



## **Policy Paper on Vocational Education and Training**

COUNCIL OF MEMBERS  
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## 1. Introduction

In this Policy Paper the European Youth Forum (YFJ) continues the process of building a European educational policy agenda for young people by young people and addresses a crucial education field: vocational education and training (VET). Over the past ten years the European Youth Forum has led the political discussion on the recognition of NFE, bringing its providers and outcomes into contact with other educational providers to build a better understanding of each field.

The European Youth Forum approaches education in a holistic way, looking at all forms of learning and at all educational provision. A knowledge-based economy needs a real lifelong learning society, going beyond the traditional focus on formal education, but with a parity of esteem for formal education, non-formal education (NFE) and informal learning.

Education is of vital importance for all citizens, but especially to young people who invest a serious amount of their time into their education in order to be prepared to enter wider society as autonomous citizens. Education policy is therefore a key part of youth policy and demands a horizontal approach connected to employment and social inclusion. As the representative of young people and youth organisations in Europe, the European Youth Forum takes up its responsibility to encourage the participation of young people in policy-making processes at all relevant levels.

The European Youth Forum believes that Formal Education is failing to provide all the required competences young people need and is convinced of the complementarity of formal and non-formal education in order to provide life skills that are crucial for young people. In an ever more complex society with a constantly developing knowledge-based economy, finishing compulsory formal education-will not suffice for a life of employment nor for feeling included fully into society.

The European Union attempted to define what the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes are to be able to take part in society and the economy, these competences have been defined as the European Key Competences<sup>1</sup>. The European Youth Forum believes that various non-formal and formal educational providers have a role to play to ensure that all young people acquire these Key Competences. This requires both more coordination between educational providers and recognition of learning in each field.

This policy paper puts forward the view of young people and youth organisations on VET and is a first step in the discussion on the complementarity of VET and NFE. The Policy Paper looks first at the concept of VET and the realities in the different countries in Europe. It then explores the position of VET in our lifelong learning society and what political framework currently exists. Based on this the YFJ identifies three core challenges: perception and quality of VET, complementarity of VET and Non-Formal Education, and lastly representation and participation in VET.

## 2. **VET Concept and Realities**

The European Youth Forum recognises the wide variety of VET concepts and definitions <sup>2</sup> born out of

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- 1 Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council, of 18 December 2006, on key competences for lifelong learning [Official Journal L 394 of 30.12.2006]
  - 2 For example the definitions in: Descy, P. Westphalen, S-A., 1998, Measuring the effectiveness of training, Working paper, Cedefop. ILO, 1990, Statistical Sources and Methods (Geneva, ILO). And in West, A., 1999, \* **Vocational education and training indicators project priorities and objectives related to VET**, November (European Commission, European Centre for the Development of **Vocational Training** (Cedefop))

different educational and economic realities. Within this paper, YFJ understands VET as the vocational strand of secondary education leading to the first degree qualifying for a certain profession. While several post secondary education programmes can be understood as VET or continued vocational education, in the view of YFJ they can be better understood as higher education and will not be dealt with in this Policy Paper.

A great variety of practices across Europe is recognised with respect to VET.

Differences include:

- starting age/ending age
- number of VET strands (technical, professional and apprenticeships)
- possibility to continue to higher education
- split within higher education (professional and academic bachelor)
- number of young people in VET (at present, about half of all students enrolled in upper secondary education participate in vocational programmes. However, the EU average masks significant differences reaching from participation rates of almost 80% in some countries to less than 15% in others.)<sup>3</sup>

This variety is linked with national/regional settings in which the role and function of VET are embedded. Since these are very diverse, the European VET landscape is as well. Nevertheless, ensuring the opportunity for all young people to complete secondary education is an essential public obligation.

This variety of practices refers to the way VET is organised, to the way it is financed, to the way it relates to other sectors (educational or other), to the way it is perceived by young people and employers, to the way it responds to the labour market needs, to the social integration of disadvantaged groups, to its flexibility and so on. This fragmentation has negative implications, such as a lack of recognition of VET abroad as well as a challenge for youth mobility. Hence the incoherence of the European VET landscape represents a major obstacle for quality education for young people in Europe.

### **3. VET in our Lifelong Learning Society**

Due to the diversity of the VET landscape in Europe, different challenges are noted in different countries or different VET systems. Nevertheless, both institutions and VET-stakeholders recognise certain common challenges.

#### 3.1. Changed economy

The European economy is rapidly evolving, resulting in a skills mismatch due to skill shortages in certain areas while a lot of young people end up in unemployment due to saturation in others. The New Skills for New Jobs Forecast by the European Commission predicts that the number of low skilled jobs will diminish in favour of higher skilled jobs. Especially in a post-Fordist society where knowledge is the basis of each and every productive process and where workers will change tasks many times during their working life, it is fundamental to provide students with the most suitable tools to understand and to live in the future labour market as active protagonists and responsible citizens. A holistic approach, which recognises the value of non-formal education, is needed in order to match the necessary skills with the qualifications that young people gain in VET.

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3 The European Vocational Education and Training policy (VET) - Frequently Asked Questions, MEMO/08/736; Brussels, 26 November 2008

### 3.2. A changed political framework

While the EU had competence in VET for a long time, it is only since the Lisbon agenda that the reform and convergence between systems properly started. This brought to light several issues concerning the compatibility between national VET systems and its consequences on educational and labour mobility. While the political framework is changing, due to the differences in VET systems, the absence of a real structural reform such as proposed by the Bologna process and the slow implementation of the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET), various national systems are not yet compatible. Therefore, a holistic strategy which puts young people's needs in its centre and ensures a coherent European VET system is crucial in order to qualify young people for the future.

Unlike in most educational fields, the European Union has a legal base for vocational education since the Treaty of Rome. Article 166 (1) of the Lisbon Treaty states that "the Community shall implement a vocational training policy which shall support and supplement the action of the Member States...". It is therefore leading a policy process with the Member States on development of Vocational Education and Training, the so called Bruges-Copenhagen process.

This process started to accelerate after the Lisbon strategy called for European education and training (E&T) systems to become a world quality reference by 2010. To achieve this, the EU formulated the "Education and Training 2010" work programme in 2001, which set the policy framework at EU level. VET policy is an integral part of the Education and Training 2010 and Education and Training 2020 work programmes. EU policy work in VET is complemented by the "Leonardo da Vinci" programme, which supports mobility and the modernisation of VET systems.

While VET has been a competence of the EU for a long time, the VET sector is still struggling. The Bruges-Copenhagen process is far less advanced and has had much less impact than the Bologna process. This is partly related to the different needs of each national/local economy for VET skilled workers.

The EU has set up a credit system for VET called ECVET. While it should have put VET squarely in lifelong learning policy and practice, it is not compatible with the European Credit transfer system (ECTS)<sup>4</sup> which was set up for higher education. The European Youth Forum believes that there should be one credit system for all types of lifelong and lifewide learning connected to a European Competence Framework.

## **4. Core Challenges**

### 4.1. Does the perception match the quality of VET?

Unfortunately, VET is in many countries considered to be a 'lower' form of education than academic programmes. This negatively influences educational choices and reflects on the status and self perception of VET students. A positive communication on VET and its benefits is needed next to a serious investment by Member States. Governments should not see VET as a fast track to the labour market, but instead as a fully valid educational path.

A consequence of the lower status, and sometimes also a cause, is that the quality of VET suffers. The European Youth Forum is clear that the highest quality should be guaranteed for all students. VET should be high quality education throughout Europe and several issues need to be urgently tackled:

- The drop out rate for VET needs to be reduced drastically.
- VET needs to be better funded.

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4 [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc48\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc48_en.htm)

- VET is preparing now for a different society and an evolved economy and should be up to date regarding preparation for the labour market, while more strongly focussing on the citizenship aspects of education.
- Student participation and student rights should be guaranteed in all VET institutions.
- Work-based learning should have quality guarantees. The learning objectives have to be clearly indicated and they have to be shared with the students' representatives.
- There has to be a compensation for the expenses sustained by the student during her/his workplace experience.
- Student welfare needs to meet the expectations and the needs of the VET students

Regarding internships within VET, as in general in formal education, the YFJ believes that the educational objectives of an internship have to be set right from the outset, concurring with the educational programme. The tasks have to contribute to gaining the competencies set out in the objectives. While receiving a wage or salary cannot be the central aim of an internship, it is important to acknowledge that interns are providing their labour to the hosting organisation, thereby creating an added value. Thus they have the right to be remunerated adequately. This remuneration should be in addition to mandatory financial support in case costs are incurred or if the interns work beyond normal working hours.<sup>5</sup>

VET should be accessible to all students and courses be affordable to all. States and educational institutions need to create possibilities to easily switch between different types of education through qualifications systems and recognition of competences. This is to ease the transition between academic and vocational but also between NFE and formal education.

Guidance and counseling play a big role in that matter. Sufficient free and high quality counselling and guidance services are hugely important for guaranteeing quality in all educational forms, and must always be focused on the needs and abilities of each individual student. VET students have additional problems with mobility due to widely differing VET systems in Europe and degrees that are not universally recognised. International transparency should be increased through the European Qualification Framework, and the Bruges-Copenhagen process should be strengthened and properly financed to increase quality and comparability of VET throughout Europe.

#### 4.2. NFE-VET are complementary fields in Life Long Learning

In the Life Long Learning society and a more flexible economy, a VET degree might not be a guarantee for employment throughout life. VET, as is the case with other educational fields, should place itself within a lifelong learning strategy and develop partnerships with other providers.

A valuable cooperation can be developed with NFE and youth organisations. While VET providers have a great deal of experience with providing professionally oriented skills and knowledge, YFJ believes that life skills and personal development can be acquired better within NFE in youth organisations. Youth organisations and VET have a clear complementarity and when fully realised can be beneficial for young people.

Youth organisations provide NFE not only to acquire valuable competences but also for social inclusion. Furthermore, NFE programmes can be useful complementary education for young people that dropped out, or that were disappointed by the formal education systems. The European Youth Forum therefore

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<sup>5</sup> See also 0076\_09YFJ Opinion Paper on Internships.

calls upon the European VET providers to engage in a lifelong learning discussion with NFE providers, and on national VET providers to engage with National Youth Councils, youth and students representative organisations to discuss lifelong learning policies and practices that benefit all young people. The YFJ therefore urges all stakeholders of VET to foster their collaboration with and recognition of NFE and its providers in order to ensure a holistic education of young people.

#### 4.3. Vocational Education and the Labour Market

The European economy is further evolving into a service economy and a highly technological industry. This has two consequences:

- many schools have problems keeping up with the latest evolutions in technology;
- students will need to be life long learners and it is doubtful whether VET is preparing students sufficiently for this.

Youth unemployment has risen to dramatic levels in Europe which needs to be urgently tackled by different actors, including the educational sector. The EU forecast of New Skills for New Jobs indicates that jobs will be increasingly higher qualified. The jobs requiring qualifications which are generally outcomes of VET are declining. In the past it has been often the case that VET graduates were only prepared for lower qualified jobs.

The Medium qualifications which can be either VET or general education will increase but these will need a bigger set of competences, leading to either an improved VET provision or further LLL participation. This is further connected to social policy as lower-qualified adults are more likely to end up in precarious jobs and are significantly less likely to participate in LLL. VET-providers therefore face the challenge of increasing the quality of their programmes to ensure that all VET-graduates have sufficient transversal skills to succeed in a Life Long Learning economy. One way of acting upon this challenge is to increase cooperation between VET schools and companies while safeguarding the public governance of the schooling system.

Another crucial issue is to challenge the gender balance in VET. Many vocational programmes are still or increasingly followed by either women or men. This situation is leading to a loss of competences through people not choosing what they might do best but what they think society wants them to do.

#### 4.4. Representation and participation in VET

Despite efforts of student organisations, VET students are less involved in representative structures in education and they are less involved in the higher and European levels of youth organisations. This is a clear challenge that student unions, youth organisations and education institutions should tackle. Youth organisations and student unions need to increase their efforts to reach out to young people in VET.

Education institutions and national governments should adopt the Declaration of School Student Rights developed by the European School Student Unions – OBESSU and the Charter on Student Rights of the European Student Union.<sup>6</sup> There must also specifically be student participation in every decision-making body governing each VET provider. Student representatives are, and must be, treated as equal partners in

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6 Education is a right not a privilege; that students are equal partners in Education; and that Education has a societal, personal, cultural and an economic objective. Every student is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Charter without regard to their field, mode of study or methods of programme delivery. "Every student is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Charter, free from any form of discrimination, including discrimination on the basis of political conviction, religion, ethnic or cultural origin, gender, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, socio-economic standing or any disability they may have."The rights laid down in this Charter stem from the fundamental human right for education.

governing bodies. Furthermore, VET students should be encouraged to join both trade unions and student unions.

Participation in schools could also serve as a learning environment for democratic skills. Democratic societies draw their legitimacy from broad participation. If a certain group does not participate, this not only threatens democracy but also means that society has a democratic obligation to facilitate the participation<sup>7</sup> of this group.

### 5. Conclusion

In an evolving society, VET cannot play the same role that it did during the industrial economy. It needs to give young people the opportunity to acquire the necessary competences for our knowledge based economy, and it needs to place itself squarely in the context of lifelong learning policy and practice. In order to ensure a holistic approach to VET, the added value and crucial role of NFE and its providers such as youth organisations has to be recognized by all stakeholders of the VET system. In addition, young people's interests have to be put into the centre of each and every change towards a coherent European VET strategy.

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7 "Participation is about having the right, the means, the space, the opportunity and, where necessary, the support, to participate in and influence decisions, to engage in actions and activities so as to contribute to building a better society." The Revised European Youth Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life