

STATEMENTS on ‘Bridging the transition between education and the labour market’

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# Relevance of the theme

This theme is relevant for different reasons:

* Young citizens pay a high price for the current economic crisis. From the second quarter of 2008, the youth unemployment rate has taken an upward trend peaking to 23,6 % in the first quarter 2013, before receding to 23.1 % at the end of the year (Eurostat). According to the OECD Education at a Glance interim report (January 2015), more than 30 % of the employed 15-29 years-old who are not in education are not working full time.
* Another worrying phenomenon is the ongoing skills mismatch between the competences and competence levels of those leaving the school and the competences and competence levels needed in a ‘learning economy’.

The transitions between education and labour market are therefore a main strategic line in the working programmes of all education councils as it is also a common red line in the national education policies.

The theme is also high on the EU-agenda, in the Europe 2020-strategy in general and in the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (jointly coordinated by DG Education and Culture and DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion) in particular. The theme is also part of the ongoing work in the development of common instruments for transparency in the slipstream of the Copenhagen Declaration.

# Central questions

These statements focus on the strategies to facilitate the transitions between vocational education and training (VET) and the (re)integration of youngsters in the labour market. How can education and training systems organize broader and better established bridges between the education and training system on the one hand and the labour market on the other hand?

We focus on

* the nature of skills needed for a sustainable integration in the labour market.
* how to keep the pace of developments in society from the perspective of VET-schools and training centres.

## The nature of skills needed to enhance the quality of transitions from school to the labour market

EUNEC reflected on the skills needed beyond the school and the competences required in a quickly evolving and highly competitive labour market, in a perspective of sustainable development in professional and personal life and as a citizen.

In order to guarantee lifelong participation and inclusion and a sustainable career management, specific professional competences are needed, but also key competences, personal development and transversal skills. Within curriculum development it is important to **find the right balance between general skills, ‘soft skills’ and the specific professional skills**. In this debate we should be aware that ‘mismatch’ may not be defined to narrowly. VET strands prepare for a wide range of occupations, not only for one job here and now. From this respect, it is worrying that pupils entering VET lack basic skills. This is a threat for sustainable integration on the labour market and for lifelong learning. One of the reasons for the lack of attractiveness of VET is that it does not offers perspectives for further learning at different levels at upper secondary, post-secondary and tertiary level. Integrating **learning to learn competences** and **career competences** offering a basis for further learning are essential in a 21st century curriculum for VET.

The debate is not only on defining the needed competences as such. It is as important to guarantee that youngsters develop specific professional competences and general skills in **an integrated way**, so that they are able to act in real life and that they are not stuck in theory or cognition only. They need to be able to transfer competences into new and unforeseen contexts and circumstances. Therefore **work oriented experience** during the school trajectory is a must.

Another issue is the fact that labour market requires workers with a higher level of competences both in abstract and conceptual thinking. People that are able to act efficiently in an adequate and flexible context. They can **adapt standardized routine behaviour to new challenges**. Labour market is in need for this **medium qualified skilled workers** in specialized sectors of the economy (e.g. technicians, health care workers). It becomes obvious that certain specialised technicians need an education at level 5 of the qualification structure, situated in post-secondary education. There is a clear need for increase of VET offer at higher, specialized levels.

Enhancing the quality of transitions from school to the labour market requires a **continuous and structured feedback between the education and training system and the labour market**, completed with information from social welfare services and services for (un)employment.

## How to keep the pace of developments in society from the perspective of VET-schools and training centres? Seven main recommendations to raise the relevance and attractiveness of VET.

### Raise public awareness of the nature and value of labour

Too often VET is seen as less valuable than the general track. Pupils in VET are too often children with a negative self-concept and with a history of failure in the education system. Parents perceive VET as a dead end in the education trajectory of their child. Employers hesitate to hire youngsters leaving the VET system even with a qualification and they choose overqualified more generally educated employees. This **misconception is partially due to the social disdain** for manual work although in reality the work floor of the 21st century is no longer purely manual or industrial labour. The impact of ICT has changed drastically the working conditions and the nature of labour.

### Enlarge the mission of VET: leading to direct integration in the labour market AND offering access to a broad range of post-secondary, higher and lifelong learning VET tracks

The attractiveness of VET is influenced by tensions between education as a process towards personal development and critical citizenship on the one hand and the responsiveness towards labour market innovation on the other hand. Modernisation of VET should try to find the balance between functional employability and sustainable integration in society.

An underestimated factor in raising the attractiveness of VET is putting the secondary VET strand **not only as qualification oriented** but also to focus on the opportunities for further learning and developing competences at the levels 5 and 6 of the qualification structure. These provisions could be organized either in lifelong learning or in higher education institutions. Modern vocational education and training offers a valid access to post-secondary and tertiary education (vocational and academic programmes).

### Re-inforce the counselling and guidance system for learners and potential learners

**Supporting individuals to acquire the knowledge, skills and experience necessary to identify options, explore alternatives and succeed in society, is an essential part of any high quality vocational education system.** The career motto in order to practice a job with pleasure is to get out from the cage. Youngsters or adult learners should develop positive attitudes towards career and feel responsible and adequate to manage it through different phases of life. Dealing with uncertainty and new challenges is part of this process. It is thus very important to motivate the students. That is exactly the task of the counsellor, the teacher, the parents: to help the pupils to come out of the cage, and to see the opportunities. It is about preparing better individuals for the changing workplace of the 21st century. It’s about helping and supporting individuals to balance the personal needs and the requirements of society. [[1]](#footnote-1)

This supposes involvement and commitment of the students: they play an active role investigating personal features, likes and preferences, relationships, self-confidence, decision making etc. Crucial competences are to explore their own career, become aware of their personal profile, be responsible for personal career decisions, develop positive and realistic attitudes towards the employment process, share learning experiences and knowledge, analyse the labour market and to understand the correlation between interests, competencies, attitudes and opportunities.

The local community plays an active role in support of the counselling and guidance system.[[2]](#footnote-2)

### Integrate work-based learning systematically into all vocational programmes, both for learners and for teachers

**Work-based learning is an umbrella term** that can include projects with or for companies, training and junior firms, simulations, school workshops, labs, internships, traineeships, company-based part of apprenticeships and on-the-job training. It includes school-based learning or learning at school and learning in a company (work floor). This type of learning can be achieved in a wide variety of learning provisions, both formal and informal.

Work based learning is extremely **important for the match between education and the labour market.** It is an instrument of stimulating the integration in the labour market and smoothening the shock of the first working experience. For the pupils, apprenticeship leads to a better awareness of the job reality, gives meaning to learning. For them it is a strong instrument for motivation and for engaging them in learning and personal development.

It should be a prerequisite of all vocational education and training to offer this opportunity to acquire the practical skills, knowledge and understanding necessary for employment. Therefore this strand within the education system should make a priority to provide pupils with a real labour market experience, on the work flour, in or outside the school, during the training pathway or afterwards. This **work based learning needs to be integrated at all levels of VET**: at secondary, post-secondary and at tertiary levels and for different target groups: youth, adults, unemployed.

There is **no ‘one fits all’ model** to structure work based learning in the different vocational strands. It might have different features and structures, related to the relationship between employers and employees on the regional/national labour market and the traditional involvement of the social partners in the organisation of workplace based learning in VET. It is clear that different countries organise the work based component in education and training differently taking into account the characteristics, the needs and the culture of the regional/national labour market. Work based learning is differently understood and structured in the different countries. EUNEC recognises and welcomes this differentiation in features but underlines **the necessity of reality based learning in different learning contexts.**

A crucial element for successful work based learning is **the engagement of the employers and companies who believe in the added value to invest in youngsters**. Companies benefit from this involvement in education because they have a say in the qualification process of future employees, they choose the best for future employment, they benefit from the productive capacity of the employee. Whatever the structure of work based learning might be, it offers an added value in terms of relevance of competences, in terms of prospection of talented employees, in terms of innovation from the education system into the labour market. The policy level may give incentives to companies to stimulate work based learning (tax incentives, a social framework for pupils, quality criteria).

**Safeguarding young people from exploitation** is a precondition for further development of work based learning. A regulatory social framework is needed in order to avoid that apprentices are used instead of statutory personnel.

### Invest in a smooth and warm transition between school and labour market

Guidance is not only relevant before and throughout the VET programme, as demonstrated in point 2.2.3. This is not sufficient. If youngsters enter the labour market, more provisions are needed at the border area between training and work in order to prevent a practice shock, not only in the first weeks of employment, but during a longer period of induction. **Further learning and coaching on the work floor are needed**. One of the ways to implement this, is to work with coaches, mentors.

### Invest in the professionalization and the quality of teachers and trainers at the school/training centre, and at the workplace.

Teachers but also the coach, trainer or mentor in the company or at the work floor are important for explaining, showing how to do and to turn the experience by doing into a deep learning. Therefore it is necessary to give **incentives for a professional development and training of these coaches/mentors/trainers**. There is a need for mobility between schools and companies for each teacher and each instructor/coach, in both directions. There is a need for a more intense exchange of knowledge and skills, of cultures and values. Within the contracts made with social partners this need should be considered.

### Validate work experience by focusing on learning outcomes.

In recent years, a number of tools have been created and implemented: Europass, Qualification Frameworks[[3]](#footnote-3), ESCO, EQAVET, ECVET, ECTS.[[4]](#footnote-4) In the discussions on the future priorities of education and training, it is often said that these tools are not an end in itself, but that they are more a means to put the **focus more on the outcomes of learning**. The paradigm shift to learning outcomes and the recognition of previously acquired competences will be helpful in bridging the gap between the world of education and training and the world of work by offering flexible paths and transitions.[[5]](#footnote-5)

1. [EUNEC statements on ‘Guidance through transition moments in the learning pathway’, Budapest, 2009.](http://www.eunec.eu/sites/www.eunec.eu/files/attachment/files/statements_16_-_guidance.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [EUNEC statements on ‘Community Schools’, Brussels, 2013.](http://www.eunec.eu/eunec-work-statements/shared-viewpoints) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [EUNEC reflections on EQF, Brussels, 2005.](http://www.eunec.eu/sites/www.eunec.eu/files/attachment/files/statements_7_-_elements_of_reflection_eqf.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [EUNEC reflections on ECVET, Brussels, 2007.](http://www.eunec.eu/sites/www.eunec.eu/files/attachment/files/statements_10_-_ecvet_-_reflections.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [EUNEC statements on ‘Learning outcomes’, Madrid, 2008.](http://www.eunec.eu/sites/www.eunec.eu/files/attachment/files/statements_13_-_learning_outcomes.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)