

EUROPASS Training ⁽¹⁾ Plus: Practicert

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SUMMARY

As teachers in German vocational education, the authors have a considerable interest in and responsibility for developing intercultural business skills, which are increasingly vital for successful management across cultures. Special international competence may help trainees find attractive jobs and may also strengthen their companies' position on the global market.

Particularly in the context of European integration, cross-border work placements offer an appropriate tool for qualifying trainees to cope with international situations at work. Such training modules away from home require special coordination with foreign partners and careful consideration of the curriculum, pre-departure preparation, language training, organisation, supervision, monitoring and assessment.

Valid certification of the intercultural learning progress, which should find wide acceptance by employees, seems particularly important in order to document the added value of training abroad for both trainee and employee.

(¹) Editor's note: On 1 January 2005, Europass Training was replaced by Europass Mobility.

Background

Almost a quarter of a century ago, Felix Kempf, Head of the Vocational Training Department in the National Executive Committee of the DGB (Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund – Federation of German Trade Unions) since 1965 and a leading member of many European bodies, summed up the ‘Gemeinsame Politik der EG auf dem Gebiet der Berufsbildung? – Die Sicht der Gewerkschaften’ (Common policy of the EC in the field of vocational education and training? The trade union perspective). The question mark in this publication on education policies in the European Community was deliberate. However, Kempf called it ‘a little one’. Looking back at the period from 1965 to 1980, he believed it was ‘arrogant and wrong to underestimate or belittle the work of the EC in the area of vocational education and training. What is worrying is that whole passages of this article still apply!’ There was the same feeling of déjà-vu at a recent conference on cross-border cooperative training (21-22 April 2004 in the Haus des Handwerks in Berlin). The current recommendations of the BIBB (Federal Institute for Vocational Training) experts do not differ significantly from those made by a four-country working party (CH-D-F-Lux) under the overall lead of the German Foreign Office, submitted to the government commissions concerned on 1 June 1997 under the title ‘Initiative zur Steigerung der Qualifizierung der Arbeitskräfte für grenzüberschreitende Tätigkeiten und Mobilität’ (Initiative to step up workers’ training for cross-border occupations and mobility). However, it cannot be denied that progress has been made in improving the mobility of young Germans.

Just showing the Europass Training document (over 70 000 have been issued since its launch in 2000, half of them in Germany alone) was once considered an indication of a trainee’s flexibility with regard to job mobility. Now the time has come to introduce Europass Training Plus ⁽²⁾. This is no coincidence: mobility is increasingly finding itself at the heart of initial training. While in the past only about 0.7 %, or 11 000, of all trainees in the German dual system of vocational training gained work experience in other European countries, according to the BIBB the number may now be as high as 16 000. This represents 1.0 % of a total of approximately 1.6 million trainees ⁽³⁾. However, these numbers need to be increased considerably. By 2013 the EU Commission wants to enable at least 150 000 trainees per year across Europe to take advantage of the Leonar-

⁽²⁾ Editor’s note: In 2005 Europass Training was replaced by Europass Mobility, one of the five instruments of the Europass framework (see <http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu>). Europass Mobility is a record of any organised period of time (called Europass Mobility experience) that a citizen spends in another European country for the purpose of learning or training (vocational education and training, higher education, voluntary work, etc.).

⁽³⁾ It should be remembered that the BBiG (German Vocational Education and Training Act) no longer applies to the just under 200 000 young people who are in full-time in-school training. A considerably higher proportion of these young people go on work placements abroad than those in the dual training system, the system through which only about 60 % of a school year gain their vocational skills (dpa. Kulturpolitik, No 18/2004, 26 April 2004).

do da Vinci programme and gain experience of working abroad, as opposed to the 45 000 at present. Compared to the declared intentions of the Commission regarding increased mobility in the sphere of general education in schools (at least 10 % of pupils should be able to take part in the Comenius programme between 2007 and 2013, as opposed to 3 % currently) and particularly in the sphere of higher education (the aim is to have 3 million students receiving Erasmus funding by the year 2010, amounting to a threefold increase), there are few exchanges among vocational education trainees ⁽⁴⁾.

Nonetheless, politicians have grounds enough for promoting the status of experience abroad in vocational education and training. The draft of amendments to the German Vocational Education and Training Act provides that young people can complete occupationally relevant parts of their training abroad (up to a quarter of the training period) as an integral component of their initial training. Implementation of this long overdue reform will make new demands on teachers. These will be addressed in this article ⁽⁵⁾. The improved legislative framework is accompanied by increased funding for mobility which will be provided by the Leonardo vocational training programme from 2007. In addition to the planned consolidation, streamlining, decentralisation and simplification of the new generation of programmes in the field of education and training from 2007, part of the Lisbon strategy is to make Europe the world's most competitive economic area by 2010. The primacy of economic strategies in general and in the field of vocational education in particular naturally has an effect on educational objectives, methods and content. EU politicians' proposals for improvements also include higher quality standards for 'European work placements' – and not just because of applicant demand which exceeds the budget available through EU education and training programmes. This will also be taken into account in the context of the 'framework for the transparency of qualifications' prescribed under Priority I of Leonardo's 2005-2006 Call for Proposals.

ECVET stands for 'European credit (transfer system) for vocational education and training' and is a system for evaluating European work placements. It is related to the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), which is already recognised in higher education institutions across Europe. In future ECVET will be used to evaluate the potential of mobility measures and help them achieve recognition as important components of lifelong learning. At the same time, the system will help make VET qualifications more comparable across Europe. It is no longer a case merely of certifying foreign language skills, but of certifying any occupation-related qualifications acquired in Europe ⁽⁶⁾.

This is where Europass II – currently Europass Mobility – comes in. The EU Commission's proposal for the new Europass did not pass the hurdle

⁽⁴⁾ ec.europa.eu/comm/dgs/education_culture/index_en.htm (retrieved on 31 January 2005).

⁽⁵⁾ www.bmbf.de/pub/eckwerte_bbig_reform.pdf (retrieved on 31 January 2005).

of the European Parliament at the first attempt, but it seems likely that it will be adopted in the first half of 2005 ⁽⁷⁾. With its scope extended to include general education, in future it will certify mobility experiences of all kinds, although there is a risk that it could become so arbitrary and widespread that it might lose its relevance for vocational education and training. It will probably consist of the following documents: the Mobilipass itself, the European CV, the European Language Portfolio, the Certificate Supplement and the Diploma Supplement. It remains unclear – in respect of VET – precisely which diplomas and certificates are meant. Cedefop is responsible for the required electronic technology and has already developed a prototype. The new Europass must provide a reference framework for vocational education and training and must therefore be open to further and possibly more relevant and specific documents, which could complement it and thus significantly increase its information value for the head of HR in an enterprise. The outcomes and significance of phases of training abroad, relocation of learning sites to other countries, placements abroad during initial vocational training, cross-border cooperative training and the like will be more transparent if the ECTS points system of accreditation in higher education is extended to cover the occupational sphere as well. According to the pleasingly ambitious ideas of the EU Commission, ECVET should be ready for implementation by 2010. For years the German-French youth organisation *Deutsch-Französisches Jugendwerk/Office franco-allemand pour la Jeunesse* (DFJW/OFAJ) has been pioneering such work through the Leonardo pilot project Practicert, which, under the working title 'Europass Plus', has set itself the goal of evaluating and certifying supplementary qualifications acquired during initial training. Not only are the European work placements themselves analysed – the quality of both the pre-departure training and the after-return evaluation can be observed and included in the ECVET evaluation. The evaluation of skills and competences acquired through time spent working and studying abroad and European recognition of mobility by means of the Europass Plus represent a chance to promote its sustainability in VET.

This article reflects only *one* outcome of the Leonardo project Practicert / Europass Plus; the acquisition of intercultural competences. For that rea-

⁽⁶⁾ In a very interesting working paper 'Zum Umgang mit im Ausland erworbenen Qualifikationen' (Dealing with qualifications acquired abroad), written for the above-mentioned conference on cross-border cooperative training held on 19 April 2004, Klaus Fahlke, head of the National Agency in the BIBB, pointed out that the question frequently asked by the enterprises, educational institutions and trainees involved in placements abroad is: 'What form of recognition, credit or certification is planned or possible for qualifications acquired abroad? Lack of recognition of qualifications is regarded as a significant obstacle to the mobility of workers in the EU. This circumstance affects the conception of transnational training measures.' The author is right to point out that although Europass Training, which has been used up to now as a standard European document, confirms a period of residence abroad, it does not certify the additional qualifications acquired during the stay.

⁽⁷⁾ Editor's note: Decision No 2241/2004/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 December 2004 on a single transparency framework for qualifications and competences (Europass) was actually adopted on 15 December 2004.

son, this article focuses on outlining the pragmatic considerations⁽⁸⁾ necessary to gather 'intercultural competences' within the framework of Practicert and to evaluate or certify them with ECVET Credit Points.

The birth of the Practicert project

DFJW/OFAJ supports around 700 German and French placements every year constituting part of initial vocational training. The average placement lasts seven weeks. In addition the organisation promotes around 600 joint programmes a year for approximately 15 000 trainees, young employees and unemployed young people. In Germany the DFJW is one of the organisations which issue the Europass and publicise it at annual evaluation and planning conferences and during appraisals of the document, which is crucial for promoting occupational mobility in Europe. DFJW/OFAJ has, moreover, participated in a number of projects aimed at increasing trainee mobility and improving the quality of measures.

The fact that quality improvements are already under consideration is evidence that weaknesses were found even in the preparation phase of European placements, beginning with the training of vocational school teachers. This is why DFJW/OFAJ, together with the Danish PIU-Centret, developed 'Modules and materials for the trans-national training of trainers and teachers in VET institutions' in another Leonardo pilot project. The results were recorded on a double CD-ROM and awarded the Europäische Sprachensiegel (quality seal for languages) in 2002.

⁽⁸⁾ Use of the term 'pragmatic considerations' already points to a fundamental scientific standpoint. Without looking in greater depth at the academic concept (this has already been done elsewhere, see for example Alexander, 1996, pp. 32–51), the methodology here will – for pragmatic reasons relating to the project – focus on the concept of pragmatic decision-making and its two addenda by Stachowiak (1973, p.52 ff.).

Pragmatic decision-making: Determine what it is you construe as knowledge only on the basis of the intended ends (purpose, objectives, goals) that you as an individual or member of one or more groups working towards sufficiently homogeneous goals have set for a given time period. That is, do not attempt to achieve knowledge devoid of knowledge-based intentions and which does not produce 'knowledge to an end'.

First addendum to pragmatic decision-making: The intentionality of knowledge, and thus the ad hoc definition of knowledge, should not degenerate into ideas which are abstractly pragmatic (Stachowiak, 1973 p.52).

Second addendum to pragmatic decision-making (safeguarding against a perpetual downgrading of knowledge): 'Excluding cognitively non-binding preliminary drafts... the repertoire of pragmatic definitions of knowledge should not be transcended with a metatheoretical approach' (Stachowiak, 1973, p.52).

Within the framework of such liberalness, the test methods for the validity or invalidity of theories are qualified and a pluralism of methods and theories relating to the search for certification criteria emerges. On the one hand, the use of the intuitive, extra-pragmatic, spontaneous and playful is fully legitimate in this definition of pragmatic decision-making. On the other hand, the liberalness characterised here is fully compatible with a strictly scientific approach: 'Exactitude becomes even more important, the more undogmatic, flexible and open to discussion are the fundamental plans of the individual theories resulting from processing documentation of experiences. [...] Empirically-based theories can take on something of the character of technical systems in which great freedom on axioms and strict adherence to the rules of deduction exist complementally' (Stachowiak, 1973, p. 60).

Evaluations of reports on schemes promoted by DFJW/OFAJ revealed substantial quality differences among work placements abroad. These were caused primarily by a failure to properly integrate the work placement into the actual initial training programme, lack of communication between the home educational institution and the host enterprise, lack of support during the placement, inadequate information on the skills and competences of the learner, i.e. on potential tasks for the learner, etc. This led to the launch of another Leonardo project, again together with PIU in Denmark. A manual for all those involved in organising work placements abroad aimed at improving and assuring the quality of occupation-related periods of residence abroad. If indeed transparency is engendered by guaranteeing quality in this way, it ought surely to be possible to assess and then certify the additional skills acquired through such a work placement.

Practicert was a logical progression of the joint efforts of DFJW/OFAJ and PIU to increase the European mobility potential of young trainees. Drawing up criteria for the certification of additional occupational, language and specialist qualifications and of intercultural competences was designed to increase the relevance of Europass. In the meantime, however, PIU has amalgamated with Cirius to form the Danish national Leonardo agency, and is no longer a potential project partner. DFJW/OFAJ therefore sought the services of a coordinator with a vast amount of experience in issues of European certification – the International Certificate Conference.

There had been previous attempts to increase the significance of Europass. In *Bulletin Officiel*, Jean-Luc Melançon of the French Ministry of Education tried to include vocational schools in a model scheme covering the whole sphere of education, '*sections européennes*'. He wanted to Europeanise vocational education and training by making training uniform throughout Europe, and he introduced the Europroexamination to this end. Three French academies participate in Europro: Bordeaux, Dijon and Toulouse. Ultimately, the *Académie de Dijon* became a partner of the Practicert project. However, the material developed by vocational school teachers (subject and language teachers from the hotel/catering, motor vehicle and energy sectors) was heavily biased towards country-specific concerns and revealed marked deficits in intercultural training. Forming a group of German and French vocational school teachers should remedy this.

Due to their differing educational systems, the two countries have different conceptual approaches. In Germany the dual system of training predominates; duality is often simulated even in full-time in-school education. In contrast, school-based education and training is prevalent in France. Europro also favours school examination practices: it includes a final oral examination which is credited using the usual French 20-point system. Before this, participants complete two work placements, one in Germany and one in Britain. Thus Europro follows the French system of training. Searching for ways to adapt Europro to other education and training systems (i.e. in Germany and Italy) was therefore an urgent priority. Persuading the Vocational Education and Training Department of the Lower Saxony Min-

istry of Culture to become an important partner was an initial step.

This collaboration made it possible to establish more intercultural approaches in Europro (including during preparation for European work placements). Practicert and Europro remain linked in a network of personal and professional contacts. Europro is also becoming increasingly popular in France. Whereas in 2001/2002 five vocational schools participated in the *Académie de Dijon*, this number had already risen to 12 in 2003 – representing almost a third of all vocational schools in Burgundy. With this expansion to other regions of France will follow automatically.

Definition of intercultural competences

'If I were again facing the challenge of integrating Europe, I would probably start with culture,' Jean Monnet, founder of the European Union, once declared. For him, culture is the context in which things happen; outside that context even legal matters lack significance (Trompenaars, 1993, p. 8). This is not the only view of culture. Almost every author attempts to create his (°) own definitions (Perlitz, 1995, p. 302). Nevertheless, there are points which connect the chaotic terminology of culture. Since the seventeenth century the word 'culture', which comes from the Latin *cultura* in the sense of agriculture and cultivating body and mind, has been associated on the one hand with tilling the soil and on the other with nurturing intellectual refinement. Over time, the generally accepted meaning of the term 'culture' as the totality of intellectual and artistic expressions of life (of a community, a people) developed (Baumer, 2002, p. 77; Hofstede, 1997, p. 4-5). Richard Hall, the renowned cultural anthropologist, sees culture more as a 'hidden dimension', which is firmly rooted, biologically and physiologically, and is even comparable to an extraordinarily complex computer (Hall, 1966/1982, p. 3; Hall/Hall 1987, p. 4). Another well-known anthropologist, Geert Hofstede, considers culture from a wider angle. His thoughts seem to be the most pertinent in the context of the present exposition, especially as most culture-comparative management research studies from the 1980s and 1990s use his definition (Perlitz, 1995, p. 303). Hofstede derives his definition of culture from social anthropology and includes not only activities which refine the mind, but also the ordinary and banal elements of daily life, such as greeting, eating, showing emotions and maintaining personal hygiene.

All in all, Hofstede presents culture as a group-specific, collective phenomenon of commonly shared values, as a collective programming or software of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group of people or nation from another (Hofstede, 1997, pp. 5-6) (10). Accordingly, culture can be used as a criterion for distinguishing or differenti-

(°) Aus Vereinfachungsgründen werden männliche Bezeichnungen gewählt.

ating groups, organisations, enterprises, sectors or societies (Bea/Haas, 2001, p. 454 f.). Moreover – and this is central to the acquisition of intercultural competences – in contrast to human nature, culture is learned and not inherited (Hofstede, 1997, pp. 5-6; cf. also Trompenaars, 1993, p. 13) ⁽¹⁾. This makes it possible, to a certain degree, to understand facets of other, foreign cultures, to roam between two or more cultures and thus acquire intercultural competence ⁽¹²⁾.

Unlike culture, competences are relatively simple to define: ‘Competences denote a successful outcome of the learning process for the learner himself and his capacity to act independently in the private, occupational and socio-political [and cultural – authors’ comment] spheres. In practical terms the learning outcome is (however) a qualification’ (German Education Council, 1974, p. 64) ⁽¹³⁾. Whereas *qualification* can refer in particular to the usefulness of a skill on the labour market and more generally to its desirability in occupational, social and private situations, and can be documented by certificates such as Europass Plus, *competences* can be interpreted as a learnable characteristic of the person involved (Herbrand, 2002, p. 48; Bader/Müller, 2002, p. 176; cf. also Lüdtkke, 1975, p. 175).

The concept of intercultural skills is just as hard to define as the term culture. Nevertheless, numerous authors have attempted to identify factors which can explain the success of intercultural collaboration. ‘Since, however, it remains unclear which factors play a key role in humans’ ability to adapt to foreign cultures, there has, to date, been no agreement on what comprises intercultural competence. Among other things, there is controversy over the differing significance and weight of various factors and dimensions of intercultural competence’ (Jaßmeier, 2003, p. 218). Nevertheless, taking pragmatic decision-making into account, a definition of the term according to Thomas Baumer (2002) will be given here. In the broadest sense, intercultural competences can be understood as ‘the abil-

⁽¹⁰⁾ ‘Culture [...] is always a collective phenomenon, because it is at least partly shared with people who live or lived within the same social environment, which is where it was learned. It is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.’ (Hofstede, 1997, p. 5).

⁽¹¹⁾ Similar comments are to be found in American literature on international management. Cf., for example, Deresky, 2000, p. 105.

⁽¹²⁾ Trompenaars’ onion model: ‘Culture comes in layers, like an onion. To understand it, you have to unpeel it layer by layer’ (1993, p. 6). If culture is represented as an onion with three levels, it might look like the following:

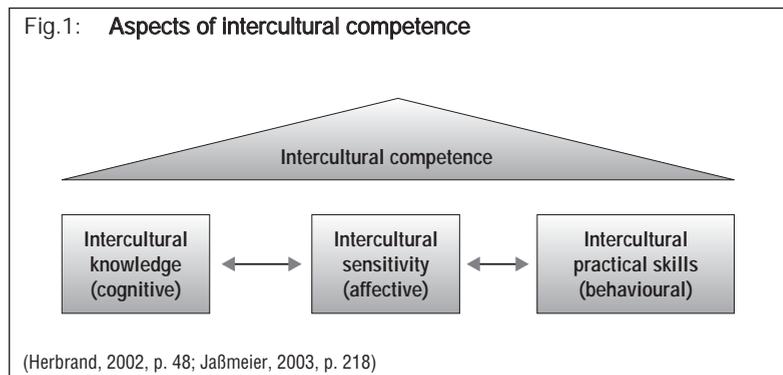
- visible level: behaviour and cultural products (management style, lifestyle, negotiating tactics, workplace design, etc.)
- conscious level: values and norms (individualism, equality, role of women, etc.)
- subconscious level: subconscious basic cultural assumptions (concepts of space and time, relationship of humans and environment, ideas about the nature of humanity, etc.)’ (Baumer, 2002, p. 78).

⁽¹³⁾ The definitions of competences and qualifications used by the German Education Council as early as 1974 are still applicable in the fields of vocational and economic education today; a distinction is still made between competences which can be learned, for example in vocational schools, and qualifications of practical use on the labour market (Alexander, 1996, p. 9 ff.; cf. also Jungblut, 1998, p. 99; Kuhlmeier, 1998, p. 137).

ity to communicate successfully with other people' (p. 76). In the narrower sense, Baumer offers: 'A person is intercultural competent when he recognises and understands the specific concepts of perception, thinking, feeling and actions of people from foreign cultures when working with them' (p. 80). The idea of teamwork between mobile young people is fundamental to the European work placements at the centre of Practicert. It is precisely this teamwork which allows operational criteria for evaluation to be set up.

Although there is no clear definition of intercultural competence, there are, nevertheless, several recognisable aspects which may be used as terms of reference for pre-departure training in intercultural competences, during the placements themselves and in the after-return evaluation (cf. Jaßmeier 2003). A categorisation based on pragmatic decision-making seems logical here – without going into a discussion of different approaches. The subject can be divided into its cognitive, affective and behavioural dimensions (Figure 1), which can also be regarded as training goals. The dimensions are interrelated; their borders are fluid. Whereas the cognitive dimension refers to knowledge of a culture (intercultural knowledge), the affective dimension concerns sensitivity to the characteristics and idiosyncrasies of a culture in connection with modification of personal attitudes towards the previously alien (intercultural sensitivity). These two dimensions are complemented by a third, communicative-behavioural, dimension: intercultural practical skills. These presuppose intercultural sensitivity and intercultural knowledge and equip trainees with the capability to act appropriately in culturally delicate situations (Apfelthaler, 1999, p. 194; Demorgon, 1996, p. 10 f.; Herbrand, 2002, p. 48; Jaßmeier, 2003, p. 218 f.; cf. also Axel, Prümper, 1997, p. 352 f).

Intercultural competence is also important for acquiring abilities and skills in order to work efficiently in a different cultural setting. For (training) enterprises this is particularly important in areas such as customer care, teamwork and personal development. Once trainees have picked up these intercultural competences they can be an economic asset to the training companies. A prerequisite for the acquisition of intercultural competences is a cosmopolitan attitude on the part of both enterprises and trainees. Only



those young trainees who demonstrate cosmopolitan attitudes when applying⁽¹⁴⁾ for a placement abroad have the capacity to develop intercultural competences; they are the only ones motivated enough to acquire intercultural knowledge. This is linked to the development of cultural awareness. Cultural awareness consists primarily of those intercultural skills and abilities which depend on the insight that we have our own way of thinking and acting which (may) be due to completely value-free differences from other cultures (Apfelthaler, 1999, p. 185). Top of the list are tolerance of other organisational forms in the host country, diplomacy and tact. These factors are even more relevant than mastering the language of the specific country, which outsiders often mistakenly regard as paramount⁽¹⁵⁾.

The acquisition of intercultural competences in this sense covers information about foreign cultures, developing empathy for them and creating patterns of behaviour which reflect an awareness of one's responsibility for oneself and one's actions. The range of entrepreneurial cosmopolitanism is broad; teaching intercultural competences can be assigned to political science classes in vocational schools or it may be included in knowledge dissemination approaches such as presentations by various information providers. But only a longer-term period abroad allows young people to acquire intercultural competences quickly and easily, as various studies have demonstrated (Apfelthaler, 1999, p. 184 ff). It is precisely here that Practicert comes in; this broad range of intercultural competences, starting with the motivation to undertake a European work placement, continuing with the acquisition of techniques for mastering intercultural tasks and culminating in the European work placement itself, is ultimately evaluated and certified in the after-return evaluation.

Problems associated with the certification of intercultural competences

Although the modularisation of training resulting from the accreditation and certification of separate training phases is viewed with scepticism in Germany, it is generally well-received in Europe. Thus it is a concept that Germany cannot ignore, especially since the ECVET system is opening up new opportunities for lifelong learning (German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, 2004, p. 206; Heidemann, 2004, p. 1

⁽¹⁴⁾ Ideally a cosmopolitan attitude – Weltoffenheit – should be one of the criteria when recruiting and selecting new employees, since working in an intercultural environment places greater expectations on an employee than similar work in monocultural surroundings. At the least, employees should display empathy, tolerance, the ability to deal with conflicts, a willingness to learn about other cultures and lack of prejudice, a willingness to integrate, communication and team skills and a general interest in intercultural cooperation (Herbrand, 2002, p. 143 ff).

⁽¹⁵⁾ Some organisers offer special language preparation courses for promoters of intercultural education and training, e.g. the DFJW's further training programme: www.dfw.org. Mastering a lingua franca will always make communication easier between all partners.

ff.)⁽¹⁶⁾. In the current discussion on certification through ECVET there is debate on the usefulness of ECTS for recognising credit points for training phases. The application of ECVET could not only increase the transparency and recognition of training outcomes, but also facilitate transfer from vocational education and training to study at university. In this way ECVET would enhance the overall quality of vocational education and training and make it generally more appealing. Practicert must consider at least two questions on the basis of pragmatic decision-making concerning the credit rating of stages of training in European work placements:

- (1) To what extent can a consensus be reached within Europe on making the credit points system uniform – for intercultural competences, for example?
- (2) To what extent can academic and vocational education and training be viewed as equivalent, making it possible to compare ECTS credit points for studies (irrespective of subject) with credit points attained through ECVET?

Three basic rules for efficient implementation of the ECVET system must be considered when reaching pragmatic consensus on the first question⁽¹⁷⁾. However, formulating course units and assessment criteria must involve reaching a pragmatic consensus with international partners – in this case the partners in the Leonardo project Practicert.

Practicert might solve the second issue by making the workload of full-time students, which corresponds to 60 ECTS credits during the academic year, equivalent to a workload of 60 ECVET points for people undergoing vocational education and training. Correspondingly, a 24-30 hour workload would correspond to one ECTS credit point or one ECVET credit point⁽¹⁸⁾. After that, the timescale of the pre-departure training module and the proposed number of credit points for the European work place-

⁽¹⁶⁾ Cf. also www.na-bibb.de/uploads/leo/ecvet_eu-kommission_leitlinien.pdf (retrieved on 31 January 2005).

⁽¹⁷⁾ These basic rules are:

- The goals of the training path, the training programme or the components of a qualification are knowledge, skills and abilities which must be acquired or mastered at a specified reference level. These will be formulated, collected and organised in units.
- In accordance with an agreement at European level, a maximum number of credits from all units will be allocated to a complete course of training, training programme or qualification programme. This agreement makes it possible to allocate a number of credits to each unit (or group of units) on the basis of the relative weight of each unit in the overall group. The transfer and exchange value of each unit is defined in credit points.
- A cooperation agreement links the training sites responsible for imparting mobility capabilities to participants in ECVET. This agreement constitutes mutual trust among the providers. It includes all the units linked to training in another educational or vocational education and training system. It also includes elements of the learning modules, learning programmes, placements, course units etc. in which the learner will participate to heighten his mobility potential. This agreement, together with other documents (Europass, Certificate Supplement, Diploma Supplement, etc.) guarantees the transparency of the individual mobility process, the targets of learning activities and the acquisition of relevant knowledge, skills and abilities' (www.nabibb.de/uploads/leo/ecvet_eu-kommission_leitlinien.pdf, p. 4) (retrieved on 31 January 2005).

ment itself would have to be determined. Furthermore, consideration should be given to how behavioural dimensions of intercultural competences might be documented and tested, perhaps by European placement mentors. As part of the after-return evaluation, operational criteria would be used to diagnose the behavioural dimension of intercultural competences, so that the relevant intercultural qualifications could be certified in Europass Plus – together with ECVET credit points. In a further step, a decision must be made on how far the ECTS grading scale from A (excellent) to FX/F (fail) should be applied⁽¹⁹⁾.

Preparation

Trainers/vocational school teachers must have intercultural skills to prepare trainees for work placements abroad

Not many trainers and teachers assigning work placements currently have experience of working abroad. This situation is likely to change in the future. European integration and greater acceptance of European educational programmes will play a vital role in achieving this. That does not mean that the many trainers and vocational school teachers now supporting the idea of *work placements abroad* and *learning site relocations to other countries* are less experienced or insufficiently qualified for this task. But interested persons and newcomers do need to know what competences are expected of them in order to perform their desired job.

Personal qualities are the most important attributes for workers in the international field. This applies to both participating trainees and organisers. First among these attributes are *acceptance of different educational structures in the host country* and the *ability to be diplomatic* (affective aspect of intercultural competences). Ideal candidates are committed, open to new ideas and flexible. They will have learned to master even difficult situations confidently.

It is important that managers are involved in cross-border contact at an early stage. In France and southern European countries in particular, managers can often forge links denied to ordinary employees at educational institutions. In many countries, school/industry contacts are established exclusively by enterprise and school administrations. These then mediate between partner institution personnel responsible for cooperation. It has proved helpful for representatives of an institution to participate in meetings between partner institutions and to familiarise themselves with condi-

⁽¹⁸⁾ http://ec.europa.eu/comm/education/programmes/socrates/ects_de.html (retrieved on 12 December 04, p. 1)

⁽¹⁹⁾ There appear to be no results as yet, as an InWent GmbH conference in Hanover (17 January 2005) revealed.

tions in the host country, in order to gain practical onsite experience of the behavioural aspects of intercultural competences.

It also benefits the sending institution if staff involved in cross-border education and training receive the support of school administrators and all the teaching staff, since there will inevitably be situations in which they must harmonise to find common solutions, for example when pupils need to be released from lessons during their visit to the partner institution.

Preparatory visits are a great help when creating new school and training partnerships. These are supported by European educational programmes and youth organisations. It is useful to link up with national coordination offices, since they provide guidance and support which are very useful in establishing lasting partnerships. Although the application procedure takes some flexibility away from participants, the forms give applicants an awareness of important aspects of a preparatory visit and facilitate subsequent interaction with partners in the host country.

It will not be possible to give outsiders a detailed impression of the multi-faceted experiences of a stay abroad. However, European education programmes, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) and bilateral institutions (DFJW, German-Polish Youth Office, the German-Czech coordination offices Zukunftsfond and Tandem) offer many introductory and preparatory courses and provide accompanying material for VET facilitators ⁽²⁰⁾.

Certification module: Pre-departure training as preparation for the European work placement

Decentralised learning arrangements during set periods of vocational education and training abroad in the form of European work placements place VET teachers and trainers in an unfamiliar role. At home, trainers and trainees are almost always in direct contact, enabling the trainer to influence and guide the learning process as the situation demands. In contrast, during European work placements the usual trainer can only intervene in the learning process to a very limited extent, even accounting for the use of telecommunications. Such intervention would actually be contrary to the basic principle of European placements and make them less interesting

⁽²⁰⁾The further training programmes can also be found on the Internet, for example at www.cedefop.europa.eu, www.dfjw.org.

⁽²¹⁾ At national level there has been little or no progress with our demand for adequate preparation for placements abroad as an enhancement to a VET course. It is small consolation that the situation is little better elsewhere. According to Apfelthaler (1999, p. 184) even in multinational enterprises only 30 % or at most 45 % of employees are prepared for working abroad and encountering foreign cultures. Richard Mead goes even further: 'Only 12 % of employees in 51 multinational US corporations had been offered seminars and workshops on cross-cultural differences and doing business abroad. Other research estimates that 65 per cent of United States MNCs do not offer training to their expatriates before sending them overseas' (Mead, 1998, p. 423).

pedagogically. Despite this, even at a distance, learning must be organised as effectively as possible to achieve the optimal intercultural learning outcome. For this reason it is useful to prepare trainees for (intercultural) situations that might arise during their stay abroad before they start the placement (pre-departure training) ⁽²¹⁾.

The objective is to provide enough information to help trainees take in the extremely complex world of work in the host country and guide their awareness. This can prevent decentralised learning abroad leading to uncertain outcomes. Adequate preparation gives a placement structure and reduces its risk of failure.

There are concerns that mobility measures for young people in initial vocational training may be poorly prepared at international level, too. Data on the type and scope of preparation for young trainees sent to work abroad does not seem to be available. Surveys are difficult to conduct because these training phases are decentralised in isolated enterprises and schools, and the modern placement movement is still in its infancy. At present it is only possible to note with regret that systematic preparation for placements abroad is rare. This is particularly unfortunate as young trainees are not yet personally or mentally equipped to cope with problems arising while they are abroad. They lack the backup on which experienced expatriates can rely. Young people on work placements abroad are much more likely to experience an ineffective training phase than delegates from companies operating internationally. In extreme cases young people may thus abandon their placement.

It is an urgent requirement that all those responsible for training act to avoid such outcomes. The task they face is new, and as a first step they must establish the goals of preparation for a work placement abroad and the curricular content to achieve these goals.

Possible curricular elements of work placement preparation

Following the analysis and reduction of several lists produced for experienced employees going to work abroad, published among others by Apfelthaler (1999, p. 184 ff.), we propose – on the basis of pragmatic decision-making – that at the *affective intercultural competence level* (intercultural sensitivity) international work placements should achieve the following as their primary objective:

Trainees on a placement should engage with the foreign culture competently, fairly and efficiently.

This primary goal can be divided into the following sub-goals, which constitute basic criteria for awarding ECVET credit points. Employees sent abroad should:

- possess the sensitivity necessary in intercultural contexts;
- be able to adapt quickly to other environments;
- be able to cope with uncertainties and ambiguities;
- show interest in thinking beyond the boundaries of their own culture;
- display willingness to look beyond stereotypical ideas of other cultures;
- be able to integrate into new work teams.

At the *cognitive-geographical* level, (intercultural knowledge) participants should acquire as much *complex knowledge of the foreign culture and their own culture* as possible. The list below is the result of pragmatic consensus; individual items or sub-blocks may be more relevant depending on the situation in the host country. The list is intended to function as a stimulus to debate:

- language of the country ⁽²²⁾,
- demographic data of all kinds,
- geographical information,
- information about transport systems,
- availability of modern communications technology,
- the school system,
- educational status of the workforce,
- the role of women,
- the role of minorities,
- the role of the host country's history,
- property ownership structure,
- safety regulations,
- forms of worker co-determination,
- environmental awareness,
- political situation/distribution of power,
- trade unions and employers' federations,
- tax issues,
- regional business development,
- the influence of religion on attitudes to and at work,
- legal peculiarities,
- leisure activities.

Dealing with a selection of these or other topics may help increase trainees' awareness of various problems in the host country and help take some of the pressure off young people coping with the complex experience of living abroad, making it easier to handle. This preparation could then progress to a work or observation task during the practical phase. The objective of such a task would be to guide the trainees' attention in a partic-

⁽²²⁾ The expansion of foreign-language competences is traditionally and justifiably regarded as a main goal of placements abroad. The popularity of Britain, France and Spain as host countries is explained by the widespread use of their languages and the expectation of trainees that gaining experience of the language in its natural context will be useful in school and in the workplace. Of course, it is worthwhile attempting to reduce or avoid language problems for trainees in these countries by a situational approach to language tuition in school during the preparation phase. This also applies to placements in which English, French or Spanish have the function of a lingua franca.

ular direction and provide a basis for an assessment interview or presentation upon completion of the placement. This would make it possible to diagnose and evaluate in particular the behavioural dimension of intercultural competences acquired ⁽²³⁾. With regard to accreditation with ECVET credit points the question is: how many hours should be allocated to such pre-departure training? For example, if the trainee workload comprised a three-day workshop of eight hours a day, it could be accredited with one ECVET credit point.

From European work placements to cross-border cooperative training – working towards certification of European training phases by the international VET cooperative

Despite the total number of trainees participating in bilateral programmes, up to now placements of trainees in the dual system have lagged far behind expectations. Cross-border cooperative training could improve the figure significantly ⁽²⁴⁾. The idea is obvious, and initial tests are being run in border areas, something from which we could all learn. These usually started with full-time courses. The distances travelled were not excessive, so that in case of conflict, personal mediation by a trainer from the home institution was possible. Nevertheless, these first attempts were not without problems – usually administrative ones – because of, for example, differing training systems. There were serious differences in the amount of theory and practice in training courses in participating partner countries. This led to difficulties ensuring reciprocal recognition of final examinations. Ways to overcome these bureaucratic obstacles must be found as quickly as possible. There is a centuries-old tradition in craft training in particular which can provide a basis for training abroad. Although it is true that a journeyman's travels did not start until *after* initial vocational training, participants on placements would be around the same age.

⁽²³⁾ In the first instance it may be assumed that only operable, that is observable, criteria can be used for evaluation purposes in the sense of test theories. On these grounds, evaluation of affective dimensions will be impossible a priori. In contrast, cognitive dimensions can readily be tested in written or oral tests and therefore evaluated by observers.

⁽²⁴⁾ For us, a possible basis for cross-border cooperative training could be trainers from the same occupational sphere in different European countries developing a joint training concept for initial vocational training and agreeing on the supplementary training content to be provided by the partner. The objective is achieved in cooperative training if, on completion of the regular training period, the final accreditation can be given by at least two European countries. Young people must be able to gain cross-border experiences as part of their initial vocational training. In the past this was only possible after initial training – for example for travelling journeymen.

⁽²⁵⁾ Trainees particularly suited for cross-border cooperative training are, for example, construction workers (e.g. roofers), heating engineers, agricultural mechanics and vehicle mechanics, electricians and parquet layers.

Pragmatic considerations seem to suggest that cross-border cooperative training is particularly appropriate for Chambers of Trade ⁽²⁵⁾ which already have experience of European training. The following steps should be considered:

- a large part of initial vocational training should take place in one, or perhaps even two, institutions of training partners abroad;
- these phases of training should consist of long periods of residence abroad (four to six months); a one-year stay might be more practicable for German trainers;
- the trainees receive certificates from their host countries in addition to those of their own country, as is the practice in academic education. This is already done in many higher education cooperatives.

An important counter-argument will probably be that the projected time abroad will only allow the trainees to get to the point where they are just starting to become reliable workers and make a profit for their enterprise. In many cases it will probably not be easy for trainees to catch up with missed vocational school lessons on their own. Some training experts maintain that for a project to work successfully as a training cooperative, it must be under the direction of competent bodies such as the Chambers of Trade, in cooperation with a VET centre and the partner organisations abroad. A first step could be requiring trainers to become mobile themselves. Trainers would go abroad to view the actual training conditions for their apprentices and to arrange training phases. Together with their partners abroad they would structure the period of training – normally three to three and a half years – in such a way that periods spent abroad do not extend or diminish overall training time. At the same time, a project for harmonising training plans could be used to integrate periods spent abroad into a binding framework.

The possibility of certifying cooperative training through ECVET presents a great opportunity to increase the quality and appeal of the German dual VET system. This is particularly pertinent against the backdrop of the previously mentioned move towards a bigger international element in VET thanks to the amendment of the BBiG. This article reflects only *one* aspect of the Leonardo project Practicert/Europass Plus: the acquisition of intercultural competences. The pragmatic decision-making approach used in the Practicert project shows us that there are definite possibilities for formulating criteria for all dimensions (affective, cognitive and behavioural) of intercultural competences. These can be included in the framework of Practicert and can be evaluated and certified with credit points. It is clear that cooperative training would greatly facilitate both pragmatic consensus-building on criteria for the aspects of intercultural competences and the consensus-oriented award of ECVET credit points, as well as corresponding certification by Europass Plus. ■

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