

## **The ECVET Conversion Exercise in Malta**

### **Authored by:**

Agius, Matthew & Curmi, Richard (NCFHE)

### **Introduction and Background**

The Malta Qualifications Council embarked on an ambitious project entitled *VET Credit Conversion System* supported by the Leonardo da Vinci Lifelong Learning Programme spanning over March 2011 and February 2013.

The backbone of policy development within the education sector in Malta has been the establishment of the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) in 2007 through Legal Notice 295. The MQF served both to present a snapshot of the education system in Malta and reflect the different types of qualifications in Malta, as well as to trigger progress and develop the system itself. Malta was the second country in Europe to reference the MQF to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the first to reference to the QF/EHEA. This gave an advantage to the Maltese system to pioneer major developments in lifelong learning and education.

The Framework formally introduced the concept of learning outcomes, through which the concept of learning is centred on the individual in understanding what the learner is expected to know and be able to do at the end of any given learning experience irrelevant of the context in which the learning experience occurred.

This led towards easier access and transition through one's education pathway progression and the introduction of permeability between academic and vocational streams. The introduction of a learning outcomes-based approach was a change in mentality in the Maltese education system. Therefore the MQF went beyond introducing eight levels of learning where the level of difficulty is described through level descriptors for each level.

Having made significant advancements in achieving parity of esteem between different modes of learning, be it through the general academic, vocational or informal and non-formal methods, initiating the implementation of the European Credit Transfer System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) (European Parliament & European Council, 2009) within the national system was the next natural step.

Learning experiences within the Bologna Cycles in academic higher education (reflected as Levels 5 to 8 on the MQF and the EQF) had already passed through a positive experience of a credit system, that of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). The way forward was that of giving learning experiences within the VET sector a value in terms of credit and through the use of units to be able to set learning experiences into building blocks in a common area of study which when grouped together develop a holistic qualification which in turn can be broken down into units of learning reflecting the respective credit value attributed to it. This helps in terms of: guidance, where the learner can see the learning in a set of structures making it clearer for the individual to know what a specific part of a qualification is set to achieve; quality assurance, where it is easier to identify what is expected to be achieved through thorough a description of a block of learning experiences and set measures and criteria in this sense; recognition and transfer, where credit is given in terms of units of learning and value is given to this credit which is then transferable since it is described through achieved learning outcomes and given points. A trusted credit system can be described as an authorised and recognised currency system in terms of learning achieved.

The VET sector in the Maltese education system has developed and grown in recent history, primarily through the re-opening and expansion of The Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST), investment in the Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS), the essential role given to the Employment and Training Corporation (ETC) to provide courses particularly for the unskilled, semi-skilled and unemployed, and also through the vast expansion and improved quality within the

private sector of VET providers. Therefore this led to the necessity of developing of structured credit system for VET that is recognised beyond our shores and across the different streams of education.

The *VET Credit Conversion System* project was designed to address this need by setting up a pilot phase of implementation of an ECVET system. The target was that of converting, through ECVET, the courses of 30 VET qualifications selected from the main public providers whilst also bringing private providers on board. Indeed the project partners included MCAST, ITS, ETC and Clear Dimension Ltd. (CDL – A private training provider focusing on IT and network administration courses) from Malta, and The National Centre for TVET Development (CNDIPT) from Romania, the Department of Educational Sciences within the University of Florence (UNIFI) from Italy and the Institute of the RS for vocational education and training (CPI) from Slovenia. The project addressed fifteen qualifications from MCAST, five qualifications from ITS, five qualifications from ETC, and five qualifications from CDL in order to take courses covering both public and private provision, being of different levels, subject area, foreign or home-grown, different durations and modes of delivery. This would reflect a plausible sample as a pilot project to create an experience of converting these thirty courses. The experience and lessons learnt from the conversion were then intended to be reported and documented to produce the *Manual for the Conversion of qualifications into the ECVET System*. The manual serves as the major deliverable of the project by producing a tangible guide on the processes necessary to adapt and convert a given course leading to a VET qualification into a system which is structured and readable through ECVET, empowering the provider and keeping the learner at the centre of benefitting from the process.

### **The Project Outline**

The *VET Credit Conversion System* project was devised on seven work packages. These were: *Management; Review of Existing VET Qualifications; Development of Methodology and Tools for Conversion; Piloting of Conversion Tool; Ensuring Quality of Process and Outputs; Dissemination of project aims and achievements; Exploiting the Results of the Project.*

## *Management*

The overall management of the project formally included the preparation of the Interim and Final Reports required by the LLP funding programmes. This primarily included ensuring sound finance management and administration on track. The management aspect was concerned with effective communication between partners which was essential to ensure that each of the partners gave their respective contribution to each deliverable as necessary in order to achieve the best results through the effective input and workings of the partnership consortium. This aspect of the project also warranted a sense of ownership between the partners and an understanding of the targets and deliverables. This was followed through regular communication and status reports to ensure that the project deliverables were on course. The management was particularly supported through the use of three partner project meetings at different intervals of the project duration which enabled the partners to communicate and discuss the aims, direction and deliverables of the project.

## *Developing the Technical Aspect*

There were three main work packages which were of a technical and development nature. Each of these represented one of three major phases of the project.

The first part was that of reviewing the existing VET qualifications through an exercise which sought to describe the courses to be converted into ECVET and also identify the strengths and weaknesses in view of the impending ECVET conversion. This process identified the status of the qualifications in terms of learning outcomes, recognition and level-rating by the national authority, the use if any of study units and whether there was any form of credit system in place. This analysis identified the existing learning outcomes used and whether these were divided and explained in the common system identified by the national authority – that of dividing these into:

- Knowledge
- Skills

- Applying Knowledge and Understanding
  - Communication Skills
  - Judgemental Skills
  - Learning Skills
- Competences

Moreover these have to be written in a manner that reflects the level descriptors of the MQF and it is also suggested that these are worded through the use of Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956). The EQF Recommendation describes learning outcomes as *statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process* (European Parliament & European Council, 2008). However the MQF then further breaks down this statement into the approach given above in order to give a deeper description in a structured manner that can be linked through a common practice of describing qualifications (Malta Qualifications Council, 2012). CEDEFOP describe learning outcomes in terms of their functionality depending on the depth of their breakdown (CEDEFOP, 2010). These can either be statements that define the overall goals of a given training programme or those of specific blocks of learning within a programme or learning experience that can then be grouped into units.

Assessed learning outcomes constitute credit and this credit derived from relevant structured learning outcomes can then be grouped into units (European Commission, 2009). The value and weight of credit of units in context of the qualification is allocated through credit points, taking the benchmark of 60 credit points and workload for one year of studies for full-time study in a VET qualification. This benchmark is set at a similar workload of that in academic education through ECTS whereby the notions of parity of esteem and transferability are enhanced.

The study showed that 63% of the courses in the conversion process had already undergone the process of level-rating and recognition by the national authority. This meant that the approach taken in developing the conversion tool had to take into consideration courses that had not necessarily been given a level and recognised by the national authority. This would mean that perhaps a number of these courses would not have had the correct use of learning outcomes, units or other essential components for the conversion and the tool would therefore need to address this discrepancy. Indeed the report had to study not only whether learning outcomes had been developed but whether these reflected the common requirements and formulation indicated by the national authority. Credit systems were not in place in some of the providers, but whilst there were forms of credit systems in place, these were not of a common composition. For instance, the origin of allocating credit may not have been necessarily according to points in terms of value in relation to the global workload of the qualification, but merely reflected contact hours. Moreover the number of total learning hours allocated to each credit point may also not have been equivalent.

At this stage the report had to also deal with institutional practices beyond the technical aspect of course description and curriculum building. The project therefore studied whether the providers had mechanisms to assess and validate learning outcomes achieved through informal or non-formal practices. In terms of being able to transfer credit and credit accumulation systems across institutions or even countries, the study also inquired into the readiness of the infrastructure to be able to work on Memorandum of Understanding partnership agreements between one institution and another in order to be able to recognise the credit achieved across institutions. ECVET also suggests the use of a learning agreement involving the learner in order to formally engage the learner in the cycle of describing a mobility learning process. The use of a personal transcript is that of describing the credit and learning undergone and achieved both to provide the learner with a detailed official document of the qualification and to provide the learner who would not have completed the qualification fully with a formal document highlighting the achievements in terms of credits and learning achieved.

This then led to the second part where the methodology of conversion envisaged was designed and a template was drawn up in order to convert the description and design of the given courses into ECVET. The template drawn was used as a catalyst to support the providers in understanding how courses should be built and described. This therefore gave impetus towards shifting the attitude in course-building towards a learner-based approach that brings about a common system. The template has two parts, with the first highlighting the course description and the second referring to the institutional readiness to host ECVET as described above.

The template starts with a brief profile of the training provider and then it delves into providing a thorough description of the qualification and indications of methodology how to apply the description in terms of the template. These would include matters such as the level of engagement, entry requirements, general course objectives, study units and total learning hours (divided accordingly between contact, self-study, hands on and assessment time). Then each unit is listed in terms of learning outcomes and described through matters such as the number of ECVET points suggested, the mode of delivery, the mode of assessment and the suggested reading list.

The third part was the implementation of the conversion through the template. A report was drawn up reflecting the conversion exercise which was then used to produce the final product – the *ECVET Conversion Manual*.

#### *Project Quality*

The project's success was also maintained through a laborious quality assurance system analysing the process and outputs which would serve not only as a checks-and-balances approach but also an opportunity to fine-tune the project and workings along the duration of the project. This included a two-pronged approach – both internal and external evaluation processes. The internal evaluation was conducted through internal feedback forms amongst the partners following set milestones of the project and through feedback from the participants in the activities conducted. The results of

internal evaluation were collated through two reports, one at the interim phase and another at the final phase. These sought to address the quality of the partnerships' workings, the quality of internal project communication, coordination, and quality and level of sustainability of the project results. Moreover this was supported by two external evaluators with VET and credit systems expertise that gave additional input and external outlook on the way the partnership was functioning and on the quality and direction of the results, through two separate reports.

### *Dissemination*

An important pillar of the project was the aspect of dissemination which intrinsically needed to promote both the concept of ECVET, as well as the project itself and its deliverables. The stakeholders and public needed to be engaged in the process of producing the deliverables and also to explain and expose the results to them. Two national conferences were held through the project. The first conference was intended to launch both the concept of ECVET as well as the project itself and engage all potential stakeholders in becoming acquainted and contributing directly. The second conference which happened at a later stage in the project was primarily intended to explain the qualifications after ECVET conversion as well as promote the Conversion Manual and the processes which had been developed. This was supported through four seminars each addressed at engaging public and private training providers and their staff. On an online level this aspect was addressed through an interactive project website which was constantly updated and an info-CD pack which sought to promote ECVET and its advantages. Various dissemination material was also produced and consistently distributed in order to promote ECVET and the brand of the Maltese project. Beyond the lifecycle of the project, the entity is committed to exploit the results by promoting the conversion process as a pilot phase which intends to have a multiplier-effect across the board.

### **Conversion Process**

The *ECVET Conversion Manual* (National Commission for Further and Higher Education, 2013) produced through this project is intended to help any educational institution interested in either developing a training programme or converting already existing courses into the ECVET system according to ECVET specifications. The conversion process developed through the manual identifies the following steps towards implementing ECVET.

#### *Identify Competences*

The initial step of the process is to start by identifying the competences being developed through following the course leading the qualification. This can be done through the use of pre-established level descriptors which can be found in Malta's referencing report (Malta Qualifications Council, 2012). It is important that the description of competences is divided according to the recommendation of describing learning outcomes which has been referred to earlier on in this paper. It is also recommended that action verbs and clear concise descriptions are used, such as that of using Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956).

The Maltese experience has identified occupational standards as a useful tool to use in extracting the competences needed to achieve such standards to be used as a basis for course development. In this manner VET courses would reflect industry needs. Indeed where occupational standards would not have been yet set for the specific sector it is highly recommended that consultation with the relevant industry and other key stakeholders takes place to be able to establish the key competences required.

#### *Identify/Propose Level*

Once again, the level of the occupational standards can be used if available. If not, reference has to be made to the MQF/EQF framework levels (levels one to eight) by identifying which level of descriptors best fit the level of competence overall, in terms of those statements being put forward as the competences to be achieved following such a course. This helps in setting the course within a

framework of progression and identifying the course's level of difficulty in a common understandable language.

The level descriptors are generic in nature and serve as reference points for all forms of qualifications be they formal, informal and non-formal as well as sectoral. The level descriptors of the MQF include a list of learning outcomes which encompass knowledge, skills and competences and highlight communication, judgement and learning skills. Progression in the MQF is recorded in terms of knowledge and understanding, communication skills, judgement skills, learning skills and autonomy and responsibility. A distinctive feature of the level descriptors in the MQF is that they are focused on the individual. Thus, they are always written in the singular form, to reflect the fact that they are designed with the individual in mind (Malta Qualifications Council, 2012).

In terms of the MQF, it places great emphasis on a series of key competences which are intended to provide the possibility for learners to move from one occupation to another and possibly even across different sectors. These include communication in the mother tongue, communication in foreign language, mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology, digital competence, learning to learn, interpersonal skills, intercultural and social competence, civic competence, entrepreneurship and cultural expression (Malta Qualifications Council, 2009).

#### *Set Course Objectives*

The course objectives are different from specific learning outcomes. Setting the course objectives means giving an outline of specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound objectives whilst also making due reference to key competences intended to be developed. The course objectives identify what the course intends to deliver and general overall learning outcomes.

#### *Establish Learning Outcomes*

Establishing learning outcomes for a given learning experience means establishing statements which describe what such a qualification represents in terms of knowledge, skills and competences. These

should be based on the relevant occupational standards when in place, or else written in line with the given level descriptors of the MQF/EQF framework depending on the established level at the first step of the process. In cases where the course has already been developed and is being translated into ECVET, it may be easier to identify the learning outcomes first and then compare these with the level descriptors to establish the level of the course rather than the other way round.

Learning outcomes in Malta are written based on the guidelines published by the Further Education and Training Awards Council in Ireland (Further Education and Training Awards Council - Ireland, 2005). Learning outcomes should be concise statements, devised independent of delivery and setting, worded in clear, unambiguous language. Learning outcomes are to be written in the future tense and commence with an active verb which most precisely describes the actual or preferred outcome. Learning outcomes are to clearly reflect the level of the award. It is necessary to make reference to the level descriptors to ensure that the proper level is being targeted. Learning outcomes need to be observable and measurable so that learners clearly know what is expected of them. Learning outcomes will enable and encourage a range of assessment methodologies to be applied.

### *Knowledge, Skills & Competences*

In line with the MQF, the National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE) being the national authority entrusted to implement the EQF in Malta, recommends learning experiences to be described in learning outcomes based on the level descriptors of the MQF. These learning outcomes reflect the level descriptors of the EQF but are more elaborate and given more depth so as to reflect the national context. The system used in Malta subdivides learning outcomes in Knowledge (Knowledge and Understanding), Skills (Applying Knowledge and Understanding, Communication Skills, Judgemental Skills, Learning Skills), and Competences (Autonomy and Responsibility).

Knowledge refers to the understanding of basic, factual and theoretical information which is traditionally associated with formal learning but can also be acquired through other settings. Skills refer to the ability to apply the acquired knowledge in different contexts. Each competence is therefore then defined as an amalgamation of knowledge and skills illustrating the level of autonomy and responsibility. The NCFHE and formerly the Malta Qualifications Council (MQC) (Malta Qualifications Council, 2011) have published a number of documents which can further guide this step of the process.

*Set Learning Activities (Contact Hours, Self Study, Hands on)*

This step includes establishing the total learning hours needed, the number of credits and the duration of the course. Following consultation NCFHE has adopted a credit system of 1 ECVET point being equal to twenty-five hours of total learning to be used in the VET sector. This weighting runs in parallel with the ECTS credit system used in academic higher education. This provides a further degree of comparability, transferability and permeability. However in terms of dividing the total number of hours between contact hours and other learning hours, so far in VET NCFHE has adopted a more flexible approach rather than the guideline of 6.25 contact hours and 18.75 hours other learning hours (such as self-study) which is used in the case of ECTS. This is due to the range of areas and types of fields of study covered by VET which require different exigencies according to the subject matter. Yet a rigorous quality assurance system needs to support ECVET in order to assure that the learning outcomes expected to be achieved are in fact achieved and that the courses are credibly designed in such a way to deliver such learning outcomes.

When referring to twenty-five hours of total learning this means that these include contact hours, self-study hours, hands-on hours and assessment hours. This aspect of the process would describe the mode of delivery of the course and can include various methods such as discussions, lessons, presentations, role-play, seminars, placements, fieldwork and other. Contact hours should refer to theoretical (non-practical hours). Self-study hours should refer to the study of something by oneself

without direct supervision or attendance in a class. Hands-on hours should refer to practical sessions which can also be supervised. Assessment hours should include the time needed to prepare a given assignment or the time allocated for an exam.

### *Set Assessment of Learning*

The methods of assessment of learning chosen for a specific course or unit should be those best triggered towards capturing the learning outcomes that the learner should have achieved during the given learning experience. Using different types of assessment methods is an advantage since this helps in diversifying the learning experience as a whole as well as being able to garner the best facets of different assessment methods. Examples of methods of assessment include assignments, logbook, written test, oral examination.

### *The ECVET Application Form*

The above steps lead to a concrete way of developing an ECVET course or translating an existing VET course into ECVET. The tools developed in this project have developed an ECVET Application Form which can be used as the skeleton of understanding how one needs to describe such courses. It is divided into two sections with the first section referring to the Overall Application Form and the second section (to be repeated for as many times necessary, depending on the number of units) referring to the Profile for each module/unit of the qualification.

The first section includes the name, brief profile and confirmation of tuition license of the education and training provider. Then it delves into an overall description of the course including the title of qualification, the proposed MQF level, the type of course and duration, the target group, entry requirements, overall course objectives, course outline with number of modules/units, total expected hours of learning and total number of ECVET credits.

The second section is devised for each module or unit. It gives the name and number of the unit pegged with the hours of total learning tied with ECVET credits for the specific unit and the in-depth

description of learning outcomes to be achieved through the unit. This is followed by the modes of delivery and modes of assessment applied for the given unit. This section also includes the reading list for the unit. The minimum formal qualifications or experience required to deliver the unit is also identified together with the Curriculum Vitae of those persons who will be delivering it.

The final part of the form would then include copies of the policy on the recognition and accreditation of prior learning, the Memorandum of Understanding partnership agreement, draft Learning Agreement and the outline or template of the Personal Transcript and Diploma Supplement. This latter part ensures that all tools for ECVET recognition and transferability are in place.

### **Concluding Notes**

This paper has sought to expose in brief the processes undergone and experience achieved through the *VET Credit Conversion System*. The two-year project has brought together eight partners to work towards the introduction and implementation of ECVET in Malta. As can be deciphered from this account, this project did not occur in a vacuum but in parallel with developments on an EU level as well as developments within the education sector in Europe and Malta particularly in VET.

ECVET as a credit system for VET, has developed into that necessary next step to unify the various systems in VET both in Malta but more so across Europe. The credibility and value of learning experiences in the VET sector need to be strengthened and broadened through important tools such as ECVET and therefore projects such as this are a living experience of how the benefits of ECVET can be achieved and exploited. This shows that through this pilot initiative that has taken a lengthy but effective process, ECVET conversion is realistic and can be applied to VET of different forms and contexts. The end product has not only been the success of the conversion process that has in fact produced an ECVET conversion manual that can be used as a tool beyond the institutions participating in the project, but most of all the awareness of ECVET and its benefits that has been

raised. It also makes ECVET a reachable target for training institutions to implement rather than an abstract concept.

The challenges encountered have also shaped the process into a successful one which particularly when developing the conversion manual, have also proved to be essential in order to outline the process in a manner which helps third parties using it to surpass such challenges.

Nevertheless, this project is a first step and not a conclusion in itself. NCFHE together with its partners, hopes that the benefits of this project are taken on board by other authorities, providers and education policy-makers in order to widen and further develop the ECVET experiment by which finally the VET sector as a whole will benefit. This would include the policy-makers, the providers, the employers, but most of all the end-users and thus the general public.

#### **Select Bibliography:**

Bloom, B. S. (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives: the classification of educational goals; Handbook I: Cognitive Domain*. New York: Longmans.

CEDEFOP. (2010). *Learning outcomes approaches in VET Curricula*.

Commission, E. (2008). *Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework*.

European Commission. (2009). *ECVET: Get to know ECVET Better*.

European Parliament & European Council. (2009). 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). *Official Journal of the European Union* , 155/11-155/18.

European Parliament & European Council. (2008). Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning. *Official Journal of the European Union* , 111/1-111/7.

Further Education and Training Awards Council - Ireland. (2005). Retrieved from FETAC Website: [http://www.fetac.ie/fetac/documents/det\\_stands\\_policy\\_doc\\_280905.pdf](http://www.fetac.ie/fetac/documents/det_stands_policy_doc_280905.pdf)

Malta Qualifications Council. (2011). *Learning Outcomes Report*. Salesian Press.

Malta Qualifications Council. (2009). *Referencing of the Malta Qualifications Framework to the European Qualifications Framework and the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area* (1st ed.). Salesian Press.

Malta Qualifications Council. (2012). *Referencing of the Malta Qualifications Framework to the European Qualifications Framework and the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area* (3rd ed.). Salesian Press.

National Commission for Further and Higher Education. (2013). *Vocational Education and Training Credit Conversion System: Manual for the Conversion of qualifications into the ECVET System*. Salesian Press.