

magazine

Keeping you informed about the European Credit system for Vocational Education & Training

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The ECVET Magazine is produced with support from the European Commission. The views expressed in it do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the European Commission, which cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of this information.

Edito



Carlo Scatoli

Team Leader within the vocational training unit in the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion of the European Commission

Two statements:

- The European employment strategy is part of the Europe 2020 growth strategy and it is implemented through the European semester, a policy coordination process.

- ECVET facilitates the accumulation and transfer of assessed learning outcomes of individuals.

Spot the difference: a high level strategy, an unassuming operational tool, too easy, no fun.

There is more fun with spotting patterns, a task which has doomed loads of artificial intelligence projects to the virtual wrecking yard. No wonder we need to look around a bit before our low tech eyes and organic brains perceive the pattern that connects.

Noblesse oblige, we start with the European employment strategy, which aims at creating more and better jobs. This can be pursued through such actions as modernising wage-setting systems, converting undeclared work into regular employment or reducing taxes on labour. So far, nothing that seems able to trigger into operation any pattern recognition app just downloaded from the store into our skull. Still, some neurons are firing in that skull – since they heard about jobs.

Those early warning cells invite us to brush away setting wages and reducing taxes, and keep the focus on jobs. Creating jobs means first of all making more jobs available on the labour market. That's just the beginning however. Once a job is available,



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there needs to be somebody who's able to do the job. If the strategy only produces more jobs, the glass is half empty:☹☹, or half full:☺☺, but still half:☺. A self-respecting strategy aims at a full glass☺: more jobs available and a workforce with the skills to match those jobs.

Let's now turn from the strategy to the operational tool. ECVET is about learning outcomes. This sounds less original now than it did when its development started more than ten years ago. It is now widely accepted, and increasingly practiced, that when it comes to learning the focus needs to be on what comes out of the process: what people know and are able to do, which they didn't know and weren't able to do before that learning process. Input factors and formal features, such as the duration of a formal programme or which body hosts the learning process, matter to the extent that they facilitate achieving the expected outcomes – which can be achieved with different input factors.

European instruments, in particular the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), have played a major role in the emergence of what is now commonly called the learning outcome approach. An approach that focuses on what people know and can do rather than how they learnt to do it – their skill backpack, rather than how they filled it. Wait a minute: our neuronal interceptors are not going to leave this piece of luggage unattended. This smells of labour market.

The founding acts of ECVET and the EQF, and Europass before them, recog-

nised this smell. The very first recital of the Europass Decision says that better transparency of skills and qualifications supports both mobility of learners and “mobility for occupational purposes, between countries as well as across sectors”. The coordinated legal bases of the EQF and ECVET both refer in their first recital to “competitiveness, employment and social cohesion” as well as to “meeting the requirements of supply and demand in the European labour market”. In later recitals they mention the objective of increasing the employability of workers. ECVET pursues this goal by facilitating the recognition and transfer of units of learning outcomes acquired through flexible and individualised pathways in either institutional or informal settings.

Good that the legal basis talks about the labour market and employability, but that is just talk, no matter how legal. Not always does the real thing follow simply because a legal text invites people to do something, and when it happens the result may remain below legitimate expectations. We (who deal with ECVET) should then look for evidence that if qualifications are made up of components – sets of knowledge, skills and competences – that can be assessed and validated, then this supports people in their career pathways.

Some such evidence can be exhibited. The Dutch team of employer, employee and policy officer reported in June to

"A self-respecting strategy aims at a full glass☺: more jobs available and a workforce with the skills to match those jobs."

the ECVET users' group how the validation of separate units of skills is supporting the requalification of workers to provide enterprises with the skills they need (“meeting the requirements of supply and demand in the European labour market”). In the Dublin peer learning activity, a similar Irish line-up confirmed – through real life stories – the effectiveness of single, validated units to make the ends meet on the labour market.

Cheers to our neuronal pattern recognition squad, which located the missing link: real life stories. We have evidence that such stories are possible, and we would like to learn how more of them can become real. That is why we have organised the 2015 ECVET Forum as an exchange with labour market experts and witnesses. We would like to be able to soon hear more of such stories of people who developed the right skills and moved from unemployed to worker. Spot the difference. ■

Keith Brumfitt, ECVET Team

The Annual Forum

Flexible qualifications for a changing Labour market



This year's Annual Forum will be in Barcelona on 5 November. It will focus on qualifications and how the ECVET principles can be used to support individuals to develop the skills that are needed by the labour market.

Traditionally the ECVET Annual Forum has brought together the ECVET community, those responsible for vocational qualifications, VET providers and stakeholders from the world of education and training. Social partners and employers' organisations have always been represented, but the direct involvement of employers has been more limited. In previous years the discussions have focused on issues that mainly affect education and training systems.

The 2015 Annual Forum will be different

It will examine how, through improving the quality of VET provision and qualification systems, the ECVET principles can be used to support the labour market. We know from many national and system-wide projects that the ECVET principles help to make qualifications more flexible and this increases opportunities for learners to develop their skills and competences. The use of learning outcomes, the ability to accumulate achievement, and the use of units to organise learning can be beneficial to employers, workers and jobseekers. However not all qualification designers have been persuaded of the value of creating qualification systems based on the ECVET principles. **The 2015 Annual Forum will bring together the ECVET and economic communities to facilitate a more detailed discussion on how the ECVET principles contribute to meeting the needs of the labour market.**

The Annual Forum will be based on two sessions: the first will explore the changing needs of individuals and the labour market; the second will examine the extent to which these needs can be addressed through using the ECVET principles. By drawing on experiences from Member States and a range of ECVET projects, the Annual Forum provides an opportunity to find out what is already happening in relation to the creation of more flexible approaches to organising and designing qualifications; the main lessons from existing qualification reform programmes; and how the ECVET principles have been used to support VET reform. In addition, the Annual Forum will enable participants to collect information on what works and to identify which VET challenges have been addressed through the adoption of the ECVET principles.

Following the Annual Forum, members of the ECVET Users Group and the ECVET national experts will be invited to meet on 6 November. They will use the discussions from the Annual Forum to develop a work plan for 2016-2017 in order to support Member States.

Invitations to attend the Annual Forum have been sent out by the European Commission and the ECVET team. If you are not sure who has been invited from your country, you can contact Anaïs Dubard in the ECVET team on dubarda@anfa-auto.fr for more information. ■

Using the ECVET and EQAVET principles: a short summary of early experiences at a national level



Keith Brumfitt, ECVET Team



Michel Aribaud, ECVET Team

The context

EQAVET and ECVET were published as Recommendations from the European Parliament and the Council in 2009. Decisions on how, and whether, to use the ideas and principles in each Recommendation are made by Member States. The 2014 evaluations of ECVET and EQAVET included comments and statistics on Member States' decisions and progress in implementing the Recommendations and the principles contained in each of them.

In many contexts the Recommendations have been seen as separate and decisions on their implementation and use have been made independently. However there is an increasing recognition that many of the European instruments have close connections as each contributes to the reform of vocational education and training.

The 2014 evaluation of EQAVET's implementation¹ commented on the connections between the European instruments. The report noted that 'in

principle these European tools are complementary meaning that the existence of quality assurance procedures should reinforce the implementation of EQF and ECVET. This evaluation report also went on to comment that 'there is currently no EU-level document explaining how the different tools fit together'.

Cedefop has commented² that 'the EU tools and principles have until now predominantly been taken forward as separate and 'free-standing' initiatives and only to a limited extent been linked together. While this approach has been necessary during the initial developmental stage, this 'tool-by-tool' approach has now reached its limit.' The idea that there are clear connections and that synergies can be achieved through a more coordinated approach to using the principles in the European instruments was recognised in the Bruges Communiqué³.

In this context the ECVET Team and the EQAVET secretariat established a joint working group. This group was given a mandate to strengthen the co-

operation, systematise the exchange of information and provide guidelines for Member States and advice to the European Commission.

The work of the group: the example based approach

The working group met on four occasions and quickly agreed to focus on current and emerging practice in initial VET. Their approach sought to learn from experience rather than using a theoretical approach to identify possibilities.

To support the working group's analysis, **18 examples** were produced. These provided a 'snapshot' of practice and contained examples of projects, legislative change, changes to working methods, and new ideas which were being tested. These examples covered aspects (or parts) of the VET system – they rarely illustrated system-wide reform. From these examples, and the detailed reflections during a peer learning meeting in Budapest in March 2015, the working group developed the following main messages:

- a) the starting point for benefitting from combining or aligning the two sets of principles is to establish a shared and consistent vision for VET reform. This vision can involve applying the European instruments at the system, provider and learner level in order to achieve a 'fit for purpose' VET;
- b) there is a need to develop a multi-level approach to reform which involves all the key actors. This ap-

proach needs to focus on building the capacity of the system through applying all phases of the quality assurance cycle to the learning outcomes approach;

- c) a quality assured learning outcome approach to VET and qualifications reform has to be considered – there is a need to plan, define learning outcomes, deliver reform, assess learning, and improve practice;

**"There is currently
no EU-level document
explaining how the
different tools fit
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- d) there is a need to develop further the competences of teachers, trainers, tutors and principals by providing adequate initial and continuous training in the field of learning outcomes and related instruments;
- e) it is important to emphasise the role of output oriented evaluation and monitoring (using indicators) of the system – as well as evaluating the input and processes;
- f) as change and reform is time-consuming and expensive, it helps to focus attention on those areas where change leads to the largest impact. In this context, the application of a risk analysis enables reformers to fo-

cus their quality assurance efforts on those areas of VET where the largest benefits can be realised.

As part of their analysis of the examples, the working group recognised that the principles which underpin ECVET and EQAVET were being used to address specific VET questions. The analysis was based on identifying when there were significant advantages in using the principles from both European instruments. In the following eight situations Member States found advantages in simultaneously using both sets of principles:

- a) how the ECVET principles can help to create more effective work based learning which can be quality assured through the EQAVET principles;
- b) how the EQAVET indicators can measure VET schools' progress on provision which is based on the ECVET principles;
- c) how to use a quality assurance cycle based on the EQAVET principles to design learning outcomes for VET which uses the ECVET principles;
- d) using an EQAVET aligned quality assurance process to design and monitor individualised learning programmes based on an ECVET compatible credit system;
- e) using a quality assurance cycle based on the EQAVET principles to design VET standards or curricula which are compatible with the ECVET principles;
- f) using a quality assurance cycle based on the EQAVET principles to design non-formal and informal certification

- processes which use the ECVET principles;
- g) using a quality assurance process based on the EQAVET principles to create ECVET compatible mobility;
- h) using an EQAVET aligned quality assurance cycle to establish 'rules of combination' for units which lead to qualifications based on the ECVET principles.

Across the examples, and arising from the reflections during the peer learning meeting, it seems the working group identified a number of challenges to simultaneously using the principles from the two European instruments. These can be summarised as:

- the need for stakeholders to develop a shared understanding of what it means to move to a learning outcomes approach;
- a key aspect of the move to a learning outcomes approach is the need to reconsider and review the existing quality assurance arrangements;
- in a VET reform perspective, it helps to recognise that some stakeholders want to change things quickly and others want to move much more slowly. To maintain impetus the working group highlighted the value of finding 'quick wins' which meet the needs of those stakeholders who have a greater appetite for change.

The working group analysis of the examples highlighted that these challenges were being overcome in Member States through measures which respond to national circumstances and conditions.

Conclusions

There are clear signs that Member States are drawing on principles from both European instruments to support the reform of VET.

It appears that the connections and complementarities within the EU instruments enhance VET reform. In this context the working group proposed that further work was undertaken on the synergies and opportunities for co-operation.

The working group also supported comments that have been made on a number of other occasions, namely that there is a need to:

- strengthen the references to learning outcomes and certification in the EQAVET Recommendation;
- include more specific and explicit references to the ECVET and EQAVET Recommendations in the expectations associated with the use of the European Social Funds and the use of funds associated with the European Semester.

This working group was the first initiative to combine the strengths of two European networks – it has worked extremely well. Supported by the ECVET Team and the EQAVET Secretariat, the working group has found new solutions and approaches that would not have been available easily within the context of one network. The discussions and reflections led to a greater realisation that both European instruments are using, at the national or system level the principles from the two Recommendations to address problems and challenges in VET. ■

The full report of the working group is available on the EQAVET and ECVET websites at:

www.eqavet.eu/gns/home.aspx
www.ecvet-team.eu/fr

¹ Evaluation of implementation of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) The final report is available at http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/more_info/evaluations/index_en.htm [Accessed on 31-3-15]

² Stepping up the pace, Conceptual and technical reflections on how to take forward European tools for education, training and employment. Area ECVL/RB(2014)02611 Thessaloniki, 13 November 2014

³ The Bruges Communiqué on enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training for the period 2011-2020 http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/vocational-policy/doc/brugescom_en.pdf. [Accessed on 1-5-15]

State Education Development Agency: the Erasmus+ National Agency in Latvia

A customised seminar and implementing ECVET in Latvia

A customised seminar focusing on “Improving mobility with ECVET” took place in Jurmala (Latvia) on 16–17 April 2015. The focus was on applying the ECVET principles to support VET learners’ geographical mobility. This was the first time that Latvia had hosted a tailor made seminar to discuss the application of the ECVET principles.



The seminar was organised by the State Education Development Agency which is the Latvian Erasmus+ National Agency having responsibility for education and training activities since 2014. The Agency worked closely with the European ECVET Team’s experts from France - Mr Thierry Lefeuve and Mr Michel Aribaud.

Preparatory work began in December 2014 when the request to host a seminar was sent to the European ECVET team. Organising the seminar was time-consuming and required the identification of a set of complex and demanding objectives which would provide the focus for the training sessions. This complexity meant that the preparation required face-to-face meetings; it could not be done through virtual communication. The preparatory meetings with the ECVET team took place in Riga (Latvia) on 18 March 2015 and the day before the training started. The four Latvian national ECVET experts, the Latvian Erasmus+ National Agency and the two international experts were deeply involved in the preparatory activities as this helped to ensure the training was of high quality, met the needs of the participants, and focused on the agreed seminar outcomes and desired results.

The seminar was designed for VET practitioners and was attended by representatives from 14 state VET compe-

tence centres and key stakeholders from public administration institutions such as the National Centre for Education (with responsibility for VET content development), the State Education Quality Service (with responsibility for checking the quality of VET provision) and the Erasmus+ National Agency. The number of participants was limited (29 attended) in order to maximise the opportunities of discussion in small working groups and to create an interactive working atmosphere for the whole training session.

The seminar’s content was set within the context of the ECVET Recommendation and focused on:

- providing information on the national VET context and the latest developments in Latvia (presented by one of the Latvian national ECVET experts);
- explaining the ECVET essentials including a discussion on ECVET for mobility which was led by the international ECVET experts;
- small group discussions during two training workshops – “Unit Based Qualifications” and “Mobility Learning Agreement in Practice” – which were jointly managed by the international and national ECVET experts.

As part of the programme, small group discussions were monitored by the international experts. This provided the opportunity for them to provide essential

additional information (especially for the most complex ECVET topics e.g. defining units) in response to the needs of the Latvian participants.

The training seminar was designed to be interactive in order to ensure participants were fully involved in question and answer sessions and discussions; and had time to express their views, share their experiences and concerns, and suggest further developments. The completed evaluation forms indicated the very high appreciation on the content and topicality of the training, the discussions in the small working groups, and the professional level of expertise of the international ECVET experts.

The seminar (in relation to the agenda, the pedagogic strategy, the training methods and the workshop materials) fully met the objective to provide training on the how to apply the ECVET principles to geographical mobility in a VET context. The two-day training session closed with a discussion on the need to

go further – this provided an opportunity to reflect on ECVET's implementation in Latvia. The discussion identified some of changes that would be required in relation to amending the legal documentation. The discussion also noted that implementing ECVET would align with other changes currently taking place in the VET system such as strengthening the VET institutions' network, facilitating the internationalisation of VET, modernising the VET infrastructure, etc.

The ECVET concept is still seen as new and relatively unknown in the Latvian education sector as ECVET activity only started in late 2014. There is a continuous interest in ECVET and its further implementation in Latvia. This demand is accommodated by the following ECVET activities:

- national ECVET experts from Estonia, Finland, Latvia and Lithuania completed a two day peer learning activity on the "Practical application of ECVET principles: achievements and challenges" in Riga (Latvia) on 19-20 August 2015;

- the Latvian national ECVET experts are preparing a set of recommendations based on the current state of play with ECVET's implementation. This will include suggestions for further development which could include the updating of the national legislation. The recommendations are due to be submitted to the Ministry of Education and Science in Autumn 2015;
- an international conference on "ECVET implementation in Latvia in a European context" for all those with an interest in VET (e.g. ECVET coordinators in VET institutions, staff and managers from VET institutions, social partners, VET policy makers etc.) in Riga (Latvia) in November 2015. This conference will raise awareness of the benefits of ECVET and the practicalities of its implementation for all stakeholders.

The training session was closed by Mrs Ennata Kivrina, Director of the EU Programmes Department of the Latvian Erasmus+ National Agency. Her conclusion noted that the 'outcomes of the ECVET awareness raising activities, as well as the existing guidance on implementing the ECVET principles in transnational mobility form a solid and sustainable basis for its further application in VET. These activities will support the implementation of mobility programmes implemented within the scope of Erasmus+. The outcomes of our discussions will be disseminated to Erasmus+ project managers, used in subsequent seminars for potential project applicants, learners and other stakeholders in the VET sector. For us, the successful implementation of ECVET is of great importance.'



"Glad about the training results"

(from the left): Mrs Ennata Kivrina (Director of EU Programmes Department, State Education Development Agency (LV)) and International ECVET experts - Mr Thierry Lefeuvre and Mr Michel Aribaud.

ECVET implementation in Lithuania: after the customized seminar



Roma Šimukauskienė,
ECVET expert

The implementation of the European Credit in Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) system in Lithuania has taken its first steps. ECVET's implementation will be based on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) that was approved in 2010.

The Lithuanian NQF covers all education sectors and is consistent with the principles underpinning the European Qualifications Framework. From 2005-2008 the Concept of a VET Quality Assurance System was developed as part of a national ESF project 'Development and Implementation of a Common Quality Assurance System in Vocational Education and Training'. This Concept was elaborated on the basis of the "Study of Quality Assurance in VET in Lithuania and Other Countries" (2007) and has taken account of the EQAVET Recommendation. Once the background structures which support ECVET's implementation had been completed, Lithuania started to focus on using ECVET to improve the quality of VET. A modular VET system based on learning outcomes and credits will be piloted in 2015.

The team of five ECVET national experts was established in 2014. Their first task was to persuade the many different stakeholders in the VET sector that ECVET could add value to the quality of study programmes and provide immeasurable benefits to VET providers, learners and the labour market. To communicate the value of ECVET to VET providers and other stakeholders, the Lithuanian National Agency (Education Exchanges

Support Foundation - Švietimo mainų paramos fondas) asked the European ECVET Team to organise a customised seminar in Lithuania for the national experts, VET providers, representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science and other stakeholders. The ECVET Team's experts (Mr. Thierry Lefeuvre and Mr. Segundo Gonzalez) worked with the national experts to support ECVET's implementation in Lithuania.

The customised seminar took place in October 2014. The training included theoretical presentations, explanations of different terms, examples of effective practice and workshops. The ECVET Team experts presented ECVET in a European context; explained the various tools which support ECVET's implementation; and discussed the meaning of many of the key terms such as 'learning outcomes, units, credits and points'. During the discussions on using ECVET for geographical mobility the experts presented examples of effective practice to show how ECVET mobility (where achievement in the host country is recognised in the home country) adds a great deal of value to the quality of VET.

The customised seminar included many practical activities which were organised in small working groups. The ECVET Team experts worked with the Lithuanian experts to organise and moderate the discussions during the workshops in order to achieve the expected results. The Lithuanian ECVET experts then led workshops on:

- how to connect ECVET to the Lithuanian vocational education system;
- how to create units of learning outcomes using ECVET;
- how to improve the quality of mobility programmes using ECVET.

"Lithuania started to focus on using ECVET to improve the quality of VET. A modular VET system based on learning outcomes and credits will be piloted in 2015."

The ECVET Team's examples of effective practice inspired the Lithuanian experts to continue to promote ECVET's implementation, and the impact that ECVET can have on the quality of geographical mobility and the whole VET system. The information and examples from the 2014 customised seminar have been used by the Lithuanian experts to organise three seminars for representatives of VET providers on 'ECVET for geographical

mobility'. More than 100 directors, VET teachers and project managers from across the country attended the seminars and this has helped to raise awareness about the use of ECVET and its benefits.

Each seminar combined workshops and discussions. After a short presentation of ECVET and how it can be used to support geographical mobility, the seminar participants worked on a series of practical tasks. These enabled participants to work in small groups, discuss more detailed questions on

how to use ECVET, and share their knowledge and experience. By taking things slowly and by working together, the participants strengthened their understanding of why ECVET is useful and how it helps to improve the quality of geographical mobility and VET provision. One of the outcomes from the seminars was a series of requests from VET providers for further discussions and seminars at their teaching institutions. In these follow-up ses-

sions at the VET centres, the national ECVET experts were able to continue the process of transferring knowledge and building understanding. This dissemination has included consultations, seminars, workshops at VET schools, the production of brochures, articles, reports and other information on the websites of ECVET national experts' institutions and on the Lithuanian National Agency.

The on-going plan is for the ECVET national team to continue to deepen VET providers' knowledge about the application of ECVET; and consult with VET providers, employers and other stakeholders about using ECVET to strengthen geographical mobility and to improve lifelong learning. There is also a significant task for the national experts to work with the Ministry of Education and Science on the legislation relating to the ECVET principles in Lithuania. ■

ECVET in the Netherlands: an efficient and effective approach to learning



Marijke Dashorst, project leader
ECVET pilots LLL



Tijs Pijls, consultant Partnership
for Life Long Learning

Developments in technology and globalisation are driving rapid change in the labour market. In this context, it is a major challenge to identify efficient and effective ways to update people's knowledge and skills in line with the demands of the labour market. The ECVET system can contribute to finding tailor-made education and training solutions for adults.

Up-to-date

A key question for adults is how to find effective and efficient education and training options that enable them to combine work with other aspects of their life throughout their career. This is particularly true for adults seeking to re-enter the labour force when their knowledge and skills are not up-to-date. In addition, education and training are important for those who are employed and need to keep their skills up-to-date to retain their job in an environment where roles and functions are changing rapidly. In addition employers know that it is vital to equip their workforce to respond to competitive markets.

In The Netherlands, with the support of the Ministry of Education Culture and Science, a series of ECVET lifelong learning pilots began in 2012. They aim to identify how to retain workers in the workplace; how to support mobility in the workplace; and how to contribute to re-integration in the labour market. The pilot projects look at three inter-related European instruments - the European Qualification Framework (EQF), the European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) and the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The principle of using learning outcomes plays a crucial role in the development of the methodology.

The pilot projects use the idea that ECVET is based on dividing a qualification (in The Netherlands' situation this covers both formal and sectoral qualifications) into ECVET units which opens up the possibility of accumulating units for the purpose of obtaining a full qualification. The pilots also respond to the demands from employer/sector - these can arise from, for example, a need to up-skill workers; to meet the challenges in relation to filling job vacancies; to replace employees who leave a company; to respond to new legal requirements etc. ECVET units (which can be from different qualifications) provide a response in each of these situations as there is not always a need, from the worker or employer, for a full qualification. Without a clear demand from the employer/sector a pilot project is not initiated.

Building blocks

Each ECVET unit is seen as a building block which is based on knowledge, skills and competences. These units may be related to an NQF/EQF level. Learners are offered the possibility of gaining credit for each unit (at the moment we are looking for the possibility if credits can be adjusted to units). The education and training providers are required to offer flexible learning pathways (in relation to timing, the lo-

"The provision of a certificate for each unit is also considered a key success factor, as without certification units will have a much lower impact on society."

cation of training and training methodology). This flexibility has to be organised in an efficient and effective way and be based on an agreed set of well-described and recognised learning outcomes.

Validation

Validation is an important element of these ECVET pilot projects. Validation takes account of what a person has already achieved in terms of knowledge, skills and competences. The effect is twofold: the individual avoids unnecessary training and frustration; and the employee's absence from the workplace to pursue education and training is reduced. A validation procedure has been developed which is based on the learning outcomes in each unit. These describe the learning which should be acquired in each unit (it is like a 'shopping list') and this enables each individual to collect evidence to demonstrate they have met the learning outcomes required by the unit. This can be done gradually and one unit at a time.

In The Netherlands the validation process is led by an registered APL provider. Alignment with examination committees, education and training providers of the validation process and procedures is crucial in relation to acceptance of the results of the validation. To develop a new validation process for the pilot projects it was vital to have these examination committees on board from the outset. These committees approve the 'shopping list' and the procedures for recognising what has already been achieved by individual learners. The agreement on processes has to be completed before

any decision can be made on giving exemptions to candidates in relation to the education and training programme and/or examinations.

Key factors of success

So far an analysis of the pilot projects has identified some key factors for success. These include the importance of using a demand driven approach; using learning outcomes; and involving all stakeholders (employers/sector; providers of education, training and validation; and the examination committees). The provision of a certificate for each unit is also considered a key success factor, as without certification units will have a much lower impact on society. At the moment research takes place on criteria and for the competent body to deliver certificates. Work is continuing on the value of issuing of certificates for individual units alongside further research on whether the award of credit would support these developments.

Where are the pilots taking place?

Currently there are pilot projects in the health care sector, technology companies, the temping or agency industry (particularly for less well qualified people looking for a temporary position), the social work and care sector, the beauty therapy industry (pedicure and manicure), and the army. ■

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The DELAROSE project recognising the management of work-related stress through ECVET/ECTS

The DELAROSE project provides ECVET/ECTS accreditation to health and social care professionals who complete online training on the management of work-related stress. The project is coordinated by the School of Health Sciences at Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) in Ireland.



ECVET was developed to support people educated through a vocational pathway (for example many workers in the health and social care sector in Europe) to benefit from a common European credit scheme. In 2010, the Council of Ministers noted that ECVET will complement the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) by linking vocational education and training with higher education¹. Furthermore, the Bruges Communiqué of that same year called for enhanced permeability between different educational and training systems, including VET and HE, and proposed that the Commission and member states should work towards greater coherence between the two European credit systems, ECTS and ECVET². Currently, no Member State has introduced a system where VET credit is automatically accepted by the higher education sector. DELAROSE breaks new ground in relation to recognition between higher education institutions (HEIs) in Europe and between EU and non-EU states. Within an Irish context DELAROSE will be the first programme to use ECVET to recognise learners' achievement in a HEI.

DELAROSE focuses on the needs of health and social care workers.

This occupational group suffers from considerable work related stress [often associated with higher rates of mental illness drug and alcohol misuse, and suicide] compared to the general population. EU policy emphasises the importance of Member States reducing occupational stress. Activities which support health and social care workers to deal with occupational stress are ad hoc and localised. They also tend to associate workers' problems with personal failure, illness and/or 'stigma' rather than seeing it as a normal consequence of poor organisational structures and a lack of support for staff. This perception discourages sufferers from seeking help and this sometimes leads to devastating consequences.

The aim of the DELAROSE programme

DELAROSE aims to support the development of personal resilience in workers to manage their occupational stress, and improve organisational structures and support in order to reduce the amount of stress. The on-line training programme seeks to 'normalise' the experience of occupational stress and provide support based on principles of autonomy and self-help. There

is open access to the online training and resources, which enables staff to avoid going through a third-party for help. This helps to preserve privacy and avoid stigma.

Background

In 2009 an international consortium, led by WIT, secured Leonardo Da Vinci funding to develop an easy access online self-help programme for health and social care workers. The project, Reducing Occupational Stress in Employment (ROSE), included a survey of occupational stress which was completed by health and social care workers in five European countries. As well as measuring their levels of occupational stress, the project collected information on organisational policies and support in relation to reducing stress at work. Based on this survey, expertise within the group and a review of the scientific literature, the ROSE online self-help programme was established.

During the ROSE project, the team observed that workers in this sector saw their lack of training and knowl-

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edge on how to manage challenging work situations as a source of stress. Those working in the sector also commented that they would like formal recognition of their learning through the ROSE programme.

This led to a second bid to the Leonardo Da Vinci fund to establish ROSE as an online learning programme whose outcomes would be recognised through both ECVET and ECTS. The outcome of this bid was the DELAROSE project (Delivering E Learning Accreditation to Reduce Occupational Stress) which is due to be completed at the end of October 2015.

Implementation of DELAROSE

DELAROSE is coordinated by WIT and involves nine partners³ from Ireland, UK, Austria, Belgium and Switzerland. The DELAROSE training programme is

delivered by three of the HEI partners; WIT (Ireland); Karl Franzens University (Austria) and the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland, in the English, German and Italian languages respectively.

The original plan was to establish a framework of credit equivalency between ECTS and ECVET in order to facilitate the common recognition of the qualification across Europe. However, following a review of previous Leonardo da Vinci projects which sought to establish permeability between these systems, it was determined that utilising ECTS credits and ECVET credit points for this purpose would not be feasible.

The project team subsequently decided that the learning outcomes approach should be used as the basis for a common connection between ECTS and ECVET. This is consistent with a recommendation from a European Commission ECVET evaluation report (2014)⁴, which argued that merging the systems should not be considered as a priority, but that utilising learning outcomes as a reference point for relating the systems would be a more appropriate goal. The learning outcomes approach is a fundamental feature of ECVET and has also been steadily integrated into the ECTS system in recent years. This stems from the Bucharest Communiqué of 2012, in which EU Ministers called for the linking of 'study credits with both learning outcomes and student workload and to include the attainment of learning outcomes in assessment procedures.



DELAROSE units of learning**Module 1: Person centred management of work-related stress**

- 1 Introduction to stress
- 2 Prevention of stress
- 3 Learning ways of coping with stress
- 4 Changing how you think about things
- 5 Giving feedback
- 6 Challenging behaviour
- 7 Learning how to relax

Module 2: Environment centred management of work-related stress

- 1 How the organisation contributes to stress
- 2 Interpersonal skills
- 3 Leadership and motivation
- 4 Change management
- 5 Organisational policies
- 6 Risk assessment
- 7 Ergonomics

This resulted in a re-formulation of the system in order to strengthen the implementation of the learning outcomes approach⁵. The use of learning outcomes is now stipulated in legislation in 32 higher education systems⁶.

The DELAROSE programme was developed and accredited initially in line with the ECTS system. However, the course curriculum was also designed to facilitate optimal compatibility with the ECVET educational framework. As such, the course content was organised into Units of Learning Outcomes with all the learning outcomes described in terms of knowledge, skills

and competences as outlined in the ECVET Recommendation. The programme was then allocated credits based on ECTS principles and each Unit of Learning Outcomes was allocated credit points according to the ECVET principles. The programme framework and credit allocation was agreed by the three HEIs who deliver the programme. As such, it is one of the first programmes to pilot an HEI-based system of equivalency between ECVET and ECTS in order to promote learner mobility and recognition of pan European vocational training.

The DELAROSE programme is currently

being piloted with over 30 learners from 10 health and social care service organisations in Europe.

This online educational programme is available through the project website (www.delarose-project.eu/moodle) and the pilot programme will run from June to September 2015. ■

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(jswells@wit.ie) and see

<http://www.delarose-project.eu> or

<http://www.adam-europe.eu>

¹ See <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=URISERV:c11107> [Accessed on 24-8-15]

² See http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/vocational-policy/doc/brugescom_en.pdf [Accessed on 09-09-15]

³ The DELAROSE partners are Waterford Institute of Technology, Cluain Enterprise & Training Centre, The National Federation of Voluntary Bodies (Ireland); Karl Franzens University, Pro mente steiermark (Austria), University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland (Switzerland); Kings College London, University of Lincoln (United Kingdom), and The European Association of Service Providers for People with Disabilities (Belgium).

⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/more_info/evaluations/docs/education/ecvet14_en.pdf [Accessed 09-09-2015]

⁵ [http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/\(1\)/Bucharest%20Communique%202012\(1\).pdf](http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/(1)/Bucharest%20Communique%202012(1).pdf) [Accessed on 09-09-2015]

⁶ http://bologna-yerevan2015.ehea.info/files/2015%20Implementation%20report_20.05.2015.pdf [Accessed on 08-09-2015]

SPECIAL ABOUT UNITS

Michel Aribaud, Keith Brumfitt, ECVET Team

ECVET's working group on units

Background and context

The working group aims to identify lessons from countries' experiences of assessing and validating units of learning outcomes. By gathering and analysing examples from a range of countries, the group will produce a report on different approaches. This report will provide the basis for a guidance note for policy developers and practitioners working on the assessment and validation of units based on learning outcomes.

The working group includes representatives from eight qualification systems, trade unions and VET providers. There is a core group of participants who attend the working group meetings – they are supported by a wider group of representatives from five other national systems. The core group met in March and May 2015, and organised a peer learning meeting in June. The third of their four planned meetings will take place in October. During the fourth meeting in December, the working group will finalise the report which will be discussed by the ECVET Users Group and published on the ECVET website. The associated guidance note will be produced by the European Commission.

Discussion

The group's early reflections highlighted that units have been introduced, and are used, for many different reasons

e.g. to encourage lifelong learning; as a way of organising training courses; as a way to support the accumulation of achievement which helps individuals to acquire qualifications; to enable informal and non-formal learning to be seen as equal to qualifications acquired through the formal system; to support international mobility programmes etc. Whatever the original reason(s) for introducing units once they are part of a qualification system they are used for other purposes. This 'drift' from the original intention can benefit learners and cause difficulties with implementation. The process of designing for one but using for many purposes has been described as the problem of the 'Swiss Army knife' – you buy the product for one reason and end up using it for everything. If the product is good, you can be confident it will work in each new context. However there are risks when the unit-based approach is stretched to address problems and issues that are a long way from the original design intentions.

As units are seen as a solution to problems in the VET system, the working group is looking at the consequences of using different approaches to assessment and validation¹. In this context the group has recognised there is often a distinction between units which support general or 'academic' qualifi-

cations, and those that are used for VET. In the former situation, units are often seen as a way of organising an initial school-based qualification where nearly all the learners are studying full-time; they are on a programme of fixed length; and they are unlikely to request recognition for non-formal and informal learning. In this situation the design parameters for a unit based system are different to the expectations of continuing VET, work-based apprenticeships or initial VET for adults. In these latter situations, learning is more flexible; informal and non-formal learning is significant; part-time training and study is often the norm; content is often determined by standards set by employers; accumulating units (or credit) at a pace that meets the needs of individual learners is important; and there is a need to design units in such a way that learners can achieve the outcomes in a range of contexts. It is clear that the needs of a school-based unitised system and a work-based VET system are different. Designing units to respond to the needs of these different situations requires a great deal of attention to be paid to the assessment and validation processes. In many ways the focus of the working group is based on identifying the lesson from designing a 'great product' such as a Swiss Army knife and not a poor-quality imitation.

"There is a need to design units in such a way that learners can achieve the outcomes in a range of contexts."

In relation to assessment, the group has discussed the importance of:

- the size of individual units – too big and the opportunity for accumulation and individualised pathways is reduced; too small and the bureaucratic burdens and costs of assessment are too high;
- content which meets the needs of employers and provides learners with the opportunity to progress. If the content is too focused on the needs of one occupation or employer, learners have fewer options. If the content is too broad and generalised, the unit may not meet the needs of individual employers and this inhibits learners' employment opportunities;
- designing assessment processes that respond to the needs of VET learners who may take a programme part-time; complete units at work or through the recognition of non-formal and informal learning; complete just one unit rather than a qualification; or take units in a non-traditional order. These constraints make it more difficult to develop units with pre-requisites; have end-of-course examinations or other forms of synoptic assessment; or create assessment specifications that can only be met in a limited number of situations;
- identifying how learners can use their units once they have been assessed. While in some systems learners can use assessed units for progression and other purposes, these options are limited as qualification systems often require units to be assessed

and validated before they can be used. Establishing clear expectations of the value of an assessed unit is an important element of a unit-based system.

In relation to validation, the group has discussed the value of:

- treating all assessed achievement in the same way e.g. when considering achievement from an informal or non-formal context. The group is seeking to identify where there are cultural or other barriers to seeing achievement in these contexts as being equal to what has been demonstrated in a formal setting;
- identifying, at a system level, what options are available to learners who have been assessed and whose achievements in a unit have been validated. Often there are local arrangements and 'possibilities' for learners to use their assessed and validated units; there are fewer entitlements at the system level and this can inhibit the full potential of a unit-based system;
- recognising achievement in a unit (as opposed to only recognising a learner's achievement when they achieve the full qualification). This debate has considered whether units or qualifications are seen as more important for the labour market (and this value could differ in relation to initial and continuing VET programmes, between young and more mature learners; and between apprentices and those on initial

school-based programmes). In many ways this debate has been influenced by culture and tradition; and the group has noticed that some systems assign value to partial or minor qualifications at the same time as encouraging learners to complete a full or major qualification.

The work of the group

To support the group's reflections, the members of the Users Group were invited to respond to a short questionnaire on the assessment and validation of units (an analysis of their responses is included in this edition of the ECVET magazine). In addition the group organised a two-day peer learning meeting in Dublin in June 2015. During this meeting, members of the group looked at the requirements of learners and employers in relation to qualifications and how unit-based qualification systems in DE, IE, SE and CZ respond to these needs. The meeting's participants identified:

- that clear assessment criteria are an important part of the process of establishing valid and reliable learning outcomes;
- a need to improve the quality of learning outcomes as these determine assessment tasks and assessment criteria;
- the need to strengthen the quality of assessment;
- a need to simplify the language and terminology of the ECVET assessment and validation processes – the complexity of the language creates barriers to engaging employers and other stakeholders;
- that many qualification systems use units as a way to support interna-

tional mobility and in this context the quality of the validation processes are particularly important;

- a need for agreement on what is included in a unit. Even though the ECVET Recommendation describes minimum requirements for a unit² there is considerable variation in practice. This makes it harder to establish and maintain relationships between unit and credit systems across Member States;
- the importance of involving employers in defining/describing learning outcomes;
- the need to be clearer about how learners can use units. As the main advantages of units accrue to learners, encouraging and empowering them can help to drive and support the reform process;
- that units are not the solution to every VET problem – consequently it is important to be much clearer about why units are being used and which issues they address;
- the increasing importance of a ‘capstone’ unit (i.e. an end-of programme unit which provides an opportunity for all the learning outcomes in the qualification to be assessed. In some systems this ‘capstone’ unit is described as a final examination or a holistic

assessment). As this type of final assessment is meeting the needs of some VET systems, the group needs to understand better which concerns are being addressed through such an approach.

In addition to these statements, the peer learning meeting provided an opportunity to look at why units are being used, and how assessment and validation processes can be aligned and contribute to the same purpose. Central to this discussion was a question about whether units automatically improve the quality (i.e. the reliability, accuracy and validity) of assessment. For some participants, a unit-based system could lead to an assessment overload with learners spending too much time being assessed and not enough time learning. For other participants time spent writing clear learning outcomes with precise assessment criteria reduces the need for assessment and provide learners with a more manageable workload. This debate led to many questions about where to focus reforms which can improve the quality of VET. For some the focus was on organising units as they were seen as the structural basis for qualifications; for others the focus was on learning

outcomes as they set out what is expected from learners. These approaches highlight two different priorities: organising training in order to ensure the VET providers can deliver high quality and understand the changes that arise from a unit-based system; and organising provision to ensure that learners can accumulate achievement from a wide range of contexts. While both approaches are needed, the decision of whether to focus first on VET providers or learners reflects different circumstances in each qualification system.

The next steps

The working group is half-way through its reflections and discussions. The group’s report will be finalised after the fourth meeting in December and will be discussed by the Users Group. Alongside the report the European Commission will produce a guidance note that aims to support policy developers and practitioners working on questions relating to the assessment and validation of units.

Feedback and comments on this article, which illustrates the group’s thinking in September 2015, would be welcomed.



¹ The group is not considering the recognition of units or the award of qualifications.

² The ECVET Recommendation defines a unit of learning outcomes’ (unit) as a component of a qualification, consisting of a coherent set of knowledge, skills and competence that can be assessed and validated. Annexe II of the Recommendation notes that the rules and procedures for defining characteristics of units of learning outcomes and for combining and accumulating units for a given qualification are defined by competent institutions and partners involved in the training process according to the national or regional rules. The specifications for a unit should include the:

- generic title of the unit;
- generic title of the qualification (or qualifications) to which the unit relates, where applicable;
- reference of the qualification according to the EQF level and, where appropriate, the national qualifications framework (NQF) level, with the ECVET credit points associated with the qualification;
- learning outcomes contained in the unit;
- procedures and criteria for assessment of these learning outcomes;
- ECVET points associated with the unit,
- validity in time of the unit, where relevant.

SPECIAL ABOUT UNITS

Martine Levreux, ECVET team

The assessment and validation of units of learning outcomes

Dublin: 25-26 June 2015

The ECVET Team organised a peer learning activity (PLA) to support the working group which is considering the assessment and validation of units based on learning outcomes. The PLA took place after the second meeting of this group and the results from the discussions will be used to prepare a first draft of a 'guidance note' from the working group.

The PLA was attended by representatives from the European Commission, Cedefop, the European Training Foundation, the European Association for University Lifelong Learning and 33 participants from 17 countries. The agenda, presentations and PLA report are available on ECVET Team website at:

<http://www.ecvet-team.eu/en/training-and-events/pla-units-learning-outcomes>.

This article highlights the organisation of the PLA, the main issues for discussion and a summary of the conclusions which are also contained in the PLA report.

The rationale for the PLA

The PLA was organised to support the reflections of the working group on units. This group is preparing guidance on the assessment and validation of units. The two day PLA in Dublin provided an opportunity to share experiences and identify key policy messages associated with the assessment and validation of units based on learning outcomes.

The working group is operating within the context of ever closer connections between VET provision and the world of employment, and the changing needs of

individuals and the labour market. This changing context is providing ECVET (and other European instruments such as the EQF and Europass) with a new orientation and set of questions such as: How do ECVET principles help systems to respond to employment trends, the needs of individuals and the labour market? How can ECVET support individuals to develop the skills that are needed by the labour market?

VET and qualification systems also face new challenges in relation to supporting learners' access to labour markets, improving employability and creating effective career pathways in IVET and CVET. In addition finding ways to re-qualify or update the qualifications of workers and unemployed people highlight the need to continue to improve the quality of VET provision and develop systems which make qualifications more flexible.

One of the main questions considered during the PLA discussion was how can ECVET help to create more flexible approaches to organising and designing qualifications? The use of units based on learning outcomes, the opportunity for learners to accumulate achievement, and using units to organise learning are central to the process of strengthening individuals' professionalism.

The agenda

The PLA agenda included discussions on how units could support the quality of VET; different ways of using units; and agreement on a set of main findings and messages.

Session 1: how can units support the quality of VET?

This first session looked at how units meet the needs of learners and employers. It began with two short presentations from an employer and an employee from Ireland. They set out what they wanted from a qualification system and how they hoped the national or system level regulators could respond to their needs. Colleagues from Ireland, the French Community in Belgium and the Czech Republic explained how their qualification systems used units to respond to the needs of learners and employers.

Following the presentations there was a discussion with a representative from a VET providers organisation. This helped to develop a greater understanding of the challenges of using units and the range of ways in which VET providers are responding to the needs of the labour market and learners.

At the end of the first sessions, the PLA participants worked in small groups to identify issues relating to improving the relevance of VET and respond to the needs of learners and employers. The small groups considered the following questions:

- how to identify the needs of the labour market;
- what are the challenges in relation to

using units;

- what are the advantages of using units to meet the needs of employers and learners;
- what are the conditions that are needed to ensure the advantages of using units are realised;
- what are the issues related to the transfer and recognition of learning achievement.

Session 2: different ways of using units

The second session began with a presentation from CEDEFOP on their research into the quality assurance of the certification process in initial VET in 12 countries.

The main focus of the second session was a discussion on the different approaches to designing a similar qualification. The presentations enabled participants to look at how the unit based approach differs across Member States. The three presentations looked at national approaches in Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden and focused on the qualification that is awarded to a waiter. The presentations illustrated differences in terms of the number of units, the level of the qualification, the pathways that are available to the learner, the time it usually takes for a learner to complete the

qualification, how the units that make up the qualification are assessed and validated, and the quality arrangements that are used.

As each national system had its own approach to using units, Ms Brigitte Trocmé from France provided an independent review of the three presentations. This synthesis included an analysis of the presentations and some reflections on the earlier small group discussions. One conclusion was that units are being seen as a kind of “Swiss army knife” to address many problems and solutions. Qualification systems are deciding to use units to address one VET problem – but once units are in place, they are being used in many different ways e.g. to:

- organise training programmes;
- monitor learners’ progression;
- ensure a transparent validation process;
- improve the quality of assessment;
- support work based learning;
- enable the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

This creates a lot of challenges as sometimes units are being expected to take on too many roles and, as with the Swiss army knife, it is sometimes better to have a range of equipment rather than rely on one general purpose tool.

"This creates a lot of challenges as sometimes units are being expected to take on too many roles and, as with the Swiss army knife, it is sometimes better to have a range of equipment rather than rely on one general purpose tool."



Prior to the PLA the members of the ECVET Users Group had been invited to complete a short questionnaire on the assessment and validation of units in one of the qualification systems in their country. A short analysis of the questionnaire responses was presented (the full analysis is available on the ECVET website at: <http://www.ecvet-team.eu/en/training-and-events/pla-units-learning-outcomes>).

The questionnaire identified that:

- the unit based approach continues to increase in importance in qualification systems. As the 2013 Cedefop report on ECVET says “in many ways, what has occurred could be described as a ‘quiet revolution’ in the expansion of modular structures within initial VET qualifications.” This informal questionnaire suggests that this quiet revolution goes beyond initial VET and is spreading into many other qualification systems;

- increasingly it seems that learners are able to use individual units for a range of purposes – while there are restrictions in some systems, there is a greater awareness that units (and not just qualifications) are valuable to learners and employers;
- units can be used to organise training and qualifications – this structural focus is important for VET organisations and at the system level. However, from the learners’ perspective, there is another important consideration – accumulation. This ability to take and achieve units which build towards a qualification at a speed that meets learners’ aspirations and circumstances is a significant feature of some (but not all unit based systems).

Session 3: main findings and messages

The main messages from the PLA will be used to inform the reflections of the working group on the assessment and validation of units, and will be included

in the ‘guidance note’ being developed by this group.

By working in three small groups, the PLA participants concluded by agreeing the following main messages:

- using units is helpful: especially for adults and those with specific training needs, for progression, for recognition of non- formal and informal learning etc.;
- units are a good way to respond to the needs of the labour market particularly in areas where there is rapid changes;
- there are some restrictions for using units;
- it is necessary to quality assure the assessment process when units are used;
- there are prerequisites for a high quality unit based systems (e.g. the description of learning outcomes, involvement of employers, assessment criteria, standards for assessment).

Mr. Carlo Scatoli from the European Commission closed the PLA by highlighting the importance to using stories from real life to illustrate the advantages of units. The opportunity to assess and validate separate units based on skills, knowledge and competences helps to meet the requirements of the labour market and the needs of learners. ■

Units - their assessment and validation



Pavel Hradecky, University of Chemistry and Technology Prague/Ministry of Finance, Czech Republic



Mirka Katzerová, Upper Secondary School of Chemistry, Pardubice, Czech Republic



Keith Brumfitt, ECVET Team

Since May 2015 an ECVET working group has been looking at how qualification systems use units which are based on learning outcomes.

To support their work, each member of the ECVET Users Group was invited to describe a qualification system with assessed and validated units.

By the end of June the ECVET team had received information on 24 qualification systems in 22 countries. This short article summarises these responses (the analysis) and looks at one approach - the Czech Republic's qualification system - to illustrate how units are being assessed and validated in practice.

The analysis

The questionnaire focused on individuals' perceptions of how the assessment and validation of units was organised. As most countries have more than one qualification system, the responses included initial and continuing VET arrangements in a national, regional, sector, and work based context. This range of responses makes it difficult to produce a set of definitive and clear conclusions - however there

are emerging findings which illustrate the approaches that are being taken to the assessment and validation of units across Europe.

The questionnaire responses show that a unit based approach is being used in the majority of European countries. However there is no standardised approach – sometimes a unit based system is part of a pilot programme; sometimes it is used in only a few sectors; and sometimes it is used to support international mobility. However at the other end of the spectrum, some systems use units for every VET qualification. As part of these qualification systems half the respondents use 'points' even though there are different interpretations of what points mean and how they are measured.

Across different systems, contexts and circumstances there is considerable agreement on why a unit based approach has been introduced. The main reasons include a desire to:

- provide a better way of organising training for the learner;
- enable non-formal and informal learning to be recognised more easily;
- improve learners' employability;
- strengthen opportunities for lifelong learning.

An important feature of a unit is its ability to be assessed². In the vast majority of the systems described every unit is assessed. However there are some examples of units which are not assessed because:

- it is the qualification that is assessed via a national examination or process;
- some 'soft skills' are seen as part of a qualification rather than something that can be assessed in a unit;
- the qualification is organised in units but the assessment is based on the whole qualification.

These exceptions illustrate an important difference between how qualification systems use units: sometimes units provide a structural arrangement for organising learners' experiences; at other times units are self-contained and allow a learner to accumulate learning to achieve the qualification. In many ways the first approach divides an existing qualification into units while the

"It is encouraging to see that most systems do not have restrictions on the assessment and validation of units and, where there used to be constraints, solutions have been found."

second approach uses units to build a qualification. This division between 'breaking down' and 'building up' can also be seen in the different approaches to assessing learners - in some systems learners are re-assessed on the learning outcomes. If a qualification is built on units, the learner receives the qualification when they complete a sufficient number of units and demonstrate the expected learning outcomes. This can be automatic. However when units are created by breaking down a qualification, the learner is more likely to be re-assessed at the end of their programme (e.g. through an examination or a process which ensures that the learning outcomes from all the units can be used together). In this second type of system it seems that the underlying philosophy is one that values holistic assessment and gives a greater emphasis to the learner's ability to combine theory and practice.

As indicated above, the reasons for using units are partly based on the benefits to learners in terms of increasing their employability and the organisation of their training programmes. To test

these ideas further, the questionnaire looked at whether it was possible to identify a consistent approach to how assessed units could be used. Many respondents emphasise that learners have 'possibilities' to use assessed units. However these opportunities are often determined by local arrangements and agreements. The only consistent message from the questionnaire is the limited opportunity for learners to use assessed (but not validated) units to support an application to take a higher qualification. It is interesting to note that in only half the qualification systems give learners an exemption from repeating their learning and assessment at a later date. This need for learners to demonstrate the learning outcomes a second time arises when systems use 'end of programme' examinations, assessments or national tests.

Following assessment, the learner's achievement has to be validated. How this is done and who is involved often depends on the context in which learning occurs:

- in a work based context the VET teachers in schools/providers have a

significant role in more than half the systems, though a panel-based approach is also used in a significant number of situations;

- in a VET school/provider context, the VET teachers are even more likely to be involved in validation, though the panel-based approach remains popular;
- in non-formal and informal contexts, the panel-based approach to validation is the most commonly used methodology.

In many systems learners can use validated units for a wide range of purposes as there is much greater recognition of achievement once a unit is validated (as compared to when units are assessed)³. Consequently from a learner's perspective the timing of the validation decisions are important - while there are examples of validation taking place at the end of each unit or at the end of a traditional 'school term', the majority of systems validate achievement at the end of the year or when the qualification is complete. The timing of these validation decisions is influenced by the existence of any requirements for learners to be re-assessed at the end of the year/qualification and whether the qualification uses units as a means of structuring the learning or as a way to assess learning (i.e. are existing qualifications being 'broken down' into units or are units being used to 'build up' qualifications).

The final section of the questionnaire considered constraints in relation to the assessment and validation of units. It seems that there are restrictions on how units are assessed and validated in about one third of the systems described. These restrictions are created by different organisations in the system – the ministry; the VET schools/providers; the employers; the organisations controlling assessment; the competent bodies etc. However, it is encouraging to see that most systems do not have restrictions on the assessment and validation of units and, where there used to be constraints, solutions have been found.

Increasingly learners are able to use individual units for a range of purposes – while there are restrictions in some systems; there is a greater awareness that units (and not just qualifications) are valuable to learners and employers. In some situations the achievement of a set of units is acknowledged through 'partial' or minor qualifications. And in some systems certificates are issued for individual units. These approaches are indicative of the ways that systems recognise the value of units when learners do not complete a 'full' qualification.

The unit based approach continues to increase in importance in qualification systems. Cedefop commented in 2013 that "in many ways, what has occurred could be described as a 'quiet revolution' in the expansion of modular struc-

tures within initial VET qualifications⁴." This informal questionnaire has suggested that this quiet revolution goes beyond initial VET and is spreading into many other qualification systems.

The practice

When we look at a particular qualification system we see many of the features described above. In the Czech Republic there are three approaches:

- qualifications awarded as part of initial secondary education are not organised in units but they are based on learning outcomes;
- company qualifications and qualifications defined by legislation are not usually based on learning outcomes;
- qualifications in the National Register of Qualifications (NRQ) which are based on knowledge, skills and competences. These qualifications do not use units but the learning outcomes are organised in clusters which are comparable to units.

Within the NRQ, there are qualifications at EQF Level 1 to 8 for initial and continuing VET. These can be achieved in formal, informal and non-formal contexts; and learners can train in school and work based settings, or through apprenticeships. This framework has been designed to support the recognition of informal and non-formal learning; improve employability and strengthen the opportunity for lifelong learning.

As with many unit based systems, each unit is assessed separately. Learners are offered two choices:

- they can accumulate all the units in a qualification which is recognised and accepted by the labour market. The learner receives the qualification immediately on completing all the units in the qualification. With this option the achievement of the qualification does not allow for the learner to make further progress in the formal education system;
- they can accumulate all the units in a qualification and then take the final examination at EQF Level 3 or Level 4 - the matura. This requires learners to be re-assessed on some

of the competences they have already demonstrated in individual units. The learner can only use their achievement from individual units to support progress when they have passed the final exam/matura and received the certificate. This end of qualification assessment enables soft skills to be evaluated and ensures that each learner can use all the competences, skills and knowledge in an integrated and holistic way.

The learning outcomes approach is relatively new and it is taking time for the methodology to be understood and accepted in the education and

training sectors, and in the labour market. The rules and regulations of the NRQ are determined through legislation – and they reflect the cultural importance of learners achieving qualifications (rather than units) as these are seen as the passport to employment. VET learners who have completed their initial training but not taken the matura (or failed the matura) are less likely to find employment⁵ and so far they have not been able to progress to higher education. ■

¹ In the ECVET Recommendation, ECVET points are described as providing complementary information about qualifications and units in numerical form. They have no value independent of the acquired learning outcomes for the particular qualification to which they refer and they reflect the achievement and accumulation of units. To enable a common approach for the use of ECVET points, a convention is used according to which 60 points are allocated to the learning outcomes expected to be achieved in a year of formal full time VET.

² The ECVET Recommendation defines a unit as a component of a qualification, consisting of a coherent set of knowledge, skills and competence that can be assessed and validated.

³ In some situations there are 'restrictions' on what can be done with a unit that has been assessed and validated. More than half the systems allow the learner to use the unit as credit towards another qualification in the same system or to avoid repeating learning at a later date. In many systems the validation of the learners' achievement help them to gain access to the labour market; achieve a partial or minor qualification; gain credit as part of a mobility programme, or support an application to acquire a higher level qualification.

⁴ <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news-and-press/news/ecvet-magazine-issue-15-2013> (page 16 - Loukas Zahilas-)

⁵ Unemployment of graduates - 2011

Vocational without matura (ISCED 3c-vocational)	18,7 %
Vocational with matura and practical training	16,0 %
Vocational with matura (ISCED 3a-vocational)	11,4 %
Gymnázia (ISCED 3a-general)	3,2 %

Source: Burdová, J. - Chamoutová, D.: *Nezaměstnanost absolventů škol se středním a vyšším odborným vzděláním - 2011* [Unemployment of graduates with upper secondary vocational and tertiary technical education]. Praha: NÚV 2011.

ECVET Team

Work programme 2015

(fourth quarter)

October

6-9	Customised seminar	Qualifications for Nuclear Sector - Lisbon
8	Working group	Assessment and validation of Units of learning outcomes - Brussels

November

5	Forum 2015	Barcelona
6	Forum 2015	Meeting of UGM and National ECVET experts teams - Barcelona
18-19	Customised seminar	Units of learning outcomes - Cyprus

December

2-4	Standard seminar	ECVET for life long learning - Budapest
7-9	Standard seminar	ECVET for Mobility - Budapest
8	Governance	UGM meeting - Brussels
9	Working group	Assessment and validation of Units of learning outcomes - Brussels

ECVET forum 2015 - 5 november - Barcelona

DRAFT PROGRAMME

Flexible qualifications for a changing labour market

APPLYING THE ECVET PRINCIPLES TO STRENGTHEN THE DEVELOPMENT AND USE OF THE SKILLS NEEDED BY THE LABOUR MARKET

08:30 - 09:30	Get to know ECVET better: optional session For those who are 'new' to ECVET
09.30 - 09.45	Opening session - European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion - Spanish authority (tbc)
SESSION 1 – UNDERSTANDING THE REQUIREMENTS OF A CHANGING LABOUR MARKET	
09.45 - 10.30	Roundtable 1: Trends in the labour market - Mr Simon Field, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (tbc) - Mr Jordi Garcia Viña, Confederación Española de Organizaciones Empresariales, (member of Business Europe), Spain - Ms Agnes Roman, European Trade Union Confederation, European Economic and Social Committee - Mr Jean-Louis Pailhous, HR Manager, Groupe Canon France (member of European Association for People Management), France
10.30 - 11.15	Roundtable 2: The needs of employers and individuals - Ms Marianna Georgallis, European Youth Forum - Mr Enrico Bressan, Fondazione Centro Produttività Veneto, (member of Eurochambres), Italy - Mrs Laëtitia Beckers, European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises - Mr César Morcillo, HR Manager, Groupe Pierre Le Goff, France - European Trade Union Committee for Education (tbc)
11.15 - 11.45	Coffee break
11.45 - 13.00	Discussion in parallel workshops (1) The potential for using the ECVET principles to meet the requirements of a changing labour market
13.00 - 14.00	Lunch
SESSION 2 – FACING THE CHALLENGES WITH THE HELP OF ECVET	
14.00 - 15.15	Challenges for the labour market and individuals: testimonials on the lessons learnt from using ECVET - Dr Mihail Ceclan, European Commission, JRC Institute for Energy and Transport - Ms Chantal Huinder, Stichting Opleiding en Ontwikkeling Flexbranche, The Netherlands - Ms Pilar Roguera, Educational institution Centre Estudis Joan XXIII Catalonia, Spain
15.15 - 16.30	Discussion in parallel workshops (2) ECVET solutions and practice which meet the challenges facing individuals and the labour market
16.30 - 17.00	Coffee break
17.00 - 17.30	Final roundtable
17.30 - 17.45	Conclusion and closing words - ECVET Team : Mrs Dominique Faivre-Pierret, Deputy General Director, ANFA, France Michel Aribaud, ANFA, France - European Commission, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion
17.45	End of the 2015 ECVET Annual Forum and departure for the social event
18.30 - 21.00	Social event