



## BRIEFING NOTE

# Shaping lifelong learning: making the most of European tools and principles

Successful implementation depends on a clear understanding of how they relate to each other

As rapid change threatens to outpace the skills of an ageing workforce and Europe developed towards a knowledge based society, the European Union, other European countries <sup>(1)</sup> and the social partners have worked together to establish a policy framework for modernising education and training.

In vocational education and training (VET), the EU has developed a platform for voluntary cooperation and coordination between Member States called the Copenhagen process.

Under the Copenhagen process, Member States, with the social partners, have established common European tools and principles (Box 1), namely the:

- European qualifications framework (EQF);
- the European credit system for VET (ECVET);
- Europass;
- European quality assurance framework for VET (EQAVET);
- principles and guidelines for identifying and validating non-formal and informal learning;
- principles on lifelong guidance and counselling.

These tools and principles constitute an integrated framework, the impact of which depends on their consistency and how they interact. Their implementation will increase transparency of qualifications, support mobility and benefit citizens by providing a systematic way to validate and document their knowledge, skills and competence.

European tools and principles have been developed at different speeds over the period 2004-09. For all of them, the objectives, guidelines and timetables are agreed at European level, with implementation driven by Member States.

All are based on learning outcomes which make it easier to understand what the holder of a certificate or

diploma knows, understands and is able to do. They also provide for the recognition of learning outcomes, and make non-formal and informal learning visible.

Developing European tools and principles has stimulated dialogue among a wide range of stakeholders, including governments, social partners, institutions, learners and VET providers from public and private sectors. A shared understanding of qualifications and how they relate to each other is emerging. The dialogue has also improved links between different parts of national education and training systems; how systems of other countries relate to each other; and how education and training can be more relevant to labour market needs.

Europass, ECVET and validation support individuals looking for a job or applying for training. Since Europass' launch in February 2005, 15.5 million Europass CVs have been generated online. Hundreds of thousands of Europass Mobility, Certificate and Diploma supplements have been issued. More than 150 European pilot projects are currently experimenting with and testing ECVET to facilitate implementation of credit systems in VET in all Member States.

Arrangements for validation of learning outcomes are being put in place in all Member States, reflecting the principles and guidelines agreed at European level. Countries have developed lifelong guidance systems, also for adults, to help people to better manage their learning and careers.

The EQF and EQAVET operate at the systemic level. Most countries are committed to linking their national qualifications systems to the EQF by the end of 2012, to make easier recognition of qualifications across Europe. By supporting quality assurance, EQAVET provides a basis for confidence and trust in national VET qualifications and their international comparison through the EQF. Improving quality increases the attractiveness of VET.

<sup>(1)</sup> EU-Member States, EEA and candidate countries

**Box1. Common European tools**

**European qualifications framework (EQF)**



The EQF supports lifelong learning and mobility by being common reference framework for qualifications. It has eight levels, which enables national qualifications (general and higher education and vocational education and training) to be compared with each other and those of other countries. Setting up the EQF has triggered development of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) in many European countries that see them as the best way to link national qualifications to the EQF.

**European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET)**



ECVET promotes geographical and professional mobility. It helps validate, recognise and accumulate work-related skills and knowledge acquired during a stay in another country or in different situations, so that these experiences contribute to vocational qualifications.

**Lifelong guidance and counselling**

The Council of the European Union has adopted two guidance resolutions: one in 2004 and another in 2008. An important goal for lifelong guidance is to promote equality of access to, participation in, and outcomes of lifelong learning, as well as labour market participation.



**Europass**

Europass supports mobility by helping people to communicate their knowledge, skills and competences acquired through education, training or work experience as well as in informal settings. Europass comprises five documents: the Curriculum Vitae and Language Passport plus the Europass Mobility the Certificate Supplement and the Diploma Supplement, which record additional information on learning from a stay in another European country, linked to a VET qualification and linked to a higher education diploma.



**European quality assurance framework for vocational education and training (EQAVET)**

EQAVET aims to increase the transparency, market relevance, consistency and transferability of vocational education and training qualifications across Europe. EQAVET is compatible with the main quality models. It includes a quality assurance and improvement cycle based on quality criteria and indicative descriptors. It addresses both VET systems and VET providers.

**Validating non-formal and informal learning**

In 2004 the Council of the European Union adopted European principles on validation. These were complemented in 2009 by the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning. The European Commission is working on a European Recommendation on validation.

**Interaction between the tools and principles**

The tools and principles make it easier to understand qualifications and encourage lifelong learning by making systems more flexible, which, in turn, supports job and geographical mobility.

Box 2 illustrates how the tools and principles interact from the individual's perspective. They are at the centre of the learning process and enable individuals to:

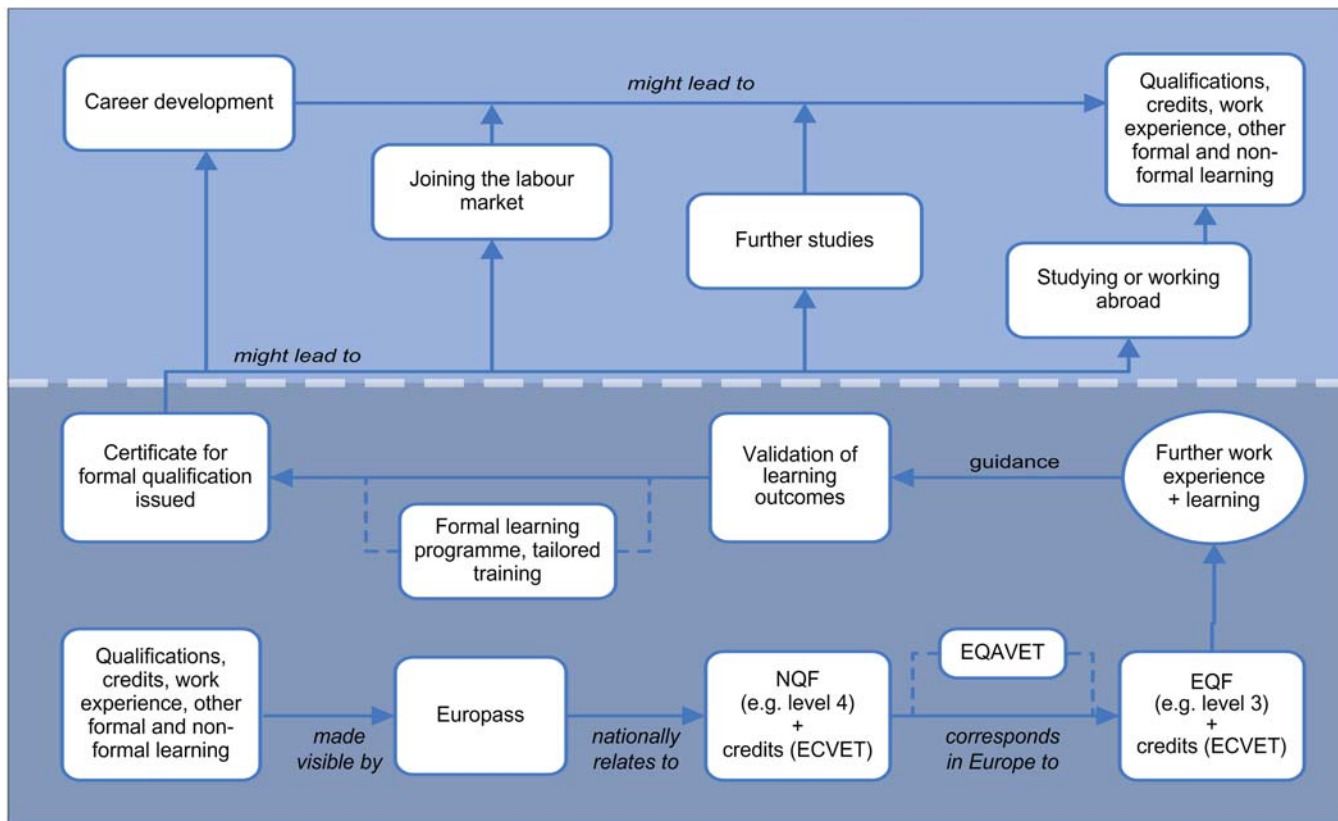
- present their knowledge, skills and competences in a transparent way, improving access to learning and work at home and abroad;
- gain an overview of learning opportunities;
- plan a lifelong learning career, allowing them to combine learning at school as well as at work.

By reducing barriers to learning, the tools and principles can improve job and career prospects.

Even though each tool and principle has its own purpose it is only through interaction that the synergy is produced to enable them all to fulfil their potential and produce the expected benefits for citizens and VET systems.

Individuals should be in a position to benefit from this interaction to set up their learning paths. For example, experience and learning from work and life could provide someone an opportunity to obtain a formal qualification. Supported by lifelong guidance, individuals can make well-informed decisions on education, training and work. Systems of validation based on European principles, would enable individuals to have their new knowledge, skills and competences recognised.

Box 2. Interaction of common European tools and principles



Validation may not lead to a full or even a partial qualification, but for many, seeking a job or a promotion, it will be sufficient to have their experiences identified and documented systematically. This gives individuals various options. They could follow further studies, either at a higher, or if they wished a lower level, perhaps to qualify in a new trade, craft or profession. As the qualifications are understood abroad, there is also the option of studying or working in another European country.

This is just an example of how European tools and principles interact and make systems more flexible and accessible.

**Coherence, integration and coordination**

To ensure that European tools and principles interact effectively, their development and implementation must be coherent. In some cases this may require an integration of existing tools, in others it is more a case of defining and clarifying the role that each plays in relation to the others and using a common terminology facilitating cross-references.

For example, one option would be a single credit system that integrates ECVET and ECTS (European transfer and accumulation system for higher education). However, it is

important to clarify the boundaries between tools, such as credit and validation systems. Both provide opportunities to recognise learning from outside the formal national system, but each have specific purposes.

Information about the relationships between the tools and principles is important and steps are being made to improve documentation. For example, from 2012, national certificates and diplomas will start to show their EQF level. Europass documents will make references to NQF and EQF levels and ECVET. The role of NQFs as a reference point for the other tools is critical. The value and attraction of validation and credit systems is greatly enhanced if they are integral to NQFs.

In summary, systemic tools and principles, such as EQF and EQAVET underpin those used by individuals, such as Europass, ECVET and validation systems. As mentioned, the learning outcome principle is integral to all tools and provides an integrating feature which facilitates their consistency and interaction.

## Challenges: cultural changes

Circumstances are favourable to make European tools and principles a success. European tools and principles have strong political backing and are part of the strategy to modernise education and training. Institutional changes such as the development of post-secondary non-tertiary programmes, higher level vocational qualifications and a wider use of learning outcomes in tertiary qualifications are bringing VET and higher education closer together.

But there is a need to bridge the gap between the concepts of the tools and their application to the realities of national education and training and qualifications systems. Many countries have used learning outcomes to define descriptors for their NQF levels. However, learning outcomes have to be consistently applied and must systematically address standards, curricula, assessment and teaching and learning methods.

In addition it is necessary to link the tools to the labour market. In ESCO (European standard terminology on occupations, skills and qualifications), qualification framework terminology is related to labour market terminology (occupations). This will allow a more immediate linking of qualifications (learning outcomes) to labour market needs.

The issues surrounding the next phase for the European tools and principles are partly technical (for example a single credit transfer system for education and VET) and partly political and cultural (for example parity of esteem between general and vocational qualifications).

Countries are working on European tools and principles voluntarily and implementing them through consultation and networking and not European regulation. Consequently, broad partnerships of education and training and labour market interests (including social partners and economic sectors) at European and national levels are essential to make progress.

Making the most of the European tools and principles requires openness, dialogue, patience and determination. Monitoring, further research and evaluation are needed and will require resources even as budgetary constraints limit public investment (Box 3).

Fully implemented and effectively interacting European tools and principles will fundamentally contribute to a modern education and training system in Europe and have a huge potential for benefiting European citizens in their learning and working lives.

## Box 3: Monitoring developments

Cedefop monitors regularly development of national qualifications frameworks and ECVET in Europe. It also prepares the European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning and reports regularly on the overall progress of the Copenhagen process at the European and national levels. In addition, Cedefop carries out research and comparative analysis on related issues and supports the work of the networks on quality and lifelong guidance.

Work on the European tools is led by the European Commission and is supported by Cedefop and working groups of European experts.

Publications on European tools and principles can be found at: <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/understanding-qualifications/index.aspx> and

<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/developing-lifelong-learning/index.aspx>