



Continuity, consolidation and change

European policy-makers discuss the achievements of European VET policy and how to maintain progress despite the economic downturn

'European cooperation in education and training has produced results in three areas: national reforms of lifelong learning and qualification systems; the modernisation of higher education and vocational education and training (VET) systems; and the establishment of European instruments supporting quality, transparency and mobility. However, this is not enough; most of the benchmarks for 2010 will not be reached.' This was the frank assessment of Ján Figel', European Commissioner for education, training youth and culture, of the progress made by European Union (EU) Member States, between 2002 and 2008, in implementing the Education and training 2010 work programme.

Mr Figel' was speaking to more than 140 policy-makers, researchers, social partners and practitioners from almost 30 countries at 'Continuity consolidation and change: towards a European era of vocational education and training', a conference in the Czech EU Presidency's programme, organised by Cedefop on 16-17 March 2009 in Thessaloniki. The conference was based on Cedefop's European VET policy report, launched on the conference's opening day. Cedefop has a mandate to report on progress every two years. The conference focused on progress in VET and, in particular, on how to resolve the tension between consolidating progress to date and continuing to strengthen European cooperation while keeping up with changing labour market demands and tackling a severe economic crisis.

Common aims, tools and principles

European VET policy priorities are set out in the Copenhagen process (an agreement between the European Commission, some 32 countries – including all EU Member States – and the social partners to strengthen European cooperation in VET).



Commissioner Figel' with Cedefop's latest European VET policy report, 'Continuity, consolidation and change'

The latest review of the Copenhagen process took place in November 2008 at a meeting of the European Commission, ministers from the countries involved and the social partners. The Bordeaux communiqué, which followed the meeting, outlined the importance of consolidating the achievements of the Copenhagen process. Certainly, everyone at the conference agreed that it has brought positive results and, as Commissioner Figel' said, has supported national reforms.

Under the process, countries have agreed on which areas to work on to improve VET. All want to improve the quality of training provided and make it more relevant to labour market needs. Countries also want to attract more people into taking VET courses. According to Cedefop's analysis based on Eurostat



population projections made in 2004, there will be 600 000 fewer young VET graduates in 2030 than in 2005.

Supported by the process, all countries have been busy introducing reforms and programmes that often combine financial incentives with greater flexibility to move between general education and VET. Access to higher education through VET studies is also being made easier. And special initiatives have been introduced to support vulnerable groups to ensure access to VET for all (see Box).

Examples of policy reforms

- Expansion/development and implementation of national qualifications frameworks
- Implementation/realisation of lifelong learning strategies for special target groups (disadvantaged, older workers, women)
- Simplification of recognition of prior learning
- Development of accreditation systems for VET and/or higher education
- General education as part of all VET programmes (ISCED 3 and 4)
- VET as optional part of general education
- Modularisation/double (combining general and VET) qualification
- Financial incentives (examples are tax incentives, subsidies, vouchers, learning accounts, savings schemes, cheap loans, training funds and combinations of these instruments)

Source: Cedefop European VET policy report, 2008.

Countries have also experimented with new types of VET policies, including establishing centres of vocational excellence and providing apprenticeship type learning in higher education. An example is the higher-level apprenticeship presented by Silvia Spattini (University of Modena and Reggio Emilia). This is an apprenticeship contract for young people aged 18 to 29 that can lead to a upper-secondary or university (including PhD), or other higher education qualification. Apprentices are employed and have an individual training plan. Qualifications are obtained through a combination of formal and on-the-job training and individual study.

The 2009 European year of creativity and innovation has also sparked debate on the role of creativity and innovation in VET policies. Examples of good practice include national competitions for students and promoting cooperation between VET students, artists and cultural activities to help develop key competences such as creative thinking. Research for other examples of innovation and creativity and how to encourage it in VET policies is underway.

Following the Copenhagen process, countries have not only agreed common aims, but have also made significant progress in developing European tools and principles. The European qualifications framework (EQF) is a tool for comparing qualifications throughout Europe. It supports not only mobility between countries, but also between the different parts of national education and training, between different economic sectors and throughout the labour market.

The EQF has acted as a catalyst for reform, not least because it is based on learning outcomes, which measure what a person can do at the end of any type of learning experience. This is a radical shift from the current emphasis on learning processes (curricula, duration and place of learning). At the conference, Jens Bjørnåvold, Cedefop's EQF expert, spoke of its 'snowball' effect as nearly all countries in the Copenhagen process have either developed, are developing, or plan to develop national qualification frameworks to link to the EQF. Jikita Pohankova of the Czech Republic's National Institute for Technical and Vocational Education provided evidence how establishing a national qualifications framework to link to the EQF is supporting a shift from policies for VET to broader policies for lifelong learning. Greece too is working on a national qualifications framework. Konstantinos Kouskoukis, General Secretary for lifelong learning of the Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs in Greece, remarked that the EQF provides the key to opening up EU education and training systems. He also reaffirmed his country's commitment to creating a system of lifelong learning.

Europass, a portfolio of five instruments available in 26 languages that help make people's skills and qualifications more easily understood is another tool that emerged from the Copenhagen process. Already popular, its use is growing. Since Europass' launch in February 2005 and April 2009, 5.1 million

Europass CVs have been completed online. Common European principles have been agreed to set up systems of lifelong guidance and to validate informal and non-formal learning. Both issues are high on European and national policy agendas. More European tools are on their way. European Commission proposals for Recommendations on a European credit system for VET (to enable credits for learning outcomes to be transferred from one qualifications system to another) and a European quality assurance reference framework for VET (outlining quality indicators and principles to help countries monitor improvements of their VET systems) have been adopted recently.



Jakub Dürr, the Czech Republic's Deputy Minister for Education, with Konstantinos Kouskoukis, General Secretary for lifelong learning of the Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs in Greece

Common problems

Although there is progress and many examples of good practice, the conference emphasised that reforms still need to be translated into results. Progress in reaching the EU's education and training benchmarks is disappointing. For example, only around 9.7% of the adult working population participate in lifelong learning (much of which is vocational), well below the EU's benchmark of 12.5% by 2010. European tools have been developed, but still have to be implemented. Qualification frameworks do not yet make a real difference for people's job or geographical mobility. Member States are working to link national qualifications frameworks to the EQF and to develop national VET quality assurance frameworks. Both are demanding tasks. The European credit system for VET still requires substantial work. Recognition of non-formal and informal learning is not cheap, according to the OECD's Patrick Werquin, who told the conference that it remains unclear whether its benefits outweigh the

costs, especially since the results may not have full social recognition.

Aviana Bulgarelli, Cedefop's director, added her voice to those of the European Commission and others in arguing for stronger links between VET and the labour market. She emphasised the importance of forecasting skill needs. With 78 million low-skilled people and an ageing population, Europe faces a potential skill shortage and yet only around a third of employees participate in continuing training courses organised by enterprises. Through the EU's 'new skills for new jobs' initiative work is going to define a common approach to anticipate skill needs and identify potential shortages. In 2008, Cedefop provided the first pan-European forecast for skill needs. It pointed to a substantial number of new jobs over 2006-20 that will require high-level qualifications, while most job opportunities will be for those with medium-level and high-level qualifications. Although, owing to the recession, the numbers of jobs may change, the underlying trend of the demand for higher skills is expected to continue. The sharp decline in jobs for those with no or low-level formal qualifications, appears inevitable. These accounted for around a third of all jobs in 1996, but are expected to account for less than a fifth in 2020. The danger is that a future skill shortage could be made worse by a reduction in investment in skills now. Later in 2009, Cedefop will publish its skill supply forecast.

With VET reform far from complete the question is whether the momentum that has driven progress so far can be maintained. The Copenhagen process is due to end in 2010. Helene Clark, the European Commission's director of lifelong learning policies and programmes emphasised the importance of the new strategic framework for beyond 2010. She called for a far-reaching debate on how to position the Copenhagen process into the new Education and training strategy 2020 which was adopted in May. Micheline Scheys, preparing for the Belgian EU Presidency in the second half of 2010, highlighted the need to communicate more effectively with citizens the work being done under the Copenhagen process and to the role civil society may play to raise awareness of VET reform.

There is no shortage of difficulties to overcome to keep the momentum going. Struggling enterprises will find it hard to resist the temptation to cut



spending on training during the current crisis. Member States will have to focus on the economic crisis and its aftermath. There is a real risk that they will cut funding for VET as they grapple with budget deficits. Implementing European tools is a tricky business. Different interests not only between, but within countries have to be reconciled. The Copenhagen process has already been underway for eight years and there may be signs of reform fatigue as progress, although steady, can, sometimes, be painfully slow. A new European Parliament in June 2009 and a new European Commission in November 2009 may have new priorities and different ideas for VET.

Common sense

However, there are many good reasons to continue VET reform. Manfred Tessaring, Cedefop's head of research, outlined that Europe not only faces economic troubles and rising unemployment. An ageing population, climate change which is creating 'green' jobs and requiring existing jobs to develop new skills, technological advances and an increasing mismatch between the skills people have and those wanted on the labour market are all reasons for investing more in VET rather than cutting back. Mario Sepi, President of the European Economic and Social Committee also drew attention to the role of VET in the European social model, which needed further development during the current crisis.

Referring to the Recovery Plan for Europe Commissioner Figel called investment in people as the type of 'smart investment' needed to tackle current economic problems. He was backed by Andrea Benassi, secretary-general of UEAPME (the European association of small businesses) who stressed the need to use periods of unemployment and short-time working during the recession for training.

Although speaking specifically about skill forecasting, the argument of Marc-Antoine Estrade, from France's Ministry of Economy, Industry and Employment, that success depends on strengthening national, regional and sector coordination to build partnerships and information sharing networks surely applies more widely. Certainly the need to continue cooperation and develop partnerships is understood in the Czech Republic. As Jakub Dürr, the Czech Republic's Deputy Minister for Education, pointed out, strengthening education and business partnerships is a priority of the Czech EU Presidency.

Progress also depends on evidence to guide VET and related policies. Providing such evidence at European

level is one of Cedefop's prime tasks. The next review of the Copenhagen process will be at a ministerial meeting in Bruges in December 2010. Following its mandate in from the Bordeaux communiqué, Cedefop will provide a new report to help the European Commission, ministers and social partners to consider the next steps. The report will take stock of the Copenhagen process and review its strengths and weaknesses.



Cedefop's European VET policy report available from: http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/etv/Information_resources/Bookshop/publication_details.asp?pub_id=528

The Copenhagen process is an example of successful cooperation between the European Commission, Member States and social partners. It has been instrumental in the progress made towards the European era of VET referred to in the conference title. But that era has not yet arrived. We have yet to see whether current economic problems will undermine VET reform in Europe, or provide a greater incentive to continue work, consolidate progress and change not only what, but also the ways we learn.

More information on the conference is available from: http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/agora/vet_policy_2009/