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TOWARDS A EUROPEAN ERA OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

AGORA CONFERENCE, 16-17 MARCH 2009, THESSALONIKI

ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION: PROGRESS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PRIORITIES IN VET, 16 MARCH 2009, 12.00-13.30

SPEECH BY DR. BARBARA DORN, EMPLOYERS' SPOKESPERSON IN THE GOVERNING BOARD OF CEDEFOP

CONTINUITY, CONSOLIDATION AND CHANGE

I General remark:

The most important change in European VET policy in the framework of the Copenhagen process is the **shift from the input-orientation to learning outcomes**. This new approach is the common base for the European tools, principles and guidelines (EQF, ECVET, Europass), which are central to the Copenhagen process. The increased orientation towards learning outcomes does not only improve **transparency** and **comparability** of qualifications, it also enhances **permeability** between different educational systems and sectors such as VET and higher education. The **EQF** as a holistic reference instrument for the first time unifies general education, VET and Higher Education under one roof. **ECVET** - based on learning outcomes – refers to VET, but in a long-term perspective it should be linked with **ECTS**, the credit system of higher education institutions. The Bologna and the Copenhagen process could then finally be connected and thus open new qualification pathways in the sense of lifelong learning. The European discussion on learning outcomes, transparency, comparability, mobility and permeability was the incentive for many initiatives, projects or even reforms on national level. Key aspects are the **attractiveness and quality of VET** and the **access to VET** especially for vulnerable groups.

II Specific Aspects for discussion:

1. Raising the attractiveness of VET

Making VET systems more open, flexible and attractive is a key challenge for the Copenhagen process. Crucial points are **the participation in initial VET (IVET)** and the **access to higher education**.



EU policy in this context is based on four pillars:

- individualisation of VET pathways (e. g. by increased differentiation and flexibility of programmes),
- providing a growing range of opportunities at the end of VET pathways (e. g. access to higher education),
- modernising the government of VET and
- promoting the parity of esteem with general and higher education.

The German VET system has already been transformed - not only but also due to European discussions:

The VET offer has been diversified, routes more suited to lower-ability students have been opened:

- “Introductory Training for young people” (**EQ**) which takes place in enterprises offer a basic vocational qualification which facilitates the transition to “regular” vocational training.
- The introduction of **modules** is tested in the framework of several programmes and projects for specific target groups e. g. for the transition from school to training or from the training in one occupation to another (JOBSTARTER CONNECT).

Attempts are also being made to bring **academic education and VET** closer together for example by the opening of the access to higher education:

In their common **Qualification Initiative (“Getting ahead through education”)** the Federal Government and the Länder agreed to formulate standard preconditions under which master craftsmen, technicians, people with vocational qualifications in a commercial or financial occupation and people with similar qualifications will be eligible to enter higher education. After successful completion of vocational training and three years of experience in their occupation individuals will be entitled to study the relevant subjects at institutions of higher education. Furthermore the institutions of higher education according to the Initiative will credit equivalent vocational qualifications as being academic achievements.

The Länder are working to ensure that the institutions of higher education extend their range of study and further training courses for working students. These also include virtual study courses and “open universities”.

2. Increasing **access to VET** by addressing equity – needs of older workers

Fewer labour market entrants, high replacement demand, increasing skill requirements, skill gaps and shortages are today’s challenges. There is a growing need for highly skilled personal to meet the requirements of a global competition of knowledge and innovation. Due to the demographic change **older workers** play a central role in filling these gaps. They do not necessarily belong to the so called “vulnerable” group on the labour market. The age of a person is not the decisive factor for the labour market success, it is the level of qualification. The unemployment rate of highly skilled older workers is as low as the rate of younger workers with the same level of qualification.



Lifelong learning / continuing training is a precondition for a good perspective on the labour market.

Lifelong learning must be taken for granted: Starting with early childhood education and continuing in general, vocational and higher education/training. Lifelong learning relies on the **self initiative** of the individuals. Every person is responsible for the preservation of its own employability. Costs of CVT must be shared between enterprises and individuals according to the respective interests and benefits. Employees do not necessarily have to pay for CVT, investing their free time in CVT is an alternative contribution. **German employers** are already investing 27 billion Euro each year into CVT (1.100 per person/year). 84 % of all enterprises are active in CVT.

Continuing training according to the individual needs and circumstances needs flexibility. A legal right for CVT probably increases the participation rate, but it does not necessarily help filling the skill gaps and shortages and improve individual perspectives on the labour market. **Collective bargaining** can include framework conditions for CVT, but in the end it has to be the decision of the enterprise and the individual if and how CVT takes place/ is organised.

3. Lifelong learning through VET – Mobility of VET students

Compared to students in the higher education sector **the mobility rate of VET students** is still low. This relies on several factors such as the language barrier, the complex structures of VET (heterogeneity of systems), the lack of transparency, barriers related to social security and tax status and the lack of recognition of competences acquired abroad. Some of the European tools and instruments (EQF and ECVET) will probably contribute improving the situation. Additionally in the framework of the Leonardo da Vinci programme individual mobility measures should be introduced or at least tested. Individual mobility is one of the main pillars of the very successful Erasmus programme and even if the target group in VET is generally younger the participation rate could be increased enormously.
