

Keynote speech by Pervenche Berès
CEDEFOP conference
A bridge to the future
European Vocational education and training (VET) policy 2002 to 2010
March 17, 2011
European Economic and Social Committee

Dear Minister Czomba,

Dear Chairs Riihimäki and Nilsson,

Dear directors,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I **thank Cedefop** for their invitation to address this conference and wish to seize this opportunity to express my appreciation of the work it does to promote and develop vocational education and training in the European Union.

We hear a lot about structural reforms, competitiveness, fiscal discipline and stability these days. But to me, **the main challenge ahead for our societies and economies is called education.**

This conference comes at a very timely moment, as we have to reflect on how to optimize the Copenhagen process¹ to **meet the ambitious objectives we set ourselves in the Europe 2020 strategy** and to ensure that this time, unlike with the Lisbon strategy, we meet them.

I also strongly believe that the current **socio-economic context of the crisis** as well as the demographic **challenge** and the transition to a green economy call for more and better vocational education and training.

In deed, the **economic crisis** might not prevent the return of job growth between now and 2020, but it threatens to leave high levels of structural unemployment, particularly among young and long-term unemployed people with low levels of education.

Against this background, education in general, and VET in particular, have a key role to play in helping people to adapt to flexible working processes, to acquire competences such as multi-tasking, autonomy, decision-making and self-responsibility. This will promote new employment security by preparing workers to deal confidently and securely with repeated professional transitions. To this end, workers must be provided with a means of determining and planning their own training needs.

¹ National authorities, the European Commission and social partners from 33 European countries are taking part in the Copenhagen Process to help develop vocational education and training systems. Since 2002, the countries involved have worked together to develop innovative policies and actions. The overall aim is to improve the quality of vocational training and to encourage more individuals to make wider use of vocational learning opportunities, whether at school, in higher education, in the workplace, or through private courses. The actions and tools developed aim to allow users to link and build on learning acquired at various times, in both formal and non-formal contexts. Progress has been reviewed every two years at Maastricht (2004), Helsinki (2006), Bordeaux (2008) and Bruges (2010). At each meeting ministers responsible for VET endorsed communiqués to adjust priorities for the next phase.

Cedefop's report suggests that so far, the Copenhagen process has been successful, particularly in the establishment of a number of EU common tools to enhance transparency and portability of qualifications. However, the sector needs to be modernized to make it a more attractive and high-quality option, so that it provides young people with the right skills to find a suitable job and adults with an opportunity to update skills throughout their working life. The agenda set in Europe 2020 clearly calls for a much bolder approach to reform of VET systems. The main focus in the forthcoming period should be on swift implementation, simplification and consolidation of the most effective existing instruments, initiatives and programmes.

As regards the comparability of education and training systems in the Member States, the priorities must be to break down barriers, increase transparency, and make for ease of comparison within and between the different systems. It is crucial that high-quality VET provided in one area should be recognised across the whole of the EU in order to encourage mobility and exchange.

Vocational and educational training should be accessible, available, individually tailored and affordable at all the various times of life regardless of the status on the labour market and with a view not only to promote lifelong learning, but also to contribute to the evolution of existing professions and the creation of new ones, based on society's actual needs and furthermore to be considered as an important instrument for prolonging the whole working life of individuals.

In order to achieve effective transitions between learning phases and the world of work, guidance and counselling should be provided which will enable learners to gather relevant and timely information to inform career choices. These types of services should be available at all stages of learning, for both young people and adults, allowing learning choices to be made that will be relevant to the present jobs market.

To promote VET and to bring it up to all these challenges and expectations, **financing opportunities should be widened, simplified, and more adequate** through the Structural Funds, in particular using the funding currently provided under the **ESF**. The European Parliament's employment and social affairs committee will ensure that during the forthcoming discussions on the revision of the ESF regulation the promotion of VET is taken into account. **The European Globalisation Adjustment Fund** is also a tool that deserves to be looked at when it comes to identifying social innovation and programmes specifically tailored towards individual needs.

Let me now express some concluding concerns that should guide our policy choices:

First, there must however be a considered **balance between specialisation and generalisation** in training courses and vocational training options with both a longer-term and permanent perspective and a shorter-term and rapid perspective. By accumulating key competences, individuals become better equipped to deal with sudden and unforeseeable changes at work.

Secondly, the success of vocational education and training depends on the **participation and cooperation of all stakeholders**, local authorities, social partners

and universities, in the designing, organisation and financing of strategies towards this direction. In addition, VET strategies must be linked to economic development strategies, again at the local, national and European levels.

Finally, we know that the demand for skills will continue to rise. Industrial and technological change increases the need for workers with high and intermediate skill levels, but low-skilled labour is, conversely, being squeezed out. I therefore welcome the Commission's "new skills for new jobs agenda", but urge us all to **keep in mind that our priority needs to take everybody on board, to secure a place for each and everyone**. A knowledge society of the few that leaves the victims of the crisis, of globalisation and of change behind is not an option.

EU 2020 is not only about reaching an employment level of 75%, but also about reducing poverty and social exclusion. I truly believe that vocational education and training has a valuable contribution to bring to this objective.

Thank you.