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The role of the social partners in implementing European tools and principles*Increasing the relevance of education and training to the labour market***Joint Conference of Cedefop and the Social Partners****European Parliament, Brussels, 24 and 25 November 2011****Conference Conclusions**

This conference was jointly organised by Cedefop and the social partners to address the challenges involved in implementing the European tools and principles for education, training and learning. By providing an updated overview of developments, the conference allowed for a systematic discussion on how social partners can contribute to further strengthening the relevance and impact of these initiatives.

Common to all the tools is their focus on the outcomes of learning, on what a person knows, understands and is actually able to do, rather than a concentration on how, how long and where somebody has been learning. The focus on learning outcomes is helpful to employers and employees alike - clarifying for learners the objective of their learning process and for employers what they can expect from a particular qualification.

The event presented the tools and instruments in a broader European context of education and training and employment and this made clear that these initiatives cannot operate on their own but need to be linked to a wider policy strategy. This can be done by, for example, considering what could be the contributions of the European sectoral social dialogue, the new sectoral skills councils and the revision of the Directive on professional qualifications¹. The conference offered an opportunity to systematically reflect on how far we have come in developing and implementing European tools and principles.

The conference addressed in the plenary session the issues of implementation, synergies and impact by considering the following issues: how the European tools and principles help to make education and training institutions and systems more flexible, relevant and modern; how they can support lifelong learning and mobility of individual learners and

¹ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CONSLEG:2005L0036:20110324:EN:PDF>

workers; what social partners expect from them and how can they contribute to their implementation. In addition to the plenary sessions, the conference was divided into three parallel working groups.

The theme of Working Group 1 was “The European tools and principles and their support for the renewal and reform of VET and lifelong learning”. It focused on the contribution of European tools and principles to the modernisation of national education and training systems. Speakers reviewed the progress made so far by presenting examples from Portugal and Denmark parallel to the social partner’s views.

There was agreement between employers and trade unions that the shift to learning outcomes provides an opportunity to increase the transparency of education and training, to improve the relevance of qualifications and to make education and training institutions accountable for what is delivered. The role of EU tools in modernising education and training systems is to complement existing national tools, inspire new developments and serve as reference points. The relevance of the tools is increasing through the learning outcomes approach, transparent processes and the active involvement of stakeholders, including social partners.

More specifically social partners could contribute to:

- awareness raising among various target groups at different levels,
- implementation at all stages (like assessment and accreditation),
- use of the social dialogue to reflect on education and training developments and the usefulness of the tools
- active involvement in the further development and the evaluation of the impact of tools at EU and national level.

Working Group 2 “The European tools and principles and the individual learner/employee” focused on how far the European tools and principles are able to address the needs of individual learners and workers. The speakers reviewed progress using country examples (Belgium/Wallonia, Denmark) and paying particular attention to progress made on credit systems and validation. The social partners (Confederation of German Employers' Associations, German Industrial Union of Metalworkers) reported on their experiences in implementing the tools.

Both employers and employees pointed to the:

- growing importance of identification and assessment of skills and competences acquired outside the formal education system, at work and in life
- need for a coherent approach for validating learning at the workplace and
- key role social partners have in the process of EU tools implementation together with sector representatives

- necessity to involve all stakeholders at all levels (national, regional, local) in the implementation of EU tools
- need for continuous provision of information to all responsible actors of the education and training system so as to fully unfold the tools' impact.

The third Working Group was on “The role of sectors in implementing European tools and principles” and focused on how to release the potential of sector- and enterprise-based solutions, for example for the development of sector based qualification frameworks, the development of common qualifications standards and curricula and the promotion of validation and competence measurement. It additionally discussed how sector or company-based solutions have been used to promote the European principles and tools taking into account that during the last few years, a number of sectors have been working in this field and in particular developing common qualifications and qualifications frameworks. While sectoral approaches vary considerably in scope, capacity and sustainability, they promise to create ‘fit for purpose solutions’ by making qualifications more relevant to the labour market and by developing qualifications that respond directly to the specific needs of sectors or individual companies.

The sectoral cases of welding, construction and sports were presented and the social partner representatives confirmed their commitment and underlined the:

- need for increased action and cooperation at European, national and sectoral level,
- necessity for the direct involvement of social partners in the definition of learning outcomes and how they are used in standards, curricula and teaching methods,
- need for technical and operational support to all sectoral initiatives,
- importance of improving cooperation between different stakeholders
- crucial role of sectors in supporting and developing mutual trust and communication between partners, competent authorities, stakeholders.

The conference concluded with the presentation of the reflections from the view point of the social partners and a panel discussion that put the pieces together and pointed to the challenges ahead and how the tools and principles can be further developed in the lead-up to 2020.

Participants in the panel emphasised that particular priority must be given to a consistent development of the learning outcomes approach as this in important ways can strengthen the links between education and training and the labour market. It was furthermore stressed that qualifications frameworks now form an important part of the modernisation of education and training systems, and that the progress achieved must be built on and further strengthened. The critical role of validation of non-formal and informal learning

was also emphasised, pointing to these arrangements as critical for appreciating the broader skills and competences of individual learners and workers.

This joint event offered a rare opportunity to go beyond the traditional group of European and national policy-makers, and discuss the role of employers and trade unions in implementing the tools and principles. It is worth noting that the European cooperation process in education and training very much depends on transparency and mutual trust to succeed; without the full involvement of the social partners this transparency and trust will not be achieved.

It can be also argued that the implementation of the tools will have an impact on rights and obligations and, thus, may become more controversial as it impinges on interests of the various actors (individuals and companies). Consideration of such conflicts may in time help to establish mechanisms to resolve such conflicts and arrive at mutually acceptable solutions. While it may be too early to discuss such issues in great detail, a greater understanding of the possible implications and the role of the social partners in this context could be helpful for the future.