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MEETING OF THE MINISTERS IN CHARGE OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING, THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL PARTNERS AND THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Riga, 21-22 June 2015

SUMMARY NOTE

The Meeting of the Ministers in charge of Vocational Education and Training (VET), the European Social Partners and the European Commission (VET ministerial meeting), organized by the Latvian Presidency and the European Commission, took place on 22 June 2015 in Riga, Latvia, bringing together more than 120 participants from governments, the European social partners and the European Commission in the morning session, and over 300 participants in the afternoon session, including businesses and apprentices.

The morning session of the meeting was devoted to the endorsement of the “Riga Conclusions” and the policy debate regarding the future of the European cooperation in the field of VET. It was the first time since 2010, when ministers, the European social partners and the European Commission had an opportunity to discuss the priorities for VET. The afternoon session was held to boost the European Alliance for Apprenticeships, including welcoming new pledges. VET ministerial meeting was preceded by the Meeting of Directors General for Vocational Education and Training (DGVT) on 21 June 2015.

I. Meeting of Directors General for Vocational Education and Training (DGVT)¹

The Meeting of Directors General for Vocational Education and Training (DGVT) took place for the second time during the Latvian Presidency. This time the agenda included discussion on the final version of the draft Riga Conclusions before the endorsement, as well as on CEDEFOP’s proposal for monitoring of the implementation of the medium term deliverables for 2015-2020 for VET.

The “Riga Conclusions”

The Copenhagen process and the Bruges Communiqué set the strategic approach in order to improve the performance, quality and attractiveness of VET through enhanced cooperation at the European level.

Draft “Riga Conclusions”, which provide a new set of VET medium term deliverables for 2015-2020, is a result of fruitful cooperation between governments, the European social partners and the European Commission. It was important to reach an agreement on priorities in order to further concentrate on concrete actions that will have a significant impact on future development of VET.

During the DGVT meeting on 20-21 April 2015 in Riga participants expressed an overall support to the draft “Riga Conclusions”, as well as agreed that it should be supplemented by a preamble – political statement that will represent ministers’ commitment to implement political actions in order to jointly address the VET issues in Europe until 2020 and beyond. The revised version of the draft “Riga Conclusions” containing the preamble was presented at the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training (ACVT) on 21-22 May 2015 in Brussels.

Participants of 21 June DGVT meeting were invited to exchange opinions on the final version of the “Riga Conclusions” that was based on the results of ACVT meeting and comments submitted afterwards. The document was broadly supported, proposing a few amendments.

Participants also highlighted that VET has to be an attractive pillar of education systems, providing links to both general education and higher education. While skills development for the labour market was recognised to be a major objective of VET, it was also emphasized that VET policy went beyond skills policy, because VET as an educational sector should equally contribute to the learners’ personal development and to social cohesion.

¹ For more details see the minutes of the meeting attached.

The revised version of the “Riga Conclusions”, respecting the comments received during the 21 June DGVT meeting, was supported by participants with a view to be submitted for endorsement at VET ministerial meeting on 22 June 2015.

Monitoring of future deliverables

The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) provided a presentation about planned monitoring of future VET deliverables.

The main principles of this monitoring will include:

- Base monitoring on countries’ policy priorities in addressing the medium term deliverables;
- Use country clustering to show trends, ensure some comparability;
- Tap stakeholder expertise (ACVT, DGVT) at all stages of the monitoring process.

The planned sources will include yearly survey on medium term deliverables and progress towards national policy priorities, information on VET systems, monitoring of European tools / principles, thematic country reviews, other studies, statistic and indicators, as well as other EU and international sources. Structured discussions / interviews with ACVT members and DGVTs, as well as cooperation with the European Training Foundation is expected throughout the monitoring process.

The interim report on the monitoring is scheduled for 2017 and the final report for 2020.

The European Commission invited participants to send comments regarding the planned monitoring of medium term deliverables until the next enlarged ACVT Bureau meeting.

ET 2020 Joint Report 2015

The European Commission informed about mid-term stocktaking of strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) and preparation of ET 2020 Joint Report, emphasizing that it will include all education levels and the “Riga Conclusions” will be an integral part of the broader scope of this report.

The main focus was put on the outcomes of policy debate, which took place during the EU Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council on 18 May 2015:

- Confirmed relevance of existing strategic objectives of ET 2020;
- Shift to a new work cycle (5 years), promoting better conformity with Europe 2020 strategy and reducing the reporting burden;
- Employability remains a key guide to ET 2020 activities, but there is also need to have similar emphasis on social inclusion and active citizenship, including concrete follow-up to Paris declaration on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education;
- Main priorities: 1) high level skills and competences for employability, and active citizenship; 2) VET as a broad educational objective; 3) development of digital skills; 4) teachers’ and trainers’ initial education and professional development;
- Closer cooperation between education and employment sectors is crucial for economic growth.

The European Commission informed that these elements will be integrated in ET 2020 Joint Report 2015 and provided a list of further steps of the preparation process:

- Endorsement of the “Riga Conclusions” on 22 June 2015;
- European Commission’s proposal for a draft Joint Report 2015 is planned at the beginning of September 2015;
- Discussions in the Education Committee will take place in September and October 2015;
- Adoption of ET 2020 Joint Report 2015 by the Council in November 2015.

II. Meeting of the Ministers in charge of Vocational Education and Training, the European Social Partners and the European Commission (*morning session*)

The main aim of the morning session of VET ministerial meeting was the endorsement of the “Riga Conclusions”, setting five medium-term deliverables in VET for 2015-2020, as well as the policy debate on the future of the European VET.

Format of the morning session included plenary sessions with keynote speeches and endorsement of the “Riga Conclusions”, as well as three parallel working sessions, promoting discussion on the future of the Copenhagen process and the current challenges for competitive European VET 2015-2020 and beyond.

Ms Māriņa Seile, the Minister for Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia highlighted the role of the “Riga Conclusions”, promoting cooperation and attractiveness of VET, which has been one of priorities of the Latvian Presidency in the field of education and training. The Minister appreciated the contribution made by all participants within the VET Review process and development of the “Riga Conclusions”. The Minister emphasized that the vision of VET should go beyond 2020, promoting innovation and excellence of VET, as well as work based learning and apprenticeships.

Ms Marianne Thyssen, the European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility welcomed priorities set by the “Riga Conclusions” and informed about European Commission’s intention to present a wider agenda on skills. The objective is to get economy on the path of growth and create jobs, considering that most jobs now require more skills than before. The Commissioner stressed the importance of cooperation between education and world of work, analysing long-term needs in national strategies. In addition, the Commissioner emphasized that VET reform agenda and Copenhagen process are built on purpose and make a significant contribution to ET 2020, promoting complementary and future-supportive VET.

Keynote speeches on VET in the context of the new socio-economic and demographic challenges

During the morning session of VET ministerial meeting, three keynote speakers were invited to give their opinion on the challenges and the future of VET. The aim of keynote speeches was to provide a wider context regarding the role of VET in the changing world, the main challenges and way forward, stimulating discussion in the parallel sessions.

- *Mr Javier Calderón Beltrán*, chair of BUSINESSEUROPE’s Education and Training Working Group emphasized strengthening Europe’s competitiveness, reducing the mismatch of skills / qualifications and the labour market needs; necessity of developing innovative ideas and bringing them to market much quicker; the impact of demographic change; as well as the role of VET developing curriculum, apprenticeships system and skills, organizing the exchange of good practices, thus responding to future challenges and promoting economic growth.
- *Mr Luca Visentini*, Confederal Secretary of European Trade Union Confederation welcomed the “Riga Conclusions” as a result of an excellent cooperation of countries, social partners and the European Commission, pointing out that VET should serve not only for jobs, but also for personal development. Promotion of quality of VET and strengthening work based learning are fundamental, they require truly innovative actions, thus promoting attractiveness of VET. Sharing the analysis is needed in order to achieve our goals.
- *Mr Simon Field*, project leader of the Directorate for Education and Skills of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development emphasized the demographic situation, students’ choice of higher education over VET and a gap between the world of learning and the world of work as the main challenges for VET. On the other hand, the opportunities for VET could include making better use of work based learning, post-secondary vocational education and training, as well as innovation.

Discussion in three parallel sessions on the future of the Copenhagen process and the current challenges for competitive European VET 2015-2020 and beyond

The aim of these sessions was to discuss the future of the Copenhagen process and the current challenges for competitive European VET 2015-2020 and beyond. Within the discussion, it was important to highlight respective roles of VET stakeholders, including social partners, and to develop ideas on emerging trends in governance of VET systems for the development of a competitive European VET.

Each session gathered representatives from the governments, the European social partners and the European

Commission, as well as chair and co-chair (rapporteur) - minister or head of delegation, facilitating and focusing the discussion, and providing feedback at the plenary session.

Two background documents were prepared, providing guiding questions in order to facilitate the discussion. As a result, the main conclusions were presented:

Stakeholders' capacity to be innovative in implementing structural reforms and secure adequate financial investment, including strategic approaches and partnerships, as well as funding mechanisms, promoting innovation in European VET.

- It is important to identify the emerging needs of the labour market, reducing skills mismatch. Better research is required within this process, thus supporting evidence based policy.
- It is necessary to promote better cooperation between education and world of work, including partnerships and employers' participation in educating future employees. Good strategic partnerships cannot be established by law, they have to be based on mutual interest and benefits.
- Innovation in VET should be developed, involving different stakeholders. Innovation process means flexibility, it requires "thinking out of the box", finding new solutions and being proactive in meeting the challenges of new technologies.
- EU funds is a sufficient tool in helping to achieve the goals in VET. The call for proposal to support the involvement of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in work based learning is expected this autumn.

Strengthening excellence and inclusion as a part of national VET policies, attracting more learners, as well as generating political arguments/ strategic approaches for raising the status of VET in our countries.

- Regarding the attractiveness of VET, quality and permeability are important. It is necessary to promote the quality of VET, making it an equal choice, and improving links to higher education opportunities. Flexible and permeable pathways are the key to achieve qualitative VET system. Salaries equal to that of higher education graduates and effective recognition of skills could also make a great contribution.
- Information and better guidance should be provided to youngsters and their parents and there should not be a significant distinction between general and vocational education subjects and certificates.
- VET should provide very high qualifications, supported by closer cooperation between education and labour market. There is need to focus on qualifications and competences, not just narrow skills. Good basic education is equally important to avoid negative selection process, which is usual for VET tracking in many countries.
- VET needs to be inclusive and excellent, creating "a product to sell" and promoting its attractiveness. Still, VET is not only a labour market instrument, but also the way for personal development.

International competitiveness of European VET, considering possible move of the Copenhagen process from "enhanced cooperation" to increased convergence of reforms and recognition of qualifications, with an increased share of common European training content for occupations and professions, improving recognition of VET qualifications in Europe and in global context.

- Education is the key to Europe's competitiveness. Skills are the "global currency" and VET is the main instrument to develop skills. VET is a high priority on the European agenda, as well as a considerable part of country specific recommendations.
- Closer cooperation in the EU is the key to the future of the Copenhagen process, sharing experience and best practices. VET cooperation at the EU level needs to be improved, finding common language to describe learning outcomes.
- Cross-border cooperation and cooperation between clusters of countries would be a good testing platform for creating common VET content. Still, it should only happen on a voluntary basis by the initiative and common interests of countries.

Adoption of the Riga Conclusions

The "Riga Conclusions" is the result of joint efforts in making VET more competitive. The "Riga Conclusions" were developed within many stages, involving various stakeholders, and set new medium term deliverables in the field of VET for the period 2015-2020, as a result of the review of short-term deliverables defined in the 2010 Bruges Communiqué. The ministers demonstrated a commitment to implement political actions in order to achieve these

deliverables.

Based on the overall agreement reached during the Meeting of the Directors General for VET on 21 June 2015, The “Riga Conclusions” were endorsed. Participants emphasized cooperation between governments and social partners, as well as need for successful implementation of the “Riga Conclusions”, striving forward new deliverables.

The “Riga Conclusions” were supported by VET providers, highlighting the importance of joint actions, putting VET in the centre of the dialogue, as well as emphasizing the role of associations, transforming the best practices into national systems.

Minister Seile underlined the importance of implementing real actions in order to achieve the goals set in the “Riga Conclusions” and invited participants to ensure wider dissemination of information, as well as improvement of national policies, promoting successful further cooperation.

Commissioner Thyssen highlighted the need for better understanding and analysis, overcoming the skills gaps, as well as promoting skills recognition. Commissioner supported Minister’s position, stressing that the “Riga Conclusions” are all about the real action.

The final version of the “Riga Conclusions” is available at the website of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia: http://izm.gov.lv/images/RigaConclusions_2015.pdf

The afternoon session² of the meeting gave a boost to the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EAfA), gathering more than 300 participants, including representatives of governments, the European and national social partners, companies and apprentices.

New pledges from over 40 new partners were received, committing to co-operate for the promotion of apprenticeships and work based learning. It included the launch of the Baltic Alliance for Apprenticeships with the aim to increase the overall competitiveness of the Baltic countries’ labour force trained within the VET systems of these countries, to raise the status and attractiveness of the Baltic VET and encourage regional approaches in VET implementation.

The programme of the afternoon session also included:

- Statements from the apprentices and their success stories, emphasizing the importance of apprenticeships for career and personal development.
- Presentation of the new EAfA website and collaboration platform, guiding and providing information to companies and potential apprentices.
- Presentations of success stories and communication tools, raising attractiveness of apprenticeships for both youngsters and companies.

Discussions on getting on board companies, particularly SMEs, as well as expectations from companies, business organisations and social partners. Participants highlighted the importance of apprenticeships in further career development, as well as changing the mindset of companies, considering apprenticeships as an investment in future growth.

² For more details please see the report of the afternoon session attached.