

**Conclusions of the Council and the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States,
meeting within the Council, on the future priorities for enhanced European cooperation on Vocational Education and Training (VET)**

(Review of the Council conclusions of 15 November 2004)

(2006/C 298/05)

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE GOVERNMENTS OF THE MEMBER STATES MEETING WITHIN THE COUNCIL,

AWARE that

1. on 12 November 2002 the Council approved a Resolution⁽¹⁾ on the promotion of enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training. This was the basis for the declaration adopted by the Ministers responsible for Vocational Education and Training of the EU Member States, the EFTA/EEA and candidate countries, the Commission and the European Social Partners at their meeting in Copenhagen on 29 to 30 November 2002, as the strategy for improving the performance, quality and attractiveness of Vocational Education and Training (Copenhagen process);

2. based on the Council conclusions of 15 November 2004⁽²⁾, the first review of the process held in Maastricht on 14 December 2004 acknowledged that the visibility and profile of VET had improved at European level and that substantial progress had been made. This included a series of common tools and principles⁽³⁾. The Maastricht Communiqué set out priorities at national and European level and linked the Copenhagen process more firmly with the 'Education and Training 2010' work programme;

3. since the adoption of the Maastricht Communiqué, the EUROPASS single framework for the transparency of qualifications and competencies and the Council conclusions on the role of development of skills and competences have been adopted⁽⁴⁾. Consultation on the European Qualifications Framework has been successfully completed and work has continued on developing a credit system for VET (ECVET) which is now the subject of a public consultation.

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 13, 18.1.2003, p. 2.

⁽²⁾ Doc. 13832/04.

⁽³⁾ Resolution on guidance throughout life (doc. 9286/04);
Conclusions on identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning (doc. 9600/04);
Conclusions on quality assurance in VET (doc. 9599/04).

⁽⁴⁾ Europass (OJ L 390, 31.12.2004, p. 6);
Conclusions on skills and competences (OJ C 292, 24.11.2005, p. 3).

4. the revised Lisbon strategy and its integrated guidelines for growth and jobs 2005 — 2008⁽⁵⁾ reflect the central role of education and training within the European Union's agenda. It calls on the Member States to expand and improve investment in human capital and to adapt education and training systems in response to the challenges posed by globalisation, demographic change and technological innovation.

5. the 2006 joint interim report on progress under the 'Education and Training 2010' work programme⁽⁶⁾ concludes that *'the improvement of the quality and attractiveness of VET continues to be a key challenge for the future'*. It also states that *'the search for excellence ... should go hand in hand with a search for greater access and social inclusion'*;

EMPHASISE that

1. vocational education and training should provide a broad knowledge and skills base relevant to working life, highlighting at the same time excellence at all levels. Policies and practices should assess the relative impacts of investing in different levels of skills and competences. The supply of intermediary and technical skills as well as high level skills should be increased to overcome skills shortages and to help sustain innovation and the growth of the knowledge society;

2. VET has a dual role in contributing to competitiveness and in enhancing social cohesion⁽⁷⁾. VET policies should address all sections of the population, offering attractive and challenging pathways for those with high potential, while at the same time addressing those at risk of educational disadvantages and labour market exclusion — especially early school leavers, those with low qualifications or no qualifications at all, those with special needs, people with an immigrant background and older workers;

⁽⁵⁾ Doc. 9341/2/05.

⁽⁶⁾ *'Modernising education and training: a vital contribution to prosperity and social cohesion in Europe'* — 2006 joint interim report of the Council and of the Commission on progress under the 'Education and Training 2010' work programme, (OJ C 79, 1.4.2006, p. 1).

⁽⁷⁾ Presidency conclusions, Brussels European Council, 23/24 March 2006 (doc. 7775/06).

3. basic education should provide young people with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes necessary for further learning, employment and entrepreneurship and prepare students to follow a general education pathway or a VET pathway or a combination of both;

4. young people in VET should acquire skills and competences relevant to labour market requirements and for lifelong learning. This calls for policies to reduce drop-out rates from vocational education and training and to better facilitate school-to-work transition, e.g. by combining education and training with work through apprenticeships and work-based learning.

5. the skills and competences of the adult labour force should be promoted by encouraging the recognition of prior learning gained through training and work experience. Training opportunities should be provided for those in working life, while assessing the possibilities for and the benefits of a balanced sharing of the financial burden. At the same time, learning opportunities should be available for disadvantaged individuals and groups, especially for the less educated;

6. the diversity of European VET systems is an asset which serves as a basis for mutual learning and inspiring reforms. At the same time, this diversity makes it important to increase transparency and common understanding on quality issues, and hence mutual trust between VET systems and practices. The aim should be to promote a European VET area in which qualifications and skills acquired in one country are recognised throughout Europe, thus supporting the mobility of young people and adults.

RECOGNISE that

the Copenhagen process has played an essential role in emphasising the importance of VET to political decision makers. It has contributed to raising the profile of VET as part of the Lisbon strategy. The process facilitates agreeing common European goals and objectives, discussing national models and initiatives, and exchanging good examples of practice at the European level. At national level, the process has contributed to strengthening the focus on VET and has inspired national reforms.

STRESS that

1. special actions addressing VET need to be strengthened in the future. The Copenhagen process should be continued within the framework of the 'Education and Training 2010' work programme. A focused and holistic approach should be

ensured, in which the different initiatives and tools are inter-linked and mutually supportive, and in which VET is developed at all levels as an essential part of lifelong learning with close links to general education. Emphasis should be placed on engaging social partners and sectoral organisations in all stages of the work, and on feeding national experiences back into the developmental work at European level;

2. measures are voluntary and should be developed through bottom-up cooperation.

AGREE that

The Copenhagen and Maastricht priorities remain valid and should be reinforced in the next phase as follows:

1. Policy focused on improving the attractiveness and quality of VET

More attention should be paid by Member States to the image, status and attractiveness of VET. This calls for:

- improved guidance throughout life to take better account of the opportunities and requirements of VET and of working life, including increased career guidance, information and advice in schools;
- open VET systems which offer access to flexible, individualised pathways and create better conditions for transition to working life, progression to further education and training, including higher education, and which support the skills development of adults in the labour market;
- close links with working life, both in initial and continuing vocational education and training, and increased opportunities to learn at the workplace;
- promoting the recognition of non-formal and informal learning to support career development and lifelong learning;
- measures to increase the interest and participation of men or women in those VET fields in which they remain under-represented, for instance women in the technology field;
- developing and highlighting excellence in skills, for instance by applying world-class standards or organising skills competitions ⁽¹⁾.

In improving the attractiveness and quality of VET, more emphasis should be placed on good governance of VET systems and providers in delivering the VET agenda ⁽²⁾. This means:

⁽¹⁾ Such as the European Skills Competition to be organised in the Netherlands in 2008 and the biannual World Skills Competitions.

⁽²⁾ Key messages to the Spring European Council (doc. 7620/06).

- responsiveness to the needs of individuals and the labour market, including anticipation of skills needs. Particular attention should be paid to the needs of small and medium-sized enterprises;
- national quality assurance and improvement in line with the Council Conclusions on Quality Assurance in VET ⁽¹⁾;
- improving public and private investment in VET through the development of balanced and shared funding and investment mechanisms;
- increased transparency of VET systems;
- stronger leadership of institutions and/or training providers within national strategies;
- highly qualified teachers and trainers who undertake continuous professional development;
- active partnership between different decision makers and stakeholders, in particular social partners and sectoral organisations, at national, regional and local levels.

2. Development and implementation of common tools for VET

The development of common European tools should be continued in order to pave the way towards a European area of VET and to support the competitiveness of the European labour market. The aim should be for the agreed tools to be in place by 2010.

Further development of:

- a) common European tools specifically aimed at VET, by:
 - developing and testing a European Credit System for VET (ECVET) as a tool for credit accumulation and transfer, taking into account the specificities of VET and the experience gained with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) in higher education;
 - strengthening cooperation on quality improvement by using the European Network of Quality Assurance for VET (ENQA-VET) to support the creation of a common understanding on quality assurance and to foster mutual trust. Cooperation with higher education should be continued;
- b) common European tools in which VET plays a major role, by:
 - developing and testing a European Qualifications Framework (EQF) based on learning outcomes, providing greater parity and better links between the VET and higher education sectors and taking account of international sectoral qualifications;

- further developing EUROPASS as the single European framework for transparency, and tools for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, in order to support and complement the introduction of EQF and ECVET.

Implementation of:

- a) common European tools specifically aimed at VET, by:
 - participating in the testing of ECVET and encouraging its implementation;
 - drawing on the principles underlying a Common Quality Assurance Framework, as referred to in the May 2004 Council Conclusions on quality assurance in VET, in order to promote a culture of quality improvement and wider participation in the ENQA-VET network;
- b) common European tools in which VET plays a major role, by:
 - linking national qualification systems or national qualifications frameworks to the EQF;
 - supporting national qualifications systems in incorporating international sectoral qualifications, using the EQF as a reference point;
 - promoting widespread use of EUROPASS.

3. Strengthening mutual learning

A more systematic approach is needed to strengthen mutual learning, cooperative work and the sharing of experience and know-how. This should be facilitated by:

- common concepts and agreed definitions at European level in order to make national solutions, models and standards more easily understood;
- Commission funding for research and surveys on specific topics to deepen understanding of European VET systems and practices, and their links to the labour market and other education sectors;
- monitoring by the Commission of networks, the exchange of examples of good practice and the development of mechanisms which can be used to disseminate knowledge and expertise;
- a systematic and flexible framework to support peer learning activities in the field of VET. The framework should also support decentralised peer learning.

Adequate and consistent data and indicators are the key to understanding what is happening in VET, to strengthening mutual learning and to laying the foundations for evidence-based training policy.

⁽¹⁾ Conclusions on quality assurance in VET (doc. 9599/04).

By the time of the next Ministerial follow-up Conference in 2008 the Commission should have:

- given special attention to improving the scope, precision and reliability of VET statistics so that progress in developing VET can be evaluated;
- devoted attention to the development of the VET component within the coherent framework of indicators and benchmarks ⁽¹⁾;
- paid particular attention to the development of statistical information on investment in and the financing of VET.

This would best be achieved by using and combining existing data to the best advantage, while ensuring adequate national/regional data on VET and consistency and comparability with other data on education and training.

4. Taking all stakeholders on board

The success of the Copenhagen process relies on the active involvement of all stakeholders in the field of VET, including in particular the social partners at European and national level, sectoral organisations and VET providers. This calls for:

- concise and clear information on the process, its background, priorities and activities and the effective transfer of results;
- the active participation in all stages of the process of stakeholders at European, national, regional and local level;
- emphasis on involving VET providers, teachers and trainers in testing and implementing the outcomes of the process;
- the involvement, where appropriate, of learners and their organisations at national and European level.

INVITE THE MEMBER STATES AND THE COMMISSION, WITHIN THEIR RESPECTIVE COMPETENCES,

to implement the Copenhagen process through:

- the effective use of structural funds to support VET reforms at national level;
- targeted use of the new Lifelong Learning Programme to support the process, particularly for innovation, testing, experimentation and implementation;
- the active participation of relevant Community agencies, bodies and committees;
- close cooperation on statistics, indicators and benchmarks with EUROSTAT, OECD, CEDEFOP, and ETF;
- the exchange of information, expertise and results with third countries, particularly those countries covered by the wider Europe neighbourhood policy. Cooperation with high-performing countries and international organisations such as OECD should be strengthened.

The right of participation of all Member States in this work should be ensured.

In the annual reporting on the national Lisbon reform programmes special attention should be paid to progress in VET.

The integrated biennial report on the 'Education and Training 2010' work programme should include a specific part addressing VET, enabling monitoring of the progress and identifying key outcomes to be reported to the European Council.

⁽¹⁾ Council conclusions of 24 May 2005 on new indicators in education and training (OJ C 141, 10.6.2005, p. 7).