



Latvian Presidency  
of the Council of the  
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Ministry of  
Education and Science  
Republic of Latvia



## Meeting of Directors General for Vocational Education and Training Riga, 20-21 April, 2015

### SUMMARY REPORT

The Meeting of Directors General for Vocational Education and Training, organised by the Latvian Presidency, brought together Directors General for Vocational Education and Training (DGVT) and other senior officials from EU member states, candidate countries, EEA zone countries in order to discuss strategic issues in VET, including the ET 2020 mid-term stocktaking. Representatives of the European Commission's DG Education and Culture (DG EAC) and DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL), the European Commission Agencies (CEDEFOP and ETF), as well as the European social partners were also present at the meeting.

Following the welcome by the Latvian Presidency and the European Commission, the key note speech focused on the impact ICT has had on VET and the society, creating a new, more exploratory and interactive learning environment which must be taken into account.

Plenary sessions with information points and discussions and parallel working sessions were held, promoting in-depth deliberation on strategic issues within the ET 2020 mid-term stocktaking (the Riga Conclusions), as well as in relation to the LV Presidency priorities and the 2014 Country Specific Recommendations.

#### **1. The 2015 VET Review**

The European Commission informed about the changes in the foreseen schedule to adopt the Joint Report: it has been decided, regardless the delay in the mid-term review of the Europe 2020 process, to go ahead with the adoption of the Education and Training 2020 (ET2020) Joint Report under the Luxembourg presidency in 2015, preceded by a policy debate in the Council in May under the Latvian presidency and the Commission proposal scheduled for July. It was stressed that through consultations the ET 2020 stakeholders have shown their support to maintaining a coherent framework covering all education levels, with the Copenhagen process fully integrated in the ET2020 framework, and the new VET-related priorities being part of the ET2020 Joint Report.

The European Commission also explained the impact of the delays of ET 2020 and Europe 2020 on the review of the Copenhagen process and the planned adoption of the new short-term deliverables, which will take place in Riga in June. Information was provided on the decision to change the new policy cycle to 2015-2020 in order to be coherent with the other processes, and to facilitate reporting and monitoring. The new deliverables have consequently been renamed as the 'medium-term deliverables', and the recent consultation of DGVT and ACVT confirmed these changes.

The Latvian Presidency clarified the process leading to the Riga Conclusions, and presented the proposed 5 medium-term deliverables (priority areas) to be adopted. The European Commission explained how the process had been taken forward since the last DGVT meeting in Rome. The participants were informed that the monitoring of the countries will be mainly carried out by Cedefop and ETF. The discussion that followed showed that several Member States and social partners (UEAPME, IT, BE, DE, DK) supported the draft text of the Riga Conclusions, and proposed only minor changes to the text. An updated draft will be presented for the discussions in the enlarged ACVT bureau on 6 May.

Some participants had a proposal to engage ministers in policy debate which would require an introductory note (preamble) on selected policy issues linked to future challenges and further development of the Copenhagen process. It was agreed that the Latvian Presidency jointly with the Commission will work on such a document and propose it for discussion at the next ACVT meeting 20-21 May, 2015.

The Commission informed about its plans to propose the new CSRs in May 1, after which they should be adopted by the Council. Their number are likely to be reduced, in order for Member States to be more focussed, and to take ownership of the recommendations. The discussion raised the issue of the involvement of social partners in the process, which both the Commission and the participants considered important. ETF reminded that Candidate Countries were being subject to a 'light' European Semester, and ETF will have a role in following their policy developments. DK raised some concerns about the quality of the country reports. The European Commission encouraged the Member States to signal as early as possible all factual errors in the country reports, in order for them to be corrected before issuing the CSRs. The European Commission informed about its intention to establish a clear thematic roadmap for the coming years which would cover the medium-term deliverables (2015-2020). This roadmap should allow discussing thoroughly all the central themes under the Copenhagen process, as well as their implementation. Under each Presidency, the Commission proposes to focus on a topic in which the Presidency country is particularly strong and could showcase good examples, or in which the Presidency country (together with other countries) faces particular challenges and could be supported in finding solutions.

## **2. European Alliance for Apprenticeships**

The Commission presented the achievements and challenges under the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA) as well as the plans to give it a new boost which will be announced at the second part (session) of the meeting of Ministers that will take place in Riga on 22 June 2015. The main focus of the event will be on how to further involve companies, in particular SMEs. Currently 24 countries have made a commitment under the EAfA, including the latest one from Malta. Commission called for the remaining countries (CZ, IT and PT2) to join EAfA along the lines of the Council Declaration, by making a commitment. A great number of companies have committed to its objectives through pledges. The Commission intends to set up a plan to monitor the process. The Commission also explained its initial plans for an advisory group composed of business representatives for drafting recommendations on how to mobilise companies to increase the offer of apprenticeships. There are also plans to publish a specific call for proposals under Erasmus+ which would focus on the involvement of SMEs in offering apprenticeships.

The Latvian Presidency pointed out that the afternoon session was an occasion to boost one of the Riga Conclusions priorities, namely work-based learning and apprenticeships. The Latvian Presidency informed that the Meeting of Ministers will be preceded by a DGVT meeting on 21 June.

The participants proposed to produce a matrix containing a summary of the principal characteristics of apprenticeship systems in place in different countries, to facilitate partner finding. The issue of definitions was also raised. It was proposed to use a broader definition, also in relation to the possibilities of applying for financial support. The social partners stressed that the participation of SMEs is crucial, but they need to be supported by intermediary bodies. They cannot be expected to make pledges at European level, since this does not bring added value to them. Furthermore, they would not have the capacity to participate in EU level structures. Several participants welcomed the guiding principles for SMEs produced in the context of the ET 2020 Working Group for VET.

The member states and the social partners informed about their on-going projects on apprenticeships and work-based learning. It was stressed that some companies, in particular SMEs, need to have more practical information on apprenticeships, and that it is ultimately at national and local levels that companies need to engage. The Commission encouraged Member States to give a positive response to

any initiatives coming from companies without waiting for setting of a formal regulatory framework.

ETF pointed out that Candidate Countries consider work-based learning as a response to certain structural problems, and proposed to include them in EAfA, a proposal which the Commission welcomed and reminded that Candidate Countries will also be participating in the Riga Meeting of Ministers.

Finally, the Commission informed about its cooperation with the Global Apprenticeship Network (GAN) which is working in cooperation with the ILO but focusses exclusively on activating companies, whereas EAfA has a more comprehensive approach and involves all relevant public and private stakeholders. The Commission also highlighted that there is much to be done to raise the attractiveness of apprenticeships.

### **3. Progress on the European Agenda for Adult Learning**

The Commission presented progress in implementing the European Agenda for Adult Learning and the Commission's proposal for future priorities 2015-2020 and also summarised the work achieved so far by the National Coordinators (NC) for adult learning. DGVTs were asked to support their NCs in applying for funding under the current Erasmus+ Call on implementing the European Agenda, for which the deadline is 19 May 2015. Referring to the ET2020 national reports, main challenges and future priorities flagged up by countries were around: adult skills including basic skills for the lower qualified adults; skills relevant to the labour market and updating skills in response to demographic ageing; increasing participation and access; improving quality; educator education and inclusion of adult learning qualifications in NQFs; validation of non-formal and informal learning and equity. The Commission informed about its intention to propose new adult learning priorities under the headings: governance, supply and take up, flexibility and access, quality, as part of the 2015 Joint Report on ET2020.

The Member States in the discussion raised the following issues: the relevance of learning mentioned under the quality priority, re-allocation of funding from I-VET to CVET, links with Active Labour Market Policies. They supported the emphasis on outreach and validation, adult learning as an integral part of VET systems, active ageing and long-term unemployment as two intertwined issues. In the future, it will be important to keep older workers and integrating long-term unemployed in the labour market. Equally, intergenerational learning has broad implications for policy in this field. The importance of active ageing strategy was underlined. Given the diversity of adult learners, it was proposed to define clusters, so that supply could be better targeted to their respective learning requirements.

### **4. ET2020 Working groups**

This agenda item focussed on the work of the 6 current Working Groups (WG) operating under the framework of ET2020. The DGVT has a political role in steering the work of the WGs on VET and AL, both coordinated by DG EMPL. DGVT members were reminded that WG mandates were ending in 2015 and that they will be consulted on how to disseminate their outputs. The DGVT will be invited to contribute to the current reflection on the future of these WGs (the way they work, possible future themes, etc). Initial comments showed, however, that many DGVT members considered these groups useful and therefore supported their continuation (LV, DE, IT, UEAPME). The Commission confirmed that the forthcoming Joint Report will contain a proposal to continue the WGs. Commission explained the results obtained so far by the WGs on Digital and Online Learning, Transversal Skills, School Policy and Modernisation of Higher Education and VET. The participants welcomed the guidance framework for SMEs, produced as part of WG in VET. The other outputs by the WG in VET are still under preparation, on the guidance frameworks "Attractiveness of apprenticeships and improved career guidance", "National governance and social partners' involvement" and "Quality assurance in work-based learning". The work done within the WG on Adult Learning and the WG on Digital and Online Learning was also clarified by the Commission. It was recalled that there should be close cooperation between the WG members and the DGVT members at national level in order to convey back results of the discussions in the working group to the political level. The WGs and their future will be discussed at the coming DGVT meetings.

## **5. Working Sessions**

Within the DGVT meeting four parallel Working Sessions were held. For each Working Session 3 guiding questions and a background paper had been prepared prior to the meeting session and disseminated to the participants. Guidelines for Chairs, Presenters and Rapporteurs were used - providing information on organizational aspects of the workshops. Plenary presentation of the outcomes of the workshops were made. The themes of the workshops were based on three elements: the LV Presidency priorities, the 2014 Country Specific Recommendations, and, to a certain extent, the new medium-term priorities.

**1) Work-based learning and apprenticeships** – challenges and proposed solutions from the various involved stakeholders' perspective. Conclusions from the workshop: The examples presented clearly showed the importance for implementing VET system with WBL elements, stressing the relevance of a bottom-up approach. It was agreed that doing small steps first in a small context, e.g. starting at local level, learning the lessons out of this experiences before regulating on a large scale, is crucial. It was also concluded that WBL, notably apprenticeships, are a formula that works but cannot be held responsible for everything. In particular for the quality of the jobs or the fact of having or not having a job. WBL can be an efficient instrument against youth unemployment but is surely not the remedy.

**2) Excellence and innovation in VET** – contributing to VET attractiveness and prestige. Conclusions from the workshop: Social inclusion and excellence are the two sides of the same coin. System innovation (coherence across policies, regional approaches, diversification of VET and higher education) are important. Qualifications landscape is changing (higher VET, open national qualifications frameworks etc.). Raising standards (basic skills, entry requirements to VET) and excellence in teaching (leadership, development T&T, attractive learning environments). Talents should be supported, but social inclusion remains an issue. Monitoring success is crucial to measure excellence efforts. High quality VET as an attractive learning pathway can produce skills which are needed both in the short and long-term and can contribute to the overall raising of the prestige of VET of VET qualifications' jobs.

**3) Skills for employability** – through enhanced strategic partnerships in the initial VET provision. Conclusions from the workshop: Skills anticipation can be better addressed with enhanced strategic partnerships in IVET, involving all actors at all levels. For example, with VET Councils, Skills Councils, sectoral coordination bodies. Partnerships also ensure more and better employment opportunities by providing the skills needed. The right balance between transversal competences and occupation-specific skills may provide better solutions in a changing labour market. IVET and CVET systems may work in synergy for more efficient Lifelong learning provision.

**4) Continuous VET in the lifelong learning perspective** – implementing flexible and permeable pathways for improved CVET access and quality. Conclusions from the workshop: The main areas addressed by countries and policies are: governance; funding; quality assurance; and validation. Flexibility in the provision by public institutions should be further explored, with a view to developing more integrated approaches to IVET and CVET. The more highly skilled population are singled out for CVET by companies, but inclusiveness and ways to address the imbalances which militate against greater participation by low qualified people who need learning opportunities most require immediate attention.

## **6. Closing session**

The upcoming LU Presidency presented the priorities and the main VET-related events. The DGVT meeting (16-17 November 2015) will be followed by a conference on Youth Guarantees (17-18 November), to follow up the IT Presidency conference on the same theme. A conference on Family Learning (22-23 October 2015) will have links to Adult Learning. A conference on Early School Leaving (9-10 July 2015). Finally, in the closing remarks, the Commission referred to the Council Decision of 2 April 1963 laying down general principles for implementing a common vocational training policy, which forms one of the oldest cooperation structures at European level. The Latvian Presidency and the Commission expressed a wish to see as many ministers and stakeholders as possible in Riga in June, in order to endorse the Riga Conclusions and to discuss the future of European VET developments within the Copenhagen process and in the context of ET2020.