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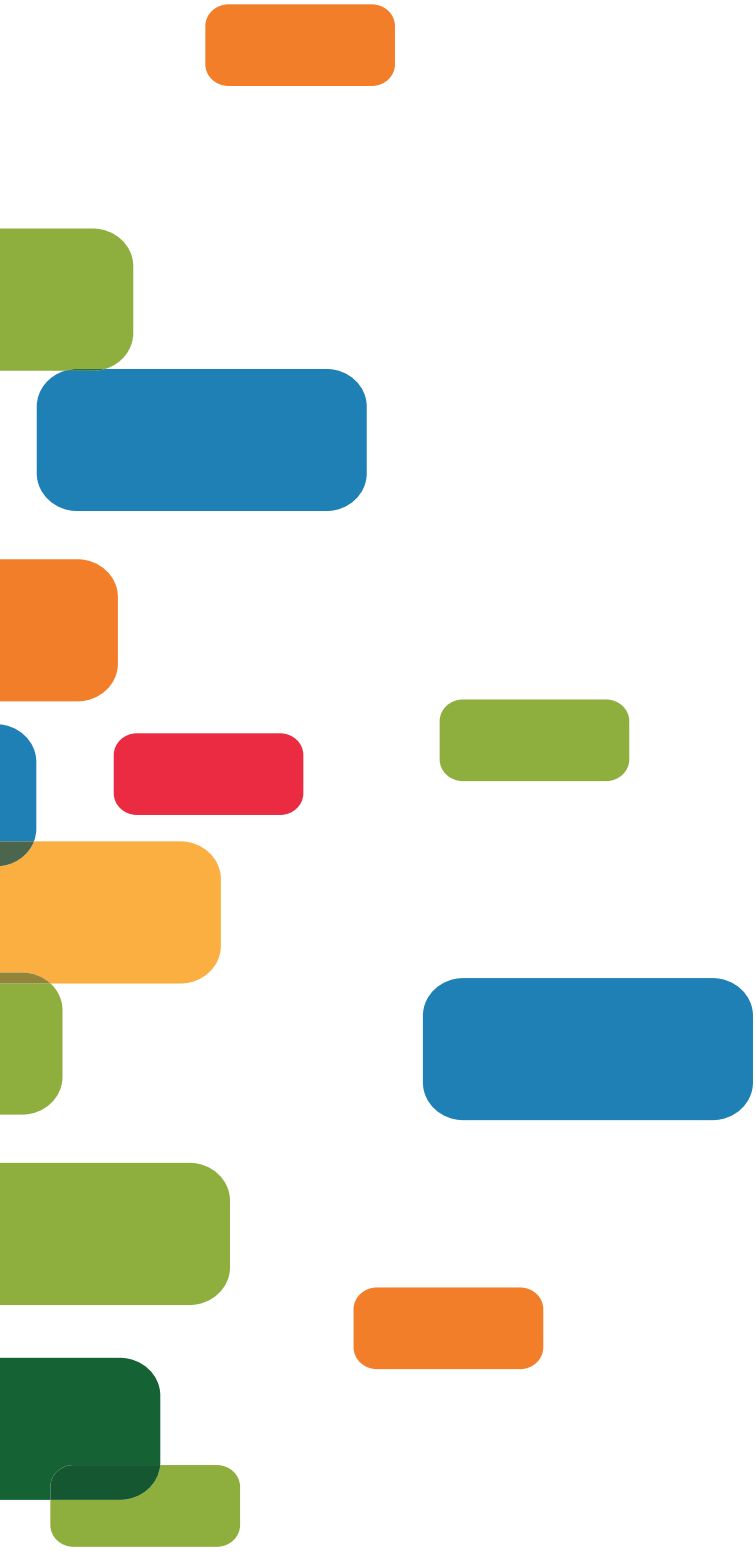
EN

Necessary conditions for ECVET implementation



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The **European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training** (Cedefop) is the European Union's reference centre for vocational education and training.

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Foreword

The European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET) is a powerful tool of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020) for increasing cross-border cooperation in education and training. It should lead to portable qualifications and transferable learning outcomes, thereby making learning mobility and lifelong learning a reality for young and adult learners. ECVET benefits from the development of national qualifications frameworks and validation mechanisms in Europe.

EU Member States have started implementing ECVET, as Cedefop's 2010 and 2011 monitoring reports show. However, there was a widespread feeling among ECVET working groups and officials in charge of ECVET in Member States that common guidelines are needed to support the strategy formulation and peer learning.

In this booklet Cedefop considers the conditions and measures that Member States need to have in place by 2012 following the 2009 European ECVET recommendation. It has been prepared in close cooperation with the European Commission, the members of the ECVET users' group, and supporting organisations such as the ECVET secretariat and the network of European agencies for lifelong learning.

This booklet is aimed primarily at education policy-makers and bodies responsible for developing ECVET in education and training systems. It is therefore potentially of interest to national, regional, local and sectoral organisations, depending on their remits. The list of 15 conditions and measures necessary for implementation of ECVET is intended to be a guide to a structured approach to ECVET implementation and to communication with national and European vocational education and training (VET) stakeholders about the progress of ECVET. It will also support peer learning and identification of further development needs.

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Acting Director

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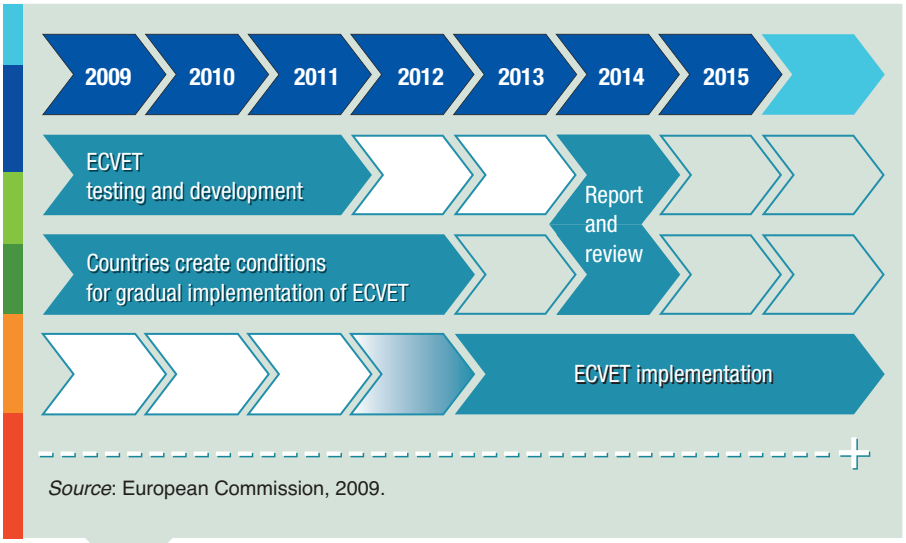
Introduction

The 2009 European recommendation (European Parliament and Council, 2009) invites Member States to gradually implement the European credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET). The implementation phases include preparation for ECVET implementation until 2012; gradual application of ECVET, with the first European evaluation in 2014; and full implementation of ECVET to VET qualifications at all levels of the European qualifications framework (EQF) over the long term.

Figure 1. **Gradual implementation of ECVET**



Source: European Commission, 2009.

Since the adoption of the ECVET recommendation, European and national education and training stakeholders have been preparing the ground for application of ECVET to VET qualifications. This is a major step that needs the support of all VET stakeholders.

ECVET implementation is essential for the development of VET and qualifications systems, but it is also a complex and challenging process. There is therefore a growing need, especially in the current climate of budgetary restraint, for guidance on how to develop ECVET and cultivate a sense of shared ownership during the implementation process. For ECVET to succeed at European level and in Member States, potential users must be aware of it and of its benefits, and those responsible for its development and implementation must fully understand it. Success also depends on exchanges between peers about the conditions and strategies necessary for implementation.

This booklet is intended as a tool to help decision-makers to identify and then create the conditions necessary for implementation of ECVET at national, regional, local and sectoral levels.

Given the comprehensive nature of ECVET, the guidance contained in this booklet is intended for all VET stakeholders: VET practitioners, policy- and decision-makers, social partners and researchers as well as enterprises and sectoral organisations. The booklet will help them to prepare education and training systems for implementation of ECVET.

To help ensure that the 2012 and 2014 deadlines are met (Figure 1) and that ECVET developments in Member States can be understood, Cedefop, the European Commission and the ECVET users' group have agreed on a list of conditions and measures. The necessary conditions and measures for implementation of ECVET are presented as a list of items that Member States could consider when preparing their education and training systems for ECVET implementation. The list is the outcome of discussions with members of the ECVET users' group during preparation of Cedefop's 2011 monitoring report on ECVET development in Europe (Cedefop, 2012a).

Development of ECVET in Europe

ECVET aims at facilitating transnational mobility and recognition of learning outcomes in VET and at borderless lifelong learning. Transnational learning mobility is very specific since it focuses on transnational mobility for the purpose of acquiring new knowledge, skills and competences (Council, 2011). This concept points to qualifications as the core element and objective of mobility and it is central to ECVET.

ECVET was introduced by the European recommendation – although we can trace its origins back to the VET reforms launched several years ago – and has been consolidated by the national initiatives and projects that are part of the testing and development phase foreseen by the recommendation. Within this phase, deliberations and discussions are taking place on both the technical specifications for ECVET and the feasibility of its implementation. Those deliberations and discussions show that ECVET links in with very profound debates on the role and scope of qualifications, the use of learning outcomes to define and describe qualifications, the understanding of occupations and professions, the definition and role of standards (qualifications, assessment and validation standards), the establishment of equivalence between qualifications, the role of quality assurance, etc. (Cedefop, 2012a).

ECVET is part of the development of common European tools for education and training: the European qualifications framework and the related national qualifications frameworks, the European quality assurance reference framework for VET (EQAVET), and Europass. It is also linked to the application of the European credit transfer and

accumulation system (ECTS) in higher education. All these tools are based on and promote learning outcomes as a key principle in the definition and description of qualifications, and they all emphasise quality assurance as a condition for improved European cooperation in education and training. They also suggest a new relationship between education and training and the labour market (Cedefop, 2011).

In terms of expectations, ECVET as a European credit system will be flexible enough to accommodate the characteristic features of VET systems and reforms of those systems, to accommodate existing credit systems and arrangements, and to support mobility and lifelong learning. ECVET will also be shared by the VET community in Europe. Combining all these elements is, in a nutshell, the main challenge facing VET stakeholders and decision-makers when considering implementation of ECVET. This booklet advocates that they take a structured approach to this task.

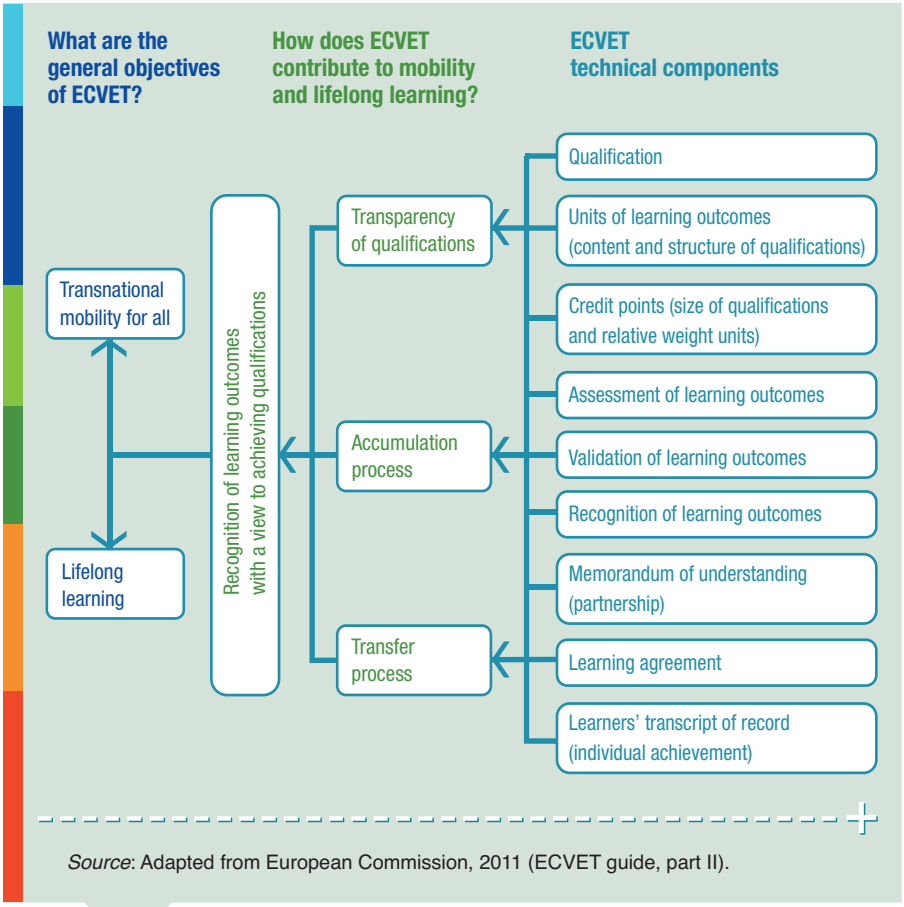
The necessary conditions for ECVET implementation

The ECVET recommendation invites Member States to 'create the necessary conditions and adopt measures, as appropriate, so that as from 2012 – in accordance with national legislation and practice, and on the basis of trials and testing – it is possible for ECVET to be gradually applied to VET qualifications at all levels of the EQF, and used for the purpose of the transfer, recognition and accumulation of individuals' learning outcomes achieved in formal and, where appropriate, non-formal and informal contexts' (European Parliament and Council, 2009).

The aim of identifying and developing conditions and measures for the implementation of ECVET is to ensure that VET systems possess the series of technical components (including agreements and templates) required for ECVET. This can best be illustrated by Figure 2.

One major condition is the need for ECVET to be embedded within qualifications systems and, more specifically, within national qualifications frameworks. This will significantly affect the extent to which ECVET becomes fully operational. This 'mainstreaming' of ECVET requires an approach tailored to the characteristics and specificities of the education and training system and qualifications framework. Ultimately, ECVET and credit transfer will be seen as a normal feature of European vocational education and training at all qualification levels.

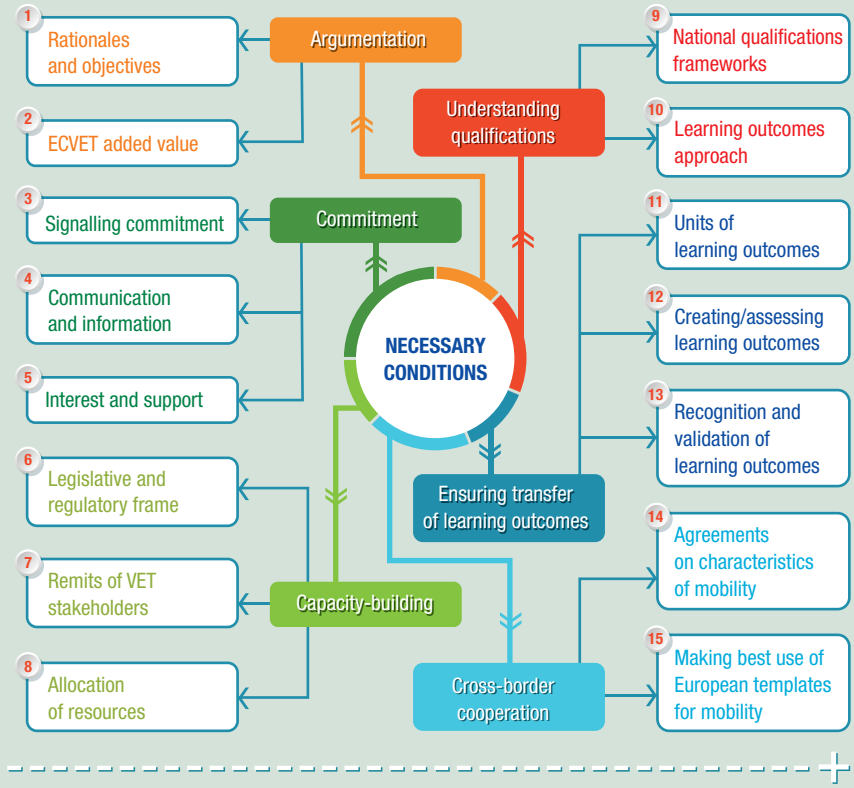
Figure 2. **ECVET objectives and technical components**



Source: Adapted from European Commission, 2011 (ECVET guide, part II).

The success of ECVET implementation depends on the institutional and political context in which the instrument is promoted and on the technical issues linked to the design of qualifications, both of which shape ECVET implementation strategies or approaches in the Member States. There are fifteen conditions that can influence implementation of ECVET, some of which might already be in place but need to be identified as relevant to ECVET (Figure 3).

Figure 3. **Overview of necessary conditions**



Source: Author.

3.1. The argumentation

Implementation of ECVET first requires clear and evidence-based statements of the objectives and added value of implementation. Those statements must take account of all stakeholders (practitioners, policy- and decision-makers, the social partners, researchers, enterprises, sectoral organisations, etc.).

1. **Clear rationales and objectives for ECVET development.**
2. **Clear identification of the added value of ECVET for the national VET context and for modernisation plans.**

Defining the objectives of ECVET implementation involves prioritising the objectives in the light of national policy aims and the commonly agreed objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. The objective-setting exercise must therefore balance system-specific concerns and objectives against the development of a coherent European approach to credit systems based upon the ECVET recommendation. Account must also be taken of the objectives pursued while developing national qualifications frameworks, validation procedures, or approaches to learning mobility.

The added value of ECVET is largely determined by national, regional or local VET conditions and by VET reforms and changes already under way. It also depends on how ECVET can address specific shortcomings and difficulties facing VET systems such as drop-outs, ensuring access to education and training or the integration of migrant groups into education and training. National reforms introducing learning outcomes, partial qualifications or validation procedures are relevant to ECVET. They pursue similar objectives and might mutually reinforce one another.

Many European Member States have launched an analysis of their education and training systems with a view to introducing credit systems. This work, which sometimes includes a cost/benefit analysis, an impact analysis or a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis of ECVET implementation over the short and long terms, could be used to demonstrate ECVET's added value. Account must also be taken of the administrative burden and workload, since human and financial resources are limited.

3.2. The commitment

Interest in and commitment to ECVET can be increased only if its added value is clearly identified and communicated not only to the experts involved in implementing and testing ECVET but also to mobility practitioners and the wider public.

3. **Signalling the commitment of policy- and decision-makers.**
4. **Communication and information on ECVET to stakeholders and the wider public.**
5. **Gaining stakeholder interest and support.**

Once specific objectives for ECVET implementation have been agreed on, commitment to ECVET must be formalised. This can be done in various ways and can be expressed in implementation papers or strategy papers prepared by ministries responsible for VET, competent authorities, the social partners, VET providers, sectoral umbrella organisations, etc.

Formalisation allows a concerted dissemination and information policy to be formulated for ECVET, thus giving a strong signal to all VET stakeholders. It also leads to shared principles and objectives. At the same time, information, dissemination, awareness-raising and marketing campaigns need to address the different needs of users.

Fostering interest and support includes developing incentives for participation in ECVET implementation. The strategy paper might include a work programme (possibly following the European recommendation schedule 2012-14), a definition of responsibilities and possibly dedicated resources. The strategy could foresee integration of existing initiatives (national initiatives, European projects, regional mobility developments, etc.). Stakeholders are more likely to play an active role if there is a formal decision to implement ECVET.

3.3. Capacity building

ECVET implementation requires collaboration between a wide range of education and training stakeholders, and the remits of different stakeholders must be considered.

6. **Development or adaptation of the legislative and regulatory framework.**
7. **Clarification of remits and allocation of responsibilities among VET stakeholders.**
8. **Allocation of resources.**

The ECVET users' guide describes ECVET as a process through which tasks are allocated to different VET stakeholders. The tasks in question are the design of qualifications, the design of formal or non-formal programmes, the design of assessment/validation processes and procedures, delivery of education and training programmes, assessment of learning outcomes and recognition of learning outcomes (European Commission, 2011). Thus, capacity building involves considering how qualification systems are organised and which organisations are performing which tasks.

A transparent definition and allocation of responsibilities and roles in the decision-making process (and following implementation process) is an essential condition for ECVET implementation. The allocation of tasks to national stakeholders is obviously within the remit of the Member States, which is also true of the legal framework, increasing interest in ECVET and encouraging the social partners, sectoral organisations, practitioners, etc. to assume ownership of ECVET.

ECVET does not automatically imply that new tasks will be defined but that some tasks might evolve. The definition of tasks and responsibilities depends upon the existing

legislative or regulatory framework and on the adaptability of this framework. In any event, VET stakeholders must be informed.

Establishment of an institutional infrastructure will ease the development of European ECVET approaches by improving coordination of ECVET activities and peer learning on the subject. Cedefop's 2011 ECVET monitoring gathered evidence on the construction of an institutional framework for ECVET: the nomination and training of national ECVET experts, the involvement of VET practitioners (trainers, assessors, inspectors, etc.) and/or mobility experts (including VET providers), the creation of brokerage organisations such as the national ECVET coordination points, or the work of national VET working groups created by competent authorities (Cedefop, 2012a). The institutional framework must also be considered part of the resources allocated to ECVET implementation. The institutional framework will consolidate the development of an ECVET community of practice and allow it to link up with different sectoral or trade-related ECVET networks.

3.4. Understanding qualifications

Developments in European education and training, such as national and European qualifications frameworks, are strengthening the transparency and comparability of qualifications. They also encourage a common approach to qualifications based on learning outcomes. Transparency and comparability are essential to implementation of

9. **National qualifications frameworks and/or registers.**
10. **Learning outcomes approach to qualifications and educational standards but also to assessment, recognition and validation.**

ECVET since the aim of ECVET is to make it easier to transfer learning outcomes between different education and training systems.

Most European countries are developing or have developed comprehensive national qualifications frameworks (NQF) covering all types and levels of qualification. National qualifications frameworks aim at making national qualifications systems easier to understand and at making relationships between qualifications more transparent, thereby facilitating access and progression. They rely upon learning outcomes-based level descriptors and form a reliable basis for the transfer of learning outcomes.

In a few countries, the development of ECVET is intrinsically linked to the development of a NQF (Cedefop, 2012a). Frameworks – whether communication or reform frameworks – have the potential to improve the coherence, relevance and quality of qualifications. Reform frameworks may involve developing new pathways and programmes or changing the allocation of roles and responsibilities among stakeholders (Cedefop, 2012b), thereby providing a new institutional framework for implementation of ECVET.

In recent years, the learning outcomes approach to qualifications emerged as a way of ensuring transparent qualifications and qualifications systems. It is now applied to a wide range of qualification-related activities, from the definition of specific work practices to the description of the broadest qualifications levels. Learning outcomes can be used in different contexts: in definitions of occupational and educational standards, descriptions of curricula/ programmes, assessment specifications, qualification descriptors, national qualifications frameworks and for other purposes, such as credit arrangements, curricula vitae, job advertisements, information, advice and guidance or the management of education and quality assurance (European Union, 2011).

The learning outcomes-based level descriptors, such as those in European and national qualifications frameworks, provide a consolidated basis for transparent qualifications and the development of a shared understanding of qualifications. However, many European ECVET experts stress the need to draft learning outcomes differently for the purposes of transfer, accumulation and validation (Cedefop, 2012a).

3.5. Ensuring transfer of learning outcomes

Some European Member States already have credit systems for vocational education and training qualifications in place. To prepare for ECVET implementation, thought must be given to how best support the portability of learning outcomes. The ECVET recommendation suggests that the best way to transfer learning outcomes is to bundle them into units.

11. Units of learning outcomes, including credit points.
12. Crediting/assessing learning outcomes.
13. Recognition and validation of learning outcomes.

Units of learning outcomes relate to the content and structure of qualifications; units and qualifications might be characterised by an indication of the ECVET points which describe the size of qualifications and the relative weight of the units with regard to the overall qualification (ECVET recommendation). European ECVET projects and initiatives underline the need to develop a quality assured approach to unitisation, crediting and recognition.

The ECVET process differentiates between crediting and recognition/validation (ECVET recommendation). Crediting

to learning outcomes in ECVET means that a set of learning outcomes, acquired by an individual, has been assessed. In the case of European learning mobility, for instance, crediting occurs in a foreign assessment context. Following the crediting stage, the learning outcomes or set of learning outcomes can be recognised and validated so that they count towards a qualification or can be transferred to other learning programmes or qualifications. It is in this context that questions of trust, equivalence of assessment processes and quality assurance arise. When applying ECVET to non-formal and informal learning, the award of credits and validation might be a single step.

3.5. Cross-border cooperation

ECVET is meant to apply in the context of transnational mobility and lifelong learning. Consequently 'crossing borders' could mean geographical borders but also institutional borders. In both cases, there is a need to consider learning that has taken place in another context than the 'usual' one. ECVET concerns the transfer and validation of learning outcomes acquired during mobility and the portability of learning outcomes. It is also about the need to develop and use agreements and documents.

14. Agreements on the characteristics of the learning mobility.
15. Utilisation of European templates for mobility.

Reaching agreement on the characteristics of learning mobility (duration, learning outcomes, quality measures, logistics and responsibilities of different stakeholders) requires common documentation on learning outcomes and on the characteristics of the learning and qualification award processes. In that regard, joint development and common use of European templates for memoranda of

understanding, learning agreements and personal transcripts are essential.

At European level, the ECVET recommendation and the European ECVET users' guide (parts I and II) contain lists of elements to be taken into account during negotiations on cross-border cooperation. Many European mobility projects and individual mobility experiences use the templates prepared as part of Europass (Europass mobility, Europass certificate supplement, Europass CV) to document European learning mobility as well as non-formal and informal learning experiences.

In brief

4.1. Conditions of different natures

The necessary conditions for ECVET address two major concerns relating to implementation of ECVET: the development of a sense of ownership among all stakeholders and the need for a quality-based approach to the award of qualifications and validation of learning outcomes. Conditions might be of political or technical nature.

Implementation of ECVET relies on certain features of qualifications systems to ensure transparency and a common understanding of qualifications. In that regard, the development of national qualifications frameworks and the learning outcomes approach form the basis for the transparency and mutual trust that ECVET needs to succeed.

The ECVET recommendation also suggests some conditions specific to the transfer and validation of learning outcomes. Those technical conditions might already be in place in national or regional education and training systems. They might also be part of existing credit arrangements/systems or validation provisions (Cedefop, 2012a).

4.2. Peer learning and monitoring

The list of necessary conditions and measures presented in this booklet is intended to support the monitoring of peer learning and progress in ECVET implementation. According to many members of the ECVET users' group, it is essential that European decision-makers but also national, regional or local stakeholders be involved. Feedback on experiences, difficulties and proposed solutions directly prepares the ground for ECVET implementation. This booklet provides a basis for systematising peer learning. Cedefop will base its future monitoring on the list of necessary conditions.

4.3. The priorities

Prioritising the necessary conditions depends to a large extent on the characteristics of education and training systems and on existing credit arrangements or systems. The development and implementation of national qualifications frameworks might also play a part in the prioritisation. The relative importance of some necessary conditions might depend upon the context in which ECVET is implemented (European learning mobility v. lifelong learning). Some countries are already operating with credits in vocational education and training; most are operating credit systems in higher education. Those experiences will be taken into consideration.

While all necessary conditions and measures are relevant to ECVET implementation, two conditions are particularly important:

(a) identification and communication of the added value of ECVET for VET systems. Information should be tailored to VET and qualifications systems and targeted, bearing in mind that Member States are at different stages of ECVET development;

(b) the need to make progress with applying the learning outcomes approach to various steps of the ECVET process.

According to the members of the ECVET users' group, the above top priority conditions are closely followed by the setting-up, adaptation or development of legislative and regulatory arrangements, as well as the involvement of stakeholders – including the social partners – and their readiness to experiment with and support ECVET.

4.4. Shared responsibilities

Cooperation within VET systems and involvement of all stakeholders are the conditions the ECVET users' group members advocate most strongly. Cooperation depends on demonstrating the added value of ECVET for education and training systems and on a clear-cut decision on the objectives of ECVET implementation.

Key to ECVET development is the setting-up of an implementation plan for national, regional and local levels. It is worth returning to the concept of mutual trust as an agreement between individuals, enterprises and other organisations which may be dynamic in nature and may become more or less formal in scope and form according to the mutual confidence and needs of the stakeholders involved (Cedefop, 2005). The implementation plan should cover all VET stakeholders and include communication of the objectives of ECVET implementation. ECVET implementation requires coordination of bottom-up and top-down processes and the development of mutual trust.

Creating the necessary conditions and measures for implementation of ECVET is a matter for the Member States and should receive support from peers and European stakeholders. This means securing and pooling existing resources and identifying needs to be addressed.

List of abbreviations

ECTS	European credit transfer and accumulation system
ECVET	European credit system for vocational education and training
EQF	European qualifications framework
EQAVET	European quality assurance reference framework for VET
NQF	National qualifications framework
VET	Vocational education and training
SWOT	Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats
EACEA	Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency

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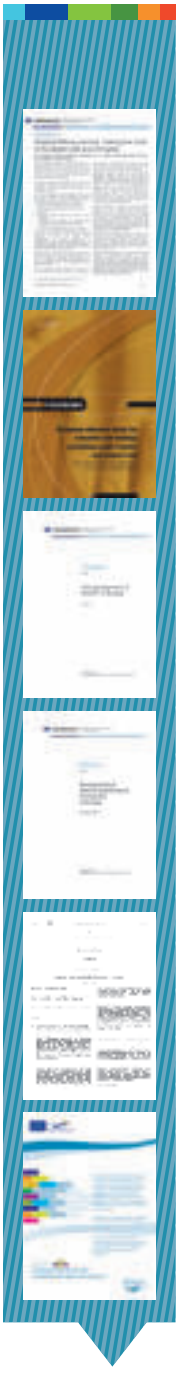

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Further reading

The European Commission, Cedefop and the ECVET users' group have prepared various documents that could be of assistance in creating the necessary conditions. Those include:

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- *ECVET magazine* 2010/ No 1. http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/news/16367.aspx [accessed 15.3.2012].
- *ECVET magazine* 2010/ No 2. http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/news/17321.aspx [accessed 15.3.2012].
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- *ECVET magazine* 2011/ No 4. http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/news/18074.aspx [accessed 15.3.2012].
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- *ECVET magazine* 2011/ No 6. http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/news/18981.aspx [accessed 15.3.2012].
- *ECVET magazine* 2012/ No 7. http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/news/19451.aspx [accessed 15.3.2012].
- *ECVET bulletin – April 2009*. http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/news/4284.aspx [accessed 15.3.2012].
- *ECVET bulletin – July 2009*. http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/news/4043.aspx [accessed 15.3.2012].
- *ECVET bulletin – April 2010*. http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/news/15578.aspx [accessed 15.3.2012].

Further websites:

European Commission:

- *ECVET website*
  http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/ecvet_en.htm [accessed 15.3.2012].
- *EQF internet portal*
  http://ec.europa.eu/eqf [accessed 15.3.2012].
- *EQF website*
  http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/eqf_en.htm [accessed 15.3.2012].

Cedefop:

- *Website on European tools*
  http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/understanding-qualifications/index.aspx [accessed 15.3.2012].
  In cooperation with the European Commission, Cedefop provides technical and analytical support for the implementation of the ECVET recommendation at the EU, national and sectoral levels.

Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA)
http://eacea.ec.europa.eu [accessed 15.3.2012].

ECVET team
http://www.ecvet-team.eu/ [accessed 15.3.2012].
The ECVET team acts as the secretariat for the ECVET European network. Its activities include workshops and seminars for ECVET users' group and the members of the ECVET European network and the ECVET annual forum. Its website informs about new developments in the network and provides documentation such as guides (interactive or on downloading), ECVET magazine, etc. It is financed by the European Union.

NetECVET
http://netecvet.com [accessed 15.3.2012].
NetECVET is a group of 14 national agencies for the lifelong learning programme, coordinated by the German national agency. It aims to support practitioners of transnational mobility who are beginning to work with ECVET. It is co-financed by the European Union's lifelong learning programme.

ECVET pilot projects
http://www.ecvet-projects.eu [accessed 15.3.2012].
This website provides the overview of the activities, preliminary and final results of the centralised European ECVET projects. It is financed by the European Union.

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The European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET) has benefited from the development of national qualifications frameworks and the learning outcomes approach to qualifications. It has also profited from the mutual trust and transparency created by successful learning mobility and lifelong learning experiences. The year 2012 is the first European milestone in the development of ECVET. It is an occasion to take stock – to invite the Member States to consider and discuss the conditions and measures needed for implementation of ECVET, the success of which depends on institutional, political, as well as cultural aspects of education and training systems in Europe.

In this booklet, Cedefop, in consultation with other education and training stakeholders in Europe, presents 15 conditions and measures designed to promote a structured approach to implementation of ECVET, including a bigger role for peer learning.

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