

Presidency Conference “Realizing the European Learning Area”

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SUMMARY

OF RESPONSES RECEIVED TO THE COMMISSION’S CONSULTATION ON ECVET DURING THE PERIOD COVERING NOVEMBER 2006 TO APRIL 2007

This summary of the responses to the ECVET consultation process is based on:

- A preliminary report prepared for the Commission by the consultancy company GHK in association with the Danish Technology Institute
- An analysis by experts appointed by the Commission with the collaboration of CEDEFOP

THE ECVET PROPOSAL

The development of ECVET takes place within the framework of the "Copenhagen Process" aimed at fostering European cooperation in vocational education and training. Since they agreed the Copenhagen declaration in 2002, European countries and social partners work together to address a number of common priorities:

- Strengthening the European dimension in vocational education and training (VET)
- Increasing transparency and supporting information and guidance
- Development of competences and qualification recognition
- Promoting quality assurance

They have designed a number of tools to address the above priorities, the importance of which was confirmed in the Helsinki Communiqué in December 2006. ECVET, together with the European Qualifications Framework, Europass and the European Network of Quality Assurance for VET provide the toolkit for VET.

THE ECVET KEY PRINCIPLES

ECVET is based on four key principles¹:

1. It is an instrument to describe qualifications in terms of transferable and accumulable units of learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competence) to which credit points

¹ European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training proposal, page 3 and following

are attached; ECVET comprises an associated transfer process based on assessment, validation and recognition of learning outcomes.

2. The instrument will facilitate the transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes acquired by people moving from one learning context to another, from one qualification system to another.
3. ECEVT will be based on the voluntary participation of the Member States and of the stakeholders in their respective qualifications systems and vocational education and training systems
4. The instrument will foster synergy between the training providers through its support for cooperation between partner organisations, with a view to the transfer and accumulation of individual learning credits.

THE ECVET CONSULTATION

Throughout 2006, DG Education and Culture coordinated the process of drafting the ECVET proposal together with the consultation questions. The proposal was designed by an international group of experts. This technical group brought together representatives of the European Commission, several national ministries, qualification agencies, vocational education and training agencies and European social partners². The proposal for ECVET together with the consultation questions was finalised in October 2006.

The document presents briefly the reasons for the development of ECVET, its objectives and mechanisms. The consultation questions concern the four chapters of the ECVET proposal: objectives; technical specifications; implementation and mobility. They were formulated in a way to encourage respondents to put forward concrete suggestions.

The consultation was launched in November 2006 and respondents were invited to submit their contributions before the end of March 2007. The Commission sent out a number of invitations to respond to the consultation, in particular to the 32 countries participating in the Education and Training 2010 work programme, the European social partner organisations, the European education and training NGOs, European networks, etc. The participating countries were invited to organise wide national consultations and to submit a consolidated position. The additional countries which take part in the Bologna process and the Bologna follow-up group were also informed. In addition, the consultation document was published on DG EAC website with an invitation to respond.

The ECVET proposal has raised wide interest. The Commission has been invited to present ECVET at numerous events in the participating countries.

The Commission has received approx. 90 responses from 32 European countries (the responses will be accessible on the Commission website). The largest group of responses comes from national and regional authorities (36% of responses), followed by the professional

² The full list of members of the working group can be found on pages 19-20 of the Commission staff working document: http://ec.europa.eu/education/ecvt/work_en.pdf

organisation, sectors and social partners (25%), education and training associations, networks and NGOs (21%) and universities sectors (16%)³.

Most responses are the result of extensive national and/or Europe-wide consultation processes. The number of stakeholders actually involved in the consultation process is therefore significantly higher than the approx. 90 detailed above.

The responses received are not of equal quality. Some responses are extremely short and address only some aspects of the proposal. The results which are presented here take into account all the responses received, but it should be noted that out of the 90 responses received, 15 were marked as very short and very partial. The majority of these (10) were responses from the category “University sector”..

Some responses were a repetition of others. Indeed, it has been noted on several occasions, that some responses were nearly identical, not only with regard to content but also their wording.

Moreover, several organisations which were consulted at national level, also submitted a response directly to the Commission and hence creating a certain overrepresentation. For these reasons, the following results mainly focus on qualitative aspects of the contributions to the consultation.

In addition to the consultation process, ECVET was subject of two studies, ECVET Connexion and ECVET Reflector. The first was a feasibility study of a European credit accumulation and recognition system in VET. The second analysed the relationship between the proposed ECVET and the national systems in order to identify both the obstacles as well as favourable conditions to be encountered by ECVET in the implementation stage. Results of these two studies were presented in November 2006 during a seminar in Berlin. To complete the ECVET development process, several projects were launched in the framework of the Leonardo da Vinci programme in 2006.

Based on all these inputs, and the outcome of the discussions at the conference in Munich, the consultation document will be updated in view of adopting a recommendation on ECVET.

AREA OF BROAD CONSENSUS

The majority of responses acknowledged the importance and relevance of the objectives of ECVET and agreed with the need to strengthen mutual trust and cooperation. The contributors welcome an initiative which tries to formulate a common European approach to transfer and recognition of VET qualifications/ certification and their components. ECVET is welcomed by a large majority of countries and equally by an important number of other consulted parties. They support the ECVET objectives, accept all or the greater part of ECVET fundamental components, they see a strong added value in ECVET and propose positive approaches to possible ECVET implementation.

³ Most countries submitted only one official country response, few, particularly UK through the elevated response rate of higher education institutions, are overrepresented.

Contributions welcomed the intention of ECVET to go beyond formal education and training, and to involve the validation of learning outcomes acquired in non-formal and informal contexts.

The responses consider ECVET to be an innovative and useful initiative for individuals. ECVET should make a real contribution to improving individuals' mobility and the validation and recognition of their learning outcomes. ECVET is also seen as a motor for cooperation between VET actors, not only at European but also at national level. In fact, the responses to the consultation show that there is broad agreement on the following specific points:

- ECVET is necessary and pertinent
- Adoption and implementation of ECVET must be on a voluntary basis
- ECVET must be based on learning outcomes and on units of learning outcomes
- ECVET must be applicable to the outcomes of formal, non-formal and informal learning
- ECVET must be exploitable by all types of learners, in a lifelong learning perspective
- The ECVET transfer process must be supported by the evaluation, validation and recognition of learning outcomes
- The allocation of credit points to units and qualifications could provide additional information on the learning outcomes, to facilitate their transfer
- Quality assurance is a key factor in building the mutual trust that is indispensable to the successful implementation of ECVET
- The partnership agreement (MoU) is an instrument essential to the development of ECVET
- ECVET must be aligned with the other European tools, in particular Europass.

This feedback may be seen as offering a strong mandate for the further development and implementation of ECVET.

THE NEED FOR CLARIFICATION AND FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

The broad support to ECVET outlined above has been made conditional on further development and refinement. Many respondents find the proposal complex and abstract and underline the need for clarification, technical improvement and testing.

Clarification

Several demands have been formulated to form a clearer definition of ECVET. The scope of ECVET, in terms of education levels and types of education (formal, non-formal, informal) should be made more explicit in the proposal.

There is some concern as to the clarity of concepts underlying the ECVET proposal. This applies in particular to the definitions of concepts like units, validation and transfer. Many of the respondents underline that conceptual agreement is a prerequisite for practical co-operation. The main ECVET approaches (ECVET transfer process, units of learning outcomes, credit points, memorandum of understanding) are accepted but need to be developed and illustrated by concrete examples.

A clearer description of the tools required to achieve the objectives of ECVET, namely the description of qualifications in units and credit points, validation of learning outcomes, mutual trust and cooperation and the links with EQF is needed.

Technical improvement

While ECVET objectives were generally accepted by the respondents, there is less consensus on the technical specifications for ECVET. The range of positions on the concrete elements of ECVET: units based on learning outcomes, credit points, competent bodies and memoranda of understanding (MoU) is very wide.

Three common positions emerge:

- The technical specifications, as described in the proposal, are accepted but not detailed enough in view of implementation.
- The technical specifications will need to be concretely tested and evaluated in view of (re)designing the final modalities of ECVET.
- The technical specifications have to be precise, in terms of terminology, but at the same time flexible to allow adaptation to the existing national systems.

The necessary additional technical specifications could be included in tools, guidelines, handbooks ... for the stakeholders.

Testing

Given the important variety of VET systems in Europe a consensus appears among the respondents that the implementation of ECVET has to be progressive. Several responses from sectors and labour market organisations underline the need for a bottom-up process.

An important number of responses suggest the following scheme:

- A first phase of pilot projects, to test and to further develop ECVET modalities
- Evaluation of pilot projects and fine-tuning of the ECVET proposal, including the development of experience based technical specifications and of methodologies for implementation.

KEY AREAS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

In addition to the general need for clarification, technical improvement and testing, responses focus on certain key-issues:

- Units of learning outcomes
- Credit points
- ECVET and Europass
- ECVET and ECTS

Units of learning outcomes

The principle of validation of learning outcomes is widely supported. All country responses are in favour of a learning outcomes based approach. The education and training community

sees the use of a learning outcomes approach as a way to overcome the differentiation between academic and vocational pathways.

Even though accepted, the learning outcomes based approach needs further development. The frequently asked questions are:

- How to formulate learning outcomes and units of learning outcomes?
- How to assess learning outcomes, especially those of non-formal and informal learning?

The principle of units is accepted; two-thirds of responses support the description of qualifications in units. However, additional information should be provided, e.g.:

- The relation between qualifications and their components – units –.
- Size and updating of the units

Credit points

Close to two thirds of contributors are in favour of some form of credit points system, however no consensus appears as to what shall be the modalities of their allocation to units and as to the 120 credit points convention. Most responses ask for modalities coherent with the learning outcomes approach; certain responses formulate that input criteria, such as the suggested duration of “one year of full time formal VET” are seen as incompatible with an approach based on learning outcomes.

Countries’ positions to credit points’ allocation differ significantly:

- Professional and sectoral organisations reject the use of credit points, and that of ‘general’ or notional’ credit, in favour of the concept of ‘specific’ credit for sets of learning outcomes described in terms of occupational competences.
- Labour market organisations question the need for credit points or the centrality of credit points in the ECVET model. On the other hand if credit points are to be used the value of 60 should be taken as a reference (instead of 120).
- Responses from education and training community (with the exception of HE responses) do not see credit points as an essential component of ECVET.
- Responses from universities are in favour of a credit point system but this should be based on ECTS. Nevertheless several responses from this group (5 out of 13) are in favour of using 120 credit points as a reference.

ECVET and Europass

Most responses consider that ECVET and Europass are compatible. The following suggestions were made:

- Use Europass as a support for recording components of ECVET, such as units of learning outcomes, credit points or existing transfer processes.
- Europass is focused on results and ECVET on process hence they are compatible
- Europass mobility could be used to record learning outcomes and credit points
- Europass certificate supplement could be used to give information on the units (and credit points) as components of a qualification
- The learning agreements could be part of Europass.

ECVET and ECTS

Most of the actors look for coherence between ECVET and ECTS. Some responses from higher education organisations call for extension of ECTS to VET. However no country contribution calls for an extension of ECTS to VET. Almost all replies show a common concern for bringing down barriers between VET and higher education.

Two main types of reactions can be described:

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- ECVET and ECTS should be coherent to allow reciprocal recognition and transfer of qualifications or their components.
- In the short term, the two instruments should be developed separately, but in the longer term, the goal should be to develop one integrated credit system.

OTHER ISSUES

In addition to the above issues, which were highlighted in most responses, the following issues attracted less attention:

- The use of Memoranda of Understanding for purposes of student exchanges is generally accepted but it should not put too much administrative burden on institutions.
- There is a demand for common formats and examples for all the documentation, MoU, learning agreements, etc. In addition responses from the education and training community suggest that ECVET should also be accompanied by counselling and guidance activities.
- When it comes to the definition of competent bodies and more generally the role of all actors involved, the proposal does not seem to satisfy the majority of respondents. Most responses require further clarifications of who are the competent bodies and what their competencies are. Some contributions outline concrete suggestions, one of them suggests a distinction between the levels of competence (evaluation, validation, recognition etc.). Each competence could be a responsibility of a different institution, depending on the existing national structure. The concept of “competent institution” is thus emerging.

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