



Reflections on the European credit transfer system for vocational education and training

EUNEC is the European Network of Education Councils. Its members advise the governments of their countries on education and training. EUNEC aims to discuss the findings and recommendations of all European projects in education and training, to determine standpoints and to formulate statements on these issues. EUNEC wants to disseminate these statements pro-actively towards stakeholders in the European Commission, relevant DGs and other actors at European level, and to promote action by EUNEC's members and participants at national level. EUNEC encourages the councils to put mobility and other European education issues high on the national agenda. They should recommend and support a European policy in education and training among all relevant stakeholders: ministry of education (and employment), sectoral and branch organisations, providers and other actors.

On 5 and 6 February 2007 EUNEC organised a seminar on the consultation by the European Commission on the European credit transfer system for vocational education and training (ECVET). At the end of the seminar the General Assembly of EUNEC approved the following observations.

1 The purpose of these reflections

These reflections are meant for two purposes:

- Reflections on the part of EUNEC to contribute to the public consultation;
- To prepare the debates in the member councils. Some education councils are invited to advise their national ministers on the necessity of a national credit transfer system and on the characteristics of such a system. We as education councils are in privileged positions to help our governments to develop such policies.

2 The added value of an ECVET-system (question 1 and 2)

According to Commission, one of the main benefits of the ECVET system is to improve international mobility in education and training. EUNEC is aware of the fact that only a very small number of learners in VET are involved in international mobility. But because this kind of mobility is at the heart of the European integration (labour market and European citizenship), this should remain a key objective. International mobility is also an element of the personal development of European citizens.

But EUNEC wants to put the focus on the added value of ECVET as a communication instrument within the national systems, even though it has some issues with subsidiarity:

- to bridge the gap between education and training systems operating in segregated settings. Most learners have some fragmented competences acquired in different systems but they are unable to transfer them from the education system to the training system and vice versa.
- to link sectors (e.g. vocational school education, workplace-based vocational education and others) within the educational system. ECVET offers an opportunity to build flexible learning paths, more appropriate to the real starting point of the learner.

ECVET could also be a unique instrument to reach another objective not mentioned in the consultation paper of the Commission that is adding educational perspective to the central aims of the ECVET-system.

Because the ECVET system is appropriate to describe the component elements of a qualification, ECVET could certainly benefit learners who risk leaving the system unqualified. ECVET offers a starting point to define the level of competence of a learner who may not reach all the competences needed to acquire a qualification. From an educational perspective, ECVET is a concretisation of the idea of accumulation of competences, rather than assessing the gaps in the competences (see the statements of EUNEC on EQF).

3 The technical specifications

3.1 The role of credit points

EUNEC considers that learners should be aware of the importance of learning outcomes of a specific unit in relation to a certain qualification delivered by a competent authority. Credit points are one of the possible tools to give an indication of the relative weight of a unit towards a the qualification, but not necessarily an integrated part of the ECVET-system. ECVET should be seen as a two-pillar system with credit points as an underlying tool. The competences certainly should be part of a validation process of prior learning or accreditation of prior learning. The same unit can be evaluated totally differently in different learning contexts.

In the context of the credit points' weight, we should also take into account that the European credit transfer system (ECTS) in higher education is a well-known and accepted system. In the long run, both systems can complement each other. Both systems use the perspective of accumulation of competences and are learner-centred. The perspective of learning outcomes and workload can be integrated. ECVET should be developed as a first step to this global system

Each competent authority should have the autonomy to decide on the relative weight of a unit.

3.2 What is a unit in relationship to a small qualification/sub qualification?

It is not always clear what the minimum size of a unit and the number of units in a qualification should be? For EUNEC the relevance on the labour market is the only test for the relevance of a qualification or a sub qualification.

4 Implementation strategies

4.1 Comprehensiveness in European instruments

EUNEC is aware of the existence of a whole range of instruments developed by the European Union to underpin mobility and modernisation of VET-systems. These instruments are developed within the Copenhagen process and the revised Lisbon process. Within the reviewed goals of both processes, new instruments can be developed. But the links between these instruments are never made explicit.

We refer, amongst others, to

- EQF and common reference levels;
- The common principles for mutual trust and quality assurance.
- The common principles the recognition of prior learning and informal and non-formal learning;
- The key competences;
- Europass;
- The principles for counselling and guidance...

EUNEC would like the Commission to clarify the links between the different policy measures mentioned herein.

4.2 ECVET as part of a wider qualifications and curriculum policy

National states need to clarify the relationship between the qualification structure and the credit system, on the one hand and the curriculum and certification policy on the other hand. This clarification is also needed to encourage actors in education systems to take a proactive stance in the discussions on EQF, ECVET, national qualifications structures and credit systems.

4.3 The complexity of the system calls for research and experiments

The elaboration of a wider system for credit transfer is a very complex issue. We will need to embrace the diversity within both education and training systems. We need time and opportunities to learn more about the nature of ECVET in the complexity of real school life and reality of the training environment. Therefore, we should support experimenting within the system and the development of expertise. Therefore, piloting and experimenting at national, regional, sectoral and cross-border levels is a necessity.

It would not be realistic to hope to implement the whole system within a short period of time.

4.4 Mutual trust

Every system within the member states has its own system for quality assurance with different criteria and procedures. The memoranda of understanding therefore cannot function without a common approach to quality. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary to underline the importance of the common quality assurance framework and to consider enforcing this European instrument. Therefore, it is necessary to create meeting places to exchange practices and foster common understanding.

4.5 The lack of drivers for the establishment of an ECVET-system

EUNEC states that the learners are vital stakeholders who benefit the most of the establishment of an ECVET-system. The interests of other parties are more dispersed: education and training providers want to preserve their market share; the trust of employers in the system has to be proven. Therefore, EUNEC recommends discussion, in the member states and the education councils, on how to strengthen the rights and the entitlements of learners to the validation of acquired learning outcomes. The more providers of education and training recognise these acquired units, the more their programme will have a value for learners. Without a stakeholder to act as a champion the renewal process is likely to sinking lethargy.

4.6 Fragmentarisation of a learning/training path

A learner can accumulate units to obtain a full qualification. For EUNEC a set of units is not necessarily a qualification. But to obtain a qualification the learner should be able to integrate knowledge, skills and competences of the units to act efficiently in a certain context.

4.7 Bureaucratisation and the rights of the individual

EUNEC fears that ECVET will create a burdensome administrative charge for the organising providers of the education and training system. For the moment EUNEC doesn't see any managing system to organise and control this burden.

Institutions will have to manage the use of the different certificates and to evaluate their value.

For the individual the whole new system of obtaining a qualification should be communicated and explained. Individuals will need to understand the extent of the change and to manage their "learning portfolio". Here there should be a more explicit link with the system of counselling and guidance.

EUNEC recommends valorising existing agencies and institutions, already integrated in the national systems, as competent bodies. A multiplication of new "competent bodies" is not desirable.