

## CLOSING SPEECH - TOWARDS A EUROPEAN VET AREA

Ladies and Gentlemen

### Introductory comments

It is a pleasure for me to be here today at the closing of this very interesting Conference which discussed the progress we have achieved since the launch of the Copenhagen process in 2002, as well as the many challenges we have ahead of us.

I would like to thank Cedefop and the Czech Presidency for having organised this Conference. As was mentioned by Commissioner Figel in his opening speech yesterday, this Conference comes at a crucial moment when all the attention of policy makers is focussed on the financial and economic crisis, and when the risks of neglecting “**people**” as the key source of change and future prosperity is very high.

Before sharing my ideas on VET with you, I would like to congratulate Cedefop not only for having hosted this Conference but also for the remarkable work it has been doing on Vocational Education and Training (VET) since 1975.

The Lisbon strategy, the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) on Education and training, the Copenhagen process and the EU enlargement, have dramatically changed the European context for VET.

Cedefop has been able to develop and adapt to these new demands and changing contexts. The Centre has become a reference point for VET, not only within the EU but also outside Europe. The numerous international papers that make references to the work carried out by Cedefop, are proof of this excellence.

For more than three decades, Cedefop has stimulated cooperation and helped us design and

refine our policies for education and training. It played a crucial role in the set-up of the Copenhagen Process and its development over the last few years as illustrated in the Communiqués of Maastricht, Helsinki and Bordeaux.

This Center has strongly supported the development of European tools such as Europass, the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), the recent key proposals on a credit system for VET (ECVET) and the Quality assurance framework (EQARF).

As the recent external evaluation of Cedefop concluded: “... *if Cedefop did not exist, an organisation that looks something like it would probably have to be invented.*” **What a compliment!**

Having given credit where it is deserved, I will now move on to address our common achievements and challenges in the Education and Training field.

### **Achievements and challenges (E&T and VET)**

Let me start by looking back at our achievements in relation to VET since the launch of the E&T programme in the early 2000's.

As the Lisbon strategy (for Jobs , Competitiveness and Growth) had just been launched in 2000, the EU's education ministers met in 2001 to formulate the E&T work programme, which set the policy framework for the decade with the aim to make European education and training (E&T) a world quality reference by 2010. This was the launch of the first comprehensive and consistent approach for education in the EU.

The work programme was based on three overriding objectives: i) Improving the quality of E&T systems, ii) Making access to learning easier, and iii) Opening E&T to the world.

Within this global strategic context, the Copenhagen Process on Enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training was launched in 2002 with the purpose of improving the performance, quality and attractiveness of VET in Europe. As a key pillar of E&T, the Copenhagen process is in fact the VET policy contribution to attain the ambitious goals set by the Lisbon strategy and the E&T 2010 work programme.

Since 2002, the Copenhagen process has significantly contributed to raising the visibility and profile of VET in Europe. It did so by developing four different dimensions:

**1. A political process** - that plays an essential role in emphasising the importance of VET to political decision makers. It facilitates agreeing common goals and objectives, discussing national models and initiatives, and exchanging good practice at the European level. At national level, the process contributes to strengthen the focus on VET and has also inspired national reforms.

**2. The development of common tools** – this is a central role of the process, by developing common European frameworks and tools, aimed at enhancing transparency and quality of competences and qualifications, and facilitating mobility of learners and workers. The process paves the way towards a European labour market and a European VET area, complementary to the European area for higher education. The two recent Commission proposals for Recommendations on the Credit system for VET (ECVET) and on the Quality

Assurance Framework (EQARF) are milestones in this process. We expect these two Recommendations to be formally adopted during the Czech Presidency.

**3. Fostering mutual learning** - by supporting European cooperation. It allows the participating countries to consider their policies in the light of experience from other countries and provides a framework for working together, learning from others, sharing ideas, experience and results.

**4. Taking stakeholders on board** - by strengthening the involvement of different stakeholders and enabling their contribution to common goals.

Both the E&T 2010 work-programme and the Copenhagen process have contributed to increasing the quality, the efficiency and the transparency of qualifications in Europe.

Many tools, instruments and guidelines have been launched as a result of this enhanced cooperation. Besides ECVET and EQARF which I mentioned before, we have also developed Europass, the Common principles on validation of non-formal learning, the Recommendation on lifelong guidance, the Reference Framework for Key competences, and the groundbreaking European Qualifications Framework (EQF), which is driving the establishment of National Qualifications Frameworks and represents a significant conceptual change by focusing on learning outcomes instead of the traditional approach focused on inputs and the amount of hours spent in a classroom.

These are all crucial steps on the road to establish a new lifelong learning paradigm in Europe.

However, progress is still insufficient in key areas, and implementation needs to be strengthened. The



EU set itself the overall ambition of achieving 5 benchmarks by 2010, on literacy, reduction of early school-leaving, upper secondary attainment, maths, science and technology graduates and participation in adult learning. Only the benchmark on mathematics, science and technology graduates is likely to be reached (indeed, it has already been exceeded). By contrast, the proportion of 15 year olds with low performance in reading literacy, which was set to decline by 20% by 2010, has actually increased by more than 10% between 2000 and 2006.

In all the discussions leading up to the review of the Copenhagen process in Bordeaux in 2008, there was a general consensus that the process has been very successful, but not 'all news' is 'good news' in VET. We must also be attentive to worrying signals. The Cedefop report you have discussed during these two days describes these problems in detail.

Furthermore, the 2008 annual report of the Commission on progress towards the Lisbon objectives in E&T also highlights the following key messages on VET:

- The participation in VET programmes has decreased between 2000 and 2006. However, participation has increased for those programmes that give access to higher level studies. Therefore, facilitating pathways between education sectors is a key element in increasing the attractiveness of VET.
- There has also been a reduction in participation and duration of continuous vocational training (CVT). Participation in CVT varied between 14% of employees in Greece and almost 60% in the Czech Republic.
- Results from the PISA survey shows that students in prevocational and vocational programmes under-perform in mathematics

compared to students enrolled in general programmes.

We are obviously still far away from a truly European area of E&T, but I am sure we all agree that we have travelled a long way since 2000.

By let me turn now to the current situation.

### **Need for increased focus on VET in the context of current crisis**

The challenges we face today are even more urgent than those of 2000, when the Lisbon strategy was launched. Besides having to address the ageing of the population, global competition, as well as rapid technological and climate change, we also have the more recent financial crisis which has caused our current economic downturn, and is already having serious social consequences. The employment growth which we have enjoyed in the

recent past has halted, and unemployment is increasing significantly all over Europe.

All the structural reforms which we have launched in the context of the Lisbon strategy should help companies and individuals in today's difficult circumstances. This is true in particular for the reform and modernisation of the labour market through the "Flexicurity" approach, the focus on research and development, and the strong investment in human capital to support the shift to the new "lifelong learning paradigm".

But the current global turmoil risks jeopardizing the efforts engaged over the last years towards structural and longer term reforms, such as the ones needed in the E&T systems. This is why the Commission has recently put forward a major Recovery Plan for growth and jobs, to respond to this rapidly deteriorating context and to boost demand and restore confidence in the economy.

The emphasis throughout the Recovery Plan is on "smart investments". It calls in particular for investing in skills to help people retain their jobs and get back into the labour market, whilst raising productivity.

“Skills” are central to the next wave of economic reform that will position us as a competitive, prosperous, knowledge-based economy that can compete and win in global markets. And VET has a key role to play in this process.

### **The new skills for new jobs initiative**

An issue which has been gaining increasing importance is the need to improve our understanding of future skills needs and current gaps between supply and demand.

This is why, in November 2007, the Education Council adopted a resolution on the "new skills for

new jobs" initiative. The March 2008 European Council then invited the Commission to present a comprehensive assessment of the future skills requirements in Europe up to 2020, taking account of the impacts of technological change and ageing populations, and to propose steps to anticipate future needs. This led to the December 2008 Communication on 'New Skills for new Jobs', which has been amply discussed during this conference, and which benefited largely from the Cedefop's work on the future skills needs up to 2020.

The Communication proposes a roadmap to strengthen the Union's capacity for forecasting and matching skills supply and demand. It foresees the regular update of projections of skills needs by sector, taking into account business requirements and the employment impact of the transition towards a low-carbon economy.

The Cedefop forecast confirms that substantial change is in prospect. In addition to the 20.3 million new jobs expected to be created between 2006 and 2020, another 85 million jobs (four times more) will be available to replace workers who retire or leave the labour market for other reasons. The total number of job openings therefore will be 105.3 million between 2006 and 2020.

Cedefop also foresees that due to demographic developments, and employment rate trends, there will be a shortage of almost 12 million people in the workforce, due to the different occupational structures and potential skill gaps.

Results highlight the general increase in qualification levels across most jobs, and the need to take replacement demand into account when determining future job opportunities, especially when assessing implications for E&T.

In 2020, 50% of European jobs are expected to require upper secondary or post-secondary levels, **particularly vocational qualifications**, and around 31% of jobs are foreseen to require tertiary level qualifications. The number of jobs requiring low or no qualifications is expected to fall to around 18.5% in 2020.

**So, what do these forecasts tell us about the role to be played by VET in the coming years?**

- First of all they confirm that VET providers have a huge growth potential, to respond to the **increasing demand for vocational skills** (50% of all future needs). Increasing the attractiveness and quality of VET will be crucial to support this growth opportunity.
- Second, it emphasises the need for VET providers to be **aware** and “**in-tune**” with labour market needs and be flexible in modernising their curricula and training methods. It would be



useless to develop wonderful systems to anticipate skills needs, if we had rigid E&T systems incapable to adapt swiftly to changing demands. Responsiveness of the VET systems is in my view a huge challenge. This can be improved through strong partnerships between VET providers and the social partners, for example.

- Third, it calls for VET to play a greater role in providing **transversal** and **generic skills** to facilitate career transitions and the participation in lifelong learning. These are highly valued by the labour market, and facilitate both adaptability to new skill needs and the employability of individuals.
- Fourth, it calls for more "**bridges**" to be built among education sectors, including those between initial and continuous VET, as a form of facilitating "**pathways**". The recognition,

validation and certification of all forms of learning, is particularly important in this context.

- And finally it emphasises the importance of improving our tools and instruments to better **anticipate future skill needs** and identify existing skill gaps. Differentiating between cyclical and structural imbalances is important in this context, because these require different responses from the VET system. While continuous VET can more easily respond to cyclical gaps, initial VET can better respond to structural imbalances.

Europe's future economic prosperity will rely on having the right number and the right mix of skilled workers. There is an urgent need to establish partnership between VET providers and employers to co-ordinate policy, and to tackle the important issue of skills shortage in our workforce today.

The Czech authorities have rightly placed the development of “partnerships” as a key issue during their Presidency. The Conference taking place in April and the forthcoming Council conclusions on partnerships should further contribute to this debate.

To conclude on this issue of adapting skills to new jobs, I would like to stress that addressing the challenge will not be successful unless we allow a great deal of innovation and creativity at all levels in our systems of VET. As you know this is the European Year of Creativity and Innovation. But our focus must remain well beyond 2009!

### **Looking ahead**

The 2008 review of the Copenhagen process in Bordeaux recognised that we have now reached a phase in which the focus should be on consolidating the strategy, and implementing the principles and tools built since 2002.

The key VET priorities for the next two years are:

- 1) Implementing the VET tools
- 2) Increasing the quality and attractiveness of VET
- 3) Improving the links with the labour market, and
- 4) Strengthening cooperation arrangements.

The Bordeaux Communiqué maintained the essential aspects of the Helsinki priorities, but introduced a new priority that aims to strengthen the links between VET and the Labour market.

This fits well with the current debate on "new skills for new jobs" and the forthcoming Council conclusions on "partnerships". It challenges us to assure that VET delivers the knowledge, skills and competences that the labour market needs.

The next review of the Copenhagen process will take place in December 2010 in Bruges, during the Belgian Presidency.

The Bruges review will be the closing of a cycle of enhanced cooperation in VET, which was initiated at the Bruges 2001 DGVT meeting, and then formally launched in Copenhagen in 2002 with a time horizon to coincide with the Lisbon strategy in 2010.

This will be the ideal moment for us to conduct an extensive evaluation of our common achievements since 2002, the policy setting mechanisms, the governance structures and methods, as well as to establish a new set of long term priorities for VET within the context of the post 2010 Lisbon process and the updated strategic framework for E&T.

The new E&T 2020 strategy is already at an advanced stage of being adopted, and the post-2010 Lisbon strategy will probably be decided by the new Commission early in 2010. Therefore, I would propose that we now launch a far-reaching debate on how best to position the Copenhagen

process as a key contributor to this wider strategic context, while at the same time catering for the specificities of the VET sector.

The new strategic framework on E&T sets **long-term** strategic goals for 2020, applicable to all levels and sectors (schools, higher education, VET and adult learning). These are:

1. Make lifelong learning and mobility a reality;
2. Improve the quality and efficiency of E&T;
3. Promote equity and citizenship;
4. Enhance innovation and creativity at all levels.

The Bruges review end 2010 may be the right moment to define our long term vision on how VET should contribute to each of the E&T 2020 goals. A more operational short-term work-plan could also be defined and reviewed under the various

Presidencies, similar to what is done with the current Copenhagen process.

Issues such as the frequency of the reviews (two or three year cycles), the purpose and role of the DGVT and ACVT meetings, the peer-learning activities, the international dimension of VET policy, etc. could also be a matter of reflection in our debate leading up to the Bruges review.

I look forward to the discussion we are going to have with the Directors General for Vocational Training in May, and the ACVT members at the meeting in June, and to an open and constructive debate on the future of the Copenhagen process.

## **Concluding remarks**

I would like to conclude by thanking all the participants for their contribution to this very interesting and fruitful Conference. It has been an opportunity to build a bridge between the recent VET priorities agreed in Bordeaux, and the future review of the Copenhagen process that will take place in Bruges under the Belgian Presidency.

We live in a difficult period and in many respects the challenges are unprecedented. It is crucial that we don't lose sight of the future while addressing our current difficulties (however serious they may be). I am sure we all agree that a skilled workforce is the key resource in any enterprise, be it public or private.

Vocational education and training is an essential pillar of E&T policy. Its quality and efficiency will also have an impact on how quickly we will find a way out of the current economic difficulties. It



would be very counterproductive to reduce investments in E&T at this point in time. This would be short-sighted, costly in the long term, and would reduce our potential to succeed in overcoming the current downturn.

As policy makers, our role must be to understand the challenges and opportunities ahead, and to modernise our VET systems so as to provide people with the relevant skills which will support their personal development, their full participation and contribution to social cohesion, and their capacity to create and innovate for the sustainable growth and prosperity of our economy.

A clear message comes out from this Conference: ***we are as determined - as ever - in pursuing our work to establish a European area of vocational education and training!***

Thank you!