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WORKSHOP: ECVET IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF LIFELONG LEARNING WITHIN THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL DIALOGUE

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« Lifelong learning, social dialogue and ECVET: the inter-professional perspective »

Introduction

The discussion on life long learning and ECVET has to be put into the broader economic and labour market context. Growth is improving (+ 2.9% in 2006). The employment situation also (7 million jobs to be created in 2006-2008) but most of Europe seems to be trapped in a negative trade off between job creation and productivity growth which undermines the sustainability of growth and employment improvements.

To be successful, we need:

1. to anticipate and respond to change,
2. a mobile workforce with broad skills,
3. transparent qualifications.

ECVET aims are to promote transparency and facilitate mobility, two objectives strongly supported by BUSINESSEUROPE.

It is still early days in the consultation launched by the Commission. I will therefore only be able to give you preliminary views on ECVET.

For the European business community, the key criteria to assess the merits of ECVET are the same as for any other education and training instrument:

1. Can it contribute to improving the functioning of labour markets,
2. Will it facilitate the development of life long learning ?
3. Is it not leading to unnecessary bureaucracy, in particular for SMEs ?



EU social partners approach to life long learning

In 2002, the European social partners adopted a framework of actions on the development of life long learning. In this framework of actions, they defined a common approach to life long learning which:

1. highlights the joint responsibility of employers and workers for the development of competences,
2. identifies 4 priorities for action throughout Europe:
 - a. anticipation and identification of competencies needs,
 - b. recognition and validation of competencies and qualifications,
 - c. information, support and guidance,
 - d. mobilising resources.

The approach taken was a genuine labour market approach (competence based), focussed on learning outcomes, taking into account both formal and non-formal learning. We find echoes of our approach in the proposed ECVET and this is greatly appreciated. However, we also have doubts on some important aspects of ECVET. It is these positive aspects and questions we have that I would now like to share with you.

Preliminary assessment of the proposed ECVET

A positive element in the proposed ECVET is that it is focussing on learning outcomes. The voluntary character of ECVET is another appreciated feature.

Similarly, we fully support the objective of ensuring that learning outcomes acquired abroad can be taken into consideration for a learner's pathway in their country of origin, thus encouraging mobility in VET

Both ECVET and EQF are dealing with complex issues and we are aware that it would be unrealistic to expect simple answers. However, we are concerned that the present ECVET proposal may be unnecessarily complex.

The advantage of the EQF is that it represents a translation grid from which national and / or sectoral frameworks can align their respective 'grids' to the EQF reference levels. It therefore remains an exercise of enhancing the comparability of qualifications – thereby improving transparency and mobility – without implying an overhaul of national qualification systems.

By contrast, European employers have doubts over the feasibility of a common European ECVET system based on the allocation of credit points:

1. We see many difficulties associated with the practical application of such a credit point system and the bureaucratic burdens it could engender. We fear that it could notably impose unnecessary bureaucratic burdens to companies, especially those that act as training providers.



2. We believe that it is too ambitious to assume that one will be able to attribute credit points to all learning outcomes across countries, whether occurring through formal, non-formal, and informal learning pathways. We feel that proposed ECVET structure does not reflect the reality of the very diverse forms of learning provision in VET across and within Member States.
3. We wonder if a more appropriate tool to record and transfer learning outcomes from one country to another would not be a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the respective learning providers which would enable to record the experiences gained from a period of mobility based on learning outcomes. Such an initial system would better reflect the voluntary nature of the implementation of an ECVET system but also grant the respective learning providers the flexibility required to implement the Memorandum of Understanding in the short term according to their specificities. This would have the advantage of permitting the recording of learning outcomes for SMEs that are not formally learning providers. It could also be a first step to pave the way for other appropriate mechanisms to record learning outcomes in the longer term.

The dialogue on ECVET

The Commission consultation has launched a broad dialogue on ECVET. However, this should not be confused with the European Social Dialogue which refers exclusively to the bilateral discussions between Employers and Workers Representatives such as BUSINESSEUROPE and ETUC taking place at the EU level and, by definition, does not involve a whole range of actors such as national authorities, education institutions, and learning providers, etc.

Furthermore, we believe that what is needed now is also a period for dialogue within national systems, on the practical implications of the proposed ECVET for each system, involving all the relevant players in accordance with national practices.

To conclude

BUSINESSEUROPE supports the objective of improving transparency and mobility in vocational education and training. We are in favour of focusing on learning outcomes and being consistent with the approach taken with the EQF.

However, we have difficulties in imagining how the proposed system of credit points could apply to informal and non-formal learning outcomes.

ECVET presents an opportunity to consider how VET systems can be modernised but a step-by-step approach to achieve this would be more realistic. Hence the idea to work through memoranda of understanding.
