



On the move: learning and mobility come closer

Step by step Member States set out on the road to implementing European credit system for vocational education and training

The European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET) is one of several European tools designed to make qualifications systems more easily understood and flexible throughout the European Union (EU) and so support mobility for workers and learners.

National lifelong learning policies are increasingly complemented by European initiatives introducing frameworks and common tools. ECVET, which is voluntary, is one outcome of close and constructive cooperation over several years between the European Commission, Member States and social partners. Cedefop has also been closely involved since 2002 providing various analyses on developing and using credit transfer systems ⁽¹⁾. The Recommendation ⁽²⁾ establishing ECVET came into force on 18 June 2009, giving Member States a roadmap for implementing the new tool.

Implementing ECVET will require even closer cooperation in VET between European and national levels, as well as both within and among Member States. Engagement, creativity and willingness will be required from many different partners if ECVET is to succeed. Many obstacles need to be overcome and innovative solutions found. So far the signs are good.

ECVET: a response to change

ECVET (see Table 1) will enable learning that has been assessed to be recognised, transferred and accumulated by young people or adults who want to gain a qualification. ECVET assumes that all learning may lead to a qualification and makes no distinction as to how the learning outcomes were acquired. ECVET makes it possible to obtain a qualification in

many different ways, over different time spans and at different points in working and learning life.

Table 1: ECVET in brief

The European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET) is based on concepts and processes to establish a common and user friendly language for transparency, transfer and recognition of learning outcomes.

ECVET is based on:

- **learning outcomes** are statements of knowledge, skills and competence that can be achieved in a variety of learning contexts;
- **units** of learning outcomes that are components of qualifications. Units can be assessed, validated and recognised;
- **ECVET points**, which provide additional information about units and qualifications in a numerical form;
- **credit** for assessed and documented learning outcomes of a learner. Credit can be transferred to other contexts and accumulated to achieve a qualification;
- mutual trust and partnership among participating organisations are expressed in **memoranda of understanding** and **learning agreements**.

Source: European Commission.

Fierce international competition and the emergence of a European learning and working area are making tools like ECVET important to European and national lifelong learning strategies. The momentum behind their development is due to several factors. Europe's workforce is ageing and needs more ready access to training throughout longer working lives. Changes in job content are becoming more rapid. People change jobs more frequently. There are new opportunities and ways to learn. Low-skilled people are especially vulnerable in the labour market and the percentage of drop-outs from upper-secondary education remains worryingly high. Both groups need more support to integrate into the labour market.

⁽¹⁾ www.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/Information_resources/Bookshop/publications.asp?section=2

⁽²⁾ www.cedefop.europa.eu/themes/theme_b/news.asp?idnews=4655

These developments are encouraging Member States to broaden the range of knowledge, skills and competence valued in and used by society, by recognising learning acquired outside the formal education and training system. This includes learning acquired at work, during leisure time, or during learning periods abroad.

Recognising learning that meets a required standard, irrespective of whether the abilities were acquired through the formal education and training system or by some other non-formal means, will make it easier for people to progress in learning and work throughout their lives. Already the trend in Member States is to develop validation mechanisms and to bring initial and continuing VET and higher education closer together in a continuum and expand post-secondary and tertiary VET.

Implementation – a complex business

Although the principle behind ECVET is fairly simple, implementation is a complex business needing to accommodate all of the very different VET and qualifications systems in the EU. Under the Recommendation, Member States are encouraged to create the conditions to use ECVET as part of their VET qualifications by 2012 (see Table 2). General principles established at European level through experimentation and testing between 2009 and 2012 will gradually be turned into operation and practice at national, local and sector levels.

Table 2: Implementation of ECVET – timetable

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Testing and			developing		Report and review	
Countries create conditions for gradual implementation of ECVET						
			Implementation of ECVET			

Source: European Commission.

This is no easy task. It requires Member States to analyse their systems in respect of the major principles of ECVET, the institutional remits and governance mechanisms and their lifelong learning strategies. Consequently, testing is extensive. The European Commission has identified over 100 ECVET projects running or completed across Europe, funded by the Lifelong learning programme.

There are many issues to resolve if ECVET is to work. Countries define and describe their qualifications very differently, making it difficult to identify those that are comparable and suitable to accumulate and transfer between different systems. To overcome this barrier ECVET is based on learning outcomes which are statements of knowledge, skills and competence that can be achieved in a various learning contexts. Learning outcomes make it possible to identify areas where different qualifications within a country, or between countries, overlap and where a transfer of learning can take place. Units of learning outcomes will enable mobility for learning to count towards qualifications.

A challenge lies in that many curricula are not yet based on learning outcomes. There are also different interpretations of what learning outcomes mean and no generalised method to identify, define and assess them. Through projects, several Member States are exploring and developing approaches to design units of learning outcomes. One approach is to describe learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, skills and competence, but other methods are also being tested. Member States are also looking several other issues. For example, how common areas between different qualifications can be identified; how they can be used to create common units for different qualifications; and even how to develop common qualifications' profiles or standards that can be shared by sectors, occupations or even countries.

However, it is not enough to define learning outcomes and identify common areas between qualifications. Learning outcomes acquired need to be assessed to determine if they meet educational standards. This means that assessment methods must also be based on learning outcomes, capable of assessing parts of qualifications and to take account of non-formal and informal learning to award credits. Most assessment systems are not structured in this way, but are based on testing the full acquisition of the required skills in a final exam. The balance also has to be found between knowledge, skills and competence for assessment. Ways of making ECVET points understood and used in a transparent way also need to be worked out. While general descriptions of learning outcomes may be sufficient to identify overlap across qualifications, more specific descriptions may be needed for assessment.

Finally, validation and recognition of achieved learning outcomes at individual level imply involving competent

institutions responsible for awarding qualifications and national validation and certification standards.

Promoters and partners of ECVET pilot projects are working on designing and experimenting with methods of different ways of developing and using ECVET. Importantly, they are not working in isolation, but sharing experience and good practice working towards common outcomes with the support of the European Commission and Cedefop. The European Training Foundation is also supporting those countries outside the EU interested in ECVET. In this sense, the projects' work goes well beyond their individual goals and objectives. They are central to the roadmap of ECVET implementation.

Linking ECVET with other European tools

ECVET is one of several common European instruments to support lifelong learning and mobility. They are designed to be mutually reinforcing and all need to be implemented in ways that relate to each other and are relevant for individuals.

The Europass framework, which provides a standard way to express knowledge, skills and competence, already enables the description of qualifications in terms of learning outcomes. Another task linked to ECVET implementation is integrating ECVET concepts into the Europass certificate supplement and Europass mobility documents to describe individual qualifications and credits acquired.

Another major challenge is to link ECVET to the European qualifications framework (EQF) and the emerging national qualifications frameworks (NQFs). EQF and NQFs, which are also based on learning outcomes, provide a structure of levels that make it possible to see how qualifications within and between countries relate to each other. They provide the framework for ECVET credits to be understood in relation to what the learner can do and how those abilities relate to qualifications and certificates.

Building on a solid foundation

Although implementing ECVET presents considerable challenges, the EU is building on a significant amount of experience assembled over many years and several Members States are already making preparations. For example, Spain, France, Finland

and Sweden have been using credits or units in education and training for many years. The new qualifications and credit frameworks for England, Wales and Northern Ireland and the Maltese qualifications framework strengthen the role of credit transfer. Belgium (Wallonia), Latvia and Luxembourg, are also updating national regulations to accommodate credit transfer and accumulation.

Work to prepare for ECVET is examining the use of credit transfer both for transnational mobility and national 'permeability', namely making it easier to move between different parts of formal education and vocational training system for example between academic and vocational courses.

FINECVET, from Finland, is an example of using ECVET for transnational mobility in selected sectors for cross-border transfer, 'enabling students to learn something they do not normally learn studying at home'. It aims to increase mobility in initial training. FINECVET makes comparison of learning outcomes acquired at home and in other countries easier, treating learning experiences abroad as a normal part of training. It focuses on ECVET process, documentation and quality assurance and aims to make ECVET understandable, in particular for teachers.

Generally, for transnational mobility arrangements under ECVET, occupational and educational standards are included in the mobility or learning agreement between the providers and the learner. This makes it possible to identify the learning outcomes forming the core of the mobility project. During the period abroad, assessment standards from both the home and the host country are used to validate what has been learned. These standards provide important and already existing reference points to ensure confidence and trust in the assessing and recognising credits.

Germany, through DECVET, is using ECVET to promote domestic reforms. The German initial VET dual system provides high quality and relevant training for the labour market, but suffers from a lack of permeability and weaknesses in validating and recognising learning achievements from other parts of the training system. For Germany, the importance of flexibility between different parts of the education and training system is emphasised by demographic changes and the economic crisis. Currently, enterprises recruit fewer apprentices to the VET dual system and fewer school leavers look to enter the dual system. Recruitment in school-based VET and

preparatory classes, on the other hand, remains high. However, there are few links between these largely separate systems. Learners wanting to progress to the VET dual system often have to start their apprenticeship from the beginning, independent of previous achievements. Similarly, those who drop out of one type of learning and later integrate into another system receive no formal recognition for prior learning achievements.

Mobility and flexibility are the prize

Implementing ECVET presents, foremost, the challenge of coordinating what represents for many Member States a major reform of their education and training systems. Coordination requires stimulating and maintaining cooperation between different organisations and stakeholders at various levels, with different interests and from different countries with different systems.

Coordination will need to be balanced, but firm. Implementing ECVET will require flexibility, willingness and considerable patience. There are considerable technical hurdles to overcome, not least developing the widespread use of learning outcomes both to describe qualifications and provide the basis of standards and assessment. This will require substantial changes for many Member States. In addition, implementation of ECVET has a direct effect on national systems of validating non-formal and informal learning and other European instruments, notably EQF and Europass.

Although the scale of the task should not be underestimated, neither should be the progress so far. ECVET, EQF and Europass are clear evidence of the depth and commitment of European cooperation in VET so far. Importantly, there appears to be no misunderstanding about the difficulties. ECVET will be implemented step by step, based on the results of testing and experimentation to find the best possible fit for ECVET in the variety of European VET systems.

The European Commission has set up a strong support system for the projects to help coordinate ECVET implementation. The work will be carried out through the ECVET users group and the European ECVET network, which will provide opportunity for continuous exchanges of experience and information. Cedefop, too, is providing expertise to support implementing ECVET through analysis, information and seminars to raise awareness on the benefits and

pitfalls of ECVET. This will help to anchor ECVET's development into the wider context of education policy and labour market developments. Cedefop is analysing the common relationships between European tools for education and training. It is identifying the rationale underpinning their long-term development and casting light on issues connecting and common to them all (learning outcomes, quality assurance, accreditation, certification or the dynamics of qualifications provided by VET systems or by the economy and economic sectors).

Further, the prize of successfully implementing ECVET, integrated with other European instruments and embedding it into national VET systems is a political and institutional framework working on a set of shared principles which allows different national standards and assessment methods to interact work together. This will open up new opportunities for young people and adults to learn in different ways and contexts, including different Member States and acquire new qualifications throughout their working lives.

The projects that test and experiment with ECVET and the commitment of those involved in its implementation will tell us if that is possible.

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Cedefop ECVET homepage:
http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/themes/theme_b/default.asp

Cedefop Virtual Community on Credit Systems and Qualifications Framework:
<http://communities.cedefop.europa.eu/credittransfer-egf?qo=2158996>