



## Report of the second ECVET / EQAVET / EQF seminar

Using units within professional qualifications



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This report presents the outputs from the joint seminar for national, regional and sectoral stakeholders involved in implementing EQAVET, EQF or ECVET. Representatives from each of the European networks, together with colleagues from the higher education sector, met to consider how units which are based on learning outcomes can support learners. The seminar focussed on synergies between the European instruments and identified how participants could learn from each other's experience. The seminar aimed to identify common understandings in relation to the use of units and questions for each European network to consider.

The seminar was organised by the ECVET team and hosted at the Lycée hôtelier Guillaume Tirel in Paris, France.

Throughout Europe the labour market is changing as the number of high-skilled jobs grows and the number of low-skilled jobs continues to decrease<sup>1</sup>. This is happening in a financial and economic environment where young people and experienced workers find it more difficult to secure temporary or long term employment. In these circumstances those who hold qualifications find it easier to demonstrate their ability. Qualifications are even more valuable when they are built on a shared and explicit understanding. With increased job and geographical mobility, qualifications need to be transferable to different economic and education sectors; and for this to happen there needs to be transparency, trust and confidence. Units which are based on learning outcomes can provide the basis for this trust and increased confidence, and they can support learner mobility, progression and the recognition of achievement. At the moment, European education and training systems continue to fall short in providing the right skills for employability, and they could work more adequately with business or employers to bring learning experiences closer to the reality of the working environment. These

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<sup>1</sup> Cedefop report quoted in "Rethinking Education: investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes", European Commission, COM(2012) 669 final, Strasbourg 20.11.12



skills mismatches are a growing concern for European industry's competitiveness. In this environment, more needs to be done to make VET attractive and improve the quality of provision. This can be achieved if institutions at all levels increase the relevance and quality of their educational provision for students and the labour market, widen access and facilitate transition between education and training pathways.

This report summarises the main issues, key messages and suggestions for the future that emerged from the discussion. Part one considers how units can help learners to increase their employability, their opportunity to progress to further learning, and their mobility. Part two explores the use of the European vocational education and training instruments. Part three summarises the main messages that emerged from the discussions and considers how these European instruments could be aligned further to strengthen their cumulative impact and encourage lifelong learning.

# 1. The use of units

The seminar brought together those with an interest in the European instruments that support qualifications and VET. Building on the first joint seminar for EQAVET, EQF and ECVET networks (the report of the first seminar is available at <http://www.eqavet.eu/gns/library/publications/2012.aspx>) the discussions focused on how units can be used to design qualifications, support learners and encourage mobility and lifelong learning. VET colleagues were joined by representatives from the higher education sector in order for progression between the two sectors to be considered.

Over the past few years there have been three recent trends in the design of qualifications, namely:

- a tendency to be more explicit about the basis of awarding qualifications. Increasingly vocational and professional qualifications are defined by explicit and measurable standards which set out what is expected by the labour market. These standards are expressed in a range of ways and cover skills, knowledge, understanding, capabilities, competences, capacities, attributes, responsibilities, behaviours or any combination of these. In whatever way they are written they clarify employers' expectations of the holder of a particular qualification;
- the use of learning outcomes to express what must be demonstrated when a learner is assessed. Through a clear statement of what needs to be achieved when assessment takes place, the learning outcomes approach helps employers to be more confident that each holder of a particular qualification has demonstrated similar things. The learning outcomes approach provides more precision about what a qualification holder can do, knows and understands;
- a more consistent and system-wide approach to the quality assurance of VET and the award of qualifications.

Once units are established and used, learners can take advantage of the flexibility they offer –in terms of mobility (by completing units in different countries or at different VET or higher education providers), progression to other sectors (by using credit from completed units) or progression to higher level VET qualifications or learning. Learners are also able to complete part of a qualification or individual units e.g. a learner could complete a unit in a foreign language, or a unit in finance to meet new

regulatory requirements, or a unit in engineering to understand new developments or techniques, or a unit that had been designed to support a mobility programme, or a unit in an unrelated discipline which supports an employee's redeployment or retraining. In each situation the learner completes what they or their employer needs – they do not take the whole qualification. This ability to match training with the needs of learners provides flexibility and encourages lifelong learning.

Each of the European instruments has the potential to benefit from using units. While at first glance the links between units and the credit based system of ECVET look strongest, there are clear connections to EQF and EQAVET and the development of ECTS:

- the EQF links countries' national qualifications systems to a common European reference framework. Individuals and employers are able to use the EQF to better understand and compare the qualifications levels of different countries and different education and training systems. The EQF uses learning outcomes as the basis for describing levels rather than learning inputs such as the length of study, the type of institution or the number of assessments. The development of units offers one way of designing qualifications for a national qualifications framework (NQF) and makes it easier to meet the criteria<sup>1</sup> for linking a NQF with the EQF;

- the EQAVET framework comprises a quality assurance and improvement cycle which is equally applicable to the "VET-system, VET-provider and qualification-awarding level<sup>2</sup>." It can be used to cover the design, award, recognition and validation of whole qualifications, parts of qualifications or units within qualifications. Developing and using a standardised and consistent approach to the quality assurance of units gives learners and employers more confidence. Trust in the use of units, as well as transparency can be enhanced through the adoption of guidance on quality assurance at a national, regional or sectoral level. In many situations such an approach is in line with the EQAVET framework;

- the basis for the award of credit in the higher education and VET sectors differs<sup>3</sup>. However there are clear synergies between the use of units in VET and the use of modules or components in the higher education sector. Increasingly learners move between different parts of the education system. Developing a shared understanding of the two approaches enhances mobility opportunities and allows graduates to more easily pursue professional vocational training, VET students to access higher education courses, and learners on higher VET courses to have their achievements recognised by both the VET and higher education sectors.

1 Referencing national qualification levels to the EQF - European Qualifications Framework Series: Note 3 [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/note3\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/note3_en.pdf) One of the ten criteria for referencing NQF to EQF is the expectation that the national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer(s) to the national qualifications framework or system and are consistent with the relevant European principles and guidelines.

2 Paragraph 11 of the EQAVET Recommendation.

3 ECVET awards credit based on learning outcomes, ECTS awards credit based on hours of study.

## 1.1 Learning from experience

The seminar was organised around three case studies. Each demonstrates the value and usefulness of units and sets the scene for further discussion. The case studies illustrate how VET providers, employers' organisations and VET systems work with units to provide more and better opportunities for learners to

improve their employability, their mobility and their ability to progress to further learning. In each case study, speakers considered issues relating to the higher education and VET sectors, as well as setting out how units support the aspirations of learners and meet the needs of employers.

## 1.2 Using units to support the mobility of learners

### Case study 1

The *I CARE* ([www.icareproject.eu](http://www.icareproject.eu)) project focused on the high number of personal care and social workers who are mobile across Europe. It sought to respond to the lack of recognition of the competences that individuals gain in other contexts (countries, institutions or systems) and learning settings (formal, non-formal, or informal contexts) as their qualifications are not considered to be equivalent.

*I CARE* sets out to increase staff mobility between different countries and learning contexts. It uses the ECVET system to establish a model of recognition for staff with the following professional profiles: care operator, social assistant, family assistant/caregiver, dental assistant and baby sitter.

The project team started by analysing existing qualification systems and produced an overview of the personal care and social work qualification frameworks in participating countries (Italy, Germany, Romania and Poland). The team focused on commonalities and differences with a particular regard to regulatory frameworks, common learning outcomes, units and competences.

This led to the team identifying a common approach, based on the collection and analysis of existing models and tools in participating countries. The *I CARE* team developed and used a common set of approaches and standards for evaluating learning outcomes achieved in formal contexts. They also developed common procedures for the validation, accumulation, transfer and recognition of learning outcomes achieved in a range of contexts.

The model for transferring learning outcomes was tested in Italy's Lombardy Region and in partner countries through the use of case studies. This testing ensured the approach worked within individual partner countries and could be used to validate learning outcomes that were transferred from one country to another.

The main impacts of the *I CARE* project have been to improve the transparency of qualifications in the personal care and social work services, and to improve co-operation between partner countries. The team's experience could be used by employers' organisations in the same sector in other countries or transferred across sectors.



Following the presentation, participants met in small groups to discuss the following:

- how do units help you to overcome the challenges of mobility of learners?
- what gives you confidence that units can be used to support mobility in your system?
- how do you ensure that the learning from abroad is captured and included in qualifications?

The discussions considered different types of mobility: geographical and occupational; recognised or informal; time spent within the same country and time spent abroad; and time spent in a similar or different role. In each situation, the purpose and usefulness of the period of mobility varies and it is important for all participants (including the learner) to be clear about both the type of mobility and the associated expectations.

For mobility to be fully effective the qualification awarding bodies and the national agencies need to be involved. If mobility is solely the responsibility of individual VET providers, it is much less likely to be developed on a systematic basis. There is also a strong need for quality assurance to give participating countries, employers and learners confidence in the assessment processes. At the heart of the discussion was a focus on mutual trust and the need to have systems and processes in place which give confidence to employers across Europe. Without guidance and support on quality assurance, there is a risk that individual VET providers including work-based providers will not design training which meets employers' current and future needs. Further value can be added when the national authorities ensure certificates include the EQF level of a qualification and the quality assurance processes align with the EQAVET Recommendation.

The type of mobility illustrated in the I Care example takes time and resources to design, pilot and embed in regional or national arrangements.

Even though employers and sectors would value an easy and simple approach to mutual recognition of competences and qualifications, the burden of development is too onerous for individual training providers or companies. A macro-level solution, either at regional or national level is needed in order to facilitate the type of international mobility described in the I CARE example. Such a solution needs to overcome organisational inertia and the barriers that can be created by individual VET providers and qualification-awarding bodies. For one of the discussion groups, agreeing a Memorandum of Understanding at a regional or national level offered an opportunity to make progress more quickly.

Learning outcomes by themselves can be sufficient for mobility. However, the added value of units lies in the ease with which achievement can be recognised through organising and then assessing similar learning outcomes. Units also provide an opportunity for part-achievement of a qualification to be recognised and competence valued. Central to the system described in the I CARE model is mutual trust in the assessment process and outcomes. When everyone has confidence we can prevent individuals from having to repeat previous training or learning when they move abroad.

The unit-based nature of VET qualifications provides opportunities to build flexibility into training arrangements – and this can include foreign language training, optional units which can support mobility programmes and additional work placements. This inherent flexibility offers opportunities to plan for mobility when qualifications are designed and approved, and when VET providers plan their programmes. It is easier to think about mobility at the planning stage than trying to adjust existing qualifications at a later stage when an individual wishes to travel abroad or to another part of the country.

## 1.3 Using units to support learners' progression to VET and higher education

### Case study 2

France's higher technician diploma – the BTS - is taken by approximately 120,000 students each year. It is a widely recognised profession-oriented diploma which is valued by companies. It is a higher education Diploma (a EQF level 5 qualification) which is awarded after a two year post-secondary education course.

As with all professional Diplomas in France, the BTS is organised in terms of units based on learning outcomes. It includes general education units and profession-oriented units that are developed and defined in partnership with professional organisations. A BTS is allocated 120 ECTS even though it is not taught by the higher education sector.

One of the reasons for re-developing the Diploma was the need to create pathways for students to move between universities and BTS courses. Some students, after their first year at university, fail or simply want to change direction and join a professional course to train for a specific job. And some BTS students decide to take a longer course and wish to move to a university. This initiative has developed a way for students' prior learning to be recognised in order that they can continue their learning.

To ensure students' learning would be recognised by both the higher VET and the higher education sector required a review of the thinking behind the certification of units. Originally the Diploma's learning outcomes related to the needs of a profession (ECVET principle). However for these learning outcomes to contribute to a higher education programme and receive ECTS credits, they would need to relate to a study programme. This required the BTS programmes to be re-written in a modular format so that ECTS credits could be assigned to each module (unit). The ECTS credits were defined according to the relative importance of the module (unit) in relation to the full certificate (which is close to the definition of ECVET points). In other higher education courses ECTS credits are defined according to student workload.

The method of certifying students' success in the Diploma remains unchanged as this preserves the recognition by the labour market. However the certification system has been linked to the assessment of modules by the teaching teams. This is unusual in France as technical upper secondary schools are not entitled to assess students in an autonomous way (the assessment of the Diploma is subject to external control.) The national initiative, which started in 2011, covers five BTS courses in different fields. In 2015, following the completion of the evaluation, the new approach could be implemented for all BTS Diplomas.

#### **The main challenges included:**

- finding simple solutions for teachers, students and companies;
- changing the teaching and assessment methods used by teachers;
- creating partnerships with universities so that students can go from one system to another.

Following the presentation, participants met in small groups to discuss the following:

- what solutions can you find to create bridges between VET and higher education?
- what could be the possible solutions in different countries?
- how to use ECTS and ECVET for recognition of credit achieved by learners in order to support their progress to higher education?

It was widely recognised that the higher education and VET systems faced similar challenges even though they had found different solutions. There was agreement on the importance of learning outcomes as well as an acknowledgement that there were divergent approaches to the use of units, the allocation of “points”, and the basis for ECVET and ECTS credit. As well as being technical issues, they define the ways of working in each part of the education and training system. As such they can lead to barriers and misunderstandings which prevent the type of co-operation that is being sought. For some delegates this reminded them of the description of America and the UK as “two nations divided by a common language” i.e. they have much in common but still the misunderstandings are frequent.

For some delegates there was a feeling that some debates are unlikely to be productive and, if the aim is to find ways to help students, there was a need to look for solutions which recognise and value the strengths and traditions of each system. As such it may be worth considering:

- joint initiatives which respond to the needs of each system (such as the prior learning issue raised in the French Diploma case study);
- local or regional arrangements which support learners’ progression – it is often easier to build mutual trust and confidence at a local level;

- a greater role for the labour market in the higher education system e.g. in the production of competence profiles or job profiles which set out what employers expect;
- pilot schemes in sectors where higher education has traditionally taken a more vocational approach.

For many delegates, this type of initiative offered a way forward and an opportunity to explore greater synergy. The different approaches taken by the higher education and VET systems are well known and have been repeated at many conferences and seminars over the past ten years. In some systems, VET and higher education are moving closer together but this is not a universal experience across Europe. While some accommodation can be found through pilot schemes such as the French Diploma, it will always be hard to reconcile systems that seek to develop learners in different ways and for different purposes. There was agreement that greater transparency about achievement makes it easier to recognise individual learners’ skills, competence and understanding.

Despite the perceived divide between the systems, there were examples where this gap was being bridged and learners were moving from higher education to VET and vice versa. This is more likely to occur when there are components (modules or units) that can be assessed and credits can be awarded and transferred. However the “devil is in the detail” and the need to understand the technicalities can be a barrier for individual learners or VET providers. For some delegates, this emphasised the need for a political decision which could bring greater unity. And although the existence of the EQF and national or regional qualification frameworks provide solutions to issues of transfer and progression, they are not enough. They need to be supplemented by a political decision at a European and national/regional level in order to remove the institutional barriers which prevent a greater focus on the needs of learners.

The recent European Commission publication, *Rethinking Education*<sup>1</sup>, makes clear that more is needed from national bodies to deliver the right skills for employment, increase the efficiency and inclusiveness of education and training institutions and work collaboratively with relevant stakeholders.

Using the case study as an example of mobility between the two parts of the education and training system, participants considered how to make 'mutual trust' a reality. There was a strong feeling that formal agreements were needed, preferably ones that were based on learning outcomes rather than 'credits' or 'points.' Creating these agreements can be easier for the higher education sector as ECTS has been the basis for similar arrangements across Europe for a number of years, and ECVET is just starting on the journey. In the absence of a political decision about mutual

recognition and transfer, delegates felt that local or individual agreements gave the greatest opportunity to make progress. Together, EQA-VET, EQF, ECVET and ECTS provide the basis for this type of agreement – and more examples similar to the French case study would be helpful.

Delegates emphasised the need to place learners at the centre of the system. Too often the discussion appeared to focus on the organisations in the system rather than the users of the system, namely students and employers. One way to emphasise the users' perspective is to focus more on high-quality work placements which meet the needs of employers and prepare learners for employment. Given the current employment situation in Europe, there is an increasingly important role for employers and organisations that represent them to strongly influence learning and training.

<sup>1</sup> Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European economic and social committee and the committee of the regions. *Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes*, Strasbourg, 20.11.2012. COM(2012) 669 final



## 1.4 Using units to support learners' employability and access to the labour market

### Case study 3

The Netherlands' qualification system in the senior secondary VET school sector includes definitions of the competences and skills that a student needs in order to be effective in the labour market. All jobs and work functions are described in an occupational profile which forms the basis for each qualification. A qualification can cover several occupational profiles and each qualification is developed by a National Centre of Expertise in the respective sector.

#### The design of a sales specialist qualification (EQF Level 3)

Qualifications include units which cover key tasks and sub-units which cover work processes. This sales specialist qualification in the retail sector has four units such as receiving and processing items for sale; and selling, advising customers and providing a service.

Organisations representing employers have responsibility for developing the occupational profiles and they can work with the National Centres of Expertise to influence the content of formal qualifications. This gives employers' organisations the opportunity to design qualifications that meet their needs, e.g. in relation to the Level 3 sales specialist qualification, the employers' branch that represents:

- 'consumer electronics' added a unit to cover the repair and installation of consumer electronics;
- 'supermarkets' did not change any of the units or sub-units. Instead they produced a document in which the knowledge, skills and competences could be interpreted in the context of employment in supermarkets;
- 'fashion' added two sub-units. These included references to management, tailoring and sector specific knowledge and skills.

As a consequence the Level 3 sales specialist qualification has a standardised approach but it also meets the varying needs of different parts of the labour market.

#### Non-formal training

Alongside the formal qualification, some employers' branches (e.g. fashion) offer students and employees a non-formal training route that leads to the award of a Diploma. There is a direct link between the units of the Level 3 formal qualification for a sales specialist and the non-formal Diploma of the fashion specialist. These links are based on agreements with training centres and this provides students with the opportunity to also obtain the non-formal Diploma.

Following the presentation, participants met in small groups to discuss the following:

- what are the advantages for the sector of having qualifications designed with units?
- what are the advantages of using units from the learners' point of view?
- how can units help the employability of learners?

The case study stimulated discussions on how the needs of learners and employers had been addressed. By providing both a standardised and a tailored approach to qualifications, the case study offered a flexible way to increase learners' motivation. Learners are offered a choice within a structure that can be delivered in a cost-effective way.



The case study demonstrated how employers can be actively and realistically engaged in the process of qualification design. Delegates commented on how the input of the labour market could be valued and maximised by keeping the structure and decisions simple. By avoiding technical and detailed discussions on qualifications and curriculum content, the case study demonstrated how knowledge, skills and competences required by the labour market could be incorporated into a bespoke training plan. The active involvement of stakeholders in the design of qualifications strengthened the quality assurance processes and this was viewed very favourably by participants. The unit-based nature of the qualification illustrated how ECVET could be used within both the formal and non-formal sectors.

One of the advantages of a clear and transparent system is the ability of learners to select the right pathway – one that meets their needs and the needs of potential employers. The lack of complexity was seen as an advantage for stakeholders: for employers because they knew what to expect from learners and because they felt they could design the qualification to meet their needs; for VET providers because there was a limited amount of choice for learners which enabled the training to be delivered in a cost effective way; and for learners because they knew the qualification was designed with the labour market in mind.

By meeting the needs of all the stakeholders, there could be confidence and mutual trust in the qualification.

By using units to underpin the design of the qualification, the case study showed how flexibility and specialisation could be incorporated. In addition, this unit-based design allowed for individual units to be up-dated to reflect emerging labour market trends and new ways of thinking. It also facilitated:

- mobility as time abroad or in another context could focus on specific units;
- lifelong learning as experienced staff could complete only the units that they needed (this was one way of recognising prior learning);
- recognition of non-formal learning;
- specialist and/or work-based VET providers offering the units where they have expertise (it is often easier for specialist organisations to offer parts of a qualification rather than the full qualification);
- those learners who needed more time to complete the qualification, or needed to take time out of their study.

Delegates also considered the disadvantages of this type of unit-based system and noted that there was a risk that learners could specialise too early in their careers and forgo a more generalised vocational offer.

## 2. The European instruments

EQAVET, EQF and ECVET are based on Recommendations from the European Parliament and of the Council of the European Union. In each case, in line with the principles of subsidiarity, Member States are invited to establish systems and approaches which take into account these developments. The basis for the introduction of ECTS was different. It was set up in 1989 as a pilot scheme within the Erasmus programme to facilitate the recognition of study undertaken abroad. ECTS is used as a credit system throughout the European Higher Education Area which includes all those countries engaged in the Bologna Process.

The ECTS system is based on the workload students need to undertake in order to achieve the expected learning outcomes. This enables knowledge, skills and competences gained in contexts other than formal higher education (e.g. non-formal or informal learning) to be assessed and recognised in the award of a qualification. While not all higher education programmes are vocationally relevant, increasingly more institutions include the skills and competences required by employers. This does not have to distract from the academic approach within the university sector – it can supplement students' learning and respond to their needs for employability and relevant work experience.

The EQF recommendation covers both vocational and higher education. It<sup>1</sup> provides a framework to assist understanding and comparisons between national qualification systems. All new qualifications issued from 2012 should carry a reference to one of the eight EQF levels. EQF serves as a translation device to make qualifications more easily understood across different countries and systems in Europe, and thus promotes lifelong learning and mobility for those who study or work abroad. For some delegates the centrality of the EQF (because it covers both the VET and higher education sectors) provides an opportunity for more collaboration and greater alignment.

<sup>1</sup> Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (2008/C 111/01)

## 2.1 Working with units

Unit-based systems comprise 'bite-sized' units or modules which can be used to recognise students' learning in an incremental way. Units offer learners the opportunity to complete part of a qualification as well as the ability to gather credit over time in a number of locations and from a range of training providers. Units, which can be used with formal, non-formal and informal learning, assist learners to be more mobile as well as providing shorter, more focused training which encourages lifelong learning. Units also enable training providers and qualification-awarding organisations to amend training in response to emerging trends, new ways of thinking or new employment practices.

However delegates were aware of the practical constraints which can restrict the use of units, namely:

- training providers often prefer to train or teach large groups of learners in order to achieve economies of scale. Offering too much choice for learners, in terms of units, can make the training provision uneconomic. A similar constraint operates for work-based learning where employers can struggle to offer training which covers the full range of units;
- sophisticated and sometimes expensive systems need to be established in order for learners' achievements to be validated and recognised, and used to inform subsequent learning. For training organisations (including higher education), the accreditation of prior learning can be technical, time-consuming and subject to learners' appeals;
- validating and recognising achievements from units provided by the informal or non-formal sector can create problems for those who award qualifications. For awarding organisations to have confidence in the learning outcomes from these units, they often require extensive quality assurance processes to be in place;

- the development and approval of units takes time and a considerable investment from stakeholders. If units are optional, their take-up is uncertain and the effort involved in their design and quality assurance may not be justified;
- if units are too specialised, learners may not gain the breadth of skills and competences they need for a career in a sector e.g. a unit which specialises in hygiene in the 'burger industry' may not provide as much breadth as a more generalised unit that covers hygiene in the catering industry. While some learners are very clear of their career intentions and are happy to specialise, others are less certain about their future.

For many delegates these were significant barriers. However their identification had the advantage of highlighting what needed to be addressed. There was a need for national, regional and/or sectoral bodies to develop system-wide high-quality solutions in order for progress on the use of units to continue, and for learners to be placed at the centre of the training process. During the discussions, the sales specialist EQF Level 3 qualification from the Netherlands was quoted as an example of how these barriers had been addressed through the development of a manageable arrangement which could be supported by both employers and VET providers.

As units are designed to be transferable, ensuring the quality of each unit is important to learners, employers and qualification-awarding bodies. Each stakeholder sees units from a different angle and has a different set of interests – managing these perspectives is an important aspect of the VET quality assurance process.



# 3. Key messages

## 3.1 Reflections from the seminar

Discussions at the seminar were technical and detailed because the European instruments are complex. It was clear that the European networks had invested considerable time and energy in using the instruments and each of them could make effective use of units based on learning outcomes. However participants were open to new ideas and new ways of seeing things - this reflected a shared awareness of the need to avoid entrenched positions if greater synergy is to be created. Participants agreed on the need to simplify the European instruments. This will help to communicate their benefits to employers, VET providers and learners.

The main reflections from the seminar were:

- the importance of quality assurance arrangements. In European VET and higher education systems that are diverse and potentially fragmented, it is not possible for any individual learner or employer to understand the details of every course. As such stakeholders are looking for indications of quality – these are often provided by a range of labels or indicators such as ‘master’s degree’, ‘Level 5 on the EQF’ and ‘apprentice.’ The European instruments have the potential to offer similar indications of quality e.g. compliance with ECVET or EQAVET;
- the needs of learners are increasingly important. Learners want to be confident that training will meet their needs, help them to improve their employability, and be relevant to the needs of the labour market. If units or modules are important to learners (because of the flexibility that they offer), it is difficult to understand why they are not seen as priorities for other stakeholders. Despite the barriers to using units (discussed earlier in this report), delegates thought more could and should be done to respond to learners’ needs. The current economic and financial environment in Europe provides an oppor-

tunity for new thinking and faster progress in response to the needs of young people. Qualification reform, based on the European instruments, has never been more important and more pressing for learners in Europe;

- it can be difficult to find new solutions at a European level. Delegates were keen to develop ‘win-win’ situations which would help both the VET and higher education sectors to find mutually-beneficial solutions to practical problems. Such solutions were likely to be local and developed to meet local or regional needs;
- the extent to which each European instrument had moved from concept to pilot to implementation to full acceptance. The ECTS system was thought to be the furthest in this developmental process, EQF was thought to be the second most developed European instrument with ECVET and EQAVET operating at the pilot phase. However each instrument was moving towards full acceptance. This part of the discussion emphasised the consistent support that is needed to reach full acceptance;
- the higher education sector is changing and the stereotypes of academic ‘ivory towers’ are disappearing. Increasingly higher education institutions focus on the needs of the labour market, encourage student mobility and meet the employment needs of their students. Collaboration and cooperation with the VET sector can be a catalyst for further change and, if they are used well, the European VET instruments give learners greater confidence in the quality of provision;
- the importance of articulating and communicating an agreed set of benefits to learners, employers and VET providers. Much more needs to be done to ensure the European instruments are part of these key messages as they each help to make VET more attractive and provide assurance to learners and employers.

These reflections seek to build on what is already common – the EQF, the use of learning outcomes and credit, and a commitment to quality assurance as the basis for mutual trust.

## 3.2 Concluding remarks

Within the European networks there is a deep and well-developed understanding of how units can be used to develop qualifications, recognise learners' achievements and promote mobility. Some of the European instruments are well on their way to embracing units based on learning outcomes. However this is not a universal situation and more can be done within the VET and higher education sectors.

This seminar was part of an on-going process which brings together the European networks so they can consider greater synergy and alignment. Each network is supporting change; partly in response to the European economic and financial environment, and partly to provide the best quality experience for learners. While the existing institutional barriers are high and new ones seem to appear on a frequent basis, there can be no doubt about the European networks' determination to support the needs of young people within a lifelong learning context.

Alongside the development of policy in the field of VET, it is important to establish a parallel process that support implementation. The priorities for such a process include the need to:

- publicise, in simpler language, the benefits of using units to design qualifications. Across all forms of VET much more has to be done to communicate a convincing argument about the need to respond to learners and the labour market;
- move quickly beyond the current piloting and testing phase in order that progression and mobility are perceived as everyday

occurrences rather than unusual or rare events. The creation of Peer learning activities, the identification of more case studies and the sharing of effective practice will be essential elements of any strategy that seeks to make faster progress;

- use the European instruments, and the outcomes of their evaluations, to identify the benefits of greater synergy and alignment in the VET and higher education sectors;
- ensure all VET providers make extensive use of quality assurance framework to enhance mutual trust and improve the quality of VET.

The networks will continue to liaise and look for greater synergy at both a European and national level. However this will not be enough to make the significant changes outlined in the European Recommendations and Rethinking Education – as well as a political commitment, the seminar identified the importance of individual VET providers and higher education institutions focusing more on the needs of learners. This would include the provision of more flexible training (units) based on learning outcomes which can be recognised, assessed and validated across Europe. VET is increasingly European in its nature (in some sectors the focus is international); learners are increasingly mobile (or wish to be mobile); and employers are seeking the best candidates in a competitive environment. VET providers need to respond to these challenges to ensure that Europe continues to be financially successful and learners acquire world-class skills and competences. And the European, national and regional networks need to provide the support and encouragement that helps VET providers to meet these aspirations.

## Acknowledgements

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## Appendix: information from the three case studies

This appendix contains additional information about each case study. The presentations from Michela Vecchia at Fondazione CEFASS in Italy, Sylvie Bonichon at the Ministère de l'enseignement supérieur in France, and Dorien Krassenberg and John Bres at the Branche Bureau Mode in the Netherlands can be found at <http://www.ecvet-team.eu/>

### Case study 1 - I CARE

The *I CARE* presentation covered many technical issues that had been considered by the team. These included the development of a competence matrix for each profession, the allocation of ECVET points to units within qualifications, a standardised approach to assessing learning outcomes, and the production of a Memorandum of Understanding between the participants. The project team found it easier to prepare the competence matrices when the national, regional or local descriptions were already described in terms of competences, in line with the learning outcomes model. The final versions of the competence matrices were based on job descriptions and the work undertaken by professional staff. The matrices combined general and job-specific competences which could be updated to reflect the evolving needs of the labour market. Each competence matrix was enhanced with examples and detailed information drawn from observation and interviews with practitioners. The following shows an example of one of the units which includes knowledge and skills at two different levels:

Unit of Learning Outcome	Learning Outcome	Knowledge	Skills/Attitude
Direct assistance to the patient	Using techniques to assist a patient with medical and therapeutic prescriptions	<b>LEVEL 1</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He/she knows elements of pharmacology (ways of administration, elimination, storage only as far as it is required by the involved skills)</li> </ul>	<b>LEVEL 1</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He/she can cooperate to ensure the correct taking of drugs according to medical prescriptions</li> </ul>
		<b>LEVEL 2</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He/she knows the basics of diagnostics, therapy and rehabilitation</li> <li>• He/she knows elements of physiological anatomy, physical, psychic and sensorial applied pathology</li> </ul>	<b>LEVEL 2</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He/she can cooperate in the diagnostic activity only as regards the collection of biological material samples, which are excreted naturally</li> <li>• He/she can transport biological, sanitary, supplying materials according to established protocols and withdraw reports</li> </ul>

To illustrate how the *I CARE* system worked, the presentation included a discussion of someone who comes to Italy and wants to work as a care operator having previously worked in this role in his home country. When he arrives in Italy, he completes the *I CARE* tests in order to certify his competence. These tests are based on the care operator matrix which is composed of five units based on learning outcomes and has been assigned 100 points. He takes the practical and theoretical tests which show that he is quite good in most of the competences, but he has an inadequate mark in three skills. By using ECVET points he can be awarded a certificate for 91 ECVET points, and the three skills where he lacks the required competences can be specified. Making this system work required the *I CARE* team to develop and test a model that works in each participating country, to agree the content of the units and their associated learning outcomes, to involve VET providers and qualification authorities in the design, to develop a system of mutual trust between partner organisations, and to put in place an effective Memorandum of Understanding.

### Case study 2 - France's higher technician diploma the BTS Import/export commercial assistant

At the centre of this programme is the need to reconcile two approaches to units, the use of learning outcomes and the allocation of credit. From the perspective of a higher VET course, the starting point for the qualification is the job or occupational profile of someone at work. In the following example, a learner is being prepared for employment in an import/export environment and needs to demonstrate competence in two key tasks associated with exporting – ‘selling abroad’ and ‘ensuring there is the proper follow-up after the sale is made’. Based on employers’ expectations a set of learning outcomes is produced alongside the unit. As some learning outcomes are more important to employers than others, each unit is assigned a relative weighting. Successful demonstration of the learning outcomes allows the learner to show they have completed this section of the Diploma. This approach is summarised in figure 1.

■ Figure 1

ECTS approach

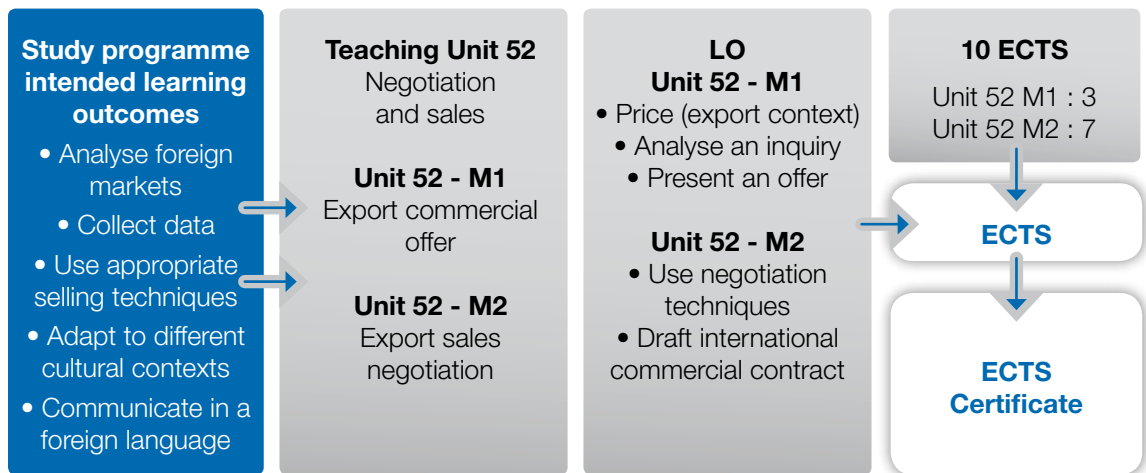
The focus is on the job profile



From the perspective of a higher education programme, the starting point for the qualification is a learner's programme of study. By using the same example of working in an import/export environment, figure 2 illustrates a different approach to units, learning outcomes and credit. The study programme is divided into teaching units which are assigned learning outcomes. Once the learning outcomes are assessed and demonstrated, the learner is assigned ECTS credit. The qualification is awarded once the learner has gathered the required number of ECTS points.

■ Figure 2

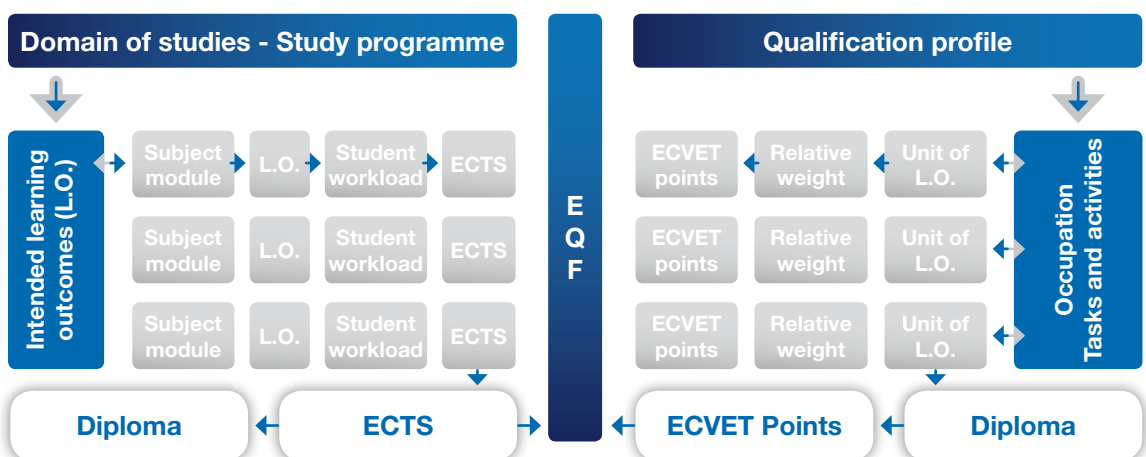
ECTS approach  
The focus is on the study programme



The BTS Diploma meets the needs of both the higher education sector and the labour market. The initiative started in 2011 and early findings from the evaluation show that the Diploma is appreciated by universities. The initiative is working and learners are transferring between the Diploma and the universities. The employment rate and wage levels are higher for graduates who have the Diploma compared to those who took the more traditional undergraduate route. Figure 3 summarises the two approaches.

■ Figure 3

ECTS and ECVET  
The commonalities and differences






## Case study 3 - the Dutch sales specialist qualification

Figure 4 illustrates this standard approach which can be adjusted to meet the needs of individual sectors (consumer electronics, supermarkets and fashion).

■ Figure 4

Sales specialist - Level 3

Unit				
<b>1</b>	Receiving and processing items for sale	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
+ sub unit	<i>assisting colleagues with customers and providing advice</i>			<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>2</b>	Selling, advising customers and providing a service	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
+ sub unit	<i>repairs and tailoring</i>			<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>3</b>	Cash register transactions, conclusion of sales	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>4</b>	Optimising sales and display	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>5</b>	<b>Repairs and installing consumer electronics</b>	<input type="checkbox"/>		

