



EQAVET

European Quality Assurance
in Vocational Education and Training

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

POLICY BRIEF

This policy brief has been prepared in order to share the results of an EQAVET peer learning activity on self assessment in vocational education and training with a wider audience of VET providers, policymakers and other stakeholders. EQAVET peer learning activities provide a means of discussing, sharing and learning from each other on areas of strategic importance for the successful implementation of the Recommendation on establishing a European quality assurance reference framework for VET. The policy brief reflects the opinions of those who participated in the peer learning activity and does not constitute an official European Commission or EQAVET position.

Self-assessment in vocational education training

Peer Learning
Activity on

Systems and provider approaches to self-assessment

Participating countries: AT, DE, DK, EE, FI, FR, HU, IT, LT, LU, LV, NL, PT, SE

SUMMARY

This policy brief is based on the EQAVET peer learning activity (PLA) on the quality assurance procedure of self-assessment in vocational education and training, hosted by the Hungarian National Labour Office –Directorate for VET and Adult Education-, Budapest, May 22-23, 2013. The activity, which is part of the EQAVET 2013-2015 work programme, brought together quality assurance national reference points¹, VET providers, practitioners, government agencies and those with a national or regional responsibility for VET policy from 14 member countries

The focus was self-assessment at both a system and VET provider level. As with all PLAs the majority of the time was assigned to discussion, reflection, and sharing knowledge and experience. This approach differs to the one used in a study visit - as the participants did not just consider the hosts' experiences. The following comments are based on the participants' reflections which were informed by presentations from Hungary, France and the Netherlands. This policy brief is not a verbatim report; instead it is an analysis of the issues that were felt to be important in an EQAVET context. It can also inform those with an interest in self-assessment who were not able to attend the PLA.

All the material is available on the website at the [EQAVET website](#).

POLICY CONTEXT

Self-assessment is a key part of most quality assurance and quality management arrangements.

It is an essential and indispensable aspect of developing a culture of quality and continuous quality improvement, and underpins many national and international approaches to quality assurance. Identifying and analysing effective practice offer opportunities for learning and improvement – and this is

very useful for VET providers and National Reference Points which have responsibility for quality assurance in their national or regional system.

The decision to include a PLA on self-assessment in the EQAVET 2013-15 work programme arose because of the centrality of the subject and as a result of a 2012 EQAVET Secretariat survey on priorities for the Member States. This had highlighted self-assessment as an area of quality assurance where National Reference Points would value additional support and guidance through opportunities to present and share good practices.

This PLA focused on self-assessment from an EQAVET perspective. It located the discussion in relation to the key characteristics of any quality assurance system or approach which is compatible with the EQAVET Recommendation. As with all PLAs at a European level, it was organised within the context of the Open Method of Coordination. It sought to promote mutual trust by disseminating and discussing effective practice while respecting subsidiarity in the education field.

Peer Learning Activity OBJECTIVES

Within the context of the EQAVET Recommendation, the PLA aimed to help participants to:

- gain a greater understanding of how VET systems and providers in Europe use self-assessment to support quality assurance and continuous quality improvement;
- identify lessons and challenges surrounding the implementation of self-assessment.



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EMERGING POLICY ISSUES

Increasingly self-assessment is seen as part of a professional's responsibility for quality assurance. Even when external quality assurance arrangements such as inspection, accreditation and course approval processes are used, there is an acknowledgement that central agencies cannot provide the only means of assuring quality. Developing high trust environments, even when there is a reliance on external processes, is an important component of any self-regulating and self-improving system. Self-assessment and the acceptance of self-assessment as a responsibility for all VET providers are central to creating this high trust environment.

Across Europe there is a wide range of approaches to self-assessment. This diversity responds to the traditional and cultural approaches inherent in VET provision. However, despite this variety, the pre-PLA questionnaire² completed by the participants identified many common themes such as:

- a clear expectation that those VET providers in receipt of public funds should use some form of self-monitoring or self-improvement;
- responsibility for deciding how to organise self-assessment is assigned to individual VET providers;
- most Member States expect their EQAVET National Reference Point to be fully involved in supporting or promoting self-assessment;
- policy makers are confident that self-assessment takes place in organisations that provide continuing and/or initial VET;
- outcomes from self-assessment can be, and are being, used in a wide range of ways e.g. for accreditation, to inform discussions with inspectors, to support peer review, to publicise performance to parents and learners, and to inform a national or regional reporting process.

DISCUSSION

In all arrangements the purpose of self-assessment is to improve teaching and learning.

This should not be forgotten or marginalised. Self-assessment for its own sake – and which does not lead to improvements – has little value. It has to be part of a quality improvement cycle for the full benefits to be realised. This highlights the value of regularly reviewing practice, using benchmarks or

indicators to measure performance, and using indicative descriptors as the basis for describing effective practice.

AT A SYSTEM LEVEL

By increasing attention on self-assessment, a debate is often initiated about the balance between internal and external quality assurance processes and the extent to which they are complementary. In this debate, it helps to be clear about the purpose and role of any external inspection process and whether this is primarily focused on monitoring the quality of provision, controlling the operation of the system or supporting the development of high quality provision. Without a clear and shared understanding of the role of inspection (or other external processes) it can be hard to identify the most appropriate form of self-assessment. In many ways this internal versus external debate reflects parallel discussions on:

- high versus low trust systems,
- VET school or state leadership on quality assurance and quality development.

Before there can be engagement with quality assurance, there needs to be a shared understanding of quality at the system and provider level and agreement on what it means in different contexts and systems. This understanding is best developed within the context of VET provision rather than being externally defined by, for example, the inspection methodology. As it can be hard to measure some of the most important characteristics of high quality VET, it is important to develop this shared understanding of what really matters. This can also help to ensure quality assurance is undertaken at every level within the VET provider.

FOR VET PROVIDERS

The practice of individual VET providers is always framed by the system within which they operate. They are more likely to be successful in designing and developing their own approach if there is a clear alignment between the expectations of the system and individual VET providers (and any intermediary or other organisation such as inspectorates, regional or municipal authorities etc.).

Self-assessment is part of the culture of quality assurance – they are not the same. Self-assessment needs to be supplemented by other aspects of quality assurance. This includes the features that are central to the EQAVET Recommendation such as the quality cycle, indicators and indicative descriptors. All these components need to be in place in order for there to be a comprehensive approach to quality assurance.

In some contexts the initial steps to creating a culture of self-assessment can be seen as bureaucratic and lead to an increased workload for staff in VET providers. This initial hurdle can lead to teacher resistance which inhibits the adoption of self-assessment. Consequently the involvement and engagement of teaching and other staff is fundamental to the success of any self-assessment process. Central to this engagement is the realisation that self-assessment (and quality assurance in general) is part of the teachers' role – it is not something that is additional to teaching – and it needs to be promoted and described in this way.

Of critical importance in determining the effectiveness of self-assessment is the frequency of answering the “follow-up” question. When things are going well or things are not effective, VET providers and staff need to ask ‘why?’ Developing a culture of asking ‘why’ creates a much more effective self-assessment process as it leads to more useful information which can be used to improve practice. Just knowing when something is good or bad does not create a culture of improvement.



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ON-GOING CHALLENGES

Throughout the PLA, two specific questions continued to present challenges – this reflected the wide range of views on the topic and the diversity of arrangements in place across Europe.

- **WORK-BASED LEARNING.** Given the importance of employers, employees and their representatives organisations in VET, many providers were looking at self-assessment which could cover all aspects of provision. Creating and/or strengthening a self-assessment culture in work-based learning is difficult but it can be done. When work-based learning is closely aligned with or is part of school-based provision it can be easier to establish self-assessment. However the difficulties are multiplied when work-based learning is company-based and there is little or no involvement of a school-based VET provider;
- **IDENTIFYING A STARTING POINT.** For those VET providers with little experience of self-assessment it can be difficult to identify the best place to start – with indicators, with management plans, with student feedback or with a review of any external processes that are already in place. While each situation differs, most VET providers have found a visit to a similar institution the best way to begin. As practice is widespread, there is no need to re-invent a self-assessment strategy as this is an area where the potential for mutual learning is strong.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

While it is not the purpose of a PLA to generate specific policy recommendations, the participants' reflections identified a number of areas where practice could be improved. These included

AT THE EUROPEAN LEVEL

There was no need for a European solution or common approach to self-assessment. However it is necessary to share practice to aid transparency, improve practice and support reflection.

AT THE NATIONAL OR REGIONAL LEVEL

Policy makers have an important role in developing a culture of self-assessment.

This should be based on the involvement of all staff, learners and external partners. This policy role should explicitly require VET leaders and managers regularly communicate the importance of self-assessment in order to engage and motivate staff.

Policy teams need to be clear about what should be achieved by an individual VET provider in relation to self-assessment and what must be determined at the system level. This clarity, which varies significantly between Member States, is central to establishing the culture and expectations associated with self-assessment.

AT A VET PROVIDER LEVEL

There is a need to use data to further improve practice.

Ensuring that self-assessment is part of the quality cycle (not an end in itself) is critical to ensure improvements are realised.

The second big challenge is to develop a learning environment where teaching staff recognise that self-assessment is part of their day-to-day responsibilities; it is not an extra task; it is part of the teaching role and needs to be given the same prominence as all other aspects of the teaching and learning process.

As with all teaching and learning responsibilities this task needs time for it to be done well. As self-assessment benefits from a collaborative approach it is useful to include it in staff timetables.

End notes

¹ Some of the participants represented a Member States' National Reference Point (NRP) for Quality Assurance in VET. The NRPs were established as part of the EQAVET Recommendation and have a central role in supporting the VET quality assurance arrangements in their system.

² A full report on the information from the pre- PLA questionnaire is available on the [EQAVET website](#).

