

THE WIESBADEN CONFERENCE: *Quality in work based learning meeting demands of labour market and lifelong learning*

11-12 December 2008

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION¹

European policy context

In 2001, ministers in charge of education and training in EU countries agreed the objectives in relation to the enhancement of education and training, to be achieved by 2010. These objectives underpin European and national developments in education and training and contribute to fulfill the Lisbon goal of making Europe “*the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion*”².

In November 2002, the Lisbon strategy objectives were further developed. The European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training meeting in Copenhagen agreed “*to increase voluntary cooperation in vocational education and training, in order to promote mutual trust, transparency and recognition of competences and qualifications, and thereby establishing a basis for increasing mobility and facilitating access to lifelong learning*”³, to contribute to the success of the economic and social dimensions of the Lisbon Strategy.

Several initiatives have been developed to support member countries' efforts in the area of education and training. Among the most significant: the establishment of a network on quality assurance (QA) in Vocational Education and Training (VET), ENQA-VET, the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), the Common Quality Assurance Framework (CQAF), The European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) and the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF).

1. Toward a knowledge based European economy: the role of Work Based Learning

Within the Lisbon strategy and the Copenhagen declaration, VET is a key focus area as a result of its direct link to employment and social cohesion.

¹ This report presents the results of a **Conference**, which has been prepared by an independent expert. The report is based on a conference where policymakers and practitioners from a number of countries presented and exchanged ideas and experiences on an issue of shared policy interest. This report reflects the opinions of the participants and does not constitute an official European Commission or ENQA-VET position.

² Lisbon European Council:

http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/00100-r1.en0.htm

³ Council: Detailed work programme “Education and Training 2010”:

http://eurlex.europa.eu/pri/en/oj/dat/2002/c_142/c_14220020614en00010022.pdf

Within VET, Work Based Learning (WBL) is grounded in enterprises, i.e. WBL is the most directly connected to the labour market among the different education /training systems.

Therefore, WBL is particularly important and a major contributor to fulfilling the Lisbon strategy for general economic and social development in the European Union.

The ambitious target of all European countries to become a knowledge-based economy needs all forces to be concentrated towards education and training. European economies must invest in resources efficiently, hence quality assurance and quality management tools have to be applied. These tools also have to support the development of mutual trust so that mobility may develop within the European Member States. VET as a part of the whole range of education covers that section as it is strongly linked to the core of economy, in particular WBL.

1.1 Work Based Learning (WBL) in Europe: a broad overview

Definition: WBL refers to any formal VET learning that is based wholly or predominantly in a work setting. National plans and structures exist for WBL and are covered by law in all Member States. Apprenticeship training is in many Member States an integrated part of a "dual system", combining training at workplaces with education and training at VET-colleges. Short and long term labour market training is also a major part of the WBL activities in Europe.

Actors and their roles: Many actors are involved in the implementation, with different roles of the students, VET-providers and enterprises in Member States.

Enterprises and VET-providers are often linked by different types of partnerships and contracts and the social partners are often heavily involved in curricula development which together with the upgrading of the trainers and teachers is key aspects of the quality assurance of WBL.

Evaluation and Review process: A number of different mechanisms are in place in order to evaluate WBL, ranging from activities at provider level, in enterprises to system level. The quality assurance procedures are mainly a matter for the enterprises and the knowledge and insight in the procedures are in general very limited.

The use of quality **indicators** differs between the Member States, and is in general very limited.

The **feedback and procedures** for change are organized very differently in Member States as well as the participants in the feedback procedures differ between the Member States both in relation to involvement, responsibility and methods. In general are the feedback procedures relatively unclear and not well described. The roles of the key stakeholders differ between the Member States, but the cases show the importance of the social partners and especially the role of the enterprises.

The documentation of the **quality assurance procedures** for WBL in enterprises is in general very limited.

Motivate enterprises to participate actively in the many forms of WBL differs between the Member States. Financial support to the enterprises, taking responsibility for the next

generation of workers, access to new workers, close contacts to providers are among the most used motivational tools. Partnerships between enterprises and VET-providers is one commonly used way to make the links closer between these two worlds, that together are responsible for the whole education.

2. Fulfilling the Work Programme for 2008-2009: The Wiesbaden Conference

WBL is one of the key focus areas in the ENQA-VET work programme for 2008-2009.

The purpose of ENQA-VET is to create a structured and sustainable platform for Member States to exchange information and experience, debate, mutual learning and enable consensus building. The main activities of the network are thematic groups, peer learning activities, conferences and studies. These activities will contribute to the improvement of quality assurance in vocational education and training across Europe. Through implementation of the work programme ENQA-VET will:

- set out the expectations of European quality systems in VET
- add significant value to the development of quality assurance within VET across Europe through European cooperation.

The **Wiesbaden Conference** (11-12 December, 2008) was part of ENQA-VET work programme for 2008-2009. The subject of the Conference: "*Quality in WBL meeting the demands of labour market and lifelong learning*" addresses directly the core of the Lisbon strategy.

The key policy messages learnt in the Conference were:

- a) all Member States that have developed a dual-system understand the **importance of WBL in the efficiency of their economies**. However,
- b) due to the complexity of the different structures, **motivate Member States** to further improve this successful system is proven very difficult.
- c) "**Quality assurance**" is seen as key tool to improve WBL.
- d) **Exchange-platforms**, like the Wiesbaden Conference, are seen as an important for the process of improving WBL across Member States.

Some 140 experts gathered in Wiesbaden from across Europe, many from the host-country, Germany. Progress in the field of VET quality development in WBL was the underlying theme of their discussions. The participants noted the importance of VET systems and in particular quality assurance, quality development and quality management in the context of the Copenhagen Process 2002, the Education Council Conclusions 2004 and the Bordeaux Communiqué 2008. The development and dissemination of strategies, concepts and tools require research and networking and the Wiesbaden Conference proved to be a useful platform in enabling this process.

The huge variety of European educational systems in VET should be seen as an opportunity rather than as an obstacle. By exchanging experiences based on mutual trust and learning from each other the different systems can be further improved. Necessarily these systems will come closer to each other step by step and this will make the exchange of students at each level easier and easier.

The **aim of the conference** was to develop common criteria for presenting national quality assurance systems in the field of WBL (promoting mutual confidence) and to identify further opportunities for European cooperation (including the need for further research) while at the same time considering the diversity of the European vocational training systems.

The conference also considered how quality assurance in work-based learning could contribute to the implementation of the **European Quality Assurance Reference Framework** (EQARF).

Keeping this in mind, the Conference was organized around the presentation of German WBL system and four Workshops, which presented different national approaches and procedures.

2.1 Germany: an example of good practice

The topic of quality assurance and WBL contains two dimensions: a) quality assurance in practical training, including the aspect of cooperation between companies and part-time vocational schools as places of learning; and b) the contribution of WBL in assuring the quality of vocational training itself.

The *dual system* of work-based learning has a long tradition, from the Middle Ages to the present day. Dual training in Germany owes its dominant role to the many advantages it offers to all those concerned:

- by conducting their **own training measures**, companies can develop a framework for systematic and long-term personnel development;
- Staff who have been **trained** within a company are familiar **with the specific requirements of that company**, they have tailor made qualifications and experience shows they normally demonstrate loyalty to their company;
- Young people also profit from the dual training system. They are able to gain **recognised qualifications which are highly valued in industry** (vocational competence) and which provide potential for immediate employment. A large number of flexible further training occupations are based on the roughly 340 initial training occupations currently available under the dual system;
- **Skills and curricula which are regularly updated** to meet new requirements and new vocational standards are established in order to secure and enhance the employability of qualified employees;
- **All stakeholders in the field of training are involved in this process**, including both sides of industry. Work based training in companies and job related tuition at part-time vocational schools compliment each other. Local cooperation between both can provide a considerable contribution to improving the quality of vocational training;
- Other factors of **key importance for employability** include **teacher qualifications** and **assuring the quality** of practical company training. However, there are no national standards for company quality management outside the Vocational Training Act.
- The **validation of qualifications** which have been acquired informally and participation in continuing education also makes a direct contribution in enhancing employability and so assuring the quality of vocational training.

2.2 Added value result from the Conference Workshops

Four topics were discussed with a view to achieving common conclusions and policy recommendations as follows:

1. Work based learning and the development of competences.
2. Quality management of work based learning in companies, especially in small and medium sized enterprises.
3. Cooperation between schools, companies and other learning sites: assuring quality.
4. Validation of informal work based learning.

The key policy conclusions from the Workshops are:

- Factors contributing to the development and improvement of employability are not only the **adaptation of curricula** to qualification requirements of working life but also the drafting of work based and **practice oriented training units**.
- Cooperation with other players in education for example the Chambers of commerce, vocational schools and other small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) plays a particular role for quality assurance in SMEs. Qualification and continuing education of the training staff also plays a central role. **The education policy aim is to motivate more SMEs to provide training.**
- Cooperation between learning sites plays a central role in basic vocational training and in the development of competencies for apprentices' in their occupation. Cooperation between learning sites also provides all players in VET with a platform for cooperating in the apprentices' learning process at different levels. **Learning site cooperation is the task of in-company or intercompany trainers and vocational school teachers.**
- In order to make informally acquired skills visible and practical to the labour market, **valid measuring and evaluation of the learning outcome is necessary.** Outcome orientation is important in the discussions on the validation of informal learning.

2.3 Policy Recommendations

The following are recommendations as an outcome of the conference:

On the Conference

In relation to the Conference as an example of the Open Method of Coordination:

- Conferences are an important development and dissemination tool in providing a basis for ongoing work on WBL.
- The efficient dissemination of results, findings and recommendations to all stakeholders is very important. The **Quality Assurance National Reference Points (QANRPs)** can play a key role in the process of supporting quality assurance.

Key Messages for policy-makers at European, national and regional level

In relation to WBL and the development of competences the key findings are:

- There are clear similarities and differences in the European approaches, specifically the differences in the availability of **resources for further improvement**;
- In the field of quality management of WBL in companies especially in **small and medium sized enterprises** a paradigm shift from input towards outcomes based learning necessitates further **development of standards** to enhance transparency and visibility;

- In areas of cooperation between schools, companies and other learning sites the “win-win-win” situation of **quality assured cooperation needs to be promoted to all stakeholders**;

- In considering validation of informal work based learning it is very important to **highlight benefits as well as costs**;

- The importance of the VET sector can be seen in countries with a relatively low percentage of degree holders but with a high gross domestic product. Analysis indicates that such countries invest **significantly more than the norm within European countries, in their VET**.

