

BRIEFING NOTE

Opportunities and challenges for ECVET, the vocational credit transfer system

The European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET) ⁽¹⁾ is one of the European instruments designed to make VET systems more transparent. It aims to make it easier for vocational students to move between learning institutions, whether in the same country or abroad.

ECVET, which concerns qualifications at all levels of the European qualifications framework (EQF):

- allows transfer of units of learning outcomes;
- operates through partnerships between institutions; and
- eliminates the need for a second assessment of students moving between these institutions.

Qualifications can be defined as a combination of units of learning outcomes. Where the national vocational system allows it, units of learning outcomes can be recognised regardless of where and how they have been acquired. They may be used on the labour market and towards acquisition of a full qualification.

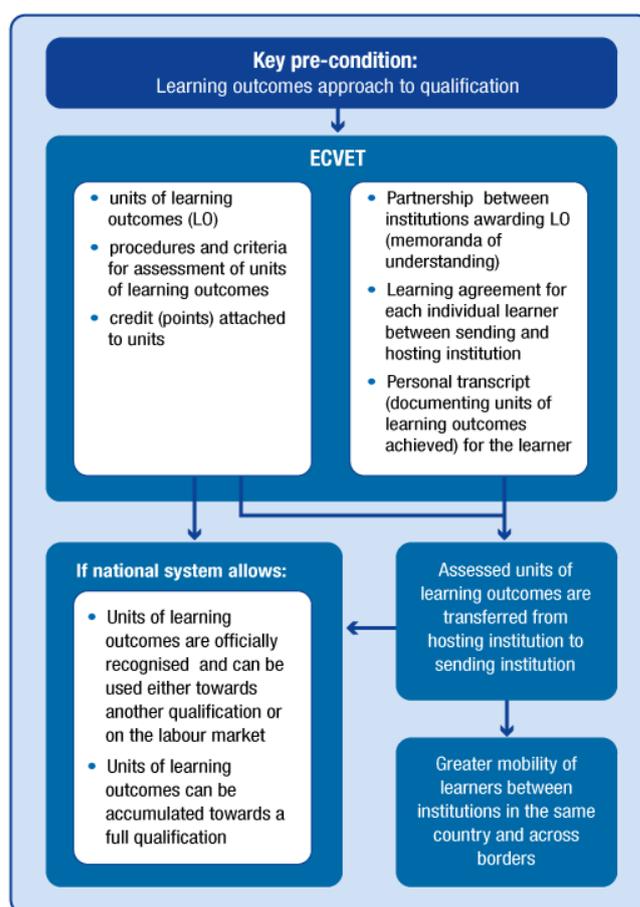
Countries have developed ECVET following a recommendation of the European Parliament and Council in accordance with their policy priorities and development of their qualifications systems. Cedefop analyses developments and publishes an annual monitoring report, which includes a country-by-country analysis ⁽²⁾.

Activities and perceptions

The latest monitoring report shows that most countries see ECVET as an instrument to enable *cross-border* mobility of vocational students. As a result of this

orientation, the system is currently being tested in hundreds of transnational pilot projects, largely funded by the EU, with the intention of gradually extending its application to a wider range of vocational qualifications.

Figure 1: **What ECVET does**



These pilot projects are mainly partnerships between vocational education and training providers (or organisations involved in transnational mobility) from different countries. Most projects concern particular sectors. Only a few are national in scope: these usually also assess how ECVET can be applied to specific qualifications or incorporated into the overall qualifications system.

⁽¹⁾ European Parliament; Council of the European Union (2009). Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on establishment of a European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET). *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 155, 8.7.2009, pp. 11-18. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2009:155:0011:0018:EN:PDF> [accessed 5.6.2013].

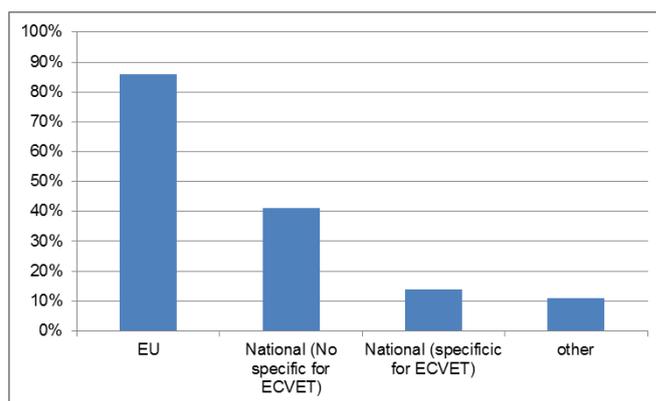
⁽²⁾ Cedefop (2013). *Monitoring ECVET implementation strategies in Europe*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/6118_en.pdf [accessed 5.6.2013].

An **EU-funded national project** is MEN-ECVET in France, which seeks to examine existing regulatory and organisational provisions and identify the conditions for implementation of ECVET. The project focuses on the education system's core qualification, the vocational baccalaureate (French level 4 and level 4 of the European qualifications framework).

Nationally-funded projects include development of a vocational credit system in Germany (Decvet) in which 10 pilot projects test whether procedures for accreditation of learning outcomes are transferable; and the Finecvet initiative in Finland that tested ECVET's suitability for Finnish vocational qualifications.

Analysis of funding by source shows that ECVET developments rely mainly on EU funds, with only a few countries reporting dispensation of national funds (Figure 2). This raises the question whether dependency on EU funds is an indication of low national interest in ECVET.

Figure 2: Sources of ECVET funding



Source: Cedefop, Monitoring ECVET implementation strategies in Europe, working paper No 18, 2013.

As regards capacity building for ECVET, countries have, however, taken the initiative to set up national contact points (from 15 in 2011 to 26 in 2012) and to clarify roles and responsibilities of the bodies/organisations involved in ECVET and dissemination of related information. In many cases, they are located within authorities responsible for national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) or EQAVET (EU quality assurance reference framework for VET). This can be helpful for coordinating the instruments.

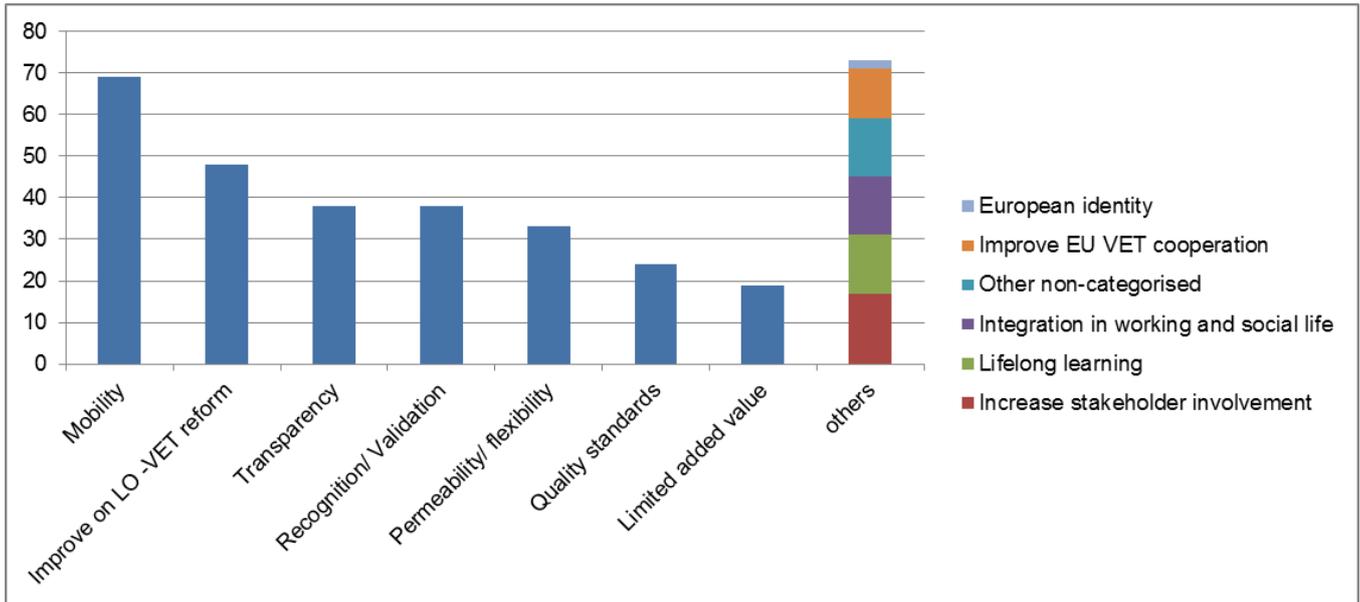
Table 1: Reported strategies for ECVET development in place or planned in 2012

Strategies in order of importance	Number of countries applying the strategy out of the total number of countries monitored ⁽³⁾
1. Adapting qualifications and EQF-related developments	28/33
2. Learning by working in ECVET European –funded projects	26/33
3. Marketing ECVET to relevant stakeholders (e.g. events, publications, web pages, information/advertising campaigns)	20/33
4. Updating VET regulations or developing new regulations to support ECVET	19/33
5. Broad testing strategies (e.g. pilot projects, applying ECVET in a fraction of the systems)	14/33
6. Gathering evidence for policy-makers on advantages and disadvantages of ECVET (impact assessment)	9/33
7. Wait and see	4/33

Source: Adapted from Cedefop, *Monitoring ECVET implementation strategies in Europe*, working paper No 18, 2013 http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/6118_en.pdf [accessed 5.6.2013].

⁽³⁾ Belgium-Flanders reported no strategy.

Figure 3: ECVET added value, percentage of respondents



Nevertheless, when asked which strategies they apply to develop ECVET, four of 33 countries report a ‘wait and see’ strategy. The majority, 28 of 33, focus on establishing a policy environment that would make ECVET possible – for instance, by introducing the learning outcomes approach in their national qualifications systems.

One in five respondents expressed doubt about ECVET’s value in their countries, arguing for instance that its objectives can be achieved through their own credit transfer systems or flexible education and training environments. Moreover, 48 % of respondents see ECVET’s value mostly for implementation of learning outcomes; which is indeed a condition for such credit transfer systems. The picture emerging indicates that perceived value of ECVET is closely related to the learning outcome orientation paradigm, but that respondents have not yet perceived an urgent need for such credit transfer systems.

Challenges

ECVET is complex, involving a plethora of bodies/organisations operating in vocational education and training in all sectors. Its specific role within and contribution to national lifelong learning policies and mobility is not as clear as would be necessary for more ambitious policies.

Links with other instruments (4)

Validation mechanisms allow non-formal and informal learning to be certified (5), while ECVET concerns formal pathways/qualifications. But there is a close connection between validation and ECVET as *validated* learning outcomes could be recognised as ECVET credits, allowing progress towards a full qualification. Whether countries can acknowledge and encourage this role for ECVET will depend on how far they have implemented learning outcomes and on the validation mechanisms they have in place.

European/national qualification frameworks (EQF/NQF) have introduced learning outcomes in qualifications at different levels and thus *created one of the conditions for ECVET*.

EQAVET introduces procedures and guidelines for improving and maintaining quality within each qualification system, and thus *ensures transparency and trust among European countries*.

Guidance and counselling are important to inform individuals on how ECVET can be of use to them. At present, citizens know very little of ECVET, although

(4) The new EU initiative, ‘European area of skills and qualifications’, which the European Commission announced as part of its *Rethinking education* strategy, aims to achieve closer coordination of European and national instruments to achieve transparency and recognition of qualifications and support lifelong learning.

(5) Council recommendation of 20 December 2012 on validation of non-formal and informal learning sets 2018 as the date by which Member States should introduce ‘appropriate arrangements’.

20 out of 33 countries report 'marketing' activities for stakeholders (Table 1).

Moving between general and vocational education ('permeability')

In qualification systems, qualifications at EQF level 4 are frequently used to test ECVET. Level 4 is a 'traditional' vocational qualification level, even though ECVET is expected to cover all levels of EQF.

In higher education, ECTS is another credit transfer system established to ease credit transfers between higher education institutions and developed in the Bologna process framework. It is primarily and to a large extent based on inputs such as course length and number of hours.

While for the moment ECTS and ECVET are developed separately, bridges between the two systems would also ease permeability between vocational and other qualifications. Current attempts to define ECTS in terms of learning outcomes may be a step in supporting their convergence.

Compatibility

There is discussion on award and use of credit points in ECVET. While agreeing to base ECVET on units of learning outcomes, countries find it difficult to assign credit points to these outcomes. Moreover, credit points are seen as incompatible with national systems allocating credits on the basis of notional learning time, i.e. namely on learning inputs, as well as outcomes.

Primarily learning outcome-oriented, existing vocational credit systems, e.g. such as in Denmark, Slovenia, Finland, and the UK are based on a combination of inputs and learning outcomes.

Governance

ECVET has two levels of governance. Education and learning providers develop ECVET to ease student exchange and transfer learning acquired abroad. On the other hand, the European Commission and national governments through the ECVET network aim to provide the institutional conditions for its full implementation. So far mainly education and training providers are involved in ECVET.

However, national systems need to develop standards of assessment based on learning outcomes, and allow recognition and accumulation of credits between countries.

This in turn requires involvement of the social partners, some of whom find the present structure of ECVET to lack clarity.

Policy implications

While most countries are now laying down foundations for ECVET, full implementation is unlikely in the near future. Many countries are concentrating on setting up qualifications frameworks and validation procedures. ECVET itself remains still largely limited to transnational partnerships. ECVET is associated with cross-border mobility which is less of a priority for several countries.

If ECVET only operates as a transnational transfer system allowing mobility of vocational students, its impact may remain limited. As it should contribute to recognition of learning outcomes and allow accumulation of credits towards qualifications, ECVET should be firmly and fully integrated into national lifelong learning policies and aligned with evolving validation practices.

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