



ECVET goes Business

O1 - Research Study - Executive Summary

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Methodology.....	5
Profile of the Focus Group Participants	6
Focus Group Research Themes	7
Research Theme 1: Current Recruitment Practices in your Company.....	7
Research Theme 2: Skills Assessment and Training of Employees	7
Research Theme 3: Current Pay Policy in your Company	8
Research Theme 4: Working in a Smart/Knowledge Economy.....	8
Research Theme 5: Use of Transparency Instruments.....	8
Outcomes and Recommendations from the Research Study.....	9
Conclusion	11



Introduction

The ECVET goes Business project aims to develop an approach to make ECVET and other European transparency instruments more relevant to the needs of HR managers and to encourage the integration of these tools in common HR processes and practices in local companies in each partner country. To achieve this aim and to increase the demand for ECVET and the other European transparency instruments on a company level, the ECVET goes Business project team will develop and provide materials and information in a format and language which HR managers, job stewards and business owners can use effectively and with ease. To upskill HR managers to be able to use these tools competently in their HR practices, the project consortium will also develop a concise and comprehensive training programme on how to use ECVET and others in HR management. So as to ensure that the curriculum and materials developed are of relevance to the needs of HR professionals and business owners, it was important for project partners to undertake the research process which has been summarised in the Executive Summary Report. This research was also undertaken so that all partners can better understand how the EU transparency instruments, such as ECVET, can be mapped onto standard HR process.

ECVET goes Business partners understand that there is a need, right across Europe, to broaden and mainstream the use of ECVET by focusing on the business world. While ECVET and other European transparency instruments and tools such as EQF, NQF, EQAVET and Europass, have been widely adopted and integrated into the VET sector across Europe, they still remain largely unknown and unused in the world of work.

Since ECVET was launched in 2009, there have been innumerable pilot projects funded through the Lifelong Learning and Erasmus+ Programmes which have been tasked with developing qualification and learning outcome descriptors for ECVET integration into VET, and tools and instruments to help jobseekers to use EU mobility and transparency instruments to avail of employment and education opportunities across the European Union. The ECVET goes Business consortium will build on the work of these pilot projects to specifically target the needs of the



business world and to encourage their use of ECVET and other European tools in their recruitment and selection processes.

The ECVET goes Business research study is the first core intellectual output of the project. The findings of this report will act as the evidence base for the development of Intellectual Outputs O2 and O3. As such, the research process had at its core the following aims:

- a)** To find out about key Human Resource processes in companies where ECVET and European transparency instruments can be embedded and used;
- b)** To disseminate the project idea directly to the target group members, helping to raise awareness and cultivate interest in the project and its outputs, while at the same time introducing the topic of ECVET and transparency instruments to the target group;
- c)** To build the theoretical background for the two other intellectual outputs of the project, (O2) Handbook – Modern HR Management with ECVET and European transparency instruments; and (O3) ECVET goes Business Training Course for HR Staff;
- d)** To foster relationships with the target group so that partners can establish a ‘community of practitioners’ who will test, use and avail of the project outputs as they are developed by the consortium.

At application stage, the project consortium agreed that using a Focus Group was the most suitable research methodology for completing the ECVET goes Business research study. The Focus Group was chosen because it is one of the best research methods for yielding qualitative research results. Meeting directly with members of the target group in an informal environment is a most effective means of developing a rapport with the target group, of getting them talking to each other and of gathering information on their thoughts, feelings and needs.

All partner organisations undertook to host focus group sessions and to gather data directly from the focus group members. This Executive Summary gives a very brief overview of the process these partners went through to conduct this



research and also provides a short summary of the main conclusions reached and recommendations made following the analysis of all country-specific research data.

Methodology

In order to introduce and discuss the project with local stakeholders, a series of focus groups were held with 76 representatives from businesses, social partners and public bodies across each partner country in January 2016 to address the following themes:

- Recruitment practices
- Skills assessment and training for employees
- Pay policy
- Working in a SMART/Knowledge economy
- Use of EU transparency instruments

To ensure a degree of uniformity and quality across the consortium in terms of organising, recruiting for, hosting and reporting on the various focus groups, Meath Partnership, as the research coordinators, produced a guide to help partners in planning and implementing their focus groups. This guide contained useful tips on how to plan a focus group, invite participants and get the most out of their participation. As a result of this guide, the methodology for completing the research in each partner country was similar. As outlined in the guide, partners invited focus group participants from their existing networks of business professionals, HR managers and business owners. Some partners used the Doodle Poll tool to find a time and date that was appropriate for the majority of participants. Using the guide, partners were better informed in selecting a suitable venue, time and facilitator for the focus group.

Once all the preparation had been completed and the focus group was underway, project partners followed the same format for their focus groups; namely, they began by welcoming and thanking the participants for attending, they gave a brief overview of the topic being discussed, they took time to establish the ground rules and write a 'Group Contract' which would determine how participants behaved



in the group setting and then they introduced the questions to be discussed by the group.

When organising and hosting focus group sessions across an international consortium, it is important that there is coherence and consistency in the research questions asked, so that the findings are comparable across all partner countries. As such, the questions to be put to the focus group participants were agreed at the first partner meeting in Trim, Ireland and it was agreed that all focus group facilitators would pose each of these questions to their HR focus group members. These questions are presented as 'research themes' further down in this executive summary.

Profile of the Focus Group Participants

As part of this project work, partner organisations are working with individuals from across the business community. Specifically, the project team are targeting the following individuals:

- HR managers and staff within companies
- Job/Shop Stewards
- Supervisors
- Line managers
- Social partners
- Other stakeholders

The research findings from these focus groups will inform the development of the curriculum and learning resources for HR specialists and businesses to use ECVET and other EU tools. Therefore, in order to ensure that the research conducted and data collected from the focus group sessions was relevant to the needs of these target groups, it was important for all partner organisations to recruit members of these groups to attend the focus groups. A profile of the participants from these focus groups is included in the Research Study Summary Report and the national research reports.



Focus Group Research Themes

As a core element for all further developments, this comprehensive research study aimed to identify the key processes of HR management in companies (large and SMEs both with a special focus) and to find the processes and aspects of Human Resource Management where ECVET and other transparency instruments can be embedded. This research study aimed to identify key HR practices (e.g. recruiting, wage/salary policy, career planning, leadership development, personal asset planning, motivation, corporate training etc.) and divide these practices into single process steps where ECVET and other instruments could potentially provide support and assistance. The methodological set-up of the research is a qualitative one; and so the focus group format was agreed upon by all partners. To ensure that partners addressed the same issues and collected comparable data from these focus group sessions, five key research themes were set by partners. These five themes were then converted into key research questions which were put to the focus group members in each partner country. An overview of these five research themes is as follows:

Ø **Research Theme 1: Current Recruitment Practices in your Company**

The aim of this research theme is to gather insight into how companies recruit employees and to unearth some best practice examples in relation to employee recruitment in Europe. By better understanding some of the processes and practices which HR managers use to recruit suitably qualified employees, ECVET goes Business partners will be better placed to advise these managers on ways they could use ECVET and other EU transparency tools in their recruitment practices.

Ø **Research Theme 2: Skills Assessment and Training of Employees**

The aim of this research theme is to gather insight into how companies ensure that their employees' training needs are identified and that suitable training opportunities are provided for their employees. Also, by understanding who makes the decision in companies with regard to identifying and addressing the training needs of employees, project partners will also be aware of whom they should be addressing when developing the training resources and the curriculum to upskill HR staff in using these transparency tools. This research theme could yield the most useful



results for project partners beginning this development work; because the provision of Initial VET (IVET) and Continuing VET (CVET) have already been mapped to these EU transparency tools and so this could be the area which project partners could target first when addressing the integration of these tools into HR practices.

Ø **Research Theme 3: Current Pay Policy in your Company**

The aim of this research theme is to gain a better understanding of the current pay policy in private and public; small, medium and large companies across Europe. The purpose of asking HR managers and senior staff this question is to gather insight into the factors which determine when an employee is due a pay rise and whether that is based on the expertise, qualifications and experience of the employee, the length of time the employee has been with the company or the list of responsibilities which are associated with the employee's role.

Ø **Research Theme 4: Working in a Smart/Knowledge Economy**

The aim of this research theme is to better understand any challenges which companies may face in recruiting suitably qualified candidates for modern business, with the required skill sets for employment in the Smart/Knowledge Economy. This research theme aims to find out if companies are struggling to find suitable employees for modern business positions, with the required IT aptitude and soft-skills to work in a modern professional environment. This research theme also aims to ascertain if HR managers and general managers believe there has been a shift in company culture and recruitment practices as a result of the Smart/Knowledge Economy. By gaining this insight, ECVET goes Business project partners will be better placed to understand the challenges faced by HR experts in recruiting employees with suitably modern skills, and partners will also be better informed to advise HR experts how to use EU transparency tools such as EURES, Europass and Euroguidance when attracting the right employees from abroad.

Ø **Research Theme 5: Use of Transparency Instruments**

The aim of this research theme is to better understand how European transparency tools are currently being used in HR practices across Europe, if they are being used at all; and also ascertain which tools are used most commonly, if any; and how these tools can be better integrated into HR practices in the future. This research theme is central to the core aims of the project; it is very important that partners understand



the current status of these tools in HR practices so that relevant and useful resources can be developed which meet the needs of HR staff who are looking to use these tools more frequently in their day-to-day practices.

Outcomes and Recommendations from the Research Study

Focus group participants from across the consortium were from a variety of economic sectors and the companies who were represented varied greatly in size. From a review of the outcomes of this research process, some observations can be made; namely that smaller companies are more flexible both in their recruitment procedures and in their pay policy. Smaller companies tend to have a pay policy which is less focused on results, production levels and performance of employees; however smaller companies also usually prefer to employ individuals who can undertake several tasks within different departments of the company. In contrast, larger companies prefer individuals with specific and particular skills, and they also tend to follow a stricter structure in assessing employee performance when setting and reviewing pay policies. Furthermore, in terms of training and employee development, larger companies are better placed to offer employees more frequent training and development opportunities; a greater variety of training opportunities and to either bring in external experts to deliver training in-house or to send employees to thematic seminars and workshops outside of the company, depending on the identified training needs. Smaller companies also tended to be more receptive to change and more open to adapting to new methods and the use of new resources in their HR practices. This is something which project partners should bear in mind when they are recruiting participants for the pilot testing phase of the ECVET goes Business project.

In terms of the knowledge and use of the EU transparency tools, following on from this research, it is clear that the tools which are most commonly known and used in Europe are the Europass documents, namely the CV template, the Language Passport and the Diploma Supplement. Of these tools, the CV template is the most commonly used, but even this was criticised by the HR experts for being too uniform and for not allowing the applicants' personality to come through.



Among the companies who were interviewed, there was some agreement that because the business community is so unaware of ECVET and other European transparency instruments, that these tools must have been developed without first consulting with the business community to see what they might want the instruments to look like, how they could use them and what would have been beneficial to them to be included in the tools in terms of recruitment practices, pay policy and human resource management (HRM). For this reason, the business community in some countries were not supportive of integrating these tools into their HR processes and procedures.

Despite these somewhat negative comments, HR experts who attended the focus group sessions generally agreed that a widespread dissemination campaign which promotes the use and value of the tools to the business community could be effective in securing better buy-in from the business community in using these tools. As well as the promotion of these tools, experts highlighted the need to create and disseminate user-friendly and practical training resources to train business or VET professionals in the use of these tools. Another recommendation for how to ensure the widespread use of ECVET and the EU transparency tools was to campaign for the tools to be introduced through a top-down approach, whereby their use would be compulsory and backed by relevant policy-makers. While this is not within the remit of this project, the development work which this project team will undertake in relation to these tools could act as a best practice example for the future implementation of these tools in Europe.

At the beginning of this research phase, very little was known among project partners with regard to the awareness and use of ECVET and the EU transparency tools by the business community in each partner country; particularly to how or if they are used in HR practices and procedures. Following the conclusion of the research and the review of the research findings, the following recommendations can be made which will inform the future development work of the project team:

- Ø The first consideration concerns raising the awareness of the EU tools within the business community: what they are and how can they be used?
 - It is clear from the outcomes of the research that the EU transparency tools are not known in the field of HR and they are not used. Where



tools were known they tended to be the Europass documents, which is unsurprising seeing as these document templates are directly related to the mobility of workers across Europe and in helping these workers to find work abroad;

- Ø Information which is provided to HR professionals needs to be practical in nature; free from the jargon and the theoretical language of the EU and needs to clearly explain how these tools can be used in HR and how they can be beneficial to HR practices across Europe;
- Ø There needs to be a standard, whole-of-Europe approach to the implementation of these tools; some respondents even suggested that making the use of the tools compulsory in HR practices might help;
- Ø Some companies saw benefit in the EU tools but others failed to be convinced of their relevance – for this reason, partners need to emphasise the value of using the tools in HRM to the companies they are working with;
- Ø Overall, the majority of participants were interested in the topic and requested additional information and support in this field which is an encouraging sign for the project consortium.

Conclusion

Overall, the research study undertaken by all project partner organisations was a great success. In total, 76 companies were interviewed and made aware of the EU transparency tools. Of these 76, the majority of participants were open and receptive to learning about the EU transparency tools and wanted to be kept informed of project progress. This was a very positive result for the project consortium; because it lends weight to and validates the work being undertaken by the ECVET goes Business team. Throughout this research study, project partners have been able to meet and speak with the primary target groups of the project, and to gain real and valuable insights into the processes they follow in their daily working lives; as well as developing a deeper understanding of how ECVET and the other EU transparency instruments could be integrated into these processes to support their work as HR managers.



Based on the research results presented here and in the Research Study Summary Report, the project partners will begin to identify how the transparency instruments can be mapped onto the various HR processes. This mapping will form the basis for the *ECVET goes Business* HR Handbook and Training Programme that will be delivered from autumn 2016.

