

# THE FUTURE OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN EUROPE

**MONDAY, JULY 9 - TUESDAY, JULY 10 2018**

Permanent Conference and Media Centre,  
Bruno-Kreisky-Platz 1, 1220 Vienna

## CONFERENCE SUMMARY

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## CONFERENCE SUMMARY

Peter Schlögl\*, Julia Stopper\*, Alexander Schmölz\*\*

This summary captures a two-day programme of key notes, panel discussions and working sessions at the Presidency Conference on „The Future of VET in Europe“, which took place from 09 - 10 July 2018 in Vienna. It was organised in cooperation between the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, the Austrian Federal Ministry for Digital and Economic Affairs and the European Commission within the context of the Austrian Presidency of the Council of the European Union. The conference brought together European stakeholders, officials and experts in the field of vocational education and training (VET) to discuss a joint vision of VET in Europe post 2020 in light of impact-factors and to identify the required policy responses at the national and the European level.

The conference began with opening remarks by Margarete Schramböck (Austrian Federal Minister for Digital and Economic Affairs), Professor Heinz Faßmann (Austrian Federal Minister of Education, Science and Research), Marianne Thyssen (European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility - VIDEO MESSAGE) and Manuela Geleng (Director for Skills, Acting Director for Social Affairs, European Commission DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion). It continued with keynotes and working sessions on topics to trends, challenges and opportunities of vocational education and training in Europe and in a different session specifically on VET in Austria (success factors, challenges, responses to current trends and future developments). The conference concluded on day two with panel discussions and another keynote on topics to trends on challenges perceived in VET practice and to the European Policy Cooperation in VET post 2020.

The conference's goal was to work on higher-level questions in a systematic approach. This approach provided that future options should be identified in the light of identifiable trends, success factors identified, and reality checks should be done. The overarching questions were:

1. What are the external factors impacting on European VET systems and in what way might they lead to changes in existing institutional, pedagogical and political approaches and priorities?
2. To what extent are current and future impacts disruptive to established European VET systems and what is our joint vision of VET in Europe for post 2020?
3. What challenges should be tackled jointly by EU member states and how can EU level policy cooperation create added value and support to national systems in the post 2020 era?

\* Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt, Department for Adult and Vocational Education, \*\* Austrian Institute for Research on Vocational Training, Vienna

Presented evidence in the context of the conference may well encourage more attention to be paid to vocational education and training, as citizens consider this to be significant and worthwhile for policy making. Data show:<sup>1</sup>

- European citizens strongly support further (public) investments in education
- Support for VET as alternative to general, academic higher education much higher than commonly assumed
- Little conflict about this issue across socio-economic classes (defined by income and educational background)

And to devote more attention (and resources) to VET could entail electoral rewards.

### THE FUTURE OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN EUROPE- TRENDS, CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES

Demographic changes, ageing and migration and digitization<sup>2</sup> are among the greatest challenges in Europe, with an impact on skilled labour force, social diversity, the structure of employment, intensity of skills shortages and provision of VET were repeatedly discussed in the political speeches and discussion rounds as highly relevant framework conditions for VET. Global megatrends in business demand such as "liquid organizations, ambidexterity, human-machine interface, remote operations and leadership and mobile working"<sup>3</sup> are leading to new forms of work and related skill needs.

So in all speeches a common basic understanding is expressed that the path to Making European Union competitive, cohesive and resilient in the future will lead through means investing in people, in their education and training, their skills, their creativity, and their capacity to innovate.<sup>4</sup> From the company's point of view, education is even called "THE key enabler" for successful change.<sup>5</sup>

But it appears that the digitization topic and with restrictions the aspect of the resumption of learning processes over the lifespan are clearly focused as challenges, but the potential for solutions by VET for the social cohesion, integration of vulnerable groups or refugees is still expandable.

1 Bussemeyer, slide 12

2 Bachmann, slide 2

3 Herlitschka, slide 17

<sup>4</sup> Background paper for the discussion on THE FUTURE OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (VET) POST 2020. Meeting of the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training, 04-05 June 2018, Brussels, p.1

<sup>5</sup> Herlitschka, slide 25

It cannot be expected that a totally consistent and clear vision of post-2020 vocational education and training in Europe gets visible, based on the various contributions and diverse discussions within the conference. On the one hand, this is due to the different models and starting points in the member states as well as the underlying concepts of vocational learning processes. On the other hand, implicit and explicit strategies to deal with the developments of global change, which are also strongly influenced by traditions or culture, are in place at all levels. Therefore, the keynote on the Austrian VET-system emphasized the need for ecological consideration of skill-formation in order to show that the respective historical developments and given structures are not arbitrarily changeable. Effective interventions that lead to sustainable developments and are logical in terms of systemology therefore require in-depth insight into the relationships and structural conditions that clearly go beyond simple if-then and monocausal relationships.<sup>6</sup> So it will be all the more important, in addition to traditional and successful funding models, to work actively on the policy frameworks (EU 2020, VET and AL-Agendas, ...) in order to appreciate the diversity that can be found, to accommodate the different approaches to development and yet to promote coherent development and mutual learning. In this context, it is not necessary to start from scratch, quite the contrary is the case: “Progress made, but continuation is needed!”<sup>7</sup>

#### TRENDS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR EU POLICY COOPERATION

Nevertheless, certain common tendencies turn up how the systems, VET providers and educational and training offers should and can react to the upheavals in the short and medium term. An advantage in this context is that vocational learning no longer has to rely on sound initial training alone, but that account can be taken of the fact that learning takes place to a very large extent in the workplace or in continuing education.<sup>8</sup>

And so one key finding is that the current developments will not be countered by the business as usual strategy. It is not considered sufficient to include specific, new educational content in the curricular to be prepared for the time to come. Accordingly, future approaches must continue to pay attention to the up-to-dateness of educational content, but must not stop there. They should rather aim at being ready for change in order to be able to react to developments that are not yet clear and conclusively identifiable. And when conventional ways do not promise to lead to the goal, there is a strong emphasis on the strategy of making existing structures more flexible and foster their ability to react and respond.

<sup>6</sup> Schlögl&Ostendorf, slide 6ff

<sup>7</sup> Bachmann, slide 7

<sup>8</sup> Herlitschka, slide 21

At the same time, it turns out that a growing share of people should be integrated into society in and through vocational training, considering a wide range of capability and age. This shows once again that the tasks of vocational education are manifold and that the qualificational aspect is undoubtedly of great importance but does not count alone. A discussion of these multiple objectives linked to VET and how it could be united in a European canon of shared understanding of goals and purposes in a common vision despite differing structures would be a worthwhile endeavour.

The CEDEFOP study shows that among VET experts, the desired goal “To prepare students to fully participate in society and to become active citizens” has already overtaken “To prepare students for working life in a specific occupation or occupational field”.<sup>9</sup>

In the course of the discussions and the speeches, the terms excellence and social cohesion have been repeatedly mentioned as claims to future vocational training. The European Union can also build on successful practice in this context. The progress achieved with the European Qualifications Framework and the underlying concept of learning outcome orientation or the elements of the recommendation for the validation of learning achievement are outstanding examples of successful common principles.

An ad hoc survey among the participants at the very beginning of the conference invited to reflect corresponding demands on future processes and structures. The participants were asked which qualities they attribute to an ideal, successful vocational education in 2030.

Cirrus from the Plenary-poll: Name one characteristic of future VET



<sup>9</sup> Bjørnåvold, slide 21

These so to say formal requirements are also likely to be seen against the background that VET structures have become increasingly diversified in recent decades and expected will continue to do so.

The CEDEFOP study "The Changing role and nature of VET in Europe" shows that different situations and trends in the member states have to be assumed. These prototypically for initial VET show different patterns:

- The majority of European VET students follow a school based approach to VET - with varying input of practise based learning
- A significant majority of VET students follow a dual, apprenticeship-based model
- A tendency that systems move in a lifelong learning direction; combining diverse approaches allowing adults to participate

But traditional developments dominating delivery models are increasingly complemented by alternative forms of learning and diversity of practice has increased in the two decades covered by the study.<sup>10</sup> This diversity is even stronger if one also considers local, regional dispersion. At the same time, transparency and mutual trust in the structures have increased. The European instruments and initiatives have made a substantial contribution to this.<sup>11</sup>

However, the different national and regional conditions and actor constellations have different ways and processes of how large developments are picked up and processed. This diversity is both a challenge and a resource.

However, it is also possible to recognize recurring or even common tasks, such as: permeability between the education sectors, the division of tasks between initial and continuing vocational training and the relationship of vocational and academic education. On the whole, this can be interpreted as an ongoing integration of vocational learning processes, irrespective of whether they are strongly anchored in work processes or organized in schools, with the other elements of the educational system. This overcomes the historically divergent roots of workplace-related qualifications and the scholastic learning paradigm. Although these two guiding principles will never be fully interconvertible, substantial approximations are emerging. This is reflected, for example, in the fact that VET provisions increasingly show links not only to industries and sectors, but to overall education and training systems. And also „dead-end programmes“, restricted to medium levels with little progression to higher levels are declining.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Bjørnåvold, slide 8

<sup>11</sup> Bjørnåvold, slide 8

<sup>12</sup> Bjørnåvold, slide 10



This approach to a common understanding shows not only itself at the system level, but also has a substantive cause: the increasing competence orientation and working with learning outcomes in the school and higher education system. At the same time, the skills and abilities demanded by digitization in the course of changing requirements, unless they have strong technical abilities, which are primarily geared towards the use and operation of the corresponding digital devices and media, show clear links to personal development and attitudes (willingness to change, curiosity) as well as classical educational content of general education (for example information gathering and selection). The claim of a change of vocational qualification processes seems to become recognizable, which puts more emphasis on social and transferable skills and this once again approximates educational thinking. All efforts should therefore also be evaluated to what extent they support “learning & teaching that fosters personal capacity development”.<sup>13</sup> This also results in a trend towards fewer qualifications and broadened profiles.<sup>14</sup>

The present challenges and identifiable developments to societies namely citizens, companies, schools, training providers, governments and social partners, seem to be addressed through a general increase in knowledge and skills. It is not the adaptation of individual educational programs or subject-specific additional qualifications that will show the way out, but a general upskilling in the context of compulsory education, general and vocational training courses and universities seems appropriate. However, the tasks that are important for vocational training are in the foreground here. For all dynamic development regarding new skills and changing forms of work organization, a good balance between flexibility of offers, providers and systems and at the same time clarity, reliability and predictability (=stability) is important. Especially for disadvantaged groups and those at risk of social exclusion, sustainable structures and professional support structures are needed.

And so complex questions arise as to how flexibility and responsiveness of VET can and should be achieved. Because democratically legitimized and based on reliable information governance of VET has many conditions. Planning and control goals can not simply be drawn from existing sources.

Anticipation and early detection of changing competence requirements is only possible in the short term. Nevertheless, for longer-term trends, the increasingly established models of data-driven labor market intelligence provide valuable foundations for individual decision-making and educational guidance and counselling on the one hand, and the further development of VET-programmes on the other.

<sup>13</sup> Herlitschka, slide 25

<sup>14</sup> Bjørnåvold, slide 10

In addition to these strong research-driven or big-data developments, the here and there already well-established systems of quality management of educational institutions and systems, with its effective feedback loops, are a supporting pillar not only trusting top-down governance but to stimulate and maintain activities on multiple levels of development. For this purpose, the ENQAVET-Initiative and the Apprenticeship Framework have also created a viable basis for further developments that could well be integrated or interlinked in perspective, especially to span the continuum of learning activities.

In this way, it is actually possible and necessary to involve teachers, trainers and instructors and learners in the processes. For if this has been established in higher education for some time successfully, the very different implementation of vocational learning processes is characterized by the fact that the systematic representation of the perspectives of these two key groups is still weakly established. This has also been addressed as a field of development in several parts of the conference, and models of, in particular, the representation of VET-learners in governance-processes should be actively pursued.

With regard to these two groups, teachers and learners, mobility is also of particular importance. If this has been a clear success story of European cooperation for a long time now, it shows that in VET this still needs further impulses and improved framework conditions in order to achieve similar frequencies of higher education and school education in VET. The rebalancing of the mix between long duration VET mobility and short duration mobility should be discussed.

In VET, too, the positive influences on personal development on the one hand and European integration on the other hand are clearly seen. Further, the other conditions should be developed or supplemented under the current highly student mobility-oriented conditions. In particular, if the basis of vocational training is based on employment (as in apprenticeship-training) or part-time training takes place during adulthood, significant structural obstacles must be overcome.

### EU POLICY COOPERATION IN VET POST 2020

The contributions to the conference were not marked as ongoing issues at the European level which were problematic or where substantial gaps were raised. So the agenda was „taking stock with a view to consolidate and to further deepen and develop existing EU instruments and processes.“

*Improve coherence between initiatives for transparency, skills and qualifications*

An opinion of the advisory committee on vocational education and training has been shown the need to enhance continuity, clarity and coherence between the implemented initiatives and to support a more comprehensive, clear and integrative vision of European policies for transparency, skills and qualifications in the field of VET and also related fields like adult learning (cVET, ...). This should be based on analysing and reviewing existing EU policies and instruments in the area of skills and qualifications. Based on the conference content, CEDEFOP, Eurostat, OECD, ETF and JRC have been identified as cooperation partners in the fields of evidence and analysis.<sup>15</sup>

*Provide a framework for quality-oriented developments at all levels*

Especially with regard to the claim of responsiveness of VET provisions, instruments of quality assurance, monitoring and outcome and impact assessment were addressed. There seems to be an overall commitment that VET-systems and provisions shall be accessible, attractive, valued and modern. A corresponding operationalization of these general goals is still pending. Otherwise, an observation of the degree of goal achievement will not succeed.

But also against the background that systems will get even more diversive the aims of integrated, and responsive systems and school-based and/or company-based provisions and their governance and funding to foster excellence, inclusion and effectiveness are an outstanding challenge. Common parameters and a close exchange of expertise and experience seem to be a necessary prerequisite for making common progress here. However, beside these development needs innovative ideas were addressed and introduced to the Discussion.

*Fostering mobility in VET*

So promoting mobility of apprentices and young professionals is a challenge for the now well-established mobility tools due to the more complex starting position. While it is known that longer periods of exchange create higher learning impact, the interests of sending companies are more likely to favour shorter absences. For (young) professionals or persons in reskilling-programmes, in turn, there are additional questions about the cost of living while being abroad, which can not be adequately covered by established support and funding.

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<sup>15</sup> Bachmann, slide 3

However, mobility was not the only topic raised in relation to the already established European tools. These instruments, which operate at different levels, are considered as helpful tools to promote just like mentioned before mobility but also transparency and to stimulate political and professional exchange.

#### *Broader involvement of knowledge providers*

A field of development that was mentioned in several places in the conference was the broad integration of stakeholders and here in a special those of the learners. This was not surprising mentioned in the panel of practitioners (including learners associations and teachers/trainers), but also by demonstrating methodologies for finding new policy approaches.<sup>16</sup> To involve currently not or underrepresented knowledge providers and interactive workshop setting are a way to help thinking out of the box were presented as successful.

#### *„Centres of Vocational Excellence“*

One concrete suggestion made by the representative of the European Commission, namely to set up trans-national „Centres of Vocational Excellence“ or, more specifically, to promote their development, has potential to address several of the challenges identified for future VET.<sup>17</sup> Such Platforms of Centres of Vocational Excellence brought into play by the European Commission would be a structural innovation which - on the condition that they are designed accordingly - could positively influence different fields of development.

For example, local and supraregional co-operation between vocational and higher education institutions could be promoted, the increased involvement of learners in educational planning and management, the focussing on quality assurance and responsiveness (using local experience as well as labor market intelligence) or fostering mobility of learners and teachers or trainers between partners of such platforms.

As an element of these platforms, stocktaking could be a fundamental part of any (local, regional, supraregional, national or European) activity, focusing primarily on the expertise of local actors and available information, complemented by inquiry, the demands and needs in relation to VET programmes and appropriate services and support systems (guidance and counselling, ...).

<sup>16</sup> Leimüller, slide 8ff

<sup>17</sup> Bachmann, slide 9-10

However, these platforms also might be able to set a new framework for dealing with further issues raised during the conference, such as:

- "whether a future of VET systems can or should be thought of without providers?": stressing how they can be helped to respond to the pressures for rapid change and diverts attention from the political level towards concrete educational planning and the teaching and learning level.
- „New learning environments“: could be promoted, monitored and evaluated through cooperative and strategic excellence cluster
- „How can VET research be further improved?“: This could take place for practical, socially relevant and yet independent research contributes to the elucidation of the complex conditions of vocational learning processes, because it represents a standard element of such platforms
- “How to ensure inclusion through education and training for all?”: This can be tackled through European co-operation between the all national Centres of Vocational Excellence and their networks to ensure that social cohesion and wealth is accessible for all Europeans.

## CONCLUSIO - FOUR CRUCIAL POINTS FOR THE FUTURE OF VET IN EUROPE

1. A common vision of VET despite differing structures would not only be a worthwhile endeavour especially if common strategies of quality assurance is supposed to be implemented, but it can already be roughly represented:
  - Skills and competences which ensure employability, adaptability and the personal development of individuals
  - Accessible, attractive, valued and modern provision
  - Integrated, responsive and diversified systems with governance and funding which foster excellence, inclusion and effectiveness<sup>18</sup>
2. Demanding developments in a global world increasingly permeated by digital processes and driven by demographic and migration developments cannot be countered by a strategy based on intensifying existing solutions. This results in a need of general upskilling with special tasks for vocational education and training, which will also have to renegotiate the boundaries and transitions to general and higher education and their new roles in the lifecourses of citizens.

<sup>18</sup> Background paper for the discussion on THE FUTURE OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (VET) POST 2020. Meeting of the Advisory Committee on Vocational

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3. A good balance between flexibility and at the same time clarity, reliability and predictability of VET-systems seems to be important. The uncertainty due to a rapidly changing world needs reliable partner structures for coping challenges. This applies to citizens policy-makers responsible for the governance, management and financing of vocational training. Reliable but up-to-date and reactive systems and structures on the one hand, and the empowerment of individuals not only to experience this changes as a risk, are required.
4. In volatile times like these, no knowledge resource can be dispensed for good and sustainable governance, therefore the representation of learners, teachers and trainers and other knowledge providers like companies and science should be actively pursued at all levels of good VET governance.

In conclusion, it can be stated that for the future of VET it has not been debated under the aspect of "more of the same" but in the perspective of moving forward well-established programs and measures that, in addition to individual innovations (such as the proposed platforms) and bundling or entanglement of individual Europeans Programs and initiatives appear advisable. (learners, parents, employees), but also to companies, schools or training-providers.