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EUROPEAN CREDITS TRANSFERT SYSTEM FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (ECVET)

Principles and reference framework for implementation

1. CONTEXT

The Copenhagen declaration of 30 November 2002 set the priority of developing a credit transfer systems for VET.

A mandate was therefore given to a working group to explore possible options for the design and development of a credit transfer system, compatible with specificities of vocational education and training. This working group, composed of experts nominated by participating countries and social partners has faced the challenge of laying the foundations of an ECVET system which allows dialogue and exchange between VET systems, which are very different from one another both in terms of perceptions and pedagogical organisation.

The implementation of ECVET requires first an agreement at European level on the objectives, principles, scope and field of application of the system, as well as on the reference framework for its implementation. These elements are set out in this note, which aims provide a basis for the document to be presented to the ministerial meeting at Maastricht.

As a result of its investigations, the technical working group (TWG) on credit transfer in vocational education and training has, accordingly, developed proposals the principles and rules of a European credit (transfer) system for VET (ECVET), which should ensure its effective implementation within a variety of mobility exchange initiatives, individual or institutional, and involving national authorities and VET providers. This basic approach has been tested in case studies (see Annex) and will be further tested through pilot projects in the context of the Leonardo da Vinci programme.

2. A EUROPEAN CREDIT TRANSFER SYSTEM FOR VET

2.1. Aims and objectives of ECVET

The overall aim of ECVET is to contribute concretely to lifelong learning. ECVET should facilitate, on the one hand, mobility of trainees within their individual VET pathway within and between different national systems, and encourage and promote, on the other hand, individual geographic and professional mobility. ECVET should also include in its

principles and organisation all formal, non-formal and informal training/education/learning processes. It should therefore support individual development and employability.

This aim can be broken down into two objectives:

- In the perspective of allowing everyone to create and follow individual learning pathways, ECVET improves transparency and recognition of learning outcomes (be they acquired through formal, non-formal or informal learning activities), in view of their accumulation and transfer within and between various VET systems.
- In the perspective of management of VET systems, ECVET should, through the development of mutual trust between the stakeholders of national VET systems, encourage cooperation between respective authorities, education and training providers, teachers, trainers and learners, within and beyond national frontiers. ECVET should thus contribute to the quality and attractiveness of VET systems.

ECVET at once requires and promotes transparency of qualifications (defined the objectives of a VET programme, in turn expressed in terms of knowledge, skills and competences), of procedures (i.e. assessment or recognition procedures), of learning processes (i.e. formal, non-formal and informal learning processes and pathways) and structures (i.e. organisation of the VET systems, institutional responsibility of the stakeholders/practitioners). ECVET is based on the establishment of mutual trust between VET authorities, providers in terms of the assessment of the knowledge, skills and competences acquired, and the level of achievements of mobile VET learners or trainees.

2.2. Principles of ECVET: Functions and scope

ECVET comprises a mechanism, the two operational functions of which are to allow individuals:

- to move from one national, formal VET system to another; to access the formal VET system from a non-formal learning context; to transfer learning outcomes between such systems and learning contexts
- and to accumulate and have valued learning outcomes along their individual VET learning pathway.

ECVET as such allows individuals to convert their learning outcomes from one system to another.

- ECVET is centred on the learner (trainee, pupil or student) in the European context where mobility and free circulation of persons are individual rights.
- ECVET is a European decentralised system based on voluntary participation of member states and of the respective VET stakeholders according to the national legislation and regulations on assessment, recognition, certification and quality assurance.
- ECVET must be linked to the new Europass, the development and implementation of which should support the diffusion of ECVET among stakeholders
- The implementation of ECVET will be supported by the common reference levels framework

- ECVET should be supported by the Common Quality Assurance Framework and the common European principles for identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning.
- ECVET will in the medium term be integrated with the European Credit Transfer System for higher education (ECTS).

The scope and field of application of ECVET at national and European levels are defined as follows:

- ECVET is designed for VET systems as a whole (formal and non-formal VET, initial and continuing VET).
- ECVET is aimed at learners at any level of the formal VET systems, whether their learning pathways include workplace or school-based learning experiences.
- ECVET makes it possible to link and to combine formal and non-formal learning experiences, and promotes access to formal VET systems on the basis of non-formal and informal learning.
- ECVET can be used in case of bi- or multilateral mobility.
- ECVET is designed to be used by any accredited VET provider irrespective of its size, status, degree of autonomy, or the legislative and regulatory framework of the respective VET system in respect of the quality standards in use.
- ECVET can be applied in a regional, national, European or even international context.

2.3. Reference framework for ECVET

ECVET rests on three essential rules, which are the pillars of its effective implementation:

The objectives of a learning pathway, a training programme or elements of a qualification are expressed in terms of knowledge, skills and competences to be acquired and mastered at a given reference level. They are agreed formally, assembled and organised in units.

It is based on the convention defined at European level that a maximal number of credits is allocated to a set of units, corresponding to a complete learning pathway, VET programme or qualification. This convention makes it possible to allocate to each unit (or set of units) a number of credit points according to the relative weight of each unit. The transfer/exchange value of each unit may thus be defined in terms of credit points.

An agreement, documented in a ‘memorandum of understanding’, links the institutions which implement a learner mobility experience based on the ECVET mechanism. This MoU formalises the zone of mutual trust between the institutions, i.e. the MoU comprises, on the one hand, the set of units which are the subject of learning in one VET system or the other, and on the other hand the characteristics of the training modules, the programme or traineeship...in which the learners will take part during the mobility experience. This MoU, along with other documents (Europass, certificate or diploma supplement...) secures the transparency of the individual mobility process, the learning outcomes, and the acquisition of the corresponding knowledge, skills and competences.

2.4. Provisional calendar of the next steps in the ECVET project

- 5 October 2004: presentation of the project to the Directors General for vocational training
- 12-13 October: European seminar on ECVET in Bonn, Germany
- 25 November: presentation to the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training
- 14 December: Explicit reference of the proposed ECVET approach in the Maastricht Communiqué, which will be adopted by the Ministers of vocational training
- Final trimester of 2004 and first semester of 2005: continue the work of the TWG
 - Definition of the credit points scale
 - Design of a general framework for the Memoranda of Understanding between VET providers
 - Design of a manual for VET providers and learners
 - Design of an experimental framework for ECVET
- End of first semester 2005: formal proposal from the Commission on the ECVET system (i.e. the principles, reference framework and the conditions for implementation of ECVET)
- Second semester 2005 and first semester 2006: experimental implementation of ECVET
- Second semester 2006: extended implementation of ECVET

ECVET: The basic approach from a user's perspective

The following description aims to identify the ECVET approach from the perspective of a VET learner exchange. Annex I contains a more detailed and technical description of the key constituents and architecture of ECVET. Annex II contains definitions of the key terms and concepts used.

The individual mobility in an exchange programme takes place between two (or more) VET providers. They both, together with the interested student(s), learner(s) or apprentice(s), come to an agreement on the content and main characteristics of the mobility programme in terms of knowledge, skills and competences to be acquired by the student during his/her stay abroad. This agreement is settled in a memorandum of understanding (MoU).

In any national or regional context education/training programmes can be divided into units or sets of units. A unit is defined within ECVET as the elementary (or smallest) part of a curriculum or education/training programme, and is outcome-oriented. Each unit corresponds to a specific combination of knowledge, skills and competences (KSC); it can be of different size according to the national VET systems.

The memorandum of understanding gives information in its annex on the respective structures of teaching and learning activities (from a pedagogical and organisational viewpoint as well as information on the notional workload). Those elements are referred to in the ECVET basic approach as modules. Modules are associated to units.

A similar portfolio of knowledge, skills and competences can be acquired in each national VET system notwithstanding differences in the learning pathways in terms of notional workload, learning arrangements and learning methods. Agreeing on equivalences between units anchored in different national systems (i.e. in terms of knowledge, skills and competences) means that it is necessary to agree on equal values for learning, methods and time invested in the learning activities and on a common measurement method relying on the portfolio of knowledge, skills and competences.

The valuing of units in terms of credits rests on the convention at European level that a full education/training programme equals 180 credit points. This convention enables to evaluate the exchange value of VET units in terms of knowledge, skills and competences. This value and the corresponding knowledge, skills and competences are part of the MoU agreed between the co-operating national VET providers.

After the period of VET study abroad, the credit points acquired (and the corresponding knowledge, skills and competences) will be integrated in the national syllabus and completed with other units to make up the whole (or part) qualification depending on the VET programme in which the learner is engaged.

ANNEX I: ECVET KEY CONSTITUENTS AND ARCHITECTURE

(1) Stakeholders

a) The learners

ECVET is designed for both young and adult learners along their lifelong learning activities. It is applicable regardless of the learners' biographies, their learning pathways (formal/informal) and their motivation (acquisition of skills and competences, employability) and mobility (regional, national, and international, horizontal, vertical).

The learner is considered as the main actor of his/her learning activities.

b) The vocational education and training providers

Within ECVET, the VET providers are denominated as the receiving bodies and sending bodies. Those providers might be schools, adult training centres, training companies, or a combination of those. The receiving body decides about the amount of credits that will be allocated to previous learning achievements, which are documented by the former provider and/or learner, according to its own set of knowledge, skills and competences within corresponding VET programmes.

In the case of time-limited international VET exchange, the sending VET body will evaluate the value, in terms of credits, of the individually acquired knowledge, skills and competences, using a convention scale of 180 credit points (see below). The VET providers oblige themselves to grant a minimum recognition to previous formal, non-formal or informal learning achievements.

c) The vocational education and training authorities

VET authorities participate in ECVET according to their respective fields of responsibilities. They provide guidance and support to the other stakeholders according to their field of activities.

d) The social partners

The social partners call for the creation, within the institutional framework of each Member State, of conditions, which will further encourage a concerted development of competencies and qualifications, in addition to existing unilateral approaches to learning (ETUC/UNICE/CEEP 2002).

The social partners consider it necessary to deepen dialogue with the aim of improving transparency and transferability, both for the employee and for the enterprise, in order to facilitate geographical and occupational mobility and to increase the efficiency of labour markets: by promoting the development of means of recognition and validation of competencies; by providing a system for transferable qualifications; by identifying the possible links and complementarities with recognised diplomas (ETUC/UNICE/CEEP 2002).

e) The employers

Employers are engaged in ECVET in their role as VET providers according to their respective national VET systems. They are linked to the implementation of ECVET and

provide feedback on the VET programme and the use of ECVET to the VET authorities and bodies.

(2) Memorandum of understanding (MoU)

- The sending and receiving institutions agree on the specific objectives in terms of knowledge, skills and competences, duration, responsibilities, rights and obligations within the individual exchange programme of the mobile learner.
- The amount of knowledge, skills and competences will become a guarantee value in terms of credits in relation to the global credit amount of the sending institution and the respective vocational education and training programme.
- The situational or specific aspects of the labour market context can be introduced and explained in the MoU.

(3) Credit (value)

- Credit points are allocated to units on the basis of learning outcomes. The value of a unit in terms of credit points corresponds to a certain combination of knowledge, skills and competences.
- Learning outcomes are considered in relation to reference levels, qualification frameworks and labour markets segments (occupational profiles, vocational families) and ought to be linked to the existing national/regional references.
- Different learning pathways may lead to comparable or even equivalent learning outcomes. These differences must not necessarily have a direct influence on the credit value of units.

(4) Design of VET programmes

The implementation of ECVET has certain prerequisites in terms of the (practical or theoretical) design of the VET programmes. This design includes as core elements units and modules:

- A unit means the elementary (or smallest) part of a qualification (?) or of a curriculum or a VET programme. A unit is outcome-oriented. It corresponds to a limited amount of knowledge, skills and/or competences. It corresponds with a specific achievement in terms of an expected vocational/professional outcome at individual level. A unit is anchored in an occupational profile at a given level within a reference levels framework.
- A module means the elementary (or smallest) part of a learning pathway, and is process-oriented. It gives information on the teaching/learning processes and necessary resources. Modules are associated to units.

(5) Measurement method for the units

- Each full curriculum or VET programme corresponds to an amount of 180 credit points.

- The allocation of credit points to units is proportional to the global amount of credit points for the VET programme.
- Credit points are awarded for the achievement of specified and specific learning outcomes
- Credit points for units are allocated after passing an examination/assessment procedure or other means for measuring achievements.

(6) Recognition/Validation

- The receiving institution, VET provider, is principally ready to accept and to support the recognition and validation of the mobile learners’ prior achievements. It is important, however, not to create expectations about “automatic recognition”.
- Recognition is an equivalent allocation of a foreign (prior) education/training achievement at a correct place and pathway in another country’s education or employment system.
- The principles agreed for validation of non-formal and informal learning¹ will be fully taken into account within ECVET.
- Validation ought to lead to the recognition of specific learning outcomes and their equivalence in view of obtaining a full VET qualification. Learners with validated or certified informal and non-formal learning experience can apply to VET programmes.
- The system of validation depends on the legal rules in progress.

(7) Certification²

- Credits can be considered as a basis for certification of units or equivalent parts of an education/training programme linked to corresponding reference levels and sub-levels within a coherent qualifications or reference levels framework.

(8) Reference levels and qualification frameworks³

- The reference levels, with their associated descriptors, form a framework and a language that can be used to compare education/training or learning outcomes in different contexts.
- The identification of the units and outcomes linked to an ECVET exchange can therefore be accomplished with the assistance of reference levels

¹ Council of European Union (2004). Draft Conclusions of the Council and of the representatives of the Governments of the Member States meeting within the Council on Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning. 9600/04. LIMITE EDUC 118. SOC 253. Brussels.

² The mandate of the Copenhagen declaration to develop common principles for certification, linked to ECVET, is being addressed through a study which is expected to report in November 2004

³³ Mandate regarding reference levels. Issue of reference levels separated from the ECVET agenda after the decision of CCG?

ANNEX II: ECVET DEFINITIONS

Certification means a device or system under the responsibility of an accredited institution aiming at the official recognition of a part or total qualification (Progress Report 2003). A certificate is an official document, issued by an awarding body, which records the achievements of an individual following a standard assessment procedure (Tissot 2003).

Credit points are a value allocated to units to describe the amount of knowledge, skills and competences which have been acquired by the learner.

Continuing vocational training means any vocational training undertaken by a worker in the Community during his or her working life (EurOP 2003:18).

Curriculum refers to process, content and outcome

Initial vocational training means any form of initial vocational training, including technical and vocational teaching, apprenticeship and vocationally oriented education, which contributes to the achievement of a vocational qualification recognised by the competent authorities in the Member State in which it is obtained (EurOP 2003:18).

Learner means each individual independent of age, gender, social or professional status who is engaged in lifelong learning activities.

Learning is taken as any change in behaviour, information, knowledge, understanding, attitudes, skills or capabilities which can be retained and can not be ascribed to physical growth or to the development of inherited behaviour patterns (OECD⁴ 200:29).

Learning outcomes means knowledge, skills and competences acquired by the learner in the context of his/her formal, informal and non-formal learning activities. In the context of ECVET, learning outcomes refer to the typology of knowledge, skills and competences (Typology actually in elaboration).

Life-long learning means the education and vocational training opportunities offered to individuals throughout their lives to enable them continually to acquire, update and adapt their knowledge, skills and competences (EurOP 2003:18).

Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) is an agreement between the VET providers involved in the exchange and the learner. It is an official document which documents, explains, justifies the actions to be undertaken and describes the units (expressed in knowledge, skills and competences) to be individually acquired. It commits the VET providers to recognising the KSC individually acquired abroad. MoU involves the participation of further institutions (qualification authorities, chamber of commerce and handicrafts, etc.) which might determine equivalence and accumulation procedures according to the national regulations.

Module means the elementary (or smallest) part of a learning pathway, and is process-oriented. It corresponds to a specific way of organising resources, workload and learning time to reach certain objectives.

Notional workload means the average full time spent during a year attending and passing courses, apprenticeships, workplace learning, and project work, independent study, preparing for and taking examinations, etc. in the context of formal VET education. The VET partners agree on a notional workload value within the MoU.

Qualifications means

Social partners means, at national level, employers' and workers' organisations in

⁴ OECD (2004). Handbook of internationally comparative education statistics. Paris.

conformity with national laws and/or practices and, at Community level, employers' and workers' organisations taking part in the social dialogue at Community level.

Unit means the elementary (or smallest) part of a qualification or of a curriculum, and is outcome-oriented.

Vocational education and training authorities means all institutions engaged in the political and educational steering of their respective national VET systems. It includes qualification authorities, education ministries, national agencies and labour authorities at national, regional or local levels. It also integrates the local or regional partners such as chambers of commerce and chambers of handicraft, vocational or professional associations and advisory bodies (cf. EurOP 2003:18).

Vocational education and training providers means any type of public, semi-public or private establishment which, in accordance with national laws and/or practices design or undertake vocational training and education, further vocational training and education, refresher vocational training or education, or retraining, irrespective of the designation given to it in the Member States (cf. EurOP 2003:18).

(Vocational) Education and training programme is defined as a collection of educational activities which are organised to accomplish a pre-determined objective or the completion of a specified set of educational tasks (OECD 2004:80).