



# The European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training

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## Executive Summary

This note seeks to look back at the development and implementation process of the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET). It takes stock of its main achievements and how they are taken forward in the 2020 Council Recommendation on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience and pave the way for future EU initiatives.

The key objective of ECVET, as intended in the 2009 ECVET Recommendation, was to facilitate the transfer, recognition and accumulation of assessed learning outcomes of individuals who are aiming to achieve a qualification. ECVET could therefore:

- ▶ help transfer and recognise learning that has taken place during a stay abroad (**geographical mobility**); and
- ▶ support **lifelong learning**, by allowing people to transfer and accumulate learning outcomes achieved in different contexts within their country to build up recognised qualifications, update or upgrade them.

ECVET was designed as a European credit transfer system that should be flexible enough to accommodate the characteristic features of European VET systems. In order to achieve this, ECVET was based on common principles concerning the design of qualifications and arrangements for credit transfer and accumulation. One of these key principles is the structuring of qualifications into units of learning outcomes. As an initiative, ECVET was closely linked to a number of other instruments and initiatives aimed at increasing transparency, supporting mutual trust and recognition in the area of education and training.

The implementation of the ECVET Recommendation between 2009 and 2020 was supported by a number of mechanisms and activities at European and national

levels, to ensure quality and overall coherence in this process. In addition to the ECVET support structure set up at European level, this was accompanied by funding provided to implement centralised and decentralised ECVET projects, as well as funding provided to set up National teams of ECVET experts.

In its eleven years of implementation between 2009 and 2020, the ECVET principles were used to support quality assurance in VET qualifications design as well as in the development and delivery of mobility schemes in many countries.

However, while the implementation of ECVET can be considered a success in several respects, these eleven years have not been a journey without its challenges.

A 2019 study on EU VET instruments ECVET and European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQAVET) found that ECVET made a significant contribution to the implementation of a learning outcomes approach and to a higher level of quality of mobility experiences (better understanding of competences gained, sharing experiences about methods, management competences). In some countries, ECVET contributed to reforms of national VET systems. However, ECVET had limited success with the use of credit points to transfer assessed learning outcomes.

The 2020 VET Council Recommendation repealed formally the ECVET and EQAVET Recommendations. While this means the end of ECVET as an initiative and its related implementation mechanisms, the main objectives and principles of ECVET have been enshrined in the VET Council Recommendation and will continue to be a priority in European VET policy. Members of the ECVET Users' Group, as well as coordinators of the national teams of ECVET experts, met for the last time on 27 January 2021 for an EU meeting on the achievements of ECVET and the way forward.

# 1. Introduction & Background

The development of a credit system for VET was initiated by the Copenhagen Declaration and based on several years of development, experimentation and piloting. The experiences gained shaped the key concepts presented in the ECVET Recommendation.

## 2002 – 2009: From inception to adoption

Since 2002, the **Copenhagen process for enhanced European cooperation in VET** has aimed to establish common European objectives and support reforms in national VET systems. One of its aims has been to 'increase voluntary cooperation in VET, in order to promote mutual trust, transparency and recognition of competences and qualifications, and thereby establishing a basis for increasing mobility and facilitating access to lifelong learning.' The **Copenhagen Declaration** initiated activities and processes leading to the development of a set of transparency tools. It also introduced the idea of a system of credit transfer for vocational education and training to promote transparency, comparability, transferability and recognition of competence and/or qualifications, across different countries and levels.

In the **2004 Maastricht Communiqué** on the Future Priorities of Enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training (VET), the establishment of a European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and of ECVET were defined as the major

instruments of a European VET area where mobility between different countries and permeability of learning pathways would be facilitated by the recognition of qualifications and learning outcomes. This should 'allow learners to build upon the achievements resulting from their learning pathways when moving between learning systems'.

In **2006-2007**, the **ECVET proposal** – based on activities of the European technical working group, set up in 2002 – was submitted for a European-wide **consultation**. At the same time, two major European studies, ECVET Connexion and ECVET Reflector, contributed to the further development of the ECVET proposal. The European **Communiqués of Helsinki (2006)** and **Bordeaux (2008)** emphasised the need for testing and creating an ECVET (as well as an EQF) Network. The Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation on ECVET was formally submitted to the European Parliament and the Council on 9 April 2008<sup>1</sup>.

## The 2009 ECVET Recommendation

In 2009, national governments and the European Parliament gave their final approval on the **Recommendation for the establishment of a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training** (the 'ECVET Recommendation')<sup>2</sup>. Formal adoption by the European Parliament and Council of the European Union took place on 18 June 2009. The ECVET 'Political Launch conference' was held in Prague in May 2009 and the ECVET 'Technical Launch conference' was held in Brussels in November 2009.

The purpose of the ECVET Recommendation was to make VET learning pathways more flexible, allowing learners to

obtain qualifications by accumulating credits earned in different locations, settings and timeframes. It contained a list of concrete recommendations for the Member States (6) and for the European Commission (4).

It invited the European Commission to, amongst others, support, monitor and evaluate the ECVET implementation. Member States were invited to:

- ▶ promote ECVET in order to facilitate transnational mobility, and the recognition of learning outcomes in VET and borderless lifelong learning;

<sup>1</sup> COM(2008) 180 final.

<sup>2</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32009H0708%2802%29>

- ▶ create the necessary conditions and adopting measures so as from 2012, based on trial and testing procedures, it is possible for ECVET to be gradually applied to VET qualifications at all levels of the EQF;
- ▶ support the development of national and European partnerships and networks;
- ▶ ensure that stakeholders and individuals in the area of VET have access to information and guidance for using ECVET; supporting the exchange of information between the Member States; ensuring that the application of ECVET to qualifications is properly publicised and that the Europass documents contain the relevant information;
- ▶ apply the common principles for quality assurance in VET;
- ▶ ensure functioning coordination and monitoring mechanisms at the appropriate levels in order to guarantee the quality, transparency and consistency of the initiatives taken to implement ECVET.

## Key objectives and core principles of ECVET

The key objective of ECVET, as intended in the **ECVET Recommendation**, was to facilitate the transfer, recognition and accumulation of assessed learning outcomes of individuals who are aiming to achieve a qualification. ECVET could therefore:

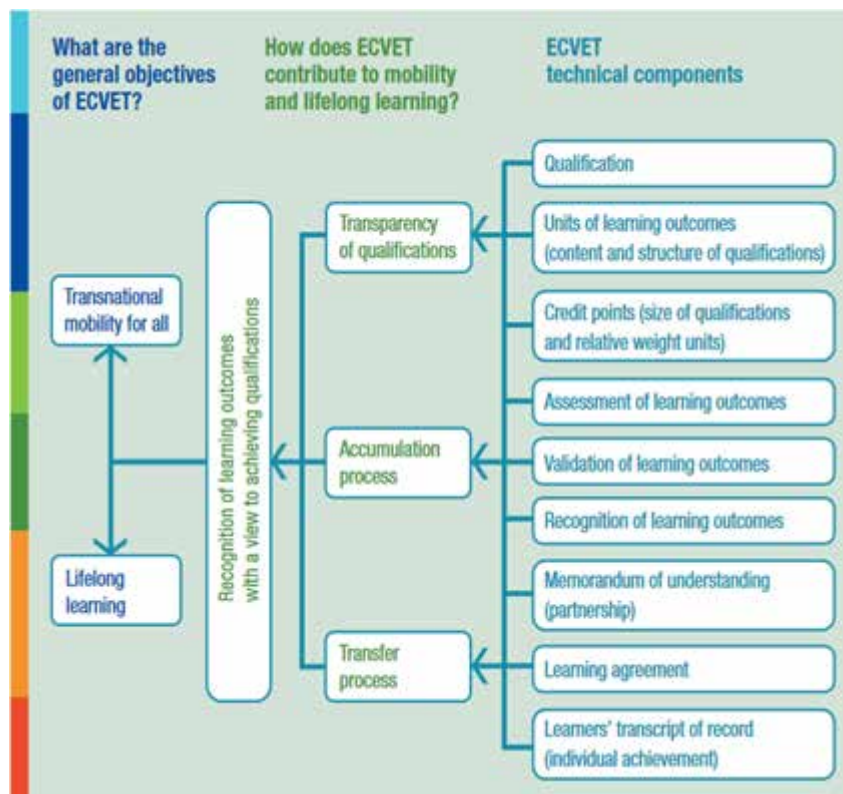
- ▶ help transfer and recognise learning that has taken place during a stay abroad (**geographical mobility**); and
- ▶ support **lifelong learning**, by allowing people to transfer and accumulate learning outcomes achieved in different contexts within their country to build up recognised qualifications, update or upgrade them.

In order to achieve this, ECVET was based on common principles concerning the design of qualifications and arrangements for credit transfer and accumulation:

- ▶ Qualifications are designed based on **learning outcomes**. Learning outcomes are statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do upon completion of a learning process, and are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence. Through learning outcomes, it is possible to identify whether the learning in one context, system or country, is comparable to another one.

- ▶ Qualifications are structured in **units of learning outcomes** that can be assessed, validated and recognised separately.
- ▶ **Assessment** of units is documented and enables progressive accumulation and transfer, by constituting credits.
- ▶ **Credits** can be validated and recognised in the context of other qualification systems.
- ▶ **Partnerships** among competent bodies facilitate the recognition of credit as they trust in each other's qualifications and assessment.
- ▶ Qualifications and units can additionally be described using **ECVET points**. The points help identify the size of a qualification and the relative weight of the units within the qualification. 60 points are allocated to the learning outcomes expected to be achieved within a year of full-time VET. This quantitative reference in terms of points is meant to serve a descriptive function, while the learning outcomes structured in units form the core of transfer and accumulation

The figure below summarises these ECVET objectives and technical components:



Source: Cedefop (2012).<sup>3</sup>

ECVET was designed as a European credit transfer system that should be flexible enough to accommodate the characteristic features of VET systems and reforms

of those systems, to accommodate existing credit systems and arrangements, and to support mobility and lifelong learning.

## ECVET and its linkages to other initiatives

ECVET as an initiative was by design linked to various other instruments and initiatives in the area of education and training aimed at increased transparency, supporting mutual trust and recognition in education and training. These include in particular the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF), European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET), the common European principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning, Europass, and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).

The implementation of ECVET thus did not take place as isolated processes but was in many respects linked to these other processes.

Since the adoption of the ECVET Recommendation in 2009, the policy context has evolved considerably, having an impact on the way ECVET has been positioned and integrated into the broader context of European cooperation in education and training. Of particular relevance in this context were the 2015 Riga Conclusions, the 2016 New Skills Agenda for Europe, the revision of the EQF Recommendation and the revised Europass Decision, as well as most recently the 2020 European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, and the 2020 Council Recommendation on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience as well as the European Pillar of Social Rights and its Action Plan (see Chapter 4 for an outlook).



The ECVET factsheet below sums up its key objectives and core principles:

| <b>ECVET Factsheet</b> |  |
|------------------------|--|
| <b>Initiative</b>      | European credit system for vocational education and training   |
| <b>Timeline</b>        | <p><b>Adoption:</b> 2009 Council Recommendation for the establishment of a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training</p> <p><b>Repeal:</b> Council Recommendation on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience</p>  |
| <b>Key objectives</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Facilitate the transfer, recognition and accumulation of assessed learning outcomes</li> <li>▶ Support flexible and individualised pathways in education and training</li> <li>▶ Promote lifelong learning and mobility</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Key concepts</b>    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Qualifications are composed of ‘units of learning outcomes’ that can each be assessed and validated independently</li> <li>▶ Transfer process</li> <li>▶ Assessed units of learning outcomes can be accumulated towards a full qualification and transferred to another country or setting</li> </ul> |
| <b>Key tools</b>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ European templates to support transfer of learning outcomes (Memorandum of Understanding, Learning Agreement)</li> <li>▶ Credit points: ECVET points can be assigned to a unit of learning outcomes, as additional information on the weight of the unit within the qualification</li> </ul>          |
| <b>Context</b>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ 2002 Copenhagen Declaration on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training</li> <li>▶ 2004 Maastricht Communiqué</li> <li>▶ Various linkages to other European instruments for the cooperation in education and training: EQF, Europass, ECTS, EQAVET</li> </ul>               |





## 2. Key implementation mechanisms of ECVET

The implementation of the ECVET Recommendation was supported by various mechanisms and activities at European and national levels, with a view to disseminating and supporting ECVET within Member States, and to ensuring quality and overall coherence to its cooperation process.

### A voluntary tool based on mutual exchange, monitoring and peer learning processes with a dedicated governance structure

This section presents the key implementation activities of ECVET from **2009 until 2020**. Before doing so, it needs to be noted that the ECVET implementation was based on the **voluntary participation of the Member States** and of the stakeholders in their respective systems as it was based on a recommendation, i.e. a 'soft law' that is not binding to Member States in contrast to directives or regulations. Education has traditionally been a policy area firmly anchored at national level and thus also ECVET was developed and implemented through the '**Open Method of Coordination**' (OMC). As part of the OMC, Member States work towards common EU objectives (for example, based on sharing good practice and peer learning) but it is up to the individual countries how they want to pursue these objectives. In practice, this means that at European level, Member States agree on common objectives and – also at European level and based on a mandate given by the Member States – guidelines or supporting tools are designed and developed. Member States can decide themselves whether and how they use and implement these in their national systems and whether and how they shape their national policies around them. Thus, also in the case of ECVET, the way countries implement it entirely depends on their individual decision.

In the period between **2009 and 2012**, ECVET was **tested** and countries were supposed to create conditions to enable its **progressive implementation as from 2012 onwards**. The **2010 Bruges Communiqué** emphasised that participating countries should systematically use and promote European transparency tools, including ECVET, to promote transnational mobility and that they should participate in testing ECVET for mobility. The Bruges Communiqué and the **Europe 2020 strategy** also considered permeability as a pre-condition for modern European education and training systems that encourage lifelong learning (LLL), that takes place not only in schools but also at work or even during leisure time.

The **ECVET governance structure** was set up in 2010 with a view to establishing fora for mutual (i.e. cross-country) exchange, learning and feedback, as well as the development of partnerships. This sought to ensure a cascading of results from discussions and mutual learning at EU level to the national level. In 2015, action was taken to simplify the ECVET governance and cooperation structure. The EU-level governance of ECVET was composed of the following three layers:

- ▶ The **ECVET Users' Group (UG)** as set up in 2010 was composed of representatives from Member States (three per country), EEA and candidate countries, from employer organisations and social partners, from national agencies for education and lifelong learning, from the European Commission, Cedefop and ETF. Sub-groups (working groups) were also set up and developed, for example, a series of guidance documents and notes which constitute the ECVET Users' Guide ('Get to know ECVET Better – Questions and Answers', 'Using ECVET for Geographical Mobility', 'Using ECVET to Support Lifelong Learning') and templates for the Memorandum of Understanding and the Learning Agreement. In 2015, the Users' Group was redefined as a policy group, comprised of Member States' representatives in charge of VET, consisting of one governmental and one non-governmental representative per country. Besides Member State representatives, it also included representatives from EEA and candidate countries, employer organisations and social partners, EFVET, Cedefop and ETF agencies. The ECVET Users' Group met regularly (three times per year) to discuss and steer policy developments with regard to ECVET. Also between 2015-2019, several non-permanent topical working groups had been set up with a mandate to explore and discuss in-depth topics of particular relevance (e.g. ECVET mobility tools and services, ECVET principles for flexible

pathways). The working groups were conceived as a sub-group of the ECVET Users' Group, hence consisted of UG members plus dedicated thematic experts.

- ▶ The **ECVET Network**, a large open forum gathering competent institutions, social partners, sectors and VET providers, was launched in 2010. Its main task was to enhance transnational cooperation among the bodies concerned with ECVET implementation. In 2015, it was redefined as network of national implementation bodies and encompassing a broader group of stakeholders than the Users' Group by adding coordinators of national ECVET experts (see below).
- ▶ The **ECVET Community of Practice (CoP)** was introduced in 2012, comprising a broad group of people interested and involved in working with ECVET in practice. It consisted of the ECVET Network plus the practitioners working with ECVET on a day-to-day basis (e.g. VET and mobility providers). Representatives of the ECVET CoP met once per year during the Annual ECVET Forum. Moreover, the ECVET Communities of Practices Portal was launched in 2013 to provide a space for the CoP to meet virtually.

At **European level**, the ECVET implementation process was coordinated by the European Commission, with support from Cedefop (providing expertise based on research activities) and the European Training Foundation (ETF). The **ECVET support structure** was also set up in 2010 (first as the 'ECVET team' and since 2015 as the 'ECVET Secretariat') to assist the European Commission in supporting Member States in implementing the ECVET Recommendation. This support included in particular the following activities:

- ▶ **Organisation of meetings of ECVET constituent bodies:** ECVET Users' Group, ECVET Network, working groups;
- ▶ Organisation of **events** related to ECVET development purposes: the **ECVET Annual Forum** and **peer learning activities (PLAs)**;
- ▶ Provision of **expert support** and advice to bodies outside the European Commission and training of users;
- ▶ **Dissemination** and distribution of information on ECVET via the **ECVET website** and the **ECVET Magazine**.

Furthermore, the experimentation, implementation and promotion of ECVET involved a wide range of actors and consisted of several layers:

- ▶ **Centralised pilot projects** coordinated by the EACEA, funded through the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP) and lasting two or three years, were launched for the testing of ECVET (through two consecutive calls, with the first focusing on mobility, and the second one on lifelong learning),
- ▶ ECVET was among the priorities **for decentralised projects** funded through the LLP and coordinated by the LLP National Agencies. Additionally, the **Thematic Network NetECVET**, which consisted of 14 National Agencies of the LLP, promoted ECVET in the context of transnational mobility and supported the implementation process in the Member States through a bottom-up approach. In the context of the NetECVET project, seven workshops were organised, each focusing on ECVET-related topics. The final product of the NetECVET project was the ECVET Toolkit.
- ▶ The European Commission also provided funding for **National Teams of ECVET experts** (coordinated by the National Agencies of the LLP/ Erasmus+ programme; many of them set up ECVET National Coordination Points) to promote and develop the adoption, implementation and use of ECVET at national level and to provide counselling to VET competent bodies and institutions.

**Cedefop** undertook (until 2015) the **monitoring of ECVET implementation** activities in the Member States, to document and keep track of developments through collection and analysis of information, in order to demonstrate progress of the policy initiative. In 2012, Cedefop published a booklet on 'Necessary conditions for ECVET implementation', which addresses the conditions and measures that Member States need to have in place for fully implementing the ECVET Recommendation. Moreover, Cedefop also conducted several research studies related to the core principles of ECVET (such as learning outcomes, units or modules) and on related instruments and initiatives (such as EQF implementation and NQF development, validation of non-formal and informal learning)<sup>4</sup>.

## ECVET implementation after the 2014 evaluation

An important step-stone in the ECVET implementation process was the **evaluation of the ECVET implementation**. The report published in **2014** highlighted several challenges related to the implementation of ECVET and pointed to the limited evidence regarding the impact of ECVET on facilitating the transfer, recognition and accumulation of assessed learning outcomes, supporting citizens move across and within countries and building their flexible learning pathway. Although some reforms towards flexible pathways had been initiated, very few cases of system reform occurred. It was observed that the implementation of ECVET mainly focused on mobility and to a very limited extent on lifelong learning or permeability between VET and higher education. The (units of) learning outcomes and the ECVET documents (Memoranda of Understanding and Learning Agreements) were considered as the most valuable elements of ECVET. However, the evaluation did not identify any particular relevance or demand for credit points. It observed that ECVET had not been used as a European ‘credit system’, but rather as a framework to support flexibility of VET provision (including mobility). The recommendations formulated based on the evaluation included:

- ▶ Putting stronger emphasis on the benefits and elements seen as most relevant, particularly learning outcomes;
- ▶ Linking with other tools, particularly Europass, EQF and ECTS;
- ▶ Making the EU level governance structure lighter and clearer;
- ▶ Better monitoring of all projects using ECVET so that lessons can be learned and effectively disseminated;
- ▶ Further consolidation and improvement of the targeting of support actions to users of ECVET and National Coordination Points; and
- ▶ Putting a stronger focus on quality to promote development of long-term partnerships and trust.

The goal of achieving greater synergy and consistency between the European instruments was also identified as a priority in the stakeholder consultation process in the framework of the **European Area of Skills and Qualifications (EASQ)** in **2014**. In particular, a need for closer coordination of credit systems (ECTS and ECVET) with the EQF was stipulated as the European instruments only unfold their full potential when they are

implemented together. The **Riga Conclusions** presented in June **2015** ensured further EU level support to the development and implementation of the European transparency and recognition tools (EQF, ECVET, EQAVET, Europass and validation of non-formal and informal learning) and also underlined that this should happen in a coherent and integrated way.

**Between 2015 and 2019**, several **initiatives** were taken to address the shortcomings highlighted in the 2014 evaluation and in particular to address the need for synergy and consistency across instruments. For example, peer learning activities were organised focussing on ECVET and related instruments or initiatives, such as ‘ECVET and validation of non-formal and informal learning’, ‘ECVET, NQFs and Upskilling’ or ‘The benefits of credit systems for curricula, qualifications and validation’. Other events focussed on mobility, such as using ECVET for long-duration mobility or developing tools for VET learner mobility (addressing also Europass). During these years, among the main topics addressed in the ECVET context was also how to use ECVET principles to support flexible VET pathways, connecting learning and working.

In June **2016**, the Commission adopted a ‘**Communication on a New Skills Agenda for Europe**’<sup>15</sup> which announced, among other things, action to modernise VET, including a possible **revision of ECVET** and EQAVET (under the objective of improving the attractiveness of VET through increasing the quality and relevance of skills formation and flexible organisation of VET). To this end, an **ECVET Working Group** was set up in **2016** to reflect on the possible revision of the ECVET instrument as established by the 2009 Recommendation. Since there was general agreement already that the definition of ECVET as a ‘credit system’ in itself was misleading - also confirmed by the 2014 ECVET evaluation - the phrase ‘ECVET principles and tools’ was often used in subsequent discussions, meant to pursue the objectives of ECVET. Such concepts were not defined in the 2009 ECVET Recommendation, however they had been used informally in the ECVET context. The ECVET Working Group took into account these discussions and the experiences gained in implementing the ECVET Recommendation and concluded that it was still important to improve the transfer and recognition of learning outcomes as well as the possibilities for flexible and individualised VET pathways. Therefore, the main outcome of the Working Group, published in **2018**, was a set of eight **principles which would be necessary for supporting flexible VET pathways** (see Chapter 3). Based on this set of ECVET principles, case studies were developed to illustrate how they were used in and have

added value to VET mobility and to reinforce flexible learning pathways within VET. The outcomes of the Working Group were also discussed in the ECVET Users' Group and fed into the subsequent policy development related to the future of ECVET.

Members of the ECVET Users' Group, and coordinators of the national teams of ECVET experts, met one last time on 27 January 2021 for an EU meeting on the achievements of ECVET and the way forward.

## ECVET timeline



Own illustration based on <https://www.ecvet-toolkit.eu/introduction/ecvet-history-and-timeline> (ECVET Toolkit)

### 3. Eleven years of ECVET implementation: a journey marked by key successes and persisting challenges

In its eleven years since the ECVET Recommendation was adopted in 2009, the implementation of ECVET has seen active use of ECVET principles to support quality assurance in VET qualifications design and in development and delivery of mobility in many countries. While the implementation of ECVET can be considered a success in several respects, these eleven years have not been a journey without its challenges. Over this period, ECVET had limited success with the use of credit points to transfer assessed learning outcomes.

#### Taking stock of the key ECVET achievements<sup>6</sup>

A 2019 study on EU VET instruments ECVET and EQAVET found that ECVET made a significant contribution to the implementation of a learning outcomes approach and to a higher level of quality of mobility experiences (better understanding of competences gained, sharing experiences about methods, management competences). In some countries, ECVET contributed to reforms of national VET systems. The key achievements of ECVET implementation identified by this study are summarised below:

##### Key achievements of ECVET implementation

In total, in parallel with the generalised adoption of a **learning outcomes-based approach**, 21 countries introduced modules or units in initial vocational education and training and four others had some qualifications or parts of qualifications modularised.

**Credit systems** were introduced in 17 countries though very few applying the concept of ECVET points.

ECVET widely contributed to the development of a **better-quality mobility experience**, through more effective agreement on, and documentation, of learning outcomes and their recognition being adopted within all Member States.

In a few countries, it contributed to developing **more flexible vocational pathways**.

The use of peer learning activities (PLAs) and other events (Annual Fora, Users' Group and Network Meetings) for **mutual learning and exchange of experience** were widely believed to have sustained implementation of ECVET principles.

**For the organisation of VET at national level**, one of the main areas of ECVET's influence was on increasing the **introduction and implementation of learning outcomes approaches and the structuring of qualifications into units or groups of learning outcomes**. The concept and use of groups or units of learning outcomes have been central to reforms of VET systems in a variety of countries: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Malta and Romania attributed a strong influence of ECVET on their substantive VET reforms. In Romania, ECVET, in conjunction with the EQF, has been the main for the revision of qualifications in the technical VET system.

Between 2009 and 2019, six more countries had introduced **modules or units in IVET** (bringing the total to 21). Credit systems had been introduced in an additional nine countries over the same period bringing the total to 17.

Among the countries for which the impact of ECVET was high, the following five countries can be highlighted as **examples where significant reforms of the VET system are linked to ECVET**: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta and Romania.

At the same time impact on national systems also varied across countries. For some countries ECVET had a limited impact on national systems because they either already had unit-based systems and well-established credit systems for VET in place (i.e. the initial 'ECVET readiness' of the system had been high – see table below) or they have systems that are not, or not easily compatible with ECVET principles (i.e. the initial 'ECVET readiness' of the system had been low).

<sup>6</sup> See also <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/205aa0ac-460d-11e9-a8ed-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>; <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020SC0123>

The table below groups EU-27 Members States and the UK according to two dimensions: their degree of ECVET readiness of the system around the time when ECVET was adopted; and the impact of ECVET on national (initial) VET systems since then. 'High impact' of ECVET

on VET systems describes a situation where VET systems have undergone significant changes that are in line with ECVET principles, and where these changes are at least partially attributed to ECVET.

| Impact | ECVET readiness of the system                             |                    |
|--------|---|--------------------|
|        | Low   | High               |
| Low    | AT, BE-nl, CY, CZ, DE, EL, ES, DK, FR, HR, HU, IT, NL, SK | IE, LU, SE, SI, UK |
| High   | BG, BE-fr, EE, LT, LV, MT, PL, PT, RO                     | FI                 |

Source: European Commission (2019), p. 45.<sup>7</sup>

**In the field of VET mobility**, ECVET has contributed to the development of **better-quality mobility experiences for VET learners**, through more effective agreement on, and documentation, of learning outcomes. In some countries, this has reinforced the shift to using learning outcomes acquired abroad to obtain a VET qualification, while also ensuring that the mobility experience is better structured, organised and quality assured.

There is widespread agreement that ECVET templates (Memorandum of Understanding and Learning Agreement) are considered to increase the quality of mobility in terms of better understanding of competences gained and increased mutual trust. ECVET tools, most notably the Memorandum of Understanding and the Learning Agreement, are widely implemented at national level and considered useful and effective to enable this.

The 2019 study confirmed this. A mere three countries were found to have no or very little reported activity implementing ECVET in transnational mobility (see table below). In a group of eight countries, ECVET principles were used for transnational mobility. The third, and by far biggest group of countries, consisted of countries that have reported ECVET implementation activity both in the context of transnational mobility and lifelong learning. For many but not all countries in this group, the impact of ECVET on transnational mobility has been considered more significant than on lifelong learning in general.

In addition, several countries reported significant progress in ensuring the recognition of learning outcomes achieved in international mobility, i.e. this has made it possible to recognise them as part of their respective initial VET pathways (e.g. in, FR, IT, HR, LT, RO).



| Group   | Member States  |
|---|--|
| Countries with no or very little reported activities to implement ECVET in transnational mobility   | BE-nl, LU, EL  |
| Countries that explicitly focus implementing ECVET in transnational mobility only (with no or very little activity in the content of LLL) | DE, DK, HR, IE, SE, SI, SK, UK   |
| Countries that report ECVET implementation activity both in the context of transnational mobility and LLL                                 | BE-fr, BG, ES, FI, FR, LT, LV, MT, PL, PT, RO, mainly mobility but some other aspects as well: AT, CY, (early stage), CZ, HU, IT, NL |

Source: European Commission (2019), p. 49.<sup>8</sup>

## Challenges persist despite significant achievements

Member States have taken different approaches in implementing ECVET, with differences mainly due to different qualifications/VET systems and regulations (for instance, related to the use of units and learning outcomes, the possibilities for validation of non-formal and informal learning, and the existence of credit systems) but also their different national needs and priorities (geographical mobility, lifelong learning).

ECVET was designed as a voluntary initiative that sought to provide the possibility for accommodating the characteristics of different systems in the European countries, and to accommodate existing credit systems and arrangements. Yet, the different approaches taken and different objectives towards the implementation of ECVET also presented significant challenges for the success of this European initiative. For some systems it has been easier, thanks to their conceptual characteristics, than for others to implement ECVET technical specifications.

### Persisting challenges in ECVET implementation

ECVET had limited success with the **use of its credit points to transfer assessed learning outcomes**.

At national level, it was observed that ECVET was **not always being considered holistically** with the other EU instruments (such as the EQF, Europass, VNIL).



The use of credit points was a sensitive and much-discussed topic within ECVET implementation from the start. A few countries considered them not compatible with their VET systems and this aspect seemed to overshadow considerations of credit transfer and accumulation.

This does not mean that countries did not set up credit systems for VET. Indeed, Finland, Estonia and Malta set up credit systems compatible with ECVET. Ireland, Sweden, Slovenia and the UK use credit points in VET

## Taking achievements further

Throughout the years of its implementation, the ECVET networks worked to adjust the instrument to changing requirements and policy developments. One of the key outcomes of the 2014 external evaluation of ECVET was that the definition of ECVET as a ‘credit system’ was misleading. This then also translated to the discussions within the ECVET community, which increasingly used the **term ‘ECVET principles and tools’** instead; others in turn would prefer referring to it as a credit framework.

While ECVET may have originally been conceived as a ‘credit system’ that facilitates transfer and accumulation of units of learning outcomes based on credit points, practice has shown that only a few countries implemented ECVET in that manner. As a result, from June 2016 to February 2017, an **ECVET Working Group** consisting of ECVET Users’ Group members from 11 countries and European stakeholders was working together to discuss (ECVET) principles for flexible vocational pathways. As a basis for further debate, the ECVET Working Group identified a set of eight principles, expressing what is needed to support flexible learning pathways in vocational education and training.

### Eight principles for supporting flexible VET pathways (as outcome of the ECVET Users’ Group Working Group)

Qualifications should be composed of clearly defined **groups of learning outcomes**.

Groups of learning outcomes within a qualification should be capable of **independent assessment**.

The assessment of each group of learning outcomes should be **properly documented**.

**Provision of learning opportunities** should be arranged to facilitate individuals to achieve groups of learning outcomes.

Individuals should have the opportunity to have their **learning outcomes validated**, irrespective of how

as well, though not considered compatible with ECVET. Ultimately, ECVET did not lead to the establishment of a *European* credit system for VET, as the initiative’s name initially suggested.

Furthermore, while ECVET implementations led to significant achievements in the area of cross-border mobility in VET, the achievements overall were more modest in the field of lifelong learning or permeability between VET and higher education.

and where they have acquired them.

Individuals should have the opportunity to **accumulate their assessed groups of learning outcomes** towards a qualification.

Individuals should have the opportunity to **transfer their groups of learning outcomes validated** in one context to other contexts (such as programmes, qualifications, national/regional systems or countries).

**Processes** for development, assessment, validation and recognition of sets of learning outcomes should be **transparent and underpinned by quality assurance**.

*Source: ECVET Secretariat (2017).*

In 2019, a set of **case studies** were developed to show the benefits of using ECVET principles. They were selected from a broad range of examples shared and discussed in the ECVET community during ECVET meetings and events. The case studies show how initiatives and projects have used ECVET principles to enhance activities around mobility of VET learners or to create and reinforce flexible learning pathways within VET. Each case study addresses at least one or more ECVET principles and demonstrates how ECVET principles have added value for learners, VET-providers, employers, or the wider VET system; and have helped to increase the visibility of skills and competences.

The study on EU VET instruments cited above concluded that ECVET contributed to the promotion of flexible pathways in European VET systems. It adds that there is room for new policy applications for ECVET in the context of the upcoming and recent policy developments i.e. the updated Skills Agenda, Council Recommendation on vocational education and training, establishment of the European Education Area and the implementation of the Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and the outcomes of learning periods abroad which calls for continuing the work on ECVET (also see next chapter).



## 4. The way forward: continuity of ECVET principles in the Council Recommendation on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience

The new VET Council Recommendation repealed formally the ECVET Recommendation. While this means the end of ECVET as an initiative and its related implementation mechanisms, the main objectives and principles of ECVET have been enshrined in the new Recommendation and will continue to be a priority in European VET policy.

### Evolving policy context and the need for change

The purpose of ECVET was to make VET learning pathways more flexible, allowing learners to obtain qualifications by accumulating credit (assessed units of learning outcomes) earned in different locations, settings and timeframes. In the changing policy context, the goal of making VET more flexible still remains valid and is even more underlined by the growing economic demand for fast-responding VET systems. The adequate use of flexible learning pathways can significantly contribute to equipping the European workforce with the skills demanded by companies. In a context of rapid technological and organisational innovation, flexible opportunities for developing and recognising skills can play an important role in responding to the changing needs of the labour market. As discussed above, the experience from several years of its implementation shows that there are areas where ECVET has had a positive impact and areas where its impact has been more limited. As outlined in the 2016 Skills Agenda, and in line with the results of the 2014 evaluation and the reflections in the ECVET Users' Group, ECVET clearly was in need of modernisation and streamlining with other VET instruments.

Thus, a **review process** at European level was initiated in **2018/2019**, in line with the 2018 ACVT (Advisory Committee on Vocational Training) Opinion on the Future of VET post 2020<sup>9</sup> that called for a streamlining and consolidation of the EU VET policy framework, governance and existing EU instruments. This review process comprised in particular the following activities:

- ▶ The European Commission commissioned the above-mentioned **study on 'EU VET instruments (EQAVET and ECVET)'**<sup>10</sup> to take stock of the progress EU Member States have made in the implementation of these instruments since their adoption and to examine the influence they have had on VET policy developments at national and European level, as well as their relationship with other EU instruments. The study also considered if and how the instruments can build on what has been achieved so far and how these can be further developed.
- ▶ An ad-hoc **ACVT Working Group on VET Instruments** was established to study the various EU tools and initiatives in the field of VET and skills and qualifications and to discuss options for the way forward.

<sup>9</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=20479&langId=en>

<sup>10</sup> [Publications catalogue - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

In its Opinion on the Future of VET post 2020, the ACVT had invited the Commission to prepare a proposal that could take the form of an overarching Council Recommendation on VET embedding the elements of ECVET and EQAVET. The proposal was presented to Member States in July 2020, as part of the **European**

**Skills Agenda**<sup>11</sup>, and the '**Council Recommendation on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience**<sup>12</sup> was subsequently adopted in November 2020.

## The way forward...

The new VET Recommendation reminds the reader that the 2009 ECVET Recommendation had set 'the objective to improve the recognition, accumulation and transfer of learning outcomes, supporting mobility and lifelong learning as well as the establishment of a EU credit system in vocational education and training.' The concept of ECVET points however was generally not applied and ECVET did not lead to the establishment of a European credit system in VET.

Yet, during the ten years of its implementation, ECVET has widely contributed to the development of a **better-quality mobility** experience through the use and documentation of units of learning outcomes. Thus, the VET Recommendation states that the **ECVET tools supporting mobility of VET learners** (Learning Agreement and Memorandum of Understanding) are **to be further developed** in the framework of other EU instruments such as those supported under the Erasmus+ programme. It also calls for having opportunities for learning **mobility** of vocational learners and staff in place, including virtual mobility, long-duration mobility and mobility to third countries, facilitated through the **use and recognition of units of learning outcomes** and of relevant European tools. This is also in line with the objective of the **European Education Area** to develop a genuine European learning space where high quality and inclusive education and training is not hampered by borders and which aims at removing obstacles for recognition of higher education and upper secondary education and training qualifications and learning periods abroad, and work towards the smoother cross-border validation of training and lifelong learning outcomes.

Since ECVET has also influenced the development of **flexible learning pathways** in many countries, the VET Recommendation stipulates that the **key principles of ECVET** (e.g. units of learning outcomes) related to flexibility should be **maintained and further implemented**. According to the Recommendation, flexibility and progression opportunities are at the core of VET in Europe. Three paragraphs in the VET Recommendation are particularly important in

that regard and clearly show the continuity of the developments during the last years in the ECVET context:

Vocational education and training programmes are learner centred, offer access to face-to-face and digital or blended learning, **flexible and modular pathways** based on the **recognition of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning**, and open up career and learning progression; continuing vocational training programmes are designed to be adaptable to labour market, sectoral or individual up- or reskilling needs. (5)

Vocational education and training programmes are based on **modules or units of learning outcomes** and validation mechanisms are in place allowing the **transfer, recognition and accumulation of individuals' learning outcomes** with a view to gaining a qualification, a partial qualification, as relevant in the national context. In initial VET the primary goal is to progress to a full qualification. (6)

Initial and continuing vocational education and training are part of the lifelong learning. **Flexible and permeable pathways** are in place between both initial and continuing vocational education and training, general education and higher education. (10)

*Source: European Commission (2020).*

<sup>11</sup> [European Skills Agenda - Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion - European Commission \(europa.eu\)](https://european-council.europa.eu/media/en/press-communications/inline-photos/attachment-data/file/attachment)  
<sup>12</sup> [EUR-Lex - 32020H1202\(01\) - EN - EUR-Lex \(europa.eu\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/rec/2020/1202/01/EN)

Thus, the VET Recommendation recognises that breaking vocational qualifications into smaller parts of learning outcomes (units, modules) is the way to flexibly update the content and to customise it to the needs of individuals. Validation of learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal learning will facilitate up- and reskilling, leading not only to full qualifications, but also to partial qualifications. Moreover, the unit approach (i.e. qualifications are composed of units of learning outcomes that can each be assessed and validated independently) can support the regular update of qualifications or of parts of qualifications

and address rapidly changing skills needs. This also links to the policies developed in the framework of the Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways which highlights the importance of flexible learning offer.

Building on ECVET experience, the new Erasmus+ funding period from 2021 onwards will see an update of Erasmus+ Learning Agreements. Their use will be made compulsory. A flexible template will be provided at EU level, which will integrate the learning outcomes approach.

## ...towards new beginnings

The use of units of learning outcomes is also relevant for developing **micro-credentials**, as called for in the VET Recommendation and also announced in the European Skills Agenda. Moreover, it will be useful for developing **European Vocational Core Profiles**, as suggested by the VET Recommendation. The aim of the latter is to define a certain share of a common training content at European level. The profiles have the potential to significantly facilitate mobility of learners and workers, automatic recognition of vocational qualifications, and the development of joint VET qualifications and curricula. There are many examples of projects, in particular from the ECVET context, that aimed at comparing qualifications and identifying similarities of the content of qualifications (e.g. with a view of supporting mobility of VET learners) or to develop a new unit relevant for and common to all partner organisations. Thus, the experiences gained in these contexts can be used for exploring these new concepts in VET.

In terms of **governance and implementation**, the VET Recommendation foresees a simplification of governance at EU level, by integrating the current ECVET and EQAVET Recommendation and subsequently repealing them. As part of this development, the VET Recommendation foresees a reconfirmation of the role of the tripartite Advisory Committee on Vocational Training (ACVT). This also includes the **provision of support service at EU level** for Centres of Vocational Excellence, former EQAVET and ECVET secretariats, apprenticeship support services and expert working groups.

These recent policy developments have brought profound changes to ECVET as an initiative, leading to the eventual repeal of the underlying ECVET Recommendation. This also means that label 'ECVET' will inevitably disappear from the policy discourse. This, however, does not mean that the enormous body of work undertaken since 2002 (and even before that) was in vain. In many ways, the work on implementing ECVET has had profound implications on the current policy discourse in vocational education and training. As outlined above, some of the core principles of ECVET could continue to be a priority as part of the VET Recommendation and will be a useful source of inspiration for future initiatives such as the EU approach regarding micro-credentials as well as in the forthcoming EU initiative on individual learning accounts

The socio-economic recovery from the COVID-19 outbreak will be an opportunity to accelerate reforms in VET and strengthen its resilience, notably by digitalising learning tools and agile adaptation to changing labour market needs. Future-proofing VET systems means making them adaptable to any foreseen and unforeseen challenges. It means strengthening their capacity to adapt quickly throughout economic cycles, but also in light of an ever-changing world of work and skills. The key principles of ECVET can play an important role in achieving these goals.

## 5. List of abbreviations used

|                  |  |
|------------------|--|
| <b>ACVT</b>      | Advisory Committee on Vocational Training                                  |
| <b>Cedefop</b>   | European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training                 |
| <b>EACEA</b>     | Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency                        |
| <b>EASQ</b>      | European Area of Skills and Qualifications                                 |
| <b>ECTS</b>      | European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System                           |
| <b>ECVET</b>     | European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training               |
| <b>ECVET CoP</b> | ECVET Community of Practice  |
| <b>ECVET UG</b>  | Users' Group   |
| <b>EEA</b>       | European Economic Area   |
| <b>EfVET</b>     | European Forum of Technical and Vocational Education and Training          |
| <b>EQAVET</b>    | European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training            |
| <b>EQF</b>       | European Qualifications Framework  |
| <b>ETF</b>       | European Training Foundation   |
| <b>LA</b>        | Learning Agreement   |
| <b>LLL</b>       | Lifelong learning  |
| <b>LLP</b>       | Lifelong Learning Programme [predecessor programme to Erasmus+, 2013-2020] |
| <b>LO</b>        | Learning outcome   |
| <b>MoU</b>       | Memorandum of Understanding  |
| <b>NQF</b>       | National Qualifications Framework  |
| <b>OMC</b>       | Open Method of Coordination  |
| <b>PLA</b>       | Peer learning activity   |
| <b>VET</b>       | Vocational education and training  |

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