



**The Netherlands Presidency of the Council of the EU Conference
'Skills for a lifetime – towards a future proof VET'
Amsterdam, 16 - 17 February 2016**

Summary conclusions

The conference 'Skills for a lifetime' addressed a wide variety of topics in six workshops. The topics cover key areas that were also discussed in the context of the **Riga Deliverables**¹. Some of them might be included and given a new impetus in the forthcoming (wider) New Skills Agenda for Europe which is currently being developed by the European Commission.

The **aim of the conference** was to make good use of the experts who are among the participants and through their contributions inspire policymakers in the relevant ministries as well as education and training institutions, and other stakeholders. While the outcomes of the two days' conference may confirm earlier conclusions on work towards a future proof VET, the Netherlands Presidency of the EU Council wants to share the conference results from the plenary session and the workshops on the three different themes, as broadly as possible.

The **results of the conference** were translated into a document called "*Stepping Stones towards a future proof VET*", to be shared with VET stakeholders in Brussels and throughout Europe. These can be found on the Presidency website, together with an interactive magazine about the conference², which gives an overview of the conference in the actual structure per theme, containing links to films and speeches contained in the programme. The following summary of our vision on the outcomes reflecting the Stepping Stones will also be brought to the attention of EU Education ministers, when they meet in the Education, Youth, Culture and Sports Council (EYCS) on the 30th of May 2016.

I. Excellence in VET: flexible solutions in a changing labour market

Structural cooperation between VET, industry and research can boost economic growth, international competitiveness and personal development. VET contributes to innovation in many ways: VET graduates are often the ones who apply new technologies in their work (human capital aspect). Also, by including practical knowledge in the innovation process, the

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/vocational-policy/doc/2015-riga-conclusions_en.pdf

² <https://issuu.com/magazineonthespot/docs/mots-skills4lifetime-issuu>

application in industry is optimised and speeded up. In order to stimulate innovation and quality of education and improve employability and the quality of VET education, companies, VET schools and research institutions should work together in sectoral and regional partnerships right **from the start**, from research to production and business application.

Links between innovation, VET and industry

How to initiate, organise and maintain **innovational partnerships** between VET and industry? How to involve small- and medium sized enterprises (SME's) and other social partners effectively in these partnerships?

First of all, it is important that there is a focus on **regional and sectoral level**. Stakeholders at regional and sectoral level can initiate triple helix platforms to take up their most urgent common challenges. National and European support and facilitation can stimulate this development. Special attention is requested for promising cross-overs between industrial sectors, and for the inclusion of SME's. Schools should become more entrepreneurial and provide agents of change who are able to connect with partners beyond their usual scope. Students should become better prepared for their work placements at school, which will stimulate both ambitious apprenticeships as well as SME participation.

Facilitating excellent students and inclusion: learning from Europe's diverse educational systems

There is a high degree of **diversity in education systems** in Europe. Each system has its own strengths and challenges. There is no such thing as a 'perfect' European education system that fits all Member States equally well. How can Member States improve their systems in such a way that it provides better chances for all of its students to realize their potential?

Educational system characteristics may enhance certain educational outcomes, while impeding others at the same time. Moreover, trade-offs may occur between excellence and inclusion in education. Therefore, an **integrative perspective** is needed when evaluating educational systems and outcomes. An integrative evaluation model of educational system characteristics and outcomes could serve as a tool for dialogue in cross country comparisons facilitating the assessment of potentials and pitfalls of educational systems at the national level across Europe.

II. Facilitating careers through VET: Lifelong learning for Lifelong Employability

In subsequent stages of life, people bring different sets of experiences to the labour market. Personal circumstances also change over lifetime, leading to different labour market orientations and perspectives. At the same time, the labour market itself is in a state of flux. How do we connect the dynamics of the labour market with career and lifetime developments? How could VET providers contribute? The need for lifelong learning is already high but will increase further. What is needed in this situation?

Firstly, a **qualifications framework** and corresponding set of training programmes is needed to facilitate every adult citizen at any skill level at any time in his/her career to keep up with developments in the labour market. This requires accessible, flexible and tailor-made training offers, (regional) arrangements between government, business and education for adequate guidance and quality checks. Low-skilled and older workers making less use of training than higher-skilled and younger workers need focused attention. Especially these groups need also guidance and comprehensive arrangements to validate non-formal and informal learning.

Secondly, more **emphasis should be put on SME's** and more specifically on the more vulnerable lower educated and elderly employees within those SME's. It is of great importance that possibilities for informal learning in SME-companies are improved. Building a learning culture in SME's and personal career guidance will therefore be key to reach those groups. Education – notably VET - should also pay more attention to entrepreneurial skills.

Thirdly, training infrastructures must be open and accessible to all workers regardless of their employment contract. The financing of lifelong learning requires attention as well. Every adult individual should have **access to lifelong learning** without financial hindrances. Bringing regional and sectoral stakeholders together in programmatic and financial cooperation could be a successful approach, while it is crucial to guarantee a long term commitment from all stakeholders for such partnership.

III. Internationalisation in VET inside and outside Europe

Studies and the experiences of parents, teachers and students reveal that international experience in vocational education generates skills and contributes to excellence, and thus to the employability of VET students in the labour market. Furthermore, the resulting transversal, “21st century” skills will be used by students during their entire career. internationalisation of VET can therefore **contribute to its excellence**. However, international mobility and exchanges are relatively limited in VET. How can internationalisation in VET be boosted, helped by a **European approach**?

Mobility through cooperation inside Europe: from theory to practice

The European ambition is set by the 6% benchmark VET mobility in 2020. While reaching this goal, several questions still need to be answered. It is essential to be aware of the difference between Member States. Their starting position (level of mobility), instruments and funding are all very different. This requires **tailor made measures** to bridge the variety of gaps towards the ambition of 6 % VET mobility in 2020. There should not be too much emphasis on quantity instead of quality, letting personal growth of students on hidden competences underexposed. Preferably, setting quantitative targets should be linked to **fostering quality**. The Erasmus+ VET Mobility Charter should be promoted throughout Europe as quality label. Companies should trust the students, and show this together with the schools. In return, they can expect students with an open and proactive attitude.

Mobility outside Europe

A clear – preferably evidence based - view is needed on why (and where, how and for whom) investments are needed in international cooperation, to be followed by the question how to make progress from ad-hoc initiatives to structural and sustainable policies. Cooperation activities are clustered at four levels: policy level (e.g. policy dialogue), targeted at individuals (e.g. mobility), operational level (market research) and VET provider level (capacity building). Important to reach out for more international, global qualification frameworks **connecting Europe** to the rest of the World.

Success factors include embedding initiatives in a wider outreach, equal levels of commitment, commitment at strategic levels and resources. **Research and good practices** (from VET or HE) are needed to define the added value of international cooperation for VET.

The existence of strong VET systems in third countries outside the EU (and help building these systems) is also in our own benefit. The **presence of international students is of great benefit** for national education and if students retain, for society as a whole.