



EQAVET

European Quality Assurance
in Vocational Education and Training

Supporting the implementation of the
European Quality Assurance Reference Framework
for Vocational Education and Training

Peer Learning Activity on EQAVET indicator 6: *utilisation of acquired skills at the workplace*

3-4 December 2013
Belfast, Northern Ireland

Background paper

Put a good person in a bad system and the bad system wins, no contest.
W. Edwards Deming, American statistician, professor (1900-1993)

Background

The EQAVET work programme for 2013 will feature two peer learning activities (PLAs): the first took place in Budapest on 22-23 May 2013 and its topic was self-assessment at both system and VET provider level. The second will be in Northern Ireland (Belfast) on 3-4 December 2013 and will be hosted by the Department for Employment and Learning.

In the survey conducted by the EQAVET Secretariat on the implementation of the EQAVET Framework in 2012, EQAVET members were asked to identify the indicator they would most like to examine collaboratively with other Member States. The majority (92%) of the 11 EQAVET members responding to this question identified indicator 6 "Utilisation of acquired skills at the workplace".

As a result, this PLA has been devised to respond to the needs of the EQAVET Network to further investigate how EQAVET indicator 6 can be implemented, and to discuss related approaches to engaging with end users of VET as part of a structured quality assurance process.

Given that this PLA will build on previous work developed by the EQAVET Network, it is suggested that PLA participants visit the EQAVET on-line tool: EQAVET quality cycle¹ (developed within the EQAVET work programme 2010-2012).

Issues in implementing EQAVET indicator 6

Within the European Union (EU) Member States, as elsewhere (e.g. OECD, ILO, UNESCO), policy and research agendas adopted priorities which centre on skills and jobs. Since 2000, these priorities have been the policy drivers in the EU, including in the field of Education & Training (E&T). Accurate measurement is a key requirement in the effort to improve E&T because without reliable data generated by proven methods, it is not possible to say what strategies are most likely to improve VET provision.

The measurement and evaluation of skill utilisation, therefore, is a major challenge for policymakers, providers and employers both at national and international level, but should be seen as one of the ultimate aims of quality assurance in VET: it is the litmus test for the quality of VET provision as it demonstrates the effective use of knowledge, skills and competence in the workplace for which the learner has been trained². By the same token, it is a challenging measurement to make, and certain

¹ For more information on indicator 6, please visit the EQAVET quality cycle on-line tool in our website www.eqavet.eu. The on-line tool provides information on EQAVET indicators. You can find information on indicator 6 at system level at: http://www.eqavet.eu/ga/tns/monitoring-your-system/evaluation/indicator_6.aspx; and at provider level at: http://www.eqavet.eu/gc/tns/monitoring-your-system/evaluation/EQAVET_indicators/indicator_6.aspx

² See OECD Skills surveys at <http://www.oecd.org/site/piaac/surveyofadultskills.htm>

issues concerning the implementation of indicator 6 (see the operational definitions³) were identified by a previous EQAVET working group⁴. However, in order to explore how we might implement this indicator, it may be useful to dig deeper into the “what” and the “how” of assessing skills utilisation as well as considering the kind of challenges VET systems and providers may face when undertaking this exercise.

The “what” in the “Utilisation of acquired skills at the workplace”

One of the challenges facing Europe is boosting productivity for the benefit of enterprises, workers and society at large. Skills utilisation is a way of linking together the shared interests of employers and employees. It is in this context that we should read EQAVET indicator 6 which is described as follows:

- a) Information on occupation obtained by individuals after completion of training, according to type of training and individual criteria;
- b) Satisfaction rates of individuals and employers with acquired skills/ competences.

In order to trigger discussion on the use of this indicator, the following issues could be considered:

- What kind of information should be assessed when investigating the relevance of the acquired skills/competences to the occupation: a) **generic skills** (employers’ assessment, job tasks carried out), b) **occupation and firm specific skills** (occupation-specific tasks and knowledge, field of training, occupation, perceived value of skills in other firms), c) **work skills** (required qualification, required work experience, occupation), d) **skills mix** (occupation-specific and generic skills)?⁵
- What should be assessed when investigating employer satisfaction with acquired skills/competences: a) satisfaction with skills and knowledge of VET graduates/employees; b) satisfaction with the VET graduates’ ability to perform on the job; c) satisfaction with the VET graduate’s ability to contribute to the success of the company?;
- What should be assessed when investigating VET graduate/ employee satisfaction with acquired skills/competences: a) overall satisfaction; b) satisfaction with i) an appropriate system of appreciation for good work; ii) career prospects; iii) professional self-realisation; iv) job mobility?

The “how” of collecting information on skills utilisation

Designing, collecting and responding either to employer feedback or to VET graduate feedback should be a cyclical process that can be implemented in different ways. For a survey-based approach, the process may well involve: a) selection of target population to survey (employers / graduates/ employees); b) developing the relevant questionnaires; c) administering the survey and d) analysing data which should lead to the improvement of the VET provision followed by review of results.

³ See the EQAVET IT tool, Monitoring your system at http://www.eqavet.eu/ga/tns/monitoring-your-system/evaluation/indicator_6.aspx or EQAVET(2009). *EQARF indicators— reviewing and agreeing definitions* (p.27). <http://www.eqavet.eu/gns/library/publications/2009.aspx>

⁴ See the EQAVET quality cycle online tool, Monitoring your system at http://www.eqavet.eu/ga/tns/monitoring-your-system/evaluation/indicator_6.aspx or EQAVET (2011). *The EQAVET Indicators’ Toolkit* (pps.54-55). http://www.eqavet.eu/Libraries/Working_Groups/EQAVET_Indicators_Toolkit_final.sflb.ashx

⁵ Adapted from Green,A., & Green, F., (2011). *A proposed framework for the OECD skills strategy*, unpublished manuscript. Cited by Mark Keese (2012). PowerPoint presentation at the Third International Congress on TVET, Building skills for work and life, Shanghai. <http://www.unesco.org/education/TVET2012/roundtable/3/Mark-Keese.pdf>

Where providers already have good relationships with a range of employers who are able to feed into curriculum development and quality assurance, these avenues can be used to collect information on their satisfaction with skills acquired by graduates, but the plan-implement-evaluate-review cycle should also form the core of this process.

In order to develop such a process, some issues need to be addressed e.g. for survey-based approaches:

- How can information on skills utilisation be collected and used: a) large scale survey or sample survey of target population (different work contexts, different sectors) ; b) dedicated surveys (specific work contexts and/or sectors; c) supplement/modules to existing surveys at national/European level (e.g. Labour Force Survey, Household Survey)?
- How will the survey(s) be designed and conducted: a) which objectives to pursue; b) what target population to survey; c) which questions to ask; d) what survey modality to use (e.g. on-line questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, postal mail, phone calls, focus groups, etc); e) what timeframe to establish for i) administering the survey; ii) administering the questionnaire?

Where relationships already exist, key questions could include: a) how can the process be formalised; b) are all vocational areas sufficiently covered; c) what is the actual information that will be most useful in quality assuring VET provision?

Challenges for VET systems and providers in implementing EQAVET indicator 6

There are a number of challenges, both at system and provision level, to implementing an indicator on the utilisation of acquired skills at the workplace. To illustrate, we might consider the following:

- The implementation exercise touches on a variety of policy areas and involves a large number of stakeholders, e.g. ministries (education, labour, industry), sector skills councils, providers (public and private), employers' associations, trade unions. Mobilising these actors to work together may be one of the challenges to overcome either at system level (ministries, employers' associations, trade unions) or at local level (providers, employers of SMEs/ large enterprises).

From this perspective we might consider:

- How to make sure that the value of collecting and using information on the end result of VET provision is generally perceived a) by employers' associations or local employers as an added value for their business strategy, including their human resources needs; b) by VET graduates/employees as an activity which will lead to relevant work ?
 - How to engage local employers systematically so that they will provide feedback on the quality and relevance of the VET provision, including the skills acquired by VET graduates/ employees?
- Implementing this indicator requires the capacity to process complex information that countries need at system level and provision level to analyse the *status quo*, to identify possible policy trade-offs (between the demand and supply sides of the labour market) and synergies (between the different actors).

This leads to the following question:

- What would be the most useful and informative data to collect for QA purposes? Is it described by indicator 6? If not, is there a need a) to use other indicators to support the analysis of skills utilisation? b) to include questions about organisational factors that are likely to influence skills utilisation?

From exchanging practices and experiences to learning from and with peers

As usual in peer learning activities, participants in this EQAVET activity will have the opportunity to learn from and with each other by a) openly discussing the issues relating to the measurement of skills utilisation and b) sharing knowledge, ideas and experience on how they are implementing/ have implemented/ are planning to implement indicator 6 at national level (at system and/or VET provider's level).

Thus, in order to encourage discussion and further reflection on the policy and organisational issues relating to the use of this indicator, the host (Northern Ireland) and representatives from Estonia and Spain will present their own experiences in tackling the implementation of indicator 6, or a comparable activity not specifically described by indicator 6.

Some of the issues pointed out by our colleagues in Northern Ireland and by the case studies identified (i.e. from Estonia – system level and Spain – provider level) include : a) studies of leaver destinations and what leavers do when they get there; b) how current quality assurance systems (at system and provider levels) promote the use of skills utilisation data as part of providers' self-evaluation processes and c) a provider view on how they persuade employers to feed into their quality assurance and curriculum development processes.

These presentations on existing practices will set the scene for further discussion among the PLA participants on common approaches, to ensure that skills utilisation is measured comprehensively and systematically across Europe in all sectors and companies, regardless of size.

Expected outcomes

The two-day PLA will enable participants to

- gain a better understanding of the policy and operational issues relating to skills utilisation at the workplace across Europe, both from the employer as well as the trainee/employee perspective;
- share lessons learned in measuring skills utilisation and identify challenges faced or likely to be faced by VET systems and providers in implementing this indicator.

PLA follow up brief

A policy brief (3-5 pages) will be produced and circulated to participants. This will highlight the key issues discussed during the PLA and it will be uploaded on the EQAVET website (www.eqavet.eu).