EUROPEAN VET INITIATIVES IN THE UK: WHAT ARE THEY AND HOW DO THEY INTERACT?

Qualifications
Frameworks
in the UK

Contents

Introduction

In recent years there has been formal agreement amongst the European Union (EU) Member States to use European level initiatives to enhance Vocational Education and Training (VET) within a single competitive European market and in the context of lifelong learning. These initiatives are based on principles that give a definite conceptual shape to VET at European level. However this only becomes concrete at national level. In this digest we look at the concepts behind the European initiatives and how they are used in VET in the UK.

The European level initiatives are summarised in the table below.

Table 1: Outline of European initiatives

Initiative	Function	Implementation
Europass	A set of templates that support mobility by improving the transparency of personal achievements	Generally used across Europe, for example about 18 million people have completed a Europass style CV
European Qualifications Framework (EQF)	Making qualifications systems in Member States transparent and qualifications levels comparable	About half the Member States have lined up their qualifications levels with those of the EQF
European Credit transfer system for VET (ECVET)	Helping mobile learners to have small units of learning gained in one country to be recognised in another	Countries are gradually creating conditions for international credit transfer, for example by developing unit based programmes and metrics for volume of learning in VET
European Quality Assurance system for VET (EQAVET)	Providing the means for collaboration between countries to make quality assurance systems more transparent and to provide common quality criteria and indicators	Becoming established in most countries through new (common) data gathering processes and reporting systems
European Skills, Competences and Occupations (ESCO)	Helping to link job vacancies and job seekers across Europe using multilingual databases concerned with taxonomies for occupations, qualifications and skills/competences	Not implemented – in the design phase

This document aims to explain these initiatives, the potential synergies between them and the UK position in terms of their implementation.

European Policy for the Development of VET

Education and training in Member States is outside European Union legal powers and is the responsibility of national governments. However there are some aspects of European Union economic policy and social policy that impinge on national education and training practice and make a hard boundary between national actions and European initiatives impossible to sustain. For example, and directly relevant to this document, if there is to be a single European labour market and a competitive European economy, which is an aim of the Lisbon treaty, then vocational training in all countries needs to be highly effective. Ministers have therefore voluntarily agreed to accept developments at European level that aim to improve the quality of VET in the hope that it will enhance the single European market.

The 'Copenhagen process' is the umbrella term used to describe all the European agreements that aim to develop VET in Member States. These include the initiatives that are the subject of this document and many others, for example improvements in counselling and guidance of learners and the principles for the validation of non formal and informal learning. The same may be said for higher education where knowledge-based businesses need to thrive on a supply of well-educated and highly specialised people.

The 'Bologna process' aims to harmonise higher education programme structures across Europe and bring transparency and greater mobility of people with high levels of learning. Social inclusion and cultural exchange across Europe depends on actions in schools. There are European programmes that lead to consensus on key competences to be developed in compulsory schooling and others that foster links between schools in different countries. It is thus inevitable that the boundary between European level interventions and national interventions is blurred.

The European initiatives such as Europass, the EQF, the ECVET, the EQAVET and ESCO are all voluntary agreements supported by the ministries in the Member States. There are other such 'soft' agreements, such as the principles that should underpin national approaches to the validation of non-formal and informal learning, and on the development of key competences. These voluntary agreements are developed through consensus among experts in the Member States and then scrutinised and amended by the European Parliament and recommended to ministers in national governments who agree to voluntarily implement them. There is no legal imperative to implement them and different national circumstances might lead to varied levels of implementation. Thus the legal term for the 'soft' approach is to make a Recommendation that is adopted by national governments rather than make a legally enforceable regulation.

The Directive on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications

There is one area of European Union law that is enforceable and that impinges on education and training in Member States – the Directive on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications. This general Directive replaced a series of more specific Directives and has been in place since 2005. It is being modernised in 2012. It is not a Recommendation but instead lays down legal requirements of national authorities to recognise the qualifications of people from other Member States. At the core of this law is that those who are a qualified general nurse, dentist, veterinary surgeon, midwife, architect, pharmacist or doctor must gain automatic recognition for their qualified status across the EU. In fact the effects of this Directive impacts on other professions and titles in Member States making it a key tool for mobility of EU citizens. More information can be found through the UK national contact point for the Directive - www.ukncp.org.uk.

Lifelong Learning

Encouraging lifelong learning has been at the heart of many European and national education and training policies. In 2009 the Council for the European Union stated:

'European cooperation in education and training for the period up to 2020 should be established in the context of a strategic framework spanning education and training systems as a whole in a lifelong learning perspective. Indeed, lifelong learning should be regarded as a fundamental principle underpinning the entire framework, which is designed to cover learning in all contexts – whether formal, non-formal or informal – and at all levels: from early childhood education and schools, through to higher education, vocational education and training, and adult learning.'

Lifelong learning policies also aim to increase participation in learning by stimulating the demand for learning and making sure that provision is adapted to the needs of individuals and other users of qualifications. As these policies are implemented, the demand for lifelong learning will have an obvious impact on how learning is delivered and will raise the demand for recognition of learning throughout life, and for more flexible validation and certification systems. As a result lifelong learning policies aim to improve permeability between different education and training systems, so that people can progress vertically (raise the level of their qualifications and competences) or horizontally (broaden their achievements, re-qualify or change learning pathways). These progression opportunities will mean people are more likely to take up the opportunity to be mobile within countries and across borders.

Learning and the labour market

There has been a strengthening of the role of EU level policies with an employment focus in education and training. In 2009, EU education policy was reinforced by statements about linking education and training with the labour market needs of the future. Investing in people and modernising labour markets is one of the four priority areas of the Lisbon strategy. The most recent economic plan for the EU is based on three priorities:

1. smart growth – basing economies on knowledge and innovation – this requires improvements in the quality of education, knowledge transfer, open and relevant education systems and a better gearing towards labour market needs
2. sustainable growth – by taking account of future skills needs and in particular skills for green jobs
3. inclusive growth – fostering high employment economies, social cohesion and implementation of lifelong learning principles.

Increased focus on qualifications

Ensuring the employability of citizens has resulted in EU policy that is strongly orientated towards qualifications. For a decade, both qualifications and qualifications frameworks have been high on the agenda of education and training policymakers engaged in European level cooperation. The focus on qualifications also helps with improved recognition of learning across borders and with easing some of the problems confronting those who want to be internationally mobile.

Taking stock of national developments across Europe there are signs that significant progress is being made in support of national reforms of lifelong learning, the modernisation of higher education and in the development of European initiatives that promote quality, transparency and mobility across the EU.

PART 1: THE EUROPEAN INITIATIVES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF VET

The five European initiatives have been outlined in Table 1. More detail is provided below about the structure of each of them.

Europass

Europass developed from the need to make education and training more transparent. Since its inception in 2005, it has been adapting to changes in education and training systems in individual countries. The aim of Europass is to support the mobility of learners and workers by helping people to communicate their knowledge, skills and competences acquired through education, training or work as well as what they have learned in voluntary and informal settings. More specifically, Europass:

- helps citizens communicate their skills and qualifications effectively when looking for a job or training
- helps employers understand the skills and qualifications of the workforce
- helps education and training authorities define and communicate the content of curricula.

Europass is actually a group of five templates – see Table 2 below:

Table 2: the Europass templates

Template	Function
Curriculum Vitae	To offer a common way to express a person's education, career and achievements so that comparisons can be made between candidates on a fair basis.
Language Passport	A self-assessment instrument for language skills and language qualifications. It is based on a widely used framework of six levels of language competence.
Europass Mobility	A way of documenting the knowledge and skills acquired in another European country. This initiative is currently under transition to a new European Skills Passport.
Certificate Supplement	Describes in more detail than a qualification certificate the knowledge, skills and competences recognised in vocational education and training certificates.
Diploma Supplement	Describes for an individual the detail of the learning programme followed by holders of higher education degrees.

In every European Union country there is an agency (national reference point) that promotes the use of the Europass initiatives and offers support to users. In the UK this national reference point is ECCTIS – www.uknec.org.uk.

Without Europass there would be different approaches to describing qualifications and the experience in every country. The users (such as employers and course tutors) would find it difficult to make fair comparisons between the candidates for a job or study programme.

EQF

The EQF was adopted in 2008 to make qualifications systems in the EU countries more transparent with the view that businesses, learning providers, learners and workers will find that their ambitions for mobility and recognition will be easier to achieve. Particularly significant was the desire of business sectors for a translation device to aid the understanding of the different national qualifications systems.

In summary the EQF aims to:

- promote lifelong learning
- make qualifications across Europe easier to understand
- clarify the training systems across Europe
- encourage the integration of the European labour market.

The EQF has eight levels, all described in terms of learning outcomes, which enables qualifications from one country (including general school education, higher education and vocational education and training) to be compared with qualifications from another country. The central concept of the EQF is that if each country makes a systematic link of its qualifications levels to those of the EQF then, through the EQF, there can be an indicative link between the levels of specific qualifications – see Fig 1.

Fig. 1: How the EQF works
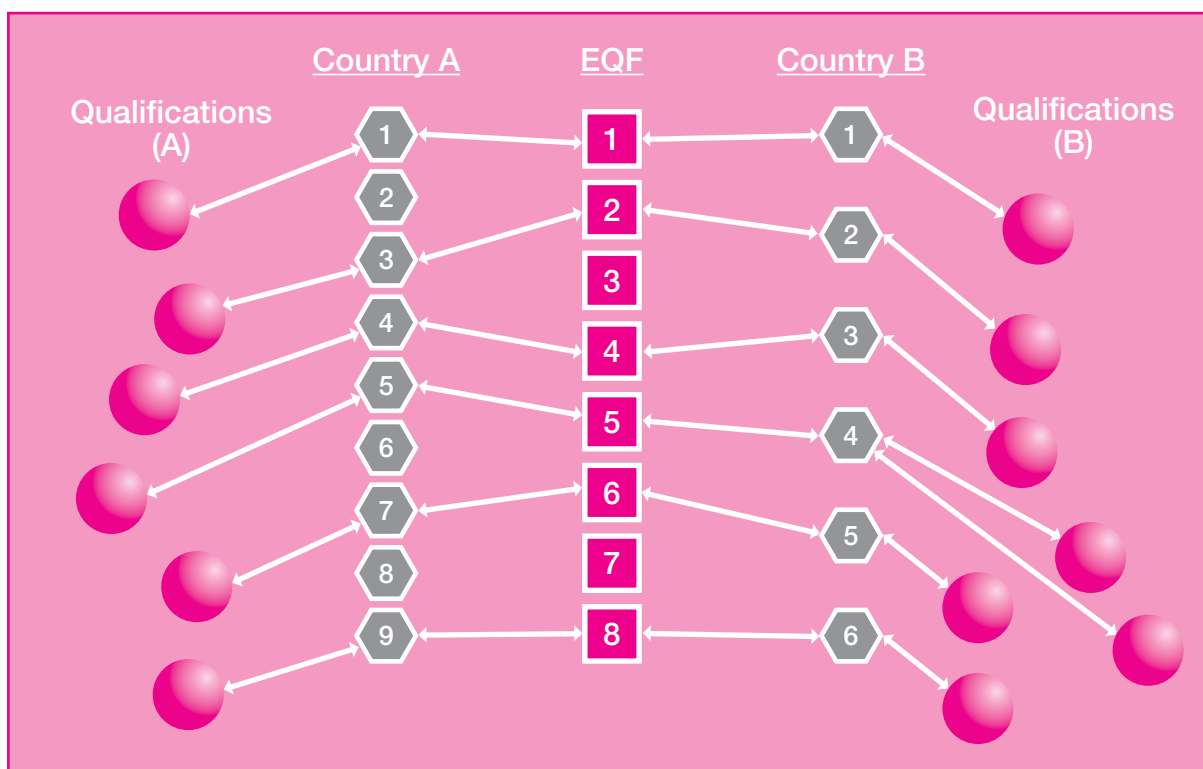
The 32 countries of the European Union and the European Free Trade Area have agreed to systematically link their qualifications systems to the EQF and to make reference to the EQF level of qualifications on certificates. Through this referencing process, national authorities responsible for qualifications systems, in cooperation with stakeholders responsible for developing and using qualifications, define the correspondence between the national qualifications system and the eight levels of the EQF. By June 2012 16 countries had referenced their qualifications levels to the EQF. UK levels of qualifications relate to the EQF levels as shown in Table 3. In the final column of Table 3 the correspondence of UK frameworks with the framework of qualifications for the European Area of Higher Education (EHEA) is shown. The latter covers qualifications levels in higher education.

Table 3: How the UK frameworks relate to the EQF

EQF	QCF	CQFW	SCQF	EHEA (Bologna)
8	8	8	12	3rd Cycle
7	7	7	11	2nd Cycle
6	6	6	10/9	1st Cycle
5	5/4	5/4	8/7	Short Cycle
4	3	3	6	
3	2	2	5	
2	1	1	4	
1	E3	E3	3	
	E2	E2	2	
	E1	E1	1	

Setting up the EQF has triggered development of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) in almost all European countries. These NQFs help greatly with understanding the qualifications systems in the different countries.

Without the EQF each of the levels of qualifications in every country would be difficult to compare with those in other countries, therefore understanding and appreciation of the national qualifications systems across Europe would be extremely challenging.
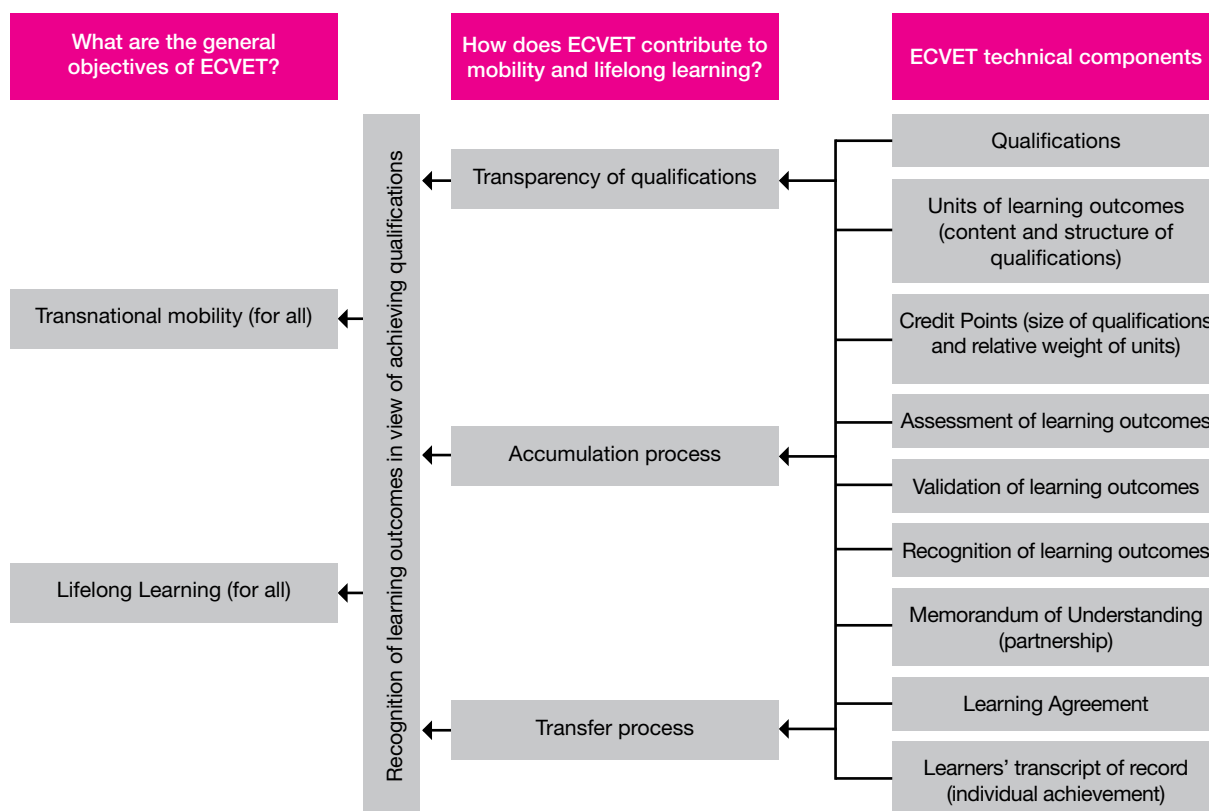
ECVET

ECVET was conceptualised from 2002 onwards and adopted in 2009, it is designed to promote geographical and career mobility. It helps validate, recognise and accumulate work-related skills and knowledge acquired during a stay in another country or in different situations, so that these experiences contribute to vocational qualifications.

ECVET is in fact a common language for stimulating exchanges and developing mutual trust among VET providers across Europe so that international mobility of learners is facilitated. ECVET can support mobility within countries where no credit transfer arrangements are in place.

The main idea in the ECVET initiative is that it becomes easier for employers to understand the content of qualifications achieved abroad and improves the credibility of international education and training experience by identifying and documenting what the learner has achieved. In this way ECVET facilitates cooperation between VET providers and companies and through this mechanism, strengthens the link between education and training and the labour market.

By giving learners the possibility to undertake parts of their training abroad, VET providers can enrich the training provision, raise the attractiveness of training programmes and enhance their reputation in Europe.

Fig. 2 - ECVET: from objectives to practical activities

What are the general objectives of ECVET?	How does ECVET contribute to mobility and lifelong learning?	ECVET technical components
	Transparency of qualifications	Qualifications
		Units of learning outcomes (content and structure of qualifications)
Transnational mobility (for all)		Credit Points (size of qualifications and relative weight of units)
	Accumulation process	Assessment of learning outcomes
		Validation of learning outcomes
		Recognition of learning outcomes
Lifelong Learning (for all)		Memorandum of Understanding (partnership)
		Learning Agreement
	Transfer process	Learners' transcript of record (individual achievement)

Recognition of learning outcomes in view of achieving qualifications

From: Using ECVET for Geographical Mobility - Part II of the ECVET Users Guide

ECVET is based on a common and user-friendly language for transparency, transfer and recognition of learning outcomes. Some of these concepts and processes are already embedded in qualifications systems across Europe, for example:

- learning outcomes, which are statements of knowledge, skills and competence that can be achieved in a variety of learning contexts;
- units of learning outcomes that are components of qualifications - units can be assessed, validated and recognised;
- Memoranda of Understanding and Learning Agreements that exemplify mutual trust and partnership among participating organisations;
- ECVET points which provide additional information about units and qualifications in a numerical form; and
- credit that is given for assessed and documented learning outcomes of a learner - credit can be transferred to other contexts and accumulated to achieve a qualification on the basis of the qualifications standards and regulations existing in the participating countries.

The higher education community in Europe has defined a separate system of credit transfer – the European Credit transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)[1].

Without ECVET there would need to be multiple bilateral agreements between providers if credit for learning is to be transferred across the borders of countries.

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[1]*The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is a standard for comparing the study attainment and performance of students of higher education across Europe. ECTS credits are awarded on the basis of 60 ECTS credits for one academic year corresponding to approximately 1500 to1800 hours of study. ECTS enables the transfer of credit from one institution to another, promoting greater student mobility. The ECTS Users' Guide, available on the European Commission website, provides guidelines for the implementation of ECTS. www.europa.eu*

EQAVET

EQAVET is a community of practice bringing together Member States, employers, trade unions and the European Commission to promote European collaboration in developing and improving quality assurance in VET by using the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework. Quality assurance initiatives have been developing on a European basis for some time and EQAVET has brought together quality assurance initiatives since 2010.The European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET builds on the EQF, ECVET and previous European quality assurance systems (such as the Common Quality Assurance Framework – CQAF) in that it uses a methodology based on:

- a cycle consisting of four phases (planning, implementation, assessment and review) described for VET providers/systems;
- a recommended set of quality criteria, which will be useful for Member States to assess how their QA systems address all aspects of the quality cycle; and
- a recommended set of indicative descriptors to be used as a toolbox for Member States to improve their quality assurance systems, some based on statistical data, others are of a qualitative nature.

EQAVET aims to promote mutual trust and understanding across EU VET systems and providers by promoting transparency and intelligibility in the practice of quality assurance. Additionally it aims to raise the market relevance, consistency and transferability of vocational education and training and qualifications across Europe.

To achieve these aims EQAVET provides a robust quality model, templates for national agencies to use to collect and analyse data on the VET systems, guidelines for the systematic gathering and use of data, good practice examples from different counties and a forum for encouraging exchange between members of the quality assurance community.

Some countries are experienced in the use of quality assurance models and EQAVET is compatible with the main quality models currently in use. These countries have begun to show how the national system provides the basis for reporting quality according to the EQAVET criteria and indicators. Other countries are new to systematic quality assurance operating across VET provision and EQAVET provides a model on which these countries can develop quality assurance processes.

EQAVET can be seen as underpinning the other EU level initiatives.

Without EQAVET there would be weaker levels of trust in VET systems operating in different countries and this would have a negative influence on mobility and the use of the other European initiatives.

ESCO

ESCO is in the early stages of development and is being developed and tested for the first time in 2012. The idea is to link all the national data systems for describing the occupations in the national labour markets and the skills and competences needed for jobs. It is hoped that this will help employers state their job vacancies in a way that can be understood in other countries and in a way that job seekers can understand in terms of their own ambitions and their knowledge, skills and competences. To do this there is a need to create a European classification that can link skills/competences, qualifications and occupations.

Currently ESCO is constructed using three interrelated pillars of skills/competences, qualifications and occupations. These pillars are being designed in ways that are consistent with other initiatives such as the EQF levels and reflect the desire to promote the use of output based descriptions (learning outcomes) wherever possible.
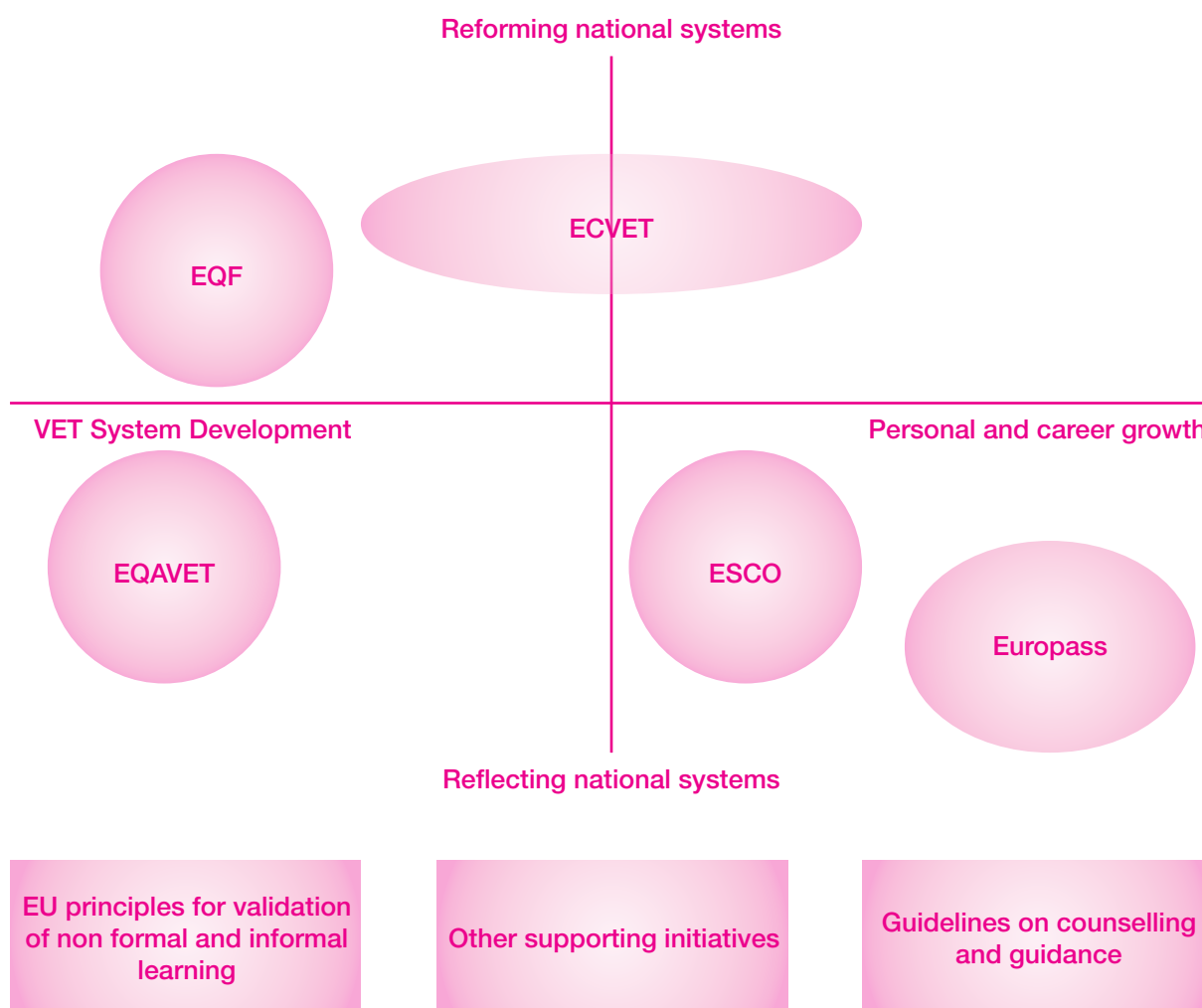
It is planned that ESCO will provide a rich resource that will internationalise the labour markets in Europe. To make this happen the database will be available in 22 languages.

Without ESCO national job markets will remain relatively isolated from one another.

Synergies between the initiatives

The initiatives described above can be seen as an integrated framework, the impact of which depends on their consistency with one another and how they interact. Consistency depends on the principles on which each initiative is based and this aspect is firmly in the hands of the designers at EU level. Interaction between the initiatives is also strongly dependent on the national implementation. One productive way to look for synergy is to use two perspectives. Firstly that of the user which is best taken as the individual citizen, be they a learner or a recruiter. These users are looking for transparency and support from one or more of the initiatives as they plan their next steps. The second perspective is that of the national VET system and the question here is whether the EU initiatives are supporting reforms that are leading to a more effective VET system or simply reflecting current practice. These two perspectives are represented in Fig 3. The five initiatives are located according to how they work together to support the individual and the national VET system.

Fig. 3: Synergies between EU Initiatives – the VET system and the individual

Reforming national systems

EQF

ECVET

VET System Development

Personal and career growth

EQAVET

ESCO

Europass

Reflecting national systems

EU principles for validation of non formal and informal learning

Other supporting initiatives

Guidelines on counselling and guidance

Synergies seen from the user perspective

The individual learner is the key user alongside employers and those that recruit on the basis of qualifications. The initiatives therefore need to interact and reinforce each other from the user perspective. The user needs to see that two or more of the initiatives can help with:

- presenting knowledge, skills and wider competences in a transparent way so that it improves access to learning and work at home and abroad;
- gaining an overview of learning opportunities;
- having a career that develops over time and allows the building of competence through learning from formal settings and that gained in work; and
- reducing barriers to learning, the initiatives can improve job and career prospects.

Synergies seen from a national VET system perspective

The key question is: how do the initiatives interact to add value to national VET strategies? There are many ways that VET is being improved across the EU countries but two of the most common strategies are to make the VET system as responsive to the labour market as possible and another is to create a system where upskilling and lifelong learning is the norm. Taking these two strategies we can explore how interactions from the EU initiatives can help. In Table 4 below the two examples are used to show that, in theory at least, the EU initiatives can work well together.

Table 4: Two examples of how European initiatives can work together to support national VET strategies

	EQF	ECVET	Europass	EQAVET	ESCO
Making the VET system responsive to the labour market	Supports an NQF in making qualification levels explicit, makes it possible to better evaluate qualifications	Makes it possible for people to use learning gained outside training as part of a qualification	Can help individuals to choose programmes that seem to be valued in the labour market	Can take into account the employability of graduates of VET programmes	Signal to individuals the valued characteristics in job profiles
	Working together the tools encourage transparency of the content of programmes and qualifications so that they can deliver the learning outcomes needed in the labour market. The tools can help people to have their learning recognised. Whilst the EQF is a guide to qualification levels, ECVET can allow specific training to be selected for its job relevance and through Europass credit can then count in a CV, mobility document, language passport or certificate supplement. ESCO can make clear what is valued in the job markets from requirements of real vacancies. EQAVET underpins the quality assurance of the VET system and provides monitoring evidence of whether a programme is leading to good employability.				
Supporting continuing skills development	The EQF supports NQFs in making progression routes clear	Units of learning (formal or non formal) can be assessed and credit rated	Records of all learning is held in one place and can be monitored and improved	The added value of programmes can be monitored and reported	Job applicants can learn of real job requirements and take steps to develop competences
	Whilst the EQF encourages NQFs to set out progressive learning and create permeability between the main education sectors, ECVET and ESCO work together to make learning possibilities transparent. ECVET offers the possibility of encouraging credit transfer and recognition of smaller episodes of learning achieved at home or abroad. Whilst the EQF and ECVET can codify learning achievements it is Europass and ESCO that allow actual learning to be reported for job seeking. Thus working together the tools facilitate recognition of learning throughout life. EQAVET supports system managers and providers to ensure programmes are tailored to labour market needs.				

Coordination at EU level

It is generally accepted that to provide the support and guidance to implement and embed the initiatives in a way that is appropriate, efficient and effective, a strong European infrastructure with strong European coordination and guidance is needed. Some steps have already been taken, for example, from 2012 Europass documents will make references to NQF and EQF levels and to ECVET. However access to experiences gained in leading countries is also important, not only to help guide policy and practice but to demonstrate actual, as opposed to expected, benefits of reform. Other possible actions at EU level are to improve:

- representation in developments at EU level (social partners, sector associations, all Member States with special arrangements for large and federalised countries)
- synergy (cross-sector projects, broader based 'communities of practice')
- monitoring, analysis, evaluation and dissemination
- responses to unintended consequences
- assessment of the time needed for change and realistic timescales
- information and guidance
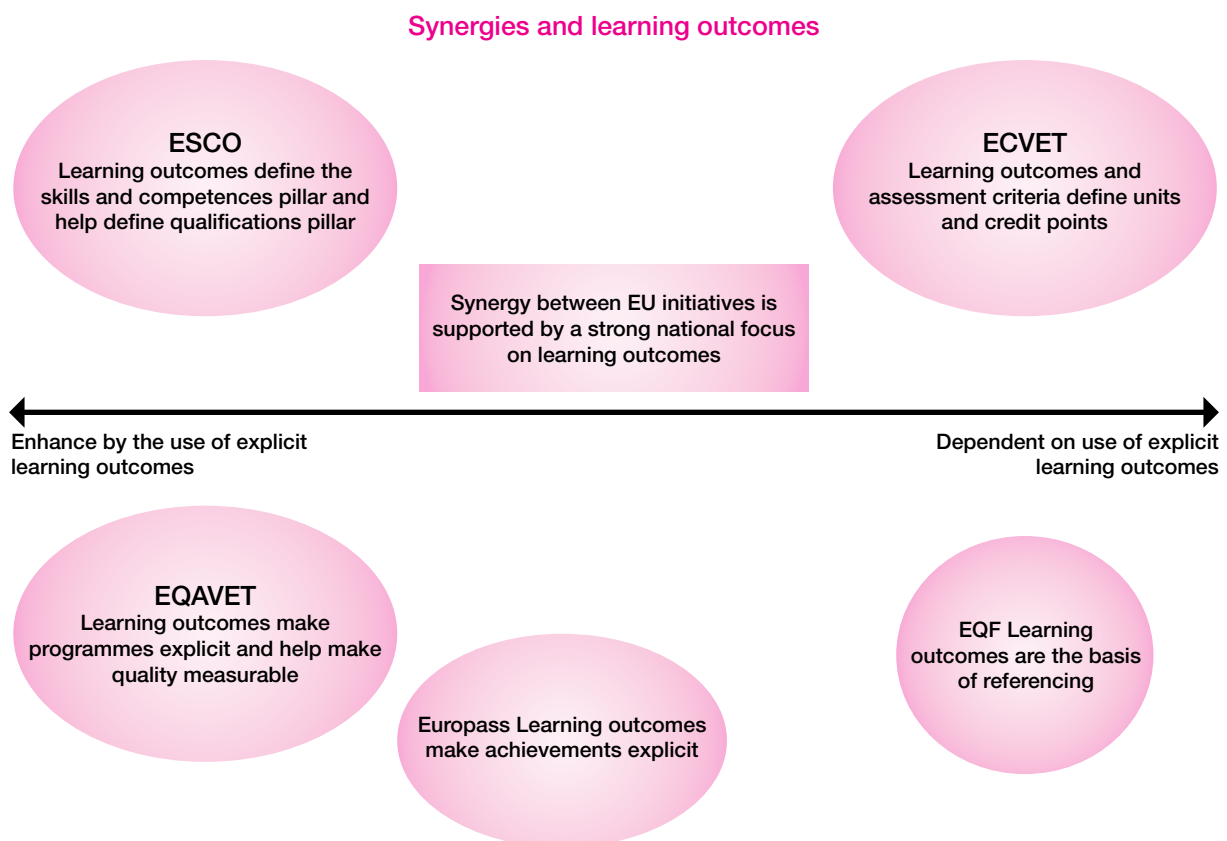- use of EU funds and projects to support developments.

Information about the relationships between the initiatives is important and steps are being made at EU level to improve coherence through presenting information about synergies.

Learning outcomes
– a key to opening up links between initiatives

A key factor in creating synergy between the initiatives is the common approach to using learning outcomes rather than relying on such things as institutional structures and duration of programmes. All the initiatives are based on learning outcomes - these make it easier to appreciate links between the initiatives. For example, in Europass, all the templates require expressions of what has been learned; the language passport and the certificate supplements are good examples of the use of learning outcomes. The EQF level descriptors are only described in learning outcomes and in ECVET it is the use of learning outcomes that allows a unit to be assessed and weighted in terms of credit points.

The importance of the use of learning outcomes in EU initiatives is shown in Fig 4.

Fig 4: The importance of national approaches to using learning outcomes

Synergies and learning outcomes

ESCO
Learning outcomes define the skills and competences pillar and help define qualifications pillar

ECVET
Learning outcomes and assessment criteria define units and credit points

Synergy between EU initiatives is supported by a strong national focus on learning outcomes

Enhance by the use of explicit learning outcomes

Dependent on use of explicit learning outcomes

EQAVET
Learning outcomes make programmes explicit and help make quality measurable

Europass Learning outcomes make achievements explicit

EQF Learning outcomes are the basis of referencing

One of the common conclusions of meetings of national experts in VET is that there is no clear European level terminology and taxonomy with regard to learning outcomes. The European Commission has taken a step in this direction with the publication of guidelines on use of learning outcomes[2]. This publication sets out the ground rules for discussions on learning outcomes across Europe.

[2]http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/eqf/note4_en.pdf

The impact of the European initiatives

In general it is agreed that the EU initiatives, and particularly the arguments for their value, have a positive impact on developing national VET policies. They are recognised as helping to speed up national developments through playing the role of catalysts.

A recent conference report[3] classified the EU countries into 4 groups with regard to the impact of EQF, ECVET and EQAVET at national level.

Group one: national systems have been based for some time on more or less the same principles as those underpinning the three EU initiatives and are therefore fundamentally compatible but the features and language of the systems may differ. The challenge for these countries is to find a 'best fit' solution for the integration and usage of the EU initiatives. The UK fits this category.

Group two: national systems have been based for some time on the principles that underpin one or two of the initiatives but not all three. The main challenge for these countries is to implement a systematic and comprehensive lifelong learning policy that covers the principles in all three initiatives.

Group three: national systems are at advanced stages of reform that take account of the underlying principles of all three EU-initiatives, and are at the early stages of implementation of one or more. The challenge for these countries is to embed the underlying principles in their systems.

Group four: national systems are still in the conceptualisation and/or initial planning phase, some are testing developments through pilot projects. The challenge for these countries is to convince stakeholders of the benefits of reforming systems in accordance with the underlying principles of the EU initiatives.

Europass in Europe

Since its launch in February 2005, 18 million Europass CVs have been generated online. Hundreds of thousands of Europass Mobility, Certificate and Diploma Supplements have been issued.

The Diploma Supplement has become more popular following the Bologna process for harmonising higher education programmes. As more people become mobile the use of the Certificate supplement is increasing.

The structure of the Language passport is based on research which has become the common way to view and measure language competence.

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[3]*See the report of the Joint EQAVET/EQF/ECVET Seminar - Assuring the quality of VET qualifications – The contribution of EU tools to the definition and re-definition of learning outcomes based standards – web reference to follow.*

European Qualifications Framework (EQF) in Europe

The EQF has had strong support from countries and about half of the EU countries have already referenced their qualifications systems to the EQF. The EQF has also pushed forward the drive for using learning outcomes, for links between different education sectors (permeability) and for improved quality assurance. The EQF is used as a reference point in many other EU policies (for lifelong learning and economic and social policy) and for many national and European initiatives (such as those in this document).

European Credit transfer system for VET (ECVET) in Europe

More than 150 European pilot projects are currently experimenting with, and testing, ECVET to facilitate implementation of credit systems in VET in all Member States. The general perception is that it will take a long time for the conditions to be created for ECVET to operate at national level. Only when national arrangements are in place can full international use begin.

European Quality Assurance system for VET (EQAVET) in Europe

It is clear that EQAVET has had two strong effects in countries, firstly coordinating national quality assurance reporting across countries and secondly, for other countries, acting as a model for shaping new broader systems. The development of a community of practice has been a strong influence on these two effects.

European Skills, Competences and Occupations (ESCO) in Europe

The ESCO initiative is new and it is not possible to judge its impact at this time. It is expected that a first usable outcome from ESCO will become available in 2012 and will be continuously updated in line with market developments and the corresponding demand for new skills.

The future

It is likely that the next three or four years will see some changes in the European initiatives, some like ESCO are in an early stage, others like the EQF and EQAVET are to be evaluated. ECVET is receiving particularly strong EU level support and is likely to become a stronger feature influencing national VET.

Europass is also being revised currently. The Europass CV will remain untouched in this revision process as its success is testimony to its current structure. However the other templates in Europass may be gathered together in one new portfolio that can better reflect lifelong learning.

In addition to these changes to the specific initiatives there is likely to be a continuing effort to ensure that they are not acting as 'island' projects but working together across the national landscape.

A development of a European position on the validation of non-formal and informal learning has been propoed. A new Recommendation is expected to be adopted by the Member States in late 2012. The systematic approach to broader validation is slowly developing in many countries whilst in others it thrives and serves to support national policies such as for VET and lifelong learning. It is interesting that validation practice also interacts strongly with the EQF and Europass and is in turn supported by EQAVET. The validation of informal and non-formal learning can use the same architecture as ECVET and very strong synergies exist between these two initiatives.

The Directive on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications is one of many initiatives to improve the cross border recognition of qualifications. Each country has an agency dedicated to the task of facilitating such recognition. With the increased focus on qualifications in Europe this area of recognition is likely to develop further over the next few years.

PART 2: IMPLEMENTATION IN THE UK

In recent years the development of the European initiatives has coincided with a stream of reforms to VET in the UK. The goal of a high skills economy, a responsive training system and the flexible delivery of programmes has created an environment where the various EU reforms have reinforced UK strategies. For example, there were qualifications frameworks in existence in the UK before the development of the EQF, the conceptual basis for credit arrangements were also well established before the definition of ECVET. In terms of databases of information about the labour market and qualifications (as is envisaged in ESCO) the UK has had systems in place for many years that have served UK needs. All of these relatively advanced positions are at least partly explained by the reforms of the 1980s to drive towards outcomes based descriptions of occupations, curricula and qualifications.

The European initiatives have therefore never been perceived as serious challenges to the direction of UK policies and it has been a straightforward process of supporting and using the European initiatives.

Coordination in the UK

The UK governments have established a coordinated plan for working with the European initiatives across the UK and within each administration. Table 4 below summarises the UK management structure for the initiatives.

Table 5: Who coordinates the European initiatives in the UK

EU Initiative	National Coordination Point (NCP) and lead contact			
	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
Europass	UK National Europass Centre (managed by ECCTIS) (http://www.uknec.org.uk			
EQF	Ofqual (Bernadette Smith)	CCEA Accreditation (Caroline Egerton)	SCQFP (Aileen Ponton)	Welsh Government (Trevor Clark)
ECVET	ECCTIS (Tatsiana Zahorskaya)	CCEA Accreditation (Caroline Egerton)	SCQFP (Aileen Ponton)	Colegau Cymru (Sian Holleran)
	ECVET Experts Group – coordinated by ECORYS			
EQAVET	BIS (Ian Pegg)	DEL (Nick Gibson)	Scottish vq Board (George Brown)	Welsh Government (Kim Ebrahim)
ESCO	Department for Work and Pensions (Stephanie Bennion)			
Directive for the Recognition of Professional Qualifications	UK NCP (managed by ECCTIS) (Katherine Latta)			

The initiatives are being implemented in the four administrations of the UK and this presents a serious challenge for coordinating activities and presenting coherent information to the users of the initiatives. For these reasons a UK European Coordination Group for VET has been established which brings together the coordinators of initiatives and their government counterparts for exchanging information. This group plays a major role in ensuring that, from a user perspective as well as a policy perspective, the synergies between these initiatives is optimised and communicated. This document is an example of coordinated activity to stress synergies between the initiatives as they operate in the UK.

Europass in the UK

Europass is a portfolio of documents each of which is widely recognised across Europe. UK residents have completed about a quarter of a million CVs of the 18 million issued across Europe. The CV template and portal is undergoing an update in 2012 with the launch of the new template and portal expected towards the end of the year.

Across Europe, the Language Passport has been completed online over 842,000 times since launch, and 145,000 times in English. In 2010 an iPhone application was launched for the Language passport, which is currently being modified for other mobile platforms.

Europass Mobility records periods spent in another Member State for the purposes of work or learning. Over 10,000 Europass Mobility Documents have been issued in the UK since 2008. Europass Mobility is particularly popular within the VET sector with the vast majority of Europass Mobility documents being issued for the Leonardo Programme. There is evidence of a tangible benefit in recording the experience.

The Diploma Supplement is issued to students by universities and other Higher Education Institutions alongside the qualification certificate and provides information on the content of the qualification and contextual information to aid recognition. A recent survey indicates that 79% of UK Higher Education institutions currently issue a Diploma Supplement. Over half of them have received a Diploma Supplement from another European Country.

The Certificate Supplement is issued by VET Awarding Organisations and is specific to a qualification rather than to an individual. Whilst the Certificate Supplement may not have yet achieved the widespread UK implementation of the Diploma Supplement, it is gaining popularity with 5 Awarding Organisations currently issuing, or preparing to issue it in the UK. The UK National Europass Centre recently drafted UK implementation guidelines with a view to maintaining consistency of content. The guidelines will be published once feedback from the sector has been evaluated.

European Qualifications Framework (EQF) in the UK

The UK was, and remains, a leader in qualifications frameworks and the development of the EQF as a metaframework was not seen as requiring significant development in order to link UK frameworks to it. Indeed the UK was one of the first countries to create a formal referencing of UK qualification levels to the EQF levels (see table 3). A second requirement of the EQF development was for countries to create a reference to the EQF level on certificates. The UK took the view that this was for Awarding Organisations to decide. However the UK has provided publicity that will allow people to determine the EQF levels of certificates they hold and the managers of the main qualification databases have included an EQF level in the data for every qualification in the databases.

The EQF works as a metaframework as described in Fig 1. To help this process the European Commission has set up a public portal to allow individuals and employers to quickly determine the correspondence between UK qualification levels and those in other countries. From a UK perspective this is now operational[4].

European Credit transfer system for VET (ECVET) in the UK

The ECVET recommendation invites Member States to create, by 2012, the necessary conditions for ECVET implementation. The UK is well advanced in meeting these conditions and has the frameworks to support ECVET.

Cedefop, who has the role of supporting and monitoring ECVET implementation at EU level has recently published (April 2012) a document on 'The necessary conditions for ECVET implementation'. This summarises the conditions as follows:

- existing national qualifications framework or register (transparency on qualifications);
- learning outcomes approach to qualifications, educational standards (teaching and training plans, curricula, etc.) but also to assessment, recognition and validation;
- design of units of learning outcomes -
  - component of a qualification
  - adaptability for mobility purposes;
- assessment provisions adapted to learning mobility and learning outcomes approach / unit-based qualifications;
- crediting of learning outcomes;
- recognition and validation of learning outcomes; and
- transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes.

It is clear that the UK has the elements required for ECVET (learning outcomes, units of assessment, credit points and credit transfer) already in place. For the UK a significant challenge is to make learners, providers and employers aware that ECVET is a convention that is being used here and abroad. The network of ECVET experts will help with this challenge. However there may be greater challenge ahead as there is no evidence in the UK for motivation to develop a culture of mobility in VET. However there may be greater challenges ahead to develop a culture of mobility in VET. There are no reports or studies but anecdotal evidence suggests that the demand for mobility does not exist currently.

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[4]*See http://eqf.intrasoft-intl.com/eqf/compare/select_en.htm#comparison*

The UK Frameworks and ECVET

The Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) is a system for recognising skills and qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It does this by awarding credit for qualifications and units (small steps of learning). Each unit has a credit value. This value specifies the number of credits gained by learners who complete that unit. The flexibility of the system allows learners to gain qualifications at their own pace along routes that suit them best. The QCF is a world leading system and makes the implementation of ECVET depend largely on articulation of the systems and communication with users.

In the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) approved bodies are able to credit rate qualifications and the Framework currently holds all mainstream national qualifications and an increasing number of sectoral or individual ones. Credit Rating is the process of allocating an SCQF Level and SCQF Credit Points to a qualification or learning programme and has been in place for some time. This means it is relatively straightforward to link ECVET points and SCQF credit points.

Wales was a pioneer of developing a national credit system - the Credit Common Accord is the foundation document formalising agreement on terminology, design specifications, principles and systems required to ensure that assigned and awarded credit is fully assured in Wales. The Common Accord Forum is a main cross-sector committee that exists to support, guide, give direction and facilitate access to wider expertise through members' networks and contributes to the on-going development of a credit system in Wales. ECVET is compatible with the Welsh Common Accord.

National Contact Points (NCPs)

During July 2011 the Scottish Government in agreement with the SCQFP Board confirmed SCQFP as the ECVET National Contact Point for Scotland. The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) in Northern Ireland confirmed CCEA as the ECVET NCP for Northern Ireland. The Welsh Government has recently confirmed Colegau Cymru as the Welsh ECVET NCP (An NCP for England has existed for some time managed by ECCTIS Ltd).

The ECVET Contact Point for England was established in April 2010. Since its inception the Contact Point has created a designated website (www.ecvet.org.uk) and started its activities by conducting a needs analysis of ECVET, establishing the level of compatibility between the European VET Credit System and the Qualifications and Credit Framework in place. It further conducted a survey amongst UK VET students establishing the level of interest in European mobility and the potential of having learning undertaken in another European Member State recognised towards a UK VET qualification. The survey indicated a considerable amount of interest by UK VET students. The Contact Point for England further conducted a pilot project with an awarding organisation on the allocation of ECVET points to QCF units and on the basis of this established a more general discussion paper on a potential mapping methodology to convert QCF credits to ECVET points and vice versa. This discussion paper will be shared with the other UK ECVET NCPs to develop it further.

Discussions have taken place between Scottish Government, the SCQFP and SQA (as the main VET awarding organisation as well as the regulator). These four organisations currently form a working group to take forward EQAVET and propose to extend the remit of this group to also look at ECVET. The first activity will be to produce a guidance note for training providers on how they can engage with and use ECVET.

The Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) in Northern Ireland took on the role of National Reference Point for EQAVET implementation in 2010 and a Steering Group was formed to take this work forward. The group is chaired by a senior DEL official and has representation from all the relevant education stakeholders in NI. The remit of this group has recently been extended to advise on the implementation of all existing and emerging EU VET initiatives, including ECVET, in Northern Ireland.

The Welsh Government has established an internal group to co-ordinate the implementation of the European Qualifications Framework, EQAVET and ECVET in Wales and to advise the Minister and social partners on all existing and emerging EU VET and other initiatives at the same time.

National teams of ECVET experts

The UK national agency (Ecorys UK Ltd) together with the four national administrations has established a network of ECVET experts that will promote and raise awareness of ECVET in the UK to support its implementation. The expert teams will:

- aim to raise awareness and active engagement of all stakeholders;
- test how EVCET can work in practice;
- be a point of contact for networks of users of ECVET and share experiences of implementing ECVET; and
- provide information and guidance on ECVET practice.

Information on their role can be found at www.ecvetexperts.org.uk.

European Quality Assurance system for VET (EQAVET) in the UK

The four administrations of the UK have recently reported the progress they have made to the EQAVET network.

The implementation of the EQAVET recommendations in England is led by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. The FE Quality Assurance System (introduced in April 2010) was designed to reduce burdens and bureaucracies that existed in previous performance management arrangements for post-16 learning. It was also designed in the knowledge of the ten EQARF indicators. BIS is currently consulting on new performance management and quality assurance arrangements for the FE Sector in New Challenges, New Chances: Next Steps in Implementing the Further Education Reform Programme. There are plans to develop a communications plan; and to work with stakeholder bodies to promote the EQAVET recommendation and its benefits to post-16 education and training providers.

The implementation of the EQAVET Recommendation in Northern Ireland is overseen by an EQAVET steering group. Northern Ireland has a quality improvement strategy in place and has therefore met the primary aim of the Recommendation. The initial phase of the implementation work has focussed on an examination of the NI VET quality assurance system in comparison to the EQVAET indicators. The further education sector, and stakeholders on the steering group have completed surveys allowing analysis at system and provider level, and a review document has been completed. The next steps of implementation are likely to include further communication with providers on the EQAVET Recommendation, in conjunction with wider communication on other, linked initiatives (e.g. EQF, ECVET). The EQAVET steering group's remit is being widened to support a coherent approach. Work done on the analysis of indicators will also serve as useful groundwork for any future review of the Department for Employment and Learning's quality improvement strategy.

The Scottish vocational qualifications Board is acting as the National Reference Point for Scotland. Scotland has carried out an initial analysis and benchmarking of the EQAVET indicators. This was presented to the Scottish vocational qualifications Board and this body advised that the quality assurance mechanisms in place with regards to VET met most of the indicators although there were some gaps. The Scottish Government has announced a major review of post-16 Education, Putting Learners at the Centre: Delivering our Ambitions for Post-16 Education. The proposals are wide-reaching and some of the outcomes may have an impact on the quality assurance arrangements for the VET sector. The Scottish vocational qualifications Board will re-consider the initial analysis to determine what actions, if any, need to be taken with regards to the gaps previously identified but also to take account of any changes in the VET landscape as a result of the wider post-16 review.

In Wales the Quality Effectiveness Framework (QEF) that was introduced in 2009 continues to play a critical role in Wales for FE institutions and Work Based Learning providers. Work was commissioned earlier this year to look at how existing quality systems in FE align with the EQAVET indicators. The key messages were that there is common consent that all the data required by the EQAVET quality indicators were useful as measures of progress. The indicators measuring participation and completion/attainment rates were the most commonly used measures of progress.

The further development of the Quality Effectiveness Framework (QEF) will be an important step given that a number of the indicators that are more difficult to quantify are identified as priority areas within the new framework. Work is going on with relevant Welsh stakeholders at all levels using the web quality cycle tool in order to improve awareness and understanding of the benefits of working within the framework.

European Skills, Competences and Occupations (ESCO) in the UK

This is a new venture but the UK is playing an important part in chairing the Management Board, and participating in the maintenance committee and leading one of the sector committees developing the system.

Achieving more coherence, consistency and sustainability – some pointers for the future

The UK European Coordination Group for VET has evolved in a short time into a valuable forum for leaders of VET in the UK and leaders of specific European initiatives in the UK to learn about the latest developments, see opportunities for cooperation and to seek further developments. All this is within a collective view of what is affordable, practical and sustainable. Some of the achievements of the last two years include:

- setting up EU funding for supporting the implementation of the EQF and ECVET on a UK basis whilst paying attention to more regional priorities;
- linking and mutually supporting the reporting on EQAVET indicators from across the four UK administrations;
- commenting on reporting the UK VET system to the European agency for VET; and
- advising on the approach to implementing EQF development projects in ways that ensure compatibility with other development work.

There is more to be done to support the coordination of the implementation of European VET initiatives in the UK.

The different UK networks that exist covering EU affairs should be encouraged to continue to work together. These thematic networks can widen access and lead to greater national synergy between EU Initiatives.

There is a case for encouraging the organisation of UK wide and regional seminars and conferences that focus on the lessons we can learn from 'front running' European countries.

Continued commitment is needed for EU level activities that drive towards seeking greater synergy between the EU initiatives at EU and national level and to ensure that the EU initiatives can serve the UK to best effect.

Similarly the UK needs to support European activities linked to the five initiatives so that VET systems in the UK can be informed by EU experience and help push up mobility levels and lead to improved recognition.

CONTACT POINTS

Qualifications
Frameworks
in the UK