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ECVET in the non-formal education sector Potential, demand, implementation

The Austrian strategy for implementing ECVET, the European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training, pursues several objectives, including an “improved recognition of formally, non-formally and informally acquired learning outcomes to ensure ‘optimisation of learning times’”. To date, the non-formal education sector has not been considered sufficiently in the implementation process. This project, which was commissioned by the Federal Ministry of Education and Women’s Affairs, has therefore aimed to inform education providers in the continuing education and training (CET) and adult learning sector of ECVET and the way it works, as well as to assess the fundamental interest in this instrument and the potential for implementation. Discussions with experts from this field have revealed that, despite the large number of challenges brought about by implementing ECVET, the system and the objectives behind it are rated positively. Permeability is seen as a key concern of educational policy-makers; therefore the focus should be on reducing implementation barriers and creating the prerequisites for interlinking formal and non-formal education more strongly.

1. Background

In June 2009 the European Council and Parliament adopted the Recommendation on the establishment of a **European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)**. In line with this recommendation, Austria has taken a number of steps to establish ECVET in the initial VET sector. With this implementation, Austria is essentially pursuing two **objectives**: Firstly, the quality of transnational mobility projects will be enhanced; secondly, ECVET will make the transfer of learning outcomes (“permeability”) within the Austrian VET and CET systems possible or work more smoothly.

Stronger interlinking of VET and CET programmes with **credit transfer options** will enable as seamless a transfer as possible for learners from one education or training context to another, and will contribute to preventing overlaps and detours in educational careers. The transfer of previously acquired learning outcomes as **learning credits** will shorten subsequent education and training programmes when changing the establishment/ programme/context (in other words, optimisation of learning times).

2. Project objectives and design

An **information event** was held at the beginning of this project, with the aim of raising awareness of ECVET in the CET sector and identifying its potential for application. Afterwards, ECVET was **tested** using five test

qualifications. For each of these qualifications, “interface qualifications” were identified which would fundamentally be suited for credit transfer depending on their content. Based on a comparison of the learning outcomes (LO) of test and interface qualifications, the first findings were compiled for a possible application of ECVET. Within the framework of a **focus group discussion**, the results of the LO comparison were discussed with representatives of the test and interface qualifications, and conclusions as well as recommendations for educational policy makers derived.

3. Conclusions and recommendations

Low level of information about ECVET in the non-formal education sector

In the Austrian formal education sector, framework conditions have already been legally laid down for the credit transfer of available (formally acquired) learning outcomes. There is also some awareness already of ECVET in this education segment. CET providers, however, have **no or merely very rudimentary knowledge** of ECVET and the possibilities of its application. Here the non-formal education sector plays a truly important role in quantitative terms within the Austrian education landscape: Many qualifications of relevance for the labour market are acquired in this education segment. In addition, CET programmes complement, deepen or expand various initial VET qualifications. Therefore, to ensure stronger interlinking of the VET and CET systems, it is important

to raise awareness of instruments such as ECVET among CET providers as well, and to highlight its potential. The optimisation of learning times, which is the goal of the transfer of learning outcomes, is of major relevance particularly for adults who are active in CET and frequently have only limited time resources due to their employment.

Recommendation 1

Due to the lack of knowledge about ECVET, it is recommended that an **information campaign** is launched especially for the non-formal education sector. Events should be geared to CET providers, to be able to supply them with basic information about ECVET. Furthermore, **dialogue** should be sought **with associations**, such as the Austrian Conference of Adult Education Institutions KEBÖ or the Platform for Vocational Adult Education, which in turn can disseminate information through their networks. Also, information events could subsequently be organised for multiple education segments. As ECVET is intended to act as the “technical tool” in cooperation and credit transfer schemes, the exchange between education establishments above all is very important. This is also essential for the creation of mutual trust, which is the prerequisite for closer cooperation.

Learning outcome orientation as a challenge

To implement ECVET, it is necessary to formulate qualification descriptions in a **learning outcome-orientated** way, and to define “**smaller components**” (units, modules, fields of learning, etc.). A good part of CET programmes is currently formulated with input-orientation. Although the use of learning outcomes and the detailed description of the programmes are welcomed by CET providers, the related efforts and associated costs are assessed as not insignificant.

The formulation of learning outcomes presupposes intensive work with the qualifications provided. It furthermore requires close coordination within the institutions, particularly between teachers and examiners. Although this work is expected to push forward internal quality, the representatives of the CET sector also expect **significant time, personnel and financial resources** will be needed.

Recommendation 2

To prevent the implementation of ECVET leading to excessive workloads on CET providers, **advisory and support services** should be offered. Thus, for example, workshops could be held to make the representatives of CET institutions familiar with the procedure to be adopted when structuring their training programmes in line with ECVET principles. Additional support could be provided by way of practical guidelines with specific instructions for action and meaningful examples. Examples from the practices of the CET sector could also be inspiring. In this

way, a certain orientation regarding the description and presentation of learning outcomes could be provided to other establishments. This could also contribute to reducing reservations, doubts and uncertainties about the amount of work required and how the implementation actually goes.

Within the framework of information and advisory activities, however, **increased awareness of the importance of learning outcomes** should be created, regardless of the implementation of ECVET. Learning outcomes not only play a key role in the setting-up of credit transfer cooperation schemes between different education providers. They will also be important for referencing qualifications to the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). In addition, the extensive work on the qualifications available can lead to quality improvements. Therefore the message should be conveyed that the efforts connected with the switch to learning outcomes not only serve a purpose – that is, ECVET – but create a larger benefit. In this way, the time and money spent would pay off sooner.

Lack of trust between educational establishments/ segments/ contexts

Lack of trust between different educational establishments/ segments/ contexts is frequently the major obstacle to recognitions and credit transfer. This lack of trust relates both to the quality of training and the validity or reliability of assessment procedures and certificates. The reasons for this lack of trust are a pronounced “camp mentality” and, as a result, ignorance of the respective other system. This applies especially to the non-formal education sector, which is marked by large institutional diversity and a wide range of programmes. Therefore reservations can frequently be found regarding the recognition of learning outcomes from this sector during transfer to the formal context.

But credit transfer cannot always be effected easily, partly because it is hard to **assess the content and level** of existing learning outcomes and rate the **quality of the examination methods applied**. Non-formal qualifications are not enshrined in law, i.e. curricula and exam contents are designed by the CET establishments themselves. The extensive lack of interfaces to other education contexts and the focus on the respective own educational environment make the establishment of “zones of mutual trust” very difficult.

Recommendation 3

To encourage stronger interlinking of educational contexts, it is essential to take **confidence-building measures**. For this purpose, stronger awareness of the necessity of transparency and quality assurance in the non-formal education sector should be created first and foremost. A great many steps are already being taken in this respect – it is important to improve them, push them forward and then enhance their visibility if appropriate. The provision of

information may be useful for removing knowledge gaps and building up trust. But the reliability of the information provided is also essential. A sustainable culture of trust can only be created if it is evident in cooperation schemes that the data from other education contexts (such as the learning outcomes confirmed by means of a certificate) is valid and reliable.

To build up trust, **communication** is also essential. Information events geared towards multiple educational contexts could be used for mutual familiarisation and for setting up networks and cooperation schemes. Such inter-institutional activities could be boosted by the responsible ministries and the major CET associations as well as the social partners.

Change in the funding and subsidisation structure is required

The introduction of ECVET in the non-formal education sector presupposes **major changeovers** to a degree (as well as the learning outcome orientation of curricula, these are new examination procedures and elements of quality assurance, the qualification of the staff, for example), which might be associated with **considerable costs**. Moreover, coordination processes with establishments from other education sectors/contexts are required, which could also be very resource-intensive. Where CET establishments recognise parts of the training that the learners have already completed, this can also lead to lower revenues (course fees, examination fees). In addition, the current **funding logic** is linked to the course duration and periods of attendance. As CET establishments are market-orientated and in **competition** with other institutions, the aspect of funding is central to the implementation of ECVET. Discussions held during this project have shown that there is willingness to implement this system only if the establishments can expect reasonable costs (combined with benefits) as well as financial support from the public.

Recommendation 4

In the first phase of the implementation of ECVET in the non-formal education sector, **initial or start-up funding** seems absolutely necessary. ECVET pioneers should be compensated for at least the major part of the expenses they have incurred in implementing this system. As CET is not regulated by any law in Austria, it is not possible to exercise any pressure on the establishments by legal means. The implementation of ECVET will therefore depend on the voluntary willingness of the educational institutions. If educational policy makers aim to interlink the formal and non-formal education sectors more strongly, they should therefore foresee corresponding funds. Only if the first implementation phase shows the benefits for providers of ECVET in the form of more cooperation schemes between institutions, an increase in market presence, greater interest on the part of potential participants etc., will it be possible to enshrine ECVET more strongly in this sector.

A **reorientation of the funding system** (“learning outcomes rather than learning times”) could add momentum to ECVET implementation in the CET sector. This would further motivate providers to switch over to learning outcome orientation. Funding could also be linked to the application of ECVET and the recognition of already acquired learning outcomes. Such “pressure” from the side of funding would be the only option for the state to act on CET establishments because, as already mentioned, non-formal education is not legally regulated and is not within the sphere of responsibility of the federal and provincial governments.

Systematisation of recognition processes as the goal

The recognition of certificates and existing learning outcomes from the non-formal education sector has to date been possible **on an individual basis** and therefore largely **at the discretion of those responsible** at the hosting institution. Based on the submitted documents, they investigate if the learning outcomes already acquired can be rated as equivalent in terms of content and level and can therefore replace parts of the desired training. Systematisation of the recognition processes at the interfaces between formal and non-formal education can currently not be observed. This shifts the efforts related to credit transfer towards the training participants. The consequences are both time-consuming ways of procuring information – due to the wide range of programmes and the often non-transparent presentation – and low planning certainty. A higher degree of automation of credit transfer processes could reduce the effort for learners considerably.

It should however be considered that coordination schemes between educational establishments that aim to enable or automate credit transfer would involve **extensive communication**. In addition, credit transfer provisions would have to be adapted continually because the programmes offered in the non-formal sector in particular change repeatedly.

Furthermore, the CET sector is **not characterised by any central (state) structures** that could support a larger number of cooperation schemes between educational establishments, lay down specifications and manage coordination processes. The establishments act autonomously and the content orientation of their (non-formal) programmes is not linked to any legal provisions.

Recommendation 5

ECVET could make recognition processes easier if the **description of learning outcomes and qualifications is standardised to a greater extent** (language/terminology/structure, etc.) and consequently a “common language” could be established across education segments. For this purpose it would be useful to reach agreement on general rules as well as standard guidelines and templates. It

is also recommended that educational providers are encouraged to contact potential interfaces as early as possible when launching new programmes: as soon as curricula and learning outcome descriptions are prepared, possibilities of transfer to other programmes/qualifications in other establishments should be considered. This ex-ante coordination would have the advantage that learning outcomes could be formulated jointly, which would mean that the establishments would not have to start a tedious search for overlaps afterwards. Another advantage of this procedure is that it would contribute to minimising the costs of the coordination process.

Benefits for CET providers as the stimulus for implementation

Whereas learners benefit from the recognition of their previous learning outcomes, the benefit for education providers is often **not clearly apparent**. Recognitions can lead to the waiving of parts of programmes or exams, which might result in a reduction of course or exam fees. What is more, the coordination efforts required before recognition can be very resource-intensive. This provides little incentive for CET establishments to cooperate with other providers more closely.

The willingness to cooperate is additionally weakened by the establishments' **competitive situation** on the market. Every establishment must attempt to raise its own profile in order to be successful on the market. Therefore they frequently aim to design programmes with contents that distinguish them from their competitors. This makes it more difficult to identify interfaces that would allow a transfer of learning outcomes.

Recommendation 6

It will be critical to the acceptance of ECVET in the CET sector for attention to be drawn to the **advantages** and **benefits** of its implementation for the institutions. Here it must be especially highlighted that, due to the thorough analysis of the available programmes during the phases of learning outcome formulation and coordination with other providers, ECVET can **boost quality**. Credit transfer cooperation schemes with other establishments can also have a truly positive effect on **demand**: the very willingness to recognise previous learning outcomes can enhance the attractiveness of programmes for learners.

To convince CET providers of ECVET, it would be useful to highlight **examples of implementation in the formal education sector**. If it was possible to demonstrate the application of ECVET based on specific examples from schools and higher education establishments, this could be motivating for the non-formal sector. This could also raise interest in “docking on” to existing cooperation schemes. Overall it would be advisable first of all to encourage the implementation of ECVET in the formal area and then – after a short period of time and following a broad information campaign – start in the non-formal sector.

It also seems indispensable to make the two systems, **ECTS and ECVET**, compatible. ECTS is already being used in many parts of the CET sector to obtain information on the workload. If not only education sectors but also credit transfer systems can be interlinked more strongly, it will be easier to communicate the benefits. In the medium term, however, the goal should be to merge the two systems, as a reduction of education barriers can only be achieved with one uniform system.

The entire study in German (ibw Research Report No. 182, ISBN 978-3-902742-92-6) can be obtained online at <http://www.ibw.at/de/ibw-studien>.

Bibliography:

The Austrian ECVET strategy: www.ecvet-info.at > Downloads > ECVET in Österreich