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Accompanying document to the

Proposal for a

**RECOMMENDATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT
AND OF THE COUNCIL**

**on the establishment of a European Credit System for Vocational Education and
Training (ECVET)**

IMPACT ASSESSMENT

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This Impact Assessment Report commits only the Commission's services involved in its preparation.

This text is prepared as a basis for comment and does not prejudge the final form of any decision to be taken by the Commission.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One of the main obstacles to attracting more interest in mobility within the framework of initial and continuing training is the difficulty in identifying and validation learning outcomes acquired during a learning period abroad. Moreover, the lack of arrangements allowing citizens to transfer and have their learning outcomes recognised from one learning context to another can also create barriers to learner mobility and access to lifelong learning.

This impact assessment sets out the various options Commission has considered in seeking to find solutions to these issues and for ensuring take up of the European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training. It underlines the added value a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)¹ would bring in facilitating lifelong learning and reducing barriers to mobility across Europe.

The European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) is aimed at citizens, and is intended to facilitate the recognition of their learning outcomes, in a borderless lifelong learning process. The technical specifications of ECVET are founded on practices already existing in Europe. They are based on the following elements:

- Description of qualifications in units of learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competence), which can be transferred and accumulated.
- Design of a process of learning outcomes transfer and accumulation which is transparent and enables units or parts of units of learning outcomes achieved and assessed in one setting to be transferred to another setting and accumulated;
- Establishment of partnerships between competent institutions to create an environment in which mutual trust can be developed and provision of a framework for ECVET credit transfer with a view to achieving a borderless learning and training area;
- Allocation of ECVET credit points to qualifications and to the units as a necessary and complementary source of information. These are developed on the basis of common European conventions.

Units or parts of units of learning outcomes achieved and assessed in one setting are transferred to another setting. In this new context, they are validated and recognised by the competent institution as part of the requirements for the qualification to which the individual aspires. Units of learning outcomes can then be accumulated towards this qualification, in accordance with national, sectoral or regional rules.

¹ An indicative table on specific terminology related to ECVET is included at the end of the IA

Education and training are an integral part of the Lisbon Strategy – the EU’s programme of reforms which seeks to meet the challenges of the knowledge society and economy. More specifically, the development of citizens’ knowledge, skills and competences, through education and training, is critical to achieving the Lisbon goals of competitiveness, growth, employment and social cohesion.

The mid-term review of the Lisbon Strategy in 2005 concluded that these challenges are currently not being met. In particular, in the context of this paper, major barriers to the achievement of lifelong learning and to learner and worker mobility still remain. There is therefore a need to develop tools and cooperation mechanisms which can increase participation in lifelong learning and facilitate transfer of qualifications – between institutions, systems and countries.

The purpose of ECVET is to help address some of these issues: ECVET is a device to facilitate the transparency, comparability, transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes between different learning contexts. It is thus intended to complement and reinforce existing mobility instruments such as the European Credit and Transfer System for Higher Education (ECTS), Europass and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). On a secondary level, it is expected that ECVET could contribute to the reform of national vocational education and training systems and the achievement of genuine lifelong learning.

ECVET, which is an integral element of the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme, aims to provide added value in the area of mobility and lifelong learning.

The Commission prepared its blueprint for ECVET in response to repeated requests from the Member States, the social partners and other stakeholders.

The first option considered involves taking no action (that is, no action by the European Union) and would entail allowing the current situation on transparency, comparability, transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes between different learning contexts in VET to continue. This option, however, would be unacceptable to many stakeholders and would not fulfil the clear mandate received by the Commission from the Member States.

A second option is a Communication from the Commission. However, a Commission Communication is an instrument which would not have to involve the Member States or the European Parliament in its adoption. It would therefore not generate the necessary political commitment for the creation and the effective implementation of an operational ECVET.

A third option is a Commission Recommendation under Article 150 of the Treaty, which relates to vocational training. Although a Commission Recommendation is a legal instrument, it would have no more than the previous option, as it would not involve Member States or the European Parliament in its formal adoption and so would still not generate the degree of political commitment required in order to effectively implement ECVET.

A fourth option considered is to establish ECVET via the legislative instrument of a Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council, under Articles 149 and 150 of the Treaty. This instrument would recommend that ECVET be used by Member States on a voluntary basis as a device to facilitate transparency, comparability, transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes between different learning contexts throughout Europe.

A fifth option is to establish ECVET via the legislative instrument of a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council, under Articles 149 and 150 of the Treaty. However, this alternative would be a Decision adopting principles and obligations for those Member States whose national systems are linked to ECVET. However, the overwhelming consensus among stakeholders (Member States, social partners, sectors and others) is that ECVET should be entirely voluntary.

DG EAC has compared the strengths and weaknesses of the above options, and has elected to propose option 4, which would enable the Commission – with the co-operation of the Member States and the social partners – to address the challenges identified and to find appropriate solutions.

This option, which also corresponds most closely to the expectations of Member States and stakeholders, would provide the best basis for the successful implementation of an operational ECVET and for achieving the real added value that the European dimension can bring for citizens in the field of lifelong learning and mobility, through transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes between different learning contexts.

ECVET's success in meeting its objectives will be continuously monitored and evaluated. If adopted by the Parliament and Council, ECVET would not be "set in stone", but would instead be kept under review and form the basis for further development. The Commission would monitor the implementation of ECVET and, four years after its adoption, report to the European Parliament and the Council on the experience gained and consider the implications for the future, including if necessary a review of the legal instrument. This report will be based, *inter alia*, on the results of an external evaluation.

1. PROCEDURAL ISSUES AND CONSULTATION OF INTERESTED PARTIES

Lead Directorate-General: DG Education and Culture

Other Services Involved: SG, SJ, MARKT, ENTR, EMPL, REGIO, JLS, COMM, ECFIN, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) and the European Training Foundation (ETF)

Agenda Planning/Work Programme reference: 2007/EAC/011

The proposed *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training* is part of the Commission's Legislative and Work Programme for 2007.

Consultation and application of expertise

1.1. Expert Group

In November 2002 the Commission established a technical working group on credit transfer in VET, composed of experts drawn from the Member States, the European social partners, Cedefop and the European Training Foundation. Experts were selected on the basis of their competences in the field of VET. The mandate of the Group, in line with the Copenhagen declaration on increased cooperation in vocational education and training (VET), was to “investigate how transparency, comparability, transferability and recognition of competences and/or qualifications, between different countries and at different levels, could be promoted by developing reference levels, common principles for certification, and common measures, including a credit transfer system for vocational education and training”. The Group was to provide a report outlining a basis for action in the field of credit transfer in VET, which would be used by the Commission for the launching of an extensive consultation of relevant stakeholders throughout Europe, with a view to formulating a concrete proposal on credit transfer in VET.

1.2. Consultation process

1.2.1. Consultation within the Commission

On the basis of the Group's advice, the Commission prepared a draft Staff Working Document which was submitted in September 2006 for Inter Service Consultation to the Secretariat-General, the Legal Service and DGs COMM, ECFIN, EMPL, ENTR, JLS, MARKT and REGIO. On conclusion of the internal consultation, the Commission published on 31 October 2006 a Commission staff working document “*European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) – A system for the transfer, accumulation and recognition of learning outcomes in Europe*” – SEC(2006) 1431 – which presented a blueprint of ECVET for external consultation.

1.2.2. External Consultation

On the basis of the Staff Working Paper referred to above, the Commission conducted a Europe-wide consultation of stakeholders, including the 32 countries participating in the Education and Training 2010 work programme, the European social partners, the other

European institutions (e.g. parliamentary committees), the competent European associations, NGOs and networks, the Bologna Follow-Up Group, etc. The public consultation on ECVET took place between November 2006 and end of March 2007.

Each of these consulted bodies in turn conducted consultations of their own members or stakeholders. In many countries the consultation generated a considerable amount of activity, information exchange and discussions, involving several ministries, institutions, networks, organisations and authorities, sometimes involving several hundred people. Events such as conferences, seminars and workshops were organised locally, while institutions and networks operating at European level also organised working meetings in Brussels. The Commission received a large number of requests to present the consultation document and to encourage debate at local and/or regional level, and replied positively to all invitations (around 20 in six months). In this context, Cedefop provided important assistance by hosting a major European conference for the social partners in Thessaloniki in February 2007 on the subject of ECVET.

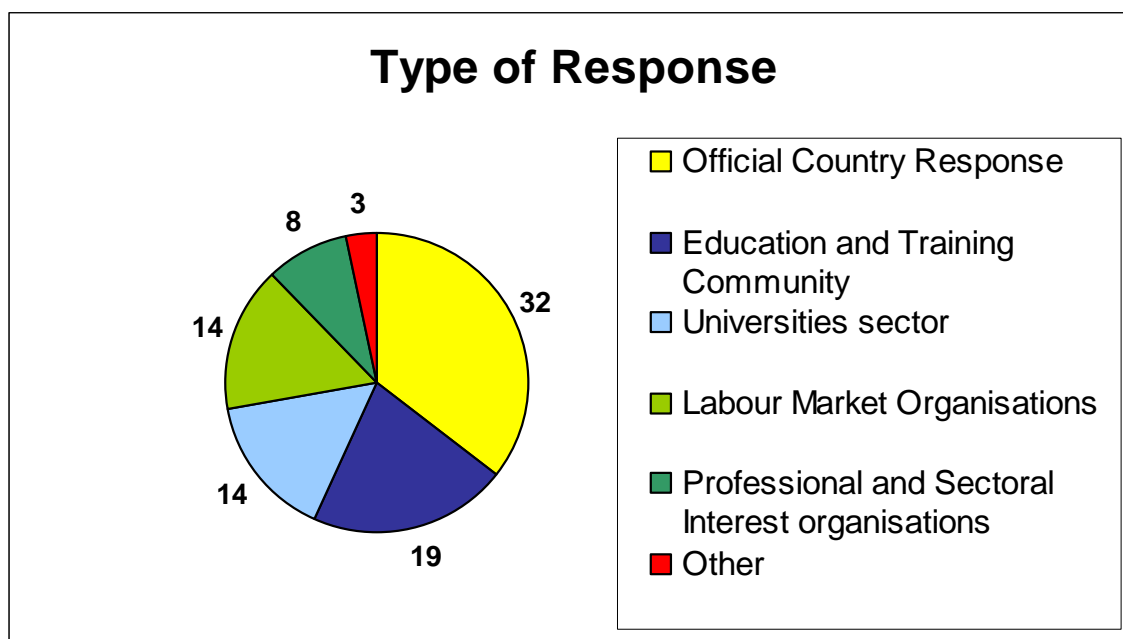
The Commission received approximately 90 responses to its consultation which, as mentioned above, in many cases reflected the outcome of extensive national and European consultations organised by the respondents. The actual number of individual organisations taking part was therefore much higher than the number of official responses. The Commission contracted a professional consultant to analyse the responses to the consultation and to produce a report detailing his findings. Further details can be found at the following website:

http://ec.europa.eu/education/ecvt/results_en.html

The distribution of replies according to participant type is as follows:

- National governments (administration or body appointed by the Minister of Education or Labour / Employment / Social Affairs to conduct the consultation at national level): 33
- Economic and social sectors at national level: 14
- Economic and social sectors and networks at European level: 18 (including organisations representing the social partners at European level)
- Higher education networks at European level: 3
- Other: 18²

² Including training providers, research laboratories and consultants; their contributions usually do not exceed one page, or even two or three lines



The format, form, readability and content of the replies varied significantly from one participant to another. In the case of national governments, the replies varied in length from two to nearly 200 pages. The longest included a presentation of the national consultation process, a summary of the results followed by the answers to the consultation questions, plus annexes containing contributions from the bodies and institutions consulted (sometimes in unabridged versions). The degree to which the replies could contribute to the development of the ECVET proposal depended on whether opinions had been developed, and whether suggestions, proposals or even recommendations had been put forward.

Since the majority of the national governments organised a national consultation process which meant, in most cases, that they conferred with many VET stakeholders from a range of different backgrounds (training providers, authorities, social partners etc), the replies reflect dominant or majority opinions. However, frequent reference is made to nuances or even actual differences of opinion between the stakeholders consulted.

1.2.3. Main conclusions of the consultation process

ECVET is seen as welcome initiative. Some national governments have no hesitation in referring to it as an instrument or even a driving force for the modernisation of their vocational education and certification systems, linked to the labour market. The replies to the consultation also reveal overall agreement on the following points:

- ECVET is necessary and relevant;
- the adoption and implementation of ECVET must be voluntary;
- ECVET must be based on skills and units of skills gained through learning;
- ECVET must be applicable to skills gained through formal, non-formal and informal learning;
- it must be possible for all types of learners to use ECVET, with a view to lifelong learning;

- the ECVET transfer process must draw on the appraisal, validation and recognition of skills gained through learning;
- credit points associated with skills units and certification can provide additional information about the skills gained through learning, thereby making these skills easier to transfer;
- quality assurance is a key factor in creating the mutual trust essential to the successful implementation of ECVET;
- the partnership agreement is an important instrument for the development of ECVET;
- ECVET needs to be linked to the other European instruments, particularly Europass.

This broad support was conditional on a number of observations, remarks, requests and proposals, which need to be taken into account with an eye to future developments. In particular, stakeholders called for further elaboration and clarification of specific points, including:

- the units of learning outcomes;
- the concepts of validation and recognition of the skills gained through learning;
- the concept of competent authority;
- the processes which allow ECVET to be used for validating and recognising skills gained through non-formal and informal learning;
- the proposed reference figure of 120 credit points associated with learning outcomes achievable in one year of formal learning.

Furthermore, consultees suggested developing some points further and, in particular, providing concrete examples of the following:

- the actual use of ECVET, from the viewpoint of the people involved and the training providers;
- the implementation of ECVET for the validation of non-formal and informal learning;
- the form which partnership agreements and learning agreements can take.

Finally, a series of questions were raised concerning the following:

- credit points (and particularly their role in the process of accumulating skills gained through learning and the transfer process, and the arrangements for allocating points to units);
- connections and potential links between ECVET and ECTS;

- links between ECVET and EQF (in particular with reference levels);
- the impact of ECVET on the supply and organisation of training.

The high-level conference entitled "*Realizing the European Learning Area*", organised in Munich by the German Presidency in co-operation with the Commission on 4-5 June 2007 also provided an important forum for the presentation of the preliminary conclusions of this consultation. ECVET held a special place in this conference, which was attended by approximately 400 participants. The conference confirmed that there is currently a broad consensus on ECVET among European stakeholders.

Discussions on ECVET in Munich were mainly channelled through a round table and two targeted workshops on key topics: a) European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) – taking stock of the public consultation and a look at the future; and b) Mobility: challenges in vocational learning beyond borders and role of ECVET. The conclusions can be summarised as follows:

- Participants gave broad support to the Commission's proposed approach, but there was also a strong call for the clarification of technical specifications and the establishment of a common glossary of all terms and concepts, as well for the development of common methodologies;
- Experimentation is the basis for optimisation. A thorough and sufficiently long test phase, rigorously managed at European level, should conclude with the revision of the basic instrument after appropriate appraisal of the tests;
- There has to be solid support during the preparation and implementation stages with, in particular, the provision of guides, standard procedures, models and appropriate documents;
- A continuous dialogue should be established between all stakeholders involved in education and training, in order to make systems evolve and converge on a long-term basis.

The preliminary results of the consultation were also presented and discussed at the regular meeting of the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training (ACVT) held in Brussels on 14-15 June 2007. The Commission proposed to the ACVT a detailed process aimed at the adoption of a Proposal for a Recommendation, which was accepted as a basis for further work.

1.3. Follow-up to the consultation

On the basis of the results of the public consultation and the conclusions drawn from the discussions with the stakeholders in the abovementioned fora, the Commission established a Technical Working Group, whose terms of reference were to assist the Commission in elaborating ECVET's technical specifications and drafting the relevant annexes of the proposed Recommendation, in order to make them as clear and operational as possible.

The Group, composed of experts from the countries participating in the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme nominated by the Member States and the European Social Partners, met three times between from July and September 2007 to examine and revise the working documents prepared by the Commission in collaboration with an external contractor

and a small drafting group of experts in this field. The final technical specifications, which are annexed and form part of the formal ECVET proposal, are the agreed result of this group's work.

Furthermore, in their responses to the Commission Staff Working Document as well as at the Munich conference and the meeting of the ACVT, stakeholders also asked the Commission to support further testing of ECVET. In response, the Commission is planning to launch a Call for Proposals under the Lifelong Learning Programme in the near future to support those stakeholders who wish to work together on testing ECVET and further developing its technical specifications at regional, national or sectoral level.

1.4. External expertise

At the end of 2005, the Commission financed two studies on ECVET, limited to the use of the ECVET system for initial vocational training in the context of European mobility in initial vocational training³. The aim was to come up with specific ideas for the finalisation of the ECVET proposal and the practical implementation of ECVET at European, regional and local levels, while taking account of the vocational training and certification systems that already exist in all the EU Member States.

Two consortia were set up for "ECVET REFLECTOR" and "ECVET CONNEXION" studies. F-bb⁴ and BIBB⁵ managed the "ECVET REFLECTOR" study, while the "ECVET CONNEXION" study was conducted by ANFA⁶ and MENESR⁷. The studies involved a large number of experts from leading administrative bodies, competent authorities, training providers, etc.

"ECVET REFLECTOR"⁸ dealt with the role and possible forms of the process of appraisal, validation and recognition to allow the transfer and consideration of skills gained through learning in the context of mobility projects, and proposed a typology of systems reflecting their degree of openness to ECVET.

"ECVET CONNEXION"⁹ looked at organising the provision of training as a framework for the application of ECVET and developed a typology of the initial training systems relating to the flexibility, autonomy and technical skills of the training providers - qualities which guarantee optimal use of ECVET for learners and young people in initial training. The typologies developed in the two projects are based on the Commission's ECVET consultation document.

³ Funded under budget heading 15 03 01 05, which was established in 2005 by the European Parliament at the initiative of Ms Catherine Guy-Quint and concerned pilot activities for an "Erasmus-type programme for apprentices". The idea behind this initiative is to provide a solid basis for the generalisation of transnational mobility in VET, on the same principles that made Erasmus student mobility programme an important part of higher education in Europe

⁴ *Forschungsinstitut Betriebliche Bildung* (Think Tank on Occupational Training, Germany).

⁵ *Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung* (Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, Germany).

⁶ *Association Nationale pour la Formation Automobile* (French National Association for Training in the Automobile Sector).

⁷ *Ministère de l'éducation nationale, de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche* (Ministry of National Education, Higher Education and Research, France).

⁸ For or more details, cf.: <http://www.ecvet.net/>.

⁹ For or more details, cf.: <http://www.ecvetconnexion.com/>.

Both studies conclude that the ECVET principles are viewed in a positive light by those stakeholders who were met and interviewed. Furthermore, ECVET is seen as a key means of improving the VET systems with a view to achieving a better match between individuals' needs and the requirements of the labour market. However, they stress that ECVET cannot be introduced and used unless it is culturally and technically adapted to the national, regional or sectoral systems. At the same time, they confirm that ECVET can be applied without calling into question the fundamental principles of the certification and/or initial vocational training systems.

Furthermore, the Commission has drawn useful conclusions (and will continue to do so in the future) from the results of projects previously funded under the Leonardo da Vinci programme (such as VQTS, Cominter, etc.) which demonstrated that an approach based on units of learning outcomes is the appropriate answer to the issue of transfer and accumulation (capitalisation) of learning outcomes of individuals who move from one learning context to another.

1.5. Opinion of the IA Board

The IA Board expressed recommendations for improving the Impact Assessment. The IA Board recommendations were taken into account in particular by focusing the problem definition on the nature of the barriers to lifelong learning and the mobility of learners and workers, by underlining examples of Member States which currently have in place a credit system or which are planning actions linked to the implementation of a units based credit system following the principles of ECVET.

2. DEFINING THE PROBLEM – WHAT ISSUE/PROBLEM IS THE PROPOSAL SUPPOSED TO TACKLE?

2.1. Barriers to lifelong learning and the mobility of learners and workers

Education and training are an integral part of the Lisbon Strategy, which is the EU's programme of reforms that seeks to meet the challenges of the knowledge society and economy. More specifically, the development of citizens' knowledge, skills and competences, through education and training, is critical to achieving the Lisbon goals of competitiveness, growth, employment and social cohesion.

The mid-term review of the Lisbon Strategy in 2005 concluded that these challenges are currently not being met. In particular, in the context of this paper, major barriers to the achievement of lifelong learning and to learner and worker mobility still remain. There is therefore a need to develop tools and cooperation mechanisms that can increase participation in lifelong learning and facilitate transfer of qualifications – between institutions, systems and countries. Increased transparency of qualifications is a prerequisite for this strategy and is necessary to the development of the knowledge, skills and competences required by Europe's citizens.

The purpose of ECVET is to help address some of these issues: ECVET proposes a common approach to describing qualifications in order to make them easier to understand between systems, and to describing the procedures for validating learning outcomes.

Furthermore, ECVET is a device to facilitate the transparency, comparability, transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes between different learning contexts. It is thus intended to

complement and reinforce existing mobility instruments such as the European Credit Accumulation and Transfer System for Higher Education (ECTS), Europass and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). On a secondary level, it is expected that ECVET could contribute to the reform of national vocational education and training systems and the achievement of genuine lifelong learning.

ECVET therefore aims to provide added value in a borderless and lifelong learning area.

The parties consulted during the consultation process were invited to reply to questions about the potential of ECVET to provide solutions to the problem to be tackled: specifically, this meant what was ECVET's main added value, how did it contribute to the development of trans-national and even national partnerships, and its contribution of ECVET to the improvement of the quality of Community programmes on mobility and participation in these programmes.

The consultation results demonstrated that ECVET is seen as an innovative, constructive and useful initiative, which should contribute significantly to improving the mobility of people and the validation and recognition of their skills gained through learning, on the basis of mutual trust and transparency, which is necessary in a borderless lifelong learning area. ECVET is also seen as the mainspring of cooperation between the stakeholders of VET, not only Europe-wide but also nationally.

2.1.1. ECVET and lifelong learning

Lifelong learning is the guiding principle of the "Education and Training 2010" Work Programme, which seeks to achieve the education side of the Lisbon goals. Indeed, the conclusion that lifelong learning is essential to the achievement of the Lisbon objectives was reached at the Brussels European Council of March 2005. In particular, the combination of technological and economic change and Europe's demographic challenges, i.e. the ageing of the working population, make the practice of lifelong learning a necessity in the Member States.

However, the realisation of lifelong learning is hindered by numerous barriers between institutions, systems and countries that are preventing access to, progression within and overall participation in education and training. Lack of transparency makes it difficult for individuals to choose the best education and training options, and the absence of arrangements for the transfer of learning outcomes achieved in various different contexts prevents people from learning or working in other countries. This is well documented in recently published research, in particular that carried out by the OECD and Cedefop¹⁰. Apart from obstacles related to financing, the OECD¹¹ points to the following main obstacles to lifelong learning:

- a general lack of awareness among potential learners of existing learning opportunities;
- highly fragmented and complex education and training provision and delivery mechanisms;

¹⁰ Cedefop (2004): Policy, practice and partnership: Getting to work on lifelong learning

¹¹ OECD (2003) Beyond Rhetoric: Adult learning policies and practices

- inflexible institutions and systems failing and refusing to address the needs of individuals, particularly as regards the transfer of knowledge, skills and competences acquired in a non-formal or informal context towards a formal context;
- lack of arrangements for validation of prior learning.

To a large extent, these barriers and obstacles can be attributed to a lack of transparency, the absence of proper arrangements for transfer, validation and accumulation of learning outcomes and incomplete systems for the recognition of learning outcomes for the achievement of qualifications. This position reflects:

- a lack of common understanding with regard to assessment, validation and recognition of learning outcomes;
- a serious lack of communication and co-operation between education and training providers and authorities both at national and at international level;
- a lack of permeability between education, training and qualifications systems.

Lifelong learning may take place in a wide variety of contexts, resulting in comparable learning outcomes:

- non-formal learning (programmes, modules completed outside the formal system of education and training);
- informal learning (self-teaching, on-the-job training, daily experience);
- different kinds of training programmes and modules of various durations, and involving various arrangements.

In addition, standardised training programmes may be pursued by different categories of learner (full-time, part-time, intensive or non-intensive training, ICT based learning, etc.).

In May 2004, the Council Conclusions on common European principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning¹² emphasised again that "*In the context of the principle of learning throughout life, the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning aim to make visible and to value the full range of knowledge and competence held by an individual, irrespective of where or how these have been acquired.[...] Identification and validation are key instruments in enabling the transfer and acceptance of all learning outcomes across different settings*".

- ECVET can be implemented irrespective of the learning context. It facilitates the transfer and validation of learning outcomes achieved in non-formal and informal learning contexts;
- ECVET helps to improve access to qualifications for all, throughout their lives.

¹² Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on common European principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning, 9175/04 EDUC 101 SOC 220 - 18 May 2004

Thus, the adoption of ECVET would facilitate lifelong learning by providing a way of enabling people to pursue their learning pathway by building on their learning outcomes when moving from one learning context to another, in particular in the framework of mobility (see 2.1.2).

2.1.2. *ECVET and mobility between learning contexts*

The lack of arrangements allowing citizens to transfer and to have their learning outcomes recognised from one learning context to another also has the potential to create barriers to worker and learner mobility.

Directive 2005/36/EC currently facilitates the recognition of professional qualifications through the consolidation and simplification of 15 previous directives on recognition of professional qualifications adopted between 1975 and 1999. This Directive also ensures the transparency of qualifications on the labour market through the certificate attesting the equivalence of a qualification obtained in another Member State with the national qualification (i.e. of the country whose labour market the migrant is entering).

However, in areas not covered by this Directive, there are still barriers to the mobility of learners and workers.

Existing studies¹³ appear to confirm that mobility is hampered by the lack of systems for transparency, comparability and transfer of qualifications. This is a problem particularly in the field of vocational and professional education and training, where the complexity of institutions and systems makes transfer and combination of qualifications difficult. This problem is exacerbated by the lack of established international co-operation mechanisms and credit transfer arrangements. The proposed European vocational credit system, ECVET, is intended to remedy this problem. The situation is somewhat better in the academic field, where the Bologna process and ECTS have resulted in some progress.

Arguing that a lack of transparency hinders transfer, a report by L'Observatoire Thalys International¹⁴ demonstrated that one third of the workers interviewed believed that a greater transparency of qualifications would encourage mobility; among managers this figure rose to 45%. The study also states that mobility would be enhanced by a better matching of supply and demand for knowledge, skills and competences, which would enable employers to judge job offers more accurately. The European job mobility portal, EURES, cites the view of careers advisers that the lack of comparability of learning achieved through their vocational education and training systems is one of the most common problems encountered by employers.

Greater transparency of qualifications and corresponding validation and recognition systems are thus required to enable learning outcomes to be transferred effectively in the context of mobility. ECVET:

- a) is in line with the initiatives taken at European level, such as the planned introduction of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), designed to improve the transparency of qualifications;

¹³ See for example Cedefop (2005): Learning by moving

¹⁴ "La mobilité des Européens", Observatoire Thalys International (2003)

- b) proposes a common approach to describing qualifications in order to make them easier to understand from one system to another, and to describing the procedures for validating learning outcomes.

Today's European labour markets offer workers many new opportunities. To benefit from these opportunities, citizens often need to be mobile between jobs (occupational) and countries or regions (geographical). Surveys¹⁵ show that EU citizens believe strongly in the right to free movement and realise that geographical mobility can improve their job prospects. In practice, however, only 3% have previously moved at least once to another country to work. The same percentage say that they are likely to move to another EU Member State within the next five years. Additionally, according to the European Labour Force Survey, the percentage of citizens of active working age from the Member States who are currently resident (but not born) in another EU country accounts for only 1.8% of the overall EU-25 working age population, which indicates low levels of worker mobility and hence limited geographical and occupational mobility in the EU.

However, the available evidence indicates that mobility can enhance employability. For example, 25% of long-distance movers have seen their job situation or working conditions improve, while only 5% have seen these deteriorate. Furthermore, for the unemployed or inactive, moving to another country or region appears to improve the chances of finding a job. 59% of those who had been unemployed in another EU country found a job in the current year. Europeans are aware of the opportunities offered by mobility as a solution to unemployment – between 25 and 50% (depending on their nationality) would be prepared to move to another EU country to find a job.

EU data also reveal relatively low levels of job mobility in Europe. The average duration of employment in the same job is 10.6 years in Europe, compared to 6.7 years in the USA. However, changing one's employer seems to be the best way of acquiring new and different skills and therefore of fostering the adaptability required in modern economies.

One of the main obstacles to attracting more interest in mobility in the context of initial and continuing vocational training is the difficulty in identifying and validating the learning outcomes acquired during a stay in another country. The need for mobility and the demand among Europeans for mobility and its benefits, point to a need for measures and instruments at EU level that facilitate this movement. ECVET is thus proposed as:

- a) a useful and practical means to facilitate the transfer and accumulation (capitalisation) of learning outcomes of individuals who move from one learning context to another and/or from one qualifications system to another; and
- b) a methodical way of describing a qualification in terms of units of learning outcomes which are transferable and which can be accumulated (knowledge, skills and competence), with associated credit points.
- c) an approach whereby learning outcomes acquired abroad can be taken into consideration for the purposes of issuing a qualification in a learner's country of origin;

¹⁵ "Europeans and mobility: first results of an EU-wide survey", Eurobarometer survey on geographic and labour market mobility (2005).

- d) a tool for providers, practitioners and competent bodies, enabling them to compare more easily the learning outcomes acquired in different countries, and to validate and recognise them.

The lack of mutual trust and cooperation that persists between the competent bodies and other actors involved in training and qualifications systems impedes and even prevents the development of initiatives to resolve the various problems posed by the transfer and validation of learning outcomes. ECVET proposes:

- a) a methodological framework, agreements and common principles to foster dialogue between the providers;
- b) instruments for developing partnerships between the actors involved (competent bodies, providers, etc.).

2.2. Political mandate

The proposed ECVET is an integral part of the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme, which seeks to achieve the education and training aspects of the Lisbon goals. The Commission prepared its blueprint for ECVET following repeated requests from the Member States, the social partners and other stakeholders.

The Lisbon European Council in 2000 concluded that an increased transparency of qualifications should be a key measure in adapting Europe's education and training systems to the demands of the knowledge society, and the Barcelona European Council in 2002 called for improving transparency and recognition methods in the area of vocational education and training.

In its Resolution of 27 June 2002 on lifelong learning¹⁶ the Council acknowledges that priority should be given to "the effective validation and recognition of formal qualifications as well as non-formal and informal learning, across countries and educational sectors through increased transparency and better quality assurance".

The Resolution adopted by the Education Council on 12 November 2002¹⁷ and the Copenhagen Declaration of 30 November 2002 on the future priorities for enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training (VET)¹⁸ emphasised that giving priority to a system of credit transfer for vocational education and training was one of the common measures needed in order to promote "the transparency, comparability, transferability and recognition of competence and/or qualifications, between different countries and at different levels".

In May 2004, the Council Conclusions on common European principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning¹⁹ emphasised again that "in the context of

¹⁶ OJ C 163, 9.7.2002, p.1.

¹⁷ Council Resolution on promoting enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training, OJ C 13, p. 2-4, 18.01.2003

¹⁸ Copenhagen Declaration by Ministers responsible for vocational education and training, in EU Member States, the EFTA/EEA countries and the candidate countries, the Commission and the European social partners

¹⁹ Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on common European principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning, 9175/04 EDUC 101 SOC 220 - 18 May 2004

the principle of lifelong learning, the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning aim to make visible and to value the full range of knowledge and competence held by an individual, irrespective of where or how these have been acquired.[...] Identification and validation are key instruments in enabling the transfer and acceptance of all learning outcomes across different settings".

Following up the conclusions of the Education Council of 15 November 2004²⁰, the Ministers responsible for vocational education and training in 32 European countries, the European social partners and the Commission agreed in the Maastricht Communiqué of 14 December 2004²¹ to give top priority to the "development and implementation of a European credit transfer system for vocational education and training (ECVET) in order to allow learners to build upon the achievements resulting from their learning pathways when moving between vocational training systems".

More recently, the Ministers responsible for vocational education and training, the European social partners and the Commission, meeting in Helsinki on 5 December 2006 to review the priorities and strategies of the Copenhagen Process, agreed in the Helsinki Communiqué²² on the following:

- Further development of common European tools specifically aimed at VET, by developing and testing a European Credit System for VET (ECVET) as a tool for credit accumulation and transfer, taking into account the specificities of VET and the experience gained with the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) in higher education; and
- Implementation of common European tools specifically aimed at VET, by participating in the testing of ECVET and encouraging its implementation.

The proposed ECVET is therefore a key tool contributing to the achievement of the Lisbon goals.

2.3. Legal basis

Article 149 of the Treaty states that the Community shall contribute to the development of quality education and that Community action shall be aimed at encouraging mobility of students by encouraging recognition of periods of study and Article 150 of the Treaty states that Community action shall support and supplement the action of the Member States and in particular, as stated in paragraph 2 of the Article, that it shall aim to improve initial and continuing vocational training, facilitate vocational integration and reintegration, and also to develop exchanges of information and experience on common issues and facilitate access to vocational training and encourage mobility of trainees. The objective of the proposal is to improve all these aspects of vocational education and training and to facilitate Member States'

²⁰ Conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council, on the future priorities of enhanced European cooperation in vocational training and education, 13832/04 EDUC 204 SOC 499, 29 October 2004, adopted by the Council on 15 November 2004 (http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/council13832_en.pdf).

²¹ Maastricht Communiqué on the future priorities of enhanced European cooperation in vocational training and education, 14 December 2004 (http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/ip/docs/maastricht_com_en.pdf)

²² Helsinki Communiqué on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training, 5 December 2006 (http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/helsinkicom_en.pdf)

efforts to adapt their vocational education and training systems to respond to the changes in the labour market and society in general.

ECVET is therefore proposed under Articles 149 and 150 because it has a clear focus on both education and vocational education and training objectives and components within a lifelong learning perspective:

- it provides a common approach of access to qualifications for mobile learners with a shared language and shared rules and principles in the perspective of a lifelong learning area without borders. This was requested by the Member States, social partners and stakeholders in the form of successive declarations and communiqués of the Ministers and the social partners (Copenhagen, Maastricht, Helsinki), and confirmed by the results of the public consultation;
- it should lead the competent institutions that are responsible for qualifications to better take into account the individuals' demand, having regard to their individual training needs and the requirements of the labour market. In this way, ECVET represents an instrument for the improvement of the vocational education and training system.

However, the implementation of ECVET is voluntary and entails neither any legal obligation nor any reform of the education system: it can be used by Member States as a catalyst for potential reform.

2.4. Subsidiarity and proportionality

The subsidiarity principle applies insofar as the proposal does not fall under the exclusive competence of the Community.

The objectives of the proposal cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States for the following reasons:

The main function of ECVET is to improve mutual trust and to facilitate transparency in order to enable the transfer of learning outcomes in the context of mobility.

As a trans-national problem this cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States, in particular since the lack of mutual trust and lack of common references and tools between national and sectoral stakeholders has been identified as one of the main problems causing the lack of transparency and preventing transfer of learning outcomes.

Community action will better achieve the objectives of the proposal for the following reasons:

- The challenges related to mutual trust, transparency, validation and transfer of learning outcomes in VET on the European scale are shared by all Member States and cannot be solved exclusively at national or at sectoral level.
- If stakeholders involved in VET from all 27 Member States were to negotiate bilateral agreements on the subject covered by the proposed Recommendation with all other stakeholders separately and in an uncoordinated way, by using specific and particular concepts, principles and rules, this would result in an extremely complex and non-transparent overall structure at the European level.

- The proposal provides a common device, a common terminology, common references and shared approaches and procedures for cooperation between involved stakeholders. These functions cannot be provided by action at the national level.

One of the qualities of the proposed Recommendation is that it enables very flexible implementation, without prescribing the priority to be decided by the Member States. Thus, the principles of subsidiarity and of proportionality are both respected, as it is up to each Member State to define the field of application and the necessary measures to be taken, taking into account its own systems.

This proposal conforms to the principle of proportionality because it does not replace or define national vocational education and training systems and/or qualifications, and leaves it to the Member States to implement the recommendation. Existing reporting systems will be used, thus minimising the administrative burden.

ECVET is a tool which is not expected to have any impact either on the national social security system or on the rules governing the mobility of persons in terms of administration, employment contracts, social security, etc. ECVET will have an impact, however, on the pedagogical approaches of each Member State, according to how each decides to develop its own reforms. The extent of the impact will be dependent on the choices made by the Member States as regards implementation (scope, speed and rate of implementation, etc)

3. OBJECTIVES

3.1. Consistency with other policies and objectives of the Union

As stated by the Lisbon European Council in March 2000 *“the Union must become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion”*.

The current proposal contributes to the Lisbon goals of growth, employment and social cohesion:

- the Lisbon European Council in March 2000 recognised education and training as an integral part of economic and social policies, as an instrument for strengthening Europe's competitiveness worldwide, and as a guarantee for ensuring the cohesion of our societies and the full development of its citizens;
- the promotion of lifelong learning is necessary for the development of a competitive and sustainable European economy; ECVET will contribute to reducing barriers to lifelong learning by facilitating validation, recognition, transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes acquired in different learning contexts;
- the Barcelona European Council in 2002 called for European education and training to become a world quality reference by 2010;
- in the context of the revised Lisbon strategy, the Employment Guidelines 2005-2008 stress the need to ensure flexible learning pathways and to increase opportunities for the mobility of students and trainees, by improving the

definition and transparency of qualifications and the validation of non-formal learning.

3.2. Policy objectives

The principal policy objectives are the facilitation of lifelong learning and the geographical and occupational mobility of workers and learners. The proposed ECVET aims to increase access to, and participation and progression in, lifelong learning by reducing barriers to co-operation between education and vocational education and training providers in different systems and between competent authorities in different countries, and by facilitating greater communication between them. ECVET is designed to develop mutual trust with a view to facilitating validation, recognition, transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes acquired by individual citizens in different learning contexts.

3.3. Operational objectives

The immediate operational objectives are to create a concrete, simple and viable device intended to facilitate transfer and accumulation (capitalisation) of learning outcomes of individuals.

ECVET is part of an integrated system which includes other mobility instruments such as EQF, ECTS, Ploteus and Europass.

Many countries have a national framework defining levels of qualifications or a classification for such levels. These frameworks may or may not be geared towards the organisation of education or training cycles. Moreover, depending on the system (or sub-systems within an individual country), qualifications may be obtained either after only one type of formal training programme or after following several different kinds of programmes, regardless of the learning pathway.

The award of qualifications is based, in some systems, on the accumulation of units of learning outcomes with associated points (United Kingdom, Finland, Sweden...) or without credit points (France, Spain...). Credit systems are sometimes developed within a broader qualifications framework (Scottish and Welsh credit and qualifications frameworks) or designed for specific qualifications (IFTS system in Italy).

Furthermore, depending on the country, there are many ways of using units and points for learning outcomes in VET. For example, in countries where there are several VET sub-systems, different practices for the allocation of points for learning outcomes may exist side by side.

Considering the diversity described above, common conventions and technical principles are needed in order to ensure mutual trust and to enable the transfer and recognition of learning outcomes in the context of trans-national mobility.

3.4. Specific objectives

The specific objective is to encourage the adoption and use by Member States (stakeholders involved and competent authorities) of common principles and methodologies for the description of qualifications, processes and procedures for credit transfer and the accumulation and establishment of partnerships, with a view to contributing to the creation of

a European qualifications' area in the field of Vocational Education and Training, which will be the basis for genuine freedom of movement for learners.

4. WHAT ARE THE MAIN OPTIONS AVAILABLE TO ACHIEVE THE OBJECTIVES?

There have been repeated requests to facilitate the development of transfer of learning outcomes and mobility across the EU, so the question is how is this to be achieved. Five options have been taken into consideration. Instrument options 2 to 5, set out below, all envisage the establishment of ECVET. In each case, the content, structure and aims of ECVET would be the same – but it would be proposed or introduced via different instruments. The options are set out in ascending order based on the degree of prescription or obligation on Member States, as determined by the respective legal instrument in each case.

4.1. Option 1: no action

One policy option is to take no action and continue with the various existing arrangements and instruments. This would mean continuing at European level on the basis of a varied assortment of national credit and transfer systems or even a situation where no such systems exist at all. There would be no reference point from which to obtain further developments in terms of transfer and recognition of mobile learners' learning outcomes. A number of countries pointed to the need for a European system that would be widely accepted and applied by stakeholders. National developments are very diverse. This is in keeping with the Member States' responsibility for the governance of their systems. Common European references, which are altogether compatible with this responsibility, will make it possible to maintain transparency and consistency between the different policy initiatives of the Member States.

The absence of any reference instrument at European level would result in greater inconsistency, little transparency and a lack of trust in VET provision and qualifications systems between the Member States, thus making it difficult to enhance the status of VET and the quality of mobility for VET learners. It would inhibit follow-up to the enhanced cooperation launched by the Council Decision and Declaration of 2002, which envisaged the development of a credit system at European level. It would mean that the Commission had not responded to the request of the Member States to develop a credit system that could be used in education and training, and thereby to support the implementation of EQF.

Cooperation between Member States on the basis of bilateral agreements would be complex and uncoordinated. Stakeholders would not have an overall framework for cooperation on credit transfer. This option would not meet the demands of Member States to foster European cooperation so as to develop common principles and conventions for the implementation of a European credit system for Vocational Education and Training.

4.2. Option 2: A Commission Communication

Under this option, the Communication would simply set out the proposals for ECVET outlined above, specifying tasks for the Member States and the Commission. The Council could choose to respond with Conclusions if it wished. A Commission Communication is not a legal instrument under the Treaty, and a Commission Communication on ECVET would not require commitments from Member States to implement this tool at national level.

4.3. Option 3: A Commission Recommendation under Article 150 of the Treaty.

Under this option, the Commission would put forward, under Article 150 of the Treaty (which applies to vocational training), the proposals on ECVET outlined above and would set out recommended actions for both itself and the Member States. However, while a Commission Recommendation is indeed a legal instrument, it does not involve the Member States or the European Parliament in the formal adoption of the instrument.

As a legal instrument, a Commission Recommendation would therefore, in formal terms, go further than a Commission Communication on ECVET, but not to the extent of requiring a political commitment from the Member States to implement this tool at the national level.

Deciding on how qualifications should be linked to ECVET (in particular their description in terms of units of learning outcomes and the allocation of ECVET credit points) is an important issue for the effective and sustainable implementation of ECVET. The implementation of ECVET needs clear commitments from competent bodies and providers, formalised at the relevant levels in each country. This requirement has been clearly demonstrated in the Bologna process for Higher Education, where voluntary commitments have contributed to the widespread implementation of ECTS. Following a testing phase driven by the European Commission, ECTS is now fully integrated in the higher education systems of most European countries.

In order to implement ECVET properly, the competent body responsible for qualifications or units, or more generally empowered to implement ECVET, should define and decide on the scope of its implementation and take a formal decision at the appropriate level, according to the national rules.

Given also that earlier related policy issues, such as the EQF proposal, were advanced via the mechanism of a Council/EP Recommendation, to move at this stage to a simple Commission Recommendation would be seen as a backwards step.

4.4. Option 4: A Council and European Parliament Recommendation under Articles 149 and 150 of the Treaty.

This option entails adopting a Recommendation under Articles 149 and 150 (education and vocational training) to establish ECVET, as outlined above, to be used by Member States on a *voluntary* basis. A Council and European Parliament Recommendation is a legal instrument, and under this option the Member States and the European Parliament would participate fully in the legislative procedure.

A Council and European Parliament Recommendation would go beyond options 2 and 3 in requiring a political commitment from the Member States to implement ECVET at the national level.

Taking into consideration the process for designing ECVET – co-operation between the Commission, Member States, EEA and candidate countries and the European social partners – and the extensive process of consulting the appropriate bodies and stakeholders at European level in the field of VET, the Commission has devised a blueprint for ECVET:

- ECVET would be supported by a set of principles/procedures agreed at European level - for example, related to quality assurance and validation of non-formal

learning. Member States and sectors wishing to use ECVET would need to accept these principles and procedures.

- It is important to stress that ECVET is not intended to take over any of the established roles of national systems or frameworks.

The principal functions and components of the proposed ECVET are set out in more detail below.

ECVET is:

- A useful and practical device intended to facilitate the transfer and accumulation (capitalisation) of learning outcomes of individuals who move from one learning context to another and/or from one qualification system to another;
- A methodical way of describing a qualification in terms of units of learning outcomes which are transferable and which can be accumulated (knowledge, skills and competence), with associated credit points.

In order to facilitate the process of transferring learning outcomes, ECVET is based on:

- The description of **qualifications** in terms of **learning outcomes** (knowledge, skills and competence);
- The expression of qualifications in **units of learning outcomes** which can be transferred and accumulated.

In addition, to facilitate the understanding of qualifications and units, **ECVET points** are used as a numerical representation of each unit and to define its weight and its value relative to the qualification as a whole.

ECVET is based on learning outcomes. When adopting the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), the Commission confirmed that learning outcomes provide the only viable basis for the descriptors. Learning outcomes describe what someone can do or what he or she knows, and can therefore take account of the diversity of qualifications systems and so offer a neutral reference point to facilitate communication between the different qualifications systems in Europe. By contrast, an inputs-based system – e.g. based on duration of study – would be incapable of meeting this vital requirement.

The use of units of learning outcomes, within ECVET, facilitates movement not only between Member States, but also between different vocational education, training and qualifications contexts. This will be a real contribution to putting lifelong learning into practice. ECVET will thus help those who wish to pursue their careers in different systems of vocational education and training and to build on the learning outcomes they have previously acquired.

ECVET can only function on the basis of mutual trust. Signing up to ECVET requires that the competent national, regional or sectoral authorities adopt the required technical specifications related to units of learning outcomes, credit points and the accumulation and transfer process, so that other stakeholders have confidence in these specifications. ECVET would not replace national qualifications systems and would not take over any of their established roles or functions.

(a) ECVET and the mobile learners: a tool to improve the quality of mobility

The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on transnational mobility within the Community for education and training purposes: European Quality Charter for Mobility²³, states in point 8 of its Annex that, when mobility is undertaken by individuals, "*participants should be provided with assistance to facilitate recognition and certification*" of learning outcomes.

A simple and operational ECVET (combined with other similar tools and instruments such as EQF, Europass, ECTS, Ploteus etc.) would support the quality of individual learners' mobility as called for by the abovementioned Recommendation. ECVET proposes an approach whereby learning outcomes acquired abroad can be taken into consideration for the purposes of issuing a qualification in the learner's country of origin.

(b) ECVET and the citizen: a tool to support learners

ECVET would facilitate the transfer, recognition and validation at national level of non-formal and informal learning, i.e. learning that takes place outside formal vocational education and training institutions, for example at work or in voluntary or leisure activities. Furthermore, ECVET would encourage individuals to resume VET activities.

(c) ECVET and the European labour market

Today's European labour markets offer many new opportunities for workers. To take advantage of these opportunities, citizens often need to be mobile between jobs (occupational) and countries or regions (geographical). Changing employer seems to be the best way of acquiring new and different skills and therefore fostering the adaptability required in modern economies. However, EU data reveal relatively low levels of job mobility in Europe. The development of a borderless and lifelong learning area for young learners will contribute to getting round the cultural obstacles to mobility of workers. In this way, ECVET– through its function of supporting and facilitating the recognition, validation, transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes between different learning contexts – would facilitate international labour mobility and contribute to a better match between supply and demand in the European labour market.

4.5. Option 5: A Council and European Parliament Decision under Articles 149 and 150 of the Treaty.

Under this option, ECVET would be established by a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council under Article 150 of the Treaty (which applies to vocational training) as outlined above.

A Decision is a legal instrument adopting principles, and would involve Member States and the European Parliament in the legislative procedure. A Decision on ECVET would be different from a Recommendation in that it would decide on the objectives, principles and mechanisms of ECVET at the European level.

It would therefore be more prescriptive in stipulating what actions would be carried out by Member States and more stringent in its requirements for compliance from the countries.

²³ JO L 394, 30.12.2006, p. 5

5. ANALYSIS OF THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF THE FIVE OPTIONS

An analysis of the impacts, both positive and negative, of the five options considered is set out below; it identifies the problems and the objectives the Commission is seeking to achieve, and defines a set of criteria against which the impacts can be assessed.

Problems identified	Objectives	Indicators
Uncoordinated or non-existent communication between different national and sectoral VET systems for mobility purposes.	Measures adopted by 2011 for progressively applying ECVET. Units of learning outcomes and credit points used for the qualifications by 2011.	Use of ECVET as Credit system (and ECVET users' guide) established to facilitate communication between systems and transfer of learning outcomes.
Barriers between and within vocational education and training and qualifications systems hinder citizens' access to lifelong learning.	Increase citizens' access to and participation and progression in lifelong learning.	Greater participation by citizens in lifelong learning. Member States' lifelong learning strategies include credits, validation, recognition, transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes.
Non-formal and informal learning are currently not receiving sufficient credit and recognition.	Increased development of systems for the transfer and the validation of learning outcomes achieved in non-formal and informal learning settings at the national level and greater use of the common European principles.	An increase in the number of citizens whose non-formal and informal learning has been assessed, credited and validated.
Mobility - geographical and occupational - is hindered.	Facilitated citizen mobility for the purposes of learning and working.	Greater movement of learners and workers between different learning contexts.

5.1. Advantages and disadvantages of Option 1: no action

This option entails addressing the problems identified by accepting a system of bilateral and multilateral arrangements between the relevant stakeholders and competent authorities without the involvement of the EU. Potential positive impacts could include immediate, practical solutions in some cases, for example in the recognition, validation and transfer of learning outcomes. Moreover, such an approach would entail little or no cost to the

Commission and would not require the establishment of European-level bodies to co-ordinate or oversee processes.

However, bilateral or even multilateral arrangements would not be underpinned by a Europe-wide set of criteria necessary to achieve the consistency required to promote mutual trust across the EU. In a European Union of 27 Member States, a system of bilateral agreements using specific and particular concepts, principles and rules would result in a complex and opaque set of arrangements. While such an approach might offer solutions in some cases, the replication of such arrangements across the EU would be more problematic. Bilateral/multilateral arrangements could therefore support and supplement, but not replace, a Europe-wide solution.

Furthermore – given that the calls for a European transfer system in VET date back to 2002 and the Commission has a clear mandate from the Member States to develop ECVET – the no-action option would be unacceptable to many stakeholders and would hinder the development of European vocational education and training systems and European labour markets.

Moreover, the European Parliament Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, when discussing amendments to the Recommendation on a European Qualifications Framework (EQF), confirmed that it considers ECVET to be an important and useful instrument.

5.2. Advantages and disadvantages of Option 2: Commission Communication

A Communication from the Commission would not meet the criteria. As a non-legal instrument, it would simply be too weak to initiate the construction of an operational ECVET. In effect, it would hardly take ECVET any further forward than the stage of discussions already reached through the 2006 staff working document and at the Munich conference described above.

A Communication would preclude any role for the Member States and the European Parliament in its adoption and thus reduce the standing and credibility of the proposed ECVET.

It would not require any commitment from Member States, and so neither they nor the Commission would be motivated to take the concrete measures for its implementation. A Communication would not therefore create the structures and systems of co-operation necessary for the establishment of an operational ECVET.

Furthermore, Member States would not be encouraged or be given incentives to reform aspects of their vocational education and training systems, in particular the development of procedures for assessment, validation and accumulation of learning outcomes.

Its additional positive impacts would therefore be limited. However, its negative impacts would be considerable. Member States, social partners and other stakeholders would be disappointed with a Communication that has only limited influence, after investing considerable time and effort in responding to the Commission consultation, participating in the Munich conference and designating a formal technical working group on ECVET.

5.3. Advantages and disadvantages of Option 3: Commission Recommendation under Article 150

A Commission Recommendation, under Article 150, would not meet the criteria. It would have the major disadvantage that, even though it is a legal instrument, it is unclear whether it would have a stronger impact than Option 2. Similarly, it would not require Member State or European Parliament involvement in the formal adoption of the instrument. The initiative would therefore not generate the political commitment to implementation at the national level that is crucial to the success and continued momentum of ECVET. Such a recommendation would lack the necessary political standing and thus effectiveness with the Member States, who have worked closely with the Commission in developing ECVET in its current form.

It is therefore unlikely that, at a practical level, a Commission Recommendation would result in Member States taking the measures necessary to establish the infrastructure or achieve the implementation of an operational ECVET.

5.4. Advantages and disadvantages of Option 4: European Parliament and Council Recommendation under Articles 149 and 150

It is expected that this option should be able to address all the issues and problems identified and achieve the set objectives. Firstly, ECVET would support vocational education and training by encouraging mobility through the possibility for citizens to have their learning outcomes transferred between different learning contexts and accumulated where appropriate in a borderless lifelong learning area.

Secondly, a positive impact would be achieved at European and national levels, for citizens and also outside the EU. Stakeholder feedback - at the national, European and sectoral levels - has overwhelmingly called for ECVET to be implemented on a *voluntary* basis. This would be the solution that is most acceptable to the Member States and would be in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity under the Treaty and proportionate in its requirements and impact.

Crucially, Member States would maintain the political investment they have made in ECVET from the earliest stages of its development, instead of being excluded from the legislative process as they would be under option 3. A European Parliament and Council Recommendation under Articles 149 and 150 would therefore be **the most appropriate legislative instrument**.

Moreover, there is a history of using such Recommendations to achieve objectives in fields related to ECVET, for example:

- The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on mobility within the Community for students, persons undergoing training, volunteers, teachers and trainers 2001/613/EC of 10 July 2001, in particular the recommended measure which specifically concerns the recognition of the period of study abroad;
- the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on Key competences for lifelong learning, 2006/962/EC of 18.12.2006;

- the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on trans-national Mobility within the Community for education and training purposes: European Quality Charter for Mobility 2006/961/EC of 18.12.2006;
- the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council 2006/143/EC of 15 February 2006 on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education (OJ L 64 of 4.3.2006, p. 60), based on Commission proposal COM(2004) 642 of 12.10.2004
- the Draft Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on a European Qualifications Framework, Commission proposal COM(2006) 479 of 5.9.2006.

In addition, there are several earlier examples in the field of education and training, including the 2001 Recommendation on European cooperation in quality evaluation in school education.

5.4.1. Impact on competent authorities and involved stakeholders.

Creating and implementing ECVET would enable better communication and cooperation between Member States' competent authorities and involved stakeholders and allow a network of related competent authorities and involved stakeholders to be established across Europe, particularly the VET providers, who would communicate with one another and enhance transparency and mutual trust. A genuinely European transfer system in VET based on voluntary cooperation would be created. Agreement on a set of common criteria and principles as well as on a comprehensive mechanism for transfer of learning outcomes in VET would foster the mutual trust necessary if a decision of one competent authority to validate and recognise a particular learning outcome is to be trusted by other stakeholders concerned. Effective implementation of ECVET would be supported by an EU-level co-ordination structure or ECVET users' group, drawn from representatives of the Member States, the European social partners and involved stakeholders.

5.4.2. Impact on citizens' lifelong and borderless learning.

(a) Increased access to, and participation and progression in, lifelong learning.

By establishing a process based on mutual trust, ECVET would reduce barriers to co-operation between providers of vocational education and training in different systems and between competent authorities in different countries, and so facilitate greater communication between them with a view to a borderless learning area. This would facilitate access to, and participation in, vocational education and training. Learners and workers would be supported in combining learning outcomes acquired in different learning contexts and so be able to pursue lifelong learning and move more easily within the European labour market.

(b) Increased validation of non-formal and informal learning

An ECVET established on a voluntary basis and based on learning outcomes would serve to support countries in developing processes and systems for assessment, transfer, recognition, validation and accumulation of non-formal and informal learning. ECVET would both support ongoing work across Europe (a majority of countries are active in this field) and

encourage the use of the common European principles agreed in the Council conclusions of 28 May 2004. In particular, the focus on learning outcomes promoted by ECVET would benefit citizens by accelerating the development of validation of non-formal and informal learning.

(c) Increased mobility for learners, workers and citizens

The effect of ECVET would be to complement and reinforce the existing European mobility instruments such as ECTS, Europass and EQF. ECVET would make it easier for learners to transfer learning outcomes acquired in another learning context into their own system. By facilitating such transfer of learning outcomes, ECVET would make it more interesting and easier for citizens to move between jobs and countries in the European borderless learning area.

5.4.3. Impact on VET and qualification systems.

While ECVET would be implemented entirely voluntarily, many Member States and sectors have already signalled their intention – in their response to our consultation and at the conference in Munich –to establish processes that take ECVET into account. Moreover, some Member States are planning the introduction of a units based system (e.g. Belgium French community) or a wide experimentation of ECVET (e.g. DECVET in Germany). ECVET is based on a set of coherent principles and technical specifications: namely units of learning outcomes, ECVET credit points and a transfer and accumulation process. Each of these instruments is an integral part of the ECVET process for consistent implementation. Some Member States have stressed that ECVET may prove to be an important driver for reforming their training and qualification systems. Furthermore, ECVET Reflector and ECVET Connexion studies have demonstrated that ECVET can also be of interest for stimulating the modernisation of training and qualification systems.

An important finding from the studies is that the stakeholders in European VET qualifications systems consider ECVET from two standpoints, which correspond to differing practical approaches and differing impacts on VET and qualification systems:

- Approach 1: implementing ECVET solely as a neutral instrument for cross-border transfer of learning outcomes;
- Approach 2: implementing ECVET to promote, inter alia, domestic reforms towards more accessibility and flexibility of national qualification systems.

5.4.4. Impact outside the EU.

Although the proposed legislative instrument would be a Recommendation of the Parliament and of the Council, and therefore only applicable to the 27 Member States, it should be emphasised that 32 countries are taking part in the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme, in which ECVET could be an important element. Some of the additional EFTA or candidate countries have been actively participating in the preliminary discussion on the development of ECVET, including via the Commission's consultation, attending the Munich conference and taking part in the work of the Technical Working Group.

The countries seeking accession to the EU would undoubtedly benefit from such early participation in the discussion on ECVET.

Potential negative impacts include the possibility that, because of its voluntary nature, Member States might eventually choose not to apply ECVET or that, in introducing ECVET, they would not abide by the established criteria and procedures and that this might in turn hinder transparency and undermine mutual trust. Other uncertainties would be the potentially slow pace of implementation of ECVET at national level, which might hinder a truly Europe-wide application.

5.4.5. Impact on the administrative burden and costs for competent bodies and institutions.

The studies on the feasibility of the ECVET system have highlighted the diversity of situations in the different national qualifications and VET systems or sub-systems from the point of view of implementing ECVET. Regarding their characteristics and specificities, the closeness of the relationship between the various systems and ECVET differs considerably from one Member State to another, and from one system to another. Thus, the administrative burden for public authorities and stakeholders will vary depending on the context.

The importance of the administrative burden will depend firstly on the existing technical characteristics of the qualifications and VET systems. In certain systems, the adoption of ECVET will be a very simple formality; for other systems the adoption of ECVET will require substantial work.

The extent of the administrative burden will also very much depend on each Member State's options for implementing ECVET, which will include the scope of the implementation (e.g. all qualifications or only some qualifications), and the administrative organisation chosen for implementation (centralised, partially decentralised or fully decentralised).

Thus, for competent bodies and institutions and their partners, the amount of administrative costs and the investment depend on a number of factors. No exhaustive data are available. For some of these factors, such as the organisation of the processes developed for the design of qualifications, the existence and the type of specific regulatory barriers, the current or envisaged implementation of credit-type systems, the contribution of each partner, and many other aspects.

The mechanisms for the monitoring and the control of implementation will be facilitated by the existence, or likely existence, of organisations which are already involved in such mechanisms, such as the EQF national coordination points. It will be up to each Member State to design the appropriate mechanism, taking the existing structures into account. Thus, the costs are expected to be low, as no new bodies or structures will need to be created for this purpose.

5.4.6. Impact on the EU budget.

The impact on the EU budget is likely to be insignificant. The work would include the organisation of meetings of an ECVET users' group and the design and dissemination of documents, such as brochures and an ECVET users' guide. The corresponding costs will be very low.

5.5. Advantages and disadvantages of Option 5: European Parliament and Council Decision under Articles 149 and 150

The Decision option would provide solutions to some of the problems identified. It would facilitate better communication and cooperation between the competent authorities of the Member States, increase mobility and facilitate greater validation of non-formal and informal learning.

However, there are a number of problems with using a Decision under Article 150 to introduce the ECVET. In general, a Decision is more prescriptive than a Recommendation. A Decision would adopt principles and obligations for those Member States which relate their national systems to ECVET. By contrast, the overwhelming consensus among stakeholders - expressed in the responses to the consultation and at the conference in Munich - is that the implementation of ECVET should be entirely voluntary and that it should entail no legal obligations. Member States and other stakeholders might object to the increased burden of obligations stipulated in a Decision. Additionally, ECVET's impact in terms of assisting the reform of national VET systems and influencing developments in other countries that are participating in the Education and Training 2010 Work Programme, i.e. the EFTA and the candidate countries, is likely to depend to a great extent on its status as an entirely voluntary framework.

Decisions in the area of vocational education and training policy have been rare, and in the main have been used to authorise financing of programmes.

For all these reasons, a Decision would therefore be difficult politically.

6. COMPARING THE OPTIONS

	No action	Communication	Commission Recommendation (Article 150)	EP and Council Recommendation (Articles 149 and 150)	EP and Council Decision (Articles 149 and 150)
More effective communication, translation and cooperation between systems.	No.	To a limited extent only - political commitment would not be sufficient.	No, because of limited influence of Member States that would not be involved in the adoption process	Yes.	Decision is a binding instrument which is not appropriate for a voluntary system
Increased access by citizens to and participation and progression in lifelong learning.	No barriers would remain; E & T systems would still be confusing and complex for learners.	Unlikely on a significant scale.	No, because of limited influence of Member States that would not be involved in the adoption process	Yes.	Yes.
Improvement of the quality of the learner's mobility by the recognition of learning outcomes achieved abroad	Not systematically; only indirectly as a by-product of bilateral arrangements	Would be patchy in application and limited in impact.	No because of limited influence of Member States that would not be involved in the adoption process.	Yes.	Yes.

Development of systems for the validation of non-formal and informal learning at the national level	Not systematically; only indirectly as a by-product of bilateral arrangements	Would be patchy in application and limited in impact.	Would probably be patchy in application and limited in impact.	Yes.	Yes.
Greater learner and worker mobility	No.	Limited.	Would probably be patchy in application and limited in impact.	Yes.	Yes.
Increased development and acceptance of sectoral qualifications using ECVET	No.	Limited - political commitment would not be sufficient.	Would probably be patchy in application and limited in impact	Yes.	Unclear at this stage.

7. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

ECVET's success in meeting its objectives will be continuously monitored and evaluated. If adopted by the Parliament and Council, ECVET would not be set in stone, but instead would be kept under review and form the basis for further development. The Commission would monitor the implementation of ECVET and report four years after its adoption, to the European Parliament and the Council, on the experience gained and consider the implications for the future, including if necessary a review of the legal instrument. This report will be based, *inter alia*, on the results of an external evaluation.

The following indicators will enable the Council, Parliament and Commission to determine whether ECVET's objectives have been reached:

- the use of ECVET by all Member States as a common tool for credit, validation, recognition and transfer of learning outcomes;
- the adoption of ECVET by all Member States as a part of national lifelong learning strategies;
- the implementation of ECVET at national level based on transparent procedures and quality assurance mechanisms;
- the use of ECVET by all Member States for credit and transfer of validated non-formal and informal learning outcomes, leading to generalised access to this form of recognition.

Annex Definition of key terms

For the purposes of the ECVET Recommendation, the following definitions²⁴ apply:

- a) "Qualification": a formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent institution determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards;
- b) "Learning outcomes": statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process and defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence;
- c) "Unit of learning outcomes" (unit): a part of a qualification, consisting of a coherent set of knowledge, skills and competence, that can be assessed and validated;
- d) "Credit for learning outcomes" (Credit): individuals' learning outcomes which have been assessed and which can be accumulated towards a qualification or transferred to other learning programmes or qualifications;
- e) "Competent institution": institution which is responsible for designing and awarding qualification or recognising units or other functions linked to ECVET, such as allocation of ECVET points to qualifications and units, assessment, validation and recognition of learning outcomes, under the rules and practices of participating countries;
- f) "Assessment of learning outcomes": methods and processes used to establish the extent to which a learner has in fact attained particular knowledge, skills and competence;
- g) "Validation of learning outcomes": the process of confirming that certain assessed learning outcomes achieved by a learner correspond to specific outcomes which may be required for a unit or a qualification;
- h) "Recognition of learning outcomes": the process of attesting officially achieved learning outcomes through the awarding of units or qualifications;
- i) "ECVET points": a numerical representation of the overall weight of learning outcomes in a qualification and of the relative weight of units in relation to the qualification.

²⁴ At this stage, definitions have an indicative value. They will be consolidated in the draft Recommendation on ECVET. Definitions of technical terms common with the European Qualifications Framework can be found in the Recommendation on EQF