



Introduction

This report has been drafted by the EQAVET National Reference Point of Northern Ireland and describes the main quality assurance arrangements in vocational education and training.

SECTION A – DESCRIPTION OF QUALITY ASSURANCE ARRANGEMENTS

1. Brief description of the context of the VET system in the country and the role of EQAVET

Introduction

In Northern Ireland, the Further Education system is built upon a statutory basis, whereby the six regional colleges of further education are recognised and must discharge the duties set out in law, primarily the delivery of further education to 16 year olds and over. The colleges along with a number of private providers, operate under a contractual arrangement with the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) to deliver a range of VET programmes.

2. Initial VET (IVET)

Introduction

The Programme for Government 2011-2015 sets out the strategic priorities for all government departments and recognises the contribution of education and skills to growing a sustainable economy and investing in the future.

In January 2016, the DEL published a new strategy 'Further Education Means Success' for the further education sector. The strategy aims to develop the role of the sector to be recognised locally, nationally and internationally for high quality and economically relevant vocational education and training provision.

2.1 Quality assurance arrangements at system level in IVET (include information on work-based learning)

- National Framework for quality assurance in initial VET – who is in charge of what?
In Northern Ireland, the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) is responsible for developing and implementing policies relating to further education and training programmes.
- Statutory stakeholder involvement in quality assurance in initial VET systems
As at March 2016, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), and Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) are the key stakeholders in IVET and quality assurance.
- Requirements for evaluation and review
The approach is based on a cyclical model compatible with the EQAVET Recommendation. The key elements of the system are: the use of data, self-assessment and inspection, teachers and work-based learning.
- Identification of training needs
DEL recognises that measuring and benchmarking quality of provision is an essential step towards improving quality, and it monitors and reports progress towards these objectives, along with a range of other relevant data, to the NI Assembly, and publishes annual analyses of the quality and performance of its programmes and provision (see www.delni.gov.uk/qualityperformanceanalysis). At provider level, the Department's quality improvement strategy, Success through Excellence, sets out steps towards improving quality and improving quality assurance for its programmes, and is the overarching strategy for VET quality assurance in Northern Ireland.
- Who can deliver VET and under what conditions – accreditation or other requirements on VET providers
Further Education sector and training providers of work based learning
- Certification – assessment and validation of learning (system level)/ monitoring, inspection and use of indicators
Organisations develop self-evaluation reports and quality improvement plans which are scrutinised by the ETI, and which are implemented and reviewed on a regular basis.
- How is the quality assurance implementation monitored?
Quality assurance is also closely linked to funding arrangements for the further education sector in Northern Ireland. Bilateral meetings are held annually with each FE college to discuss their college development plans. These discussions are informed by reports from the Education and Training Inspectorate, and by the college's own annual self-evaluation process. Budgets are agreed on the basis of progress against priority objectives and overall quality of provision.

2.2 Quality assurance arrangements at provider level in IVET

- Planning at VET provider level (including identification of training needs)

In Northern Ireland, the quality assurance system is continuously monitored and, where appropriate, improved. For example, revised and rigorous standards for teaching in the FE sector have been developed. The Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning have also introduced a programme of provision for 14-19 year olds. This approach builds on existing work within the Vocational Enhancement Programme and the ongoing implementation of the Entitlement Framework described above. There has been an increased emphasis on skills and applied and general qualifications.

- Requirements for monitoring and review (self-assessment)
In addition, Northern Ireland uses quality standards to report outcomes to the NI Executive for both IVET and CVET; details of quality assurance processes are set out in Improving Quality: Raising Standards. As set out in previous sections, quality processes in providers are also closely aligned to their annual funding arrangements.
- Certification, assessment and validation of learners
The Success Through Excellence (January 2007) strategy continues to drive the approach to quality assurance arrangements at system level in relation to FE and training. The key quality relationship is with awarding and professional bodies and regulators, particularly where regulated qualifications are used.
- Stakeholder involvement
The FE sector primarily work in partnership with local employers and through Sector Skills Councils. In recent years, there has been increased focus on the role of FE colleges in terms of their capacity to respond to employer and learner needs.

3. Continuous VET (CVET)

Introduction

In Northern Ireland, upskilling the existing workforce is seen as a current priority. The focus on quality and performance is reflected in the implementation of the Skills Strategy: Success Through Skills – Transforming Futures, Further Education Means Success and the Welfare to Work Reform Agenda.

3.1 Quality assurance arrangements at system level in CVET

- National Framework for quality assurance in CVET – who is in charge of what?
The main CVET system falls under the responsibility of the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL).
- Statutory stakeholder involvement in quality assurance in CVET systems
As detailed in paragraph 2.1
- Requirements for evaluation and review
Self-evaluation and quality improvement are key elements in the achievement of continuous improvement which is an integral part of the organisation's quality assurance and management arrangements which are rigorously evaluated during formal inspection and evaluation activities.

- Identification of training needs
Training needs are identified through self-evaluation reports and quality improvement plans which are scrutinised by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI).
- Who can deliver VET and under what conditions – accreditation or other requirements on CVET providers
Further Education Colleges and training providers of work based learning
- Certification – assessment and validation of learning (system level)
In Northern Ireland, mainstream further education funding is only distributed to recognised (statutory) further education colleges. The remainder of DEL’s funding for VET is made available through contracts with either individual providers or consortia to deliver specific programmes. In both cases, providers must be open to inspection by the ETI and to the Department’s quality assurance arrangements, including minimum qualification requirements for VET teachers. For a provider to deliver any regulated VET qualification it must also meet the centre recognition criteria set out by the qualification awarding organisation, which is regulated by CCEA.
- Monitoring, inspection and use of indicators
As detailed in paragraph 2.1
- Requirements CVET providers have to comply with (if not described in 1st section)
As detailed in 1st section.

3.2 Quality assurance arrangements at provider level in CVET

- Planning at CVET provider level (including identification of training needs)
Across the UK there is a strong tradition of stakeholder consultation in the policy design and development of CVET. This applies to national consultation on programme reforms and to the involvement of stakeholders in defining national occupational standards through the SSCs.
- Requirements for monitoring and review (self-assessment)
As detailed in paragraph 2.2
- Certification, assessment and validation of learners
As detailed in paragraph 2.2
- Stakeholder involvement
As detailed in paragraph 2.2

SECTION B – INTERACTION BETWEEN NATIONAL QUALITY ASSURANCE AND EQAVET

- National Reference Point – Introduction

The NRP for the UK was established in 2009 and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) acts as the NRP representative for the Devolved Administration of Northern Ireland.

- National approach to enhance quality assurance

The Quality Improvement Strategy for Further Education and Training has been in place in Northern Ireland since 2007. This very much drives the quality agenda and was in place before Northern Ireland's involvement in EQAVET. In addition, the new further education strategy 'Further Education Means Success', which was published in January 2016, aims to develop the role of the sector to be recognised locally, nationally and internationally for high quality and economically relevant vocational education and training provision.

- Influence of EQAVET on national developments of quality assurance

A Scoping Group was set up in Northern Ireland to oversee the first mapping exercise between EQAVET and the NI approach. Although limited to the FE sector, representatives include Ofqual, the Inspectorate, CCEA, a SSC representative and officials from within the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education with responsibility for funding education and training. The scope of this group has now been extended to also include ECVET and EQF, which are perceived to be the instruments that are key to mobility.