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MEETING OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON VOCATIONAL TRAINING 18 December 2015, BRUSSELS

MINUTES

1. OPENING AND WELCOME BY THE CHAIR

The meeting was chaired by Mr Detlef Eckert (Director, DG EMPL, Skills) in the morning and by Ms Dana Bachman (Head of Unit, DG EMPL E3, Vocational training, apprenticeships and adult education) in the afternoon.

The Chair welcomed the participants, including the representatives of students and EU VET providers, who were joining the meetings since 2013 as observers. Information about the re-organization of DG Employment and the new Directorate for Skills was provided, as well as on the Annual Growth package that has recently been published.

2. JOINT REPORT EDUCATION AND TRAINING 2020

Ms Bénédicte Robert (DG EAC, Unit A1, Coordination of ET 2020 Working Groups) provided the main elements of the recently adopted ET 2020 Joint Report, its relevance in the context of the Paris Declaration of March 2015 and the link with the new ET 2020 Working Groups. There will be six new Groups starting in February 2016 until June 2018. Groups will be composed of invited Member State representatives, as well as EEA and Candidate countries. European social partners and EU-level stakeholder associations will also be part of the Groups, and selected through a call for applications.¹

Mr Norbert Schöbel and Mr Paul Holdsworth (DG EMPL, E3, vocational training, apprenticeships and adult learning) illustrated the priorities for the mandates of the future ET 2020 working groups for VET and adult learning.

The process for selecting members of the working groups (WGs) from social partner and other European stakeholders' organisations raised questions about the criteria for selection and the number and level of participants. Some wished to involve national members with the right expertise to support the work of the groups.

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/strategic-framework/expert-groups_en

The Luxembourg delegation, as spokesperson of Governmental representatives, asked to consider the difficulties in nominating representatives for the working groups as the topics covered by the group are broad.

The German governmental member stressed that the focus of the VET working group (teachers and trainers) might be less appealing for some countries as many activities (networks and thematic working groups) had already been carried out on this topic (echoed by the Dutch Gov). He suggested covering other strategic topics that are linked to the Skills agenda, such as migration or digital learning.

The UK Gov representative queried how the working groups would be linked to the Skills agenda.

The Chair clarified that the work of both WGs will be closely linked to the implementation of the Skills Agenda; for example the WG on adult learning in the workplace will contribute to the work on the upskilling of low-skilled adults.

There was a strong call (UEAPME, DE Gov) for building on what had already been achieved in the past and disseminating well the outcomes of the working groups. A need for translating results of working groups in all languages was stressed by several members (e.g. HU Gov).

The French trade unions requested to specify VET teachers in the mandate of the VET group and asked what type of stakeholders would be invited as participants, as this might raise conflicts with social partners.

The Commission (Mr Schöbel) explained that the new members of the groups would have the opportunity to fine-tune the mandates at the kick-off meeting to ensure that they deliver on the strategic objectives of ET2020. As for the social partners it would be their responsibility to decide who should represent them. He reminded that the key outcomes of the last working groups would be translated into all languages. The workload for the WG would be similar to that of previous working groups. More peer learning activities of participating countries with an interest in a specific topic could be envisaged.

3. IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING OF THE VET MEDIUM TERM DELIVERABLES 2015-2020

Ms Lore Schmid from Cedefop presented the revised approach to monitor the progress in achieving the medium-term deliverables (MTDs) in VET for 2015-2020, taking into account the comments made at the last DGVT meeting.

The Luxembourg Delegation wished to have a validation process for the 'starting point' of each country. The timetable should be reviewed to allow for exchange within the Member States (echoed by UK Gov).

Some clarifications were requested on the involvement of ACVT and DGVT and the frequency of reporting (DE Gov).

Cedefop clarified that they will pilot the policy grid (in which DGVT members will indicate their country priorities and policy options among the 5 MTDs) with a number of DGVT members. They explained that the starting point which is based on the monitoring report for

the period 2010-2014, had been validated by all DGVT members. The timetable for the process will be updated to ensure enough time for feedback.

The Commission, Mr Jan Varchola, underlined that the involvement of DGVT members is absolutely necessary next to the data collected by Refernet. The data has to be collected annually also because of the need to provide inputs for the European Semester.

BusinessEurope highlighted the importance of taking account of the views of social partners during the monitoring and therefore welcomed the involvement of the ACVT in the process.

4. COMMISSION INITIATIVE 'PROMOTING INTEGRATION AND EMPLOYABILITY IN THE LABOUR MARKET'

The Chair shortly introduced the item and explained the possible structure of the Skills Agenda initiative and the future discussions in the Council.

ETUC called for a genuinely strategic agenda, not focused mainly on technical tools and several delegations, including some governmental and employers' representatives mentioned the possibility to consider migration issues in the paper.

Governmental representatives welcomed the possibility to discuss the topic at an early stage but hoped to be further involved, for example in a working group before adoption of the initiative. They asked clarifications about the intended role of EQF (echoed also by the employers) and the reason why ESCO was not mentioned among the tools covered by the initiative.

LT trade unions asked clarifications about the targeted low-skilled adults.

The German employers called for a balanced approach between improving the skills for the low-skilled and ensuring that the high-skilled stay competitive and to keep pace with labour market needs. They asked to include higher VET in the initiative.

UEAPME welcomed the discussion in the ACVT. On mobility, their members indicated that Erasmus+ resources should not be redirected to long-term mobility at the expense of short-term mobility which is more suitable for SMEs. They asked for practical obstacles faced by SMEs to be overcome before moving further to long-term mobility.

The Chair acknowledged that some companies cannot afford to send apprenticeships or staff for long mobility, however, in order to make VET more attractive, the business world was requesting that more transnational mobility opportunities with a longer duration and in a systemic way should be made available. On ESCO, he clarified that this was still under development and was linked to the EURES Regulation and therefore not to be covered by the Skills agenda.

BusinessEurope welcomed the narrative of the Skills agenda and considered having a comprehensive policy strategy, in addition to the tools (coordination and simplification). They were cautious about a "skills guarantee", in particular if the burden was to be put on companies to compensate for the basic skills not achieved in compulsory education. They supported the idea of fostering mobility.

The DK Gov asked for a broad vision on investment in human capital for the 21st century to be spelled out in the Skills agenda (labour market relevance, digital skills, forecasting etc.). He asked if the Skills agenda would create links with existing initiatives like the EAfA and the Riga conclusions.

The Luxembourg delegation welcomed the basic skills initiative for adults and asked for commitment at European level, while leaving the responsibility to Member States to decide how to implement it. In their view, the idea of EU common core profiles could be explored.

Social partners remarked that digital skills were not mentioned in the outline of the Skills agenda. The Chair confirmed that this topic would be part of the Skills agenda.

The Belgian trade unions underlined that education systems should be aligned with what is required by the jobs at entrance level and consider what are the real challenges in the labour market and education systems (poverty, social dumping etc). Regarding EQF there would be no need to add international qualifications.

The AT employers representative underlined the issue of skills mismatch. He would prefer the reference to be made to the "right" skills which are required in VET, including higher VET (mentioning a wide interpretation of the headline target of 40% tertiary attainment) Rather than skills forecasts, the governance of national and regional E&T systems should ensure responsiveness to the labour market. As far as the level of qualifications was concerned, several rounds of referencing to the EQF would still be necessary to ensure transparency.

The BE-fr and SE governmental representatives underlined that validation of non-formal and informal learning was crucial and should be applied consistently to support the upskilling of the low-skilled.

French trade unions called for more visibility of workers' competences and knowledge. Basic skills are important but they need to be made visible and aligned with the labour market and also for citizenship in a broader sense.

The DK and CH trade unions highlighted that employability should not be assessed in a too narrow sense. The Danish colleague commented that for adults it was more difficult to upskill than for youngsters: elements of higher education should be available to adults and it would be also important to ensure maintenance of skills via continuing VET. Issues need to be solved at national level, but a reflection at EU level is important.

The SE Gov stressed that the mobility of teachers and trainers was crucial, but warned that long-term mobility should not go to the detriment of short mobility.

The FI Gov raised the question on the future of ECVET as some delegates see it as a useful tool. On mobility both long and short term ones should benefit from an increase of the budget as both boost the quality of learning and teaching (languages, capacity to adapt). Also short visits are useful. In order to increase VET attractiveness, she called for more permeability regarding higher education and the support of higher VET.

The Chair thanked the participants for the comments and mentioned those fora in which the Skills Agenda would be further discussed: a) the Council groups and b) a social dialogue meeting for social partners. He informed that the public consultation mentioned in the ACVT background document would last a couple of months and be launched at the beginning of 2016. ACVT could send their written comments on the ACVT paper until 18 January. Several members stated that they welcomed the Commission's reassurance that EQF would not become a recognition tool but was meant to be a tool for transparency.

Comments in writing were sent by several members of the ACVT and they are stored in circabc <https://circabc.europa.eu>.

5. EUROPEAN ALLIANCE FOR APPRENTICESHIPS (EAfA)

The Commission (Mr Norbert Schöbel) presented the priorities of the EAfA for 2016, particularly deepening business-education partnerships, developing a support platform and organising a high-level event on national and regional commitments.

In relation to the business-education partnerships and the suggestion of a new Erasmus+ call for proposals supporting the European Pact for Youth, ETUC and BusinessEurope questioned the Commission strong support for the Pact.

The Commission (Mr Joao Santos, Deputy Head of Unit E3) responded that Commissioner Thyssen is very supportive of apprenticeships and work-based learning: CSR Europe who has initiated the European Pact for Youth represents a big network of companies and committed to achieve 10.000 business education partnerships through the Pact. The Commission therefore supports this initiative and a call for proposal could complement its efforts.

ETUC stressed, nevertheless, their preference for giving priority to the EAfA initiative.

BusinessEurope questioned the weighting of the action plan on communication and emphasised the need to do more on reforms and establishing positive framework conditions at national level. BusinessEurope would like to see more cooperation and exchanges between Member States in this area. This was partly echoed by UEAPME, who also requested more support to companies on the local and regional level, and the Luxembourg Presidency.

The Chair explained that the suggested support platform would be a knowledge transfer mechanism, in which certain Member States would offer to share their expertise with other Member States. In addition it would also help to give visibility to some important actions, tools and results, and therefore raise the attractiveness of VET which is also the idea behind a European VET Week.

The Commission (Mr Norbert Schöbel) explained that the high-level event proposed for the 2nd half of 2016 would focus on national and regional reforms and framework conditions.

The governmental spokesperson and UEAPME asked questions about the feasibility of a new support platform and the interplay with existing platforms, given that so many platforms already exist and asked for a thorough assessment before starting the work.

The Turkish delegation explained that they are using the EAfA for involvement of SMEs and the GAN for mobilizing the multi-nationals.

The Austrian employers asked for a wider dissemination of the 20 guiding principles on "High performance apprenticeships & Work-Based learning" developed by the ET2020 Working Group on VET.

Cedefop explained that they have finished their apprenticeship country reviews for Malta and Lithuania, and that the exercise is ongoing for Italy, Greece and Slovenia.

The Maltese governmental representative shortly explained the reforms in Malta aiming at a substantial increase of apprenticeships.

The Italian governmental representative explained the focus of the cooperation with Cedefop which has started recently. Italian Trade unions welcomed the participation of Italy in the EAfA but would like to see a stronger role of social partners in the Italian governance process.

The Slovenian delegate explained their experience with the ongoing Cedefop review (background information is available in circabc).

The presentation by the European Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education (ESSDE) which was scheduled could not take place for unforeseen reasons.

6. ERASMUS+ : CALL 2016, STATISTICS AND ADAM/VALOR DATABASE

The Commission (Mr Felix Rohn, DG EMPL, Unit E3, vocational training, apprenticeships and adult learning) gave an overview of the recent Calls under Erasmus+ and provided a demonstration about the VALOR online database, which includes all projects running under Erasmus+. The ADAM database, which had been specifically developed for VET would be phased out from 2017.

About statistics on mobility undertaken, the main trend was short mobility (under 1 month duration) for apprentices and other VET learners. Some comparative statistics about the past calls on Sector Skills Alliances (SSA) was also shared.

ETUC asked clarifications about the Sector Skills Councils and core curricula and pointed to different positions of some sectors and bodies on these.

The Commission explained that SSA are demand driven, i.e. available for those sectors that want to gather skills intelligence across borders or develop transnationally shared common training content for European professional core profiles.

The BE-fr Gov delegate pointed out that some Member States may develop skills strategies with ESF or national funding also in the framework of the Riga MTDs.

The FIN Government underlined that mobility figures of Erasmus+ do not give the full picture as for example in their country there is a complementary initiative by the government.

The Chair acknowledged that several efforts needed to be seen in complementarity both for SSAs as well as for mobility and informed the meeting that mobility would be one of the topics tackled by the events of the Dutch Presidency in 2016.

7. INFORMATION ON THE LATEST EDUCATION AND TRAINING ISSUES

The Chair invited the meeting to ask questions or make comments on the topics presented in the information notes, which included also information on the results of the previous working groups within ET2020.

ETUC asked for clarification about the online consultation on ESCO and the timing foreseen for the EQAVET + work on new indicators and descriptors. In addition, about Drop'pin, they wondered what quality checks were in place for advertisements concerning apprenticeships (what type of training provided, learning outcomes, remuneration etc.)

The UK Gov representative asked how the wealth of topics dealt with in the note was linked to the strategic view of the forthcoming Skills Agenda. He referred in particular to the

Network of National coordinators for adult learning, and how their knowledge is shared and disseminated.

The Commission explained that the timetable for the development of EQAVET+ is ambitious but feasible given the scope of this exercise. Nevertheless, the planned deadline to finish this work could be extended if needed (Mr Koen Bois D'Enghien, DG EMPL, E3). The ongoing online consultation on ESCO had brought about many comments and contributions, but their level of coverage was different according to the sector (five sectors out of 16 are already at 90% but others were at around 40-50%; it would also be possible to re-open the consultations at a later stage for sectors which did not give sufficient results in the first round of consultations (Mr Aldo Laudi, DG EMPL, E2).

For Drop'in the importance of quality checks in place was acknowledged and several quality controls were available in the online tool, including checks of offers prior to their publication or possibility of the public to rate their quality (Mr Henric Stjernquist, DG EMPL, D1).

On the AL National Coordinators, Mr Paul Holdsworth noted that the group is exploring how to strengthen links with policy makers among countries and at European level, and how to better share their expertise, for example by holding more exchanges, also at the grass roots level. The Chair also recalled that EPALE plays a key role for visibility of work in the field of adult learning done at regional and local level.

8. STUDIES COMMISSIONED BY DG EMPL

Some governmental members would have preferred to have oral presentations in the meeting and underlined that it was important to ensure dissemination of the studies, which in addition should be linked to the working groups.

The Chair commented as well that in the future the presentation of the studies could be linked to the policy topics on the agenda and reminded colleagues that, for example, the adult learning studies had been running in parallel with the working group on AL and this has worked well to enrich the quality of the process.

BusinessEurope welcomed the study on adults in digital learning environments, particularly for linking it with the skills agenda regarding the topics "open educational resources" and more ICT for VET.

ETUC pointed to the need for access to more ICT infrastructure even when public education budgets were tight and decreasing. They informed delegates that in 2017, digital competences would be a theme for their social dialogue.

The SE Government delegate highlighted that digital learning environments require teachers with the right skills to make effective use of digital media and the focus for the future should be to develop material for teachers (WG mandate makes the link).

The issue of systems for financing adult learning was touched upon by several participants and the work done by a previous working group on the topic was recalled. The Commission said that the next working group would base its work on previous conclusions in this area.

Governmental representatives called for more cooperation with other Directorates General of the European Commission. At EU level there should be a better definition of objectives.

Cooperation with the agency, the European Training Foundation was underlined by the UK Gov.

The TR Gov representative proposed to link internationalization strategies to the emergency of migrants from Syria (education also plays a role for their integration). In addition, they would like to have a kind of ReferNet system for candidate countries.

Ms Maria Todorova from the Commission (EMPL/E.3) clarified some points regarding the VET internationalisation study. She replied to a question by ETUC that additional information could be found in the annexes. Follow-up actions are being undertaken in terms of closer cooperation among Commission's services and in an Inter-agencies group, with international organisations (UNESCO, OECD, ILO etc.). Some European initiatives are also open for interested countries (EAfA – for candidate countries). Last but not least - the work of ETF adds to the EU VET policy priorities an external dimension, in supporting partner countries outside of the EU.

Mr Georgios Zisimos from the ETF informed that in the work programme of ETF 2016, a network of stakeholders for the MTDs (a kind of ReferNet) was foreseen.

The CH Governmental representative considered higher VET a strategic topic for innovation processes and development of applied sciences; furthermore higher VET learners have very good employability rates. They called for greater efforts towards tertiary VET.

Other governmental representatives asked to have a follow-up discussion on this study in another ACVT meeting.

On the feasibility study for a network of national VET providers, the French Trade unions raised some issues concerning the expectations of such stakeholders and their role and representation.

The Commission explained the study had concluded that more concrete objectives for such possible network should be defined in order to meet the needs and interests of these organizations. Additional information about the expert group of European VET providers involved in the study was also given.

9. UPDATE BY THE UPCOMING DUTCH PRESIDENCY

Mr Peter van Ijsselmuiden from the Dutch Presidency presented the priorities of their Presidency and the main events in the first semester 2016. In the field of VET and adult learning, the DGVT meeting would take place on 15-16 February; the main topics to be covered are the Skills agenda, VET mobility and performance-based funding. A visit to a VET training centre would also take place. The Conference 'Skills for a lifetime - for a future proof VET' would follow on 16-17 February. He explained that participants should pre-register already by beginning of January and that a link would be sent to the ACVT after the meeting.

10. AOB AND CLOSING OF THE MEETING

The next meeting of the Advisory Committee is scheduled for 23-24 June 2016. The Chair underlined that following the discussions in the ACVT Bureau, the minutes of the meetings of ACVT and DGVT will be exchanged among the two bodies. In addition, ACVT members would receive a link requesting their participation in a "satisfaction survey" concerning the meetings of the ACVT.

In addition to this, following to the meeting, the link to the call for expressing interest in the future ET2020 working groups (relevant for European social partners and other European level stakeholders) had been sent to ACVT members, together with the link to the powerpoint presentations uploaded in circabc <https://circabc.europa.eu>.