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Research

Address

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on the subject of

'The European credit point system

in vocational training'

Ladies and gentlemen

As the representative of the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, it gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training conference, and I am also pleased about the great interest which you have shown in this event. Our meeting today is taking place at exactly the right time: the European Commission has included its proposal on the European credit point system in vocational education and training (ECVET) in a European consultation process which should be concluded by the end of March 2007. I see this event as an important contribution to this consultation process, in which we will participate and put forward the German position, which takes into account the views of the social partners and other vocational training institutions in particular.

Perhaps I can start with a brief outline of the European and national context, in terms of education policy, for the important ECVET initiative, which derives from a clear mandate from the European Education Ministers within the framework of the Copenhagen Process. In December 2006, this mandate was strengthened by a joint 'Helsinki Declaration' by the European Education Ministers and top representatives of the European social partners.

European cooperation on vocational education and training long had a shadowy existence and lagged substantially behind the dynamic developments in the higher education sector (the Bologna process). It was also becoming increasingly apparent that the European Member States were also all facing growing challenges of the same kind in vocational education and training which required agreed proposals for action and a voluntary coming together. The creation of the European Economic Area and the European labour market is having an increasingly strong and direct impact on education policy. European integration and commercial interlinking at international level, as well as swift technological change, have led to new qualification requirements in national and international labour markets. Europe and its Member States face increasing global competition. Geographical distances are becoming increasingly meaningless as a result of new information and communications technologies. With its living and social standards, which are high in international terms, its limited mineral resources and its high dependency on exports, and in addition to its good infrastructure and its democratic and social culture, Europe has an important competitive advantage which should be protected and developed: the high level of education and training on the part of our citizens, the strength and capacity to develop innovation and to adjust to new living and working requirements. Additionally, our companies in Europe increasingly need employees who, in addition to their technical vocational skills, have the capacity to work together with other people across language and cultural boundaries.

This is particularly true in the case of Germany which, as a leading world exporter, with new neighbouring countries bordering the growth countries of Eastern Europe, has a particular interest in creating a European employment area and a European education area.

The Copenhagen Declaration of 30 November 2002 on increased cooperation in vocational education and training, made by the European ministers with responsibility for vocational education and training and by the European Commission, was a decisive breakthrough in giving a new status, not to say priority, to vocational education and training as part of European educational cooperation.

The Copenhagen Declaration formulates specific goals and instruments for vocational education and training up to 2010 and thus provides the opportunity to create a European education area that is accessible to citizens and to make a substantial contribution, by means of vocational education and training, towards making Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economic area in the world. As well as the objectives of strengthening the European dimensions of vocational education and training by supporting mobility, the acquisition of intercultural skills and increased cooperation as well as supporting transparency in qualifications, the Copenhagen Process is increasingly characterised by the creation of joint European instruments to bring about convergence in vocational education and training. The European qualifications framework and the European credit point system for vocational education and training are two outstanding initiatives in this respect.

From the outset, Germany has been active in helping to design the process of voluntary convergence in vocational education and training through the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, which is in overall charge, by agreement with the *Länder* and social partners, and has moved the process forward with proposals of its own. We were one of the very few EU countries to be actively involved in all the EU working groups concerned with the implementation of the Copenhagen Process, and I would particularly like to emphasise the EUROPASS, EQF and ECVET developments. We were always guided by the following basic principles in the joint development of new instruments:

- the voluntary nature of the application of new instruments in the Member States;
- respect for national educational legislation and provisions;
- the bottom-up approach (voluntary cooperation by States and their leaders at various levels, no rigid top-down requirements from the Commission);
- the inclusion of social partners.

At national level also, we have set up committees to deal with these European instruments, involving the *Länder* and social partners in particular, which have helped to influence the European discussion.

It was particularly important to us that the special features of our national system, particularly the dual system, be taken into account in our work in a European context – not in the sense of our system being imposed on other States but rather in the sense of an equal role for the systems and for initiatives being designed in a manner that can be adapted equally by different systems.

In the meantime, the further development of national vocational education policy has indirectly and sometimes even directly become increasingly characterized by thoughts of reform at European level. I would like to give a topical example of this. An innovation group on vocational education and training convened by Ms Annette Schavan, the Federal Education Minister, has set itself the target of structural improvement and a better overall structure for the national vocational education and training system. The following proposals are being discussed there and have in part already been agreed:

- the creation of a German national qualification framework which goes beyond the educational sector (feasibility study, EQF as reference, joint committee representing the federal government and the *Länder*)
- the creation of a model for nationally standardised systems, to be derived from training regulations, of training components that can be credited (the objectives being to facilitate movement between the subdivisions of the education system for particular groups of people such as older applicants and those who have dropped out of training; system-related flexibility and dovetailing of initial training and further education; subsequent qualification for young adults; procuring additional training resources in businesses)
- implementing the new legal options of the German Vocational Education and Training Act (Berufsbildungsgesetz – BBiG) for long-term periods of qualification abroad in professional training (by creating sustainable exchange networks with planning certainty over a number of years and intelligent exchange and service structures in Europe).

These proposals were either partly inspired by the European developments or are of great importance for achieving and implementing European instruments in national practice.

I will now talk about the Commissions' ECVET proposal and its possible contribution to the improvement of European cooperation on vocational education and training.

Please do not expect me to give you the Federal Government's official position, because we of course want to include all voices and positions in the current consultation process in Germany before coming to a final view. Naturally, however, I would like to comment in general on the Commission's ECVET proposal, in part on the basis of on my experience as a member of the ECVET working group and on my knowledge of the previous history of ECVET.

The Commission's proposal on ECVET must be understood as a supplementary instrument to help ensure greater transparency, acceptance of credit points and recognition of skills and qualifications within Europe. It is mainly concerned with cross-border educational mobility, in other words with exchange periods during vocational training. ECVET is a tool for voluntary use, no more and no less. ECVET is closely connected with the European qualification framework and will certainly also become an important element of the EUROPASS once it is implemented.

Like the European Qualifications Framework, ECVET pursues the demanding goal of depicting learning results and thus 'outcome', instead of merely building on input factors such as length of training and curriculum requirements. The goal is to establish what someone can do and not at what educational establishment and for what period of time he learnt something. This distinguishes ECVET from other credit point systems, particularly the ECTS.

The core elements of ECVET have already been presented to you today by other speakers, and for that reason I would prefer to discuss questions and consequences of ECVET for our vocational education and training system which are still outstanding.

The Commission's ECVET proposal represents a substantially shortened and partly modified adoption of basic principles from a final report, together with annexes, prepared by the European ECVET working group. These documents also contain further details on the practical implementation of the proposal. For an overall assessment, it is sensible to look at these texts, which the Commission has made available online.

The work on ECVET proved difficult. This was firstly because the vocational education and training systems (school-based, dual, company-based) were very varied by comparison with the higher education sector and the responsibilities for vocational education and training (central, federal and regional decision-making, independent VET boards) and the parties involved (governments, regional authorities, schools, companies, boards, other educational establishments) were very varied. Secondly,

it was difficult because of the different models which brought together the Commission, CEDEFOP and about twenty EU experts from 14 EU countries, ETUC and Unice with ECVET.

On many issues we were able to achieve joint agreements, but compromise wording was sometimes necessary in order to deal with the considerable differences between systems and their specific regulations. Finally, it was quite often necessary to choose open formulations in order to leave room for national interpretation in accordance with the special features of the national systems.

On other topics, it was finally impossible to achieve results. This was true in particular with regard to the establishment of a single reference standard for the award of credit points in respect of qualifications and units (to mention only a few implementation possibilities: relative share of the learning result of a unit measured by the result of the overall qualification, workload, notional learning time, fixed standard 120 points/educational year).

We expect the European consultation process specifically to achieve progress towards a single harmonised standard in Europe. Another matter which has remained outstanding, as it has incidentally also in the case of the European qualifications framework, is the question as to whether the classification of learning outcomes on the part of persons who complete units is to be measured using a standard methodology or by guidelines for the participating states, and by what other confidence-building measures the skills-oriented ECVET approach can be implemented in practice and also actually recognised in EU courses. This is also a central and still completely unresolved question for the purposes of the implementation of the EQF.

Thirdly, the stipulation in the ECVET proposal as to the nature and the rigour of the implementation requirements is still relatively open. This is true in particular of the memorandum of understanding which is intended to form the basis for international vocational education and training exchanges and the application of credit points. There are still no detailed provisions on regulations to be laid down between the parties as to the application of ECVET, which are necessary in order for there to be a uniform application of ECVET in the EU.

Finally, as with the EQF, it is most important that the consultation on the ECVET model is followed by an extensive period of testing and sampling, in order to use the knowledge so acquired to optimise the proposal before it is formally adopted as a European instrument in the Council. The Federal Ministry of Education and Research will shortly announce its own national pilot initiative for a credit point system in vocational education and training to accompany this test phase.

For the purposes of implementing ECVET in Germany, I would like to stress two points or issues which played an important role when ECVET was being prepared:

1. Does ECVET endanger the German vocational education and training system?

ECVET is based on the principles of the voluntary nature of bottom-up use and a commitment being made only between the vocational education and training partners which apply it. In this respect, it is implausible that ECVET will jeopardise the German vocational education and training system.

The application of ECVET provides for the use of skills-based units which are to be derived from full qualifications and to which numerical credit points are assigned. The goal of the European instrument is in particular to improve cross-border mobility. In quantitative terms, at present one or two per cent of the target groups at best take part in such foreign training initiatives. Even if we were to achieve a doubling in mobility as desired, the use of ECVET would, at least in the immediate future, be limited to a relatively small group of persons undergoing education and training in Germany. Simply for quantitative reasons, ECVET must not therefore be overestimated.

Qualitatively, it is conceivable for ECVET to be used in the German education and training system, particularly in further training, as the structures here are more open than in initial training and modular courses already exist to some extent. For the purpose of vocational training in the dual system, however, the objective which applies in Germany (unlike many other countries) is that of comprehensive, high quality vocational training, the vocational concept and the binding final examination, which we wish to continue to retain as characteristic of the system. However, this is also not directly jeopardised by ECVET, as the orientation and content of the units must follow the national training regulations. The application of the units would be agreed between the competent authorities or the training institutions in accordance with the national regulations and credits would have to be allowed within the framework of the national provisions. The BBiG already provides for foreign training periods to form an integral component of training courses, and credits in terms of time are less of a problem than credits in terms of content. Whether and in what manner Germany is to permit such credits in terms of content will certainly also have to be discussed in the context of the national reform processes that have already been mentioned, but it will remain a purely national decision and will not be influenced by Brussels. Accordingly, ECVET does not make it mandatory or automatic for units to be credited up to full qualification. The regulations of the Member States apply here in each case.

A second key question on ECVET should be: what added value does an ECVET system of this kind have for vocational education and training, as a matter of policy and in practice?

I would like to make four points by way of example which clarify the potential added value of ECVET in Europe and in Germany:

1. Improvement in cross-border mobility and the quality of mobility in vocational education and training.

Cross-border mobility in vocational educational and training has up to now been limited and generally of a very short duration (3 to 6 weeks in 90% of the courses). Mobility is understood in practice to be incidental rather than a serious integral component of the training. Generally, the courses are also not sufficiently certificated, so that it is not possible to make a qualitative distinction in respect of courses and participation results. Accordingly, periods spend abroad are not widely accepted or accredited.

By using ECVET, we are creating standards for mobility in a number of respects. Before the exchange, the exchange institutions are obliged to make binding specifications about units and educational results and to make agreements about assessing, certifying and accrediting them. This is connected with the expectation of increasing the quality of the exchanges, creating lasting longer-term cooperation structures, successively extending exchange periods and better acceptance of and usability of ECVET points in the national and European employment market.

Additionally, many Member States will make such units or points allowable in respect of the training in terms of time and/or content. As already explained, accreditation in terms of time is feasible even in Germany, while taking content into account is a long-term matter, but one that cannot be excluded in the case of longer foreign qualifications under the BBiG, for example in the final examination (whether as a result of being taken into account in the overall evaluation of the final examination which is still an integral unit, or by including the units in the final examination or by declaring the credit points in the final certificate).

2. Promoting the permeability of vocational education and training in Europe

The use of units and corresponding credits in vocational education and training is crucially important at European level in order to improve movement between the stages of the European qualifications framework. This presently has eight separate skills stages, to which national or sectoral full qualifications are assigned. However, 'transitional zones' or 'corridors' between these eight stages do not exist, but they could facilitate crossing in stages or climbing up to the next stage through the acquisition and certification of partial qualifications and points.

3. Making vocational education and training more flexible, and better transitions at the interfaces at national system level

Deriving units 'from full qualifications' could contribute to national system reform as well as making Europe more open. By means of the ECVET unit, standards could be set for part qualifications in vocational education and training which could be used and credited also in the purely national context. The German business associations are also giving considerable thought to the use of training components (the 'Dual with choice' proposal by the Association of German Chambers of Industry and Commerce (DIHK) and the German Confederation of Skilled Crafts (ZDH)).

Additionally, ECVET's outcome orientation may help to promote the skills orientation of German training courses and achieve better recognition for skills which are actually proven as opposed to formal course completion certificates.

4. Thoughts about a European strategy

The European credit-point model in vocational education and training is based on clear instructions from the European education ministers and is very likely to become a reality in Europe. It is certainly better in this case for Germany, with all the particularities of its system, to cooperate in developing a model which all Member States can implement than for it to allow a model to be developed by other EU states to which it can merely respond as an observer, while finding itself in difficulties because of an external development. ECVET is also important in terms of educational policy in view of the common long-term goal of establishing a common credit point system for vocational education and training and higher education. When the outcome-orientated ECVET is combined with the input-orientated ECTS system, ECVET will occupy a strong position only if it is already tried and tested and matured and can then be combined with ECTS on the same level, in other words with skills-based output orientation and the objective of real possibilities of crossing over between vocational education and training and higher education by means of credit points.

Ladies and gentlemen, the German EU Presidency is aware of its special responsibility for the consultation process on ECVET in the first half of 2007. We will take an objective and proactive role in the sense of constructively promoting and improving EU proposals. In the further consultation process, we will, jointly with the European Commission, cast further light on the risks and weaknesses but also the opportunities and strengths of ECVET. This evaluation will also include the question of administrative outlay, measured by the added value for educational institutions and the individual. The European consultation process will finish by the end of March at the latest. During the German EU Presidency, we wish to cooperate with the Commission in the evaluation of the views from the EU Member States, support it where appropriate in developing further proposals for improvements and

then close the European ECVET consultation process with conclusions at the European Conference of the German EU Presidency on vocational education and training on 4 and 5 June 2007 in Munich.

For the purpose of preparing Germany's national position on ECVET, we will endeavour to end the substantive work if possible by early March 2007, as we need the remaining time for procedural consultations. The consultation questions in the Commission's ECVET proposal should largely be the guiding principle for the position.

Nationally, we have provided for open and broad consultation. This includes views received by us being honestly evaluated and considered. Considered on the one hand when the federal government and the *Länder* adopt their own position, but considered on the other hand quite practically and physically by the official German position being sent to the Commission together with an evaluation of all views received from social partners, associations and committees and all relevant papers.

I am glad that we were able reach agreement with the German Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung – BIBB) that the BIBB will actively support us in this process, particularly with the evaluation of views received, and I would expressly like to thank the BIBB at this point.

I would like to encourage you to take part as intensively as possible in the consultation process and to submit your opinions and views, if possible, via your umbrella associations, in order for overall positions to be drawn up there. We will also, in accordance with the previous good tradition, hold a consultation meeting with the federal authorities, the *Länder*, trade unions and business associations in order to prepare the ECVET position.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am aware that the European developments and specifically the proposal for a European credit point system have not met with an exclusively favourable reaction but also with critical questions and evident scepticism. Against this background, it is important that I should stress once again that both sets of instruments in respect of the EQF and ECVET are based on the principle that their use should be voluntary. The question of what performance and examination requirements lead to what conclusions remains a question of national regulation alone. Germany's responsibility for the design of its education and training system remains unchanged.

We have the original task of adjusting the system of vocational education and training, by means of structural improvements and reforms, to fit in with national and European requirements and at the same time of optimising the tried and tested dual system.

In this respect, I am certain that we will have some interesting and lively discussions at the conference today.

I hope you will enjoy the day.