

Ján Figel'—Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture, and Youth

**Strengthening practice-oriented VET in Europe:
A political challenge**

**Conference "Dual vocational education and training—the key to a
competitive Europe"**

Berlin, 29 January 2008

Liebe Frau Ministerin Schavan,
lieber Herr Minister Zver,
liebe Gäste,
sehr geehrte Damen und Herren,

Ich freue mich ganz besonders, heute bei Ihnen hier in Berlin zu sein und an dieser Konferenz teilnehmen zu können. Ich möchte mich ganz herzlich beim Zentralverband des Deutschen Handwerks für die ausgezeichnete Organisation dieses Ereignisses bedanken. Mein Dank gilt auch dem Bundesinstitut für berufliche Bildung und dem Deutschen Industrie- und Handelskammertag, die ebenfalls bei der Vorbereitung dieser Konferenz mitgewirkt haben. Mit all diesen Institutionen verbindet die Europäische Kommission eine ausgezeichnete Zusammenarbeit. Meinen herzlichsten Dank dafür!

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to start my analysis of the current state of vocational education and training in Europe and of its prospect for the future with a look at the broader economic and social picture.

According to our latest Competitiveness Report issued last November, Europe's economic performance has been rather good.

- in 2006, Gross Domestic Product grew by 3.0% in the EU; the highest figure since 2000;
- millions of new jobs have been created, and general unemployment rates have dropped; above all
- productivity has improved, especially in the new members of the Union.

Everyone in Central and Eastern Europe should be proud of our contribution to the overall economic success of the Union.

We know the global outlook for the immediate future may not be as good, but we can feel encouraged by the achieved results.

What is driving Europe's competitiveness? The report lists—among other things—microeconomic reforms, investment in ICT and trade openness. It also stresses investment in skills and skills upgrading as crucial competitiveness factors. Research and innovation as well as training and education policies have a strong impact on competitiveness. Of course, this is nothing new to us who are familiar with the field; but it feels good to know that education and training are being increasingly recognised as among the strands of the Lisbon strategy that are beginning to actually work.

However, not all is well in our domain. As the report suggests, the need for upgrading the skills of Europe's workforce is being felt more acutely than in the past. European, national and regional authorities must come together to prevent a situation that may be caused by a skill mismatch: the co-existence of high unemployment and unfilled vacancies. Such situation presents costs and inefficiencies on many fronts: on the welfare state, for the companies, social costs, etc.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

This is where we come in. To rise to the challenge posed by skills-hungry economies, we need to improve, reform, and update Europe's VET systems.

The Copenhagen process has already put specific points on the table:

- improving the attractiveness of VET and
- assuring open pathways and parity of esteem between VET and general/higher education.

The ministers and social partners who met in Helsinki in 2006 also agreed that basic education should prepare young people to follow a general education pathway; a VET pathway or a combination of both. It is essential that basic education gives even the weaker pupils enough skills; because those who enter the labour market with the lowest qualifications face the highest risks of unemployment and social exclusion. Even simple skills acquired early in school—such as reading—are key for learning and professional development later in life.

These and many other skills are measured in the OECD PISA survey, which is an important gauge of the performance of education systems. I am aware that this survey has been a hot topic of debate in Germany since its first publication in 2001. I am happy to see that Germany is showing better and better results and your policies are producing the desired effects.

But, unfortunately, the EU as a whole has been less successful. While there is an increasing demand for skills, people at the bottom of the qualifications ladder are least likely to participate in further learning and so to improve their working life prospects. Also, enterprises are less willing to provide training for the disadvantaged and for those without basic skills. This is what we found in our policy document on the efficiency and equity of Europe's learning systems of 2006.

In sum, we suggest policies that would reduce drop-out rates from VET and make school-to-work transition easier—for instance, through apprenticeships and work-based learning.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would now like to turn to practice-oriented and work-based learning; which have long been among the priorities in our education and training policies. This has been reaffirmed in the Helsinki Communiqué of 2006 reviewing the priorities in Vocational Education and Training in the framework of the Copenhagen process. It calls for close links with working life, both in initial and continuing VET as well as for increased opportunities to learn at the workplace in order to improve the attractiveness and quality of VET.

Practice-oriented learning can prepare trainees to enter the world of work, and in our experience the best schemes are those that combine the classroom with on-the-job training. Practice-oriented learning has many benefits: for the trainees, for the employers, and for the schools. Practice-oriented learning motivates individuals and gives them skills—such as problem-solving and human-relations skills—that their prospective employers regard as essential. Often practice-oriented learning improves the chances of pupils at risk of dropping out and gives access to technical education beyond what is available in most schools. The advantages for the schools and the community are better working relationships with crafts, business and industry.

This last point is important; because it is a general goal of the EU education and training policies to multiply the links between the world of learning and the broader economic and social context.

Against this background, you will not be surprised to learn that the European Union promotes practice-oriented training, especially through our

programme called Leonardo da Vinci. For instance, each year more than 80,000 people participate in traineeships abroad thanks to the Leonardo programme.

I am proud to report to you that participants seem to be very happy with the scheme. 87 % say that their stay abroad was very useful, 10 % satisfactory, and only 2 % thought it was poor.

In addition, SMEs are well represented in the Leonardo mobility scheme. 80 % of participants had their traineeship in a company with fewer than 250 employees and 12 % worked in crafts enterprises. Apart from being a long-standing feature of our policies, practice-oriented vocational training has become a specific priority in our current call for proposals.

For the immediate future, we are also planning to address the specific issue of the mobility of apprentices, who combine both learning in school and a practical training in SMEs. In the course of the present year, a number of pilot projects on that issue will be finalised and we plan to launch a test phase involving a limited number of countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

What are our goals for the future? I believe that our first task is to proceed with the implementation of the goals agreed in Copenhagen. We need to make cross-border mobility of learners and workers easier and we need to make an extra effort for mutual recognition and quality assessment.

One helpful tool will be the European Qualifications Framework, which has been approved and is currently being implemented in Germany. The next steps will be the European Credit Transfer System for VET and the Common Quality Assurance Framework for VET. Proposals for both of these are to be adopted by the Commission in March.

In general, I attach a great deal of importance to the validation of non-formal and informal learning, which are traditionally key areas in VET.

I think these are important areas especially because they would benefit young people who drop out of school or apprenticeship before they can get a certificate.

Under many systems currently in use, these are people who have absolutely nothing to show for their efforts. As the Competitiveness Report has indicated, enhancing the skills of our workers is a vital challenge for our future. The German “Dual System” is already a good response to existing skills needs.

However, there is always room for improvement. The recent Council resolution on “New Skills for New Jobs”—for example—calls for better forecasts of the skills needed by labour market. Forecasting is always a difficult art, but it would be easier if we had comprehensive statistics and better assessment methods.

Finally, another attractive way to promote VET is skills competitions. Inspired by the success of WorldSkills, the first EuroSkills competition will be held in Rotterdam in September this year.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Copenhagen process was launched within the 2010 horizon. That target year is fast approaching; it is high time we set our minds beyond the present decade. Initiatives like this one in Berlin today are important because they help prepare the debate on where we want to go after 2010.

We do not know all about our future, what kind of decisions we will have to take. But I’m sure that excellent VET systems and high-skilled workers will continue to be essential if Europe wants to succeed in the global competition.

Thank you.