

PEP goes local, an interview with the project leader



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PART I: ECVET...what should or can we do with it?

Can you present yourself briefly? And what is your relation with ECVET?

My name is Pauline van den Bosch and I am advisor and project leader at the European Vocational Training Association. It is a network, with actors in vocational training and together we are facing common challenges in Europe in the field of education and employment.

The aim of our network is to set up a sustainable environment for exchange of knowledge and experiences and to work on shared issues in the field of LLL at European level. In this sense, it is our “duty” to bring the European policy closer to members and make it understandable, and let members see how the different European initiatives can be us benefit and use for the context of the member organization.

ECVET is an example of one of these European initiatives which can not only be of great use in the context for the partner countries, but it can also help Europe in creating a strong European environment in which education and employment are closer connected between the member states.

Can you explain that?

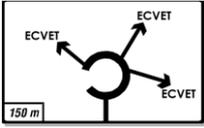
For example: we see now that there are about 27 different educational systems, and each of the partner countries think their own system is the best. But if it comes to compare qualifications, to send a student abroad for training, to find a job abroad, to validate competences of migrants, or even to get a diploma from another country recognized, this seems a very hard job, if not impossible. I think this is unthinkable, especially in these times.

We are still in times of crisis and although it is very hard, it is now the time to think about how we can improve our educational systems and get them better connected to the labour market. Of course no one knows what will happen in the future, but an educational system should be able to provide skills and competences for learners and workers so that they are not only competent to do that particular job, but also for jobs of the future. This means not only focusing on technical skills and knowledge, but also on competences in a professional and personal way: skills for life! If we manage to do that, I really believe that vocational education can be strong answer in this times of economic depression.

But what is the relation with ECVET in this sense?

One of the important elements behind ECVET and EQF are the learning outcomes based approach: so no thinking in terms of input, study hours and number of pages of a book, but on what is expected from them when they finish their training. This is a big step forward in bridging education and labour market.

Besides, if we manage to send students abroad to do a part of their training abroad, this means a huge added value for the student and for the future employers. Think about the cultural, language and technical competences this person will gain in a short term abroad. This is never possible between the save walls of the school... Besides, it seems that when people are mobile during their study, they are less vulnerable on the labour market in a later stage as well.



So ECVET is more than only credit points and mobility?

Absolutely! It is all about transparency and opening our VET systems towards each other! Mobility is often a logic consequence, but not the first priority in working on ECVET. If we manage to create more transparency of qualifications and openness of VET systems with the help of ECVET, we already have a great win at European level.

We see that people often get stuck in the technical specifications, for example the credit points! There are many misunderstandings about ECVET points. Actually they only provide information on the relative importance of a qualification and this is different than the points we know from the ECTS in the higher education system.

For me the credit points are not the most important issues, we can deal with that, it is more important to make agreements between partners.

I know that we are still very far from the ideal ECVET world, where every country has VET system in terms of learning outcomes, linked to the EQF and where learning outcomes gained in another context can easily be recognized, but I still like the ideas and principles behind ECVET very much and I still believe it is possible.

For example the learning outcomes based approach I was talking about, this can be huge step forward in improving education. Also the opportunity to open up your VET system to other systems. And then I mean not only from abroad, but think also about "How transparent is your VET system for people in your own country?" For example people who are looking for a job, with no diploma but rich in working experiences, people who like to continue training because they know already that they have to work longer... all examples in which it is important that educational systems are more open and flexible. This is exactly the basic idea behind ECVET!

What are for you at the moment the most interesting items of ECVET to work on?

This question is more related to concrete cases. I will try to explain some of them...

In the first place thinking in terms of learning outcomes! As I already explained earlier, this is one of the basic elements behind ECVET in order to create more transparency.

Another issue in this field is setting up partnerships and mutual trust between partners at national and European level. At operational level, and especially in projects and experiments, we see agreements and everything is possible, but if it comes to the reality when the project is finished or when it comes to policies at higher level, it is often more problematic, as organizations have to deal with all kind of legislations and cannot change their system. So how to work on policies and sustainable solutions remains important.

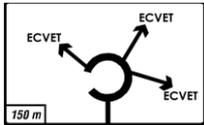
I am also very curious about summative assessments abroad. The conditions for mobility often seem to be present, but if it comes to real transfer of learning outcomes, in other word the acceptance of the summative assessment abroad, it becomes difficult, while this is at the end of the day the real essential of ECVET.

I am also convinced that the EQF levels cannot be ignored, as they are a huge help in creating more transparency at European level. Not only in the field of qualifications, but also for working experiences and jobs. It is our common language, our "esperanto" in the world of education and labour market.

This is a lot, is this still realistic do you think?

For me many issues are important, but for the moment I think it is the most important to have a culture and environment where you can talk with the right stakeholders on these issues and to see together how you can make the next step forward.

Focusing on the technical specification is not enough. It is as much important to focus on the political part, otherwise nothing will happen. In other words: communication, commitment, awareness raising are key words.



In the implementation of ECVET, there are many parties involved and it is therefore important to set up the dialog with all these partners and to explore the ideas and opinions and possibilities together.

People are afraid to start and have the idea that everything has to be developed before they can start. In fact the first step is to make agreements, collaborate with each other and start the dialog between partners in your own country and across the borders.

PART II: Experiences from projects

You have taken the initiative of this project PEP goes local, what it is about and how can it contribute to what you have just said: getting one step closer to ECVET implementation?

We started in 2009 with a partnership project an experiment to explore what ECVET can do for us. We were with about 10 partners and already very soon we discovered that all contexts were different. Both in terms of educational system as in terms of how they wanted to apply ECVET.

We saw that as a result of this partnership, some of the partners were setting up bilateral projects and initiatives to continue the work, or to transfer the work to another sector or context. This was good, because it created an atmosphere for collaboration at European level.

However, as a result, the partners felt also that they had to go back home with the results. In order to go one step further, the partners first have to set up the dialog with the relevant stakeholders in their own context. We can know what ECVET can do for us, but awareness raising and involving other partners from the beginning is essential.

This is why this follow up project is set up: It is all about organizing workshops at regional, local or sectoral level, involving the most relevant partners for them, in order to discuss the opportunities for ECVET in their context and to see how they can work together on a next step forward.

The project will finish at the end of this year and at the end of November we will share all the results and experiences of all the workshops with all the partners. This will be a very rich experiences for everybody.

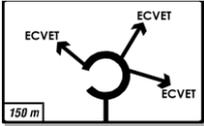
But there is the ECVET Recommendation, everything what people have to do is in it and all the EU member states have put their signature on it. What is the problem?

It is all about creating the right conditions and atmosphere for collaboration and this means that we have to start with people and not with frameworks. Of course the Recommendation is a very good document with specifications and expectations, but it is a voluntary framework and not a directive. However, we have to make sure that the Recommendation is interpreted by the member states in the same way.

For example, we see often that people don't know how and where to start with ECVET implementation. Or, the ECVET Recommendation is known, but if it really comes to what it is in, a lot of people don't catch it. So it is of great importance that all the relevant parties know what it is about and therefore the Recommendation has to be "translated" to the language of the potential users. What does it mean for them?

We see also that some organizations want to take their own system as a model for others. In my opinion, ECVET implementation without working on learning outcomes based approaches, linked to EQF and working on summative assessments abroad, is not possible. So I have my doubt when people say that they have implemented ECVET and that it didn't had any impact or consequences on their educational system.

There are a lot of projects in the field of ECVET implementation? For so far, what can you tell about these projects and what are the main challenges?



A lot of work is already done and in progress. Member States are now working on implementation strategies for ECVET, but the most effective way of working is to work from both ways: practical experiments, supported by strategic actions for implementation at policy level. For a successful implementation, policy and practice have to “meet” each other.

For example, we see a lot of initiatives in which partners have worked on the development of a common qualification in terms of learning outcomes and on assessment criteria. Besides, they managed to set up the conditions for mobility between the partner countries. So a lot of the ECVET elements are taken into account in this sense. However, if it comes to the real recognition of these competences and the real implementation of this qualification in their VET system, they get blocked, as the legislation in their country doesn’t allow to do this. So in other words, people experiment with ECVET, and use ECVET, but they can’t implement it. Simply because ECVET implementation is more than only working on the technical specifications.

When it comes to implementation, there is indeed a technical part, but the political and the collaborative part is as much important as this is often the critical factor in implementation. Think about legislation, resources, regulation frameworks, capacity building, commitment of all parties etc.

And therefore it is important, again, to have the right people on board. So creating awareness, making clear the added value, commitment are essential in this stage. Once there is commitment, it should be formalized. For example by a strategy paper of the ministry.

Today, there is a stakeholders meeting in France, assuming that the room is not filled with representatives of the ministries, what is your recommendation for the audience to make the event a success?

I am very aware of the fact that in such a short time, you can’t do that much. It is not about changing the educational system in half a day, but as I said earlier: start the dialog with each other. What are your ideas about ECVET, about what I have said, about opportunities in your context, about your experiences etc.

Talk with each other about the possibilities, your goals instead of focusing only on the technical aspects and obstacles.

In this perspective, it is important to have “an open mind” in this discussion as we often reject already a lot of issues from the beginning (“no this is not possible, because...”) and this is the most important threat in getting one step forward. It is not about “OK, this is what you have to do....”, no, it is more about creating the right conditions for further collaboration and enriching the discussion on how we can improve vocational training with our experiences, ideas and of course, with ECVET...

So I wish you all a very productive, cooperative and last but not least FUN workshop today!