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Implementation of ECVET in the Austrian IVET sector

With ECVET, the European Commission has proposed a learning credit system that aims to contribute to making learning outcomes acquired abroad more transparent in order to facilitate their recognition. In preparation for a possible implementation of ECVET in Austria, the Federal Ministry for Education, the Arts and Culture (BMUKK) commissioned a study* aiming at examining the IVET sector's "ECVET suitability". On the basis of an analysis of legislative and organisational framework conditions in full-time school-based and dual IVET, the study aimed to identify "ECVET favourable" and "ECVET inhibiting" factors in order to reveal needs for adjustment and subsequently formulate recommendations for an implementation of ECVET. The study revealed that ECVET implementation would, at the present point in time, be connected with partly far-reaching changes in the IVET sector. It is therefore necessary in advance to clarify the key issue of what is to be attained with ECVET in Austria: Is its objective to act as an instrument facilitating mobility procedures or as a system for recognising and validating learning outcomes? Both views have different implications for ECVET implementation.

1. *Starting point*

ECVET pursues the objective of presenting qualifications and diplomas in a more transparent manner in order to facilitate the transfer of learning outcomes. In this process, the description of qualifications is planned to base on the following **three instruments**:

1. Qualifications should be described in the form of **learning outcomes** bundled into **units**. In this context, a unit is defined as the entirety of knowledge, skills and competence that represents a part of a qualification. The number, content and characteristics of units constituting a qualification are specified at the national level by the body competent for that qualification.
2. Apart from the description of qualifications in the form of units, **ECVET credit points** represent an additional source of information in a numerical form. Their value can only be assessed in connection with the units or the whole qualification. The points are awarded, first of all, for the whole qualification and then assigned to the individual units in accordance with their relative importance for the qualification. The body competent for the qualification is in charge of assigning credit points.
3. The third pillar of ECVET is the **transfer process**. It can be described as the transaction of offices competent for assigning learning credits (= recognition

of learning outcomes in the form of a certificate). For this purpose, an organisation assesses the learning outcomes and assigns learning credits. The second organisation validates (i.e.: accepts) them as proof of learning outcomes and recognises them, which means it takes them into account with a view to the awarding of the qualification. In the course of a mobility process, the first step would be the conclusion of a partnership agreement (a so-called "memorandum of understanding"). This memorandum would have to include the learning outcomes for which a partner awards learning credits. The other partner would have to recognise them. A tailored pedagogical agreement should lay down the expected learning outcomes and the credit points awarded for them. The learning credits would be awarded following an evaluation of learning outcomes and recorded in a transcript of records. On the basis of agreements, learning credits would have to be transferred to the individual, validated by the sending organisation, and recognised for obtaining the respective qualification.

2. *ECVET in full-time school-based VET*

For the **full-time school-based VET sector**, the following factors can be specified as favourable or inhibiting to the implementation of ECVET in relation to the presented instruments:

Learning outcomes and units

At present, input-oriented descriptions prevail in this country. Although descriptions of learning outcomes are frequently found in the educational objectives of the individual VET programmes or in the descriptions of the educational and teaching missions and tasks, they are almost always very abstract, unsystematic and mostly bear no reference to assessment criteria. This other perspective, the pronounced teacher-centredness and different structural logic of qualifications can prove inhibiting to describing learning units.

Even if the description of qualifications on the basis of learning outcomes is still in its infancy in Austria, some initiatives have been taken that can also be used for ECVET: In 2005 ministerial offices of the BMUKK (then BMBWK) initiated a project regarding the development of educational standards for general and vocational core subjects. These educational standards aim to ensure that - independent of individual implementation of educational provisions or their autonomous implementations by a school - the students' learning outcomes remain comparable in core areas. The educational standards formulate requirements on problem-solving capacities and on teaching and learning to safeguard the acquisition of school-based basic skills. The requested learning outcomes are described in the form of specialist subject-specific and interdisciplinary skills students are expected to have acquired by a particular year and are important also for their further school-based and vocational development. Educational standards comprise a competence model for the relevant subject (or subject area) and standards that are concretised through sample tasks. As the educational mission of VET schools and colleges extends beyond these core qualifications, however, the standards cannot, as a rule, be used either for assessing individual students or for school rankings.

Credit points

To date no experience has been made with credit points in the VET sector, only the number of weekly lessons is specified.

Transfer process

The Austrian school system is characterised by a legally anchored, basic openness for school attendance and work placements abroad. This can be seen by regulations concerning release from teaching and crediting of entire semesters or school years completed in non-German-speaking countries. This means that basically there exists the legislative framework for periods of work placement spent abroad within the framework of school-based VET as required for the implementation of ECVET.

Existing school partnerships and cooperation ventures could be used as starting points for further agreements within the framework of memoranda of understanding. Within the framework of the EU's Leonardo da Vinci and Comenius programmes, in addition a large number of

(school) partnerships are funded. This includes the organisation and implementation of joint projects or work placements abroad. Also attendance of partner schools is possible. These functioning partnerships, which partly boast a fairly long tradition, could increasingly be used for joint initiatives in connection with ECVET.

3. ECVET in the dual VET sector

For the **dual VET sector**, the following factors can be specified as favourable for or inhibiting to the implementation of ECVET in relation to the presented instruments:

Learning outcomes and units

The occupational profile that is used in company-based training is already structured by knowledge and skills. The activity description lists the competence the trained apprentice should be able to carry out correctly, independently and on his/her own responsibility following successful completion of company- and school-based training. The foundation stone for the description of qualifications on the basis of learning outcomes is hence already laid for the company-based part of the training. But its further development in the sense of a true learning-outcome orientation would be required.

With modularisation as stipulated in the Vocational Training Act in January 2006, a first step was taken in the direction of breaking down qualifications into units. Although the Austrian concept differs from the definition of modularisation commonly applied in Europe, this has to a certain degree triggered an awareness-raising process of a "modular system". This can prove beneficial for the implementation of ECVET.

A small number of occupational profiles, mainly in the commercial and administrative area, shows a higher degree of sequencing into units. Thus, for example, the occupational profile of the apprenticeship "corporate service provision" is subdivided into ten units (e.g. "corporate accounting") and some subunits (e.g. "cost accounting and calculation", "taxes, duties and wage accounting", etc.). This type of structuring is very close to the presentation of qualifications with learning units as proposed in the ECVET document.

The curriculum for the school-based part is largely formulated by using input-oriented criteria. The teaching content is not defined in the form of knowledge, skills and competence from the viewpoint of the learner. The curriculum rather lists the topics to be treated by teachers within the framework of the lessons. This formulation proves as rather inhibiting to the implementation of ECVET. Therefore a restructuring of curricula in the direction of learning-outcome orientation would be required in the school-based sector.

Although school- and company-based training forms a unit, the teaching and training content is presented in separate documents. "Duality" is hence frequently

understood as a "separation" rather than as a "supplement", as actually intended. This separation could prove inhibiting to the description of a whole qualification by learning units as foreseen by ECVET. Because here it is not relevant where competence was acquired - the only important factor is the learning outcome.

This separation can also prove challenging with a view to the specification by the competent body one of whose tasks would be the definition of learning outcomes in the form of units. Due to differing responsibilities, there would be two learning outcome descriptions (in each case of partial qualifications) by two competent bodies, which only combined constitute the entire qualification. Also in this respect the "separating element" becomes visible and hence the emphasis on the place of learning.

Credit points

The lack of a joint learning outcome description (without any separation into school- and company-based parts) as well as the only partly existing sequencing into learning units currently represent major obstacles for the assignment of credit points. Without any clear structuring into learning outcomes it is not possible to assign any numerical values within the meaning of credit points to the individual units or the whole qualification.

Transfer process

The current legislative situation can be assessed as basically positive for ECVET. Training periods spent abroad (in the case of school-based training, however, only in non-German-speaking countries) are recognised if specified periods have been complied with, without the necessity of any complicated validation procedures or repetition of exams. Nevertheless its concrete application in the apprenticeship sector is difficult.

In company-based training, there is formal evaluation of learning outcomes during the apprenticeship period. Outcomes show themselves in day-to-day work routine when the apprentice carries out tasks of relevance for the company. The only formal evaluation is conducted at the end of the apprenticeship period within the framework of the final apprenticeship exam. The awarding of learning credits for (parts of) learning outcome units therefore builds mainly on workplace observations. In case there exists an appropriate relationship of trust between the sending and the receiving institution regarding the assessment, therefore, learning credits could be awarded relatively easily. In this connection, related quality-assurance measures would be important. These could contribute considerably to confidence-building.

School-based performance is largely tested and evaluated in the form of formal exams. These evaluations reflect in the certificates entitling, or not entitling, holders to advance to the next higher grade. Following temporary stays abroad related to school-based learning periods (which in the vocational school sector, for organisational reasons, de facto never last five months) it is therefore

necessary, as a rule, to take formal exams. This causes a considerable workload for the teaching staff.

The integration of education and training periods spent abroad is in general more difficult in the school sector than in company-based training due to prevailing framework conditions (formal exams, concrete curricular sequence, certificates, full-time blocks, etc.). At companies, trainees acquire competence in day-to-day work, with learning situations repeating at regular intervals (e.g. customer contact, processing of workpieces, implementation of job orders, etc.). Therefore the points in time when skills are rather variable as long as companies move within the time specifications according to the training profile concerned. Part-time vocational school, however, is oriented towards curricula in which the different topics are not taught several times. The training content acquired abroad therefore needs to be practically identical to the Austrian one to safeguard smooth linking of training programmes.

Another obstacle in the transfer process is found in the recognition of learning outcomes across various places of learning. As mentioned above, the content of company-based training and vocational school curricula are described and also evaluated in separate documents. In the implementation of ECVET it would be necessary to describe the whole qualification without any separation into a school- and a company-based part. This would also make it possible to acquire learning outcomes abroad that affect both places of learning in Austria. Currently it cannot be assessed how such recognition across places of learning might take place.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The study has led to the following **main results**:

- In the IVET sector, the implementation of ECVET would require legislative and organisational adjustments. This would necessitate human and financial resources.
- In both areas, curricula and training plans would have to be formulated with a stronger orientation towards learning outcomes. This would necessitate the development of adequate methods to describe knowledge, skills and competence as well as training programmes for the people involved in the preparation of curricula and training plans.
- In addition, a more pronounced structuring of qualifications would be needed. For making the transfer of units easier, curricula and training plans would require a modular design. It would have to be possible to assess and certify each of these units separately.
- Each individual unit and the whole qualifications would have to be assessed numerically by using credit points.
- The definition of units, the formulation of learning outcomes, and the allocation of credit points are incumbent on the so-called competent body. This

body would have to be specified both for the school-based and for the dual VET sector.

- For coordinating these measures, the establishment of an ECVET agency would also be necessary.
- In legal respect it would be necessary to provide mobility and permeability with a clear legislative framework within the meaning of ECVET. Changes would be desirable particularly regarding the extension of the advancement rule in the school sector pursuant to the School Instruction Act, § 25 (9), also to German-speaking countries or regions, a higher degree of flexibility in terms of time, or a generally applicable right to take a release from instruction for stays abroad within the framework of training.

The following **recommendations** can be derived from these main findings:

Recommendation 1:

First of all it is important to lay down the primary objective to be pursued with ECVET in Austria:

- If it mainly aims to serve as promoting transnational mobility, increased attention should be paid to establishing qualifying mobility. In this connection, mobility stays should cover a longer period than currently common and be recognised by the sending VET provider/institution. Similar to the HE sector, stays abroad should not lead to any prolongation of training times in Austria. For such a type of mobility stay, the efforts connected with the implementation of ECVET would be justified. If however there is no need for qualifying mobility and if periods spent abroad would remain unchanged in their present form, the introduction of ECVET would not be required.
- If it is intended to establish ECVET in the medium- to long-term as a "system" aiming to promote permeability within the Austrian qualification system, this would entail a restructuring and redesigning of the VET sector (learning outcome formulation, awarding of credit points, modularisation).

For that reason, extensive political discussions among all educational-policy stakeholders about possible objectives to be pursued with the introduction of ECVET in Austria as well as a declaration of political intent regarding the respective implementation are required.

Recommendation 2:

Independent of what the primary objective for the Austrian VET sector will finally be, ECVET could - mainly with regard to increasing mobility - be tested by conducting pilot projects in one or two areas. It would be recommended to select areas where mobility already plays a considerable role in quantitative respect (e.g. tourism). On the basis of these pilot areas, ECVET could be tested in practice. This would afford a realistic picture about the required steps, resources (human, financial) and adjustments (legislative, organisational).

Recommendation 3:

To prepare the pilots it is recommended to develop and select appropriate methods to describe learning outcomes. In addition, already existing forms of credits, recognitions and cooperation venture should be collected and analysed with a view to their usability for the implementation of ECVET. In addition, a detailed study and analysis of practical experience made during stays abroad and transnational mobility projects is recommended. In particular, no quantitative and qualitative analysis of stays abroad with the purpose of school attendance abroad has to date been conducted.

Recommendation 4:

Experience made in pilots should be considered in the further procedure. The findings obtained could lead to a shifting of the initial focus on increasing mobility towards establishing an ECVET system. This gradual procedure would have the benefit that changes would be conducted more slowly and sufficient time would be allowed to reflect about the individual steps.

Recommendation 5:

It is recommended to combine the possible implementation of ECVET and the connected processes in close coordination with the development of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Both sets of instruments build on uniform concepts and principles, aim at increasing transparency, permeability and improvement of lifelong learning, and are conceived as mutually supplementary.

*) This study was conducted in cooperation with the "3s research lab". Karin Luomi-Messerer is the author of the second chapter of this "research brief" and co-author of chapter 4.

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