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## **The comparative research analysis of the ECVET system in Finland, Spain and Poland**

On the basis of TRANS-FINECVET Project

„Implementation of the FINECVET model to the formal and nonformal education” Erasmus+

Project: 2014-1-PL01-KA202-003355

### Z badań porównawczych nad systemem ECVET w Finlandii, Hiszpanii i Polsce

**Słowa kluczowe:** transfer osiągnięć w kształceniu i szkoleniu zawodowym (ECVET), efekty kształcenia, kształcenie formalne, kształcenie pozaformalne.

**Key words:** European Credit Transfer System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET), learning outcomes, formal education, non-formal education.

**Streszczenie:** Problematyka projektu TRANS-FINECVET nawiązuje do rozwoju w krajach Unii Europejskiej systemu transferu osiągnięć w kształceniu i szkoleniu zawodowym (ECVET). Opisano kontekst wdrażania ECVET w państwach UE oraz poziom wdrożenia poszczególnych narzędzi ECVET w Finlandii, Hiszpanii i Polsce – państwach będących partnerami w projekcie. System ECVET opisano na przykładzie zawodów ważnych dla europejskiego rynku pracy: „Opiekunka dziecięca” i „Opiekun medyczny”. W artykule opisano także dobre praktyki stosowane w edukacji zawodowej w Finlandii, w której ECVET wprowadzono formalnie do wszystkich szkół zawodowych w 2015 r. Artykuł kończą wnioski i rekomendacje.

The article contains comparative analysis of ECVET system in 3 countries being the part of the project "*Implementation of the FINECVET model to the formal and non-formal education TRANS-FINECVET*". The analysis includes a comparison of ECVET in the partner countries together with the level of advancement of the

implementation of the various elements of ECVET, way of implementation as well as common and distinct features of the system. The analysis is designed to not only assess the level of implementation of ECVET but also indicate the pathway to implement or how to improve ECVET not only in the partner countries: Finland, Poland and Spain but also in other EU countries. Consequently, the article presents recommendations about the conditions and facilitation process for the implementation of ECVET for each country.

**Background of the problem – ECVET in Europe.** The starting point for a comparative analysis is the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)<sup>1</sup>. The Recommendation set forth definitions of basic concepts, the implementation pathway and the principles and technical specifications of ECVET. The process of transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes began in the EU in the higher education system. The European Credit System began operating in 1987 and in 2004 changed the name for the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System – ECTS<sup>2</sup>. ECVET is applicable for all learning outcomes which should be achievable through a variety of education and learning pathways at all levels of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (European Qualifications Framework – EQF), and then be transferred and recognised including recognition of learning outcomes which are acquired through non-formal and informal learning. The Recommendation specified that the documents related to ECVET, such as the “Europass”, contained a clearly defined set of references and information, and to enhance the coherence and complementarity of ECVET with ECTS used in higher education.

The European Commission, in its Bruges Communiqué, proposes the use of a number of activities at national level and supporting activities at EU level to support the development of vocational education<sup>3</sup>.

A number of EU countries started to implement ECVET. Member States may introduce ECVET according to their own decisions on how implement the system.

The Commission has established European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) as a methodological framework which can be used to describe qualifications in terms of units of learning outcomes, with activities related to these points. The system allows attestation and recording of learning outcomes achieved in different countries and also in various contexts: formal, non-formal and

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<sup>1</sup> Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) (2009/C 155/02).

<sup>2</sup> Based on: Ryszard Rasiński *Ekspertyza dotycząca gromadzenia i przenoszenia osiągnięć w szkolnictwie wyższym w Polsce – zastosowanie ECTS. Podsumowanie*. Warszawa 25.06.2013.

<sup>3</sup> The Bruges Communiqué on enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training for the period 2011–2020. Communiqué of the European Ministers for Vocational Education and Training, the European Social Partners and the European Commission, meeting in Bruges on 7 December 2010.

informal one. Learning outcomes shall be transferred to the host system of the unit, where they are included in the acquired qualifications.

The diversity of national systems that define the levels and content of qualifications is not conducive to transnational mobility of learners. ECVET is a possible solution facilitating the mobility of learners throughout Europe. Member States may, according to their own will, adapt this recommendation and implement the system.

ECVET aims at promoting transnational mobility and the access to lifelong learning. It is not supposed to replace national qualifications systems but only help to improve the comparability and consistency between them. ECVET applies to all individual learning outcomes achieved through a training pathways which are subsequently transferred, recognised and accumulated with a view to obtaining qualifications. Thanks to this initiative, European citizens can easily have their trainings, skills and knowledge recognised in another member state.

It should be stressed that the ECVET system does not give the citizens any powers to ensure that learning outcomes and ECVET points are automatically recognised. Its application to particular qualifications adheres to the legislation of the member states.

To support the process of ECVET implementation, most EU countries set up national contact points. In the majority of countries decision-making matters fall under competence of the authorities responsible for National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and EQAVET (European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training). That may help to coordinate the instruments<sup>4</sup>.

Declared ECVET development strategies point to the widespread adoption of determining qualifications through learning outcomes, according to the EQF and NQF. Most EU countries also take information measures and pilot projects show no need for broad implementation of ECVET. Gradually, EU countries are introducing various elements of the system, including validation of learning outcomes<sup>5</sup>.

**Comparison of ECVET system in Poland, Finland and Spain.** A survey has been conducted in order to obtain up-to-date information on ECVET system in the partner countries i.e. Finland, Spain and Poland. A draft of the survey has been developed by Edukacja i Praca (Education and Labour, EP) and sent to the partners. The survey questionnaire was sent to the partners after the changes submitted by the Institute for Sustainable Technologies – National Research Institute (ITeE-PIB) and Fundación Equipo Humano (FEH) had been introduced. The results comprised 10 responses, including 7 received from ECVET experts. The respondents in Finland were representatives of the Centre for International Mobility and Cooperation – CIMO, Omnia, The Joint Authority of Education in Espoo Region – Omnia,

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<sup>4</sup> cf. Information note. System for Vocational Education ... Cedefop. July 2013.

<sup>5</sup> The Recommendation of the Council of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, (2012/C389/01). 22.12.2012. 2018 was set as the deadline for Member States to "appropriate solutions".

Vocational Education Centre Sedu – SEDU; in Spain the participants represented THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, CULTURE AND SPORT, and the Fundación Equipo Humano – FEH; in Poland the responses were provided by 3 ECVET Poland Experts, including: one from the Ministry of National Education, one from Wojewodship Teacher Training Centre in Zgierz, one from Army General Professor S. Kaliski Technical Education School Complex in Turek and 2 directors of the Centre of Practical Education. In addition, when preparing a survey report in Poland prior research on the matter was used.

The method of obtaining data for comparative analysis

The following tools were used to carry out a comparative analysis of ECVET system:

- international and national publications, including CEDEFOP reports, ECVET experts' publications i.e. USERS' groups, ECVET Poland's Panel of Experts;
- materials presented at the conference on ECVET system
- the results of the surveys on the progress of ECVET system implementation in partner countries
- the results of survey interviews on the calculation of ECVET points
- websites relating to the ECVET projects including [www.ecvet-toolkit.eu](http://www.ecvet-toolkit.eu); [www.ecvet-team.eu](http://www.ecvet-team.eu); [www.ekspertciecvet.org.pl](http://www.ekspertciecvet.org.pl); <http://ec.europa.eu/education/ecvt> (ECVET reflector).

**Survey results.** It should be pointed out that the work on the implementation of ECVET in Finland, under the name FINECVET, was completed in December 2012 and formally the system was commonly implemented at schools from August 1, 2015.

Below are the results of the conducted survey.

According to the responses, ECVET system, both in formal and non-formal education, functions commonly only in Finland. However, in Spain and in Poland it is used to a little extent and this concerns mainly formal education.

This opinion may be confirmed by the results of research, which was carried out under the project "European Synthesis Report on the Methods and Good Practices in Defining Qualifications for SMEs in line with ECVET provisions"<sup>6</sup>. The results show that 6 out of 10 surveyed training companies in Poland knew nothing about the ECVET, EQF and EQAVET, 3 respondents heard about that and only 1 knew the system, none, however, knew the system well<sup>7</sup>.

The question "Which of the following elements of the ECVET system do not function or function?" provided important information (Table 2).

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<sup>6</sup> SME-QUAL project "European Synthesis Report on the Methods and Good Practices in defining qualifications for SMEs in line with ECVET provisions". SMEs Qualification Handbook – SME\_QUAL. Project Number: 538534-LLP-1-2013-1-IT-LEONARDO-LMP. 12/11/2014. pages 49, 50.

<sup>7</sup> The analysis has been carried out by the Polish partner of the SME-QUAL Project, and namely PAIZ Konsulting Sp. z o.o. This survey was conducted from March 24, to March 28, 2014. A total of 10 responses were collected from a gender-balanced respondent group (5:5), aged 36-59, employees of training companies and microcompanies, working in HR departments.

In Finland all the elements of ECVET system have been already implemented including the description of qualifications, transfer, recognition of learning outcomes, accumulation of of learning outcomes and individual learning pathways and this relates to both formal and non-formal education.

**Table 1. Which of the following elements of the ECVET system function or do not function?**

No.	The elements of ECVET	assessment scale			
		definitely yes	yes	rather not	no
1	Description of qualifications in terms of knowledge, skills and competences	F	S, P		
2	Transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes in formal education	F	S, P	S	S
3	Transfer and recognition of learning outcomes in non-formal education	F	F, S, P	P	S
4	Transfer and recognition of learning outcomes in informal education	F	S, P	P	S
5	Accumulation of learning outcomes	F	F, S, P	S	
6	Memorandum of Understanding and personal transcript	F	F, S, P	S, P	
7	The learning agreement	F	F	S, P	
8	Transfer and, where applicable, accumulation of learning outcomes of particular individuals	F	S	S, P	
9	Developing individual learning pathways	F	S, P	P	
10	Validation of learning outcome units	F	F, S, P	S, P	

a – the abbreviations stand for: F – Finland, S – Spain, P – Poland.

b – double-check of the responses means that experts' responses were divided.

Source: the responses of survey participants

According to the respondents, the application of ECVET system in Spain is performed indirectly because it is built into the vocational education and training programme. In Spain function the following elements of the ECVET system: description of qualifications in terms of knowledge, skills and competences and partly also the transfer and recognition of learning outcomes in formal education, accumulation of learning outcomes, Memorandum of Understanding and personal transcript, developing individual learning pathways and validation of learning outcome units.

Only some of ECVET elements function in Poland. Most of all the curricula of formal education describe the qualifications in terms of knowledge, skills and social

competences. The transfer and recognition of learning outcomes is applied in formal education and only partly in non-formal and informal education.

Besides such elements as accumulation of learning outcomes and validation of learning outcome units also function there. The remaining elements are rather not applied in Poland and the cases of their application are sporadic.

Relevant literature including brochures, guides and expert presentations relating to ECVET are available in all partner countries. Operation of FRSE (Foundation for the Development of the Education System) and IBE (Educational Research Institute) in Poland deserve special attention. Central public authorities governing the education are responsible for the development of the description of qualifications in all compared countries, including Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) in Finland, in Poland Ministry of National Education (MEN) in cooperation with National Centre For Supporting Vocational And Continuing Education (KOWEziU). The Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport develops the descriptions of qualifications for vocational education and training in Spain and the Ministry of Employment and Social Security for occupational vocational training and continuous vocational training.

The principles for recognition of learning outcomes and certification in Finland, Spain and Poland are specified within the education system. The schools and teachers that conduct education process are responsible for recognition of the teaching outcomes in Finland. Moreover, the self-assessment which students are obliged to perform periodically and discuss with their main teacher is important. The criteria for recognition and validation of qualifications in Spain are specified by the ministry of education within the national education system. The Central Examination Board and Regional Examination Boards are responsible for the validation of learning outcomes and comprise a part of external exams system.

***Obstacles in ECVET implementation.*** Negative attitude of the staff and the fear of change was indicated as the obstacle in implementation of FINECVET system in Finland. Spanish experts have pointed out that there are no technical barriers for the implementation of ECVET system. However, low participation of students in mobility projects, which in turn is associated with the language barrier (poor knowledge of foreign languages) is a significant obstacle.

**Conclusions.** The principles of the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training ECVET were published by the European Parliament and the Council in the Recommendation of 18 June 2009. Since that time, according to the data collected and published by CEDEFOP (2014) 17 countries have implemented ECVET, in 8 countries the system is tested and 13 countries have not decided over implementing the system yet. The countries that have implemented the ECVET system is Finland, which is known as FINECVET – formally implemented into educational practice on 1 August 2015.

CEDEFOP report "Monitoring the Implementation of ECVET strategies in Europe in 2013" indicates that EU countries, in reforming their vocational education

systems, use ECVET and its support to a diverse extent. Commonly used approach is describing qualifications based on learning outcomes. The ECVET system has contributed to reforms at the institutional and system level only in exceptional cases, in particular, where there is a link with the National Qualifications Framework<sup>8</sup>. As a result, ECVET has contributed to initiating national qualification system analysis, which rarely reflected in implementing changes in national educational policies.

A major problem and weakness of ECVET is a credit point system ECVET. The system does not work out and will be corrected.

Among 3 analysed countries only Finland have already implemented all the elements of ECVET, including a description of qualifications, transfer, recognition of learning outcomes, accumulation of achievements and individual learning pathways in both formal and non-formal education.

In all 3 compared countries, the description of qualifications includes knowledge, skills and competences. In all analysed countries, the central institutions in charge of public education are responsible for developing description of qualifications. A common feature is monitoring of the system, which is a part of general reporting system without special monitoring system. In addition, the monitoring is done by the ECVET experts. The experts emphasise that for its proper performance in every country ECVET must be accepted by all environments related to vocational training and professional work.

Principles for the recognition of learning outcomes and certification in Finland, Spain and Poland are set out in the framework of thier education systems, however there are considerable differences in these systems.

### **National Distinctiveness**

**In Finland**, the schools and teachers are responsible for recognition of learning outcomes. In addition, what is important is the students' self-assessment that must be carried out periodically discussed with their leading teacher.

Only Finland has decided to use ECVET points. Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE), has determined that 1 year of schooling is equivalent to 60 ECVET points. The number of points for specific skills, knowledge and competences has also been specified.

**The attitude of Spain** is well depicted by the expert's statement "There are no national frameworks and clear guidelines for the implementation of ECVET. Spain follows a "wait-and-see" policy which means that there is no clear intent on engaging in ECVET " The Expert points out that schools must respect the national qualification system and focus on the good preparation of young people and not on ECVET.

Experts from Spain state that the Spanish qualification framework – Marco Español de Cualificaciones (MECU) should be corrected. The authorities responsible

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<sup>8</sup> *Monitoring of ECVET implementation ...* . ed. cit. The monitoring was attended by 38 countries and over 80 respondents. Jolanta Urbanikowa „Wdrażanie systemu ecvet doświadczenia europejskie”. University of Warsaw. December 11, 2014.

for defining core curricula in vocational education and training should develop curricula according to the levels of EQF and a clear description of learning outcomes consistent with the principles of ECVET. There are already curricula with modular structure but their relationship to ECVET is not clear.

**In Poland** there are some elements of ECVET. Most of all, core curriculum for formal education describes qualifications in terms of knowledge, skills and social competences. Transfer and recognition of the learning outcomes takes place in formal education and only partly in non-formal and informal education. Moreover, there are instruments such as accumulation of learning outcomes and validation of units of learning outcomes. Other elements are unlikely to be used in Poland. However, if used, they are occasional.

In Poland the need to create a model of the entire ECVET and, subsequently, realisation of the piloting, development of appropriate legislation and ECVET implementation is emphasised. It is also proposed to establish national and regional education institutions responsible for, i.a. developing descriptions of qualifications and units of learning outcomes (which could be used by sending and host institutions) and for recognition and accumulation of achievements. Finally, it is also important to create flexible and individualised learning pathways.

In Poland there might be a verification of units of learning outcomes in qualifications separated in professions, adaptation of education law acts and the transfer and accumulation of achievements at a higher education level. On the other hand, since there is no Polish ECVET at the moment, there are no indications for future actions.

**Recommendations.** Among the good practices on the use and implementation of ECVET the experts from all countries agree that the learning agreement is core document of ECVET. It is also recommended to promote and share general knowledge simultaneously with specialised vocational education. In addition, the cooperation between the education system and the labor market, including sectorial representatives who can participate in definition of the training needs is of high importance.

In addition, the experts recommend simplifying and standardising the documentation used during the evaluation and recognition of competences.

Among the factors that contribute to the implementation of the accumulation system and transfer of archived achievements the particular attention should be paid to the opportunity of building individual learning pathways, the introduction of modular programs, the use of self-evaluated learning outcomes and increase the participation of schools and training institutions in international programmes as well as consequent increase in the mobility of young people.

It is worth reminding that in the note of Users' Group (2014), the experts concluded that the calculation of ECVET points is very difficult and useless for training organisations using ECVET, therefore, at this stage, it appears to be

"secondary and marginal"<sup>9</sup>. In consequence, the Commission concluded that the stress should be put on how to assess learning outcomes and units of learning outcomes rather than credit points. Additionally, the Commission should develop new clear rules for allocation of credit points to units and their use in the process of accumulation, and clarify them to key stakeholders and final beneficiaries, including training providers<sup>10</sup>

***ECVET improvements and good practices.*** As far as the ECVET improvements are concerned, the experts from Finland draw attention to the need for greater amounts of information materials and dissemination of information about ECVET in the national language, organising training courses and workshops not only with teachers but with all stakeholders and cooperation with other schools.

Experts from Spain believe that each country should define the roles of competent bodies regarding validation, recognition and quality assurance of the learning process. In addition, the national qualification system should be improved to be in line with the EU description and to ease the description of learning outcomes in the ECVET format rather than ECVET itself.

Polish experts have different opinions on the proposals for ECVET improvement. Some experts believe that the improvement of ECVET is a problem to be solved at EU level. Others point out that it is good practice to develop, according to certain criteria, units of learning outcomes with the participation of all interested parties and draw attention to the adaptation of units of learning outcomes with labour market needs. The experts also stressed the need for dissemination activities within the scope of the system, with particular emphasis on education in formal, non-formal and informal learning.

**Recommendation for Finland.** Now, when the ECVET system has been taken in use in Finland since 1st of August 2015 by law, all Vocational Education Institutes needs to focus on real work related learning outcomes, study units and modules. Schools have to give chance for individual learning pathways by offering different type of learning environments. Recognition of students' earlier assessed studies and work related experiences will increase. Teachers' professional role will change more towards tutor, mentor and coach for students. The non-formal and informal education must take more in consideration in the whole Education system and by doing so the study time for students will decrease.

**Recommendations for Spain.** Experts from Spain focus on specifying the roles of particular institutions in relation to the verification, recognition and quality assurance of the education process. It is also necessary to increase measures to

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<sup>9</sup> Note to the members of the ECVET Users Group (Subject: The first evaluation of ECVET and its follow up). Brussels, 7.5.2014. s. 9. Annex to the invitation letter of 14.4.2014 ARES(2014)1170349.

<sup>10</sup> Implementation of the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET). *Final report. 4 July 2014.* European Commission. Education and Training. s. 77, 78.

stimulate interaction and motivation of learners to participate in national and international mobility.

**Recommendations for Poland.** Poland is not ready for broad implementation of ECVET covering formal, non-formal and informal education. The experts pay attention to the lack of understanding and unfamiliarity with the functioning not only of ECVET but also related Polish Qualifications Framework (PRK), including levels of PRK and the Integrated Qualifications System (ZSK). There is also no trust to learning outcomes achieved in non-school system, which significantly hinders the accumulation and transfer of competences. In addition, the implementation of the general education in vocational schools definitely limits the use of ECVET. Polish schools focus mainly on pilot projects, including mobility projects.

Polish experts, like the Spanish, noted the need for cooperation between schools and educational centres with employers and sectorial organisations.

It can be said that there is a similar approach to ECVET implementation in Spain and Poland. As compared to Finland, there are elements of ECVET functioning in Poland, however, educational authorities have not decided to formally implement the system and there is no relevant legislation on ECVET.

Education policy-makers at national, regional and local level and in economic sectors should pay attention to the conditions and measures necessary for the implementation of ECVET. It is a transnational mobility for all; it is life-long learning and, subsequently, transparency of qualifications, the process of collecting validated learning outcomes, the process of transferring achievements. Particular system components such as transfer, recognition, accumulation and validation process of learning outcomes should gradually encompass formal, non-formal and informal education.

Implementation of FINECVET has been a long-term process, as in other countries. The process was led by Finnish Ministry of Education and FINECVET implementation was connected with the preparation of teachers for new educational and administrative tasks. A widespread dissemination of knowledge on ECVET amongst all vocational education stakeholders is the primary task of education policy-makers.

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