

Ján Figel'—Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Youth

Concluding remarks

CEDEFOP AGORA Conference—Building A European VET Area

Thessaloniki, 27 April 2007

Check against delivery

Dear Minister <Minister of Education or Labour from Portugal is invited – to be confirmed>
Dear Member of the European Parliament <Mr Jan Andersson, Chairman of the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs>

Dear Mr Chairman

Distinguished guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am pleased to be here with you in Thessaloniki. I would like to thank CEDEFOP and the German Presidency for organising this conference and for their kind invitation.

Although I know the Centre and its activities rather well, it is the first time I have the opportunity to come to Thessaloniki to visit you.

This is why I would like to start by addressing the staff of the Centre.

Cedefop—together with Eurofound in Dublin—is one of the bodies that can be regarded as the harbingers of the agencies of the EU.

Both were created in 1975. At the time, Cedefop had its headquarters in Berlin; in fact, that was before the iron curtain fell, so it was West Berlin to be precise.

When operations moved from Berlin to Thessaloniki in 1995, the relocation was not easy for the Centre and its staff, but it was successfully accomplished.

The environment for European policies on vocational education and training has greatly improved since CEDEFOP's foundation, and I am proud to say that the Centre did a lot to make it happen.

The tasks of your centre have grown in complexity and significance. Your products and services now look to a growing constituency which includes the European Commission, the Member States of the Union, the social partners, the European Parliament, regional authorities, and vocational–training researchers and practitioners.

Over more than three decades, Cedefop has stimulated cooperation and helped us design and refine our policies for education and training. Let me just recall some of them.

- Transparency and the Europass;
- Quality Assurance;
- Exchange and networking, especially the Study Visits Programme;
- Validation of non–formal and informal learning; and
- The European Qualifications Framework and the Credit System for vocational education and training.

In all these years of research, advice, and documentation, Cedefop has adapted to new demands and changing contexts. The Centre has become a point of reference for vocational education and training in the EU.

I would like to thank all the people and organisations that have contributed to this:

- the social partners;
- scientists and researchers;
- partner organisations in the many networks;
- the Greek government and the city of Thessaloniki;
- the members of the Governing Board.

Above all, I wish to express my gratitude to the staff of the Centre. Let us not forget that if Cedefop has become a recognised player in vocational education and training it is mainly thanks to your efforts and commitment.

I thank you for your dedication and I encourage you to keep up the good work.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In 2005 the Lisbon strategy was re-launched and focussed on growth and jobs. The re-launch involved stressing the role and importance of Education and Training for Europe's economic success and social cohesion.

This was a logical move. Education and training, research and innovation, are essential to boost our growth potential and preparing the future in the knowledge era.

If Europe is serious about its economic and social tasks, we have to ensure an effective use of resources, a future-oriented design of vocational education and training, and new approaches to learning in schools and at work.

We should also support the establishment of learning partnerships, in particular at local and regional levels, and the creation of learning-conducive environments in all settings.

Lifelong learning is key. Lifelong learning should become a fact of life for the citizens of Europe. In particular, continuing vocational training needs to develop substantially over the next years.

We have to tackle the issue of a large number of low-skilled people, and make sure that we have enough high-quality and appropriately skilled VET professionals.

In Helsinki the Ministers and the European Social Partners have agreed to continue the work started and to develop the Copenhagen process.

The tools for improving quality, transparency and recognition of competences and qualifications will be further developed. More attention will be paid to the image, the status and the attractiveness of VET.

In this context, let me remind you of the first Euroskills competition in Rotterdam next year. Euroskills will be the perfect opportunity to showcase Europe's VET systems and promote VET among young people and their families.

At present, 14 countries are involved, but all countries that participate in the Copenhagen process can and should join in Euroskills. The Commission will support participation through the Leonardo da Vinci programme.

The Helsinki Communiqué will guide our work over the next months and years. The text identified the challenges and indicated where VET can make a difference.

However, moving from strategy setting to implementation will not be easy.

The communiqué is right when it puts the stress on mutual learning, co-operative work and sharing know-how and best practices.

A quick look at our benchmarks shows why it is crucial for Member States to get the job done and to keep up the pace, as we are still quite a way off.

<The table is attached, Mr Figel', you may want to give some figures here. Your overall message is *Faster progress is needed to achieve our goals*.

- Constant improvement in early school leavers until 2005, but stagnation in 2006.
- Not enough improvement among low achievers in reading.
- Little progress in upper secondary attainment
- Target reached for maths and science graduates in the 2000–2004 period. However, good EU average hides uneven national results.
- Slight improvement on gender balance, but not enough.
- Lifelong learning participation remains stubbornly low.

Lifelong learning data look good only because of breaks in the series in several countries. Actual participation rates are over 2% lower>.

Why do we have this gap between the goals we set and their implementation?

We all agree that we cannot accept a situation in which 15% of our young people leave school early and almost 20% find reading and writing difficult.

Why is change so difficult? One explanation we can rule out is students dropping out to work, at least in most countries.

The unfortunate reality is that youth unemployment stands at 18.5%—still twice as high as the overall unemployment rate in the EU.

We have to redouble our efforts. Progress is visible in a number of areas, but we cannot rest on our laurels.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The European commission, together with its partners, is keeping its part of the deal. We continue to develop and implement common European principles and tools.

We continue to support the competitiveness of the European labour market and to facilitate mobility of learners and workers.

We continue to build what will eventually be a European area of VET.

The European Qualifications Framework and the European Credit system for VET have been among our priorities for some years now.

These tools were to provide a common currency through which national qualifications and skills would be easily compared, understood and converted.

I am pleased to tell you the legislative work is approaching its end. The EQF is being discussed in the Council and the European Parliament.

I am confident it will be adopted by the end of the year—under the Portuguese presidency.

<Mr Figel', light remark at the Portuguese minister if s/he's there>.

As to ECVET, we are studying the replies we have received from our consultation that ended last month.

The conference called by the German Presidency in Munich in June will be the perfect venue to present the first results and discuss what to do next.

ECVET is a complicated jigsaw puzzle and it is taking us a bit longer than foreseen to piece it together, but the extra time will result in a better product.

This tool was originally designed with formal learning system in mind, particularly to support the mobility of young people.

Thanks to our dialogue with stakeholders and potential users, we are realising that it has a much wider potential for use.

A third instrument is the Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning, which is meant to support Member States in their efforts to provide dropouts and low achievers with the key qualifications for life and work.

We should all be thinking about ways to increase the number of young people who have these basic, minimum skills.

And this is not only about economic prowess; it is—I would say—a moral imperative. People, especially young people, below a certain skills threshold are likely to end up at the margins of our societies.

They are also likely to miss the opportunities to participate in social debates and political decisions. Before they know it, they will find themselves in enter a vicious circle where they will be unable to stand up for their rights.

This is a completely unacceptable scenario in the Union we want.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

This conference, as a follow-up to the Helsinki conference of last December, is a first step to develop and implement the actions identified in the Communiqué.

In the past two days, many questions for the future development of VET have been addressed. I do not think that we already have all the answers.

However, it is clear that events like this serve to stimulate the debate among policy makers, researchers, social partners, and practitioners.

We have a real opportunity over the next eighteen month to make a significant advance in the field of vocational education and training at European level, with the proposals which are on the table now or will be in the coming month.

These meetings help us to make real progress. I expect substantial step forward our goals by the next ministerial meeting in the Copenhagen process, under the French Presidency at the end of 2008. I know I can count on your support and co-operation.

Thank you.

Appendix: Overview on progress in the 5 benchmark areas EU 27 (last update Feb 2007)

Benchmark		2000	Today (2005)	Trend 2010	Bench- mark 2010	Likelihood of achieving the benchmark
Early school leavers, (%)*		17.6	15.4 (2006)	14	10	Low
Low achieving 15 year olds, reading, %		19.4	19.8 (2003)	20	-20% (15.5)	Low
Youth education attainment (upp.sec %)		76.6	77.4	78	85	Low
MST graduates	Total	687 000	819 000 (04) (+19%)	1070 000 (+55%)	790 000 (+15%)	High (already achieved)
	% females	30.7	31.2 (04)	32	Better balance	Medium
Participation in LLL, % of adults*		7.1	9.7	10.5	12.5	Medium

* Change in series (especially in 2003 for LLL), changes in time series have overstated progress since 2000 for LLL (little real progress)