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## **BACKGROUND NOTE**

### **WORKSHOP ON ‘THE CHANGING NATURE AND ROLE OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN EUROPE’**

*Cedefop, Thessaloniki 25-26 June 2015*

The purpose of the workshop is to reflect systematically on the challenges and opportunities facing vocationally oriented education and training in Europe today. The workshop will help Cedefop to further develop its research activities as well strengthen the capacity of the Centre to provide policy advice and support to stakeholders at national and European level. This note presents some issues and tendencies which will help to inform, the discussions in the workshop.

While Cedefop’s skills need forecasts predict a high and slightly increased demand for medium level vocational qualifications in the next decade, several European countries now experience declining enrolment in initial VET at upper secondary level. This combined with the fact that the size and status of the VET-sector varies significantly between countries signals that the traditional VET-sector is under considerable pressure. At the same time, and contrary to this negative tendency, institutions outside the traditional VET sector are increasingly developing and offering vocationally oriented programmes. The extensive and important role played by continuing vocational education and training in the public and private sector adds to this complexity and makes the task of judging the character and boundaries of vocational education and training in Europe increasingly more difficult.

### **The definition of VET**

The way we define vocational education and training is of key importance. The following short definition provided by Cedefop <sup>(1)</sup> offers a starting point for a discussion on what we mean by and expect from vocationally oriented education and training:

*‘(VET is understood as) education and training which aims to equip people with knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences required in particular occupations or more broadly in the labour market’.*

In other words, a VET candidate must not only acquire abstract knowledge, but must be able to apply this knowledge, for example in the form of technical skills and reflective competences, to real problems in concrete situations. VET, as an implication, leans towards

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<sup>1</sup> Cedefop (2014) *Terminology of vocational education and training*, Luxembourg: Publications office

a combination of institutionalised (in the classroom) and experience based learning (at the work-place, through practise). While the delivery of VET takes many forms in different countries and institutions, a subject or discipline-oriented learning process isolated from work-processes and practise may be said to fall short of the above definition. The notion of apprenticeships as a 'pure' form of vocational education and training refers directly to this combination of learning forms and venues. The definition avoids linking VET to a particular institutional type or qualification level. This not only reflects the existing diversity of VET solutions in different countries but leaves the door open for VET to be provided for a wide group of (lifelong) learners at any level and in a wide variety of institutions.

A key question to be discussed by the workshop is whether the above understanding and definition of VET can be broadly accepted or whether it needs to be narrowed down or broadened?

### External and contextual drivers for VET change

VET is developing in a constant interaction and exchange with society outside the education and training system. How rapidly VET provisions are able and willing to react and adapt to these external influences varies, but is of crucial importance for the relevance and overall quality of provisions. The following drivers are of particular importance and could be addressed during the workshop:

First, demographic trends will have a direct impact on these size and orientation of education and training systems. The general tendency towards an ageing European population reduces the number of potential candidates seeking initial VET. The same tendency will influence the need for continuing VET and possibly point to a shift in priorities and provisions.

Second, understanding VET requires an understanding of how labour markets and work processes change: How are VET systems equipped to respond to the emergence of new occupations and jobs; how does it adjust to the weakening and/or disappearance of traditional occupations and jobs? In some European countries we can observe that the number of IVET qualifications have dropped during the last two decades (exemplified <sup>(2)</sup> by Germany where the number was reduced from more than 600 in the 1980s to 345 in 2013), reflecting changing labour market structures and requirements.

Third, national policies and priorities will have a direct impact on developments of the VET sub-sector. High ambitions on behalf of the university sector (illustrated by the EU target of 40% of all 30-34 year old in tertiary education by 2020) exemplify an approach which may directly influence the recruitment to and position of VET. The impact of overarching policies on the VET sector will vary considerably between the EU Member states, VET developments in the 'new' member states joining from 2004 and onwards are of particular interest.

A key question to be discussed by the workshop is the influence of external factors on VET; How can VET systems balance the need (of learners) for stability and predictability with the need to react to external changes, requirements and pressures?

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<sup>2</sup> Spoettl, G, and Windelband, L. (2013): *Innovations in VET – a successful paradigm shift within the Dual System in Germany*. ITB Forschungsberichte 52/2013. Bremen

## Initial VET at upper secondary level - a sector in decline?

In the 28 countries now members of the European Union, the proportion of upper secondary education students enrolled in vocational programmes has dropped from more than 60% in 2000 to less than 50% in 2013. According to UNESCO (<sup>3</sup>), Europe is part of a global tendency (<sup>4</sup>) where the proportion of initial VET students has dropped consistently since 1999. In Europe, this decline has taken place in a period where significant efforts have been made to strengthen the overall position of vocational education and training relative to other parts of the education and training system. The Copenhagen process (2002) and the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (2014) are the most important examples of efforts to move VET higher up on the political agenda and to unleash its potential. This relative decline in enrolment is frequently explained as a result of low status and esteem: VET is by many students (and their parents) seen as a second choice, inferior to general and academic education. Even in countries where VET traditionally has enjoyed a strong position, the perception of it as a low status, 'dead-end-option' is widespread. The relative decline of VET compared to other parts of the education and training system can be understood as a threat to the overall effectiveness of education and training systems, potentially undermining their ability to deliver – to society and economy - an appropriate mix of theoretical knowledge, practical skills and general competences (<sup>5</sup>). The seriousness of this threat, and whether it reflects a reality at national level (<sup>6</sup>), is currently being debated. Cedefop recognises the need for detailed analysis of developments at national level, notably addressing how enrolment and completion rates evolve differently in different parts of the IVET system.

A key question to be discussed by the workshop is whether initial VET at upper secondary level is experiencing a long term decline or not; and which could be the implications of such a decline?

### 'From cradle to grave' - VET as lifelong learning

Understanding the changing nature and role of VET requires a focus on lifelong learning and on how vocationally relevant knowledge, skills and competences are developed from 'cradle to grave'. An isolated focus on initial VET (for example exclusively addressing the age cohort 15-20 years of age) fails to observe the wider context in which VET operates and evolves. Two aspects are of particular importance for this analysis. First, and as Tesfaye (<sup>7</sup>) claims for Denmark, practically oriented learning is losing ground in primary education. Tesfaye claims that traditionally important activities, for example linked to basic crafts like woodwork, textiles etc., have disappeared from the school curricula and have not been

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<sup>3</sup> UNESCO (2015) *Unleashing the potential: Transforming technical vocational education and training*. UNESCO, Paris

<sup>4</sup> The only exception being sub-Saharan Africa.

<sup>5</sup> This is illustrated by Cedefop's forecasts on skills needs. It is estimated that in 2025, 48% of job openings in Europe will require middle level qualifications – ISCED 3 and 4. This is a slight increase compared to 2013 when the percentage was 47.2. These middle level qualifications will to a large extent be vocationally oriented.

<sup>6</sup> Statistics can be interpreted in different ways. Eurostat figures covering the period 2006-2012 point to a limited decline of approximately 6% (in total number of VET students) and 1,5% in overall proportion of upper secondary students. .

<sup>7</sup> Tesfaye, M. (2014): *Kloge Hænder. Et forsvar for håndverk og faglighed*. Gyldendal, Copenhagen

replaced by alternatives. This means that primary education is designed as a stepping stone to general upper secondary education and eventually to academic higher education, potentially under-communicating the prospects offered by VET. While it is unclear whether the Danish example is relevant also to the countries, it is necessary to reflect on the role of primary/lower secondary education as stepping stones to VET. To what extent is this linkage explicit in the countries and how is it translated in to concrete policies and practises? Second, the perception of initial VET as a 'dead-end-stream' may indicate that existing opportunities for Continuing VET (CVET) are unknown to potential users. While the emerging qualifications frameworks show some potential in this area, countries have only to a limited extent facilitated progression from initial VET into lifelong learning. Partly reflecting the extreme diversity of CVET, young VET learners will often be unaware of the existence of lifelong learning pathways. This also draws attention to the role of guidance and counselling services at this level; to what extent are these services orienting students towards VET? The question of lifelong learning is complicated by the fact that a significant part of CVET is organised in the private sector by multiple providers. These provisions are difficult to overview for young VET candidates and may discourage a VET career. To understand the changing role of IVET at upper secondary level it is important to reflect on the extent to which progression is possible and known to learners. The question is also whether lifelong learning possibilities are promoted in a transparent way and whether efforts have been made to convey this to potential candidates?

A key question for the workshop to be discussed is; how can the lifelong learning dimension of VET be strengthened?

### **'Academic drift' - the institutional 'upgrading' of VET**

Previous studies <sup>(8)</sup> demonstrate that the (above) Cedefop definition of VET captures education programmes and qualifications delivered by institutions at post-secondary and tertiary level. The study of qualifications at level 5 of the EQF, for example, shows that a significant part of these qualifications are directly related to occupations and the labour market and explicitly promotes the combination of what and how, of knowledge, skills and competences. The same observation can be made for tertiary education at levels 6-8 of the EQF where education (and training) of professions (doctors, engineers, nurses, teachers, social workers, lawyers etc.) play an important role. In a recent book, Smeby and Sutphen <sup>(9)</sup> point to a global tendency to 'upgrade' vocational education and training to higher, professional education - in particular in the fields of education, health and social work. This 'upgrading' can be seen as an 'academic drift' which potentially can change the institutional and content-character of a programme and a qualification. While academic drift is most visible as institutional change – for example by moving a particular education from the upper secondary to the tertiary level - the critical question is whether and how the content and didactics of these programmes is influenced by the 'upgrade'. The integration of training into tertiary education has in some cases been a conflicting process where practitioners and professional associations have argued for more practise based and practitioner-controlled training - warning against a development where the ideals of research and disciplinary oriented higher education is uncritically adopted. To understand the changing role of VET requires an understanding of these processes.

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<sup>8</sup> Cedefop (2014): *Qualifications at level 5 of the EQF*. Publications Office, Luxembourg

<sup>9</sup> Smeby, J.C. and Sutphen, M.: *From vocational to professional education*. Routledge, London

The following question can be addressed by the workshop: To what extent can this academic drift be identified at national level; and which are the implications for the content and delivery of VET at these levels?

### **'Vocational drift' - reclaiming VET at tertiary level**

While the academic drift described above can potentially dilute what we have described as the essence of VET - a strong labour market focus based on a combination of theoretical and practical learning - other developments in tertiary education can be understood as efforts to 'reclaim' and strengthen VET-principles. In recent years we have seen the introduction of tertiary programs consistently and deliberately combining academic studies with applied learning in the professional world, systematically doing this in cooperation with enterprises. Students will, as is the case in the German 'Berufsakademien', alternate between university education and on-the-job training, giving them the opportunity to apply concepts learnt in class to practice and vice-versa bring in new ideas from their work placements into the classroom. This approach implies that companies are treated as (more) equal partners to the university and participate in a continuous development of what can be described as a 'dual study concept'. Resulting from increased cooperation between higher education and businesses, this 'vocational drift' can now be identified in a number of European countries, promoting the combination of theoretical and practical learning as a major strength for tertiary institutions. To understand the changing role and nature of VET in Europe it is essential to understand these processes:

A key question for the workshop to address is: To which extent is this 'vocational drift' taking place; which forms does it take; and which are the implications for the content and delivery of programmes and qualifications?

### **Threats or opportunities - which are the scenarios for the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

The above trends and issues will inevitably influence European VET develops in the next decades. Taking as a starting point that vocationally oriented education and training needs to be seen as an integrated part of the overall education and training and lifelong learning system and be able to reflect the requirements of the labour market and society, the discussions in the workshop can support Cedefop in clarifying its research focus and in this way better support stakeholders at national and European level in developing this crucial part of the education and training system.

The overall question to be asked by the workshop is the following: what kind of VET sector is needed for the 21<sup>st</sup> century?