



**THE CORE CHALLENGE:  
A COMMON LANGUAGE ACROSS VET AND THE LABOUR MARKET**

Aviana Bulgarelli, Director, Cedefop

Ladies and Gentlemen, Participants and Colleagues,

It is with great pleasure that I address you here today at this major event marking the technical launch of ECVET and EQARF. We have been working in close cooperation with the European Commission to organise it and I am pleased to welcome you on behalf of Cedefop.

After almost 10 years of work to elaborate and fine-tune ECVET and EQARF, we are now entering the reality-testing and implementation phase. Both tools are rooted in the effort to increase the quality and flexibility of European VET as part of the overall aim of promoting growth, innovation and jobs.

The economic crisis is a very recent reminder of the need to continue to invest in skills and competences and to modernise education and training – a process which began with the Lisbon strategy in 2000 and which remains to be completed.

ECVET and EQARF both went through elaborate processes of consultation and negotiation, and success came only after some controversial discussions, which only goes to show how important the two initiatives are for the stakeholders in the European Education and Training Area. - *This is one of the reasons for devoting EQARF workshop A and ECVET workshop H to partnerships and implementation strategies* -

It is important to consider both tools (ECVET and EQARF) in the context of changing learning and working environments. The pivotal element of the changes and of the link between the labour market and education and training is qualifications<sup>(1)</sup>. If qualifications are built on learning outcomes, as defined in the EQF recommendation, they can become the common language of the emerging European Education and Labour Area. I would invite you to reflect on the construction of a common language. We are already coming across encouraging signs – but also inconsistencies – in the field of credit arrangements, quality assurance and qualifications frameworks.

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<sup>(1)</sup> In the EQF recommendation a qualification is defined as a 'formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards'.

## LEARNING OUTCOMES: ABOUT OCCUPATIONS, SKILLS AND QUALIFICATIONS

Learning outcomes are described in the context of the European Qualifications Framework as a trilogy of Knowledge, Skills and Competence <sup>(2)</sup>. This description might sound straightforward but it conceals a number of difficulties. A number of concepts are currently used to capture the learning outcomes required by individuals to cope with the challenges of a rapidly changing labour market, skills and competence needs and lifelong learning:

- qualifications are used as a proxy to describe the overall levels of knowledge, skills and competence in our societies;
- skills are commonly used to describe learning provisions and needs in the labour market. The majority of current ECVET pilot projects use the concepts of skills and learning outcomes as the basis of work on understanding qualifications and occupational standards <sup>(3)</sup> across borders; *This will be discussed in the ECVET workshop E.*
- knowledge frequently refers to the need for high-level, academic and research-based learning outcomes.

It is important to understand the dynamics of occupations and skills from the perspective of the labour market, to bridge the gap and foster a common discernment of qualifications among stakeholders. We urgently need a language able to capture learning in education and training as well as in the labour market. The current initiative (in the NSNJ) to develop a European classification for skills and competences (ESCO) might take in this direction, provided it also builds on the experiences gained from the shift to learning outcomes in education and training.

The need for such a common language – one which addresses the education and training system as well as the labour market – is illustrated by the existing Cedefop forecasts up to 2020 showing a clear trend towards more knowledge-, skills- and competence-oriented occupations.

The workplace is undergoing a series of sweeping changes that affect jobs at all qualification levels; it is a mistake to think that changing skill and competence needs concern mainly people with high-level jobs. The trend towards service-dominated economies, new work processes and technology impact all jobs, even – in some cases – those that we erroneously consider to be ‘elementary’. Building caretakers <sup>(4)</sup> are now expected to monitor the safety of buildings, understand building codes, to use computer-based tools and fulfil supervision tasks.

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<sup>(2)</sup> Cedefop. The shift to learning outcomes. Policies and practices in Europe. Cedefop Reference series; 72. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2009.  
[http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/Upload/Information\\_resources/Bookshop/525/3054\\_en.pdf](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/Upload/Information_resources/Bookshop/525/3054_en.pdf) - Cedefop's recently published comparative study on the shift to learning outcomes

<sup>(3)</sup> Occupational standards refer to the statements of activities and tasks related to a specific job (Cedefop Glossary 2008).

<sup>(4)</sup> ISCO 9141

This reflects the growing demand from employers for a balanced mix between specialised skills and transversal key competences, such as problem-solving and analytical skills, self-management and communication skills, linguistic skills, and more generally ‘non-routine skills’ as well as the ability to manage change. The reduced number of routine jobs forecast by Cedefop is linked to the need for complex and mixed competences. Across Europe, the proportion of workers undertaking non-routine tasks is already very high. About 60 % of European workers consider that they have to undertake complex tasks at work; a higher percentage consider that they have to solve unforeseen problems (80 %) or learn new things at work (70 %) <sup>(5)</sup>.

Transversal key competences are part of occupational profiles; however, the EQF descriptors might be too aggregated to be fine-tuned with the level of detail needed for analysis of labour-market requirements (nor are they intended for that purpose).

ECVET, EQARF and EQF developments increasingly draw our attention to the knowledge, skills and competence acquired from non-formal and informal learning experiences. The European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning <sup>(6)</sup> stress that the individual is at the heart of the validation process and they list as motivating factors for individuals: 1) Obtaining credits for learning from experiential learning, 2) Increased self-confidence and empowerment or 3) Planning for further learning. But we should also add a fourth key motivating factor: obtaining a currency to be used for employability and career development.

As skills and career patterns change, we see a growing need for flexible professional careers and learning paths: employees must expect that during the next twenty years they will be much more likely than in the past to encounter changing employment situations, job profiles and work tasks – all of which will require of individuals a much higher capacity for self-initiated learning and for shaping their own careers <sup>(7)</sup>.

This casts the skills and competences acquired in the labour market (and elsewhere) by individuals in a new light and raises questions concerning the relevance of the learning-outcomes-based level descriptors of the EQF. The EQF and ECVET projects show that interpretations of learning outcomes differ considerably, not only between different education and training segments, but also within educational levels and sectors.

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<sup>(5)</sup> European Communities. New Skills for New Jobs Anticipating and matching labour market and skills needs. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2009.

<sup>(6)</sup> Cedefop. European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2009.  
[http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/Upload/Information\\_resources/Bookshop/553/4054\\_en.pdf](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/Upload/Information_resources/Bookshop/553/4054_en.pdf)

<sup>(7)</sup> Even if longitudinal studies for some particular national, regional or sectoral contexts did not confirm an effective increase in staff mobility during the 1980s and 1990s. Follow-up of the Copenhagen process: Research into forms of individual career development and continuing vocational training (CVT). Interim report, Jan09 – European Commission.

## LEARNING OUTCOMES: ABOUT QUALIFICATIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS

For individuals, qualifications are an indication of personal, social and professional status: their lives, careers and income prospects depend largely on the type and level of the qualifications they hold. Employers rely on qualifications to recruit and develop human resources to cope with jobs that are increasingly skill- and knowledge-intensive. Education and training institutions use qualifications as hallmarks of quality indicating that a student has completed a particular learning experience to a satisfactory standard. Qualifications are thus carriers of information and value ('currencies') and they have a considerable influence on the way individuals and education and training institutions as well as labour-market institutions interact.

Transparency and partnerships are at the heart of the development of the European education and training tools. As shown in the previous example, they concern everyone.

Quality assurance serves as a tool for fostering transparency between highly divergent VET systems by providing a common language and benchmarks that everyone can refer to. The European Quality Framework is therefore a 'translation device' for facilitating the transparency of the VET systems and provision throughout Europe (<sup>8</sup>).

Quality assurance is broader in scope than ECVET because it encompasses all aspects of VET and can facilitate better integration of VET into the rest of the education system. EQARF can serve as a reference tool for assisting Member States to support and monitor constant improvement of their VET systems, which is the general purpose of all VET tools. In many countries, the quality assurance of the different qualification systems is a complex set of arrangements, many of which are not formalised in a single 'code of practice' (<sup>9</sup>).

Partnerships are evolving and changing. The new ECVET projects would not be efficient without strong partnerships; the cooperation between stakeholders who design and award qualifications and those who provide education and training is a guarantee of the relevance and legitimacy of qualifications in education and training systems and the labour market. The feedback that stakeholders receive from one another increases the relevance and legitimacy of qualifications in education and training systems and on the labour market.

In some cases, the development of European tools, such as ECVET, challenges well established partnerships and routines. Some ECVET pilot projects tackle the issue of permeability between VET and higher education; others tackle permeability across occupational sectors or VET traditions. For instance, the DECVET initiative (under development in Germany since 2008) focuses on assessment, recognition and validation of learning outcomes to support permeability within the initial VET system. The pilot projects involved covered different parts of the German initial VET system (from pre-vocational training to full-time school-based and dual-system initial VET), different

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(<sup>8</sup>) Cedefop realised this at an early stage and in 2003 it compiled a glossary in English and French of the most frequently used terms in field of quality in VET. In 2010 Cedefop is starting work on a new issue of quality glossary.

(<sup>9</sup>) Cedefop. The relationship between quality assurance and VET certification in EU Member States. Cedefop Panorama series. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2009.  
[http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/Upload/Information\\_resources/Bookshop/555/5196\\_en.pdf](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/Upload/Information_resources/Bookshop/555/5196_en.pdf)

occupational profiles (for example, industrial mechanic or manager in wholesale and foreign trade) and brought together a wide range of stakeholders involved in different ways in the award or design of qualifications into a single national context.

VET partnerships are rooted in a broader context: the solutions emerging from the current crisis, the development of National Qualifications Frameworks and the ECVET pilot projects and initiatives are all signs that stakeholders are cooperating more on qualifications and are paying greater attention to them. In a number of Member States we can observe more effective management at the VET system and provider levels, with a move away from input steering and control and towards output orientation and recognition of achievements – *The meaning of EQARF for VET providers will be discussed during the EQARF Workshop B* -. We need to reconsider the governance of our systems with a view to making them more accountable and assuring their quality by defining expected outcomes rather than the activities to be carried out<sup>(10)</sup>. This would reinforce the trust in partnerships in the field of education and training.

The three European tools are part of a shift which places the emphasis on the outputs and outcomes of processes: EQARF focuses mainly on assuring the quality of education and training outputs; ECVET and EQF focus on qualification-award processes, the role of standards and curricula, the involvement of stakeholders in the setting and renewal of those standards (to name only a few issues). The European tools (that is to say ECVET, EQF and EQARF) viewed jointly have a huge potential. Indeed, the success of EQF and ECVET depends on the success of quality in education and training in creating a basis for trust. This is fully acknowledged in the EQARF Recommendation, which foresees the development of VET quality assurance approaches at national level by 2011.

Further work will however be needed to articulate ECVET, EQF and EQARF for education and training stakeholders.

## **KEY MESSAGE: OWNERSHIP, TRANSPARENCY AND QUALITY**

### *Integrating the European initiatives*

For the European tools to be directly accessible and relevant to individual citizens, a coherent approach needs to be developed by linking the different European tools and instruments (namely EQF, ECVET, Europass, validation and EQARF) and ensuring that they complement each other.

National qualification frameworks founded on learning outcomes are the basis of more individualised learning paths supported by competence assessment (validation), credits for prior learning (ECVET and ECTS), documentation of knowledge, skills and competences (Europass), holistic approaches to guidance and counselling.

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<sup>(10)</sup> Cedefop. Assuring the quality of VET systems by defining expected outcomes. A cross-country analysis in seven Member States. Cedefop Panorama series; 158. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2008.

[http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/information\\_resources/Bookshop/publication\\_details.asp?pub\\_id=517](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/information_resources/Bookshop/publication_details.asp?pub_id=517)

But an additional holistic political approach at EU level (also at national level) in the field of qualifications is needed. The various EU policy initiatives related to qualifications (EQF, Directive on regulated professions, NSRF, employment strategy) should no longer be conducted as separate initiatives but as integral parts of an overarching EU qualifications policy. The New skills for new jobs (NSRF) initiative points in the right direction, in particular by trying to link education and training to employment in a better way.

### *The need for a new classification*

We need a common language – classifications and taxonomies – to facilitate communication between education, training and the labour market. The existing classifications are not adequate for elaborating on the skill and competence needs of the labour market because they are based on standards that were created for statistical purposes (for instance ISCO or ISCED<sup>(11)</sup>). On the other hand, EQF is not intended for statistical purposes but provides a basis for understanding the levels of qualifications at a given point on the learning and training path. One issue to be tackled in the context of the development of ECVET, EQF and EQARF is undoubtedly the links between occupations, tasks and qualification requirements.

How are occupational standards conceived in Europe? How could this be improved to ensure the employability of workers? There is a need for a language to describe skills and competence in jobs, occupations and the labour market in general that would broaden the learning outcomes approach from the education and training system to the labour market while being compatible with the terminology and descriptors developed for EQF. As already indicated, the work on a European standard classification for skills and competences (ESCO) that has recently started might go this direction, but only if it takes on board the experiences gained throughout Europe in defining and describing qualifications through learning outcomes.

### *The new European Education and Labour Area*

A new European Education and Labour Area is emerging in which education and training systems are undergoing reform. This process includes the review, modernisation and delegation of responsibilities as well as shared ownership and empowerment<sup>(12)</sup>. A growing number of new stakeholders – for example from enterprises, sectors and international organisations linked to sectors – are joining the ECVET / EQARF / EQF European and national initiatives or projects.

With its wealth of expertise in the fields of qualifications and quality, Cedefop is ready to take part in the new phase that starts today with this Conference, and tomorrow it is ready to contribute to making VET not only a European area but also one of the most dynamic European areas.

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<sup>(11)</sup> International Standard for Classification of Occupations, International Standard for Classification of Education

<sup>(12)</sup> Cedefop. Continuity, consolidation and change. Towards a European era of vocational education and training. Cedefop Reference series; 73. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2009.