



Author: Hans Daale, Leido, the Netherlands
January 2015

This article is about using the overlap between Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education (HE) for a better need of ECVET as an instrument in VET for making the transfer from VET to HE far better than it is now in a lot of countries.

This can be done by making arrangements between providers of Higher VET (HVET) at one side and Higher Education Institutions offering Short Cycle Higher Education (SCHE) at the other side. Both types of qualifications can be seen as representatives of 'level 5 of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)'.

But... ECTS is fully implemented in HE, and in SCHE. ECVET is not yet accepted in most of the Member States (maybe in theory but not in practice). This means that there is also no opportunity to bring all stakeholders involved in HVET and SCHE together on a regular basis to discuss the needs for more flexible learning pathways.

The coming years will be crucial for this 'problem'. We will sketch here some of the aspects of the way it can be dealt with ECVET and ECTS.

1 VET AND HE: THE OVERLAP

One of the most important issues at the moment in the world of education (and work) is the need for connecting VET and HE in a better way. This is the subject of this article and then specifically about the instruments that can be deployed here for – and whose use is encouraged at European level. It concerns the need for further training for economic and social reasons. However, the dynamism in the economy, national but especially if you look at what is happening in the world, is violently and almost not more to follow – let alone to predict. But many experts do agree about a certain movement and that there is a growing need for highly educated people – and then literally people who acquire a diploma of higher education. Regardless of whether this is due to the particularly large range of people available for the labour market, many jobs and positions in companies will be more complex and require competences that are no longer fitting in education and training programmes at level 4.

In addition to that, we have to deal with 'the individual', in social sense. In the past twenty years in many countries, especially in the successful economies in Europe, there is pressure on people in order for schooling as high as possible, especially at a young age. Objectives like 'more than 40% of the working population should have a degree in the field of higher education' have broken down the boundaries between all kinds of educational sectors in a number of respects. Directly going on with a study was the mantra, even if the person would probably have been in favor of a career in which training with interruptions, looking at the possibilities in the labour market, can be better for him or her – and thus more fitting in 'lifelong learning'.

It's time for a form of contemplation. A lot of young people cannot graduate in higher education, for example, directly following after education and training offered in VET. They make mostly an incorrect choice, not always conscious and purposeful. Information about the labour market at the end of the study is not available or not crisp and detailed enough. For the individual it is a negative experience (of which – of course - can be learned) and also for the society it is not good as unnecessary studies will be done and then also be aborted.

Therefore, there should be more flexibility in the supply of education and the learning pathways. If it's about the connection between VET and HE, countries have to seek for a possibility to 'grow'

from VET-4 to Higher VET on level 5, while in the higher education area the Short Cycle should get a anchored place. Preservation measures should include, with respect for the specific features of the two sectors to be looked at, that the overlap for each other's instruments are analyzed on agreements. Then, on this basis, the transition from HVET to SCHE and even Bachelor can get an optimal interpretation.

When it comes to exemptions and the shortening of pathways between VET and HE ECVET and ECTS come into view. The projects of recent years and the struggle that takes place to give a place to ECVET within VET, show that much remains has to be done. 'Work on the education shop', so to speak. In this article, a number of developments, possibilities and proposals will be given – also in the light of the exploitation of the results of the BeTWIN2 project.

2 STATE OF PLAY

The BeTwin project showed that there is a possibility to use ECVET as an instrument to bring VET and HE closer to each other. But we are still talking about two different sectors, having their own concerns, responsibilities and control mechanisms. So there has to be a need to for a full implementation and use of ECVET in HVET, but that means that it has also to be accepted in VET as a whole. Just having ECVET for comparing programmes for HVET and SCHE is not an issue, because there will be other possibilities to take care of the consequences of the overlap. That can be done in an individual basis and tailor made agreements between the providers involved.

So, before putting more effort in improving the connection between HVET and SCHE, it is good the look at the state of play for ECVET in relation to ECTS as a result of a study done by Cedefop. In November 2014 Cedefop published a report about what can be seen as the current situation for a number of VET instruments. Here the part of this report about ECVET and ECTS.

2.1 Credits for crossing institutional, sectorial and geographical borders

(This sub-chapter is written on the basis of Cedefop's experiences with ECVET since work was initiated (by the Copenhagen Declaration) in 2002. The experiences from monitoring implementation, starting in 2010, have been particularly important.)

VALUING learning is an important part of the FRONT-OFFICE and the two European credit transfer systems (ECVET for VET and ECTS for HE) currently in existence are critical to any future developments (*Remark: The link between credit systems and arrangements for validation will also need to be carefully considered; in the same way as recognition conventions and practices can prevent and/or promote progression of learners and employees*). At date, ECVET and ECTS are not conceptually or operationally compatible (*Remark: The issue of compatibility between ECVET and ECTS is briefly raised in the recent evaluation of ECVET (2014). The evaluation concludes that the differences regarding credit points (ECVET refrains from these, insisting on a 'pure' learning outcomes based approach) makes conversions difficult. It is stated, however, that the learning outcomes approach can provide a common platform on which cooperation can be built. The external evaluation concludes that a merging of the two systems should not be given priority 'as they have different purposes' (ECVET evaluation, conclusion 5). The interrelation between the two systems should be promoted, '...with reference to learning outcomes rather than focusing on credit points' (ECVET evaluation, conclusions 6).*).

Building on partly different principles (the use of credit points, the weighting of workload vs. learning outcomes), they have been designed to support transfer and progression within and not across education and training sectors.

Limiting credit systems to a particular sector or set of institutions seems to be in conflict with the needs of the end-users referred to above, the support to progression will by definition be limited. Developments in recent years, notably the tendency towards increasing overlaps between VET and HE, point to the need for stronger interconnections (*Remark: We deliberately avoid speaking of merging credit systems: As long as end-users progression is facilitated, through a functioning interface, different systems may operate side-by-side.*) between existing credit transfer systems.

The need for a more comprehensive review of the European credit transfer systems must take into account both the limitation of ECTS and the problems encountered in relation to the implementation of ECVET. ECTS has been successful in the sense that it is well known and widely used by end-users all over Europe. The credit points approach is now in common use and widely recognised as an expression of (nominal) workload. The weakness of ECTS lies in the (in theory existing but in practice mostly lacking) link to learning outcomes. ECVET, while being strong on learning outcomes, has not been able to reach any significant number of end-users. Part of the problem lies in the fact that ECVET was designed not as one system but as a 'menu card' allowing a variety of applications. Based on the regular monitoring of ECVET carried out by Cedefop since 2010, it may be argued that the future survival of ECVET requires a focusing of minds where the current diversity is replaced by a simpler and more predictable approach where the (learning outcomes based) interface to ECTS is defined and agreed. The most contentious and urgent issues to be dealt with are related to the way learning outcomes are expressed and credits are calculated:

- While experts agree that credit transfer and accumulation systems can work in the absence of credit points, there is also evidence from countries that credit points make the transfer systems visible and easier to understand for end-users.
- The method for calculating credits needs to be addressed and must balance the weight given to (notional) workload and learning outcomes.
- To balance the focus on workload and learning outcomes, agreement have to be reached on how to express *progress in learning*. Presenting it as a list of learning outcomes (see discussions in chapter 4.1) is challenging at a practical and operational level. Systematic cooperation, involving stakeholders from both VET and HE, must be initiated (and linked to the points made in relation to the chapter on learning outcomes above).

The main challenge in the area of credit transfer, according to Cedefop's work, is to align the existing and separate systems with the needs of the end-users. The lacking compatibility between the two systems exemplifies how a 'tool-by-tool' approach is designed according to the priorities of systems and not the priorities of the end-users. It is therefore essential to initiate a shared work between Vet and HE looking addressing the interface between ECTS and ECVET to identify a possible common basis for facilitating transfer across education and training sectors.

The focus on progression also implies that future work on VALUING LEARNING should promote increased interaction between credit transfer systems and arrangements for validation of non-formal and informal learning. The link to the various conventions and practices on recognition of formal qualifications must also be addressed under this priority.

This report shows that a lot of work has to done. But it is not all negative... In the next parts of this article it is about possibilities for positive actions, using for instance the renewed attention for more progression from VET to HE, at all kinds of (political, strategic, national, European, institutional, governmental...) levels.

3 EXPLOITATION OF THE PROJECT BETWIN2: CHANCES...

The project BeTwin2 has shown that on many fronts is thought about the use of the overlap between VET and HE, at level 5 of the EQF (and similar levels of national frameworks). However, it is very hard to use the instrument ECVET for this, even if in a country having qualifications that are seen as HVET and/or SCHE in higher education.

One of the reasons is that from the start with the introduction of the Bachelor-Master structure as part of the so-called Bologna Process common frameworks for study points are in progress. One uses, because every country is doing that, the European Credit Transfer System in higher education, of which the abbreviation is lead a life of its own as name for the credits: ECTS (or EC, as in the Netherlands). Then is has been figured out for VET that a comparable system with common agreement on the study load, expressed in credits, would be a useful addition to international cooperation.

However, VET has spread across Europe few aspects in common. The control of a national system for VET has been placed in all kinds of different hands. Also VET knows all kinds of devices, fluctuating with the audiences and the way in which the cooperation with the world of work is finding place. Normalizing of 'study load' does not fit in there, and attempts to do so, encounter much resistance - if only that external control of the system can be done much stronger.

But when it comes to the permeability between VET and HE, and then in a specific situation about HVET and SCHE towards harmonizing of the possibilities that they offer, one runs overtaken by the facts if it is about ECVET. The ECTS system is there and continues to exist, and will not adjust any possibilities to accommodate the ECVET system. Higher education is also a strong closed area, with its own rules and organizations that are managed in solid by providers. External institutions are pretty much not allowed in discussions, in order to achieve a far-reaching cooperation.

The introduction of SCHE in countries where higher education is functioning under the wings of European agreements, can and will be seen as a downgrading of the offer. As then the connection thereof with a qualification at the same EQF level must be filled in, it will be seen as a step too far...

But there seems to be put in motion some interesting developments - where the tide can be turned. As indicated in the introduction, there is the need to get more people in all stages of their career at a higher level. Authorities seize this to conditions in which the border between VET and HE more and more opens. And the European Commission agrees with this and supports this pursuit emphatically.

Here below a few examples and opportunities will be given to continue paying attention in the coming years. The fact is that a form of re-starting is required. There will be returned to that after these examples, with a targeted use of the European network that was founded in 2013: CHAIN5, the community for level 5, to combine attention to qualifications at that level.

3.1 VET4EU2

To for a number of years ago, the strategy for VET at European level in largely was determined by employers and employees, and their European associations. VET focuses on the labour market and the reasoning behind that policy was that in that case the buyers determine the policy. As reported, this is in higher education just left to the organized set of providers. However around 2011, the European Commission realised that VET providers make the difference when it comes to running the measures that at that level are conceived and have to be converted into settlements. That has meant that in 2014, also in line with the wishes of the DG EAC (DG Employment now), the four VET Associations joined forces. And so also for acting as 'a block' as EVTA, EfVET, EUproVET, and EVBB.

A smart move of this initiative was linking them to two European Associations for higher education: EURASHE and Eucen. Together they form 'VET4EU2', and recently they have noticed that this 'platform' will be in a structural way a discussion partner for DG Employment. A recent piece that came on the table is 'a memo on flexibility'. It is much more than attention to the flow of VET to HE, with the use of the issues that have gotten attention in BeTwin2. The most interesting parts – to use in upcoming activities as 'exploitation' of the results of BeTwin2 – are listed here:

-
1. There is a need for more possibilities for people (regardless of age) after completing a level 4 program (the minimum entry requirement to higher education Institutions) to get a degree at levels 5 and higher.
 2. Closer cooperation between institutions offering Higher Vocational Education and Training (HVET) and Short Cycle Higher Education (SCHE) is imperative according to the outcomes of

the CEDEFOP study on the role of level 5 in countries having a NQF. This means that transfer from HVET to SCHE and from HVET or SCHE to Bachelor's programs (or other qualifications at level 6 of the EQF) can be more and more effective and attractive if a clear and coherent credit transfer system is in place.

3. An impetus must be given for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. All Member States have agreed to have at National level by January 2018, a mechanism for the recognition and transferring of Learning Outcomes acquired via non-formal and informal learning routes. The collaboration of all parties involved in HE, VET, HVET and SCHE, is imperative to facilitate successful and timely implementation of the mechanism for the recognition and transferring of LOs via informal and formal education. Quality Assurance issues, level of the LOs, Certification, Validation of providers are some of the key elements to address and agree on. The necessary instruments and tools are already available, (NQF, EQF, ECTS, ECVET, QA, etcetera) so there is no need to reinvent the wheel just to find ways to implement them and putting them into use.
4. Flexibility is also a need for achievement of level 4 programs. For this the European member states shall accept recognition of prior learning and cumulative learning pathways i.e. with help of ECVET as possible pathways without any restrictions. This does not only give a benefit to the target groups but also for enterprises and society in total by acting against 'dropping out of the system', by producing qualified workforce and opening new pathways for an inclusive future.

3.2 Short Cycle as a formal European degree

An obstacle to good use of HVET and SCHE for a clutch of ECVET and ECTS is that no country can require higher education institutions to undertake training in level 5 under the name Short Cycle. Such qualifications can be kept outside the door carefully, seeing as post-secondary. But in May of this year, as the ministers for higher education having their bi-annual meeting, there will be a proposal on the table for withdrawing Short Cycle formally in the European Higher Education Area. To avoid political confusion one does still not have to be obliged to link Short Cycle to level 5 of the national framework, but it is a good start.... That would make it possible to put more comparisons between programs in motion, but it is certainly a promising initiative.

Here are some passages given from the advice that has been prepared for the purposes of this introduction of Short Cycle, by a European working group.

"One important development since 2005 is that short cycle programs have gained prominence in many countries and the EQF, adopted in 2008, includes a level 5, which is normally the level to which short cycle qualifications, whether in higher education or VET, are referenced¹. While some qualifications referenced against EQF level 5 are not higher education qualifications, many are, and it is worth noting that there are also qualifications at first and second degree level (EQF levels 6 and 7) that are not considered higher education qualifications in the systems to which they belong. It therefore seems incongruent that the QF-EHEA does not acknowledge the widespread existence of short cycle degrees in national systems.

It is also worth underlining that national education systems may include levels other than those included in the overarching frameworks as long as national frameworks are self-certified and referenced against the QF-EHEA and the EQF. For example, while the EQF comprises 8 levels, the number of levels in national frameworks currently ranges from 7 to 12. Therefore, including short cycle qualifications in the QF-EHEA will in no way oblige countries to include such qualifications in their national frameworks but it would give explicit recognition to the fact that many national frameworks do include short cycle qualifications.

¹ See the CEDEFOP Briefing Note "The hidden potential of level 5 qualifications" (June 2014), available at http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/9089_en.pdf.

Regardless of whether the short cycle qualifications are included in the overarching framework of qualifications of the EHEA, the qualifications framework should provide for clear articulation pathways connecting the short cycle qualifications to the first cycle (bachelor) qualifications. Public authorities should encourage higher education institutions in cooperation with the other providers of short cycle study programs to develop those articulation pathways.

Recommendation

At their 2015 meeting, Ministers should decide to include short cycle qualifications in the overarching framework of qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) based on the Dublin descriptor for short cycle qualifications and quality assured according to the ESG in order to give explicit recognition to the fact that many national frameworks now include short cycle qualifications but without an obligation on countries to include such qualifications in their NQF.

4 CHAIN5

Till 2013 the question was: who is fostering all the developments concerning the qualifications at level 5 of the EQF. All European VET Associations are involved in issues till level 4, albeit some of them have members offering Higher VET, but at a European level it is not in a formal way in the agenda. For higher (professional) education EURASHE can be addressed, knowing that in 2003 and 2011 research has been done under its umbrella on the situation of Short Cycle Higher Education in the Member States. Both reports were well accepted, and have led to the introduction of the Short Cycle in the European Higher Education Area, and have brought it on the table of the ministers for higher education. But in spite of this success SCHE is not a main spearhead of the association, having a lot of members like the Universities of Applied Sciences that are focusing on Bachelor and Master programmes.

After a lot of meetings with stakeholders of organisations involved in level 5 qualifications in 2012 and 2013 our Leido has taken the initiative for a new community of practice for level 5. It is called CHAIN5 to emphasise the link between the levels 4 and 6, and the permeability between VET and HE. It is not a new association, a 'stand-alone network' or a political movement, just that community to bring experts, organisations, institutions and other interested (national and international) bodies together to talk about 'level 5 issues'.

After the founding in December 2013 the following mission statement has been published:

Mission Statement

CHAIN5 is giving the floor to its members to discuss:

- the exchange of good practices in education,*
- the diversity of the implementation of such links internationally and mostly in Europe,*
- the relation and relevance of Level 5 in the Bologna process,*
- the relation and relevance of Level 5 to the labour market: having an independent, non-political meeting place for best practices concerning qualifications at level 5, having the specific position of them in different countries in mind, emphasizing the things we have in common – to be discussed with our relevant stakeholders with an open mind in a trustful setting.*

At the moment CHAIN5 has more than 85 members (no fee to be paid...) from 26 countries. This shows that there is a need for such a community. At the moment the Board of CHAIN5 is busy with the second annual conference (12-13 February, in Amsterdam). A small working group is writing a proposal under Erasmus+, to have a project about the most relevant themes that can help organisations in European countries for giving level 5 qualifications a better place in the educational system.

There are very good contacts with EURASHE (working group in Employability and Lifelong Learning) and VET4EU2. Most of the its memo on flexibility is written by LEIDO to link most of the developments to each other looking at the permeability between VET and HE – and to make use of the existing instruments for having better transitions from level 4 to levels 5 and 6. ECVET and

ECTS for HVET respectively SCHE will be an issue in CHAIN5, giving the members the opportunity to make use of the outcomes of projects like BeTwin2.

5 THE FUTURE... SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

The above shows that there are real opportunities in the coming years to get going with the use of ECVET. Consideration could be given to persons who have a VET background and want to grow at one point to a function or position requiring a diploma of higher education. Especially in view of this development, a number of recommendations is made here to those who are involved and can influence the implementation of ECVET, based on the capabilities that can be supported by Leido.

- Ask the current network of the ECVET-TEAM for support, having this issue in mind
- Put ECVET of the agenda of VET4EU2, directly or through one of its members – so, it can be put on the table in the regular meetings with DG Employment
- Take part in CHAIN5 and its activities – for instance by organizing some seminars on ECVET in cooperation with the Steering Committee of CHAIN5
- Use the implementation of the Short Cycle in the EHEA for contact with the Bologna Follow-Up Group, as supporting group for new developments in higher education
- Analyse all recent projects about ECVET for elements related to the progression from VET to HE and publish a report about them – and use it for an international seminar.

Hans Daale is General Manager of Leido, a network for VET and HE in the Netherlands. He is also a member of the Board of CHAIN5, and the Dutch representative in EURASHE.
