

Joint Declaration between CEI-Bois, EFBWW, EFIC, HMC and UEA on Mobility and Apprenticeships in the European Furniture and Woodworking Sectors

Between May 2010 and May 2011 the European Confederation of Woodworking Industries (CEI-Bois), the European Federation of Building and Woodworkers (EFBWW), the European Furniture Industry Confederation (EFIC), the Dutch Wood and Furniture College (HMC) and the European Furniture Manufacturers Federation (UEA) have been running a joint project, entitled “Foster VET Mobility”, aiming to enhance provisions for increased mobility action in vocational education and further training activities in the European furniture and woodworking sectors.

During the last years the Social Partner organisations have put more emphasis on the topic of vocational education and further training, mainly because of the fact that the issue is not only a focus point of EU-policy but also has numerous links to other policies and aspects of importance, i.e.:

- Employment policies;
- Labour market policies;
- The competitiveness of the sectors;
- Adaption of technical and other kinds of innovation;
- The sectors’ attractiveness for young people;
- Sustainability in terms of career paths for the workforce, their wellbeing at work and the sectors’ capacity to cope with changes in other societal and economic subsystems.

Taking into account the interdependences and interrelations between different policies and areas of activity, from the beginning onwards the parties involved in the project shared the view that activities on the European level, and aiming at the cooperation between different stakeholders, are vital for making any progress in the updating and improvement of existing structures in the sphere of VET.

With a view to achieving a more holistic view on current conditions, it was thought essential to bring together people from European and national/regional level, people from training institutes and companies, people from workers’ and employers’ side, people with a practical and theoretical background. Therefore, we considered improving the cooperation and networking between training centres and between training providers and social partner organisations both at national and European level as a precondition for the enhancement of mobility actions and as a main goal of this project.

Regarding the EU-policies, we found our general view confirmed when studying the EU Document on “Youth on the Move”. This document was published in September 2010 as one out of seven Flagship-Initiatives in the framework of the EU 2020 strategy. Of course, already in the past the EU fostered mobility actions, among others through financial support, supplied by the Life-Long-Learning programme. And existing experiences confirmed that transnational networking is a precondition for successful mobility action. Furthermore, all the tools developed at European level, i.e. the EQF, ECVET, ECAVET and others, respectively the implementation and application of these tools are demanding increased cross border cooperation.

Therefore, we aimed at creating a network that could support and intervene in European discussions and structures, namely the Social Dialogue activities in the Furniture and the Woodworking sectors. Finally, we can say that this approach has anticipated, respectively was an excellent preparation for, the beginning discussion on Sector Skills Councils on the European level.

The “Foster VET Mobility” Partners gratefully thank the European Commission for facilitating the excellent co-operation between the European Social Partner organisations, training centres and practitioners.

The participating organisations declare their commitment to distribute the results of the “Foster VET Mobility” project and to support the fruitful use of these results in all European countries. Furthermore, the participating organisations will evaluate the results on a practical basis and will continue the networking and the support of practical mobility actions as a kind of follow-up activities within the framework of the European social Dialogue within the Furniture and the Woodworking sector.

Considerations and conclusions

The first lesson we have learnt from the project is that the national systems of VET still are differing widely and that it is not easy to compare them. Even though we use a joint conceptual framework for the description of the systems from nine countries, it is not easy to understand the respective frameworks, conditions and practices. The involvement of different actors and stakeholders in the project allowed us to get a taste of the different connotations of the respective national systems. In this connection connotation means, among others, cultural aspects, the role of hierarchy in the work organisation, the concept of professions, learning methods or the relation between theoretical and practical instructions.

The system of vocational training is embedded in the educational system and this system is related and linked to the society as a whole and therefore, a simple comparison is more or less impossible. However, the differences are not a problem in itself, but they have to be considered when planning mobility actions or, even more, when trying to compare qualifications, reached after finishing an apprenticeship.

Another relevant distinction between the national systems is the appreciation of careers. In some countries it is more favourable to start one’s career from scratch than in others. In this connection it is also of relevance, in how far career paths are open for craftsman, having started the professional career from scratch. The project partners agree that permeability of the educational systems is vital and that, in general, it needs to be upgraded.

Our comparison discovered another interesting aspect namely regarding how training systems are funded. State funded systems exist beside those funded by the employers. We will not present any preferences regarding the structure of funding, but we underline that secured funding is vital in all aspects of the functioning of VET systems. Additionally, we found that the strong involvement of Social Partner organisations is also vital for any improvement in the systems of vocational education.

Follow up Activities

Over the last decades EU policies, in the area of vocational education and training, have contributed to numerous initiatives for an improvement of comparability, mobility, exchange of good practices, cooperation and other aspects, on national as well as European, company and sector level.

To go further in this direction, direct cooperation and regular consultation of training institutes needs to be strengthened in the framework of the European Social Dialogue. The networking, as started with this project, will be continued when disseminating the project results to other countries and institutions involved in training activities for our sectors.

More research activities are needed for a better understanding of the respective training systems and to support the comparability of existing qualifications on sector level. In this respect, the project partners are intending to contribute to the creation of “zones of mutual trust” and also to consider going further in the direction of mutual recognition of qualifications.

Regarding the latter, the European Social Partner organisations intend, in close cooperation with the relevant vocational training institutes, to initiate a Leonardo da Vinci project. This project will focus on two professions, namely cabinet makers and upholsterers. The project is aiming at finding out in how far it would be possible to describe (European) core qualifications for these two professions. The “Foster VET Mobility” project was essential for the creation of a consortium that will contribute to this Leonardo project.

Based on the contacts, created during this project, the European Social Partner organisations will support more and regular exchanges between training institutes from different countries. The European Social Dialogue will act as an intermediary.

The network of stakeholders will also be used to initiate a permanent discourse on the improvement of existing curricula for the different professions. Beside the improvement of the curricula it is our goal to define the core competences, independently of the country where he or she has done its apprenticeship. This will be a direct contribution to pave the way for an easier application of the ECVET tool.

Finally, the European Social Partner organisations of the Furniture and the Woodworking sectors and the HMC as representative of the vocational training institutes are intending to carefully examine whether the installation of Sector Skills Councils are feasible for the Furniture and the Woodworking sectors.

Related activities will focus on the question in which direction the wood and furniture sectors of the single countries will develop in the future. Based on research initiated by the European Commission in 2009, we will examine the economic framework conditions and related questions such as the developments in design, technology and global competition. This will also be for the benefit of training providers and national structures of Social Dialogue.

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