Reflections on the future of Erasmus+ in relation to VET

With the upcoming successor to the Erasmus+ programme, and the impending results of the Erasmus+ midterm review in mind, a group of 26 National Agency VET representatives gathered in Brussels in November 2017. The aim of the meeting was to discuss the lessons learned from Erasmus+ which could benefit and inform the development of future VET initiatives from the European Commission.

Continuity and stability, while introducing some necessary adjustments to the new programme were agreed to be of paramount importance. In light of this, two main issues were discussed:
- What the future programme should aim to achieve, both qualitatively and quantitatively
- Technical implementation of VET mobilities and partnerships

The following is a summary of the key points considered central to ensuring a smooth transition to the new programme. The National Agencies value this opportunity to contribute to the discussion.

Quality and quantity aims of the future programme

Five major themes were discussed:

1.   Relation of VET to other fields
VET should include **both initial and continuous vocational education and training**, and therefore be seen clearly in **the lifelong learning context.**

Clarification is required regarding **a potential overlap between VET, and Adult Education & Higher Education**. This should be done while maintaining simplicity, flexibility and varying Member States views. In mobility, there is currently a clear distinction between the actions and mobility types carried out in VET on one side, and SE and AE on the other. However, a **greater similarity of mobility actions between the sectors** could further clarify and simplify the programme for end users.

Introducing **international mobilities for VET**, similar to Higher Education, is crucial in in taking into account the effects of globalisation on economies and working life. However, a major simplification process of the international mobility action for both sectors would be needed.

The current programme has been weak in delivering on **cross-sectoral activities.** Further work should be done in improving the already existing cross-sectoral aspect of strategic partnerships, with a better definition of the concept and possibly also a separate budget. It should also be considered if it is possible to introduce cross-sectoral staff mobilities for topics such as e.g. language learning, guidance or special needs education as the problems are also often cross-sectoral in nature – the need is clear.

2.   Feasibility of future high quantitative targets
Quantitative **targets are important, and should be challenging, but also realistic.** The current 6% mobility target is challenging for most countries. Another challenge is increasing the number of ErasmusPro i.e. mobilities with a duration of over 3 months.

Key concerns are:
- The focus should never be quantity over quality – the quantity is already difficult to reach considering the introduction and support of ErasmusPro, that means longer and more costly, so also fewer mobilities
- For some countries the VET systems do not currently facilitate long term mobility at all e.g. in 1 or 2 year VET programmes
- Providing more relevant information to potential applicants, motivating stakeholders and attracting newcomers to the programme.
- The risk of grants to be calculated following the HE -model (lower grants for more students) despite the fact that VET-students have a more varied socio-economic background and higher risks of exclusion.

Reaching any targets will be impossible if there is a lack of **serious investment in VET**, or reduction of grants for participants, or not enough support for VET networks. Also a key **potential solution** regarding targets, would be to **introduce de-centralised mobility action national priorities** on e.g. duration but also inclusion, so as to be able, within the shared EU-objectives, to set nationally appropriate development targets that at the same time are sufficiently challenging and realistic.

3. Relation of VET to key competences and language competences
Key competences and language competences are considered crucial in VET, both as **pre-requisite and as an outcome of both mobility and other cooperation actions**.

Language competences: The **Online Linguistic Support OLS** has not been used by participants to its' full extent. Participants in VET generally need greater teacher support, and having learning styles that are unsuited to online learning. Potential **solutions** to this are: altering the platform; opening the opportunity to use the platform to VET staff mobility participants and teachers and/or possibly even re-introducing a language preparation grant.

Key competences should be connected to professional competences: Future skills seem to **focus as much on key competences as on professional skills**. This needs clear efforts both prior to mobility, during the mobility and post-mobility. We need greater focus on the mobility preparation as well as modernisation of key competences' definition within EU in general and the programme.

4. Recognition of VET mobilities
The future programme must **further reinforce validation of learning outcomes and related tools (e.g. ECVET and Europass)**, as well as other tools, such as the Europass Mobility Document – which is widely used already. This will make validation of learning outcomes from a mobility period more qualitative and reliable. Further support must be provided for newcomers to learn to define learning outcomes appropriately and also develop good practices for assessment and validation. This can only be achieved by working with a common framework allowing to transfer and recognition of competences at EU level.

5. Support of innovation for and through VET projects
Innovation is essential in an ever-changing labour market, which in turns is what drives development in the field of VET. **Innovation needs to be supported and fostered in both mobility and partnerships.** Partnership projects (both innovation and exchange of practices projects) have a key role in developing **continuous institutional cooperation in VET**, leading to innovation. But there is currently a **mismatch between the associated innovation expectations and impact on the sector and the actual reach of the**

projects, despite the level of funding the would be provided. The NAs view is that **a greater number of smaller projects produce a greater number of networks and innovations**, and the larger projects will not despite investments produce the expected reach**.** Most sustainable innovations take place in the arena of long term cooperation and networks on local, regional or sectoral level.

Potential solutions to challenges include:
- A flexible **definition of innovation** as the field also constantly changes and based on that incorporate innovation into the new programme format: how to push innovation, how to properly measure it and how to formalise it in applications.
- **Introduce actions of 'virtual cooperation'** by providing virtual opportunities for developing networks building on existing structures like eTwinning and Epale; allowing mobilities and partnerships in VET to integrate better digital, virtual and augmented cooperation.
- Target **heads, trainers, teachers and other staff** who could play a key role in developing and implementing innovative practices.

Matters related to innovation in VET, especially strategic parternships, should remain de-centralised, as the topics are highly contextualised and require support by National Agencies to be properly developed.

The technical implementation of a future Erasmus+ in VET

In terms of technical implementation, the NAs present at the meeting agreed on approaching the issue from the perspective of mobilities and that of strategic partnerships.

VET mobility
- **Continuity** but with some adjustments and some new additions, required by changing times.
- **Inclusion both for different kinds of organisations and learners of all kinds** is central both in the present and in the future programme: projects and also NAs should be required to introduce clear inclusion strategies and even EU-level benchmarks could be considered.
- A **"one size fits all" approach does not work, especially for smaller players.** This is obvious in terms of project sizes, use of PICs and tools, definitions. The next programme should adapt a proportional approach in all project implementation phases. A solutions could be simplified applications for projects under 25.000 €, which would also make the programme more attractive for SMEs, newcomers and smaller VET institutions.
- **Larger mobility projects should be able to be implemented in a similar manner to Higher Education, particularly for VET Charter holders** i.e. granting the mobility funding based on target numbers rather than detailed implementation plans (like in present applications). Encouraging organisations towards the Charter or simplifying access to it, could also be a solution to the current administrative complications.
- There is a high support for **extra points for national priorities** in order to properly implement and reach European targets in a national context. This would benefit organisations with experience submitting applications and also for newcomers. Priorities need to be known in advanced and fairly stable over several years so that they may be taken into account when organising e.g. TCA activities.
- **International VET mobilities** are key for the future, as mentioned above. If introduced, administrative procedures should be lighter than is currently the case in Higher Education, and introduction systematic so to maintain the stability of the programme and respect national

environments. Possible approaches are: allowing NAs to opt in or out; starting off with staff mobilities, both incoming and outgoing; limiting learner mobility to outgoing only initially. Only part of the VET budget should be directed towards this.

- The topic of **re-introducing the People in the Labour Market (PLM)** action was raised, but no agreement was reached. The issue is political rather than technical, as it depends on where the emphasis of the programme falls: on employability and responding to immediate labour market needs or on long term improvements to the vocational education and training systems. Potential solutions without a re-introduction of PLM's could include: extending the eligibility period for VET graduates considerably, clarifying VET graduates must come from IVET or CVET only and /or introducing national priorities in this area.
- **PICs** should become easier to access and to obtain. The platform should also be adapted and adjusted to meet the needs of small to medium sized VET organisations.
- Greater **flexibility of the project budgets** is required. The current rules for beneficiaries on budget transfer are complex and hamper mobility. They should be done with National Agency approval, rather than a formal amendment.
- Make **OLS accessible to all participants** including learners, accompanying persons and staff mobility. Licences should be issued to language teachers or trainers to aid participants in their preparation as the majority of VET learners are not autonomous learners. This is evidenced in the time spent on the platform by participants and number of language courses accessed. Features of the tool could be extended to enable a virtual teacher learner relation and communication between the teacher and his or her students. If the tool does not rise to the challenge, funding for language preparation should be considered. NAs or experts should decide on funding for language preparation during assessment.
- **Supporting establishment of internationalisation and mobility strategies** and similar quality of mobility issues can take place through establishing a European Resource Centre (SALTO) also for the VET sector
- IT tools: Currently, an organisation goes through as many as four tools, if it already has a PIC, to get their project submitted and implemented. The NA representatives deal with as many as seven or eight. To improve programme attractiveness and functionality, **the complexity of the tools needs to be reduced and there should integration of existing tools**, rather than introduction of any new tools.

VET partnerships

- The discussion centred around **continuing the programme, while improving and revising essential aspects**.
- One of the adjustments needed is a clearer **distinction between Strategic Partnerships and Sector Skills Alliances**, which, at the moment, still poses issues for many.
- Currently there are two different types of strategic partnerships – **one supporting innovation and one supporting exchange.** If both types are kept, these should be viewed as different actions with different application forms. As budgets for projects fostering innovation are often larger, many organisations target this type of project without substantiating their claims. The National Agencies could be given the opportunity to focus on exchange projects only, if that is most applicable at a national level.
- The **cross-sectoral cooperation** needs one unambiguous definition – e.g. that it impacts at least two fields. The present application form is not suitable for these types of projects. The form needs to be adapted and reviewed so that the sectors which the projects impact, are easily identified and their impact evident.

- **The time between the publication of the call and priorities, and the deadline is too short** for many applicants to develop qualitative applications. This is also due to priorities not being stable. A set of priorities for the whole programme and additional ones that can change yearly makes it difficult for potential applicants to develop their projects appropriately.
- The **assessment criteria for strategic partnerships need to be reviewed**. There needs to be an increase in the percentage allotted to "relevance" or the possibility for an expert to mark projects deemed "particularly relevant" by allocating extra points to this award criteria.
- **Learning Teaching Training Activities should become more flexible** in order to provide applicants with the possibility of deciding the appropriate duration of the activities, and also of mixing learners and staff, even from different fields and that they be allowed to also have invited staff outside of the partner organisations, which at the moment is only available for IPs in HE.
- When considering the budget structure and funding allocated, **dissemination activities require a larger and more flexible budget** to make the activities relevant and to have greater impact for all stakeholders involved.