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**Vocational Education and Training at higher levels of the EQF:
Actions needed after 20 years of just talking**

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**Berufliche Bildung in Europa – 20 Jahre nach Lissabon und am
Ende von ET 2020.
Entwicklungen und Herausforderungen zwischen supranationalen
Strategien und nationalen Traditionen.**

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Vocational Education and Training at higher levels of the EQF: Actions needed after 20 years of just talking

Abstract

In the past twenty years, various attempts have been made to achieve harmonization of national education systems by ‘Brussels’ and thus at the European level, in order to make Europe more competitive. This has been done using broad-based plans in the Lisbon Strategy and ET2020, together with all kinds of sub-plans for the underlying education sectors. But only for higher education it has been possible to have far-reaching agreements, via the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

But the other sectors have certainly not been idle. For the Vocational Education and Training sector, consultations have been started with the European Commission since 2011 through a cluster of European VET organizations involved. But more will be needed in the coming years, partly because in the formal context VET runs up to and including level 4 of the European Qualifications Framework.

The CHAIN5 platform was set up in 2013 to develop a sector with the qualifications at 5 and higher, in line with the approach in VET. This not only looks at a higher level of VET, but also at the Short Cycle HE, introduced in the EHEA in 2018.

The essence of this article is to describe recent developments and to indicate that the discussions around level 5, in the broadest sense, should be high on the agendas of politicians and policymakers. So, it is a call for action, also with the consequences of COVID-19 in mind.

Keywords: *Lisbon Strategy, VET sector, Bologna Process, Short Cycle, European Education Area*

It is certainly a perfect time to look back from a number of angles at the way in which, after the formulation of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000 as an ambitious plan for education in Europe and with ET2020 as a successor, all the underlying activities have led to certain changes. A lot has happened, that’s clear. But it is also a very special moment for a historical reflection, knowing that in the coming years in Europe and the rest of the world a lot of work will have to be done to turn the effects of the COVID-19 epidemic back to a ‘new normal’.

Normally it should be seen as what was done before the crisis in education for most of the target groups, but certainly using the experiences with other approaches that have been gained at a high and accelerated pace. The accompanying shock affects all countries, especially in education sectors such as Vocational Educational and Training (VET). This sector is now seen in many countries as absolutely crucial to a recovery of the economy and the circumstances and conditions for everyone now affected by the crisis.

There is certainly still a lot to learn from the changes that education in general and VET in particular have undergone in the last twenty years. The underlying developments and the factors that played a role may still be important. There are also several subjects that must not be forgotten, which have been initiated in the recent period. Therefore, we can extend those lines of development, and some of them are mentioned in this article.

Background

It is important to note that what will be discussed in this article and then used to make some statements at the end, is based on my experiences over those past twenty years. These experiences have been gained in several positions, both in the national and international context. I was involved in developments around VET and Professional Higher Education (PHE – next to Academic Higher Education), with a contribution that can be regarded as independent, as far as this is possible within the ‘power play’ with education and politics.

Nationally, this was and is possible as general manager of an independent national network called ‘Leido’ that focus on connecting those involved in VET and HPE. The aim is to discuss developments with each other, to provide comments in combination with proposals for all kinds of scenarios, and to pass them on to the policymakers and others who can initiate actual changes in education.

In the international context, this has been happening since 2013 in my role as President of CHAIN5, a community of practice in Europe, focused on the further positioning of qualifications located at level 5 of the EQF. As will be indicated below, there is much to do around this level since 2005, but it is difficult in many countries to clarify the role of such qualifications in VET, HPE and other education sectors. That is why CHAIN5 is important as a community, along with other organizations and associations in Europe.

VET and impact

Assessing the impact of international proposals, captured in a clear political context, should always be done in the knowledge that shaping an ‘education system’ is a national issue. All kinds of beautiful plans can be put together and unfolded with great bravado, it is up to the national government to see what can be done with them in its own country. If there are proposals that are attractive, changes within the national system must be guided through all kinds of organizations with their own interests. These rarely run in parallel and so the government must act carefully to achieve certain goals.

For the VET sector it has become apparent that, also with the use of the plans within the Lisbon Strategy and specific related developments such as those included in the aims of the Copenhagen Process, the systems in the European countries differ enormously. This has to do with the way in which vocational education has traditionally been anchored in the education system at the corresponding levels. This includes linking training and programs to the demand for up-to-date knowledge and skills by the business community, the influence of employers and their organizations, and the role of several ministries in a country that often worked together and still

do so to have a certain control over this type of education. It concerns schooling and training for young people, the elderly, jobseekers and all kinds of other groups for which training within the VET sector is a steppingstone to a job and shaping a life.

Agreements

This complexity has turned out to be too big to reach agreements for VET across the borders of the member states when it comes to harmonizing systems, achieving substantive cooperation and formulating instruments that can, for example, lead to the exchange of students and workers, based on having obtained VET qualifications. This could include specific educational matters such as the use of credits, guaranteeing quality (acceptable for a country, also in view of legal requirements for all kinds of professions) and monitoring the required level. In the plans of the past decade, attempts have always been made to provide incentives for this, but only small steps could be taken in streamlining international partnerships.

Bologna Process: an example

Nevertheless, there is an excellent example available for the VET sector when it comes to an approach that is in line with what those involved in the Lisbon Strategy had in mind. It is also in line with the topics that have been communicated as priorities under the banner of ET2020, the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training. Of course, I am referring to the so-called Bologna Process (BP), which has led to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

The BP started around the turn of the century with a group of countries, and over time all countries within Europe have joined. But many countries outside Europe also wanted to participate and that means that (including the UK) there are at this moment 48 countries that are part of the EHEA. The main reason for starting with the BP was to be able to cooperate more with each other as universities, i.e. providers of academic programmes. But the national systems had drifted apart over time to such an extent that too many obstacles arose.

The will of many national governments to monitor the quality of programs more strictly and not to leave it solely to the institutions themselves, gave this process a clear boost. Students who followed just a part of the study in another country had to be able to demonstrate that they had reached a comparable level. The need for some kind of mutual recognition proved to be important.

National strategy

From the start and the outset, the national governments have decided to allow all institutions to participate within the BP if they are classified as higher education - that is, on the basis of a national policy on the status of education providers. In addition to the 'Universities', in countries that have a binary higher education system, the 'Polytechnics', 'University Colleges', 'Hochschule', 'Colleges' and all institutions involved in Professional Higher Education (PHE)

also climbed on board. At a certain point they also received an ‘international brand-name’, mainly pushed from countries such as the Netherlands, Germany and Finland: University of Applied Sciences.

As such it is an incomplete name, as the field of ‘Arts’ is omitted. This shows how in a political and strategic situation a choice is made that is based on an incomplete decision-making process and in which all kinds of countries are simply connected to ‘trying not to miss the boat’. It can be seen as a warning for the VET sector as well as for that type of education in the coming years, especially when it comes to the overlap with the EHEA in the educational qualifications at the higher levels.

Common instruments

However, the BP is an important example for the VET sector. There is much to learn from the developments that have taken place. For example, the BP has led to instruments that can be used for this recognition as a sector. The most important of these is working with the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), on the basis of which an academic year comprises a number of 60 EC. This makes it possible to draw up an international diploma supplement with underlying information.

Subsequently, the national organizations that carry out the accreditation on behalf of the government are united in international networks. In order to be able to demonstrate reciprocal behaviour as organizations and to have institutions cooperate with each other in providing training, the first steps were taken about ten years ago to draw up 'European Standards and Guidelines' for having a relevant, transparent and reliable quality assurance system.

Interests

In the past decade, especially from Brussels, at the instigation of the European Commission, the options for linking up with this have been looked at for other sectors within education. The BP with the EHEA can be seen as a ‘private’ initiative of the countries themselves, and with the direction in the hands of its own secretariat, the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG). This means that the national governments are looking for additions to their own system and options to use internationalization for improvements in all kinds of areas, especially if the confidence of other countries in the higher education system is not yet high enough. It is therefore about interests, to participate with ‘the group’ and thereby also account for all kinds of plans to the ‘supporters at home’.

For higher education, the target groups and other stakeholders can be identified and discussed relatively quickly and easily. This approach is much more complicated for the VET sector, also at the moment with all parties who feel and are involved in the implementation of study programmes and training courses. A process to reach agreements for a ‘European VET Area’ will therefore not reflect what has now been achieved for the EHEA. The national governments, the providers of VET and all those other partners must keep this in mind.

In addition, it should be noted that the BP does not have much dynamics anymore. The goal of doing everything together in 48 countries has proved unfeasible, so the focus is far more on specific partnerships. The Universities have once again taken the lead in this regard, with the networks for ‘European Universities’ and the links to academic research.

Some recent developments

Before I go into the developments around the VET sector and then look specifically at what is happening with regard to the overlap of VET with HE, it is good to briefly go through a number of developments. These issues are without doubt relevant for further discussions about arriving at a new approach for VET, in line with the Lisbon Strategy and ET2020, and knowing that in the coming years the European Commission is strongly committed to tackling the crisis that will economy hit hard, using the opportunities that vocational education and training has.

Names and concepts

A lot of confusion has arisen in all kinds of studies that have to do with VET on the one hand and PHE on the other. This has to do with the terms ‘Vocational’ and ‘Professional’ in English texts. In many countries, these concepts have the same translation in the national language when it comes to training courses that are relevant to the labour market and derive their right to exist strongly from cooperation - in all kinds of ways - with employers and their regional and national organizations.

In the international context, ‘vocational’ is mostly used for training that relies heavily on combining this with work, offering programmes that are directly usable in companies and training for specific jobs, functions and professions. That is why it is internationally referred to as Vocational Education and Training for what is also seen as forms of lower, secondary and upper-secondary education. But there are also countries that prefer to use ‘Technical’ or the combination ‘Technical and Vocational’, but in Europe they still stick to VET.

The use of the term ‘Professional’ is reserved for higher education, according to all kinds of agreements made within the BP. This makes it possible to speak in countries with a binary system about 'Academic Higher Education (AHE)' and 'Professional Higher Education (PHE)'. It should also be noted that there is also a form that can be called ‘Higher Vocational Education’, which leads to confusion with ‘Higher Professional Education’ much faster.

In international studies that are mainly based on national reports and therefore also published in the national language, it can be seen that the translation to the English concepts is sloppy. For example, a few years ago in a study into the existence of Higher VET, i.e. VET at the higher levels, reported that this form is present in the Netherlands. That is not the case, but this can be explained from the Dutch name for PHE is: ‘Hoger Beroepsonderwijs (HBO)’, literally: Higher Professional Education. So, reversing two letters, HP to PH, already leads to wrong conclusions.

Therefore, in a further process on VET, it will have to be jointly examined at all levels where such errors can be prevented.

VE and T

For years, VET has been referred to as a homogeneous sector, with a comparable treatment of all types of schooling and training that can be grouped below this ‘term’. It turns out to be more and more inconvenient, this split. ‘VE’ can often be seen as the system that is mainly funded and monitored by the government, with all the consequences this has for the providers and students. ‘T’ can be found in the private sector, with much more customization, and linked to branches, professional organizations and other representative networks for the business community.

There are countries that make room within formal VE education for the inclusion of training programs, given their relevance for the labour market. But there are also many countries that maintain the difference. The Netherlands is an example of this where VE is given under the Dutch name ‘middelbaar beroepsonderwijs’, which is ‘secondary vocational education’.

A further consideration of the possibilities for VET would in any case benefit from using this distinction. Subsequently, the countries can learn from each other about the best construction, based on good practices.

EQF and EHEA

The existence of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) is of essential importance for the further positioning of VET as a complete sector. In 2008, this EQF with eight levels for classifying educational qualifications based on the use of learning outcomes was introduced. Subsequently, a process was started within a governmental European partnership, the EQF Advisory Board, to have a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in all countries. This has been successful almost everywhere, although its use is not such that it is possible to speak of an unambiguous approach. But the NQFs are there and that is good for communication to all users thereof.

However, the EHEA simply has its own framework, based on the Bachelor-Master system, with the associated levels and the ‘Dublin Descriptors’ to be used for this. These are to a large extent compatible with the characteristics for EQF levels, but in this way, higher education still has matters firmly in hand.

It is to be hoped that the EQF will be further introduced and used, also for the so-called non-formal qualifications, because this includes all kinds of training courses that can be seen at VET as belonging to the sub-sector T. This requires attention in the upcoming process for the VET sector.

Highest entry level for HE

As a final point before looking at the overlap between VET and H(P)E as a matter that deserves a lot of attention in the coming years, is the decision taken by the Ministers for higher education in 2012 on positioning VET in relation to the EHEA. Partly due to the introduction of the EQF

and the NQFs, countries were forced to indicate at which level the Bachelor is, as the most used degree. That became level 6, with the Master at 7 and the Doctorate at 8.

Because these Ministers had already initiated a new degree (level, degree, cycle...) under the Bachelor for the first time in 2005, level 5 had to be kept free for later decisions in this regard. As a result, countries that had already set formal education to 5 were forced to revert this to 4. Germany with the 'Abitur', the Netherlands with the 'VWO', examples of countries that had to implement this correction.

The result was that programs that give direct access to higher education were allowed to be a maximum of 4. In formal terms, this meant that the highest VET level also had to be linked to 4. This situation is still valid and is causing some confusion in countries that already had or wanted to move to VET training above 4.

Short Cycle Higher Education

I will now zoom in on those developments around level 5, what has happened so far and what challenges the VET sector is facing. These can still be seen as developments in line with the Lisbon Strategy (not really getting off the ground in those ten years), ET2020 (many issues raised, with varying degrees of success) and the plans currently being unfolded by the European Commission .

As already mentioned, the plan surfaced in 2005 to see whether a cycle and degree were possible under the bachelor's degree on the basis of all kinds of studies. This happened during a meeting for Ministers for higher education, which is held every two years. Because the formal name of the Bachelor (the general name, but of course each country may use its own national name) is 'first cycle', 'Short Cycle Higher Education (SCHE)' was used for a study period of one and a half to two years. A remarkable and also negative-sounding name, showing that the academic and scientific world was not waiting for such a thing.

It took until 2018 before, after all kinds of political and strategic negotiations at the international level, the Ministers decided to give this SCHE a formal status. It is now a 'stand-alone' qualification, not mandatory to enter in a country, but with a call to ensure that the holders of such a diploma have the opportunity to progress to a level 6 programme. That recognition must therefore be there to make it clear that it is a diploma with a formal and civil effect.

Associate

It is important for a further approach to VET as a sector in which cooperation at an international level must take place in the coming period, to realize that this requires collaboration with the stakeholders in the EHEA. A first step that could help is to have a common and internationally usable name for SCHE as a degree. This demonstrates equivalence with the Bachelor's and Master's degrees and provides the necessary transparency, since that name may only be used by higher education institutions.

The proposal that already has been on the table for some time is to use ‘Associate’. This ties in with the same kind of education in the United States, Australia, Hong Kong, China, the Netherlands, Flanders, etc. However, a formal proposal has not yet been formulated, and that is certainly regrettable, but given the balance of powers within Europe, it is a situation that can be explained. But this can certainly be raised again within a process for VET.

CHAIN5

At this point in this article, it is time to report what the role of CHAIN5 is, and why such a ‘Community of Practice for level 5 qualifications’ has a certain right to exist. As indicated, within the Bologna Process, the member countries and with the efforts of the Bologna Follow-Up Group - and thus with the backing of the higher education institutions – are strongly committed to shaping a strong and distinctive EHEA. The focus was on a framework that has the Bachelor as the first degree. The discussion about the implementation of the SCHE was therefore portrayed as irrelevant on many fronts, especially politically.

Because the European Commission could not and did not want to have any influence on the Bologna Process in a formal sense, it was difficult to determine from which angle the impulse should be given to give the SCHE a formal status. The European associations for higher education, EUA and EURASHE, did not consider this to be their first task.

For this reason, in December 2013, a number of stakeholders and experts from thirteen countries decided to take some matters into their own hands and to proceed with the establishment of CHAIN5. This did not mean an extra political network, but a platform for those who would like to pay more attention to what is happening at level 5 for the countries within the EHEA. Various studies have already shown that many qualifications at this level are offered in many countries, including in higher education, by VET institutions and in the provision of non-formal training.

Since then, CHAIN5 has acquired a place of its own in Europe, by developing all kinds of activities and feeding the discussions that are being conducted together with partner organizations in the VET and HE sectors.

One of the objectives that fits with CHAIN5 is to focus on the whole spectrum of qualifications that can be linked to the EQF or an NQF at level 5 – depending on the strategy used in a country for linking them to a framework. At an international level, it can then be examined what can be done with this bundling of qualifications, in fact, just as has happened for higher education. This could then take place in a ‘European Level 5 Area’, if support can be found for this approach in the coming period, also within the VET sector, in the interest of the institutions involved.

Higher VET

Subsequently, attention can be given to a subject that will require a lot of energy when it comes to positioning it better and conveniently. It concerns the use of the term ‘Higher VET (HVET)’. It is a combination of ‘Higher’, a term that refers to ‘Higher Education’, and of VET, the form

of education that extends up to and including level 4 on the basis of the agreements with the EHEA in the formal international context.

This combination is unclear and offers no guidance for all involved. Also, the sector in which this type of training that is strongly vocational is not part of both VET and EHEA. There may be parties involved who have an interest in an unclear and ‘blurring’ situation, but target groups such as students, employers and policymakers must have a view of a transparent system. In any case, there must be insight into the possibilities of obtaining a diploma in HVET and subsequently also how one can progress to higher levels, including in higher education.

That is why it makes sense, based on the position of CHAIN5 and the focus on the European Level 5 Area, to come up with a different name for qualifications that now fall under Higher VET. In the international circuit, this can lead to its own status as a specific sector. The name that is now circulating (and is already being used in certain places) is: Vocational-Professional Education (VPE). It is a combination of two characteristics, with a reference to the VET sector and study programmes that fall under Professional Higher Education in the EHEA.

If this approach can be used further, knowing that it will take some time before there is broad support for it, each country can determine for itself whether there is room in the education system for the Associate (SCHE), VPE on level 5 or possible for both types of qualifications. In any case, it should be arranged that learners can follow a pathway that is designed as smoothly as possible, using level 5 for that. In other words, a country that has nothing to do with this level 5, does many people short in the pursuit of an appropriate diploma.

The Dutch example

It is certainly a good idea to look at countries that focus on level 5 in the national framework, with the associated instruments to make effective use of it. It will always be the government that can take the lead in this, but in addition, there is support needed among the users and providers of the associated study programmes in the formal context and courses when it comes to training options that are more focused on workers and professionals. This concerns the providers in the VET and HE sector as well as the so-called business academies.

In the Netherlands, to take as an example, the process of searching for the positioning of such qualifications started already in 2000. This was partly at the request of a number of Leido experts who recognized its possibilities for shaping continuous learning pathways in the system. This already led to the introduction of the SCHE in 2006, so a year after this type of qualifications was accepted by the Ministers at European level, a good reason to start a search for it within the Bologna Process. The name of this type of study programmes became ‘Associate degree’, but it can only be offered within the PHE, due to the existence of a binary higher education system in the Netherlands.

It was an explicit choice, supported by all organizations and policymakers involved, for only having level 5 in higher education. There is therefore no Higher VET (or better now: VPE) in the Netherlands. Besides that all types of non-formal education and training programmes and courses can be linked to level 5, especially important for the business community to be clear

about what can be expected from such a type of education. Incidentally, at the international level linking non-formal educational qualifications to an NQF is not yet a common practice. This may also have to do with the interests involved in assigning a level to it, especially from the point of view higher education institutions. They argue that something like this can lead to unclear situations, for example, if a private company programme is awarded NQF level 6 and ‘it is thought’ that it will also result in a Bachelor's degree, also formally found at level 6.

In the Netherlands, a programme leading to the Associate degree can be offered by an institution for PHE in close collaboration with a VET institution. This makes it easier for students in the VET sector to move on to higher education. That this works is evident from the numbers for students who enrol in the SCHE programmes in recent years, partly because of their more independent positioning within the entire system and the promotion of programmes that are even more focused on the labour market. There has been an annual growth of around 15%, which shows that the Associate degree has proven itself and continues to do so.

New international processes

So, after the Lisbon Strategy, we saw many plans appear with regard to education in Europe. The Member States have certainly made use of this, directly on the basis of the recommendations but also indirectly by working together by exchanging good practices. There is now an ambitious proposal from Brussels on the creation of a European Education Area (EEA). This would mean proposing an approach in which all underlying sectors are included in order to make agreements with each other about permeability, progression, the use of relevant instruments and jointly examining how all kinds of developments affect each other's sector.

So, there is the EHEA for higher education. But for the VET sector, despite all the plans and the related documents drawn up regularly by the European Commission, no process has yet been initiated. But the approach that has recently been formulated on the basis of the crisis does provide guidance for this, if used well by all stakeholders.

Naturally, a process will also have to be initiated for the VPE sector, for the courses at levels 5 and higher, but not to be seen as higher education. Perhaps this can be done in the very short term, as an option to try out a number of things in collaboration with those involved in the Bologna Process. CHAIN5 will develop a number of initiatives for this in the coming period.

To conclude

This article tries to bridge the gap between what was set in motion at the beginning of this century to allow institutions to work together at European level and what we are facing now. In addition, ‘Brussels’ offered and offers assistance to the national governments to see what could and can reasonably be done within all kinds of international networks. Much has already been achieved, but all kinds of other plans have also got bogged down or ‘left on the shelf’.

Now that everything seems to have been arranged for higher education, it is the turn of the other sectors. As mentioned, this definitely includes the VET sector, given the role this type of

education plays in the European economic approach. Further, when it comes to connecting VET with higher education, to allow more people to obtain a diploma or degree at level 5 or higher, it can work with a new to be developed sector VPE – and in a broad sense also within a ‘European Level 5 Area’ for all qualifications that can be positioned at level 5. Great options and perfect challenges for Europe!

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