



BRIEFING NOTE

Learning to change: vocational education and training reform 2002-10

The achievements of European cooperation are significant, but their impact has yet to be fully realised

Concerned that jobs and social cohesion would be threatened if the rapid and accelerating pace of change overtook the skills of an ageing workforce, in 2002, the European Union (EU) launched the Copenhagen process to strengthen cooperation in vocational education and training (VET).

The Copenhagen process

The Copenhagen process has coordinated technical and political support for voluntary cooperation on common objectives, priorities and benchmarks for VET. It has brought together the European Commission and participating countries and European social partners. Various working groups have developed common European instruments and principles and analysed VET-related themes. Progress has been reviewed every two years at Maastricht (2004), Helsinki (2006), Bordeaux (2008) and Bruges (2010). At each meeting ministers responsible for VET endorsed communiqués to adjust priorities for the next phase. The Bruges ministerial meeting in December 2010 will review progress to date and set out long-term objectives and, for 2014, agree short-term deliverables.

Countries currently participating in the Copenhagen process are members of the European economic area (EEA – the 27 EU Member States, Iceland, Norway and Liechtenstein) and EU candidate countries Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) and Turkey.

Evidence so far suggests that the Copenhagen process, part of the Lisbon strategy, has been successful. The period 2002-10 has been one of the most productive for European cooperation in VET. As Europe embarks on a new strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth from now to 2020, it

is a good time to look at the Copenhagen process' achievements and impact ⁽¹⁾.

Achievements of the Copenhagen process

As a working method, the Copenhagen process has been effective. It helped align European and national VET policies and enabled a comprehensive European VET policy to develop. By involving candidate countries the process has supported EU enlargement (from 15 to 25 Member States in 2004 and from 25 to 27 in 2007). It gave VET, which varies considerably in the different countries, a clearer voice at European level, raising its profile in related policy areas. Significantly, the process laid the foundation for developing several common European instruments and principles (Table 1), to promote mobility for learning and working, which are influencing VET policies in participating countries in other ways.

European instruments and principles are based on learning outcomes, which are statements of what an individual learner is able to do and understand after completing a learning process. Learning outcomes are being used in all types and levels of education and training, but in particular to reform VET standards and curricula. For some countries this represents a considerable change in practice.

The European qualifications framework has encouraged countries to develop national quali-

⁽¹⁾ Council of the European Union. *Europe 2020: a new European strategy for jobs and growth: European Council Presidency Conclusion 25-26 March 2010*. Available from Internet: <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/10/st00/st00007.en10.pdf> [cited 4.11.2010]

fications frameworks (NQFs) based on learning outcomes. Most NQFs cover all levels and types of qualifications not just VET and so, in some cases, are redefining how different parts of the national education

and training system, for example VET and higher education, relate to each other. Work on NQFs has triggered other VET reforms.

Table 1. **Common European instruments and principles developed under the Copenhagen process**

Common European instruments	
European qualifications framework (EQF)	Helps compare qualifications throughout Europe to support lifelong learning and educational and job mobility
European credit system for VET (ECVET)	helps validate, recognise and accumulate work-related skills and knowledge acquired during a stay in another country or in different situations, so that these experiences contribute to vocational qualifications
European quality assurance framework for VET (EQAVET)	Helps countries develop, improve, guide and assess the quality of their VET systems and develop quality management practices
Europass	A portfolio of documents (Europass CV, language passport, Europass mobility, diploma supplement and certificate supplement) to support job and geographical mobility by enabling people to present qualifications and skills in a standard format understandable to employers throughout Europe
Common principles and guidelines	
Guidance and counselling	Strengthens the role of lifelong guidance in developing European policies for education, training and employment. It addresses four priority areas: career management skills, access to services, quality of guidance provision and policy cooperation
Identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning	Sets out common principles to encourage and guide development of high quality, trustworthy approaches and systems to identify and validate non-formal and informal learning

Countries have also agreed shared national priorities. Making VET more attractive, as a learning option, is a main priority of the Copenhagen process. Countries have worked to make VET systems comprehensive and inclusive, tailored to the needs of the best students, as well as those at risk of social exclusion. Countries have sought to make it easier to progress from upper-secondary VET to tertiary education, while also developing partial qualifications, modular courses to help integrate those at risk into the labour market.

Improving the quality of VET is another shared priority. As well as improving evaluation mechanisms, countries are improving VET teaching through better initial training and more opportunities for continuing professional development. To ensure curricula are relevant to labour market needs, labour market actors are being encouraged to play a greater role in developing VET. Supported by the European level,

new methods for anticipating skill demand and supply are being used and tested to give more insight into future needs to enable VET systems to prepare better.

Encouraging investment by governments, enterprises and individuals in VET is shared priority. Throughout 2002-08, often with support from European funds, countries invested considerably in VET and worked to improve efficiency through decentralised governance and new ways to allocate resources.

To combat the 2008 economic crisis, public money, including from the European Social Fund, was made available for enterprises to preserve jobs on the condition that employees participated in training. Arguably, this helped stave off higher unemployment.

Impact of the Copenhagen process

Despite the scale of the VET reforms it has supported, so far the Copenhagen process has had a limited impact on the performance of education and training

systems as measured by the Lisbon strategy's benchmarks (Table 2). The economic crisis set back Europe's performance, but on pre-crisis trends it is unlikely that the targets would have been achieved.

Table 2. 2010 targets related to education and training

Benchmarks for 2010	State-of-play 2010 (reference year 2009) EU-average
Raise the average employment rate in the EU to as close as possible to 70%	64.6%
Increase the number of women in employment to an EU average over 60%	58.6%
Raise the average EU employment rate among men and women aged 55 to 64 to 50%	46.0%
An EU average rate of no more than 10% of early school leavers	14.4%
Ensure that at least 85% of young people complete upper secondary education (76.6% in 2010)	78.6%
EU average participation in lifelong learning should be at least 12.5% of the adult working population (25 to 64 age group)	9.3%
Total number of graduates in mathematics, science, technology in the EU should increase by at least 15% by 2010, while at the same time the gender imbalance should decrease	+33.8%*

* Data refer to the period 2000-08

It is unclear whether VET is more 'attractive'. In most countries the number of VET students has increased. However, in the EU as a whole, VET students as a proportion of all students in upper-secondary education has fallen from 60% in 2000 to 50% in 2008. Levels of adult participation in lifelong learning are disappointing and still too many young people leave the education and training system early. Despite financial incentives a high proportion of enterprises do not train because they see no need, despite the very clear trend towards more knowledge- and skill-intensive jobs and an ageing workforce.

Although the focus has been to improve mobility, it is still low for VET learners and teachers. EU programmes have increased chances, but VET students do not enjoy the same opportunities for mobility as those in higher education.

VET teachers and trainers are carrying a heavy load. They face challenges of learning new pedagogies, keeping up with technological developments, new labour market demands and more diverse classrooms.

Data on investment in VET indicate that before the economic crisis there was no substantial increase of annual per capita investment in human resources, as proposed by the Lisbon strategy, either by governments, enterprises, or individuals. Higher public spending on VET to combat the economic crisis' effect on unemployment was an emergency measure, not a planned sustained increase in investment in human resources. Data are not yet available, but anecdotal evidence suggests that enterprises reduced expenditure on VET following the economic crisis.

How successful has the Copenhagen process been? Overall, countries and social partners assess the process positively. Agreeing and acting on shared national priorities and developing interrelated common European instruments and principles in eight years is a significant achievement for voluntary cooperation.

Countries, however, assess the Copenhagen process' impact differently. Some regard its influence as moderate, not having changed the direction of national policies. However, most countries believe it is having a significant impact and has led to substantial changes in national VET and lifelong learning policies.

Although the EU did not reach all of its benchmarks, country performance varies considerably. Some exceeded the benchmarks many years ago, even before the Lisbon strategy. Implementation of European instruments and principles and other reforms is at different stages and their full potential yet to be realised. Countries believe that more time is needed for the changes to take effect.

There are also encouraging signs. Despite the economic crisis, all of the benchmarks show improvement in 2009 (the year for which the latest data are available) compared to 2000. Educational attainment among young people is also rising. Women are now, on average, better qualified than men. Investment in VET during 2003-08 did not increase, but this may be due to falls in youth and long-term unemployment. Substantial public investment was made in VET in response to the crisis, acknowledging its key role in helping people to keep and find jobs.

Europe's challenges indicate that the direction of reforms under the Copenhagen process remains the right one for the next decade. Four drivers of change – the legacy of the economic crisis; developing a low-carbon economy; labour market trends towards more skill-intensive jobs; and Europe's future skill supply and demand – are expected to shape Europe's economies and societies and the demands on its VET systems, over the next 10 years.

The economic crisis will not prevent the return of job growth between now and 2020, but it threatens to leave high levels of structural unemployment, particularly among young and long-term unemployed people with low levels of education. Developing a low-carbon economy requires a sound base of key skills and adaptation of skills already used at work. Although qualification levels of the workforce are expected to be broadly in line with demand, skill mismatches will occur.

To keep pace Europe's current workforce needs to update, upgrade and broaden its knowledge, skills, and competences to perform well in jobs which are likely to become more demanding at all levels. For Europe to reach its 2020 employment rate target of 75%, it must tackle structural unemployment to help more people, particularly women and people with low education levels, to find jobs.

This places greater emphasis on training for adults. Encouragingly, this is the direction of VET reform over the past eight years under the Copenhagen process. As well as strengthening initial training, countries have aimed to systemise continuing training by providing opportunities to enter the education and training system at various points throughout working life and gain recognised qualifications through various routes, through validation of informal and non-formal learning.

Despite possible financial constraints, countries seem focused on long-term reforms. At European level the new VET policy framework is already in place. It sets an ambitious agenda and there is consensus among countries and social partners on what future European VET cooperation should focus on.

The next phase will be difficult. It is not certain that the potential of the progress made so far will be realised. The coming decade provides an opportunity to implement the achievements of the Copenhagen process and for them to have a real effect. The consequences of Europe being by-passed by economic and social changes make the case for carrying on with VET reform compelling.



Read the full report:
Cedefop (2010). *A bridge to the future. European policy for vocational education and training 2002-10.*
http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/3058_en.pdf