

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Establishment of the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)

COM(2008) 180 final — 2008/0070 (COD)

(2009/C 100/25)

On 23 April 2008 the Council decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the

Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET).

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on ... The rapporteur was Ms LE NOUAIL-MARLIÈRE.

At its 448th plenary session, held on 22 and 23 October 2008 (meeting of 22 October), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 109 votes to none with one abstention.

1. Introduction

1.1. This proposal for a recommendation puts forward a common European certification system to facilitate the transferability and recognition of qualifications, thereby promoting worker mobility.

1.2. Education and training are an integral part of the Lisbon Strategy, the European reform programme for meeting the demands of a knowledge society and the economy. More specifically, developing citizens' knowledge, skills and know-how through training and education is a necessary and indispensable condition for meeting the Lisbon goals of competitiveness, development, employment and social cohesion.

1.3. Although there has been progress, the targets set have not been reached, notably with regard to lifelong learning and worker mobility, areas where many obstacles persist. These inadequacies clearly illustrate the need to develop cooperation tools and mechanisms to facilitate access to lifelong learning and the transferability of qualifications between Member States, institutions and systems. Increasing the transparency of qualifications is an indispensable step in the process of implementing such a strategy and developing the knowledge, know-how and skills required by European workers and citizens, as well as all other stakeholders (especially training institutions).

1.4. The ECVET⁽¹⁾ system, which is aimed at citizens, is expected to promote the transnational recognition of their lifelong training. This system is founded on existing European practices and systems and is based on the following aspects:

- A description of qualifications in the form of transferable and cumulative units of learning outcomes (knowledge, know-how and skills).
- The establishment of a transparent system for the transfer, accumulation and validation of vocational training.
- The establishment of partnerships between institutions to create a favourable environment for transferability and an area of transnational vocational training.

2. General comments

2.1. The impact assessment reveals that the ECVET system facilitates transparency, comparability and the transfer and accumulation of units of learning outcomes between different systems. It does not require any further atomisation of qualifications, nor does it advocate the harmonisation of these or of training systems. It supports and strengthens existing provisions for facilitating mobility (ECTS⁽²⁾ and EQF⁽³⁾). In the long term, it could contribute to implementing the national training reforms needed to set up lifelong learning. This is why ECVET has added value in the areas of mobility and lifelong learning.

2.2. Nevertheless, the difficulties presented by these instruments should not be minimised. Although the purpose of EQF is to compare national systems, these systems must be designed and set up in such a way that they can be readily understood and trusted by partners in other Member States. It will be up to the Commission to establish clear criteria for ensuring relevance, transparency, comparability, and mutual trust among partners. Similarly, although EQF

⁽¹⁾ European Credits System for Vocational Education and Training.

⁽²⁾ European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System.

⁽³⁾ European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning.

was set up as a device for comparison and voluntary transposition between different European, national and sectoral qualifications, we should not underestimate the complexity of existing systems. For this reason, we should strengthen measures promoting greater transparency and arrive at a proper understanding of the different steps involved in introducing diplomas or certificates in 2012.

2.3. It should also be stressed that the ECVET system does not replace the other policies in force within the European Union, and in particular Directive 2005/36/EC concerning migrant workers. But on the other hand, it does not strengthen the links needed with existing European programmes, which stipulate in particular, as regards the least developed regions of the EU, that the ESF should finance the implementation of reforms in education and training systems so as to make people more aware of the importance of the knowledge society's needs, particularly the need for lifelong education and training, and improve access to quality education.

2.4. The ECVET system, which sets up a permanent process, requires a lasting commitment by all the players and a synergy between initiatives adapted to European, national or sectoral levels. Unfortunately, it does not expressly provide for any exploitation of advances or innovations (good practices), which may also generate a dynamic among potential players and partners for the assessment scheduled in 2012.

2.5. While the EESC has noted that the consultations which have taken place at all levels and with a large number of players in the public and private sectors have made it possible to establish a common language, the systematic use of a number of acronyms in the proposals, communications, recommendations, impact studies, reports ordered by the Commission is leading to a plethora of initials and a state of confusion that does not augur well for the aim in view. An abbreviation, set of initials, acronym or slogan that makes sense in one language may mean nothing in another, or even convey a completely negative image. Moreover, this usage may limit the entry of new training bodies and put off the people targeted from getting interested in what was designed to make transfers between national vocational training systems easier, not harder. The EESC also recommends that this effort to harmonise such vocational training systems and make them compatible with lifelong training should take account of the linguistic aspects and of the Commission's efforts elsewhere.

2.6. The Commission will have to ensure that the objective of making it 'much easier for individual trainees to complete their

training courses in different training establishments and in different countries, thereby boosting mobility of learners throughout Europe. This is an even more remarkable achievement, given that there are over 30 000 vocational training establishments around the EU ...' (1) is not accomplished at the expense of linguistic diversity on the one hand, and of the quality of linguistic teaching emphasised by the Commission on the other.

3. Specific comments

3.1. The Commission's choice of legislative instrument to set up the ECVET system, i.e. a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council under Article 150 of the Treaty, establishes a framework for implementing ECVET's principles, whilst taking a voluntary approach. Taking this route will strengthen the consultation process which was put in place and which enabled a broad exchange of views among the various stakeholders, including the social partners.

3.2. Although a voluntary approach may present a number of shortcomings, it improves coordination between the Commission, the social partners and Member States for the purpose of clearly identifying the problems that will arise and, above all, for developing the most suitable innovations and solutions. This process will make it possible to plan an operational and more effective implementation of an ECVET with real added value for European workers and citizens in terms of recognition of competencies, thereby promoting lifelong learning and mobility.

3.3. The Commission's expressed intention to carry out an assessment and publish progress with a view to developing and reviewing the ECVET system on an ongoing basis in order to adapt it indicates a commitment to cooperation. It would be appropriate for the various stakeholders, and in particular the users or their representatives, to be widely involved in the assessment and preparation of the report mentioned in the document.

3.4. The Commission's wish to support and promote transnational mobility and access to lifelong learning in the field of vocational education and training must also include full recognition of the underlying principles in the Recommendation concerning the place and role of those involved:

(1) Commission press release IP/08/558.

- The end-users are students who volunteer to have their qualifications validated for the purposes of recognised certification.

- The certification system based on the recognition of qualifications by means of credit units made up of points must guarantee them impartiality and aim at equality of access, and not constitute additional obstacles or selection criteria.

- European cooperation as regards initial and lifelong education and training is necessary in order to create the conditions for transparency and recognition of qualifications.

- Networks and partnerships should be set up, specifically centred on the ECVET system, with a view to developing new tools and new practices as regards teaching contracts and the transfer of credits.

- The Commission should ensure that the standards being adopted allow not only students but also training bodies to be treated fairly. Recent studies⁽¹⁾ still show that the people who benefit most from lifelong training are those who are already the most qualified, and that those who benefit least from lifelong training are those with the lowest level of - or no - qualifications. There are various reasons why this is so, but such a situation should be avoided for certifications and the Commission must ensure that the certification system also covers those who are least favoured in terms of certifications.

- In this area many training bodies (associations and organisations) which specialised in working with the least qualified, and which had accumulated solid experience over a long period, have recently been cut out of the 'supply' market in certain Member States because very often the economies to be made in the short term were achieved at the expense of the 'most profitable' sections of the public; The human and financial aspects of this experience should be improved, particularly in the fields of culture, the social economy and popular education, which are often the gateways to vocational training for such people.

⁽¹⁾ 'Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in Education and Training, Indicators and Benchmarks, 2007': SEC(2007) 1284. NIACE's survey on adult participation in learning, 'Counting the cost' January 2008. NIACE is the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education in the UK.

3.5. Common standards have been worked out for moving towards a European certification system through greater cooperation. This is particularly delicate as regards knowledge acquired through so-called 'informal' apprenticeships. The standards to be reached should be sorted out and studied by following the criteria proposed by, among others, CEDEFOP in its report (see note below) and by consulting bodies that have gained solid and inclusive experience (and whose successes are not based on entry-level elimination and selection of eligible qualifications).

3.6. The Commission should take account of its own Communication on an Action Plan on Adult Learning⁽²⁾, which would make it possible to include the largest possible number of people more quickly by pinpointing those who need it most, people who were not only vulnerable or disadvantaged, but who should be given priority for human and social inclusion reasons and in the interests of economic and territorial cohesion⁽³⁾.

3.7. Annexes 1 and 2 to the current Recommendation, which have been inspired by recommendations from CEDEFOP⁽⁴⁾, are key to the success of the ECVET system as they contribute to transparency and consistency while laying down principles for development at all levels. They should be the subject of clarification, follow-up and greater publicity to ensure the continuity and sustainability of the system.

3.8. The establishment of a common directory and a common field of designation for teaching objects in the context of pre-consultation and consultation of the Commission, which is a step forward, should not lead us to lose sight of the fact that education is not a matter for commercial services and that, on the contrary, it must remain a basic service accessible to the largest possible number of people, guaranteed by both public investments and political cohesion at both national level and in WTO negotiations, if we want to maintain European competitiveness in the broad sense (general interest).

⁽²⁾ EESC opinion on the *Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Action Plan on Adult Learning - It is always a good time to learn*, rapporteur: Ms HEINISCH. Opinion adopted at the plenary session OJ C 204, 9.8.2008, p. 89.

⁽³⁾ CoR opinion of 19/6/2008 on the *Action Plan on Adult Learning - It is always a good time to learn*, rapporteur: Ms SHIELDS. Opinion adopted at the plenary session of 18 and 19 June 2008.

⁽⁴⁾ The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training was set up in 1975 by Council Regulation (EEC) No 337/75 and is the EU's reference centre for vocational education and training. Report of Erwin SEYFRIED - FHVR-FBAE of Berlin (College for Public Administration and the Administration of Justice - Centre of Research on Vocational Training, the Labour Market and Evaluation/Fachhochschule für Verwaltung und Rechtspflege - Forschungsstelle für Berufsbildung, Arbeitsmarkt und Evaluation, Berlin) for CEDEFOP: Panorama: Indicators of quality in vocational education and training.

3.9. If we want to be consistent, the objectives of decent jobs and quality education have to go hand in hand as pledges of competitiveness, and the establishment of a European certification system has to continue in cooperation with the Member States, the social partners at all levels and the people concerned by validations, who, as the final recipients, have to remain the focus of these objectives. The objectives must remain legible and clear to all beneficiaries: recognition of acquisitions in terms of skills, transferability, geographical and job mobility and, where operators are concerned: recognition and access to general interest funding. A European certification system may boost employability and mobility if it is built around these concerns: keep the most efficient operators (experience; number of successful validations; quality of validations; recognise the acquired experience of operators (organisations and associations) who have actually tested methods in real life situations; give priority and regain the confidence of operators who have been sidelined (aid for migrants, support for the Roma community, adult literacy, linguistic support ...).

3.10. The EESC would point out that the employees who are currently most concerned by mobility are male employees on secondment in sectors of the construction and building industry, followed by computer services and new technologies services, then tourism, transport, etc.

3.11. As the ECVET system is dedicated specifically to initial and continuous vocational training, recognition and validation of formal (education) and non-formal qualifications (professional experience), the EESC recommends that the certification system pay particular attention to lifelong learning and the recognition of qualifications acquired by workers on secondment ⁽¹⁾.

3.12. The process surrounding the assessment scheduled in four years' time should include wide distribution throughout the Member States under the guidance of the European Commission, with a view to anchoring the system in the developments of currently existing schemes and in civil society.

Brussels, 22 October 2008.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Mario SEPI

⁽¹⁾ EESC opinion on the *Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – Posting of workers in the framework of the provision of services: maximising its benefits and potential while guaranteeing the protection of workers*. Opinion adopted at the plenary session (O) C 224, 30.8.2008, p. 95).