



# The Helsinki Communiqué

## **on Enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training**

*Communiqué of the European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training<sup>1</sup>, the European Social partners<sup>2</sup> and the European Commission, convened in Helsinki on 5 December 2006<sup>3</sup> to review the priorities and strategies of the Copenhagen Process*

## I. EUROPE NEEDS INVESTMENTS IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

### *Investment in human capital and skills needed*

Education and training have a central role in responding to the challenges we are facing in Europe: globalisation, an ageing population, emerging new technologies and skills needs. This is reflected in the European Union's agenda and in the revised Lisbon strategy and its integrated guidelines for growth and jobs 2005–2008<sup>4</sup>. It calls for expansion and improved investment in human capital and for adaptation of education and training systems in response to the challenges.

### *VET constitutes a major part of Lifelong learning*

Lifelong learning covers learning in all forms and in all settings. Lifelong learning strategies<sup>5</sup> should ensure a well functioning training market and a broad skills base. **VET – Vocational Education and Training** is an integral part of this. It plays a key role in human capital accumulation for the achievement of economic growth, employment and social objectives. VET is an essential tool in providing European citizens with the skills, knowledge and competences needed in the labour market and knowledge based society. The fact remains that VET caters for a major part of learners in Europe and a significant share of the future workforce will need vocational skills and competences.

### *Twin challenge: engaging young people and those in working life*

European VET policies should promote high quality initial VET and create conditions to improve the skills of those in the labour force through continuing VET. Policies should engage all young people in vocational training and/or higher education, ensuring at the same time that they acquire skills and competences relevant to the labour market and to their future lives. Furthermore, policies should serve people already in working-life by ensuring possibilities for further development throughout their careers. VET systems should, as part of flexible educational pathways, increasingly enable progression to further education and training, especially from VET to higher education.

### *Delivering a skills base relevant to working life*

VET should provide a broad knowledge and skills base relevant to working life, highlighting at the same time excellence at all levels. Policies and practices should assess the relative impacts of investing in different levels of skills and competences. The supply of intermediary and technical skills as well as high level skills should be increased to overcome skills shortages and to help sustain innovation and the growth of the knowledge society.

### *Contributing to competitiveness and social cohesion*

VET has a dual role in contributing to competitiveness and in enhancing social cohesion<sup>6</sup>. VET policies should address all sections of the population, offering attractive and challenging pathways for those with high potential, while at the same time addressing those at risk of educational disadvantages and labour market exclusion – especially early school leavers, those with low qualifications or no qualifications at all, those with special needs, people with an immigrant background and older workers. In short, VET should be equitable and efficient.<sup>7</sup>

### *European and national policies for enhancing VET*

*Basic education* should provide young people with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes necessary for further learning, entrepreneurship and employability and prepare students to follow a general education pathway or a VET pathway or a combination of both.

*Young people in VET* should acquire skills and competences relevant to labour market requirements, for employability and for lifelong learning. This calls for policies to reduce drop-out rates from VET and to better facilitate school-to-work transition, e.g. by combining education and training with work through apprenticeships and work-based learning.

The skills, competences and mobility of the *labour force* should be promoted by encouraging the recognition of prior learning gained through training and work experience. Training opportunities should be provided for those in working life. At the same time, learning opportunities should be available for disadvantaged individuals and groups, especially for the less educated.

Competitive business environments and strained national budgets pose challenges for ensuring necessary *investments in skills*. Public and private investment in VET should be improved through the further development of balanced and shared funding and investment mechanisms. Against this background, training systems should be efficient in providing the expected outcomes. This calls for better governance of training systems and responsiveness to the changing skill requirements of the labour market – training should be more demand-driven.

## II. MAKING IT HAPPEN – THE COPENHAGEN PROCESS DELIVERING REFORMS

### *Diversity – an asset and a challenge*

The diversity of European VET systems is an asset which serves as a basis for mutual learning and inspiring reforms. At the same time, this diversity makes it important to increase transparency and common understanding on quality issues, and hence mutual trust between VET systems and practices. The aim should be to promote a European VET area in which qualifications and skills acquired in one country are recognised throughout Europe, thus supporting the mobility of young people and adults. This VET area should be cultivated through use of common frameworks, instruments and tools and supported by consistent use of comparable data enabling evidence-based policymaking.

### *A process to improve the performance, quality and attractiveness of VET*

The Copenhagen Process<sup>8</sup> on Enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training was launched as a European strategy to improve the overall performance, quality and attractiveness of VET in Europe. Since 2002, the process has significantly contributed to raising the visibility and profile of VET in Europe. It has different dimensions:

*A political process.* The process plays an essential role in emphasising the importance of VET to political decision makers. It facilitates agreeing common European goals and objectives, discussing national models and initiatives, and exchanging good examples of practice at the European level. At national level, the process contributes to strengthening the focus on VET and has inspired national reforms.

*A process to develop common tools.* Another central role of the process is the development of common European frameworks and tools, aimed at enhancing transparency and quality of competences and qualifications, and facilitating mobility of learners and workers. The process paves the way towards a European labour market, and a European VET area complementary to the European area for higher education.

*A process that fosters mutual learning.* The process supports European cooperation. It allows the participating countries to consider their policies in light of experience from other countries and provides a framework for working together, learning from others, sharing ideas, experience and results.

*A process that takes the stakeholders on board.* The process strengthens the involvement of different stakeholders and enables their contribution to common goals.

## *Copenhagen – Maastricht – Helsinki*

The priorities of the process were first set in the Copenhagen Declaration<sup>9</sup>, December 2002. In the Maastricht Communiqué<sup>10</sup>, December 2004, they were further specified and expanded and, for the first time, national priorities were agreed. At the second follow-up meeting in Helsinki on 5 December 2006, the process was evaluated and its strategies and priorities were reviewed.

### *A more focused process*

The process is viewed as successful and necessary. Now, four years after Copenhagen, it is important to focus on continuing the work and completing and putting into practice initiatives already started. However, a more focused approach with a limited number of priority areas and clear targets should be ensured. Different initiatives and tools should be interlinked and mutually supportive, and VET should be developed at all levels as an essential part of lifelong learning with close links to general education.

The measures initiated by the process are voluntary and are developed through bottom-up cooperation. Particular emphasis is placed on engaging social partners and sectoral organisations in all stages of the work and feeding national experiences back into the work at European level.

### *Reforms take time – consistency needed*

While the Copenhagen and Maastricht priorities remain valid, the process should be strengthened, and the work focused in the following priority areas:

1. The image, status and attractiveness of VET. In this context, more emphasis should be placed on good governance of VET systems, institutions and/or providers.
2. Further development, testing and implementation of common European tools. The aim should be for the agreed tools to be in place by 2010.
3. A more systematic approach to strengthen mutual learning. To support this, special attention should be given to improving the scope, comparability and reliability of VET statistics by 2008.
4. Active involvement of all stakeholders in the work as the Copenhagen process moves towards an implementation phase.

### *Next follow-up meeting*

The next Ministerial follow-up meeting will be held in two years, to evaluate progress, to reinforce priorities and strategies for VET within the 'Education and Training 2010' work programme and to reflect on the orientation of the process beyond 2010.

### III. REVIEWED PRIORITIES

#### 1. Policy focused on improving the attractiveness and quality of VET

More attention should be paid by participating countries to the image, status and attractiveness of VET. This calls for:

- improved guidance throughout life to take better account of the opportunities and requirements of VET and of working life, including increased career guidance and advice in schools and for families, in order to ensure informed choice;
- open VET systems which offer access to flexible, individualised pathways and create better conditions for transition to working life, progression to further education and training, including higher education, and which support the skills development of adults in the labour market;
- close links with working life, both in initial and continuing VET, and increased opportunities to learn at the workplace;
- promoting the recognition of non-formal and informal learning to support career development and lifelong learning;
- measures to increase the interest and participation of men or women in those VET fields in which they remain under-represented, for instance women in the technology field;
- developing and highlighting excellence in skills, for example by applying world-class standards or organising skills competitions<sup>11</sup>.

In improving the attractiveness and quality of VET, more emphasis should be placed on good governance of VET systems and providers in delivering the VET agenda<sup>12</sup>, through:

- responsiveness to the needs of individuals and the labour market, including anticipation of skills needs. Particular attention should be paid to the needs of small and medium-sized enterprises;
- highly qualified teachers and trainers who undertake continuous professional development;
- national quality assurance and improvement in line with the Council Conclusions on Quality Assurance in VET<sup>13</sup>;
- improving public and private investment in VET through the development of balanced and shared funding and investment mechanisms;
- increased transparency of VET systems;
- stronger leadership of institutions and/or training providers within national strategies;
- active partnership between different decision makers and stakeholders, in particular social partners and sectoral organisations, at national, regional and local levels.

## 2. Development and implementation of common tools for VET

The development of common European tools should be continued in order to pave the way towards a European area of VET and to support the competitiveness of the European labour market. The aim should be for the agreed tools to be in place by 2010.

Further development of common European tools specifically aimed at VET, by:

- developing and testing a European Credit System for VET<sup>14</sup> (ECVET) as a tool for credit accumulation and transfer, taking into account the specificities of VET and the experience gained with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System<sup>15</sup> (ECTS) in higher education;
- strengthening cooperation on quality improvement by using the European Network of Quality Assurance for VET<sup>16</sup> (ENQA-VET) to support the creation of a common understanding on quality assurance and to foster mutual trust. Cooperation with higher education should be continued.

Further development of common European tools in which VET plays a major role, by:

- developing and testing a European Qualifications Framework<sup>17</sup> (EQF) based on learning outcomes, providing greater parity and better links between the VET and HE sectors and taking account of international sectoral qualifications;
- further developing EUROPASS<sup>18</sup> as the single European framework for transparency, and tools for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, in order to support and complement the introduction of EQF and ECVET.

Implementation of common European tools specifically aimed at VET, by:

- participating in the testing of ECVET and encouraging its implementation;
- drawing on the principles underlying a Common Quality Assurance Framework, as referred to in the May 2004 Council Conclusions on quality assurance in VET<sup>13</sup>, in order to promote a culture of quality improvement and wider participation in the ENQA-VET network.

Implementation of common European tools in which VET plays a major role, by:

- linking national qualification systems or national qualifications frameworks to the EQF;
- supporting national qualifications systems in incorporating international sectoral qualifications, using the EQF as a reference point;
- promoting widespread use of EUROPASS.

### 3. *Strengthening mutual learning*

A more systematic approach is needed to strengthen mutual learning, cooperative work and the sharing of experience and know-how. This should be facilitated by:

- common concepts and agreed definitions at European level in order to make national solutions, models and standards more easily understood;
- Commission funding for research and surveys on specific topics to deepen understanding of European VET systems and practices, and their links to the labour market and other education sectors;
- monitoring by the Commission of networks, the exchange of examples of good practice and the development of mechanisms which can be used to disseminate knowledge and expertise;
- a systematic and flexible framework to support peer learning activities in the field of VET. The framework should also support decentralised peer learning.

Adequate and consistent data and indicators are the key to understanding what is happening in VET, to strengthening mutual learning, to supporting research and to laying the foundations for evidence-based training policy. By the time of the next Ministerial follow-up Conference in 2008 the Commission should have:

- given special attention to improving the scope, comparability and reliability of VET statistics so that progress in developing VET can be evaluated;
- devoted attention to the development of the VET component within the coherent framework of indicators and benchmarks<sup>19</sup>;
- paid particular attention to the development of statistical information on investment in and the financing of VET.

This would best be achieved by using and combining existing data to the best advantage, while ensuring adequate national/regional data on VET and consistency and comparability with other data on education and training.



#### 4. *Taking all stakeholders on board*

The success of the Copenhagen process relies on the active involvement of all stakeholders in the field of VET, including in particular the social partners at European and national level, sectoral organisations and VET providers. This calls for:

- concise and clear information on the process, its background, priorities and activities and the effective transfer of results;
- the active participation in all stages of the process of stakeholders at European, national, regional and local level;
- emphasis on involving VET providers, teachers and trainers in testing and implementing the outcomes of the process;
- the involvement of learners and their organisations at national and European level.

## IV. IMPLEMENTATION AND REPORTING

The implementation of the Copenhagen process and its priorities should be supported through:

- the effective use of structural funds to support VET reforms at national level;
- targeted use of the Lifelong Learning Programme (2007-2013) to support the process, particularly for innovation, testing, experimentation and implementation;
- the continued support of CEDEFOP<sup>20</sup> and ETF<sup>21</sup> and their networks. They will, in particular, monitor progress in the priority areas and report on the developments;
- the active participation of other relevant Community bodies and committees, such as the Directors General for Vocational Training (DGVT), the Advisory Committee for Vocational Training (ACVT), the Education and Training Coordination Group (ETCG);
- close cooperation on statistics, indicators and benchmarks with EUROSTAT<sup>22</sup>, OECD<sup>23</sup>, CEDEFOP, and ETF;
- the exchange of information, expertise and results with third countries, particularly those countries covered by the ‘enlargement’ policy and by the ‘wider Europe neighbourhood’ policy. Cooperation with high-performing countries and international organisations such as OECD should be strengthened.

The right of participation of all Member States in this work should be ensured.

In the annual reporting on the national Lisbon reform programmes special attention should be paid to progress in VET.

The integrated biennial report on the ‘Education and Training 2010’ work programme should include a specific part addressing VET, enabling monitoring of the progress and identifying key outcomes to be reported to the European Council.

The process is supported by the ‘Framework of actions for the lifelong development of competences and qualifications’<sup>24</sup> of the European social partners which is also subject to annual reporting follow-up.

## REFERENCES

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