

Establishing ECVET in German Vocational Education and Training: Facilitating Mobility – Easing Transfer – Supporting Innovation

Recommendations of the German National Team of ECVET Experts, Bonn 2015

I. Introduction

What is the current situation?

The European Commission has been supporting the setting up of teams of ECVET experts in the Member States since 2012. The teams' mission is to raise VET stakeholders' awareness of the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) and to promote its visibility and application in initial and continuing training **practice**.

The 13 ECVET experts in Germany have conducted various counselling, information and support activities¹ with the aim of raising awareness of the ECVET instrument, explaining its function and facilitating its application.

Our experience has shown that:

- ECVET is proving a valuable toolkit,
- ECVET facilitates efforts to base VET practice on learning outcomes,
- ECVET increases the quality and efficiency of learning periods abroad,
- ECVET promotes transfer opportunities in vocational training,
- ECVET supports the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences,
- ECVET needs resources and support.

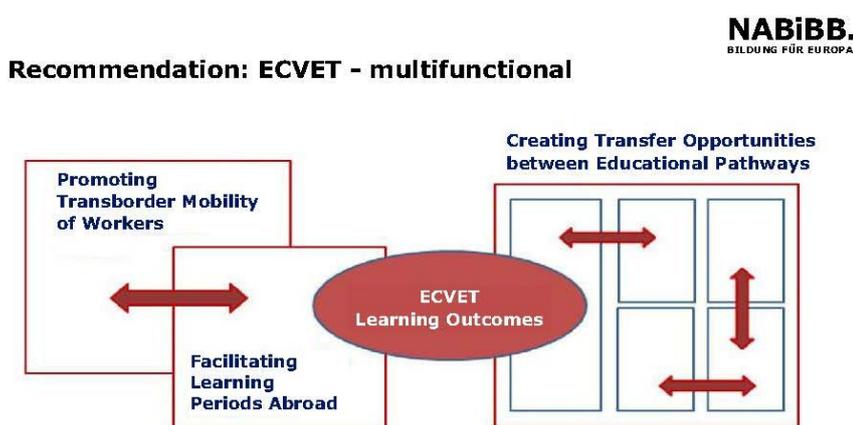
¹ The experts have been actively involved in numerous European and national ECVET testing and implementation projects as well as ECVET networks.

In the process, they passed on a lot of knowledge and know-how to practitioners, policy-makers and, to some extent, researchers. At the same time, the team gained a broad range of experience which may help encourage the broader application and consolidation of ECVET. This recommendations paper aims to **present and make available this experience** for further use.

What is the potential of ECVET?

In our view, ECVET can help solve some pressing problems weighing on the German VET and employment systems: ECVET can improve the **employability** of young people by promoting the visibility and transferability of increased personal and professional skills acquired through transnational mobility. At the same time, ECVET enhances the **competitiveness** of European companies which need staff with international experience and relevant soft skills in order to be successful on global markets.

At national level, ECVET also contributes to enhancing **transfer opportunities** within VET systems by supporting the recognition of learning outcomes of different educational pathways. For example, ECVET advises on how to shorten waiting periods for people in the transition system by improving links between prevocational and vocational training programmes. Furthermore, ECVET provides approaches to combatting the **skills shortage** by supporting the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. At the same time, ECVET promotes the **integration** of people with low-level formal qualifications into the labour market.



What are the objectives of the recommendations paper?

The ECVET experts' work and the feedback they received were to serve as a basis for making recommendations on how to encourage broader application of ECVET in Germany both in the context of transnational mobility and within the German VET system. The focus is on raising awareness of best practice and addressing problems of practical implementation. The recommendations refer to the application of ECVET in the context of transnational mobility **and** in the national context. They deal with operational, systemic and instrumental issues.

Who is the target group?

Our recommendations are aimed at medium-level **decision-makers in politics and industry** whom we consider to be important **drivers of innovation** in VET in the national context. We would therefore like to enter into or continue the dialogue with VET committees of the central associations of German industry (BDA), industrial associations, chambers (IHK; HWK) and their umbrella organizations and with worker representatives as well as with representatives of non-state education providers in transition management, school authorities of the *Länder*, European affairs offices of regional administrations, and the BMBF's ECVET Advisory Board.

II. Recommendations to support the broad application of ECVET in the German VET system

ECVET is currently understood as an instrument of transnational mobility in vocational education and training, and there is good reason to do so because this is the idea behind the system and its strengths. In addition, ECVET may also serve purposes beyond mobility. Owing to its approach which focuses on learning outcomes without referring to a specific system, ECVET may also lead to higher levels of transparency and comparability within VET systems. Our recommendations therefore target not only mobility support but also try to identify other fields in which ECVET could be of assistance.

Our recommendations:

- (1) Consider ECVET not as a closed system but as a set of principles and tools offered to solve issues of transparency and recognition of vocational skills and competences in different areas of education which supports cooperation between stakeholders;
- (2) Establish a focus on learning outcomes in VET practice by providing for relevant training of VET staff and networking of knowledge management in order to enhance the quality of learning periods abroad and accelerate the dissemination of results;
- (3) Include ECVET tools systematically in the planning of mobility measures. This requires individual counselling, material to support practical implementation, and the coordinated development of transparency tools at European level;
- (4) Describe educational programmes and qualifications in terms of learning outcomes and developing units of learning outcomes which enable the comparison of learning outcomes acquired elsewhere to facilitate vertical and horizontal permeability;
- (5) Establish ECVET as a tool for crediting and recognizing non-formally and informally acquired competences to strengthen the skills base and develop appropriate continuing training programmes. In this way, it would be possible for ECVET to promote sustainable cooperation between the education system and the labour market.

Key criteria for the successful implementation of ECVET include not only the willingness to tread new paths but also the provision of adequate resources.

(1) Using ECVET as a toolkit: Transfer to other areas of education

ECVET will be broadly applied and accepted in education if its potential is also exploited in areas beyond mobility support. ECVET should not be understood as a closed system whose components must be applied in their entirety but as a set of principles and tools offered to encourage not only transborder mobility in education but also transfer within the national VET system. We recommend considering the potential of ECVET particularly in cooperative relations between policy-makers, chambers, education providers and companies which focus on solving regional problems.

Stakeholders in initial training are already aware of ECVET while other areas of education like continuing training are not. The reason may be that transborder programmes in continuing training are less frequent. Relevant initiatives must therefore be increasingly launched in order to raise awareness of ECVET's potential for other areas of the education system such as continuing training. These efforts will be successful if ECVET is seen as a tool to solve specific problems in these areas. For example, the *Volkshochschulen* in Munich² and Vienna³ provide recommendations for applying ECVET and its learning outcomes approach: The tools can be used for quality assurance in recognition procedures for non-formal academic continuing training and as a means to enable outcome-based programme planning and education marketing.

(2) Basing VET practice on learning outcomes

Units of learning outcomes are the key instrument to ensuring the quality of ECVET mobility measures. They are the object of the learning agreement and the basis for the learning process in another learning context, for assessment, validation and documentation and, ultimately, for transfer to the educational pathway in the learner's country of origin. The appropriate development of units of learning outcomes is often something new and requires additional effort by the staff of VET providers and at vocational schools. We therefore recommend that educational practitioners involved in the organization of transnational learning periods should be supported in the formulation of learning outcomes and the development of units of learning outcomes. We propose the following measures in this context:

- ***Identifying reference points for ECVET in the German VET system.*** Teachers in various contexts are already working with elements of ECVET without realizing it. For example, there are general training regulations for in-company training and training curricula for instruction in part-time vocational school. They contain systematic descriptions of the occupational skills and competences to be acquired and can therefore be used as a basis for formulating learning outcomes. Another example are the "learning fields" on which vocational school instruction is based and which can support the development and definition of units of learning outcomes.

² Bayerischer Volkshochschulverband München, Übersicht über alle vom bvv geförderten F&E Projekte, 24.11.2014 Münchner Volkshochschule: Entwicklung und Erprobung von Umsetzungsstrategien europaweiter Transfersysteme an der Volkshochschule <http://www.fue-vhs.de/Projects/FuEProjekte.aspx>

³ Bisovsky, Gerhard/Brugger, Elisabeth (2008): Der nationale Qualifikationsrahmen: Seine Bedeutung für die Erwachsenenbildung in Neubauer, Barbara (2009): Auswahlbibliografie „Berufsbildung und Lebenslanges Lernen“. Einschlägige Veröffentlichungen aus Österreich im Jahr 2008. Wien, 2009

- **Workshops for the formulation of learning outcomes.** In recent years, the ECVET National Coordination Point (ECVET NCP) and the ECVET experts organized workshops for the formulation of learning outcomes and the development of units of learning outcomes for ECVET practitioners in schools and companies. These efforts, particularly the practical exercises in specific mobility contexts, can be assumed to have clearly contributed to enhancing the quality of mobility applications. The team of experts therefore recommends that such workshops should continue to be organized on a broader scale. A possible approach could be to integrate them into teacher in-service training as is already the case in some German *Länder*.
- **Networking and knowledge management:** Practice-based implementation of the learning outcomes approach will only be successful if educational experts at various levels cooperate and share solutions and results and involve all stakeholders in the process. Efforts to initiate ECVET platforms on which to post units of learning outcomes – and which can be searched using various criteria – could help prepare transnational learning periods. Numerous players could launch such platforms, including the VET committees of chambers and industrial associations, school managements and/or school authorities, representatives of education providers, etc. The number of users benefitting could be increased and the implementation of the learning outcomes approach accelerated by linking these platforms to other existing platforms or to the ECVET portal of the ECVET NCP (www.ecvet-info.de), which already includes an extensive collection of examples of units of learning outcomes.

(3) Coordinated application of ECVET tools to increase the quality and efficiency of learning periods abroad

It cannot be denied that mobility measures involving schools or companies require a major organizational effort; the demand expressed by the responsible educational staff for additional human resources can only be met to a very limited extent. This is why we need methods to minimize the organizational effort while at the same time enhancing the quality of mobility measures. We therefore recommend planning and organizing mobility measures with a view to ensuring the coordinated use of individual ECVET tools including the Europass Mobility as documentation instrument. This would help use synergy and avoid any duplication of work.

The greater preparatory effort required in this respect will pay off during project implementation because it increases the quality and efficiency of mobility periods.

- Information events for applicants for ERASMUS+ grants would provide a suitable framework to communicate the advantages of such coordinated use of ECVET tools to enhance the quality and efficiency of mobility periods. Learning outcomes are the key element in all activities preceding, accompanying and following the mobility measure – a common thread which links all project phases: Learning outcomes are agreed with stakeholders in the learning agreement; learning periods are organized on this basis; competence-based examination procedures establish whether the agreed learning outcomes have been achieved; these learning outcomes are then clearly documented in the Europass Mobility.
- The responsible educational staff should be supported in planning the coordinated use of ECVET elements. We therefore propose workshops combined with individual counselling for the preparation of mobility periods. An online ECVET Roadmap specifying the aids available for the individual phases of a mobility period based on ECVET criteria will support the implementation.
- There is a need for action at European level too. The ECVET and Europass documents which are currently available throughout Europe have not been designed for such coordinated use. Standardization of terminology would be useful: For example, the Europass mentions "skills and competences" while the ECVET Learning Agreement refers to "knowledge, skills and competence". Furthermore, it would serve the interests of end users if the ECVET tools were linked in such a way as to enable the automatic import of personal data, information about the learning period etc.

(4) Promoting transfer opportunities in vocational training through ECVET

One of the most important aims of the future is to improve transfer opportunities within the VET system. In this process, all options and ways of recognizing learning outcomes must be considered for both vertical and horizontal transfer. The following aspects require urgent attention from our point of view:

- Crediting of learning achievements from **transition system** measures to vocational training, which will improve links between prevocational and vocational training,
- Enhancing the attractiveness of the dual system of VET for **university dropouts** by allowing learning achievements from higher education courses to be counted towards vocational training. This could help ease the current skills shortage in the IT sector for example.
- Facilitating **entry to university** as part of lifelong learning for VET graduates following recognition of their acquired skills and competences.

These aims can only be achieved if the learning outcomes approach is consistently applied by implementing the following measures:

- Development and enhancement of units of learning outcomes including skills standards based on existing rules and regulations,
- Development/establishment of a skills standards scale to improve transparency for learners, stakeholders and outside observers,
- Use of existing instruments (e.g. the record book to document work processes and reflections).

ECVET is an excellent instrument to support these measures. ECVET offers direct assistance for the development of standards and units of learning outcomes which include sets of employable skills based on rules and regulations as well as work processes and business operations.

Regional and transregional recognition solutions can be developed for university dropouts as the chambers are responsible for certification of vocational training. Cooperation between the chambers, part-time vocational schools and companies can produce efficient solutions tailored to regional needs. Individual and cooperative initiatives of the school authorities of the *Länder*, professional associations and chamber organizations would be useful in pursuing the following objectives:

- Supplementing initial and continuing training for VET staff with qualification modules to develop teachers' and trainers' knowledge and skills for the efficient use of ECVET;
- Recognition and consideration of the commitment of teaching staff who currently shoulder an enormous workload on top of their regular duties.

(5) Supporting the recognition of non-formally and informally acquired competences through ECVET

It is an undeniable fact that lifelong learning plays a key role in meeting the future challenges of the labour market. It is therefore necessary to

- improve links between formal learning and non-formal and informal learning,
- use learning outcomes as a basis for establishing links between different forms of learning,
- enhance the recognition and use of non-formal and informal learning.

ECVET can help achieve these aims: The basic idea of ECVET is to describe learning outcomes in terms of competences. It is what an individual knows and can do that is most important, not how and where he or she has acquired such knowledge and skills. If taken seriously, this learning outcomes approach means that vocational skills and competences can be acquired on various formal, non-formal and informal pathways using different forms of learning in different places, even different countries. ECVET includes several elements which can contribute to the transparency and validation of non-formally and informally acquired skills and competences:

- The ECVET terminology based on learning outcomes is suitable for clearly describing non-formal and informal learning;
- Existing units of learning outcomes can serve as reference when determining non-formal and informal learning in terms of sets of employable skills (e.g. related to professional or modular qualifications);
- Methods used to record and validate ECVET units of learning outcomes might also be used to validate non-formal and informal learning.

Creating a common basis and terminology is not only a prerequisite but also a challenge and chance for all stakeholders in non-formal and informal learning processes. This means that syllabuses and learning programmes must be described in terms of learning outcomes and that validation structures must be coordinated.

Promising initiatives are already underway in some sectors. For example, efforts are being made in the health and care sector to ensure recognition of non-formal elderly care training

and crediting it to formal training.⁴ Quality assurance in the recruitment of skilled labour abroad should involve a comparison of required employable skills and non-formally and informally acquired competences in order to provide any necessary additional qualifications.

ECVET and its tools can provide efficient assistance in the search for regional models to meet skills requirements or integrate people with low-level formal qualifications into the labour market. ECVET provides industrial associations and their companies with an established set of tools for cooperation with chambers and education providers and contributes effectively to the development of quality-assured solutions.

III. Conclusions

The activities of the ECVET National Coordination Point and of the National Team of ECVET Experts since 2012 – whose mission is to provide advice, information and support – have contributed to raising awareness of ECVET among German VET experts and increasing the practical use of ECVET elements in the mobility context⁵. However, ECVET can only develop its full potential as a driver and supporter of innovation in the German VET system and contribute to the solution of pressing problems of VET and employment policy if decision-makers at **all** levels play an active part.

It would be useful to conduct a debate about the recommended measures and take steps towards implementation. This includes in particular continuing training for VET staff who are responsible for organizing transborder learning periods as well as the networking of VET stakeholders and information and knowledge management using databases and other solutions.

This brings us to the vital issue of **resources**: Databases must be systematically established and continuously updated; the organization of ECVET mobility periods involves efforts which cannot be permanently shouldered by VET staff on top of their regular duties; qualified trainers are needed to provide continuing ECVET training. – **We therefore combine these recommendations with a plea to decision-makers in schools, supervisory boards, authorities etc. to engage in the search for solutions which ensure that the required time and human resources are adequately considered in planning.**

⁴ Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Unterricht und Kultus, Kompetenzfeststellungsverfahren Altenpflege, KfvA 2013.

⁵ While in 2013 only 2.5% of applicants for mobility projects in VET opted for the ECVET national priority, the number of applicants indicating that they used ECVET elements in mobility had increased to 13.5% in 2014.

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