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VET in Europe: taking stock and planning the future

CEDEFOP Agora Conference: '*Continuity, consolidation and change: Towards a European era of vocational education and training*'.

Thessaloniki, 16-17 March 2009

Speech

Greetings:

- Deputy Minister Jakub Dürr (Deputy Minister for European agenda section in Ministry of Education)
- Professor Konstantinos Kouskousis (Secretary General of Lifelong Learning in the Ministry of Education)
- Mr Mario Sepi (President of EESC)
- Mr Juan Menéndez-Valdés (Chairman of Cedefop's Governing Board)
- Ms Aviana Bulgarelli (Director of Cedefop)

1 Introduction

I am pleased to be at the opening of this conference to discuss the results of Cedefop's review of progress in the Copenhagen process, and to reflect on what we can do to establish a European area of vocational education and training—or EAVET in short. This is in line with other initiatives: the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the European Research Area (ERA). Now time comes to develop, in a concrete way, a European Area for VET (EAVET). I would like to thank Cedefop and the Czech Presidency for organising this conference – a milestone to achieve this goal.

Cedefop's report includes an assessment of our common achievements since the launch of the Copenhagen process in 2002 and proposals for VET beyond 2010- This report looks into progress so far with a focus into the future. I take this opportunity to congratulate Aviana Bulgarelli and her colleagues at Cedefop for their excellent work. I also commend the social partners, researchers, experts and stakeholders for their work with Cedefop; it is also thanks to them that the centre has become a point of reference for the VET community worldwide.

The context for European cooperation in VET has changed a lot in the past ten years or so. Important turns include the Bologna process for higher education, which is now a reference, with many countries outside the Union asking to join it, the Lisbon strategy and the Open Method of Coordination, the Copenhagen process launched in 2002 and the two most recent enlargements.

We know that Cedefop has adapted well to these changes and has helped develop important tools to facilitate mobility and improve quality of VET systems: I am thinking mainly of EQF, the credit system for VET and the quality assurance framework.

2 Current global and European context

What is the impact of the current global downturn on our education and training policies?

First, the speed with which the crisis has spread internationally shows that we live in an interconnected world and that change can be really fast.

Second, although the downturn originated in the lofty heights of finance area, it's having serious implications for the social area. Our recent interim forecasts for 2009–2010 states that "*Employment growth is expected to turn negative [in 2009], with EU employment falling by 3.5 million jobs. The unemployment rate*

is expected to increase to 9.2% in the euro area, with a further increase in 2010".

The Recovery Plan we launched to respond to the crisis calls for "*smart investment*" and for investment in education and training— if you ask me, the smartest investment of all in a time of crisis.

There are 72 million non-qualified and low-skilled workers in Europe and new jobs will require higher qualifications. Investing in training is therefore a necessity, not a luxury.

Public Employment Services are crucial in this process, which points to the third consequence of the crisis: public authorities are making a comeback. One of the tasks of public authorities is anticipating labour-market needs. Both the 2008 spring European Council and the Bordeaux communiqué stress the importance of identifying skills gaps.

Last year Cedefop issued the first pan-European forecast up to 2020 which concluded that skill requirements are expected to increase across the board in the future.

The Commission's own communication on "New Skills for New Jobs" adopted last December took Cedefop's view on board and focused on anticipation and matching skills needs.

In our policy document we anticipated fewer routine skills and more creative skills in future labour markets, together with more familiarity with digital technologies and a growing demand for critical thinking and for the skills specific to particular trades.

Let me tell you one thing. The downturn will have serious implications, but it can also be an opportunity to speed up structural reforms, including to modernise VET systems and to improve their quality.

This is what the Copenhagen process is about; some measures may have to be adapted to the current juncture, but the main goals are still valid. In a long-term perspective, a crisis is a terrible thing to waste and I hope we will learn the lessons of history this time around.

3 The state of play

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Europe's economic and social model depends on the knowledge and skills of its citizens.

Education and training are crucial for success. In 2007, the employment rate of people with high educational attainment was 83.8% compared to 48.6% for those with low educational attainment.

Our assessment of 2008 shows that European co-operation in education and training has produced concrete results in three main areas:

- national reforms of lifelong learning and qualification systems,
- modernisation of higher education and VET systems, and
- establishment of European instruments supporting quality, transparency and mobility.

However, this is not enough; most of the benchmarks for 2010 will not be reached.

For instance, the proportion of 15-year-olds who cannot read properly has actually increased between 2000 and 2006. Other disappointments come from

early school leavers, learners with a migrant background or from disadvantaged groups and participation of adults in lifelong learning.

In this context, the Commission adopted a new Communication on "An updated strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training" on December 2008. The Council is expected to endorse the updated strategic framework in May 2009. It is important to stress that we work under a lifelong learning perspective and that the different sectors of schools, VET, higher and adult education need to be brought closer together. The updated strategic framework is thus meant to work as a common framework for all sectors. The implementation of the Copenhagen process is an integral part of this.

The Commission proposal is based on a set of four strategic objectives, applicable to all levels and sectors:

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

4 Creativity and innovation

The latter point reprises a main theme for 2009, which is the European Year for Creativity and Innovation. One of the issues the European Year wants to put on the table is how to build a good environment for creativity to blossom in our places of learning, including training centres.

We began to work on the European Year before the crisis, but now its topics and goals have taken a whole new meaning.

Thanks to the debate raised by the European Year, we can make a stronger case for investing more in education and training during the downturn.

In past recessions, spending in education and training dropped—particularly private spending. But we are not condemned to repeat the mistakes of the past.

I know that the people who have just lost their jobs need immediate support—and I think they should have it—but not at the expense of education and training. Besides, the support laid-off workers need includes upgrading their skills to get a new job as soon as possible.

The importance of education and training will grow in the future even when this crisis is over. Europe's success will depend more and more on our people; their learning attainments, their skills, their ability to translate bright and original ideas into reality.

Because I am convinced that the world that will emerge from the crisis will be more interdependent and more competitive than when the crisis started, life-long learning should allow Europeans of all ages to keep the pace of technological and social change.

On top of that, we want our students and trainees to *lead* change, and everybody knows that leading is more difficult than following.

In my vision, learning institutions should focus on giving their students and trainees what they need to invent jobs for themselves which do not exist yet.

This is one way to specify what creativity and innovation may mean in the context of our VET strategy.

5 The Copenhagen process

Since 2002, the Copenhagen process is a pillar of our strategy. Our VET policies have led to significant improvements especially in the development of European tools, principles and guidelines.

These have had a major impact in promoting mobility, transparency, the recognition of qualifications, and the efficiency and the quality of VET.

In 2008, we issued three important recommendations: on the European Qualifications Framework, on the European Credit system for VET, and on the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET. We expect that these recommendations will be adopted as soon as next April or May.

We know well what these instruments are designed to do; I just want to cite them as evidence of what we can achieve in practice if we take the Copenhagen spirit seriously.

In 2008 we have also held the first EuroSkills, which is a competition in vocational skills. The event attracted about 420 young competitors in 49 trades from 29 European countries and nearly 27.000 visitors to Rotterdam. The next edition will take place in Portugal, in November 2010.

In the discussions leading up to the review of the Copenhagen process in Bordeaux in 2008, there was a general consensus that the process needs to focus on consolidation.

As I mentioned earlier, the process has delivered several European tools so far; now it is up to the national authorities to implement them and consolidate domestic reforms.

However, the review also pointed out that the success of VET depends on its ability to deliver the knowledge and skills required by the labour market— more work is needed on this point which has now become a more explicit objective.

6 Looking ahead

The Bordeaux Communiqué calls for consolidation of past achievements and for the implementation of the European tools—these will be the main challenges for the future, including the next meeting in Bruges, in 2010 under the Belgian Presidency.

But we need to look further into the future, especially to what Cedefop calls the ‘**perennial issues**’ of VET; transitions and partnerships.

The concept of **transitions** involves the passage from learning systems to the labour market, and from one job to another. People need assistance in these delicate moves; they may need to upgrade their skills and they need information and guidance. What measures should be developed to make these transitions smoother in the future?

As to **partnerships**, the best way of assuring that education and training systems are in tune with labour–market needs is to build "partnerships" and networks involving the social partners.

VET providers should also be involved in innovative ways. For instance, we need to have regular communication with teachers and trainers to raise their awareness on the skills business needs.

These new types of partnership and networking are vital both for learning institutions and employers. The Czech Presidency made ‘partnerships’ a visible priority.

Finally, I would like to say a word on **international cooperation**. I believe we need to open our VET systems to the world, especially through cooperation with organisations such as the OECD, the ILO, and UNESCO.

Bilateral cooperation would also be important. Countries such as Australia, Canada, the USA, and Korea have highly developed VET systems and offer interesting opportunities of mutual learning and mobility.

Today we are training a global workforce and our best companies operate in global markets. If we aspire to establish a world-class system in Europe, we need a good understanding of how VET works throughout the world.

7 Close

I will conclude by encouraging you to continue to pursue our vision to establish a European area for VET (EAVET) based on trust, excellence, and open to the world.

Our progress since 2002 gives us reasons to believe that we are on the right path. We can make VET more attractive and more effective in raising the employability of citizens; particularly in times of crisis, we can give Europeans what they need to deploy their potential for personal development and to acquire the skills needed for life-long employability.

Finally, let me remind you of Aristotle's thinking about education where *education does not fill up the mind but opens it up* – let's pursue this line in creating a European area for VET.

Thank you.