



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

The impact of quality assurance systems in initial VET

19-20 May 2014
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Background paper

Context

1. The framework for European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) was set out in the 2009 Recommendation from the European Parliament and Council¹. It builds on the earlier work at a European level which began with the 2002 Education Council resolution² to enhance European cooperation in vocational education and training (VET) with the development and use of a Common Quality Assurance Framework (CQAF). The EQAVET Recommendation invited Member States to promote and monitor continuous improvement in their VET systems. It proposed this was done through the use of a quality assurance and improvement cycle based on planning, implementation, evaluation and review. EQAVET is a Framework that allows individual Member States to develop arrangements which meet their requirements - it is not a quality assurance system.
2. EQAVET can be applied at the VET-system, VET-provider and qualification-awarding levels³, and is supported by quality criteria, indicative descriptors and indicators. It provides a systematic approach to quality assurance and emphasises the importance of monitoring and improving quality by combining internal self-monitoring, external processes and qualitative analysis. It covers all aspects of VET (formal, informal and non-formal) in both the initial and continuing sectors.
3. EQAVET is one of a number of European initiatives in the field of education and training which has been designed to support Member States in reforming and adapting their systems. EQAVET can be used to address challenges outlined in the Education and Training strategic framework 2020, the lifelong learning (LLL) programme proposed by the European Commission (Erasmus + which has streamlined the current EU programmes for education, training, youth and sport) and the 'Rethinking Education' communication in 2012. Within the broader education and training strategy, VET plays a crucial role in contributing to the EU 2020 growth and recovery strategy which is responsive to increasing global and societal challenges. The Copenhagen Process which supported reform in VET provided the basis for addressing specific issues concerning the challenges faced by European societies. In this context the Bruges Communiqué (adopted in

¹ Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (2009/C 155/01).

² Fundamentals of a 'common quality assurance framework' (CQAF) for VET in Europe. Council resolution of 19 December 2002 on the promotion of enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training (2003/C 13/02).

³ The EQAVET Recommendation (paragraph 11) notes that 'the framework should be applied at the VET-system, VET-provider and qualification-awarding levels.' This qualification awarding level is not defined in the Recommendation.

2010⁴) provided an agenda for improving the quality of VET over the coming years. Two short term ‘*deliverables*’ set out in this Communiqué relate to the work of the EQAVET network namely:

- *the generalisation of quality assurance frameworks at system level within countries in accordance with the EQAVET Recommendation in order to guarantee improved quality, increased transparency, mutual trust, the mobility of workers and learners and lifelong learning;*
- *the establishment at national level – by the end of 2015 – of a common quality assurance framework for VET providers which will also apply to workplace learning and is compatible with the EQAVET reference framework.*

4. A number of reports are now available on the introduction of the EQAVET Recommendation. The first one to be published was the progress report prepared by the EQAVET secretariat. This provided a ‘snap-shot’ of the progress countries had made in developing their national approaches to the implementation of the Recommendation. In 2012, according to this survey:⁵

- 23 respondents from VET systems in the EU-27 Countries (there were 33 replies because some countries have more than one system) had devised an approach to quality assurance in VET at a national level in line with the EQAVET Framework;
- six of the 33 respondents identified that they were preparing their approach;
- four of the 33 respondents said they were planning to introduce a national approach by 2013.

5. The second report on the introduction of the EQAVET Recommendation was the European Commission’s independent evaluation⁶ (published 30/1/2014). This 200 page report included the following key findings:

- *directly or indirectly, EQAVET supported changes in quality assurance systems and measures in two thirds of countries analysed;*
- *EQAVET objectives remain relevant in the context of European priorities and policies in the field of education and training and beyond. The theme of quality assurance in VET also remains of relevance in the context of national developments;*
- *the fact that EQAVET was adopted in the form of a Recommendation strengthened the participation of countries in EQAVET and helped to formalise the role of National Reference Points (NRP);*
- *the vast majority of countries have set up NRPs. They are hosted in very relevant organisations;*
- *a majority of EU countries have in place approaches to improve quality assurance, even though the Recommendation is vague on what constitutes such an approach;*
- *European products on EQAVET are viewed positively but their use is greater when these are translated and adapted to the national context;*
- *the EQAVET governance structure is considered to be efficient. The expertise of the EQAVET secretariat is welcomed;*

⁴ For the full text of the Bruges Communiqué, visit

http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/vocational/bruges_en.pdf

⁵ http://www.eqavet.eu/Libraries/Annual_Forum_2013/Results_of_EQAVET_Secretariat_Survey_2012.sflb.ashx

⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/vocational-policy/doc/eqavet_en.pdf

- of the Lifelong Learning Programme funded projects on EQAVET, the most effective ones are those that are led by system-level organisations in charge of quality assurance which have the capacity to mainstream project results.

6. The report also commented that:

- *there is currently very little evidence that EQAVET is contributing to the objective of making VET systems more transparent. The content of the EQAVET Annex 1 on quality cycle, criteria and descriptors does not lend itself easily for making national quality assurance systems transparent;*
- *in principle EQAVET is complementary with other European instruments in the area of qualifications, but in practice the complementarities need to be articulated more clearly;*
- *while the school-based aspects of QA in VET are well covered by EQAVET, the framework does not provide specific guidance for QA of work-based learning;*
- *the EU-level cooperation between EQAVET and European initiatives in quality assurance in other sectors of education is not systematic;*
- *not all NRPs have a clear mandate and most NRPs do not have resources of their own. The engagement of stakeholders in national activities of NRPs is very uneven;*
- *the EQAVET governance would benefit from greater involvement of representatives of stakeholders and representatives of organisations which have an interest in strengthening transparency of national quality assurance measures.*

7. In this context, the EQAVET secretariat and ARQA-VET (the National Reference Point for quality assurance in VET in Austria) have organised this peer learning activity (PLA). The PLA will focus on measuring the impact of a quality assurance system which is compatible with the EQAVET Framework. It is important to recognise that the PLA will not look at how EQAVET operates and whether it is succeeding. The focus will be on initial VET though there may be lessons which could benefit those considering how to evaluate the impact of quality assurance approaches which are used in continuing VET, non-formal or informal learning.

8. As with all PLAs, the priority is to find time for discussion, reflection, and sharing knowledge and experience. The approach is different to the one used in a study visit - as the participants do not only consider the hosts' experiences. In addition to contributions from the Austrian hosts, colleagues from Germany, the UK (Wales), Sweden and the Netherlands will describe their experiences of monitoring the impact of a VET quality assurance system. There will be a series of short presentations which provide a stimulus for discussion, and participants will be encouraged to reflect on the policy and practice implications for their own approach to monitoring impact.

Introduction

9. The invitation to this PLA included a number of questions which will be discussed:

- what is effective practice in measuring the impact of quality assurance?
- what aspects of quality assurance have changed at the system level?
- how have these changes had an impact on quality assurance?
- how have learners benefited from quality assurance?

The PLA's focus will be at the system level though there are many questions arising at the VET provider level. As changes arising from the measurement of impact at the system level have implications at the VET provider level, it can be difficult to separate clearly these two aspects of provision. This is particularly the case when the measurement of impact affects how individual VET providers manage and lead their quality assurance processes. Before starting the process of measuring the impact of quality assurance, it is worth thinking about how the data will subsequently be used at both the system and provider level.

10. There are many quality assurance systems in use across Member States. Typically they include commercial approaches (e.g. ISO 9001⁷, EFQM Excellence Model⁸ etc.), national or regional systems which have been designed to respond to the EQAVET Recommendation and hybrid models which combine the best features from existing approaches with indicators from the EQAVET Recommendation. In many Member States the quality assurance approach differs for initial VET and continuing VET; for publicly-funded and privately-funded provision; for formal, non-formal and informal provision; for higher VET which is offered by the higher education sector and provision offered by the VET sector; and for work based compared to school-based VET.
11. Measuring the impact of a quality assurance approach is complex - it is not the same as evaluating the quality of provision. In the plan-do-check-act model of a quality assurance system, it is often the last phase that is weakest. This was recognised by the Technical working Group whose work led to the design of the Common Quality Assurance Framework (CQAF) and was supported by research work from the REVIMP project (this Leonardo da Vinci initiative looked at the quality assurance systems used for initial VET in the health sectors in six European countries) in 2009⁹. The report from the REVIMP project notes that *“it proves to be far from easy for VET provider staff to transform collected quality assurance data into improvement-oriented activities”* and *“our assumption is usually that practitioners as a result of quality assurance activities obtain information on their own and institutional functioning which they did not have before, and which is valuable for them. Therefore, it is expected that this information will be a basis for improving performance. This assumption proves to be naïve (pp 2).”*
12. Research from Weiss¹⁰ highlights that relevant information is valuable but its availability is an insufficient precondition for triggering improvement-oriented behaviour. Weiss identifies a number of ways in which the utilisation of data can be obstructed:
 - evaluation results may not be disseminated among the target group;
 - users may not understand, or believe these;
 - they may have no idea of how the results can be changed;
 - and/or lack the skills, competences for utilising the evaluation findings;
 - the required changes may be too controversial to accomplish them.

⁷ ISO 9001 sets out the requirements of a quality management system that looks at conformity to a set of requirements for developing a successful quality system. It is one of the ISO 9000 family of standards published by the International Organisation for Standardisation.

⁸ The 2013 EFQM Excellence Model, developed by the European Foundation for Quality Management, is a well-established international framework used to assist improvement and help organisations strive for excellence.

⁹ REVIMP is summarised in the QALLL report - http://biblioteka-krk.ibe.edu.pl/opac_css/doc_num.php?explnum_id=191. (page 77)

¹⁰ Weiss, C. (1998). Improving the use of evaluations: whose job is it anyway? In A. Reynolds & H. Walberg (Eds.), *Advances in educational productivity* (Vol. 7, pp. 263–276). London: JAI Press.

13. The REVIMP project also proposed a theoretical framework for analysing the impact of a quality assurance system in VET¹¹. This identified the following factors as the basis for analysing the use of quality assurance systems and the impact they have on quality:
- the processes used to design the quality assurance system;
 - the features which make up the quality assurance system;
 - how the implementation of the quality assurance system is supported and managed;
 - how the VET school is organised and the extent to which it values quality assurance systems;
 - how the quality assurance system is used in a VET school.

How these factors combine is important as they can lead to intended and unintended effects on the quality of provision. Assessing the impact of a quality assurance system needs to take account of each factor in order for the intended and unintended consequences to be identified. The REVIMP project argued that *“too often evaluations become empty, legitimising rites instead of providing a basis for organisational learning and viable transformation and improvement of the system. Thus in many cases the goal of improving the quality of VET is not realised; performance feedback is under-utilised, goals are not fine-tuned and no strategies are designed to better accomplish the goals set.”*

14. The literature often identifies two key purposes for quality assurance systems: accountability and improvement. In the context of an EQAVET-compatible system, accountability is often related to the use of public funds, the provision of quality which is in line with expectations, the importance of external control or monitoring, and the production of information to the public. In most models that are based on high levels of accountability, judgements are usually summative and based on a formal reporting process (e.g. an annual report on practice). When a quality assurance system is based on improvement, the focus tends to be forward looking rather than reporting on past practice, and the emphasis is on making recommendations. Systems based on improvement often prepare reports for expert audiences and for internal use. It is possible to combine systems which focus on accountability and improvement. When considering how to measure the impact of a quality assurance systems it is important to bear in mind its purpose.
15. Early work by the OECD¹² highlighted three obstacles to measuring the impact of quality assurance systems:
- the different interests and conceptions of quality as seen by a wide group of stakeholders e.g. some stakeholders prefer internal processes and regard all external processes as controlling as they do not support self-improvement. On the other hand some stakeholders see a reliance on internal processes as failing to provide the required accountability for performance and the use of public funds;
 - the implementation gap e.g. the difference between the intentions of policy and the realities of practice need to be considered in order to produce a full picture of the impact;
 - external ownership of quality assurance is seen to lead to compliance rather than improvement e.g. there is a risk that practitioners who work in an externally determined

¹¹ See chapter 2 of Visscher, Adrie: Improving Quality Assurance in European Vocational Education and Training. Factors Influencing the Use of Quality Assurance Findings. Enschede 2009.

¹² OECD, Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education: Current Practices in OECD Countries and a Literature Review on Potential Effects, 2005. Available at:

http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:A_kAKBXfYc4J:www.oecd.org/dataoecd/55/30/38006910.pdf+&cd=2&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=uk&client=firefox-a

system merely follow a process that is imposed by others, and they often have low levels of allegiance to quality assurance.

16. Quality assurance systems can be expected to have an impact on inputs, processes, structures and outcomes. Each is important for learners and those who fund VET. Monitoring change requires each to be considered – particularly if evaluators wish to determine a causal connection in a quality assurance system. Within the context of EQAVET, there are a set of readily-available measures – the EQAVET indicators¹³ – which could provide the basis for judging whether the quality assurance processes have led to improvements. In addition, the EQAVET web-site has been arranged in two sections based on monitoring and designing a system <http://www.eqavet.eu/ga/tns/monitoring-your-system/introduction.aspx> - the monitoring section gives examples of how quality assurance is currently being implemented.
17. Some of the lessons that have already been learnt on measuring the impact of quality assurance systems come from experiences in the school or higher education sector. While these are useful lessons they may not be easy transferable to the VET sector.
18. The PLA's focus will include discussions on the measurement of the impact of quality assurance systems and whether the principles and values which underpin the system are being met. The discussions are also likely to consider the system's design, whether implementation has been possible, whether this implementation has led to improvements in quality assurance, and whether the benefits of the quality assurance system exceed the costs. There will be a lot to consider – for some Member States this PLA will provide a first opportunity to reflect on the challenges and practicalities of organising an impact study.

Questions for the PLA

19. In preparation for the PLA, EQAVET and ARQA-VET invited each presenter to think about the four questions set out in paragraph 9. For participants, the following paragraphs set out some key issues and debates which may be raised during the presentations.

What is effective practice in measuring the impact of quality assurance?

20. In 2012 the 4th EQAVET Projects Seminar in the Netherlands focused on 'the impact of Quality Assurance' and suggested that the impact of quality assurance should be expressed in terms of 'return on investment'. The seminar then considered definitions and descriptions of return on investment and how it could be improved. The analysis highlighted that at a system level '*quality assurance is focusing on the attractiveness and effectiveness of Vocational Education and Training. Maintaining confidence in VET qualifications is strongly linked to the assessment of standards by sector specialists and by the relevance of the qualifications for the labour market and the society.*' Not everyone would agree that the impact of quality assurance should be expressed in terms of a 'return on investment' – for many this will be seen as a narrow objective that overemphasises the economic and financial dimensions of VET. In many systems there will be other considerations such as the social dimension which includes opportunities for 'second chance learning', inclusive provision, providing pathways for progression, and the provision of

¹³ Annex II of the EQAVET Recommendation identifies indicators which are based on 'context', 'process', 'input', 'output' and 'outcome'.

education and training because it is intrinsically valuable for society. Gaining agreement on what constitutes the purpose of a quality assurance system is essential before looking at how to measure impact.

21. There are a number of key questions in relation to identifying how to organise an impact study. These are universal questions which apply equally to schools, higher education and VET – however decisions on the ‘best’ answers are heavily dependent on the VET context. These questions include:
- whether data from internal reviews, external processes or a combination can be used to measure impact?
 - whether to focus on the VET institution, VET programmes or both?
 - whether to focus on indicators which are quantitative or the more subjective approach, based on observation of practice, which produces qualitative information?
22. There are arguments to support every possible answer to each of the above questions. The measures chosen in any system will reflect tradition, the objectives associated with quality assurance, the values of the VET community and society at large, and the cost-benefit analysis associated with each potential solution.

What aspects of quality assurance have changed at the system level?

23. The independent evaluation of the implementation of EQAVET identified that *‘directly or indirectly, EQAVET supported changes in quality assurance systems and measures in two thirds of countries analysed.’* However it is not always clear what needs to be changed when designing an EQAVET compatible system – this is because the VET structures in Member States are different and have different organisational arrangements. In addition the EQAVET Recommendation does not set a clear agenda for change as it invited Member States to set up National Reference Points (NRPs), devise approaches to enhance quality assurance and use the EQAVET indicative descriptors and indicators as appropriate. In this context there are many parts of a quality assurance system which could be changed.
24. The European Commission’s independent evaluation also reports that *‘when the work on EQAVET started, most countries were in a situation where quality assurance in VET was not yet ‘systematised’. That however does not mean that quality assurance did not exist. There was rarely an explicit and coherent framework. Instead there were specific rules and practices which ensured the quality of different aspects of education and training.’* Since the introduction of the EQAVET Recommendation different approaches to moving towards a systematic arrangement have included:
- establishing clear responsibilities for quality assurance;
 - checking existing data is compatible with some or all of the EQAVET indicators;
 - setting clear system-level goals or targets for VET which can then be monitored;
 - a systematic approach to strengthening the involvement of stakeholders in policy and practice;
 - new approaches to identifying training needs which support employers and learners;
 - the setting of standards which are a key component in the quality assurance of provision;
 - support to training providers to reform practice;
 - the implementation of a system-wide plan for reform.

25. As a result of the EQAVET Recommendation, many Member States have made changes to their quality assurance approaches - some changes have been major and others have been small. Annexe A, taken from the independent evaluation, summarises the size of these changes arising from EQAVET's introduction. Measuring the impact of a quality assurance system needs to take account of the size of the changes that have been introduced.

How have these changes had an impact on quality assurance?

26. Measuring the impact of a quality assurance system needs an agreed methodology as it is important to identify cause and effect. Typically this methodology will include ideas based on "the theory of change"¹⁴ which is widely used when it is hard to link the initial change with the final outcomes. This methodology is based on identifying all the intermediate steps and illustrating change through a flow diagram where each stage can be described and measured e.g. a policy change to use one EQAVET indicator → new data capture arrangements → new arrangements tested through a pilot scheme → revision made to data capture process → VET providers informed about the new data capture process → VET providers change their systems → data is collected as planned → data is analysed at the regional or national level → performance of the VET system based on the indicator is noted → comparisons are made between the old and the new approaches → the impact of the change is measured. In this type of methodology it is important to identify each stage of the change process in order for a causal link to be clear and subsequently measured. This is not the only methodology for measuring impact – the examples at the PLA will illustrate other approaches to identifying how changes to the quality assurance approach have had an impact on the VET system.

27. It can be difficult to identify why a quality assurance system has had an impact. The impact could be caused by changes which were inspired by EQAVET. However the impact could be as a result of a more generalised awareness of the value of quality assurance. This can easily occur when, at the system level, decisions are made to focus attention on any policy area. An increased interest in quality assurance can be enough to produce an impact. The possibility of an impact arising because of increased interest rather than specific actions has been the basis behind many new policy initiatives (e.g. actions based on behavioural economics or 'nudge theory'¹⁵ are being used). In this PLA, it is those impacts which are directly or indirectly related to the EQAVET Recommendation that will be of interest.

How have learners benefited from quality assurance?

28. Youth unemployment is one of the biggest problems facing the European Union. Now, as always, responding to the learning needs of young people has to be a priority for all those involved in the education and training sector. For individuals unemployment undermines confidence, encourages apathy and saps enthusiasm. At the system level, the waste of talent implied by high levels of youth unemployment inhibits Europe's ability to compete globally,

¹⁴ Weiss (1995) defined a theory of change quite simply as a theory of how and why an initiative works. Weiss, Carol Hirschon. 1995. "Nothing as Practical as Good Theory: Exploring Theory-based Evaluation for Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Children and Families." In *New Approaches to Evaluating Community Initiatives: Concepts, Methods, and Contexts*, ed. James Connell et al. Washington, DC: Aspen Institute.

¹⁵ Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein. *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness*, Yale University Press, 2008

places significant financial burdens on society, and disproportionately affects those from disadvantaged communities.

29. The question for this PLA will be whether improvements in the quality assurance arrangements for VET can improve opportunities for learners. It is possible to measure whether opportunities have improved by considering the EQAVET indicators e.g. did more learners complete their training (indicator number 4) or did more learners acquire the skills they need in the workplace (indicator number 6).
30. It is also possible to look at how changes in quality assurance arrangements have affected learners. This is particularly important when learners are looking to gain relevant qualifications which meet the needs of the current employment market. This can mean completing vocational qualifications after leaving school or following graduation, it could also mean moving to the higher education sector following the completion of an initial VET course. For those who are employed, it can mean continuing to learn through bespoke and standardised training programmes which meet individuals' immediate and longer term needs. In each situation learners are interested in knowing how they can access further learning, whether they will be accepted on a course, and whether they will gain exemption from those aspects of study/training which replicates their prior achievement. Improvements in access, acceptance and exemption are not measures to improve quality assurance. However this type of improvement will lead learners to see VET as more attractive and this will help enrolment (indicator number 3).
31. In a similar way it is possible to look at changes in quality assurance from an employers' perspective. Activities such as increasing the amount of work-based learning (not in itself a quality assurance measure) can lead to improvements in learners' acquisition of relevant skills. This is likely to lead to better employment prospects for learners (indicator number 7), a clearer link to the needs of the labour market (indicator number 9) and better acquisition of the skills needed at work (indicator number 6).
32. Paragraph 29 highlights how changes in quality assurance can have a direct impact on indicators. However, when the impact of quality assurance is considered from the perspective of learners or employers (as in paragraphs 30 and 31), there are indirect effects on the indicators. The PLA is likely to include examples where both direct and indirect effects are considered. The possibility of both direct and indirect effects highlights why the 'theory of change' methodology is a useful instrument when measuring the impact of an enabling, non-prescriptive Recommendation.

After the PLA

33. During the PLA, the discussions will prompt participants to think about the following questions:
 - what options are available to support measuring the impact of quality assurance?
 - what organisational arrangements need to be in place to measure the impact of quality assurance?
 - is it important to think about how to use the data before you start to measure impact?
 - what role do VET teachers and providers have in measuring the impact of quality assurance?

- as everyone is working with limited resources, what are the priorities for quality assurance (e.g. measuring the impact, strengthening the impact of quality assurance at system of provider level, supporting VET teachers in relation to quality assurance etc.)

34. At the end of the PLA, a policy brief (4-5 pages) will be produced and circulated to participants. This will highlight the key issues discussed during the PLA and it will be placed on the EQAVET website (www.eqavet.eu).

Table 4.1 Character of changes introduced to quality assurance in IVET before and after adoption of EQAVET

Country	2003 - 2009	Since 2009	Country	2003 - 2009	Since 2009
AT	major	adjustments	LV	adjustment	major
BE fr	adjustments	major	LT	major	major
BE nl	major	major	MT	adjustments	major
BG	adjustments	major	NL		major
CY	major	adjustments	PL	adjustments	major
CZ	major	adjustments	PT	adjustments	adjustments
DE	major	adjustments	RO	major	adjustments
DK	major	adjustments	SE	adjustments	major
EE	major	major	SI	major	adjustments
ES	major	major	SK	adjustments (important VET reform, not about QA)	adjustments
EL		major	UK	adjustments	adjustments
FI	major	major			
FR	major	adjustments	FYROM	major	Adjustments (important reform planned)
HU	major	major	HR		adjustments
IE	major	major	IC	major (new VET legislation)	adjustments
IT	major	adjustments (important reform planned)	LI*		
LU	adjustments (important VET reform, not about QA)	adjustments	NO	major	major (planned)
			TK		major
	<i>2003 - 2009</i>	<i>Since 2009</i>		<i>2003 - 2009</i>	<i>Since 2009</i>
Major	19	17	Adjustments	10	16

*VET provision in Liechtenstein is largely in line with the rules in Switzerland