Learning providers at the heart of VET

To support VET’s expanding role and to raise awareness of it, we need the full engagement of learning providers

“For many years we had neglected the vocational education and training (VET) providers,” said the European Commission’s João Santos at the first annual meeting of the European community of learning providers, which was set up by Cedefop and six EU-level associations. Things are now changing, Mr Santos added, with the Commission seeking regular contact with those “who know much more what is happening on the ground.”

Giving learning providers a voice as important VET stakeholders is the aim of the European community – an idea of Cedefop Director James Calleja. The agency’s long-serving expert Tina Bertzeletou has taken up the role of coordinator, organising the first annual meeting in March in Thessaloniki.

She explains to Skillset and match the reasoning behind the initiative: VET is seen as increasingly important, both to prepare people for jobs and to strengthen their participation in society as responsible citizens. To support VET’s expanding role and to raise awareness of it, we need the full engagement of learning providers. They not only work with national regulations and curricula but also increasingly contribute to identifying training needs and defining policies at national and EU levels; this is what guided us in setting up the European community in 2017, in agreement with the European Commission’s General Directorate for Employment (DG EMPL). Our initiative falls within the framework of the Bruges communiqué of 2010, which called for VET provider structured cooperation, as well as the Riga conclusions of 2015. The community is composed mainly of experts from the European Forum of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (EVET), the European Association of Institutes for Vocational Training (EVBB), the European Vocational Training Association (EVTA), the European Providers of Vocational Education and Training (EUprovET), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and the European University Continuing Education Network (EUCEN). The first four operate mostly in the VET sector, and the last two in higher professional education at EQF level 5 and above.

How can the community promote the role of providers as key vocational education and training stakeholders?

The European community of learning providers is a community of practice. Its ultimate goal is to help VET providers prepare for future challenges and to increase the impact of EU-level cooperation on VET. Both goals reinforce the quality of VET delivery and so raise the status of those who deliver it, the providers. The community complements the platform of European associations of VET providers set up by DG EMPL in 2015 to give policy advice to the European Commission.

What priorities will the community working groups be focusing on?

The community has decided to look into three areas of particular importance to VET providers: further development of teaching staff e-skills; promotion of staff learning mobility; and migrant and refugee empowerment and integration through learning. It will then come up with quality guidelines by 2020. These three priority themes reflect the challenges VET providers are expected to respond to: technology, automation and digitalisation that require new skills and competences and new ways to teach and learn; mobility that needs more support and funding to become accessible to all and an integral part of VET curricula; and the recent migratory and refugee waves that may strain local societies’ resources but may also provide new sources of skills supply and contribute to relieving the demographic problems most EU countries face. The quality of the responses to these challenges will certainly reinforce training organisations’ social utility for individual learners and the economy alike.

How will the work shape up?

The work in the community is done on a voluntary basis in subgroups; outcomes will primarily be addressed to VET providers. The community will also formulate proposals on post-2020 VET and submit them to the Commission. We have set up an online community and adopted a blended working approach based on both physical and virtual meetings and discussions. Mapping and analysing interesting cases, sharing information and experience, learning from peers and organising reflection groups on the three priority themes are all among the community’s activities. So far, the three subgroups have met twice: in May 2017 and March 2018 (as part of the community’s first annual meeting in Thessaloniki). They will meet again in the second half of the year.