; these credits are registered in a personal transcript. The second body accepts (validates) the credits and recognises them for the award of the qualification.

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<sup>1</sup> Bundesvereinigung der Deutschen Arbeitgeberverbände

<sup>2</sup> Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund

<sup>3</sup> The ECVET is designed primarily to cover formal qualifications but may be used more widely in the context of lifelong learning

### *Who will apply the ECVET?*

The type of competent bodies which can play these roles in the implementation of the ECVET vary from country to another and from one VET or qualifications system to another. It is therefore important to ensure that all bodies understand how to implement the system and are willing to do so. This implies that ECVET must be designed and implemented in a way which makes it easy to understand, access and use.

### *A main challenge*

The need for user simplicity, cost efficiency and overall credibility have been main concerns of the Working Group - set up by the European Commission - responsible for the technical aspects of the exercise. This is also the reason why the proposal for the establishment of the ECVET was put out for public and Europe-wide consultation in November 2006. The European Commission is particularly keen to hear the views of European and national social partners who look at this system from the point of view of labour market needs and will play an important role in implementing the system. Hence the need for a European Social Partners conference which would debate the ECVET.

### **Main issues discussed at the conference**

The conference participants were asked the following five main questions:

- What is the value of the ECVET for enterprises and workers?
- What is the value of the ECVET for vocational education and training in the Member States and at European level?
- What is the role of the national social partners in implementing ECVET?
- To which extent can the ECVET be used to identify and certify learning outcomes acquired in informal and non-formal settings?
- How can the ECVET contribute to the Lisbon Strategy?

From these questions emerged a number of more specific questions, for example related to the use of credit points, the link to validation of non-formal and informal learning, the workload implied in implementing the ECVET and the need for more specific guidance supporting future users of the system.

### **Conclusions**

The conference found that while debate continues on what precise form an ECVET system should take, there is a general consensus on the need for a system that promotes transparency of qualifications and enhances mobility.

The conference found that the ECVET as proposed is in a position to foster other forms of mobility apart from cross-border mobility. It could allow the transfer of qualifications inside national systems and especially between VET and higher education and between different learning environments.

The conference concluded that the ECVET could be a useful tool for the optimum use of human resources: the learning outcomes approach is very useful to the labour market and allows for the appropriate employment of people according to their *real* qualification level.

The development of ECVET needs to be linked to the European Qualifications Frameworks and to the National Qualifications Frameworks in particular in order to achieve transparency on what learning outcomes and qualifications represent.

The link between ECVET and the assessment and validation systems of non-formal and informal learning is crucial. The two systems can only work and be developed in a coherent way.

Learning outcomes are in fact the core of the ECVET; credit points are a supplementary tool and their use should be further discussed.

The development of a useful ECVET will require social partners and other stakeholders not just to take part in the current consultation process but to commit themselves to helping develop and implement the ECVET, which also implies that Member States and the Commission make this possible . Dialogue and action at national level will be crucial.

Cedefop will continue to support this process by providing platforms for genuine discussion and with conceptual and technical work on how learning outcomes best can be assessed and certified.