

## BRIEFING NOTE

# Stronger vocational education and training for better lives

Common European priorities in training have had a positive effect. It's time to reach levels of implementation that help people and enterprises

Today's challenges for vocational education and training (VET) were unforeseen just over a decade ago when, in 2002, the Copenhagen process for European cooperation in VET was launched (Box 1). Agreed in December 2010, the Bruges communiqué set the agenda for VET in Europe just as the impact of the economic crisis was unfolding. VET was seen as a way to help tackle rising unemployment by helping make people employable. About half of all jobs in Europe require medium-level qualifications, many of which are acquired through VET.

**Box 1. The Copenhagen process and the Bruges communiqué**

The Copenhagen process, launched in 2002, coordinates technical and political support for voluntary cooperation on common objectives, priorities and benchmarks for vocational education and training (VET).

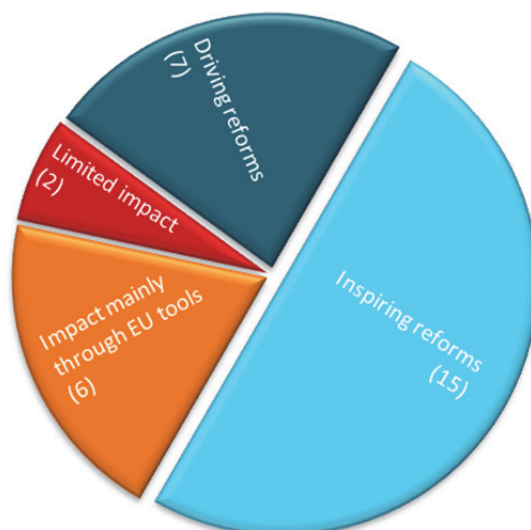
It brings together the European Commission and participating countries (28 European Union Member States, Norway, Iceland and candidate countries) and European social partners.

Progress has been regularly reviewed and the policy direction set by a series of communiqués, the latest adopted at Bruges in December 2010. The Bruges communiqué reflects objectives of the Education and training 2020 framework:

- making VET more attractive and relevant and encouraging quality and efficiency;
- making lifelong learning and mobility a reality in VET;
- encouraging creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship in VET;
- making VET more inclusive.

To help realise these overall objectives, the Bruges communiqué was supported by a series of actions (short-term deliverables) that participating countries worked on over the period 2011-14.

Figure 1. **Copenhagen/Bruges process impact on national VET policy and strategy (number of countries)**



Source: Cedefop.

Cedefop's latest report, *Stronger VET for better lives*<sup>(1)</sup> shows that the Copenhagen process and Bruges communiqué have had an impact on national VET policy and strategy in all countries (Figure 1). Its impact is influenced by countries' different starting points and is lower in countries with strong VET traditions, but even they acknowledge that Bruges has stimulated cooperation and encouraged policy learning.

When asked about the main national strategic policy changes in VET since 2010, 23 countries emphasise

<sup>(1)</sup> Cedefop (2015). *Stronger VET for better lives: Cedefop's monitoring report on vocational education and training policies 2010-14*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop reference series.

systemic improvements, namely legislative or policy changes to adapt existing or introduce new programmes, pathways and qualifications (Figure 2). Other issues, such as improving VET's quality and attractiveness, have also been high on many countries' agendas. Countries have prioritised issues, with some using the Bruges communiqué as a menu to choose themes most relevant to them.

Figure 2. **Focus of VET policy reform 2010-14**  
(number of countries)



Source: Cedefop.

Figure 3 shows the extent of this activity and countries' different starting points. All countries have been very active reforming their VET systems. Countries, such as Germany, Finland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Malta, Austria and the UK had a strong starting position relative to the Bruges communiqué, but have since adapted existing and introduced new measures. Others such as Bulgaria, Estonia, Greece, Croatia, Portugal, Poland and Romania, although starting from a lower base in 2010, have been making up ground. The report clusters countries as continuous developers, early developers, recent implementers and modest developers. All this work has been to make progress in four strategic objectives, which are discussed below.

### Making VET more attractive and relevant and encouraging quality and efficiency

Reinforcing a trend that began before 2010, countries have made great efforts to make VET a more attractive learning option. Growing recognition that work-based learning can improve labour market effectiveness has led to an apprenticeship renaissance. Several countries, including those with well-established programmes, are creating or expanding work-based learning. For example, Italy's

apprenticeship schemes now offer programmes leading to higher education degrees, including doctorates. In the UK, apprenticeships are increasingly offered in service industries, including law and accountancy as an alternative to university. Sweden's school-based VET system is also encouraging apprenticeships.

Countries are promoting VET in various ways. Bulgaria, for example, organises an annual panorama to promote VET occupations where learners showcase their skills in competitions and businesses recruit the best competitors. Estonia combines awareness-raising events on VET in supermarkets with promotions on television, social media and interactive games. Since 2009, the Netherlands has had an online internship search service, which includes links to social media and a smartphone application. Around 72% of learners in school-based VET preparing for the trade sector use the website to find placements.

Increasing work-based learning has strengthened cooperation between VET and employment stakeholders. However, more could also be done to ensure quality of work-based learning, promote VET in compulsory education and improve basic skills.

### Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality in VET

High unemployment among young people has meant promoting adult learning and mobility has been less prominent. But in setting up apprenticeships, Spain has concluded bilateral agreements with Germany, Portugal and the UK for work placements abroad.

Developing national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) to link to the European qualifications framework (EQF) has triggered wide-ranging reforms. What began as a process in VET to support mobility by making it easier to understand and compare qualifications from other countries, has become a catalyst for improving access to learning and individualising learning paths across education sectors, including higher education.

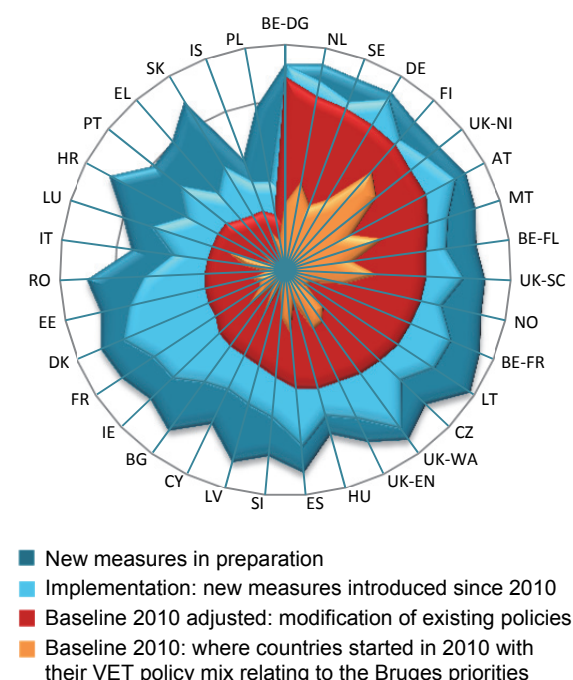
Although at an early stage of implementation, NQFs are increasingly used as a reference point to revise or develop new qualifications and modernise curricula. NQFs have also supported work on systems to validate informal and non-formal learning. In France, for example, validation of work experience has long supported access to higher VET. However, few countries have comprehensive strategies for

validating informal and non-formal learning and people who could benefit most are least aware of its opportunities.

Trends in guidance are to encourage people to take up VET and help them manage transitions into jobs. Latvia is developing a lifelong guidance system. Slovakia plans to set up a national forum for guidance policy. Lithuania has introduced new standards and methods for guidance for unemployed adults and revised the occupational profile for guidance officers. Lithuania has a national framework for career management skills.

Although not a specific deliverable in the Bruges communiqué, some countries have aimed to improve professional development opportunities for VET teachers and trainers. Spain has introduced mandatory formal training for VET trainers supporting adult learners. Malta and Slovakia have developed modularised continuing training programmes for continuing VET trainers to help students at risk of not completing their studies.

Figure 3. **Focus of VET policy reform activity 2010-14 (countries)**



NB: Belgium is divided into Belgium Flemish (BE-FL), French (BE-FR) and German (BE-DG) communities. The UK is divided into England (UK-EN), Scotland (UK-SC), Wales (UK-WA) and Northern Ireland (UK-NI).

Source: Cedefop.

## Encouraging creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship in VET

Partnerships for creativity and innovation are developing, but slowly. Romania, for example, has a platform linking education with the business world to promote innovation by sharing knowledge and promoting partnerships. As a result, 16 sectoral innovation clusters involving VET schools have been set up. France is also creating campuses linking VET, business and research institutions in industries with job creation and innovation potential.

Networks and partnerships between providers and business to ensure effective and quality-assured technology in VET or incentives to achieve this are not yet common in many countries, but several hold competitions to stimulate innovation. In Hungary, for example, national competitions exempt successful participants from exam modules or count towards higher education entrance exams. The Czech Republic hosts a national competition for innovative teaching and teaching materials.

Entrepreneurship is becoming an underlying principle in VET and links between VET and business are expanding. For example, Denmark, Estonia, France, Norway Poland, Romania, Spain and Slovenia have introduced entrepreneurship as a learning module or subject in their VET curricula, but support for aspiring entrepreneurs could be strengthened. So too could support for VET teachers and trainers to acquire entrepreneurship skills. Some countries, such as Germany, Ireland, Norway, Portugal Slovenia and Slovakia have introduced training courses for teachers to bring entrepreneurship into the classroom through e-training modules and business games.

## Making VET more inclusive

Countries have clearly prioritised making initial VET and continuing VET more inclusive.

Measures for groups at risk such as the low-skilled and early leavers from education or training have not only expanded, but are more comprehensive. For example, Bulgaria has a national strategy and Belgium (Flemish community) an action plan to prevent and reduce early leaving from education and training. Lifelong learning strategies in countries such as Estonia, Croatia, Cyprus, Lithuania and Romania all include measures to support various at-risk groups. Initiatives in Germany for low- and unskilled people focus on developing job-related literacy and basic skills.

Increasingly, incentives for learners, enterprises and VET institutions are used to help at-risk groups. For example, Iceland and the Netherlands have increased funding to keep at-risk learners in school. Incentives are also being linked to results. Ireland pays providers of training for the long-term unemployed in stages to encourage course completion. In the UK (England), 10% of the training value can be paid to a provider if the learner enters work after training.

The European Union (EU) is on track to reach its target of an average early school-leaving rate of 10% or less by 2020. And, while there is scope to invest in more training opportunities that meet their learning and practical needs, participation in training by low-skilled people and other at-risk groups is rising. However, overall participation of adults in lifelong learning has not developed as well as hoped. Most countries have still to reach the EU's target of 15% adult participation in lifelong learning by 2020.

Potential of information and communications technology (ICT) to help at-risk groups learn has not been fully tapped, but there is progress. For example, Luxembourg's 'Internet for all' programme tackles digital exclusion by increasing access and offering Internet training. Austria and Slovakia focus on ICT needs of older learners, while the UK promotes use and production of open education resources.

Limited progress has been made in monitoring at-risk groups in VET to target provision better to their needs, but some countries have been working on this. For example, in the Czech Republic, monitoring is used to inform remedial VET and provides the basis for support by counsellors, teachers and psychologists. Ireland has a new profiling model to help target VET activation measures at groups most at risk of long-term unemployment by giving them priority access and higher levels of support.

## Continuing reform to serve people

Reforms of VET systems under the voluntary framework of the Copenhagen process and Bruges communiqué have made VET in Europe stronger. There is clear evidence of reawakened interest in apprenticeship and other forms of work-based learning. National qualifications frameworks are encouraging systemic reforms. Systems to validate non-formal and informal learning are improving slowly. There is increasing emphasis on making VET inclusive through renewed attention on the low-skilled and groups at risk. These are positive signs but, as always, there is room for improvement (Box 2).

### Box 2. Challenges for the future

Adjusting to labour market needs and avoiding skill mismatches requires flexible education and training opportunities that combine different types and levels of learning throughout life.

Consequently, the challenges include: securing VET funding; reinforcing structured dialogue between education authorities and social partners; cooperating with primary and lower secondary education to ensure that the basic skills learners acquire become a bridge to VET; promoting cooperation between guidance services and businesses; making better use of data on transition and labour market outcomes to inform VET provision; linking EU tools to help people progress in learning and work; providing more professional development opportunities for VET teachers and trainers; and raising appreciation of VET's potential at all levels to contribute to innovation, encourage entrepreneurship and promote economic excellence.

Policy learning can support countries reforming VET systems. Strong cooperation, such as in the European alliance for apprenticeship or in using European tools will help achieve this. However, VET cannot be seen in isolation: it is part of countries' learning systems and their economic and social fabrics. It is important to ensure VET can make a difference to people's lives; to enable them to build rewarding careers; to safeguard a decent quality of life; and for enterprises to develop skills for economic excellence and competitive performance. Capitalising on reforms to date means people and enterprises need to be aware of them. This requires better strategies to communicate VET's potential benefits to people and enterprises

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of Vocational Training

Briefing note – 9096 EN

Cat. No: TI-BB-15-002-EN-N

ISBN 978-92-896-1730-7, doi: 10.2801/040569

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