

Network to Support VET Trainers in Europe

Final Report

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Executive Summary

The **Network to Support Trainers in Europe** was launched as a successor of the Eurotrainer consortium but with a task to develop a network that supports European knowledge development on trainers and promotes related European initiatives. The main objectives of the Network have been to

- i) Produce empirical data on the professional situation of trainers (based on the surveys of the first Eurotrainer project);
- ii) Provide a common web platform for mutual exchange and community building among VET practitioners across Europe (including the option to develop national network sites with different working languages);
- iii) Provide overviews of materials and activities in the field of VET trainers across Europe (in the context of the thematic main activities);
- iv) Organise specific events for exchanges that link research, policy and practice related to trainers (in the context of online conferences and the International conference);
- v) Support the development of programmes and policies in the area; and to provide feedback for European training policies on (in the context of the thematic activities and by supporting the European consultation seminars);
- vi) Improve the cooperation in the field of trainers between institutions and organisations including enterprises, social partners, academia and other relevant bodies throughout Europe (by developing contacts with existing networks and by promoting synergy).

The target groups for the Network are practitioners and trainers of trainers, who are involved in initial vocational education, continuing vocational training, distance learning, work-based learning and informal adult learning. The Network has also been open for individuals who provide training such as trainers, tutors, coaches, mentors and 'peer group experts' in enterprises, workplaces and institutions. The network has also provided support for stakeholders who are developing training policies and commissioning policy studies and analyses.

The direct results of the Network have been produced in the activities that have been part of the proposed work programme (joint network activities and conferences). The products are available as hard copies (research reports and conference brochures) and as electronic versions on the web platform (<http://www.trainersineurope.org>):

1. The result of **the first network activity**, the survey of VET practitioners was published by ITB as a working paper under the following title.

Kirpal, Simone & Wittig, Wolfgang (2009). *Training Practitioners in Europe: Perspectives on their work, qualification and continuing learning*. ITB Research Paper Series No 41/2009. Bremen: University of Bremen. <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:gbv:46-ep000106074> (for download)

2. The results of **the second network activity** (policy analyses and case studies) will be published as a book publication.

3. The results of the **two online conferences** have been published as conference brochures under the following titles:

“The Training of Trainers. First International Online Conference held on 5-6 November 2008” organized by the Network to Support Trainers in Europe. Conference Proceedings
http://www.trainersineurope.org/files/2009/05/itb_final_conference-proceedings.pdf

“Innovation in Training Practice. Second International Online Conference held on 9-10 November 2009” organised by the Network to Support Trainers in Europe. Conference Proceedings.
<http://www.trainersineurope.org/files/2010/05/OnlineConferenceSummary2009.pdf>

4. The abstracts of the **International conference** of the Network have been published as a conference brochure under the following title:

“Crossing boundaries: The multiple roles of trainers and teachers in vocational education and training. 13.10.-15.10.2010”. Organised by the Network to Support Trainers in Europe.
<http://www.trainersineurope.org/files/2010/10/Crossing-Boundaries-Proceeding.pdf>

5. In addition to the above mentioned results, **the web platform** <http://www.trainersineurope.org> has been developed as a multi-functional platform for supporting different network activities (including the International conference and the online conferences) via blogs, group discussions, online exhibition and online radio, e-evaluation facilities and via links to other web resources.

As a major **indirect result of the Network** it is essential to note the contribution of several Network members to the Consultation seminars on VET Teachers and Trainers (2008-2009). The six regional consultation seminars and the Europe-wide workshop examined the role of current European and national policies as well as the contribution of European research & development projects. The seminars and the workshop were supported by the project website www.consultationseminars.org. The final report of Consultation process has been published by the DG EAC (see http://ec.europa.eu/education/more-information/doc/2010/teatra_en.pdf). In a similar way several Network members contributed to the Cedefop study “*Changing Roles and Competences of VET Teachers and Trainers*” that was completed in March 2010.

The Network was launched to give more visibility for trainers (as a target group for European policies) and to support European knowledge development and cooperation initiatives. In this respect the Network itself was challenged to **transform itself from a project-oriented consortium to a support network** that facilitates other networks, cooperation processes and emerging initiatives. In this respect the role of the platform, the online conferences and the International conference in Kostelec need to be highlighted.

During the working period of the Network it has become clear that the diversity of training cultures and the heterogeneity of the target group ‘trainers’ does not provide a basis for one umbrella community across Europe. Instead, the best way to support community-building has been to promote **exchanges** and mutual learning **across different areas of training-related expertise** (e.g. mentoring of different learners, project management skills, use of new media and online resources). In this respect the **plan for follow-up activities** does not emphasise the continuation of the Network as such. Instead it highlights the work with *a research agenda* (that builds upon the issues that were taken up), *an agenda for policy-dialogue* (that takes into account the experiences with the consultation seminars and the success of the International conference) and *an agenda for developing web resources and online events* (that builds upon the existing platform and on the successful online conferences). In many respects the International conference in Kostelec could be seen as a prototype for the **Innovation Forum** (for teachers and trainers in VET) that was proposed as the conclusion of the Consultation seminars.

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1. Objectives of the Network

During the recent years the European Commission and Cedefop considered that there are major gaps of research-based information on the role and professional situation of trainers in vocational education and training (VET). Therefore, several studies and European activities were launched to overcome the gaps and to stimulate knowledge sharing. These newer activities were started with the surveys of the Eurotrainer consortium on trainers in companies (EAC/09/06 “Studies on Trainers in VET”) and the parallel project “TTplus – A Framework for the Continuing Professional Development of Trainers” funded under the EU’s *Leonardo da Vinci* programme. At the same time the Training of Trainers Network (TTnet), of Cedefop carried out studies on defining common profiles for VET professionals. Later on Cedefop launched a further study on the changing profiles of trainers and teachers in VET. At the level of intergovernmental cooperation the European Commission (DG EAC) invited the Member States to organise peer learning activities with focus on teachers and trainers in VET. These peer learning activities were organised by a European-level focus group and by institutions from the participating countries. These studies and activities provided the basis for Europe-wide consultation seminars that were launched by the European Commission (DG EAC) and implemented by an ITB-led consortium (EACEA/2007/08 VET teachers and trainers: Key actors to make lifelong learning a reality in Europe, see www.consultationseminars.org). The consultation seminars were organised in six European regions and one as a Europe-wide event. Altogether these activities sought to inform EU policies and create new supporting measures that take into account the particular needs and interests of VET trainers.

In the context of these activities the **Network to Support Trainers in Europe** was launched as a successor of the Eurotrainer consortium but with a wider range of activities. The main objectives of the Network have been to

- i) Produce empirical data on the professional situation of trainers (based on the surveys of the first Eurotrainer project);
- ii) Provide a common web platform for mutual exchange and community building among VET practitioners across Europe (including the option to develop national network sites with different working languages);
- iii) Provide overviews of materials and activities in the field of VET trainers across Europe (in the context of the thematic main activities);
- iv) Organise specific events for exchanges that link research, policy and practice related to trainers (in the context of online conferences and the International conference);
- v) Support the development of programmes and policies in the area; and to provide feedback for European training policies on (in the context of the thematic activities and by supporting the European consultation seminars);
- vi) Improve the cooperation in the field of trainers between institutions and organisations including enterprises, social partners, academia and other relevant bodies throughout Europe (by developing contacts with existing networks and by promoting synergy).

2. Approach of the Network

In the light of the above described background, the Network has had the challenge to develop several levels of activities to promote knowledge development on *and* cooperation among trainers in Europe. The main activities include the following

- i) Further development of studies that cover the professional situation of trainers and European initiatives to promote training of trainers (the thematic network activities);
- ii) Launch and development of web platform and linked web facilities to promote community development and networking among partners and the affiliated networks;
- iii) Networking at national level and within country clusters to link existing networks and partnerships to a wider community development;
- iv) Promotion of synergy, cooperation and European visibility of parallel research & development activities that focus on trainers and training the trainers;
- v) Development of online conferences, the International conference and attached workshops that promote more interactive modes of knowledge sharing policies among trainers, educators and researchers at the European and international level;
- vi) Use of different evaluation measures to get feedback of the development of Network and of its main activities.

Below, brief accounts are given on the ways in which the diverse activities were linked to each other during the funding period of the Network.

2.1 The thematic network activities

Two **joint network activities** were organised to link to each other knowledge sharing on innovations and feedback for national and European policy development:

- The **first joint network activity** (priority in 2008) consisted of implementing a survey to assess trainers' work, qualification and continuing learning in about 20 European countries. In order to reach this target group the questionnaire was translated into 18 different national languages. For the first statistical data analysis 738 questionnaires from 28 European countries were considered.
- The **second joint network activity** (priority in 2009 and 2010) consisted of different measures to analyse good practice examples, innovation programmes and current policies in the area of VET trainers. This activity was launched by joint discussions on the role of EQF and its implications for trainers. This discussion led was continued with case studies in the participating countries.

2.2 The web platform and web-based support for networking

The Network established a **web platform** (www.trainersineurope.org) to promote networking among VET trainers different working in different training contexts. A key feature of the platform was to provide support for knowledge sharing on studies and innovations in the area of VET trainers. The Network platform provides functionality for blogging, groups, forums, messaging, news feeds, user-generated metadata and static web pages.

The platform fully supports multimedia including video and podcasting and is capable of adaptation to support social software. The platform is organised similar to social networks. Every member can make use of the platform as a means to facilitate dissemination, and discussion. Moderation and a person centred support structure make sure, that the platform is focused on the professional issue on VET trainers. Additional e-features for knowledge sharing and are embedded as well.

2.3 Networking at the national level and within country clusters

Apart from operating at the international level the Network supports and builds communities of VET experts and training practitioners at the national level or in a country cluster. The partners' **cooperation with national or wider networks** brought into picture different counterparts:

- a) For several partners the main counterpart was the national TTnet (Austria, Germany, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland and Greece).
- b) In Spain the main counterparts were university institutes and social partner organisations that were establishing new study programmes for teacher education and training of trainers.
- c) For some partners (e.g. the Greece and the Netherlands) the main counterparts were the networks of regional training centres, supporting public bodies and new support platforms.
- d) In Finland the main counterparts were major projects for promoting training of trainers.
- e) For some partners (e.g. the Netherlands, Bulgaria) the associations of HR managers and developers were key counterparts.

2.4 Cooperation and synergy with parallel activities

During its funding period the Network became involved in the organisation and implementation of the European Consultation seminars on the theme "VET teachers and trainers as key actors for lifelong learning". The Network partners supported the organisation of the regional and European consultation seminars by their own participation, by recruiting other participants and by presenting the results of ongoing European and national projects. These seminars provided a major opportunity for stakeholder dialogue and for reflection on the results of prior projects and familiarisation with emerging projects and initiatives (see the next section "Outcomes and results of the network").

2.5 Development of conferences and online-conferences

During its earlier phases the Network organised two online conferences. One was organised in November 2008 with the theme "Training of trainers" and the second one was organised in October 2009 with the theme "Innovations in training practice". At the final stage of the funding period the Network organised an International conference with the theme "Crossing boundaries: The multiple role of trainers and teachers in vocational education and training". The conference was organised in Kostelec, near Prague, in collaboration with the TTnet of the Czech Republic.

The online conferences served as pilot events to reach wider professional networks (in particular with focus on e-learning in teacher education and training of trainers). The International conference served as a pilot event to introduce more interactive and participative sessions and to promote more intensive dialogue between the participants.

2.6 Self-evaluation measures

At different developmental phases the Network has used different evaluation measures to get feedback of the success and targeting of its activities.

a) Evaluation of the e-conferences

The two e-conferences November 2008 and 2009 were evaluated by means of a survey that participants were asked to fill out after the conference had been concluded.

b) First interim evaluation

In the year 2008 a **questionnaire** was distributed among the project partners to evaluate the following aspects of the Network. This information provided feedback on the desired content to be developed for the platform (including materials, online tools and links to other projects).

c) Second interim evaluation

In spring 2010 a second interim evaluation was implemented by organising a **self-evaluation workshop** that was moderated by the new coordination team. This evaluation focused on the following aspects: a) project management & participation, b) project development & the role of joint activities, c) dissemination & knowledge sharing and d) impact of the network and its activities. The discussions raised a self-critical debate on the issue, to what extent the Network had been working like a *project* (with focus on completing scheduled activities) or like a *network* (with open creative spaces for promoting emerging initiatives). This debate was taken into account in the preparation of the International conference in Kostelec.

d) Evaluation of cooperation with affiliated networks

The interim evaluation measures were focusing on the network itself. Therefore, an additional questionnaire was sent in autumn 2010 to get feedback on the outreach activities of the Network partners and on their affiliate networks at the national level. This evaluation provided a more detailed picture how different network activities had been used to stimulate cooperation with affiliated networks and to what extent these networks had showed interest in European activities.

e) Final evaluation supported by an external expert

Parallel to the International conference a final evaluation exercise was carried out with the support of an invited evaluator Jenny Hughes, who was preparing a keynote speech on evaluating networks for the annual conference of the British Association of Evaluation Research. She made use of the previous questionnaires and organised complementary interviews to find out, what activities should have been higher (or lower) priority and what new activities should be implemented to strengthen the project. The interviews and related reflections have been made available on the Evaluation 2.0 page on the Network platform.

Altogether, the evaluation measures reflect the development of the Network from a consortium to carry out pre-designed project activities towards a network that explores new grounds and tries to provide appropriate services for emerging activities. At the same time the evaluation reports and the interviews draw attention to contrasts between the Network members' ideas, how such services could be produced and the views of their counterparts.

3. Results and Outcomes of the Network

This section provides an overview of the main results of the thematic network activities, of the platform development, of specific tool development initiatives, of the synergy-promoting activities and of the conferences. The partnership development and the community-building measures are discussed in the next main section (Partnerships).

3.1 Results of the joint network activities

The outcomes of the **first joint network activity**, the survey of VET practitioners has been reported as a working paper. The survey helped the partners to establish contacts to stakeholder institutions and VET practitioners in their country/country cluster. It also supported a process of reflection and policy debate at the national level that the partners would like to strengthen. As a result, the analysis paved the way for further studies. The survey with the questionnaire in 18 different national languages can be accessed at <http://www.trainersineurope.org/activities/survey>

The hard copy version has been published under the following title: Kirpal, Simone & Wittig, Wolfgang (2009). *Training Practitioners in Europe: Perspectives on their work, qualification and continuing learning*. ITB Research Paper Series No 41/2009. Bremen: University of Bremen. <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:gbv:46-ep000106074> (for download)

The **second joint network activity**, discussion and analyses on the role of the European Qualification Framework (as support for training of trainers) was launched by an opening debate in a flashmeeting and continued by mutual correspondence and a second round of debates in the Network meeting in Madrid. This activity was overshadowed by the following intervening factors that made it difficult to develop a common approach:

- In their home countries the Network partners were facing different patterns to formalise and/or to develop training of trainers. For some partners the (re-)establishment of national standards (and making explicit reference to EQF reference levels) was a real working perspective. For some other partners the most important initiatives to promote professional development of trainers were linked to specific thematic contexts (e.g. cooperation between schools and enterprises) or to promotion of specific capabilities (e.g. project management skills or online skills). In the light of this diversity, the partners could not carry out a common study. Instead, it was agreed that the partners will carry out case studies that highlight the reform approaches that are essential for them.
- Parallel to this network activity the Europe-wide Consultation seminars organised sessions in which country representatives presented insights into current reforms and invited stakeholders from the country cluster to give feedback in terms of peer learning.
- Parallel to this network activity some of the Network partners were involved in the Cedefop study "*Changing Roles and Competences of VET Teachers and Trainers*" (see below 3.4.) and used their experience and materials to contribute to this study.

In the light of the above some of the findings and contributions of the Network partners have been used in the reports of the parallel activities. The case studies will be published in a separate book publication. An overview of the debates and key findings will be published as a separate working paper by ITB.

3.2. The development and utilisation of the platform

The web platform of the Network (<http://www.trainersineurope.org>) has firstly been launched as a project website developed and as an open communication platform for interested individuals (with support for messaging, blogging, and sharing news. Gradually the platform gained more weight by supporting the online conferences and the preparation of the international conference. In the context of these events the platform served as an arena for piloting with online exhibitions and with online radio programme.

3.3 Promotion of the use of specific online-tools for VET professionals

Based on the initiative of the Finnish partners, the Network has promoted piloting with a self-assessment tool for trainers. The tool was originally designed for vocational teachers but it has been customised for in-company trainers. In particular the Finnish and Spanish partners were engaged in a bilateral cooperation to test the tool in other national contexts. The tool *“Knowledge of in-company trainers. Self-assessment tool for VET practitioners”* is available via the following URL: <http://openetti.aokk.hamk.fi/seppoh/Osaamismittarit/english.htm>

3.4 Cooperation and synergy with other related projects

The Network to Support Trainers in Europe was established as a follow-up the Europe-wide surveys of the Eurotrainer consortium and of several parallel studies on trainers in VET. In this context the Network had an intermediate role in promoting cooperation and synergy with ongoing activities and in disseminating and exploiting the results of completed activities.

The ways in which the Network developed synergy and cooperation across predecessor projects and parallel activities can be characterised in the following way

- The Network continued the surveys of the predecessor project Eurotrainer – Studies on Trainers in Enterprises (Lot 1) and involved the main partners of the parallel project (Lot 2) to participate in the founding of the Network.
- Several Network members participated in the discussion on the follow-up of the TTnet study *“Defining VET Professions”* and became involved in the follow-up study *“Changing Roles and Competences of VET Teachers and Trainers”* funded by Cedefop.
- The Network members familiarised themselves with the case-based evidence and the conclusions of the project TTplus concerning the different possibilities to develop common frameworks for professional development of trainers. Some of the case studies launched by the Network can be seen as successor activities to the TTplus studies in their countries.
- The Network members supported the organisation of the Consultation seminars on VET Teachers and Trainers (2008-2009). In the regional consultation seminars a special role was given for witness sessions the presented brief overviews on recent European and national or regional innovation projects. The final report of Consultation process has been published by the DG EAC (see http://ec.europa.eu/education/more-information/doc/2010/teatra_en.pdf)
- The Network members (contributing to the seminars) were invited to present the summaries of the above presented studies (Eurotrainer, Defining VET professionals, TTplus).

- Other participants informed of national reforms initiatives *or* on studies contributing to professional development of trainers *or* on cooperation that promoted European mobility of teachers and trainers in VET.

In the context of organising the international conference Crossing the Boundaries several new national and European projects and emerging project initiatives were contacted and they were provided opportunities to present and dissemination their ideas and results. These projects included among others the following ones: Portfolio of Evidence (Poete), Innovet-mechatronics, Cross-mentoring, Way to Quality, National Educational Portal, Psico.com, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPLO) and TrainerGuide.

3.4 The Online conferences and the International conference

As has been indicated, the Network started its conference activities of were started by **two international online-conferences**. The first e-conference that addressed the topic “The training of trainers” took place on 5-6 November 2008 and attracted about 80 participants. The second e-conference that addressed the topic “Innovation in Training practice” took place on 9-10 November 2009 and attracted about 70 participants. In addition to the documentation on the web platform, the Network has produced conference brochures on both e-conferences.

“The Training of Trainers. First International Online Conference held on 5-6 November 2008” organized by the Network to Support Trainers in Europe. Conference Proceedings
http://www.trainersineurope.org/files/2009/05/itb_final_conference-proceedings.pdf

“Innovation in Training Practice. Second International Online Conference held on 9-10 November 2009” organised by the Network to Support Trainers in Europe. Conference Proceedings.
<http://www.trainersineurope.org/files/2010/05/OnlineConferenceSummary2009.pdf>

The International conference of the Network was organised in Kostelec, Czech Republic on 13-15 November 2010. The theme was “Crossing boundaries: The multiple roles of trainers and teachers in vocational education and training. This conference was organised as an international conference that was run parallel to the national conference of the national conference of the TTnet of Czech Republic (with some shared plenary sessions). The conference was supported by online-exhibition and by online-radio programme. The international conference attracted 48 participants and the national conference 52.

In addition to the online documentation on the web platform the main conference was documented with a conference brochure that presented the accepted abstracts:

“Crossing boundaries: The multiple roles of trainers and teachers in vocational education and training. 13.10.-15.10.2010”. Organised by the Network to Support Trainers in Europe.
<http://www.trainersineurope.org/files/2010/10/Crossing-Boundaries-Proceeding.pdf>

The International conference was characterised by a strong emphasis on interactive sessions, supported by poster session and by live radio programme and by concluding debates. In this respect the arrangements differed from a traditional conference format that focused on individual presentation and moved towards a more participative setting that supported dialogue between closely related presentations and sessions. The success of this approach has been reflected in the blogging about the conference on the Network platform.

4. Partnerships

For reviewing the work of the Network to Support Trainers in Europe it is essential to note that partnership development was not merely a mean to an end – to achieve the objectives of the project-like activities. For a European network it is crucial to develop a process dynamic that leads from ad hoc activities towards a more sustainable pattern of cooperation and knowledge sharing between the partners and their affiliated networks. However, in this case the challenge was more complex: the Network was not launched in a vacuum but in a landscape of several parallel networks, projects and forums. Yet, the Network was launched to fill a gap – to overcome the lack of visibility of trainers in vocational education and training vis-à-vis teachers in school-based settings. In this context the Network faced a challenge to position itself within the landscape and to fulfil a support function instead of duplicating the work of other actors. From this perspective the Network was engaged in a process of transforming its own activities from studies and surveys to more intensive engagement with knowledge sharing, platform development and cooperation with affiliated networks at different levels. Below, a brief account is given on the process of developing such multiple partnerships.

4.1. Development of the core partnership of the Network members

The founding members of the Network had the task to cover their own country and a neighbouring country cluster. In the initial phase this task was seen as a responsibility for providing information for the surveys and to dissemination of information on the Network, on the platform and of the forthcoming online conferences. Parallel to this the Network sub-contracted three more partners to carry out similar tasks in Turkey, Poland and the Czech Republic and to engage themselves in the international activities. However, after completing the first joint activities the Network dynamics required a stronger emphasis on active networking with affiliated networking and new initiatives to be launched with the support of the platform and joint events.

4.2. Cooperation and partnership development at national and regional level

The tasks of the partners were manageable to all inasmuch they were seen as observers and rapporteurs of developments that have an impact on the professional situation of trainers in their country and in the neighbouring countries. However, as the potential for more widespread networking grew, the Network partners were facing very different situations.

In the countries in which trainers had created established networks (e.g. via the national TTnet or HRD association or via network training providers'), there was less need for support services to be provided by a European network. (Instead, in such cases the European network could be seen as a facilitator of knowledge sharing and dissemination across such networks). In the countries in which such networks were only emerging, the role of the European network was appreciated. Bilateral or trilateral cooperation was sought to support networking and to disseminate ideas and pedagogic tools. In the countries in which there was no strong dynamic to bring different kinds of trainers to common platforms, the ideas of the Network were appreciated but there was very little to be done with the resources of the Network members.

Moreover, at the level of country clusters the acquisition of information had been no problem. Yet the professional situation of trainers and their interest in trans-national networking varied considerably. Furthermore, the role of language barriers between national networks or country-specific cooperation initiatives became more significant than had been anticipated (even within the seemingly homogeneous country clusters with minor language barriers).

4.3. The role of the platform and (online-)conferences for community building

The platform and the conferences (both the online-conferences and the International conference) provided a different basis for participation. The platform and the events were available for interested individuals who had thematic interests. In this way the online conferences and the International conference attracted participants who had not necessarily been reached via the affiliated networks of the Network members. Moreover, the platform provided an opportunity for the users to set up groups and to develop their own web pages. However, the language barriers and to some extent the lack of experience in using web tools were major obstacles.

Dissemination and exploitation through participation in national and international events

As documented in the activities reports, the partners regularly attend national events, conferences and meetings to make the Network known, but also to influence policy processes and establish cooperation with other projects at the national level. All partners are regularly provided with flyers, brochures and other material for dissemination purposes at those events. Some partners have also created information material in their own national language for distribution. The different events are to some degree fully documented and explained in the annexes. At the international level the Network was, for example represented at the conference on “*Teachers and trainers – at the heart of innovation and VET reforms*” that was held on 23th and 24th February in Thessaloniki and jointly organised by Cedefop and the European Commission. It will also be represented at

- the eLearning Baltics 2009 Conference on *Tools and Learning for Creativity and Innovation* in Rostock on 17-19 June 2009;
- the 16th gtw-Herbstkonferenz – *Technical Sciences and its Didactics – Work of Tomorrow in Technical Vocations: Research Approaches and Training Concepts for Vocational Training* to be held in Bremen on 5-6 October 2009;
- the ESREA Research Network Inaugural Meeting on *Adult Educators, Trainers and their Professional Development* on 6-8 November 2009 in Thessaloniki, Greece.

In addition, the Network was involved in the series of six regional consultation seminars and a Europe-wide workshop that were conducted between October 2008 and January 2009 in the context of the above mentioned Consultation process (see the project website www.consultationseminars.org and the final report http://ec.europa.eu/education/more-information/doc/2010/teatra_en.pdf):

- Workshop 1 at the University of Wales, Newport, UK, 8.-9.10.2008 (Country cluster UK, Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands and Romania).
- Workshop 2 at Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania, 30.-31.10.2008 (Country cluster: Lithuania, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Poland and Slovakia).
- Workshop 3 at Aarhus University/School of Education, Copenhagen, Denmark, 13.-14.11.2008 (Country cluster: Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden)
- Workshop 4 at the University of Montpellier, France, 4.-5.12.2008 (Country cluster: France, Belgium, Italy, Portugal and Spain)
- Workshop 5 at OEEK, Athens, Greece, 7.-8.1.2009 (Country cluster: Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Slovenia and Turkey)
- Workshop 6 at BIBB, Bonn, Germany, 22.-23.1.2009 (Country cluster: Germany, Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Liechtenstein and Luxemburg)
- Workshop 7 at the University of Bremen 25.-26.6.2009 (Europe-wide concluding workshop that drew upon the prior workshops).

5. Plans for the Future

As has been indicated, the Network was launched as a continuation of Europe-wide project activities and was expected to support further cooperation and knowledge development with focus on trainers in Europe. In this respect the Network had to go through the following transitions and reorientations:

- 1) Transition from a consortium that provides country-specific information towards a network that promotes knowledge sharing across country clusters and theme-based research & development initiatives;
- 2) Transition from a consortium that focuses on research-based reports to a network that provides a wider range of support services and focused use of knowledge;
- 3) Transition from a consortium that provides information on the professional situation of trainers to a network that organises debates on different policy agendas and works with a diversity of interests;
- 4) Transition from a consortium that provides web content to a network that develops online-conferences and multiple uses of web resources.
- 5) Transition from a project consortium that focuses on its 'own' pre-scheduled project activities to a network that creates synergy with parallel activities and provides creative spaces to initiate new activities.

In the light of the above presented activities and results, the Network made clear progress in all dimensions. However, there were several intervening factors that narrowed down the prospects for working further with a similar network format:

- a) The Network had been launched as a Europe-wide "container network" to cover a wide range of studies, online-activities and networking activities. However, during the work it became apparent that the interest of trainers on European cooperation can best be served with focused initiatives, small-scale peer learning and thematic studies.
- b) The Network had been launched with the expectation that the country studies and joint debates could easily provide a basis for discussing common European agendas (including the role EQF and ECVET). However, the analyses and discussions indicated that partners are confronted with far more differentiated developmental agendas (which do not necessarily follow public VET policies).
- c) The Network had been launched as an English-speaking umbrella network that promoted dialogue and outreach activities to overcome language barriers and to support mutual learning. However, the outreach activities showed that the resources and services that were provided at the European level could only to a limited extent be used to support the country-specific or 'regional' initiatives (and required the involvement of active multipliers).
- d) The Network had been launched without an awareness of parallel activities that were to be launched during its funding period (e.g. the Consultation seminars and the Cedefop study). The fact that a considerable number of the Network members were involved in several mutually complementing activities, was a positive factor (promoting synergy and wider networking) but it had its side-effects (multiple involvement of the same key actors during a limited activity period).

Although the Network was working with an aim to develop a sustainable follow-up perspective, it became obvious that the follow-up activities cannot be handed over to one Europe-wide umbrella network that would cover all the aspects that were linked together by the Network. Instead, it is more appropriate to consider the follow-up phase in the light of distributed follow-up networks and initiatives that focus on mutually complementing working agendas:

1. The future European research agenda for studying trainers: So far the European cooperation has emphasised project designs that seek to provide Europe-wide coverage of country information. The experience of the Network (and of the parallel Cedefop project) suggests the conclusion that future research should focus more on changing needs, role models and working perspectives in European training contexts.

2. The future policy-dialogue across different training cultures: So far the European policy-dialogue has supported peer learning between country representatives and with focus on national and European policy frameworks (EQF, NQF, ECVET). The experience of the Network and of the Consultation seminars shows that the most successful settings for peer learning can be provided with exemplary learning, boundary-crossing dialogue arrangements and with sessions that require active interactivity.

3. The future development of the web platform and (online-)conferences: The development of the joint platform and the organisation of online conferences were considered as major achievements that merit a specific follow-up. In the light of distributed follow-up projects and initiatives it would be helpful to maintain an online service that provides access for different successor projects and networks. In a similar way the International conference served as a Europe-wide innovation forum for different actors who wanted to bring into discussion current projects and emerging initiatives. The experience of the Network and of the Consultation seminars shows that there is a demand for such European forum.

6. Contribution to EU policies and added value

The European added value of the Network and its activities can be summarised with the following points:

- **Making the professional situation of trainers visible:** Initially the Network (and its predecessor projects were launched) because of the lack of Europe-wide data and materials were available on the target group “trainers”. In this respect, the joint network activities (the surveys and the case studies) have improved the situation. Through the platform new materials have been made available to a wider audience. Alongside the other activities (online conferences, the International conference) the platform started to gain importance as a **Europe-wide online resource** for sharing knowledge on trainers.
- **Drawing attention to the diversity of ‘trainers’ as target group for European policies:** The studies of the network have confirmed again that trainers in vocational education and training (with different organisational affiliations) are a very heterogeneous target group for educational policies. Trainers are not typically represented via similar professional associations or networks. Moreover, the expectations on professional development differ between diverse training contexts. Therefore, policies to introduce common European standards (either in accordance to teachers’ status in Higher Education) or via the reference levels of European Qualification Framework) have not met wide support. This conclusion has also been confirmed by the experience with the Europe-wide consultation seminars in 2008-2009. Therefore, the main conclusion for supporting trainers is to give visibility for new developmental initiatives on **regular innovation forums** that will draw attention to key themes in developing workplace learning and reviewing the role of trainers.
- **Drawing attention to the many meanings of ‘professional development of trainers’:** Some of the predecessor projects (in particular TTplus) had drawn attention to the cultural diversity of ‘trainers’ and to different expectations on ‘professional development of trainers’. Also, the consultation workshops drew attention to different European and country-specific initiatives to promote professional development of trainers. However, the experience with these activities has shown that there has been a lack of creative spaces to debate the benefits and side-effects of such initiatives. In this respect the discussion (of the network partners) on the role of European Qualification Framework very soon paved the way for more open exchanges on alternative conceptual ideas, how to support the development of trainers. From this perspective the International conference took several steps to promote familiarisation with new ideas and to question traditional role models (e.g. the presentations on ‘cross-mentoring’ between teachers and trainers, turning ‘teachers into trainers’ and on the role of ‘regional competence centres’ as facilitators of organisational learning.
- **Drawing attention to regional issues, common themes and cross-cultural dialogue:** Some countries have introduced reforms that have consequences for professional development of trainers. Often this is linked to establishing some basic standards for trainers’ professional development or to support career progression based on training competences. In other countries the professional development of trainers is viewed from the perspective of gaining new competences. The experience of the consultation seminars shows, that there can be a **role for ‘regional’ workshops and subgroups** to share knowledge on such initiatives and to organise dialogue between different stakeholder groups

within a country cluster and/or lingual community. However, the experience of the network shows that the most inspiring events and cooperation activities can best be based on common problems and interests *and* on related cross-cultural dialogue. In this respect the network partners felt their role as multipliers of new ideas more appropriate than being rapporteurs on and contact persons for country cluster.

- **Drawing attention to the improvement of trainers' web-competences and online resources:** During its funding period the Network introduced new tools and facilities to support online communication, conferencing and peer-to-peer dialogue. The e-conferences and the technical support that the Network offers to the users – both to the Network members and its partners, but also the broader VET community – is unique in this area. Also, in the online conferences and in the International conference the topics related to e-learning issues had a significant role. However, major progress with web competences, online-conferencing and with e-learning were made in conjunction with thematic issues that were important for the participants. Therefore, the Network has been successful in **promoting web-competences and e-learning by linking them to the thematic interests** of the Network partners and of the participants of the conferences.
- **Developing more participative and interactive conference culture:** The two online conferences and the International conference can be seen as steps from a traditional conference culture (with emphasis on high-standing keynote speakers) towards a more participative and interactive conference culture. The parallel sessions and the plenary sessions (or summarising commentaries) draw attention to the centrality of peer learning. A similar experience was made with the highly interactive formats that were used in the Consultation seminars in 2008-2009. However, in both cases the transition from traditional conference formats to a newer one was implemented with prototype solutions. Therefore, the capability to draw conclusions and to formulate them into appropriate final documents (that do justice to the creative interaction) was not fully developed. Therefore, the participants of the Consultation seminars and of the Network conferences (the online-conferences and the International conference) have emphasised the **need to continue such a participative conference tradition at the European level.**

7. Reflections

The experiences of the Network need to be considered as a special case in promoting European cooperation networks with focus on the target group ‘trainers’. In this respect it is worthwhile to note that the starting point, the approach and the evolution of the Network differ from several hitherto developed networks. The main features of this networking experience can be summarised with the following points.

1. Grounding the Network and its activities

a) Coverage of countries or interest-based participation: The Network was not launched as an ‘infrastructural network’ of country representatives who have a similar function in promoting training of trainers (cf. TTnet). However, in the initial phase the Network members joined in as contact persons for their country clusters. Yet, during the funding period they became more facilitators of contacts and interaction with different interest-driven initiatives and networks.

b) Focus on domain, policy measures or emerging initiatives: The Network differs clearly from domain-specific networks for common curriculum development or from sectoral networks to promote new qualification frameworks or credit transfer systems. In this respect the Network has had a role in sharing knowledge and promoting dialogue on emerging ideas.

c) Focus on complex change agendas or on small-scale pilot activities: The Network also differs from the “tuning” projects and networks that have supported the change processes and finding of context-specific transition models alongside the implementation of common European frameworks. Instead of promoting cooperation that focuses on a common change agenda, the Network has drawn attention on interest-based learning with focus on small-scale initiatives and transfer activities.

2. Working as a ‘network’ or as a ‘project’

a) Finding a role as ‘network’: Originally the Network was launched as a successor of the Eurotrainer project and therefore its work programme was shaped on the basis of some project-like activities (with an emphasis on producing its ‘own’ project results). At the same time the Network was facing the challenge to develop synergy and cooperation with national or regional counterparts and with parallel European initiatives and networks. Furthermore, several Network members were essentially involved in some of these parallel activities that – from a formal point of view – had to be considered as ‘external’ to the Network activities. This development added dimension to the functioning of the Network – transformation from a ‘closed shop’ network (that concentrates on its ‘own’ work programme) into a more open support network (that has responsibility on a wider activity environment).

b) Possibilities to develop synergy: Due to the fact that there were several activities that were running parallel to each other, the Network sought to adjust its work programme and its services to support and to enhance whole set of activities. However, there were some intervening factors that narrowed down the possibilities. Firstly, the calls for tenders did not envisage the possibilities to link the forthcoming projects to already existing networks or platforms. Thus, the website of the Consultation seminars had to be developed independently of the web platform of the Network. Secondly, according to the contracts, effective dissemination of the completed activities could only be started after the acceptance and publishing of the results. Thirdly, these processes were delayed due to changes of positions in the funding authorities. Yet, altogether,

the Network tried to capture the main conclusions and ideas arising from the set of parallel activities when shaping the International Conference that was organised at the end of the funding period. In many respects (e.g. the use of online exhibition, the invitation of parallel and emerging projects, the use of different kinds of interactive sessions and use of online radio) this conference could be seen as a prototype for the **Innovation Forum** (for teachers and trainers in VET) that was proposed as the conclusion of the Consultation seminars.

c) From ‘container networks’ to distributed initiatives: The Network had been launched to fill a gap concerning the visibility of the target group ‘trainers’ and initiatives to support European cooperation among trainers. Given the background of the Network members and given the diversity of training cultures in their educational contexts, the Network had to work as ‘container network’ that tried to provide space for different discourses and emerging activities. As has been indicated, the network has made some progress in promoting European knowledge sharing and peer learning between partners. However, in a similar way as several prior ‘container networks’ it has made the experience that the successor initiatives need their own space and dynamics to reach full maturity. In this respect the **plan for follow-up activities** (see above section 4) does not emphasise the continuation of the Network as such. Instead it highlights the work with *a research agenda* (that builds upon the issues that were taken up), *an agenda for policy-dialogue* (that takes into account the experiences with the consultation seminars and the success of the International conference) and *an agenda for developing web resources and online events* (that builds upon the existing platform and on the successful online conferences).

3. Issues in networking

a) Cultural diversity, community building and language issues: The Network and the prior or parallel activities have had to *face the diversity of training cultures and the heterogeneity of the target group ‘trainers’*. This has become transparent in the studies, in the policy dialogue events (e.g. the consultation seminars) and in the conferences. It has been clear that the cultural diversity does not provide a basis for one umbrella community across Europe. Instead, the best way to support community-building has been to promote **exchanges** and mutual learning **across different areas of training-related expertise** (e.g. mentoring of different learners, project management skills, use of new media and online resources). In this context the Network and the parallel activities have also had to deal with language issues. It is worthwhile to note that the *need for language support* is a crucial issue for European cooperation among trainers. Here, the experiences suggest the conclusion that simultaneous interpretation is not the best way to support cross-cultural dialogue. Instead, the use of multi-lingual facilitators and the encouragement of multi-lingual communication can lead to better results.

b) Continuing learning with the use of online tools and new media: The Network has been working with partners and target groups that only during the working period became familiarised with online tools and new media. Very soon the partners have become confident in using new tools and for giving **a role for online conferences and for wider use of the platform**. This has not only supported the implementation of the project activities, but also had wide-reaching spill off effects for other projects. The e-features of the Network have also opened a wider access for non-European experts and VET practitioners to gain information on European activities and to participate in the online events and in the International conference.