Introduction

One of the suggestions in the consultation on the European Area of Skills and Qualifications (EASQ) is a possible merge of the Europass Certificate Supplement (ECS) and the Diploma Supplement (DS), both transparency documents for national qualifications within the European Skills Passport.

Within Europass a European Working Group for the Europass Certificate Supplement was installed. Representatives of 13 member states, that are responsible for the ECS in their country participate in this working group. In order to create common answers to the question of a possible merge of the ECS and DS a separate questionnaire was developed within the WG ECS. In this position paper, the view of the working group is reported, also some recommendations are made. The Working Group would like to, however, remind the readers that many countries have not yet established a national position concerning the issue.

Amount of tools: is merging of ECS and DS a solution?

One of the problems mentioned in the background document on the consultation of the EASQ is that too many instruments have been developed in the past years. More generally, citizens but also practitioners and policy makers are confronted with a large number of tools and principles, among which they often do not see the links and which, thus, confuse them.

Could the two documents for transparency of qualifications that both provide background information on the education and training received, become one?

Why this is not a practical solution:
- The two documents are not yet fully developed and implemented
- The issuing of the DS is in most member states embedded in law, the ECS is not
- In most respondent countries, the responsible bodies for the ECS and DS do not fall under the same institutions. Expertise about VET and higher education is scattered among various organizations, which would make the accessibility of the content for the merged document problematic. Also different ministries can be responsible. Databases with ECS are in full development.

It is also important to note that the DS was developed and used in higher education long before the launch of Europass. It has its own approach (individual document with indication of learning activities and ECTS points), target group (students in HE) and governance structure (decisions are not in hands of the European Commission). The Certificate Supplement (ECS) is developed with a different approach (in almost every country it is a group document: every learner that followed the same VET pathway or the comparable RPL-procedure gets the same CS), different target groups (VET learners, but also people that were successful in the RPL procedures) and different governance. Every proposal for changing DS or ECS within Europass should take into account these facts.

We strongly advise against merging these two documents, at least not for the upcoming years. It would cause a lot of opposition by ministries, but also by issuing organizations when these instruments, that are implemented with a lot of effort in time and money, should be replaced by something new. The development and full implementation of the ECS and DS needs more time.
Involvement of employers
Currently, little information is available on the opinion of employers about the two documents. In 2010, a survey was conducted among employers about the ECS. Main results were that employers noted that the ECS is a useful tool, but too few employers knew of its very existence.
For the DS there is little Europe-wide information available about employers' opinions. The ECS and DS were developed as instruments for graduates from VET and higher education, respectively.

Before considering the possible merge of ECS and DS, research is necessary with focus on employers: Why merging or why a new document? Does it solve an existing problem? What would be the added value compared to the current situation? How does the labour market work? And most of all: How can employers be reached and how would they use the ECS/DS? Also information about recruitment techniques is necessary. For employers and intermediaries, what kind of information do they need when they want to hire people?

The ECS and DS exist already for a number of years and we understand that employers' wishes and demands might have changed over the years. Research is needed to determine these wishes. It might be possible to incorporate the use of ESCO in the existing ECS and DS or in a new document.
This also asks for a little bit more time to explore the use and benefits of this new development.
The research on the employers' wishes could reveal the relevance of various information elements, such as learning outcomes, the (inter)national level of the qualification and for example the amount of practical training that was included in the program.

Before starting any changes we strongly advise to start with research on the needs of employers as they are the main addressees of the documents. Take enough time for this research. In the meantime let the ECS and DS have time to be fully implemented.

New document?
Instead of trying to bend existing documents it could be a solution to develop a new document, which covers all educational levels and which meets the demands of the current education - and labour market.
Also the benefits of the ECS and DS could be taken into account. It must be a compact document.
Make sure that this new document offers optimal functionality for individuals to display their skills within the Skills Passport, but avoid overlap with for example the CV.

When investigating the possibility of a new document take into consideration that it is not really about the document itself, but safeguard the broader perspective: what document (if any) is needed to foster mobility and transparency for learning and working in Europe.
The EQF level should serve as a link to promote transparency between education systems.

What should also be taken into consideration is which stakeholders should be involved.
- Universities, VET-schools, what ministries? In different member states different ministries are involved.
- EURES, Chambers of Industry and Commerce, Chambers of Crafts. They have different roles in different countries.
- European social partners, Business Europe, Labour organizations (they should consult their own members). Interested stake holders will participate.
- Focus on people who have the expertise, without division between VET and HE. Use relevant contacts when necessary. This may differ for every country.
- Employers and intermediaries.
- Social partners need to be more involved in the development of European tools.
It could be considered to start a pilot-project, based on the demand for transparency documents within a certain sector. Select a certain profession, for example in the hospitality sector. Within this sector a sectoral skills passport has been developed. See if and how it is compatible with the ECS.

*We believe that the merge of the ECS and DS is counterproductive. If a substantial added value can be expected, we advise to prepare for a development of a new document that fulfills the demands of the education - and labour market. Also make sure that the relevant stakeholders are involved. Be aware of the fact that this means a very large group to comply with.*

**Should the document be personalized?**
At this moment the CS is in most countries not personalized. It was chosen to do so, because for the VET-level a lot of qualifications exist. It could be an option for schools to add information, but then this could lead to different filled in formats per country. The ECS is an additional document to the diploma. The ECS provides information on the skills and competences acquired by all candidates who are awarded a certain qualification. Personal results for the study programme are recorded in the list of results/subjects. Other achievements, such as international experience, can be recorded in the CV or the Europass Mobility. A personalized document could cause overlap with existing documents, which is not to be recommended.

*In case of a personalized document it would cause an extra administrative burden, whereas personalized information can be filled in in the CV.*

**Research on costs / Finances**
A lot of effort in human resources has been put into the development and implementation of the ECS and DS. If a new document should be developed and come into force a cost/benefit analysis should be made beforehand.

*Be aware of the fact that a lot of countries do not have the resources to develop or implement a new document, so the need for it must be well underpinned.*

**Other recommendations**
Besides our advice on the possible merge of the ECS and DS we have some other recommendations:

- Some member states have good practices with the use of the ECS, for example in the European EQF-portal a link is made to the ECS for VET qualifications. This means that for the EQF-portal only the link needs to be maintained, while the content is provided by that organization that is responsible for the ECS-database. It might be a good idea to establish this link also for those countries that have a database available with ECS.

- Europass Portal Cedefop: it is a good linking portal, also for the other NEC’s to see what documents are developed. For the ECS there is a link to the national databases of the different countries, but a small introduction to the current status of the ECS is lacking: if you choose a country it is useful to explain for what purpose the ECS is or can be used in that specific country, on what level of qualifications ECS are developed etc. Try to improve user friendliness.

- See what other documents within Europass or outside Europass could be merged.

- One single-point-of-contact: The National Reference Points for VET were established as a result of the Copenhagen Declaration in 2002, to be the contact point for all questions covering VET and the ECS, like the ENIC-NARICs for higher education and the DS.
In only about half of all member states the NRP is operational, combining their tasks with those for professional recognition on the educational level of less than three years of higher education (former EU-directive 92/51/EC). When starting Europass in 2005 the NRP’s for VET were somehow “forgotten”. It is not clear who is responsible for them, but their goal was to discuss VET-qualifications like the ENIC-NARICs do for higher education.

- A one-stop-shop for European tools could improve the transparency between countries. As mentioned above, in each country the expertise about the different tools lies within different ministries, organizations and sectors. A one-stop-shop is a very ambitious goal, but nevertheless the aim is good to provide an ordinary citizen with all the information on the rights and possibilities, information that is now too scattered.
  It should also be taken into account the latest development of the national assistance centers for professional recognition (starting in 2016). They will have a task towards citizens for all qualifications, even for non-regulated professions in the home country! in relation to the professional card.
  The ECS and DS will be useful transparency documents in that context, so investigate the additional value of these tools.

**Expertise on ECS offered**
As members of the WG ECS we would like to offer our expertise to the European Commission, DG EAC, in the discussion on and future possible developments of the ECS.