



*European Economic and Social Committee*

**NAT/650**  
**Continuing education and  
training (CVET) in rural  
areas**

Brussels, 8 October 2015

**OPINION**  
of the  
European Economic and Social Committee  
on  
**Continuing education and training (CVET) in rural areas**  
(own-initiative opinion)

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Rapporteur-general: **Brendan Burns**  
Co-rapporteur: **Pavel Trantina**

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On 10 July 2014, the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an own-initiative opinion on

*Continuing education and training (CVET) in rural areas.*

The Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 13 July 2015.

In view of the renewal of the Committee's term of office, the Plenary Assembly has decided to vote on this opinion at its October plenary session and has appointed Mr Brendan Burns as rapporteur-general and Mr Pavel Trantina as co-rapporteur under Rule 20 of the Rules of Procedure.

At its 511th plenary session on 6, 7 and 8 October 2015 (meeting of 8 October), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 139 votes to one with five abstentions:

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**1. Recommendations**

- 1.1 Recognising that the EU has no direct powers in the fields of education or vocational training and that education systems vary between Member States; the EESC wishes to highlight a common European problem concerning the provision of Continuing (Vocational) Education and Training (CVET) in rural and remote areas across Europe, which needs to be addressed at the European, national and regional levels.
- 1.2 A new Pan-European agenda is required to encourage European institutions and national governments, along with businesses, trade unions and other civil society organisations, to improve cooperation so that CVET can be accessed by employees undergoing training and their employers. This should occur close to the place of employment and in environments compatible with it. Competent authorities should promote and encourage this cooperation and make sure it is adequately funded.
- 1.3 Society and public authorities need to recognise that micro- and small businesses are not smaller versions of big companies. This assumption has proven to be false and is one of the main reasons why we have a "skills mismatch" in education and employment.
- 1.4 There is a requirement to develop new CVET and Vocational Qualifications for micro- and small businesses based on empirical evidence of the tasks that are actually carried out in these businesses.

- 1.5 Training for rural businesses must be delivered locally, using ICT and other broadband delivery mechanisms. To achieve this, universal access to high-speed mobile and terrestrial broadband in rural and remote areas should be treated as "essential infrastructure". EU competition laws should therefore not be allowed to stop national or regional governments from developing fast broadband in rural areas.
- 1.6 National and local governments need to recognise that investing in the development of micro-family and small businesses in rural and remote areas is a good long-term investment that will help to stop migration, reduce the pressures on services in towns and cities, restore economic sustainability to local communities and help preserve the rural environment.
- 1.7 The long-term financial support of local groups by national/regional governments will help coordinate the process of identifying and meeting local needs. Such support will also help involve communities in directly addressing the problems of rural exodus, while financial support from the structural funds, especially the European Social Fund, should enable the continuing vocational training to be provided that meets the needs of those involved.
2. **Context**
- 2.1 The purpose of this opinion is to highlight the need to develop a better system for Continuing Education and Training (CVET) and continual professional development in rural areas, in particular in mountain and island (RM&I) areas.
- 2.2 According to the definition from CEDEFOP<sup>1</sup>, CVET means “*education or training after initial education and training – or after entry into working life aimed at helping individuals to improve or update their knowledge and/or skills; acquire new skills for a career move or retraining; continue their personal or professional development. Continuing education and training is part of lifelong learning and may encompass any kind of education (general, specialised or vocational, formal or non-formal, etc.). It is crucial for the employability of individuals.*”
- 2.3 The problems associated with CVET in rural and remote areas have been identified in a number of EESC opinions<sup>2</sup> on agriculture and at public meetings. This opinion seeks to provide a synopsis and propose answers to some of the key questions.

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<sup>1</sup> Terminology of European education and training policy- a selection of 100 key terms CEDEFOP, Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2008, <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/node/11256>

<sup>2</sup> *Agriculture and crafts*, [OJ C 143 of 22.5.2012, pp. 35-39](#), *Towards a more balanced territorial development in the EU, The future of Europe's young farmers, The role of women in agriculture and rural areas*, [OJ C 299 of 4.10.2012, p. 29-33](#), *Agriculture in areas with specific natural handicaps*, [OJ C 318 of 23.12.2006, p. 93](#) and *Agriculture in peri-urban areas*, [OJ C 74 of 23.3.2005, p. 62](#).

- 2.4 Throughout the EU RM&I areas differ considerably. Alongside extremely prosperous regions with low unemployment and robust growth are regions with mounting economic problems, emigration and an ageing population. In addition, opportunities to access vocational education and training are not always available within a reasonable distance.
- 2.5 As living standards have improved in towns and cities many young people in RM&I areas have migrated which creates a downward economic and social spiral that gains momentum as more people migrate. The loss of population reduces the amount of money circulating within a community, which then affects the viability of local businesses, shops, and transport links. This is further compounded by the eventual loss of medical services, banks, schools and other facilities.
- 2.6 Europe's RM&I areas provide us with much of our local food and raw materials. They also provide a place where people can relax and enjoy recreation, sports and other activities but, without competent, well-trained local employees to run the farms, forests, quarries, hotels, arts and craft businesses many of these facilities will cease to exist.
- 2.7 The ability of businesses to operate in these difficult locations is a key issue and employers need competent, well-trained staff. To achieve this, there needs to be closer cooperation with employers and local schools, technical colleges and universities.
- 2.8 Regions are the level where cooperation between training centres and businesses is best introduced and developed. Authorities at all levels must give proper and specific consideration to introducing and developing CVET in rural and peripheral areas, and/or areas of low population density (which would include sufficient investment, but also support, encouragement and assistance for local initiatives that promote cooperation between training centres and businesses).
- 2.9 As the EESC stressed several times, personalised career counselling and guidance must be put in place<sup>3</sup>.
- 2.10 Access to CVET is fundamental to developing self-employment and a competent workforce. Unfortunately, most VT facilities are based in highly-populated areas, thereby placing people undergoing training from RM&I areas at a disadvantage due to their need to travel long distances to reach these centres. In most cases, this will incur additional costs and considerable inconvenience, especially if attending short or day-release courses.
- 2.11 Bringing training to RM&I areas is a problem that has been recognised in various EU countries. Unfortunately, schemes to address this problem have often mostly been based on "urban solutions" that are not relevant to RM&I areas.

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*Youth Employment Package*, [OJ C 161 of 6.6.2013, p. 67-72](#).

2.12 Education systems across Europe vary so much between the Member States (some organised centrally, others at federal level, with the regions having responsibility) that it is difficult to envisage a "European solution". However, while the solutions may vary, it is still worth identifying common problems and seeking some common solutions, enabling mutual learning from best practice. The EESC emphasises that it considers the dual training system, with joint responsibility on the part of schools and businesses providing training and the involvement of the social partners, to be particularly good practice.

2.13 Rural CVET can offer specialised training in certain areas that are directly related to rural economic activities and their natural features, including fishing, forestry, the environment, farming, etc. This specialist training should meet the quality standards required to make specialist programmes a means of attracting learners, giving people who have done this training a relevant qualification and thus contributing to local socio-economic relaunch.

### 3. **The small business perspective**

3.1 Employment in micro- and small businesses are not always understood by educational institutions that provide training. Most VET courses have been developed to meet the needs of medium and larger companies, where the workplace is organised into various departments and where employees are recruited to learn a specific job. This industrial mass-production type of work relies on having everyone performing well-defined tasks and carrying out procedures that can be easily evaluated and where each qualification is associated with a specific job.

3.2 In contrast, most micro- and small businesses need employees to be multi-skilled and flexible. Rather than being employed to do one specific job, employees work in small teams, that collectively, perform all the tasks needed to run the business. Employees in these businesses therefore have to perform tasks that in larger companies would be done by employees with several different job titles.

3.3 This manner of operating is not always understood by city-centric educational institutions. Recognising the problem would help educators understand how micro- and small businesses operate and why the present "job-focused" training and qualifications are not appropriate to how micro- and small businesses operate. This would also help small enterprises develop and support in-house work-based education and training.

3.4 Many micro- and small businesses also operate to different customer requirements, which often requires one-off innovative solutions. For example, a small mechanical business will need the practical skills to "repair and reuse". This differs from most large businesses that do not repair but "remove and refit" new parts, returning the broken part to the manufacturer. This simple example explains why employees in small businesses need additional skills that are not required in larger companies. This is why we have a "skills mismatch" and why so

many European micro- and small businesses reject the current VET and VQs that have been developed for their sectors.

3.5 Similar procedural and skills-related problems have been identified by micro-, small and medium-sized businesses in engineering, architecture, agriculture, construction, forestry and a multitude of other businesses.

3.6 Family-run businesses, also present different problems where sons and daughters are often the catalyst for change and are both trainee and potential manager. In family-run businesses, training of sons and daughters starts at a much earlier stage than for an employee in a large company.

#### 4. **The rural small business perspective**

4.1 Training new and existing employees is a problem especially when employees attend technical training centres far from their place of employment. If the time lost in travel becomes excessive, then many micro-and small employers will consider training of an employee a waste of time.

4.2 Micro- and small businesses recognise that Lifelong Learning (LLL) and validation of skills and qualifications acquired through non-formal and informal learning<sup>4</sup> help workers and businesses develop and introduce more technology. Much of the learning materials for LLL are available online by accessing industry training videos, manuals, online demonstrations, e-learning courses and other such online distance-learning, programmes. Unfortunately, access to these learning programmes is often challenging in RM&I locations, due to very slow broadband speeds (between 0.4 mbps and 1.5 mbps)<sup>5</sup>.

4.3 The distance to training centres can become less important if the quality of courses is high and if transport is arranged and travel costs are reimbursed, but this does not address the main issues facing the majority of people undergoing training in RM&I areas.

#### 5. **The local community effect**

5.1 CVET is a specific factor to consider in relation to economic and social development (Europe 2020 Strategy). It is also an element which contributes to territorial and social cohesion in the European Union.

5.2 Making local facilities available for use for the common good would help RM&I communities provide appropriate vocational training. Government authorities should

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<sup>4</sup> *Validation of qualifications – non-formal and informal learning*, EESC-2015-00802; adopted on 16.9.2015 (not yet published in the O.J).

<sup>5</sup> *Opening up Education*, [OJ C 214 of 8.7.2014, p. 31-35](#).

concentrate on removing barriers that stop local initiatives meeting identified CVET needs. Closer cooperation and a greater understanding of the challenges faced by both the local authorities and the initiators of projects, including civil society organisations, would contribute to finding constructive solutions.

- 5.3 Governments could use the opportunity to decentralise services to rural areas, thus creating advantages for local communities<sup>6</sup>.
- 5.4 At the hearing on "Vocational Development and Training in Rural Areas"<sup>7</sup>, the importance of communities taking control of their problems and finding their own specific solutions was repeated in several of the presentations. This evidence also raised other associated issues and clearly showed that the improvement of CVET needs to be part of a much wider plan that simultaneously addresses a combination of community problems.
- 5.5 Cooperation between all the stakeholders involved is essential. To bring vocational training into these communities, it is necessary to engage with all local businesses, schools, school staff, students and their families, the unemployed, employees, civil society organisations and volunteers, as well as the long-term needs of the community. In particular, it was identified as essential for local people to become empowered and for some of them to become "drivers" for change, so that communities can be empowered to develop their own solutions.
- 5.6 The need for political will at local, regional and national government levels to ensure such communities receive long-term financial and infrastructure support was also identified as a problem that needed to be addressed.
- 5.7 Communication using mobile and terrestrial broadband was identified as an important conduit for the development of Vocational Education and Training, especially the development of ICT skills, which are becoming essential in the workplace and in the home. Digital knowledge and skills are required to use devices and access services. These skills are now a core part of everyone's economic and social lives and should therefore cover all stages and forms of education, from primary to adult education<sup>8</sup>. Policies also have to take into account the characteristics of the local population in terms of age, educational attainment and income levels. Rural CVET can also use open and distance learning (e-learning/open learning) to complement face-to-face teaching for certain subjects or training activities, for which technology and connections must be available.
- 5.8 Universal access to high-speed broadband is therefore crucial to promoting social and territorial cohesion. The plans to expand the use of Structural and Rural Development funds

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<sup>6</sup> There are examples which show that relocation of vocational colleges or the establishment of new ones (and even universities) have been very successful in rural and remote areas (example - University of Corsica Pasquale Paoli).

<sup>7</sup> Held at the EESC in Brussels on 28 January 2015.

<sup>8</sup> *Towards a thriving data-driven economy*, [OJ C 242 of 23.7.2015, p. 61-65](#).

to supplement the roll-out of commercially-viable broadband infrastructure are therefore welcome. However, it is also critical that the benefits of this investment flow to the public through the provision of high-quality services (e.g. medical services, access to local government, etc.) and a significant reduction in costs for all end-users. Public areas offering free Wi-Fi access are also important for developing universal access to high-speed broadband in small towns and villages.

- 5.9 It is recognised that the provision of the skills needed to live and work in RM&I areas is a complicated issue requiring an integrated approach driven by each local community, as suggested by Volonteuropa through its campaign on rural isolation of citizens in Europe<sup>9</sup>. Businesses and local authorities should be given adequate support from the European Social Fund to provide CVET and the conditions for accessing such support should be eased. It is also essential that financial support is not founded on a purely commercial basis. Access to funds available, under LEADER and CLLD (Community-led Local Development programmes), for example, is essential. This will facilitate the role of Local Action Groups (LAGs), community organisations and civil society by providing a sustained framework for operation, funding, involvement and assistance.
- 5.10 Europe has networks of local and regional authorities that are committed to cooperation in the area of vocational training and lifelong learning (LLL). Namely, the Foundation of European Regions for Research, Education and Training (FREREF) and the European Association of Regional and Local Authorities for Lifelong Learning (EARLALL). Access to continuing vocational training, with particular focus on rural areas, should also be dealt with by these European networks, as it is mainly at regional level that areas for cooperation and partnerships between the sectors concerned can be created, i.e. between: local and regional authorities, companies and social partners, civil society and centres for employment, training and career guidance etc.
- 5.11 Civil society organisations (CSO) should be encouraged to share examples of best practice and innovative approaches to rural isolation. Their representatives should be enabled to play an active role in the governance structure of European funds that have an impact on rural development (EAFRD, ESIF), truly participate in the design of programmes and oversight of monitoring committees at national level, and involve local groups and vulnerable groups in the design and implementation of projects. In the field of non-state training organisations, the Grundtvig<sup>10</sup> Folk High School movement (which started in Denmark in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and has since spread very successfully to other countries) provides an excellent example. At the same time, CSO representatives should inform the European Commission of bad practices by Member States, in order to ensure that governments meet their obligations to consult and

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See <http://www.volonteuropa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Briefing-Rural-Isolation-Final-Layout.pdf>.

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Grundtvig also gave a name to a European funding programme, part of the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme 2007-2013 aimed to strengthen the European dimension in adult education and lifelong learning across Europe.



involve a variety of stakeholders (especially at the local level) in the design, implementation and evaluation of European programmes.

- 5.12 The EESC calls for the EU's Youth Guarantee to be used to promote the education and training of young generations in rural areas. EU subsidies should be geared in particular towards how the transfer of successful and innovative experiences can be stepped up and how these experiences can be put into practice.

**6. Further comments**

- 6.1 This opinion has proved to be an extremely complicated issue. A wide variety of associated problems such as transport, rural housing, medical and social services, the encouragement of rural businesses via tax incentives, the development of tourism and many more ideas that were touched on in our discussions and during the hearing could all have been explored in greater depth.
- 6.2 However, we recognise that these issues cannot all be dealt with in a single opinion. We would nevertheless recommend that they be addressed in future opinions.
- 6.3 More in-depth investigation needs to take place to understand the tasks that have to be performed in micro- and small businesses and how these tasks are allocated; this in turn would influence how qualifications for micro- and small businesses are constructed and how training is provided.
- 6.4 The EESC proposes to launch a study to help identify solutions to the challenges raised in the opinion.
- 6.5 The EESC calls for an inter-institutional dialogue on the challenges and possible solutions to be established, with the involvement of several Commissions Directorates General, civil society (EESC), local/regional authorities (CoR) and CEDEFOP.

Brussels, 8 October 2015.

The President  
of the  
European Economic and Social Committee

Georges Dassis

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