Using units within professional qualifications

Context for the seminar

1. The European labour market is changing. The number of high-skilled jobs is growing while the number of low-skilled jobs continues to decrease. It is estimated that by 2020 nearly 35 per cent of all jobs will require high skills and employees with the ability to adapt to change. This is happening in a financial and economic environment where young people and experienced workers find it more difficult to secure temporary or long term employment. In these circumstances those who hold qualifications find it easier to demonstrate their ability. Qualifications are even more valuable when they are built on a shared and explicit understanding. With increased job and geographical mobility, qualifications need to be transferable to different economic and education sectors; and for this to happen there needs to be transparency, trust and confidence.

2. Over the past few years three trends have been evident in the design of qualifications:

   - a tendency to be more explicit about the basis of awarding qualifications. Increasingly vocational and professional qualifications are defined by explicit and measurable standards which set out what is expected by the labour market. These standards are expressed in a range of ways and cover skills, knowledge, understanding, capabilities, competences, capacities, attributes, responsibilities, behaviours or any combination of these. In whatever way they are written they clarify employers' expectations of the holder of a particular qualification;
   - the use of learning outcomes to express what must be demonstrated when a learner is assessed. Through a clear statement of what needs to be achieved when assessment takes place, the learning outcomes approach helps employers to be more confident that each holder of a particular qualification has demonstrated similar things. The learning outcomes approach provides more precision about what a qualification holder can do, knows and understands;
   - a more consistent and system-wide approach to the quality assurance of vocational education and training (VET) and the award of qualifications.

   Each trend is helping to build confidence and trust between education sectors and facilitate geographical and job mobility. This confidence and trust can be enhanced at a European level through the development of overarching frameworks which support regional, sectoral and national approaches in VET.

3. The European instruments of EQAVET, EQF and ECVET individually and collectively support each of these trends; particularly the learning outcomes based approach to qualifications. Last year, as part of an on-going process to identify European synergies and complementarities, national stakeholders met at the National Agency in the German Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (NA-BIBB) in Bonn to consider how these instruments could enhance co-operation and support the development of high quality qualifications. This seminar helped stakeholders to consider how these European instruments could be aligned to strengthen their cumulative impact and encourage lifelong learning. The report from the seminar commented that:

    > *vocational education and training (VET) systems are steeped in tradition and inextricably linked to national economies. Political decisions determine the role of VET in the society and economy and the type, scope, breadth and currency of VET qualifications. VET qualifications for a particular occupation can thus differ considerably across countries and these differences can be aligned to policies with short term goals, for example, to cater for immediate skills- and/or labour-shortages or long-term goals, including social inclusion and economy forecasts and matters related to, inter alia, pay-scales. Thus there can be tension between European goals for enhanced comparability and national realities. Despite this, there is evidence that the principle of basing VET qualifications standards on learning outcomes is being more extensively applied even if those standards differ in scope and breadth.*

4. The seminar's participants also recognised how these European instruments are influencing the design and award of qualifications. The end-of-seminar report concluded that:

    -   *learning outcomes based qualifications frameworks are starting to become reference points for the development and renewal of VET qualifications standards at national level. Implementing the EQF speeds up processes;*
    -   *the trend to make awards and/or give credit for units of learning outcomes, for transfer and progression purposes, within the national context, is growing. The principles underpinning ECVET are generally taken into account in such developments;*
    -   *measures to quality assure processes for the development and renewal of VET standards are advanced at national level but these processes are often implicit, based on long tradition and inextricably linked to quality assured processes at many different levels. EQAVET co-operation processes are achieving success in improving the transparency and comprehensibility of national quality assurance systems.*

5. Alongside the use of learning outcomes, the creation of units plays a central role in the design of many qualification systems in Europe. Units, sometimes called modules or components in the higher education sector, provide a way of dividing qualifications. Units, which are expressed in terms of learning outcomes, offer learners the opportunity to complete part of a qualification as well as the ability to gather credit over time in a number of locations and from a range of training providers. Units, which can be used with formal, non-formal and informal learning, assist learners to be more mobile as well as providing shorter, more focused training which encourages lifelong learning. However there is a need for more clarity in the

design of units which are based on learning outcomes[1]. The 2012 seminar builds on the conclusions and reflections in Bonn in 2011 and provides an opportunity for national and regional stakeholders to consider how units support employability, improve access to the labour market, improve the mobility of learners, and support learners' progression to higher VET and higher education.

6. The 2012 seminar will focus on the use of units in relation to EQAVET, EQF, ECVET and the European Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (ECTS) used by the higher education sector. The seminar will help participants to consider the synergies between these European instruments and to learn from each other's experiences. It will also identify where there is a shared understanding of the use of units within professional qualifications, and identify common questions for the European networks that support EQAVET, EQF, ECVET and ECTS to consider.

Introduction to the European Instruments and Units

7. EQAVET, EQF and ECVET are based on Recommendations from the European Parliament and Council. In each case, in line with the principles of subsidiarity, Member States are invited to establish systems and approaches which take account of European developments. Two of these instruments focus solely on vocational education and training:

    - EQAVET[2] invites Member States to establish a quality assurance system that aligns with the European Quality Assurance Framework. This Framework includes a four-stage quality assurance cycle (plan, implement, evaluate and review) which can also inform the approach taken by VET providers. Supported by a set of indicators and indicative descriptors, the Framework sets out how the effectiveness of VET could be described and measured;
    - ECVET[3] creates a European system to support the transfer, recognition and accumulation of credit. Central to this system is the use of units. These enable VET learners to progressively achieve qualifications based on credit which is awarded when the learning outcomes for each unit are demonstrated. By making it easier to transfer and recognise learning, training and qualifications does not have to be repeated when individuals move to another country or institution.

8. The EQF recommendation covers both vocational and higher education. It[4] provides a framework to assist understanding and comparisons between national qualifications systems. All new qualifications issued from 2012 should carry a reference to one of the eight EQF levels. EQF serves as a translation device to make qualifications more easily understood across different countries and systems in Europe, and thus promotes lifelong learning and mobility for those who study or work abroad.

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[1] Cedefop (2012). *The development of* ECVET *in Europe.* Luxembourg: Publications Office.
[2] Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (2009/C 155/01)
[3] Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (2009/C 155/02)
[4] Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (2008/C 111/01)

9. Since the adoption of each Recommendation there has been significant progress in implementation. By September 2012, 23 countries had set up ECVET coordination points[5], there was a designated EQF coordination point in all countries[6], and 23 countries had established a national reference point for EQAVET[7]. **[these numbers will need to be confirmed]**

10. The basis for the introduction of ECTS is different. It was originally set up in 1989 as a pilot scheme within the Erasmus programme to facilitate the recognition of study undertaken abroad. ECTS is used as a credit system throughout the European Higher Education Area[8] which includes all those countries engaged in the Bologna Process (currently more than 45) - most Bologna countries have adopted ECTS by law. This system is based on the workload students need to undertake in order to achieve the expected learning outcomes. This enables knowledge, skills and competences gained in contexts other than formal higher education (e.g. non-formal or informal learning) to be assessed and recognised in the award of a qualification. If students complete work placements or internships at home or abroad as part of their programme (or as part of a component/unit/module of study within the programme) then the learning outcomes for this activity will be established and the students will gain credit for their work. ECTS uses two different approaches and definitions of learning outcomes. They can either be described in terms of a threshold which shows the minimum requirements to obtain a pass; or they can describe the typical or expected level of achievement of successful learners. When the typical level is higher than the minimum, this second definition sets higher expectations than the first definition.

11. Each of the European instruments has the potential to benefit from using units. While at first glance the links between units and the credit based system of ECVET look strongest, there are clear connections to the EQF and EQAVET Recommendations and the development of ECTS:

   - the EQF links countries' national qualifications systems to a common European reference framework. Individuals and employers are able to use the EQF to better understand and compare the qualifications levels of different countries and different education and training systems. The EQF uses learning outcomes as the basis for describing levels rather than learning inputs such as the length of study, the type of institution or the number of assessments. The development of units offers one way of designing qualifications for a national qualifications framework (NQF) and makes it easier to meet the criteria[9] for linking a NQF with the EQF;
   - the EQAVET framework comprises a quality assurance and improvement cycle which is equally applicable at the "VET-system, VET-provider and

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[5] Data from the ECVET team in the European Commission, April 2012.

[6] http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/about_en.htm

[7] Data collected by June 2012 in line with the 2011 EQAVET Secretariat's survey. Those countries with a national reference point include Member States and other European countries.

[8] The EQF initiative is closely related to the qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area: the two frameworks are compatible and their implementation is coordinated.

[9] Referencing national qualification levels to the EQF - European Qualifications Framework Series: Note 3 *http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/note3_en.pdf* One of the ten criteria for referencing NQF to EQF is the expectation that the national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer(s) to the national qualifications framework or system and are consistent with the relevant European principles and guidelines.

qualification-awarding level[10]." The Framework can be used to cover the design, award, recognition and validation of whole qualifications, parts of qualifications or units within qualifications. Developing and using a standardised and consistent approach to the quality assurance of units gives learners and employers more confidence. Trust in the use of units, as well as transparency can be enhanced through the adoption of guidance on quality assurance at a national, regional or sectoral level. In many situations such an approach is in line with the EQAVET framework;

- the basis for the award of credit in the higher education and VET sectors differs[11]. However there are clear synergies between the use of units in the VET system and the use of modules or components in the higher education sector. Increasingly learners move between different parts of the education system. Developing a shared understanding of the two approaches enhances mobility opportunities and allows graduates to more easily pursue professional vocational training, VET students to access higher education courses, and learners on higher VET courses to have their achievements recognised by both the VET and higher education sectors.

Background information

12. A unit is part of a qualification and includes a coherent set of knowledge, skills and competence which can be assessed and validated. Units can be combined in many ways to create qualifications – it is this flexibility that makes them attractive to learners and employers. Units can be as large or as small as required; qualifications can include one, two, four, eight or as many units as is required; units can be compulsory for a qualification (a core unit), optional from an agreed list, or selected from any unit that is available (free choice unit). At their simplest a qualification could, for example, comprise any of the following combinations of units:

- four units;
- two core units plus two optional units from a pre-determined list;
- two core units plus one optional unit from a pre-determined list plus one other unit;
- one large unit plus two smaller units;
- one unit which corresponds to the qualification;
- one very large unit plus one optional unit from a pre-determined list.

13. The way in which units are combined to make qualifications is very important – the "rules of combination" determine how each qualification is designed – and many stakeholders will want to be involved in designing and agreeing these rules.

> *Units enable progressive achievement of qualifications through the transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes. They are subject to assessment and validation which verify and record that the learner has achieved the learning outcomes expected. Depending on the existing regulations, units may be common to several qualifications or specific to one particular qualification. Units are accumulated in line with the requirements to achieve qualifications. These re-quirements may be more or less restrictive depending on the tradition and*

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[10] Paragraph 11 of the EQAVET Recommendation
[11] ECVET awards credit based on learning outcomes, ECTS awards credit based on hours of study

practice of the qualifications system and the way qualification standards are designed.[12]

14. Units can form the basis of qualifications within any NQF; and they can vary in size, level and outcomes. Expressing qualifications in terms of units (even when the unit corresponds to the qualification) provides opportunities for learners to demonstrate the learning outcomes and accumulate credit at their own pace. When qualifications are comprised of a collection of units[13] learners' achievements can be recognised more easily. As each unit's learning outcomes provide the basis for assessment, learners also have access to more information about assessment. This helps them to understand better the likely result (or grade) from completing their qualification.

15. As part of the process of placing qualifications on any NQF, consideration is given to the level of each qualification. This provides transparency for learners and employers, and meets one of the criteria[14] for linking an NQF to the EQF. Once the level of each qualification has been agreed, qualifications in the NQF can be compared with others that are described by the EQF which range from basic (Level 1) to advanced (Level 8)[15]. The ECVET Recommendation does not define whether units should have a level or not. In practice, there are qualification systems where each unit is assigned a level (not necessarily the same level as the qualification) and others where levels are only assigned to a qualification.

16. Alongside the use of units, learning outcomes and information about levels, credit can help employers and learners understand more about a qualification. Credit is assigned when a learner successfully demonstrates the learning outcomes of the unit. In some systems this credit is quantified and allocated to a unit. In these systems the allocation is based on a convention which attributes credit with a value of 60 to the learning expected to be achieved in a year of formal full time VET. In a similar way, the higher education sector assigns 60 ECTS credits[16] to a student's workload as part of a formal programme which lasts for a typical full-time academic year.

17. Once units are established and used, learners can take advantage of the flexibility they offer – whether this is in terms of mobility (by completing units in different countries or at different VET providers), progression to other sectors (by using credit from completed units) or through progression to higher level VET qualifications or learning. Learners are also able to complete part of a qualification or individual units e.g. a learner could complete a unit in a foreign language, or a unit in finance to meet new regulatory requirements, or a unit in engineering to understand new technical

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[12] http://www.ecvet-team.eu/sites/default/files/ecvet_qna_web_21_04_2010_11.pdf

[13] This is achieved by either creating units through dividing an existing qualification or by creating a qualification through combining existing units.

[14] Referencing national qualification levels to the EQF - European Qualifications Framework Series: Note 3 *http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/note3_en.pdf* One of the ten criteria for referencing NQF to EQF is the expectation that the national quality assurance system(s) for education and training refer(s) to the national qualifications framework or system and are consistent with the relevant European principles and guidelines.

[15] The higher education sector allocates a level to a qualification based on the Dublin Descriptors. These *offer generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities associated with qualifications that represent the end of each of a Bologna cycle. They are not meant to be prescriptive; they do not represent threshold or minimum requirements and they are not exhaustive; similar or equivalent characteristics may be added or substituted. The descriptors seek to identify the nature of the whole qualification.*

[16] ECTS Users' Guide, http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/ects/guide_en.pdf

developments or techniques, or a unit that had been designed to support a mobility programme, or a unit in an unrelated discipline which supports an employee's redeployment or retraining. In each situation the learner completes what they or their employer needs – they do not take the whole qualification. This ability to match training with the needs of learners provides flexibility and encourages lifelong learning.

18. Alongside the advantages of units, there are a number of practical constraints which can inhibit their use: e.g.

- training providers often prefer to train or teach large groups of learners in order to achieve economies of scale. Offering too much choice for learners, in terms of units, can make the training provision uneconomic. A similar constraint operates for work-based learning where employers can struggle to offer training which covers the full range of units;
- sophisticated and sometimes expensive systems need to be established in order for learners' achievements to be validated and recognised, and used to inform subsequent learning. For training organisations (including higher education), the accreditation of prior learning can be technical, time-consuming and subject to learners' appeals;
- validating and recognising achievements from units provided by the informal or non-formal sector can create problems for those who award qualifications. For awarding organisations to have confidence in the learning outcomes from these units, they often require extensive quality assurance processes to be in place;
- the development and approval of units takes time and a considerable investment from stakeholders. If units are optional, their take-up is uncertain and the effort involved in their design and quality assurance may not be justified;
- if units are too specialised, learners may not gain the breadth of skills and competences they need for a career in a sector e.g. a unit which specialises in hygiene in the 'burger industry' may not provide as much breadth as a more generalised unit that covers hygiene in the catering industry. While some learners are very clear of their career intentions and are happy to specialise, others are less certain about their future.

These practical problems suggest there is a balance to be struck between choice, the workload involved in developing units and the needs of training providers and employers. Too many units can create unmanageable systems: too few prevent the system from genuinely meeting the needs of learners and employers

19. Within ECVET there is an agreed minimum structure for a unit which includes:

- its title;
- reference to the qualification, including its EQF level and, where appropriate, the national qualifications framework level and the ECVET points (if they are used in the system) associated with the qualification;
- the learning outcomes;
- the procedures and criteria for assessing these learning outcomes;
- where relevant, the length of time of the unit's validity.

As these are minimum expectations, there are qualification systems where more detail is provided on units, e.g. the level of the unit.

Focus of the seminar

20. The 2012 seminar will focus on the use of units within professional qualifications. It will examine how units can be used to support learners – in relation to employability and employment in the labour market, and in relation to mobility and progression to higher levels of VET and higher education. In an increasingly competitive and less secure labour market, it is important to design qualifications that maximise the benefits to learners as well as helping to ensure their training and development meets the needs of employers.

21. The seminar has been organised around three sessions which consider issues relating to quality and how this can be enhanced through the use of quality assurance. Each session will begin with a presentation which raises general issues through the examination of a specific case study (see annexe A for more details). The presentation will be followed by discussions in four parallel workshops where participants will be invited to consider the main theme of the session. The three sessions will focus on the following:

   - Session 1 – Using units to support the mobility of learners
     This Italian case study considers how staff in the personal and social care sector can use their experience and learning in one context in another country.
   - Session 2 – Using units to support learners' progression to higher VET and higher education
     This French case study looks at how a Level 5 qualification can be designed to meet the needs of both the higher education and vocational education sectors.
   - Session 3 – Using units to support learners' employability and access to the labour market
     This Dutch case study examines the role and responsibility of employers and their representatives in the design of a Level 3 qualification in the retail sector.

22. Designing units so they can be as good as possible requires the strong involvement of stakeholders[17], particularly employers, as well as reliable, consistent and transparent quality assurance processes. Central to the development of qualifications based on units is the need for everyone to be confident about the learning outcomes, and, where appropriate, the level of the unit, the credit associated with the unit and the assessment arrangements. High levels of trust make it easier for qualifications to be based on units, for qualifications to be added to the NQF and for the NQF to be matched to the EQF. The use of systematic and system-wide quality assurance processes, e.g. as set out in the EQAVET Recommendation, help to give employers and learners confidence that their training will be as described and meet their expectations.

23. The language of units and qualifications, both in the VET and higher education sectors can be confusing. It can be easy to misunderstand a technical term or

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[17] A large number of stakeholders will be interested in the design of units. Typically this includes social partners, employers, VET providers, ministries of labour and/or education, national and regional representative groups, research institutions, teaching staff and learners.

phrase. To avoid ambiguity and make conversations more productive, we propose to use the following definitions of key terms during this seminar. These are expressed in everyday language, rather than being formally-agreed definitions. They should aid our discussions over the two days:

- a <u>unit</u> is part of a qualification and comprises a coherent set of knowledge, skills and competence which can be assessed and validated;
- a <u>component</u> is a generic name for part of a qualification – sometimes this equates to a unit, a module, a work placement, a series of practical activities or time spent abroad. It is more frequently used in the higher education than the VET sector;
- in the VET system a <u>module</u> is part of a training programme. It could be the same as a unit, it could be part of a unit or it could represent two or more units. In the higher education sector a <u>module</u> is another name for a unit;
- a <u>training programme</u> comprises a set of learning activities such as a work placement, project work, lectures, tutorials etc. It is usually based on a curriculum which specifies the learning objectives, content and assessment methods etc. A training programme could correspond to one unit, a number of units or part of a unit;
- <u>credit</u> is assigned when the learning outcomes of a unit have been assessed and successfully demonstrated;
- <u>learning outcomes</u> set out what a learner knows, understands and is able to do once they successfully complete a period of training or learning;
- <u>assessment</u> establishes the extent to which a learner has attained particular knowledge, skills and competence;
- <u>validation</u> confirms that the assessed learning outcomes correspond to what is required for a unit or a qualification;
- <u>recognition</u> is the official process of awarding a unit or qualification;
- <u>quality</u> is the extent to which VET provision meets a set of requirements**.** If these requirements are met, high or excellent quality is achieved. If all the requirements are not met, a low or poor level of quality is achieved;
- <u>quality assurance</u> is a systematic approach to ensuring the outcomes of VET provision are of high quality. Quality and quality assurance are not the same e.g. individual VET providers could produce high quality outputs within a regional or national quality assurance system which is underdeveloped;
- <u>accumulation</u> is the process of adding the achievement from one unit to another in order to gain a qualification;
- <u>transfer</u> occurs when a VET provider recognises a learner's achievement which has been assessed by another provider;
- <u>competence</u> is the proven ability to transfer learning into practice.

Questions to be considered during the seminar

24. The central question for the seminar is "how can units support learners?" This question will be explored from four perspectives, from those:

- who are in, or wish to enter, the labour market;
- who are, or wish to be, mobile;
- who wish to use part of a qualification in order to support subsequent learning in another sector or occupational area;
- who wish to progress their learning:
  - ➢ to higher levels of VET or higher education;

> ➢ from higher education to higher levels of VET;
> ➢ from one VET qualification to another.

25. In exploring units from these perspectives, the seminar will consider:

- how best to involve stakeholders in designing the "rules of combination" for individual qualifications;
- the practicalities of using units as the basis of qualifications;
- whether there is value in using a common approach to quality assurance the design and assessment of units;
- whether more should/could be done to align the unit based systems in VET and higher education;
- what should be expected from the European networks that support EQAVET, EQF, ECVET and ECTS.

Next steps

26. The outcomes and report from the seminar will be published on the websites which support EQAVET, EQF, ECVET and ECTS. This will help to promote synergies and share effective practice and new thinking.

27. The seminar will also include time for reflection on whether there are further synergies between all or some of the European instruments. If this is the case, then the seminar could consider the development of a work plan to this effect. **[this paragraph needs to be agreed by EC officials]**

Annexe A

Session 1 – Using units to support the mobility of learners

I CARE - *Improving Mobility and Career Paths for Personal Care and Social Workers*
http://www.icareproject.eu/
Michela Vecchia - Fondazione CEFASS – Milan (Italy) http://www.cefass.eu/

Partnership
Fondazione CEFASS *Regional Government Foundation* (IT); **Fondazione IKAROS** *VET and labour market services provider* (IT)*;* **IKAROS Formazione Società Cooperativa Sociale** *VET and labour market services provider* (IT)*;* **Federsolidarietà Nazionale** *Organisation representing social cooperatives, mutual and social enterprises* (IT)*;* **CISL Brianza** *Trade union* (IT)*;* **VHS Cham** *VET and job services provider* (DE)*;* **National Qualification Authority** *Public authority* (RO)*;* **TILS Romania** *Consultancy in VET and local development* (RO)*;* **Foundation for Social Innovation Centre** *Association operating in the area of social assistance* (PL)

The rationale for the project is based on the awareness of a high number of personal care and social workers who are mobile across Europe. However the recognition of the competences they gain in other contexts (countries, institutions or systems) and learning settings (formal, non-formal, or informal contexts) is hardly achievable as they do not hold equivalent qualifications.

The I CARE project seeks to support labour market integration and the development of human capital in the personal care and social work sector by increasing interoperability among different countries and learning contexts. The project addresses the need for an experimental application of the ECVET system in order to establish a recognition model in the field of personal care and social work. There is a particular focus on the following professional profiles: care operator, social assistant, family assistant/caregiver, dental assistant and baby sitter.

Starting from an analysis of existing qualification systems in participating countries (IT, DE, PL, and RO), the partner organisations will establish a stable consortium based on mutual trust to apply the new model. The project activities currently being developed include:

- provision of an overview of the state-of-the-art in the personal care and social work qualification framework in participating countries (Italy, Germany, Romania and Poland). The focus is on the assessment of commonalities and differences between the Lombardy Sectoral Qualification System and those existing in partner countries (with particular regard to regulatory frameworks and common learning outcomes/units or competences);
- identifying a common methodological approach, based on the collection and analysis of existing methodologies, models and tools in participating countries, with the overall aim of defining the most suitable model for ECVET application to the identified qualifications;

- the development and adoption of a learning outcome transfer process which includes a common set of tools and standards for evaluating competences (learning outcomes) achieved in formal contexts, and a common set of cooperative procedures for the validation, accumulation and recognition of learning outcomes;
- testing, in Italy (Regione Lombardia), of the model for transferring learning outcomes;
- testing the model for transferring learning outcome in partner countries (Germany, Poland, Romania) through case studies relating to existing professional profiles;
- assessing and validating the model with partners in order to apply and validate the learning outcomes model from one country to another.

The I CARE project targets those interested in the development of flexible training solutions, in facilitating mobility and access to work, in addressing the need for qualified professionals in the care and social sector and in increasing transparency of workers' competences and qualifications (VET providers, labour market services and organisations in the field, social partners and authorities).

The main impact relates to the transparency of the qualification system underlying personal care and social work services, as well as the improvement of co-operation among partner countries. Testing and developing relevant tools for a steady application of ECVET principles and specifications are the main elements which could be transferred. Furthermore, the I CARE experience could be transferred both geographically (same sector in different countries) and across sectors (same methodology applied to other professional profiles and sectors).

<u>Session 2 – Using units to support learners' progression to higher VET and higher education</u>

Speaker: Sylvie Bonichon – French Bologna expert with a focus on the 'short cycle' higher education courses

Context

France offers a higher technical diploma – the BTS. It is one of many professional diplomas taken by approximately 120,000 students each year. It is widely recognised and highly appreciated by companies. This national diploma is awarded after a two year post secondary education course. It is a higher education diploma which is recognised at Level 5 on the EQF Level. However, the Diploma it offered by technical upper secondary schools rather than in universities.

As with any other French professional diploma, the BTS is organised in terms of units based on learning outcomes. These include profession-oriented units that are defined in partnership with professional organisations, and general education units. A BTS is allocated 120 ECTS.

Pilot project

Objectives:

The current initiative aims to create pathways between universities and BTS courses. On the one hand, after their first year at university, a number of students fail or simply want to change direction and join a professional course to train for a specific job. On the other hand, some BTS students decide they wish to take a longer course and leave for university. This initiative should enable students' prior learning to be recognised and be awarded ECTS for their training/learning process without waiting for the full units to be validated.

Technical aspects:

The first technical issue required a change in the reasoning behind the certification of units. There was a need to move from learning outcomes which were related to the needs of a profession (ECVET principle) to learning outcomes which related to a study programme (ECTS). The method we used involved writing a programme in a modular format and allocating ECTS credits to each module. However the ECTS credits were defined according to the relative value of the units in relation to the certification (which is close to the definition of ECVET points). The ECTS credits have not been defined according to student workload or linked to the training process.

The methods of certifying the diploma have remained unchanged in order to preserve the recognition by the labour market. However it has been necessary to link this system to the assessment of modules by teaching teams. This is unusual in France as technical upper secondary schools are not entitled to assess students in an autonomous way. (The assessment of the diploma is subject to external control.)

Implementation:

The national initiative, which started in 2011, has covered five BTS courses in different fields. The example of the 'International Trade' BTS (training for commercial assistants in the import/export industry) will be presented. In 2015, after the evaluation is completed, the new approach could be implemented for all BTS diplomas.

Main challenges

These include:

- finding simple solutions for teachers and companies but also simple and understandable solutions for students;
- changing teaching and assessment methods is not easy for teachers;
- the creation of partnerships with universities that enable students to go from one system to another (in both ways) is complicated, because university are autonomous and the criteria for recognising the same national BTS diplomas may vary from one university to another. This is difficult to understand for BTS teachers and students.

To conclude, providing information on these new mobility possibilities to BTS students and to universities is not easy. BTS students seem to favour a step by step approach, first getting their professional short cycle diploma and then furthering their studies at university. The system may appear more attractive for university drop outs who see it as an opportunity to get a BTS without having to re-start a complete course.

<u>Session 3 – Using units to support learners' employability and access to the labour market</u>

Context

The Netherlands has a unique system of senior secondary school VET. The structure of the system includes the definition of the competence and skills that a successful VET student needs to work effectively in the labour market. All jobs and work functions are described in an occupational profile which forms the basis for each qualification. Qualifications describe the knowledge, skills and competence a person needs to be able to fulfil a job or function at work. A qualification can cover several occupational profiles and each qualification is developed by a national Centre of Expertise in the respective sector.

The design of units (e.g. sales specialist qualification at EQF Level 3)

Qualifications are divided into units (covering key tasks) and sub-units (covering work processes). This case study focuses on an EQF Level 3 qualification for a sales specialist in the retail sector. This qualification is divided into five units - including sub-units such as:

- receiving and processing items for sale;
- selling, advising customers and providing a service.

In every sector, there are organisations that represent employers or have responsibility for the development of a Professional Competence Profile. They can, working in cooperation with the national Centres of Expertise, influence the content of formal qualifications e.g.

- the employer's branch that represents 'consumer electronics' added an additional unit (concerning the sale of consumer electronics) to the Level 3 sales specialist qualification;
- the employer's branch representing 'supermarkets' did not change any units or sub-units of the Level 3 qualification. Instead they decided to produce a document in which the knowledge, skills and competences are interpreted within the context of employment in supermarkets;
- the employer's branch representing 'fashion' added several sub-units to the Level 3 qualification. These included reference to management, tailoring and sector specific knowledge and skills.

As a consequence of this development, the formal qualification for the sales specialist has become a bespoke qualification which meets the needs of the labour market.

Non-formal education (Fashion Specialist)

Alongside the structures that are used for formal qualification, some employer's branches (e.g. fashion) offer students and employees a non-formal training route leading to the award of a diploma. There is a direct link between the units of the Level 3 formal qualification for sales specialist and the non-formal diploma of the fashion specialist. These links are based on agreements with training centers to provide students the opportunity to also obtain the non-formal diploma.

Learner employability is enhanced and transparency for employees and entrepreneurs is improved by describing qualifications in terms of units and involving employers.

Quality assurance

CBW-MITEX (Centrale Branchevereniging Wonen - modedetailhandel) represents 7,500 entrepreneurs in the employers' branches covering fashion, home furnishing and sport. Responsibility for training in this sector rests with BBM (Branche Bureau Mode). The director of BBM, Dorien Krassenberg and BBM's advisor, John Bres, will explain how the fashion sector is involved in the design, implementation, evaluation and feedback processes

associated with qualifications. Their presentation will include a description of units, sub-units and the knowledge, skills and competences required by the sector. Their presentation, from a labour market perspective will consider:

- the use of units in qualifications;
- the benefits for employers, employees and learners;
- the challenges and opportunities for the education sector through the use of units;
- how the use of units can increase employers' confidence in the quality of education.