

**breakfast with** James Calleja



We open this issue with a very special guest: James Calleja, President of [EfVET \(European forum for Vocational Education and Training\)](#), President of [MCAST \(Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology\)](#), and former Director of Cedefop (the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training), which is based in Thessaloniki.

He is not just an expert or a policy maker but, as the Principal of the biggest public VET provider in Malta and the largest VET network in Europe, he is also a real practitioner.

**Good morning, James! Could you tell us something about EfVET?**

We are practitioners, people who work in VET: we live VET. This is very important. We are not sitting in an office doing research on VET, but live with students and staff, and we need to confront situations, like for instance the COVID-19 pandemic which rocked all economic and cultural sectors.

There is a difference between a researcher who sends surveys, compiles answers and writes reports that then sit on a shelf with the rest of their publications, and a real practitioner. We need to solve issues without delay. Students must qualify, teachers must teach, and sponsors want to know what we have done with their money. Compared to others, we have a high level of accountability, decision-making and responsibility. In a nutshell: we must practice what we preach.

EfVET's hands on matter is what makes it so attractive: we are not just policy makers. Our policy is based on the experiences of our hundreds of colleges in our network. We listen to what the industry and workplaces are saying, and we bring these solutions to the lecture rooms, laboratories and workshops. We are the ones putting into practice the process out of which people become employable, can find a job and live a better of quality of life.

In EfVET, we share and collaborate to find solid solutions to our problems. That is why EfVET is so important: we are the hands-on policy makers.

**Very interesting points. Indeed, the world is becoming full of experts without real expertise in the topics that they are working in. It is always good to emphasize the role of the real practitioners. Now, if any of our readers wants to become an EfVET member, what should they do?**

Very simple: write an email to [efvet-office@efvet.org](mailto:efvet-office@efvet.org). All you have to do is send us a profile of your organisation and, after the approval in the internal evaluation process, you will become a member of a network. Then, you can start a journey of information sharing and collaboration in VET.

**And what about our non-European readers? Would you advise them to become EfVET members as well?**

At EfVET's conferences we usually have people from Asia, America, Africa and Europe. The world has become small. We live in a global village where the sharing of information should not be bound by national or regional boundaries. What is happening elsewhere is interesting in terms of VET and, therefore, we are sharing a lot with our international colleagues.

Experiences from any place in the world are as attractive as those happening in Europe. We are all aiming at the same objective: identifying how a learning process can equip people with relevant skills and competences for their jobs.

**Coming back to Europe, we are at the beginning of a new financing period (2021-2027): how does EfVET relate to European policy?**

At the end of the day, EfVET works within the European Union, as most of our members belong to the EU. We are very much interested in the European Union's policies on VET. But we also have a different role to play as lobbyists: we want VET to become the first choice and we work towards this objective.

Therefore, we have a dual role to play. On the one hand, we contribute with all our possibilities to enrich European VET policy. On the other, we advocate to put VET at the centre of policy making. Unless we do that, it is useless to talk about VET and apprenticeships. People will not be attracted to VET and they will still follow mainstream education pathways – i.e., universities and other higher education institutions.

I have always criticised the European Union for talking about VET as the first choice but not putting this motto into real practice. The visibility of VET in Europe is still weak. It is not up to the visibility standards of mainstream education. And here EfVET has very relevant role to play: to put VET at the centre of European policy making.

**“We are not just policy makers. Our policy is based on the experiences of our colleges. We listen to what the industry and workplaces are saying, and we bring these solutions to the lecture rooms and workshops.”**

For example, EfVET has produced reports on how COVID-19 is affecting schools and higher education institutions. This is the kind of information that we present to the Commission to provide a meaningful aspect based on experience, on what students and staff are experiencing.

Having research without having people really on the ground is a valuable experience but not enough. What one writes and what one experiences are not the same.

**Yes! And many countries are having similar issues. We know that in Malta you have been doing a great job on the recognition of VET.**

MCAST is the biggest public institution for VET, and, from October, we will be offering courses from level 1 of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) up to level 8, which on our National Qualifications Framework is the doctoral level. Our goal is to give VET the same parity of esteem as universities: only then will people make VET a first choice. How can I make VET a first choice if I get lower qualifications and if the progression route stops at a certain level?

**And you are a very active college at international level. Why do you invest in internationalisation?**

It gives the college a completely different experience: we are connecting with other countries and it gives us a totally new perspective of our own work. It enriches us. Apart from that, being on an island, the wish to fly out, to take a boat or a plane and travel outside is in our DNA. Travel broadens not only the mind but also employment and development opportunities

**What is your favourite breakfast?**

I have breakfast with my team at work. We come here early in the morning and we have the first meeting of the day over a nice cappuccino, my favourite, and some crackers or cakes that we bring.

We talk over a cup of coffee. It is a work-and-talk breakfast, a kind of informal meeting. This helps to break the ice and to talk about our individual experiences from the previous evening, but also to plan the day.

**“Internationalisation gives us a totally new perspective of our own work. It enriches us.”**