



Education and Culture DG

STATEMENTS on 'New skills for new jobs. New challenges for Vocational Education and Training in the 21st century'

EUNEC Conference

Lisbon, 24 – 26 October 2011

EUNEC

EUNEC is the network of education councils in the European Union. EUNEC brings together the expertise of advisory bodies and of the stakeholders and experts who are involved in the national/regional advisory processes. These advisory bodies give advice to the governments of the different European countries in the field of education and training.

What are these statements meant for?

EUNEC discussed the new challenges for VET in the 21st century, together with experts from the national councils, from OECD, from the Polish Presidency of the EU, and from the European Commission. The European councils gathered in Lisbon; representatives of the government welcomed the participants and presented a picture of VET in Portugal.

EUNEC formulated critical remarks and statements on this issue. EUNEC wants to disseminate these statements pro-actively to the European Commission, the European Parliament and relevant DGs. EUNEC also wants to promote actions by its members at national/regional level. These critical remarks and statements can contribute to the national advisory opinions of education councils. They should lead to reflection and action by relevant stakeholders in the field of education and training, such as providers of education, teacher trade unions, social partners and experts in the field of education and training.

The conference

EUNEC organized the conference on 'New skills for new jobs. New challenges for Vocational Education and Training in the 21st century' in Lisbon from 24 until 26 October 2011, together with the CNE, the Conselho Nacional de Educação (Portugal). Fifteen countries were represented.

FOCUS AND STRUCTURE OF THE STATEMENTS

EUNEC shares the analysis made in the reference frameworks of the Union and welcomes the actions proposed in the flagship initiative “New Skills for New Jobs”. EUNEC wants to highlight developments over recent years that need to be better integrated into European initiatives.

These statements deal with the context for reform in VET, the policy measures to be taken into account and the critical conditions to realize the further development of VET-systems.

I Challenges and context

a. VET in the midst of social turbulence

Today, VET faces very encompassing and deep rooted structural changes in the economic and political environment. These changes in context have not yet been taken into account in the discussions at EU-level on the renewal of VET.

We witness rapid and unpredictable:

- changes in the labour market, with uncertainty and unpredictability growing. This makes identifying the skills needs for the future very difficult. When working on qualifications, education and training needs to have a dual focus: developing actual and new skills for existing jobs as well as new skills for new jobs. In order to be responsive to the actual and future needs of industry, it is imperative that there is good cooperation between the world of education and the world of work. Bridges will have to be built. We need good interfaces between the labour market and the education system.
- developments in qualification levels. Although there seems to be a drift towards more and higher qualifications, there will also be the need for medium and even lower level qualifications.
- changes in the budgetary environment for education and training. A lot of education systems have to deal with financial austerity and the ensuing cutbacks.

b. VET from an educational and pedagogical perspective

There is a long existing tension between the vocational and the more general or academic strand in education. Often, students and their parents make choices in favour of the academic strand, and this has to do with the poor image of VET in a lot of member states. Very often, only those pupils who fail in the academic strand, go to VET. The fact that many teachers consider teaching in VET to be a second choice makes the perception of VET even more negative.

EUNEC thinks that if VET is to be viewed as a valuable learning pathway in itself, there needs to be a focus on improving its attractiveness and social acceptance.

VET is a pathway set up for pupils who choose this route for the pleasure of learning by doing, driven by the ambition to become competent artisans or technicians. Raising the

wellbeing of learners, strengthening self-confidence and offering a positive developmental trajectory are as important for the renewal of VET as the preparation of appropriately skilled youngsters and adults for the labour market.

Educational benchmarks reflect societal regard for different types of education. In these educational benchmarks, appreciation for the VET pathway should be more apparent. An indicator for employability might help.

II. Policy measures

a. What are the skills and competences for tomorrow?

The European Commission documents express a strong belief in the accurate and early identification of labour market skills and competences. EUNEC does not question the value of identifying and articulating these skills.

But if we consider all different areas of competences needed, we see that they are all inter-related: “Key competences”, “soft skills”, “learning competences”, “life skills” and “career management skills” are prerequisites for the further development of each individual. They offer pupils a broad basis to deal with the unpredictability of the labour market, with further lifelong learning and with wider changes in society. The development of these skills and competences are necessary for new and actual jobs; they are applicable in different life situations and over a long period.

b. VET as a positive choice

Raising the sense of purpose is very important. What students learn in VET has to have a clear sense of purpose, for the students, for the parents, for the teachers, and for the labour market. Students have to be aware of the fact that what they learn is important and relevant. They should become self-confident learners, believing in their ability to perform and to be successful. If students have a clear understanding that what they can learn in VET will help them to succeed in the labour market, and in life, they might choose VET as a positive option.

Motivation and passion are essential for a successful VET learning path. VET should no longer be presented as a deficit model, but should provide a competence-building learning environment and a positive career option, offering good opportunities for personal development and integration into the labour market. Students need to find positive role models in their family, in the group of professionals they are in touch with and in their peer group. They need personalities of whom they say: that’s what I want to become.

The perspective of the student in VET has to be taken more on board. School as an affirming social experience can enhance the wellbeing and motivation of the students; those who are not happy at school may not make positive choices.

In order to realize this shift towards VET as a positive choice, we can rely on examples of good practice in different Member States. Mainstreaming VET subjects in general education can be one way to enhance its prestige.

EUNEC wants to consider the construction of a more mixed educational pathway: integrating general, qualification oriented education with a learning competences based pathway. In most countries students have to choose between VET or academic learning pathways; they should be encouraged and enabled to experience both realities.

EUNEC wants to develop more flexible strands in the bridging zone between education, work and socio-cultural development. Certainly for early school leavers these alternative strands offer new opportunities.

c. Strengthening VET from a lifelong and inclusive perspective

VET is part of Lifelong Learning, from cradle to grave.

The new VET should start in preprimary education and lead the pupil through coherent lifelong learning pathways. This necessitates the introduction of practical and technical competences in the curricula of primary education.

If VET students are to become motivated learners, it is important for them to pursue a set of achievable goals based on zones of proximal development (ZPD - Vygotsky¹). This approach would ensure that students take pride in their achievements, and step up to the next level, with even more motivation.

If we want VET learners to be confident, VET will have to offer pathways to ensure students are enabled to step up from one qualification level to the next.

Unquestionably, education systems should strengthen the synergy and permeability between professional and general education, compulsory education and VET, education and workplace based learning, education and other learning environments. Permeability has to be a leading principle; mutual trust between sectors and social partners is necessary.

This progressive learning model would also help to avoid dead ends.

d. Guidance and counseling

We refer to the EUNEC statements on 'Guidance', Budapest, 2009².

III. Conditions

a. Teachers matter!

Teachers are a critical factor in the success of VET.

Good teachers in VET need a balanced set of purely technical competences and pedagogic competences. In school teams, there is need for mutual respect between teachers coming from a general education background and teachers coming from a technical background. Both are equally valid and complement each other.

¹ L.S. Vygotsky: *Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes*

² Statements on 'Guidance through transition moments in the learning pathway' (www.eunec.eu)

Working conditions have to be optimal for the teachers; they need to have enough opportunities to acquire relevant workplace experience. They will achieve more if they are treated with trust, as responsible professionals.

Teachers should develop their competences throughout their professional career. They should keep in line with recent developments in industry and the labour market. This will require returning to industry to build up inside information.

b. VET as a community project

If education wants to offer a broad spectrum of both general and vocational subjects, schools will have to work together with the broader community. School is not the only place to learn; we should look for opportunities to take some of the learning out of the schools. The workplace is a powerful learning environment too.

The building of a responsive VET system (including LLL) demands a high rate of investment, both from the publicly financed education system and from other public financial streams, including the labour market. EUNEC states that investing in VET is as important for innovation in society as investment in higher education. The social partners also have to take responsibility both financially and in other ways, for example through internships.

Respect for VET goes hand in hand with esteem for both professional and technical workers. The media can play an important role in how these professionals are perceived and appreciated by the public.

c. Rational educational planning and building mixed educational arrangements

In order to offer VET as a lifelong educational *arrangement* for students and adult learners it is necessary to offer mixed schools where pupils have the opportunity to choose either a general strand, a VET strand or a mixed strand. This diversity should at least be offered regionally and in an accessible way.

Sharing of resources between initial VET and LLL offers a lot of opportunities. The same is true for academic and VET learning pathways.

d. Benchmarking

We are not pleading for more benchmarking from the European Commission in the context of New Skills for New Jobs. We are convinced that more peer learning opportunities will enhance the success of VET. Instead, we are asserting that existing benchmarks should reflect more appreciation for VET as a valuable strand in education.