



**Irish Presidency Conference on  
“Towards 2010 - Common themes  
and approaches across higher  
education and vocational  
education and training in Europe”**

**Dublin, 8th March 2004**

*Check Against Delivery  
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi  
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

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## 1. TWO SUB-SYSTEMS: VET AND HE

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very grateful to the Irish presidency for hosting this important conference. This is a momentous occasion because it is the first time that policy makers, professionals and practitioners from the fields of higher education and vocational education and training have come together at European level to discuss issues of common interest. I am delighted to see how readily you have responded to the Presidency's invitation – I cannot remember a better attended meeting on the subjects on our agenda. Many thanks to you all.

From my point of view, shared – no doubt – by all of you, the timing could not be better. The Council of Ministers the Commission have delivered a strong message to Heads of State and Government. The recently adopted joint Interim Report on “Education and Training 2010” is clear: if decisive, concrete and joined-up action is not taken urgently at national and European levels alike, we will not make a success of the Lisbon strategy.

Europe is progressing towards the knowledge-based economy and society. However, the available reports and indicators point to the conclusion that the pace of reforms of education and training systems must be accelerated if the Lisbon objectives are to be attained. In particular, Europe suffers from an under-investment in human resources, and most markedly in relation to higher education and continuing training.

I would like to use this opportunity to congratulate the Irish Presidency, and in particular Minister Dempsey, for the skilful handling of the Interim Report in the Council. This was a delicate exercise, led to a successful end, with a text which everybody, Member states and Commission, is happy with – and which shows the way forward toward reaching the Lisbon “2010” objective.

Both higher education and vocational education and training are of central importance for the future prosperity, competitiveness and inclusiveness of Europe, and for the active participation in society of every European citizen.

The higher education sector in Europe is situated at the crossroads of research, education and innovation; it is a central player in the knowledge economy and society and a key driver of the competitiveness of the European Union.

Progress in this sector is in some respects more advanced than in VET. More than one million students have benefited from the Erasmus programme, and the number continues to grow. But this is not enough. The Commission has set the target of 3 million by 2010 – to be achieved through a tripling of present annual participation under the new programme generation. The broad outline of a new integrated education and training programme will be soon outlined in a Commission paper.

But beyond this new ambition, there are many other areas relevant for higher education that need to be addressed. The Commission has listed them in a Communication, published last year, with issues ranging from financing, management, excellence, access, relations with the economic and social environment. A follow-up paper is planned before the summer break.

Important progress has also been made or is currently taking place under the Bologna process. The two-cycle system of undergraduate and post-graduate degrees, for example, is now universally accepted and being introduced across Europe. A mandate has been given to the European Network for Quality Assurance to work, with the higher education sector, on an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines for quality assurance.

Vocational Education and Training, on the other hand, play a vital role in providing people and enterprises with the competences and qualifications that respond to the rapidly evolving needs of the labour market. This contribution, however, is not always recognised and valued. Equal status needs to be accorded to VET; sustained efforts are required to raise its quality and attractiveness, which remain unacceptably variable. And more EU support is needed for mobility in VET: only 40,000 people per year take part in a mobility scheme financed under the Leonardo programme. Under the new programme generation we believe that, like for Erasmus mobility, we should triple participation.

But also here, significant progress has been made at the European level. Concrete results are now emerging from the Copenhagen process on enhanced cooperation in VET, just over one year on from the adoption of the Copenhagen declaration. At the end of last year the Commission adopted a proposal for a new Europass single framework for transparency of qualifications and competences; a common quality assurance framework for VET has been established; common principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning, and common principles for lifelong guidance have also been developed.

## **2. NEED FOR AN INTEGRATED APPROACH**

Important steps! What is less clear, however, and what needs to be articulated today, is how the separate contributions from VET and HE to the Lisbon goals can be strengthened by combining efforts, and by shaping a more coherent approach to education and training at the European level.

*The key question we are faced with today, is How?* Which strategies and concrete actions do we need to adopt, and which milestones should we set, given the urgency of achieving rapid progress towards the 2010 objectives?

The lifelong learning perspective is the key to creating much needed coherence. It is the guiding principle by which education and training policies must be developed. At European level it constitutes the umbrella under which policies sit, and the rationale according to which such policies are formulated. It is a joined-up perspective, which envisages the building of bridges between different parts of education and training systems, and between the systems and the wider world of learning.

It may be useful to recall at this point, with some irony, that the Commission could only launch the Erasmus programme in higher education some 17 years ago because a previous decision by the European Court of Justice had classified all higher education as vocational. Higher education and VET are, after all, the two main “producers” of qualified people for the European labour market. They share this common goal.

There is too often a tendency to treat VET and HE as though they take place at different *levels*. The reality is that VET regularly takes place in higher education institutions. As we will hear later in a dedicated workshop this reality is shaping new approaches to higher vocational training in several countries, responding to the needs of citizens for continuing professional development, taking into account their individual backgrounds, and adapted to their needs.

Learners' requirements in terms of flexibility of provision and diversity of learning pathways places a greater emphasis than ever on establishing bridges between HE and VET. Again: the theme of joining up.

It follows, logically, that the instruments, common principles and references that are developed at European level for VET and HE, in support of Member States' policies and systems, must also be connected. Of course, it is desirable and necessary that the specificities of each field be dealt with concretely and according to the needs of stakeholders.

But there are also interfaces and common targets. What is missing is that, which unites and brings them together in the service of the citizen; the single framework which stands as a common reference point for the huge diversity of actors, systems and sub-systems across Europe.

### **3. TOWARDS A EUROPEAN QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK FOR LIFELONG LEARNING**

The key challenge, to which Ministers have explicitly committed themselves in the Joint Interim Report adopted just over one week ago, is that of developing a European framework for qualifications.

This is by no means a new idea, but there is as yet no consensus between the key players – many of whom are here today – as to the character of such a framework, nor as to how it is to be implemented. The time, however, is ripe and the political momentum is mounting thanks to the recent Berlin Communiqué, advances made under the Copenhagen process, and the recommendation of the Joint Interim report.

We have the ideas, the material and the political will. Today is an opportunity which we must use to make progress on this crucial issue. I would like to see significant progress towards a blueprint of a European Qualifications Framework by the end of this year.

The development of a coherent European framework for lifelong learning is, I believe, the key to recognition of qualifications and competences in Europe. Learners should have a right to study or train for qualifications that they may use anywhere in wider Europe. It is the responsibility of us all – institutions, teachers/trainers, Governments – to equip citizens with a common currency of qualifications and competences, which may be used for the purpose of work, or further study or training, beyond the place in which they were acquired.

A European framework will allow providers from Galway to Gdansk to situate their learning offers at level X, Y or Z and it will allow learners to better understand what they are going to study, thanks to clear level descriptors, with learning outcomes and competences.

At the same time, it must be clear that there is no intention to impose on a school, a university or an employer any kind of legal obligation to automatically recognise qualifications, but the framework will allow admission officers and employers to take swift and informed recognition decisions. I am speaking of a tool for clarity and confidence: a common reference, which is enabling and not constraining; which simplifies and expands options, rather than adding new layers of complexity.

The purpose of a European framework should be to link the wide diversity of different qualifications frameworks and systems at national level, so that these different systems

and frameworks are able to communicate, and so that individuals can move between them. The framework must be flexible enough to accommodate different national approaches, and different learning pathways, while not imposing particular solutions on the national level. It should be a ‘meta-framework’.

The implementation of a European qualifications framework will have important implications for equal opportunities on the labour market and also for the development of European citizenship. It must therefore be based on the needs of individual citizens for the recognition of their qualifications and competences, rather than concentrate on existing institutional or systems-based requirements.

It must facilitate the transfer of competences and qualifications within a lifelong learning perspective, valuing learning from a broad range of settings, formal, non-formal, and at all levels, from general education and initial VET, through to higher education and continuing training.

#### **4. A TECHNICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK – ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS**

As described in the background research report for the conference we need a European Qualifications Framework, which is both technical and conceptual. The technical framework would include a classification of qualifications and competences according to a set of criteria for levels of learning achieved. The conceptual framework may include a philosophical rationale underpinning the approach to qualifications, core principles and operating guidelines, such as statements about access, linkages, articulation and quality.

The European Qualifications Framework must combine and integrate the qualifications framework being developed for the higher education area, following Berlin, and the common reference levels being established for VET, following the mandate of the Copenhagen declaration.

There are a number of other initiatives at European level, which in my view are essential components of a European Qualifications Framework which is both technical and conceptual and they are the topics of our workshops today.

First, quality assurance: the necessary mutual trust, which must underpin a qualifications framework, can only stem from quality assurance instruments which are compatible and credible. An exchange of experiences and methods should therefore take place between those responsible for developing the common quality assurance framework for vocational education and training and those responsible for taking forward the European Network for Quality Assurance mandate on quality assurance and accreditation in higher education.

Second, we need level descriptors from kindergarten via VET and HE to lifelong learning, which will guide both providers and learners. In Higher Education, there are the “Dublin Descriptors” for bachelor and master qualifications developed in this very town by colleagues of the Joint Quality Initiative and the generic and subject specific competences developed by the university Project “Tuning Educational Structures in Europe”.

In relation to the common reference levels for VET, agreement must be reached before the end of 2004 if they are to form part of the overall blueprint.

Third, Credits linked to learning Outcomes. It also stands to reason that the European qualifications framework should be linked to credits. The ECTS and the credit system

under development for the vocational education and training will of course need each to reflect the specificities of the field for which they are developed. At the same time, the need for coherence obliges us to come up with an integrated credit system for lifelong learning.

I insist that by the end of this year, significant progress must be made. The basic design and principles of a European credit system for VET must be on the table for Ministers at the Maastricht conference in December 2004 under the Dutch presidency. It is vital that what is presented to Ministers gives a clear picture of how credit transfer in VET will work and how it can be implemented in both the short and long term and how it is integrated with ECTS.

Fourth, there is a range of instruments, already been developed from a lifelong learning perspective, which must also form part of, or support, the European qualifications framework: the new Europass for transparency of qualifications and competences; the common principles for validation of non-formal and informal learning; and the common principles being developed for lifelong guidance.

In summary, these are the themes we must address in drawing up a European Qualifications Framework: the technical and conceptual elements, quality assurance, level descriptors, ECT, transparency, validation and guidance.

Our work must of course be based on what functions best within the national systems. But we should not assume that a European framework will emerge naturally as more and more frameworks are developed at national level. Progress towards a European framework of reference for qualifications will be an interactive process, where national experience will nourish the European blueprint, which will in turn provide a reference point for actors who want to draw up a new national or sectoral framework. This is the only way in which we can avoid creating built-in incompatibilities from the outset.

## **5. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The development of a European qualifications framework is our major challenge for 2004 and I have no doubt for some time afterwards. It is a challenge which faces us all, and stating the objective, as I have done, is considerably easier than reaching it.

I urge you to tackle head-on the broad array of issues I have described in your discussions today. We must take advantage of this unique opportunity to drive forward the Education and Training 2010 agenda in a more effective way than would otherwise have been possible. Without the overarching ambition and goal that I have set out, our work will continue to progress in a fragmented way, and that this will do a disservice to the citizens of Europe and to the economic and social development of Europe as a whole.

In addressing these challenges let us not forget the broader picture. The EU has entered a new, exciting, but equally critical stage of its existence. 2004 will see the enlargement from 15 to 25 Member states, a newly elected European Parliament, a newly appointed Commission, and hopefully a new Treaty based on the important work of the Brussels Convention. We will also launch into a critical exercise aimed at setting the budgetary framework for EU activities from 2007 till 2013. In times of budgetary constraints in all countries, it is not surprising that positions taken by Member states and the European Commission diverge and promise a difficult debate.

It is in this context that we will have to address the issues arising in the education and training sectors. We have been able to position the latter at the centre of the Lisbon strategy, and the Commission has rightly included them under the political and budgetary heading of sustainable development (while pointing out the importance of education and training for personal development and social cohesion). The Commission has also stressed the need for a considerable increase of budget allocations for our sectors: as much as four times the present amounts. Nevertheless, if this approach is adopted, education and training will still not take more than some 1,5% of the EU budget (compared to some 0.8% today) – not exactly an exaggeration in the light of the importance the Lisbon strategy attaches to Europe becoming the world's number one in competitiveness and education and training quality.

The overall debate on the new financial framework, the so-called financial perspectives, will be difficult. We should not wait for the outcome to see whether an extra effort, as I outlined before, is worth making. Instead, we should, through this effort, and by being successful in it, show that the education and training world is aware of the crucial contribution it can and must make to the success of the whole European integration project. Steer, rather than be steered, should be our motto.

With such a pro-active approach we are not only justifying the central position of our sectors – we will also show their relevance in the every day life of our citizens. By improving the quality of our systems, by making them more accessible, by catering for the huge lifelong learning needs, and by allowing our citizens to learn whenever, wherever, whatever and apply the learning, in further studies and/or careers, wherever in their common European home, unhampered by borders. Let us never forget -however much we must concentrate on the complexities of our tasks- that our ultimate goal must always be to serve Europe's citizens.

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear colleagues, our task is not easy. We are at the beginning of a closer coordination between two fields, which have artificially been separated until now. We will agree on many ideas, principles and approaches. We will, as usual, discover the devil in the fine print. May the broader picture, which I have allowed myself to remind you of, help us to exorcise him.

I wish you very fruitful discussions in the working groups, and look forward to your conclusions this afternoon. Thank you for your valued contribution and for your attention.