Opinion of the Committee of the Regions on the 'European Quality Assurance Framework for Vocational Education and Training' and the 'European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training'

(2008/C 325/07)

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

— agrees that there is a broad consensus in the EU on the need to modernise and improve vocational education and training in Europe. Quality assurance in vocational education and training is a key part of this aim

— considers that the difficulties in recognising learning outcomes from different Member States, however, have put a brake on mobility in the EU and hinder genuine lifelong learning experiences

— highlights that in many Member States the regional and local level is responsible for vocational education and training

— welcomes the Commission's two recommendations, as they aim to propose solutions to the social and economic challenges of a globalising, knowledge-based world economy and they also aim to increase mobility within the European Union and encourage skills exchange. Consequently the CoR believes that it is necessary to develop areas which are important for citizens and activities which local and regional authorities are responsible for

— considers that the main users of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework will be national/regional and local authorities in charge of quality assurance and improvement in education and training

— asks that local and regional competent authorities be involved in the exercise of linking up national/regional qualifications frameworks to ECVET

— highlights that the actual implementation and take-up of the system will be the real measure of its success. Local and regional authorities will be useful partners to promote this through their networks and to make ECVET credible and usable.

Rapporteur: Kent JOHANSSON (SV/ALDE), Member of the Regional Executive Board, Västra Götaland Region

Reference documents

Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Framework for Vocational Education and Training

COM(2008) 179 final, 2008/0069 (COD)

Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)

COM(2008) 180 final, 2008/0070 (COD)

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

1. notes that vocational education and training are critical factors for achieving the Lisbon strategy's objectives of raising economic growth, competitiveness and social inclusion. Education and training, skills and lifelong learning form part of the CoR's key policy priorities;

2. considers that the difficulties in recognising learning outcomes from different Member States, however, have put a brake on mobility in the EU and hinder genuine lifelong learning experiences;

3. agrees that there is a broad consensus in the EU on the need to modernise and improve vocational education and training in Europe. Quality assurance in vocational education and training is a key part of this aim;

4. highlights the fact that in many Member States the regional and local level is responsible for vocational education and training. Vocational training is financed from a variety of sources, although in most Member States it is financed by the government both at national and regional level, with a high rate of incidence of regional and local funding;

5. sets out its views on two communications relating to European cooperation in the field of vocational training. It endorses both communications and welcomes the proposals contained in them. In the case of the first one, on the *European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training*, the consultation process is well advanced while in the case of the other one, on the *European Quality Assurance Reference Framework*, the process is at an earlier stage. For this reason further consultations will be important and would be welcomed;

6. welcomes the Commission's two recommendations, as they aim to propose solutions to the social and economic challenges of a globalising, knowledge-based world economy we live in. They also aim to increase mobility within the European Union and encourage skills exchange, and consequently the CoR believes that it is necessary to develop areas which are important for citizens and activities which local and regional authorities are responsible for;

7. notes that the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) is a tool for describing qualifications in terms of units of learning outcomes with associated points, with a view to transferring and accumulating learning outcomes. It will aim to provide a methodological framework which is meant to facilitate transfer of credit for learning outcomes from one qualifications system to another, or from one learning pathway to another;

8. considers that the main users of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQAF), on the other hand, will be national/regional and local authorities in charge of quality assurance and improvement in education and training. As opposed to ECVET, the Framework aims at increasing transparency and consistency of policy developments in vocational education and training;

9. agrees with the Commission that participation in the implementation of ECVET and EQAF must be voluntary but stresses that there is a need to create frameworks and guidelines for administering the scheme. User groups (ECVET users group and ENQAVET) must also have representatives with a direct mandate from local and regional level. Similarly, the private sector and the social partners should also be represented;

10. points out that, irrespective of whether a particular country participates in the implementation of ECVET or EQAF or not, regions which have a statutory responsibility for the education system should have direct access to the joint forums engaged in developing the systems;

11. stresses that it is of critical importance in future development work to achieve a good balance between the following two considerations: on the hand, the desire to increase citizen's mobility by improving the portability of credit systems and enhancing the quality of activities; on the other hand, the need to develop the diversity of the education systems which local and regional authorities in Member States are responsible for;

12. underlines the fact that ECVET and EQAF are part of a broader range of initiatives in the education field, which also includes the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), Europass, the European Quality Charter for Mobility (EQCM), the Europe-wide principles for the recognition and validation of non-formal learning and the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF);

13. has pointed out in its past opinions that the constantly evolving requirements of the workplace involving new systems of work and adaptation to new technologies call for a continuously trained workforce. Vocational training, following a lifelong learning approach, can prove to be essential instruments in developing this, which is the core element of sustainable economic and social development ([1]). Specifically in the light of the demographic development a more effective use of the existing workforce has to be made;

14. stresses that specific financial resources will be needed for the testing and further development of the systems;

The European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)

15. notes that cross-border learning and professional activity have a long history in Europe. They have been very important for the development of the craft sector, manufacturing, trade and business, laying the ground for rising prosperity at local, regional and national level;

16. believes that cross-border learning and professional activity will take on great importance in a highly globalised economy and that up-to-date tools are needed to support mobility in this area; further believes that ECVET is one such tool;

17. thinks that identification of skills needs takes place increasingly at regional level; has highlighted the fact that local and regional development is, of course, based on different starting conditions and circumstances but this should by no means be considered to be isolated from developments in the world at large; as old jobs disappear in regions and local communities, jobs are needed in new areas of production so as to prevent stagnation, social exclusion in the form of unemployment for example, high levels of sick leave and high levels of premature and unwanted exits from the labour market ([2]);

18. points out that the labour market in Europe needs to be characterised by a high degree of flexibility coupled with reliable social security as outlined in the European Commission's document on 'Common Principles of Flexicurity' ([3]);

19. has agreed with the European Commission in the past that national and European qualifications frameworks facilitate the validation of learning in all contexts ([4]);

20. has welcomed the European Commission's Framework of Qualifications (EQF), and supported its double objective of improving transparency of qualifications and promoting mobility in the European Union;

21. similarly to its request in connection to EQF, asks that local and regional competent authorities be involved in the exercise of linking up national/regional qualifications frameworks to ECVET;

22. reinforces the European Commission's recognition of ECVET as '*culturally and technically adapted to the (…) regional contexts*', and recalls that regional authorities themselves often have a role in identifying, developing and implementing qualification systems and lifelong learning in formal, informal and non-formal contexts;

23. points out that, when examined from a life-long learning perspective, a large part of vocational training takes place in knowledge-intensive businesses or business networks and increasingly on a cross-border basis;

24. notes that there are also many good examples today of cooperation in the area of vocational training between professional associations and regions in different countries which also include joint planning and mutual recognition ([5]). These initiatives should be encouraged and their potential tapped;

25. stresses that various stakeholders should participate in a recognition system, not only the public sector but also private players, businesses and the social partners;

26. welcomes the establishment of an ECVET users group that updates and coordinates the processes. Insists, however, on including regional and local authorities, as well as local companies and social partners, as members of the users' group in order to allow direct access to ECVET for them, respecting at the same time national rules and regulations;

27. highlights the fact that it is often local and regional authorities that are able to put in place effective operational actions in VET;

28. notes that ECVET is a unit-based credit system, providing a way of measuring and comparing learning achievements, and transferring them from one institution to another;

29. welcomes the fact that it is compatible with all qualifications systems, especially with the European Credit Transfer System that supports and facilitate the mobility of university students within Europe and further afield;

30. highlights however that the actual implementation and take-up of the system will be the real measure of its success. Local and regional authorities will be useful partners to promote this through their networks and to make ECVET credible and usable;

31. believes that the effective use of ECVET requires that practical examples of how the system works are needed once it is up and running. This would help to a encourage a broader range of users to exploit the opportunities offered by ECVET;

([1]) CdR 226/98 fin.

([2]) CoR opinion of 14 June 2006 on the Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning.

([3]) See opinion CoR 274/2007 on Commission document COM(2007) 359 final.

([4]) CdR 335/2006 fin.

([5]) For example, the European class in truck maintenance www.anfa-auto.fr.

The European Quality Assurance Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAF)

32. notes that greater efficiency in socio-economic terms in vocational education and training is determined by ensuring that vocational education and training is better geared to meet the constantly changing labour market demands of the knowledge society, in particular promoting a highly qualified workforce able to rise to the challenge of globalisation;

33. stresses that education and training systems should not, as is sometimes the case, be developed in isolation from the enterprise, social and innovation environment of a locality or region as growth, competitiveness and the employment prospects of an area are increasingly dependent on the skills of its current and future workforce, as well as on the extent to which vocational education and training, and retraining, contribute to the ongoing completion and enhancement of skills;

34. highlights the fact that it is therefore essential to link EQAF with the needs of the local labour market and calls for the accreditation of VET centres as part of this process;

35. recognises the added value that EQAF brings in carrying forward education and training policy across the EU in particular the promotion of mutual learning, mobility and exchanges of best practice;

36. welcomes the arrangements for an improvement cycle for EQAF and stresses that quality indicators should not be regarded as guidelines but rather as reference points which can be continually developed in various ways, for example in bilateral or multilateral contexts;

37. emphasises that EQAF should not be restricted to being a statistical system or some kind of monitoring tool but should instead be seen as an instrument for ongoing quality development at different levels and by different players and stakeholders;

38. believes that use of the reference framework should not be confined solely to national level, but that similar processes should also be encouraged at local and regional level. The same also applies to learning systems which are outside public education systems so as to ensure that they too can be improved and developed on an ongoing basis;

39. feels that consideration must be given to the shape of the reference framework and to how detailed it needs to be in order to meet its objectives. The Committee thinks that the indicators must not be so detailed that implementation of the reference framework and follow-up would result in education systems being subject to indirect control;

40. emphasise that the reference indicators proposed by the Commission

— are to be considered as a toolkit for the purpose of helping to evaluate and improve the quality of vocational training systems in accordance with national legislation and procedures;

— do not introduce any new standards, but are intended to assist the Member States' efforts whilst maintaining the diversity of approaches between Member States;

— are to be applied on a voluntary basis, are purely advisory and are not therefore to be used as a means of comparing the quality and efficiency of the various national systems in Europe.

It would therefore be a strength that the various users can select the indicators that are most relevant to the needs of their particular quality assurance system;

41. stresses that the local and regional dimension must be reinforced in particular through support for local and regional networks in this field and regrets that the Recommendation does not give adequate recognition of the importance of the involvement of local and regional authorities more explicitly;

42. calls for a stronger direct involvement of the local and regional level in ENQAVET, the European Network on Quality Assurance in VET. Regions and businesses involved in EQAF should be encouraged to network and these networks should be supported;

43. suggests the use of a label of quality for VET establishments, similarly to the ranking that already exists for higher education institutions;

44. feels that improvements in vocational education and training are a considerable advantage for both individuals and society. Raising overall skills levels helps to improve economic indicators, such as productivity and unemployment, and social indicators, such as civic participation, criminality and healthcare costs;

45. vocational training has the potential to promote social inclusion of groups which are at a disadvantage on the labour market, such as migrants and older people, and early school leavers;

46. stresses that attention should be focused not only on groups within education systems but also on individuals who do not have access or have limited access to them or who fall out of them.

Brussels, 8 October 2008.

The President
of the Committee of the Regions
Luc VAN DEN BRANDE