



## **CYPRUS PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION**

### **BACKGROUND DOCUMENT FOR THE JOINT MEETING OF THE DIRECTORS-GENERAL FOR VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND THE DIRECTORS-GENERAL FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

**FILOXENIA CONFERENCE CENTRE, LEFKOSIA (NICOSIA), CYPRUS  
22-23 OCTOBER 2012**

#### **SESSION III: Expanding opportunities and raising skills: Opening pathways between VET and HE**

##### **Rationale**

The Europe 2020 strategy underlines the need to equip Europeans with the right skills to succeed in a changing labour market and create growth. Education and training systems should provide individuals with higher and more varied skills. An important challenge both in vocational training and in higher education is to find the right mix of transversal and more specific skills.

Demographic changes combined with increased aspiration and expectations means that learner profiles are changing, with profound impacts on the design and delivery of programmes. Adults are staying longer in the labour market and need increasing flexibility from training institutions, to combine work and study in order to improve their career prospects or to change careers in later life. Universities and vocational institutions must adapt to attract and retain non-traditional learners: mature students, migrants and students from lower socio economic backgrounds. HE institutions will need to be ready to accommodate more students with VET background and similarly VET institutions need to respond to needs of students who might have completed higher education degree. The issue of skills mismatch persists, even during the current economic crisis, with employers struggling to recruit the right people in their region or sector.

In response, education sub-systems must become more permeable and better connected in order to better meet the changing needs of learners and to enable them to raise their skill levels at any stage of their career, through learning pathways that respond to the individual's, and not the system's, needs. All Higher Education (HE)- Vocational Education and Training (VET) interfaces need more permeability – from VET to HE, within VET, and from HE to VET. There must be genuine possibilities for VET graduates to continue their studies at higher education. Equally, university graduates should be able to complement academically-oriented study with high level vocationally-based learning post-graduation. Validation of non-formal learning would enable adults with few formal qualifications to enter the education system and help others to continue and complete interrupted studies, and enable adults who are HE graduates to have their continuing training recognised as higher education credits.

In this joint meeting of the Directors General for VET and Higher Education we propose to discuss how to increase the openness and the permeability of education sub-systems. How can education and training institutions better take into account the changing needs of learners, and contribute to their personal development and employability? How can we develop joint mechanisms – credit systems, learning outcomes, qualifications frameworks, partnerships – to secure permeability?

Permeability between HE and VET continues to be a policy priority. It is reflected in both the Bruges Communiqué<sup>1</sup> from 2010 and in the European 2020 headline target stipulating that 40% of the young adult population should reach tertiary or equivalent degrees by 2020. Bologna Education Ministers reiterated their commitment to providing flexible learning paths and alternative access routes into higher education in the 2012 Bucharest Communiqué.<sup>2</sup>

The complexity of our current education systems and the diversity of interests calls for a careful review of the functioning of the European education systems, taking into account the perspectives of different target groups and stakeholders.

## Issues for discussion

### **I. Permeability: barriers and challenges**

Permeability has long been recognised as a major challenge in implementing lifelong learning policies. This is why education and training systems are developing a range of mechanisms to introduce more flexibility into the system, reinforced by the process of setting up comprehensive National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) and referencing them to the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF). While evidence is still sparse on the efficiency of existing arrangements facilitating permeability, analyses indicate that the learning outcomes approach to qualifications, credit systems, the validation of prior learning and the establishment of national qualifications frameworks are part of the sustainable basis for permeability.<sup>3</sup>

The barriers to permeability can be looked at from different perspectives – systemic, institutional or individual. Some of the major challenges to be addressed include:

- In many countries, VET and HE institutions have different status, e.g. the scope, responsibilities and functions of competent institutions vary greatly when it comes to examination, recognition and the awarding of qualifications and certificates.

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<sup>1</sup> ...[http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/vocational/bruges\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/vocational/bruges_en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/\(1\)/Bucharest%20Communiqué%202012\(2\).pdf](http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/(1)/Bucharest%20Communiqué%202012(2).pdf), "We will step up our efforts towards underrepresented groups to develop the **social dimension** of higher education, reduce inequalities and provide adequate student support services, counselling and guidance, flexible learning paths and alternative access routes, including recognition of prior learning."

<sup>3</sup> The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) has since 2008 dedicated resources for expert workshops and studies on permeability in education and training, see [www.cedefop.europa.eu](http://www.cedefop.europa.eu)

- A complex, often fragmented legal apparatus is in place in many Member States which can diminish transparency for the learners. A lack of a framework with standardized equivalence checks across the entire education and training sectors means that learners need to undergo case-by-case recognition procedures with potentially varying outcomes.
- Differences in credit systems and quality assurance make for a lack of comparability between VET and HE which can hinder the learner's progression through the education system. Reflection is needed on how the different systems and approaches can be translated and understood in the same way by stakeholders in VET and HE.
- Transition routes between educational sub-systems are often under-developed. The academic world and the world of VET tend to use different languages and pursue different philosophies, limiting discourse and development of mutual trust.
- While most countries have developed holistic lifelong learning strategies these are not always broadly applied and individuals are not adequately informed and guided in seeking further learning opportunities. In addition, VET still holds a negative image for learners and parents according to a recent Eurobarometer<sup>4</sup>.
- Admission procedures - from VET to HE and vice-versa - are not always transparent and can lead to the exclusion of certain groups of learners. Assessment and validation of prior and non-formal learning is not an established practice everywhere and recognition of qualifications is different depending on the country.
- The funding framework for studies in HE doesn't always adequately take into account the diversity of learners, particularly part-timers. As yet, only a minority of HEIs draw in non-traditional learners, offering tailored part-time courses and flexible learning opportunities for employed learners, alongside pedagogical support or web-based learning portals.

*Question: What are the prerequisites for permeability (success factors, constraints)?*

## **II. VET and HE: a need for compatibility and complementarity**

The development of comprehensive national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) and linking to the European Qualifications Framework marks a shift in paradigm in our education systems and offers a real opportunity to construct bridges between different sub-systems and design lifelong learning paths. The aim is to increase overall transparency and improve transferability of qualifications, both within and between different education and training systems. Introducing a common, learning outcomes based reference-point makes it easier to identify the relations and potential linkages between qualifications awarded by different institutions and in different education sub-systems.

Credit systems (ECVET and ECTS) complement this exercise; qualifications are described in terms of units of learning outcomes which facilitates access to study

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<sup>4</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/20110930\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/20110930_en.htm)

programmes and offers learners an opportunity to gain credits incrementally and accumulate them.

This new approach forgoes the conventional and not necessarily successful practice to regulate entrance by referring to qualification titles. Instead it opens up much broader progression routes as units (or components and modules as they are phrased in the context of HE) might be designed jointly or agreed as equivalent by the respective stakeholders in the different sub-systems.

Using units as a vehicle to link different levels of qualifications has an impact on institutional arrangements and the roles of the stakeholders involved, including sectoral stakeholders and administrative and teaching staff. Likewise, this change in paradigm calls for a stronger practical cooperation between main quality assurance actors in different sub-systems in facilitating more transparency and better understanding of the different quality assurance systems in place.

Qualifications at EQF level 5 play an important role in facilitating further learning and continuing training since level 5 operates at the cross-roads of education and training and includes a diverse and heterogeneous mix of qualifications. Not only can they function as a bridge to higher education - offering partial qualifications which can be used as building blocks for first cycle degrees in higher education - they may also facilitate horizontal learning paths allowing for vocational and professional specialisation. Candidates with a general background may use qualifications at this level to acquire and strengthen specific vocational or professional skills and competences. They also provide the labour market with advanced skills and competences, potentially responding quickly to the new demands of the labour market.

*Question: How can Qualifications Frameworks, including an increased focus on learning outcomes, support the learner's access to and progression through the education system?*

### **III. Steps to take**

Various steps can help in easing the way towards open bi-directional pathways.

- Review of national legislative and regulatory measures to ensure that administrative frameworks and financial resources permit a learner access to different training pathways. Validation and recognition procedures that operate in a transparent way can help make sure that any person can build on prior learning or experience gained in the labour market.
- Shared discourse between national authorities, education and training institutions, sectoral stakeholders and awarding bodies to facilitate the translation of the sub-system specific languages and mechanisms in place (credit systems, learning outcomes, quality assurance) and to understand the "culture" of the respective sub-systems in order to increase transparency and build trust.

- Capacity building and cooperation strategies, including with employers, that reflect on the importance of work-based learning for employability as traineeships and work placements offer real world experience by bridging theory and practice and developing both soft skills and specific professional skills.
- Adoption and use, by HE and VET stakeholders, of a shared language (terminology) in designing learning outcomes-based curricula and courses, and devising teaching methods and assessment procedures.
- Developing and applying quality systems in VET and HE, underpinning with quality assurance system, and raising mutual understanding of the quality processes in place in each sub-system.
- Stepping up efforts at national and EU level to better coordinate the use of European mechanisms. Reinforcing cooperation between the different contact and reference points at national level, e.g. for EQF, recognition (ENIC/NARIC), quality assurance, and credit systems, supported at European level by developing appropriate instruments, through mechanisms such as the EQF Advisory Board, and through collaborative efforts with national stakeholders, such as the Open Method of Coordination and targeted peer learning activities to further help to intensify on-going work and share recognised best practices.

*Questions:*

- *What should be put in place in order to realise these steps? How can structured dialogue with stakeholders of different sub-systems be taken forward to facilitate better understanding of the potential for transitions between VET and HE and vice-versa?  
What are the specific obstacles that can be tackled through better use of European mechanisms and frameworks?*