

ENQA-VET AND SKOLVERKET, SWEDEN

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STOCKHOLM, DECEMBER 3-4, 2009**

**QUALITY VET
A KEY TO SUCCESS**

CONFERENCE REPORT

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Conference entitled **QUALITY VET- A KEY TO SUCCESS** was held in Stockholm on December 3-4, 2009, jointly hosted by ENQA-VET and Skolverket: The National Agency for Education, Sweden¹ and an associated event of the Swedish European Presidency. 140 vocational education and training (VET) stakeholders from 28 European countries gathered with international guests to review the qualitative features of VET in Europe, consider the results of the ENQA-VET work programme of activities to support quality development and reflect on how best to respond to the challenges for the sector in the context of economic recession.

Representatives of the European Commission, Social Partners' Confederations and the Swedish Government presented their policy perspectives. Reflections on how to maintain the momentum of European-wide initiatives to improve quality assurance in education and training during the period of economic recession were contributed by representatives from: the European Network for Quality Assurance in VET (ENQA-VET) and the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). Case studies were presented that demonstrated innovative approaches to VET quality development 'in action'. World Skills' Champions, all in their early 20s and employed, contributed their insightful and frank opinions on quality VET to the debate and a panel of experts discussed the emerging key issues with the audience. In the lively exhibition space, delegates were given the opportunity to talk to specialists who had participated in the ENQA-VET work programmes and review their products. The conference report, written by Elizabeth Watters, aims to highlight the main issues that emerged at the conference and to give the reader a 'flavour' of the proceedings².

2. CONTEXT

The economic recession puts the quality of our VET systems and arrangements to the test. The same features and conditions that ensure the quality of VET in times of economic expansion apply in economic recession, albeit in a more rigorous way, when VET is additionally required to contribute to recession exit and regeneration strategies by renewing and adapting knowledge, skills and competences as well as swiftly responding to skills needs for emerging sectors. Amongst these conditions are: how employment relevance is reflected in VET policy, governance & organization, how VET and related occupations are esteemed and whether: collaboration between the 'world of school' and the 'world of work' is effective; quality developments focus on the relevance of VET for employability and VET is integrated in lifelong learning policies and processes³.

The Inuit language has at least ten words to define snow; conversely the EU has an agreed term, VET, to define the range of vocationally orientated education and training pathways and programmes within and across the Member States. VET in each Member State develops in accordance with social, economic and political realities. VET is based on complex foundations of traditions and arrangements; has diverse economic and social objectives; targets disparate groups of beneficiaries; is delivered in many contexts through different pathways and programmes by learning facilitators with varied expertise, acquired formally, non-formally and informally and can lead to wide-ranging levels and types of qualification. Thus, when we use the term 'VET' in the context of EU-level debate we must be vigilant of the breadth and depth of concepts it symbolizes.

Although the quality of VET is determined at national/regional levels, Member States have intensified their efforts to work collectively, in order to increase the transparency of their quality systems, exchange good examples of practice in the field and develop

¹ The Conference Moderator, Shawn Mendes, represented Skolverket

² For more detailed information, the reader is invited to view the website <http://www.enqavet.eu/> for the: conference presentations, background papers, publications and other related documentation.

³ Watters E, Making Initial VET More Attractive for Learners, ENQA-VET, 2009

common references for the mutual development of quality VET in the EU. The conference placed the spotlight on VET in Sweden and provided the opportunity to consider: the recent evolution of VET and its strengths and weaknesses; the challenges confronting VET, and new opportunities to grasp, as a consequence of the economic recession and the contribution of EU co-operation to quality improvement. The profile of VET in Sweden provided a 'looking glass' for delegates to reflect on the *status quo* of VET in their own countries. Whilst VET focuses primarily on the needs of domestic markets, this EU-level conference focussed on the aspects of VET that related more closely to the needs of the EU Single Market. One sub-text for the delegates' own reflection was whether some VET systems are more responsive to the needs of individuals and enterprises and ultimately economies, in these difficult times, than others and if so, why and how?

To set the scene for the debate, policy-makers reflected on the economic context, within which stakeholders needed to develop and improve the quality of VET. According to Amelie von Zweigbergk, State Secretary, Ministry of Education and Research, Sweden, the downturn in the Swedish economy is the worst seen since the 1930s; at close to the EU 27 average of a fall of 4.9%⁴, "*We have never before seen such a drop in gross domestic product (GDP)*". Hermann Nehls, ETUC and the Confederation of German Trade Unions, drew the attention of the participants to the impact of the recession on employment. EUROSTAT estimates that 22.510 million people in the EU are unemployed (October 2009); the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate in Sweden stands at 8.8%⁵, with the EU27 rate at 9.3%, reflecting a range from 3.7% in the Netherlands to 20.9% in Latvia.⁶ Speakers warned that these numbers were likely to multiply due to the delay between the onset of recession and its impact on employment, together with the bolster-effect of public policy measures such as short-time work. A key issue is the sharp rise in youth unemployment, at a current rate of 20.7% (EU27) with the highest rate recorded in Spain at 42.9% and the lowest rate of 7.2% in The Netherlands. Amelie von Zweigbergk highlighted the paradox of current shortages of skilled workers and Hermann Nehls considered the impact on employment of massive re-structuring by enterprises, as well as other issues threatening economic stability including: changes in demographics, rapidly changing global markets and the increasing mobility of jobs and workers.

Despite showing similar trends, the statistics clearly denote significant differences between the performance of economies in different countries and their employment maintenance capacities, indicating the diversity of EU labour markets in terms of, *inter alia*: type, size, organization, dominant sectors, and domestic versus foreign trade balance. Additionally, social and employment policies are reflected in the shaping of domestic markets, thereby contributing to their uniqueness. In common with some other Member States, the population in Sweden has been rising steadily since 2000, reminding the audience that demographics are changing in different ways in the EU with different implications for domestic markets. Differences in EU economies raise important issues for EU-level strategies aimed at economic recovery, including increasing the responsiveness of VET to short and longer-term labour market needs.

*'Europe needs a strengthened and competitive industrial base, a modern service sector and a thriving agricultural, rural economy and maritime sector'*⁷

Sophie Weisswange, Policy Officer, European Commission, DG Education and Culture considered the topic from the Single Market perspective and EU-wide commitments to developing and implementing joint policies and strategies. She updated the audience on the key features of the EU 2020 Lisbon Strategy, a new common vision and direction

⁴ Eurofound European Restructuring Monitor (ERM) Quarterly, Issue 3, Autumn 2009. GDP output growth fell by 4.9% (EU27) in the 12-month period (2nd quarter 2008-2009).

⁵ Amelie von Zweigbergk drew attention to the constant ebb and flow in statistics, for example the unemployment rate in Sweden ranged from 7.3% to 9.8% falling back to 7.9% and rising to the current 8.8% in 2009.

⁶ Eurostat newsrelease, euroindicators 170/2009, December 1st 2009 (source for all the statistics in this paragraph)

http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_PUBLIC/3-01122009-AP/EN/3-01122009-AP-EN.PDF

⁷ Consultation: future "EU 2020" Strategy [COM(2009) 647/3] <http://ec.europa.eu/eu2020/>

driven by the need to: empower and include people; base growth on knowledge and innovation and create a more inter-connected, greener and competitive economy with an emphasis on the need for labour market balance. She drew attention to the achievements and disappointments of the 'Education and Training 2010' Strategy⁸, focussing particularly on the: rising rates of low achievement in literacy, persistently high rates of early school leaving and insufficient increases in adult participation rates in lifelong learning⁹, with close to 30% of Europeans educated, at most, to lower second-level. Achieving better results in these goals as well as raising tertiary level attainment and increasing participation in early childhood education, underpin the 'Education and Training 2020' Strategy, with possible additional benchmarks for employability, mobility and language learning. Education and research, innovation and creativity continue to be key components of the Lisbon Strategy.

*'Investment in education and training is crucial as a way out of the economic crisis, both as part of long-term structural reforms and to lessen its immediate social impact. More than ever, Europe's success in global competition is dependent on its skills and innovation capacities.'*¹⁰

3. QUALITY VET-THE CHALLENGES

*"The winds and waves are always on the side of the ablest navigators."*¹¹ Gibbon
The quality, relevance and attractiveness of VET must be continuously improved in order to: develop, renew and update competence, draw out talent and creativity and maintain equitable, inclusive and cohesive societies that can manage innovation and change. Maintaining the quality of VET through continuous improvement is an imperative, regardless of the economic situation. Even though VET is inextricably linked to the labour market, it also serves other socio-economic purposes and goals.

In order to be responsive to rapid economic change VET needs to be rooted in robust legislation that underpins strong public and private partnership. Social partners and public authorities need to co-operate openly, efficiently and effectively at every level, with the necessary degree of trust to facilitate pragmatic decision-making. VET must cater for both the professional and social development of individuals; this requires that stakeholders contribute varied and complementary competences and services: employers and their representative bodies shape VET for immediate and short-term labour market needs and public authorities and employee representative bodies complement the shaping of VET for the medium to long-term. The functions and goals of different VET pathways and programmes in relation to employment must be explicit and related qualifications must verify the kind, breadth and depth of knowledge, skills and competences held. VET should be distinguished from traditional higher education but individuals with VET qualifications must have access to education and training offers that can both update, renew and advance their existing qualifications and facilitate the acquisition of other qualifications, which also take account of existing competences, as relevant; this is dependent on dialogue and trust-building between education sectors.

*"Perhaps we cannot raise the winds. But each of us can put up the sail, so that when the wind comes we can catch it."*¹² Schumacher

3.1. Improving employment relevance

In Sweden not only must VET replenish the skilled workforce, *"500.000 people will retire in Sweden by the end of 2012"*, but it now must absorb up to three times more people, due to the recession. Amelie von Zweigbergk referred to the *"historical mistreatment"* of VET, with the spotlight of recent decades on higher education, leading to the classification of VET as a second-rate alternative, an opinion which seemed to resonate in

⁸Progress towards the Lisbon objectives in education and training [SEC(2009)1616 final]

⁹ The attainment of EU benchmarks varies enormously from country to country, for example 34% engage in lifelong learning in Sweden whilst the EU average is 9% with a target of 12%.

¹⁰ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2009:119:0002:0010:EN:PDF>

¹¹ Gibbon E, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776)

¹² Schumacher, *Small is beautiful: A study of economics as if people mattered*, (1973)

the audience. She cited anomalies such as: despite lay-offs there are skills shortages; the skills of immigrants are needed but not enough emphasis is placed on how to recognise their qualifications and integrate them in VET and more flexible workers are needed but people haven't been prepared to be adaptable. These weaknesses are being urgently addressed with reforms, designed to increase the quality and relevance of VET, underway at upper-second and post-second level. The features of reform include; increased engagement with social partners, reversing recent policies and shifting the emphasis back to vocational skills development rather than generic skills and providing more exposure to the world of work, improved teacher competence, a clear system for validation, better guidance provision, more systematic quality assurance, including a new school inspectorate and more national testing and assessment to benchmark and identify trends. According to Björn Schéele, Director of the Policy Analysis and Labour Market Intelligence Unit, Swedish Agency for Higher Vocational Education, *"The future is in the hands of qualified workers"* He shared information on the Agency's approaches to analyse labour market needs and accredit, assess and audit providers and programmes. The Agency is the national co-ordinator for the EQF, which is considered an important tool to support geographical mobility, and has been given the responsibility to co-ordinate and support a national structure for the validation of prior learning. Reiterating the shift in priorities, evident in the recent reform, he cautioned that VET is primarily concerned with professions and trades, skills and qualifications, not only competences' development.

3.2. Sustaining economic and social goals

The German VET system was considered at different times during the conference. In his presentation Hermann Nehls stated that in Germany robust legislation and social partner engagement in VET safeguarded the quality of VET and provided the conditions for rapid responses to the challenges of recession. Recent legislation to enhance quality assurance is considered successful and supportive of lifelong learning. He also stressed the need for pragmatism and flexibility and gave the example of the negotiated modification of the quality assurance legislation in the context of the recession, which has been waived temporarily for in-company VET as it was considered cumbersome and a barrier to 'just-in-time' training by companies. In Germany short-time work has helped to prevent a sharp rise in unemployment and major attempts are being made to use the resulting free time for VET, which is financed by employer/employee contributions. Referring to the current trend to focus on learning outcomes Hermann Nehls alerted to the danger of competence being too narrowly defined as simply outcomes that are detached and disassociated from input and method and personal and social development. VET reform should focus equally on the choice, determination and design of course content and methodology and an orientation towards learning results. Assessment of learning results alone does not provide information on the quality of the learning process. We need to know what learners are learning (contents) and how (teaching methods). VET cannot be exclusively orientated towards the needs of the economy and the benefits of companies; European culture values all learning and VET must not be reduced to utilitarian aspects, the social dimension must not be allowed to fade. VET needs to develop the capacity for *"reflective activity competence"* to link professional development with personal and social values. According to Hermann Nehls, *"Learning without socio-political and emancipatory goals and without social planning and responsibility will lead us astray!"*

4. THE EU VET DISCOURSE

'The point is not to be better than others but to be better than you were yesterday'. (Chinese proverb)

Jürgen Horschinegg, Chairperson of ENQA-VET, referred to the intensified level of co-operation for the continuous improvement of VET as Member States aim to achieve the goal of making VET in the EU a world quality reference¹³. The main forum for EU collaboration in VET, the 'Copenhagen Process'¹⁴ has been extremely productive; the

¹³ http://www.consiliium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/71025.pdf

¹⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/education/vocational-education/doc1143_en.htm

ingredients for success can be summarised as follows: joint ownership of the Process by governments and the social partners; jointly agreed priority goals and achievable targets; expert multi-national, multi-actor networks charged with developing relevant and reliable processes and products to support the attainment of mutual policy goals and EU-wide commitment to make use of common references and instruments to raise all VET provision to the highest possible standard and to increase its transparency and visibility. Quoting Simon Fields, OECD, he stated that quality VET can be summed up in a simple phrase loaded with meaning: *“The right skills, well taught in the right place”*.

The key to quality VET is quality management that provides a forum for involving stakeholders and increases transparency, creates knowledge and evidence and links quality development and quality assurance. From the outset of the ‘Copenhagen Process’ in 2002, the Member States have played the lead role in relation to setting and attaining mutual objectives for improving VET quality, with the support of the European Commission and its agencies for VET: Cedefop and ETF. In 2005, the Member States established the European Network for Quality Assurance in VET (ENQA-VET), which now comprises representatives from twenty three countries from: government ministries, state or semi-state organizations operating at the interface between VET policy-making and provision and employers’ and employees’ unions. To date, nineteen countries have set up Quality Assurance National Reference Points (QANRPS) a linked service network that disseminates information on, and encourages the use of, the ENQA-VET outputs at national level. These results were influential in the design of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET (EQARF)¹⁵, which all countries are encouraged to use and develop, with continued support from the European Commission.

With the adoption of the EQARF, EU co-operation enters a new phase and Jürgen Horschinegg presented the ENQA-VET members’ views, regarding priority setting:

- support the network of Member States to implement the EQARF, with special reference to strategy planning for the network of QANRPs;
- improve processes for involving stakeholders in cultures of quality improvement, to enhance transparency and trust, with emphasis on self-evaluation and peer review;
- implement the guidelines for supporting quality assurance in VET systems;
- improve and test indicators;
- forge linkages with EQF¹⁶/ECVET¹⁷ developments;
- maintain an effective dissemination and communication strategy.

The underpinning principles include: relevant stakeholder involvement and ownership, a holistic and incremental approach and a focus on implementing and building on existing achievements. There is a need to use expert interlocutors, who understand both the world of work and the world of education and training, to convey the messages in understandable language, in the right forums and facilitate collaboration processes.

4.1. ENQA-VET-Capturing and sharing innovation

ENQA-VET works as a collective to build a shared understanding of VET quality development and assurance in Europe. The ENQA-VET 2008-2009 work programme coincided with the final negotiations and adoption of EQARF and thus focused on activities to support its introduction and implementation as well as continuing to contribute to policy development in the field. A good deal of collaborative work was undertaken, evidenced by a wide-range of publications. Over a twelve-month period four thematic groups worked respectively on: *EQARF indicators, reviewing and agreeing definitions*¹⁸; *Guidelines to support quality assurance in VET systems*¹⁹; *European Peer*

¹⁵ Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council (18.06.2009) on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET (EQARF) <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2009:155:0001:0010:EN:PDF>

¹⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc44_en.htm,

¹⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc50_en.htm

¹⁸ Galvão, M. E. EQARF indicators, reviewing and agreeing definitions, ENQA-VET 2009

¹⁹ Brumfitt, K. Developing guidelines for supporting quality assurance in VET systems, ENQA-VET 2009

*Review-structure and process*²⁰ and developing cultures of continuous improvement to *Make Initial VET more attractive for learners*²¹. ENQA-VET also commissioned studies on: *Quality assurance systems in work-based learning and assessment in European VET; The set of indicators in the EQARF for VET; Evaluation of the impact of peer learning activities*. The latter is based on the learning and results of ten peer learning activities that were organised during the 2008-2009 work programme on themes such as; quality assurance procedures for: work-based learning, evaluation, student assessment, recognition of prior learning, accreditation, training VET trainers as well as the role of the social partners in quality VET and quality assurance labels for VET²².

4.2. EU 'Laboratory for innovation'

The EU programme 'Leonardo da Vinci'²³ (LDV) serves as 'a laboratory for innovation in VET' and Siegfried Willems, from the National Agency (NA) for the EU Lifelong Learning Programme²⁴ in The Netherlands, informed the delegates that improving the quality of VET through trans-national co-operation had been a key theme for the Leonardo da Vinci Programme and its predecessors for two decades. Quality VET is also one of a small number of themes selected for multi-agency thematic monitoring, the aim of which is to network projects in the same field and raise the visibility of their results. QALL: Quality Assurance in VET and Adult Education is a new, 36-month (2010-2013), thematic monitoring project comprising 15 partner countries, led by the Austria NA. It is expected that the project will contribute to quality assurance matters related to the implementation of the EQF and ECVET in keeping with the EQARF. Additionally, Siegfried Willems drew attention to the important function of LDV NAs to operate at the interface between policy and practice, interlinking policy development with innovative action and acting as a conduit for the dissemination of good examples of initiatives that work well. NAs play an important role in the internationalisation of VET nationally and ensuring that national priorities for the development of VET are reflected in EU-level policy debate.

4.3. Facilitating mobility

Facilitating pathways between VET and tertiary-level education is a common European goal. Richard Lewis, immediate past President of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) began his presentation with the quotation: *"Vocational training is the higher education of the working class and higher education is the vocational training of the middle class"*²⁵. He pointed out that much of higher education is vocationally orientated but for professions that are held in higher social esteem than VET occupations, as are the locations of learning and the teacher-researchers. However, the 'massification' of higher education is increasingly blurring the distinction between the two sectors, together with ever-increasing government interest in higher education, manifested in, for example: matters related to funding, in external qualifications' and quality assurance frameworks and through compliance with international agreements such as the 'Bologna Process'. In this context he made reference to the changing profiles of providers and programmes at tertiary level. Richard Lewis described the common features of quality assurance in higher education and the impact of the 'Bologna Process' on the sector. Despite commonalities with the 'Copenhagen Process' common quality assurance goals for VET, he expressed doubt as to whether shared approaches and procedures had greatly increased mutual trust or permeability between VET and traditional higher education.

5. WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE THINK?

²⁰ Gutknecht-Gmeiner, M. Proposal for a structure and process for trans-national European Peer Reviews, ENQA-VET 2009

²¹ Watters E, Making Initial VET More Attractive for Learners, ENQA-VET, 2009

²² Publications are available at <http://www.engavet.eu/>

²³ http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-programme/doc82_en.htm

²⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/education/leonardo-da-vinci/doc1253_en.htm

²⁵ Tyrell Burgess (commenting on the English system), quoted by R Cuthbert in "Quality and Access in Higher Education: Comparing Britain and the United States, (p 124), SRHE 1991

Young people wishing to enter the labour market are hit hardest by the economic recession. The EU27 unemployment rate for the under 25s is 20% with sixteen Member States ranging from this rate and the highest percentage of 41% in Spain²⁶. Young people, who have recently qualified for occupations that have been seriously affected by the recession, are particularly at risk of being long-term unemployed. Hermann Nehls predicted that the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) will continue to rise and urged action to re-dress this. In Europe, approximately half of the cohorts of young people opt for upper-second level vocational education²⁷. Male enrolments in almost all countries are higher, with a difference of at least 10%. Whilst these young people are still in the VET system it is critical to analyse the currency of their aimed for qualifications in today's labour markets and the possibilities for these young people to progress to programmes for further vocational education or tertiary-level education and training, if they so wish.

Four young workers came to the conference to tell delegates about their experiences of VET and why its quality and relevance for employment was so important. Not only are all four fully qualified, employed in their desired job and continuing their learning but they are also World Skills Champions! Helle Barnholt (20) from Denmark is working in a Michelin three-star rated restaurant in Copenhagen and has started sommelier training to add to her qualifications, Sofie Danielsson (22) from Sweden is working full-time as a florist, Joakim Karlsson (22), also from Sweden, is a sheet metal worker who worked in a company for 3 years and has recently set up his own business and Jan Nevels (22) from The Netherlands is working full-time as a machine builder and studying for a qualification in machine engineering at night school. The key messages for VET decision-makers from these talented people were to: integrate meaningful 'on-the-job' experience in VET programmes, maintain the highest occupational standards, recruit the best teachers, pay attention to demand-supply forecasts, offer opportunities for learners to demonstrate their skills and take account of learners' views in the evaluation of VET.

5.1. VET-labour market relevance

The four young people were attracted to VET because each wanted, in Jan Nevels' words, *"to work with my hands"* and to *"learn by doing"*. Their work-based learning enabled them to evaluate the quality and relevance of their training. Jan's advice was to *"improve school-company collaboration in order to ensure that technology and teaching in schools are up-to-date"*. Helle Barnholt added *"when people have high expectations of me I work harder to meet those expectations. When you are learning in a real work context, you have to perform to the best of your ability for your own satisfaction and for the sake of your colleagues"*.

5.2. Teacher/Trainer excellence

Joakim Karlsson asked us to *"make sure that VET has the best teachers. Some of my teachers were very good but others were not"*. For him a good teacher was a 'master' in the trade and a motivator. According to Helle Barnholt *"teachers must know the business and the market inside-out, they must know exactly what goes on within the walls of enterprises and have up-to-date experience of working, not just teaching"*. Sofie Danielsson agreed but insisted that teaching must be of excellence and Jan Nevels added that *"a good teacher is a teacher who can motivate because s/he is motivated and enthusiastic. A good teacher never just does the bare minimum"*.

5.3. High and transparent standards

Sofie Danielsson considered that too many florists were being trained and some were leaving schools without the right set of skills and experience. She added that *"it may be attractive to qualify as a florist but it's not attractive to find yourself unemployed because the standards of your course and qualifications are not high enough for employers"*. In

²⁶ Source: Eurostat, Labour force Survey, Seasonally adjusted for the 2009 third quarter

²⁷ EURYDICE Key Data on education in Europe: With more than 70% in Austria, Czech Republic and Slovakia. In those countries as well as Italy, Romania and Slovenia the difference of male participation is remarkably high at more than 70%

Helle Barnholt's experience, *"standards and qualifications drop in value if trainees cannot gain experience on the job"*. Skills demonstration competitions make the quality of VET visible and motivate learners. As stated by Joakim Karlsson *"I pushed myself to do better and better, I also learned more about other countries, met different people and learned a lot about myself"*.

5.4. Breaking learning boundaries

The young people were all eager to continue learning. Helle, Sofie and Jan would welcome the opportunity to gain further experience abroad to enhance their professional skills and Joakim thought he might consider this in the future. Jan Nevels asked us to impress on employers the importance for workers to be given opportunities to continue learning *"so that we can be of increasing value to the company and contribute to developments in work"*. For the last words, Joakim Karlsson, Silver Medallist in Canada 2009, stated that quality VET is vital *"To enable more people like me to be amongst the best in our trade in the world and to break personal and professional boundaries."* *"Live your dreams"*, sang Samson for President, a young and gifted singer and song-writer, reminding delegates to consider the importance of all kinds of talent, creativity and entrepreneurial capacities and to value the innovative ways young people find to make best use of their talents and skills and their powerful roles as peer models and mentors.

6. WHAT WORKS WELL?

Throughout Europe VET stakeholders are introducing pioneering policies and practices to improve the quality of VET and make it more attractive²⁸. The conference offered delegates varied opportunities to take stock of a small sample of these initiatives.

"Let's go find some inspiration, be the masters of our own creation"

Samson for President

6.1. Applying the EQARF in an EU sector

Mario Spatafora, President of the European banking and financial services training association (ETBN), presented the EU funded 'EURO-BANQUA' (European Banking Network for Quality Assurance) project. <http://www.ebta.eu>. The aim of the project was to improve the quality of training in the sector by involving key actors in a culture of continuous development and enhancement. The project fine-tuned the 4 cycle EQARF model to suit the conditions of the Banking and Financial Services Sector (BFSS) in Europe, implemented and reviewed the model and developed 10 guidelines. The co-operation process has increased the visibility of existing approaches for quality assurance in the BFSS and strengthened sustainable sector-wide trans-national cooperation on quality issues. The guidelines are considered to have inter-sector transfer potential.

6.2. Quality trans-national VET mobility

The strength of social partner involvement in VET in Germany and the focus on work-based VET was reinforced in the contribution from the German Confederation of Skilled Crafts (ZDH), the umbrella organization for fifty three Chambers and thirty eight National Confederations of skilled crafts, thereby representing 27% of all businesses (962.000 with 4.84 million employees) and 30% of apprentices (483.000)²⁹ in Germany. Christian Sperle, Department of VET (ZDH), picked up the issues of: skills shortages, systemic flexibility and the need to internationalise VET, in his presentation on the initiative to implement structures for high quality work-based VET mobility: 'Training without Borders', a joint initiative of the ZDH, the Association of Chambers of Industry and Commerce and the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. He made reference to a 2008 survey which determined that whilst 50,000 small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Germany work in international contexts, 70,000 more have the potential but not the competences. He believed that quality trans-national training placements for apprentices could help to foster these competences, including entrepreneurship, but there was a lack

²⁸ Consult: Watters E, Making IVET More Attractive for Learners, ENQA-VET, 2009, for snapshots of information on policy initiatives

²⁹ In Germany the intake of apprentices is approximately 500,000 per year with 1.5 million apprentices at any one time

of employer confidence in the potential added value and a lack of information, guidance and support. The aim of 'Training without Borders' is to address this impasse. Integral to the initiative is the network of 37 mobility coaches with mandates to develop a corporate culture of quality mobility in VET, and provide guidance, expertise, resources and technical assistance. Strategies to internationalise work-based VET in order to enhance and broaden competences that are responsive to skills shortages, can also serve to attain other objectives, including system transparency and flexibility by: increasing the outcome orientation of training regulations and curricula; providing different forms of assessment for learning and making use of credits for the portability of achievement, which can increase VET/higher education permeability.

The trans-national project 'Internship to Industry' (i2i), which was presented as a case study at the conference had similar objectives to 'Training without Borders'. The project coordinator, Gisela Bohlin, Gothenburg Technical College Sweden, considered that the quality of workplace training periods for school-based VET learners, whether at home or abroad, needed to be improved, in order to prepare them better for work in the future. Involving schools, companies, educational boards, regional governments as well as exchange organizations from four countries (AT, BE, ES, SE), the partnership produced useful tools³⁰ to improve the quality of trans-national work-based learning. Quality criteria include: extensive and intensive preparation of trainees, careful matching of the right trainee with the right company; expertly trained tutors competent to work with people with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds; supportive mentoring and monitoring processes and procedures, appropriate assessment methods and techniques. She made reference to the EU frameworks and tools that support quality VET mobility, including: Europass and the European Quality Charter for Mobility³¹.

6.3. VET tailor-made and just-in-time

Enhancing the knowledge, skills and competences of workers, to improve the competitiveness and productivity of enterprises, was the focus of two initiatives from Ireland and Germany: Skillnets and 'Keep Competence'. Carl Blake, Senior Programme Manager, Skillnets, explained that Skillnets is a ten-year old employer-led company, 100% funded by the Irish government, to promote and facilitate workplace learning as part of the national skills strategy, which aims, *inter alia*, to raise the populations' qualifications by one level³². *"Skillnets Training Networks are the coming together of enterprises of whatever size, to use their combined talents and resources to achieve results that would not be possible if the enterprises operated individually."* Skillnets acts as an intermediary between government policy-makers, both sides of industry and VET providers. It supports networks of companies to self-help by: funding initiatives, transmitting policies, strategies and concepts and facilitating and promoting the cross-fertilisation of innovation in work-based VET. Skillnets operates a VET demand-supply policy that surmounts barriers to training provision experienced by enterprises, particularly mini and micro sized, and offers solutions, *"tailored affordable training, delivered in the right place at the right time by the right trainers"*. Carl Blake recounted many success stories, *"I've progressed from having a job in a shop to a career in retail"*, said one employee. He demonstrated a nation-wide improvement in enterprise training with increasing levels of employer commitment, and employee motivation to learn. Between 2008 and 2009 Skillnets supported training initiatives managed by 123 training networks, for 80,000 employees in 27,000 companies. Despite these positive outcomes, government funding was severely cut back in 2009. However, Carl Blake felt confident that employers would meet the funding shortfall, at least in the immediate future.

Marion Engelhardt, Human Resources Expert, presented the 'Keep Competence' initiative, taken by the Alstom Transport Company in Germany, to offer training opportunities for

³⁰ I2i 'how to do it well' manuals for coordinators, supervisors and trainees, with useful instruments, are available at <http://www.internship2industry.eu/>

³¹ http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/education_training_youth/lifelong_learning/c11085_en.htm

³² In accordance with the Irish Framework for Qualifications, which is fully referenced to the EQF <http://www.nqai.ie/>

employees, at a time of over-capacity. The heavy-industry company employs 2,300 workers, mostly male, the majority of whom had attained qualifications in the VET 'Duale System'. Changes in Alstom Transport's business orientation required new and enhanced skills and the company saw the advantages of facilitating their staff to fill skills' gaps. Seventy employees responded to an open offer to leave the company temporarily, with a monthly training allowance to gain advanced qualifications. The advantages of the project include: improved relations and co-operation between employer, employees and their union representatives; better use of funds, investing in staff rather than dismissing them with severance pay; increased employee satisfaction, motivation and loyalty; a gain in qualified engineers with the practical experience of technicians who can re-insert into the company smoothly and quicker and more relevant responses from local education and training providers to meet enterprise needs.

7. WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

"We cannot solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them". Einstein

7.1. Act on reality not rhetoric

According to Christian Lettmayr, Deputy Director, CEDEFOP, the economic crisis had precipitated the moment of truth and that efforts to improve the quality of VET and its responsiveness to labour market needs would now be evident and could no longer be disguised in rhetoric. The capacity of the Single Market to exit successfully from the crisis is dependent on the combined strengths of all EU labour markets. There is a need to frankly compare what has been done and still has to be done to improve VET and for this common references are needed that are comprehensible for the different stakeholders involved. Karin Kuessner, German Federal Ministry for Education and Research, contributed that common comprehensible language could only be developed in the context of common processes. In this regard, the worlds of work and school need to find a common language and suitable methods to work together effectively and efficiently. There is a need to target messages for the business communities to help them to address urgent needs through quality VET.

7.2. Address weaknesses

The recession is serving the purposes of forcing changes and making improvements; in difficult times weaknesses cannot be ignored as they might be in prosperous times. Improving the relevance of VET is a key quality criterion and in that regard Arnaldo Abruzzini, Secretary General, Eurochambres, considered it vital to invest in training teachers, particularly in relation to improving their occupational competences, which he felt could be enhanced best through work placements in enterprises. Karin Kuessner cautioned that when improving the employability relevance of VET there needed to be a balance between the short-term vision of industry and the lifelong learning needs of learners. Pauline van den Bosch, Senior Advisor, European Vocational Training Association, considered it crucial to improve the transparency and reliability of qualifications, particularly important in the recession as enterprises could not afford to be misguided in recruitment. She also advised that increased efforts needed to be made to recognise all learning as people know and can do a lot more than their qualifications testify. Arnaldo Abruzzini reiterated that what the learners know and can do is the central concern, no matter what their certificates state, and improving the quality of the learning experience itself was at the heart of the matter. He stressed the need to convey to employers the importance of improving VET quality assurance, which may not appear to be the priority it is, but engaging them would require the reduction of cumbersome bureaucracy. Christopher Lambert, Vice Principal College Improvement, City College Norwich stressed the point that quality assurance, which centres on measurement, does not necessarily lead to quality development and that the quality of the learning experience is based on the quality of the service. Christian Lettmayr warned that change to bring about VET quality improvement would impact strongest on VET providers and *"formidable decisions will need to be made to achieve the qualitative and responsive VET*

systems required for today and the future". Christopher Lambert urged collective action to improve the image and status of VET otherwise it would not attract learners.

7.3. Work collaboratively

Effective co-operation between the worlds of work and school are of paramount importance in the quality debate and co-operation depends on creating a culture of mutual understanding and commitment to accommodate the functions, goals, roles and responsibilities of all partners. Pauline van den Bosch stressed the need to create and reinforce networks to do together what cannot be done alone. Panellists considered aspects of VET that are difficult to tackle unilaterally, including: forecasting and addressing future skills needs; aligning work-based learning with theoretical study, maintaining teachers' competences and linking education and training sectors. Regarding skills forecasting Arnaldo Abruzzini drew attention to the need to stretch the vision of enterprises to forecast, at least, their medium-term needs, which would require collective action involving public authorities, social partners, VET providers and the business community. Given the 5-year latency between identifying new skills needs and the first graduates, Christian Lettmayr considered it important to respond incrementally to change by merging learning and working; to work when learning and learn at work.

7.4. Build on success

Much of VET in the EU is of high quality but often the spotlight is on VET weaknesses rather than strengths. The features of and conditions for quality VET need to be highlighted and success factors shared. What we value and what has served and continues to serve us well we must preserve. According to Arnaldo Abruzzini, the 'Duale System', and similar forms of VET governance and organization were highly esteemed by Eurochambres members". Karin Kuessner agreed that the 'Duale System' in Germany was highly prized nationally and more and more sought after as a model internationally. She suggested that Germany may not have been pro-active enough in EU initiatives to ensure that the successes of the approach were adequately reflected in EU developments". She added that the 'Duale System' was under constant review and development. *"Complacency must be avoided at all costs and even successful systems are only successful because of an acceptance of the need for continuous improvement"*.

8. CONCLUSION

"Together we have deepened our competences and strengthened fruitful cooperation processes. We see a European VET 'renaissance' and we must continue to be a part of it; the 'spirit' of ENQA-VET must live on."

Thus, Jürgen Horschinegg concluded the conference, which marked the end of the current ENQA-VET programme of work and set the scene for the new era of European-level action for the continuous development of quality VET. He stated that the intensity of EU co-operation reflected the need for mutual support particularly in the face of rapid change. EU-level initiatives, processes and instruments have a strong influence on national debates and can drive change by forcing long-needed change. He added that the ENQA-VET concept represented the Member States best thinking on how to tackle common VET quality development issues and to build confidence in each others' quality management and assurance systems and that ENQA-VET was a 'mission', not an initiative.

"I find that the great thing in this world is not so much where we stand as in what direction we are moving: To reach the port of heaven, we must sail sometimes with the wind and sometimes against it— but we must sail, and not drift, nor lie at anchor."

Oliver Wendell Holmes