



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 note summarises the key issues emerging from a Joint Seminar, established as part of the EQAVET work programme 2010-2013 on increasing synergies between EQAVET, EQF and ECVET. The Joint Seminar provided a means by which the EQAVET Network will address and work on areas of strategic importance for the successful implementation of the Recommendation on establishing a European quality assurance reference framework for VET. The key task is to develop practical guidance and materials which will assist Member States in developing their national approaches to the implementation of the Recommendation and reporting on progress. This note reflects the opinions of the working groups' participants and does not constitute an official European Commission or EQAVET position.

EQAVET, EQF, ECVET - Joint Seminar

Assuring the quality of VET qualifications – The contribution of the EU tools (EQAVET, EQF, ECVET) to the definition and re-definition of learning outcomes based standards

With the participation of national experts from twenty three European countries, the Social Partners and the European Commission

This note is based on the outcomes of the joint seminar organised by the Commission, together with the respective Secretariats responsible for EQAVET, EQF and ECVET. The seminar was held on 14 and 15 November 2011 in Bonn and was hosted by the National Agency Education for Europe at the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB). (The concept paper, case studies, presentations and the report are available at: <http://www.eqavet.eu/gns/what-we-do/joint-seminar.aspx>).

INTRODUCTION and POLICY CONTEXT

Improving coordination between EQAVET, ECVET and EQF is one of the priorities of the EQAVET Work Programme 2010-2012. In 2010 a Reflection Group, with EQAVET, EQF and ECVET representation was established to explore possible approaches to enhance synergy between the EU tools. The Reflection Group agreed that cooperation between stakeholders on issues of common interest would facilitate the development of a more coordinated approach to the implementation and further development of the three EU tools. The seminar, planned by the Reflection Group, created an opportunity for a structured reflection on how the EU tools support processes for defining and renewing VET qualifications. The seminar provided a forum for national stakeholders to consider how to improve and make better use of the three EU tools, and enhance cooperation at EU and national levels.

This work should be seen as a step towards the realisation of an 'EU education and training area' contemplated by the [Bruges Communiqué](#) which reviews the strategic approach and priorities of the Copenhagen process for 2011-2020, on enhancing EU cooperation in VET. The Communiqué emphasises: the importance of fostering mobility in VET, which is optimised by the use of the EU transparency tools (e.g. EQF, ECVET, EQAVET, Europass) as well as by increasing coherence between the two European credit systems - ECVET and ECTS; and the need to set up an enhanced coordination procedure for their implementation at EU and national levels. Also it recognises the key role played by the application of the learning outcomes approach in these processes.

SEMINAR AIM

The aim of the seminar was threefold:

- To gauge the impact of the learning outcomes approach on processes related to the definition and renewal of quality assured VET qualifications' standards.
- To reflect on the extent of the influence and usage of the EU tools, and their underlying principles, with regard to the definition and renewal of quality assured VET qualifications' standards.
- To consider the ways in which the three EU tools might be further developed and co-operation enhanced in order to improve their impact.

SEMINAR FINDINGS

Across the EU, measures are being introduced to develop **learning outcomes** referenced VET systems, in many cases, related to the development of national qualifications' frameworks.





Learning outcomes

The learning outcomes approach is not new to VET but it is often more associated with VET pathways that are occupationally specific and have a long tradition of integrated work-based learning, such as apprenticeship¹. Drivers of the introduction of the learning outcomes approach in school-based VET include shifts in policy to integrate more work-based learning in VET programmes and to facilitate progression to further learning. The learning outcomes approach 'opens up' qualifications by making them more transparent for employers and learners; as it focuses on the validation/certification processes. The labour market understands and is responsive to the approach and this helps to create/reinforce links between enterprises and schools and to increase the labour market relevance of qualifications.

Learning outcomes should be fit for purpose and thus their description may differ according to the context in which they are used.

VET qualifications' standards based on learning outcomes

There are similarities and differences in the EU regarding the development and renewal of learning outcomes referenced **VET qualifications' standards**, *vis-à-vis*: drivers, concepts, stages of development, policies, approaches and practices.

Maintaining confidence in VET qualifications is strongly linked to the judgement of standards by sector specialists. For many countries the very involvement of the economic world in the definition of standards is a quality assurance mechanism. Defining competences as 'learning outcomes, based on defined work processes' can be considered as a quality standard. The accumulation of learning outcomes needs to be referenced to the quality standards determined for the full qualification for an occupation, otherwise the employability of the individual may be in question.

Standards development is the start of a long and inter-connected process and is dependent on a 'feedback loop' that safeguards the quality, relevance and suitability of standards for the intervening processes: curricula/contents development and delivery, assessment and certification. There is a need to ensure that explicit and comprehensive quality assurance policy, which balances top-down with the bottom up practice, underpins all processes.

Implementing programmes designed to enable learners to achieve learning outcomes based standards changes the roles, responsibilities and practice of provider institutions and 'learning facilitators'; this shift requires support in terms of familiarization, guidance, training and the provision of resources.

There is also greater need for national responsible bodies to safeguard standards, with cost-benefit considerations.

A consequence of placing the learner in a more pivotal position is the transfer of more responsibility to learners; they too require supports tailored to their needs.

The influence and usage of the EU tools

When applied, the principles underpinning the **EU tools** contribute to the quality, relevance, flexibility and transparency of learning outcomes referenced VET qualifications' standards.

EQAVET co-operation processes are achieving success in improving the transparency and comprehensibility of quality assurance systems that ensure the reliability of standards.

Learning outcomes based qualifications frameworks are starting to become reference points for the development and renewal of VET qualifications standards at national level. Implementing the **EQF** is considered to 'speed-up' change processes.

The trend to make awards and/or give credits for units of learning outcomes, for transfer and progression purposes, within the national context, is growing. The principles underpinning **ECVET** are generally taken into account in such developments. The trend to define standards that facilitate units of learning outcomes is increasing and this is important for the implementation of ECVET.

EMERGING ISSUES and POLICY POINTS:**(1)
EMBEDDING
LEARNING
OUTCOMES:****Takes time;****Stakeholders
need substantial
support and
encouragement;****Requires responsive
quality assurance
systems****(2)
THE USAGE OF THE
EU TOOLS:****Relates to their
functions;****Relates to the
implementation
approach;**

The shift to learning outcomes is an iterative process and all stakeholders, particularly 'learning facilitators' require encouragement and support to pioneer developments.

1. **Find the equilibrium between maintaining momentum and ensuring that all stakeholders at every level have the time they need to embrace, adjust to and embed the learning outcomes approach.**

Whilst developing VET standards in terms of learning outcomes can be demanding, the culture change required to ensure the paradigm shift permeates the learning process thereafter, is considered to be much more challenging.

2. **Implement measures to ensure that the learning outcomes approach permeates the learning process. Practices to support 'learning facilitators' include:**
ENGAGING them as partners in planning developments from the outset and at all subsequent phases: implementation, evaluation, review;
EXPLORING their concerns and needs with them, regarding the impact of change on their roles and practice;
ENABLING them to develop the necessary know-how and methods to bring about change, including change management skills and capacity building to improve quality cultures;
ENCOURAGING interaction between them and related 'communities of practice', for example through common projects;
EVALUATING the impact of change on 'learning facilitators' and responding swiftly to unintended consequences.

The shift from defining standards based on teaching inputs to learning outcomes based standards has an impact on quality assurance policies and practices. As more responsibility is devolved to providers for learning outcomes curricula, pedagogy and assessment, there is evidence that this is being matched by the augmentation of "regulators" at system level, which has resulted in an expansion of 'responsible' bodies (quality assurance bodies, accreditation bodies, awarding bodies, examining bodies), or of their tasks, or their volume of work.

3. **Ensure the coherence of quality assurance policies and practices throughout the cycle of standards definition and their re-definition, taking account of all the intervening processes related to: curricula, pedagogy, learning, assessment and certification. Monitor changes in quality assurance policies and practices resulting from the shift to learning outcomes and how effectively change is being managed.**

The articulation of the EU tools with national policy and practice is vital and this relates to their functions, which can be seen as, *inter alia*:

- catalysts for changing mind-sets;
- drivers of developments needed to support lifelong learning;
- devices to promote co-operation across stakeholders, peer review and benchmarking;
- instruments to speed up reform and maintain momentum;
- references for quality;
- enablers for establishing mutual trust.

EU Tools applied in parallel to national systemic practice will be perceived as difficult.

4. **Take stock of the respective functions of the EU tools in each national context and whether the approach to their implementation is: 'loose' (principles underpinning the EU tools already underlie policy and practice); 'tightly structured' (the EU tools are applied directly as models of best practice); somewhere in-between or whether the EU tool is 'stand alone'. Develop impact assessment models that take account of implementation differences.**

**Can be boosted through learning from practice;**

The embedding in national VET systems of all, or some of, the principles underpinning the three EU-tools predates the creation of the EU tools in some countries. As a result, such countries are likely to integrate the EU tools in a way that is coherent and maximises synergy between them. These countries are probably already well placed to attain the trans-national goals of the EU tools. However, in order for the EU tools to achieve their full potential their integration into national systems should be EU-wide and this will take time.

- 5. Promote and monitor practice in the use of the EU tools by countries to ‘tune’ their systems for European level transparency and mobility purposes. Analyse and evaluate practice and disseminate outcomes.**

Can be reinforced through enhanced co-ordination at national and EU levels

As the use of the EU tools is voluntary this can result in different types of management of the tools by different types of bodies. In some instances, promotion/implementation is managed by qualifications’ and quality assurance authorities in other contexts these responsibilities have been allocated to bodies that manage EU programmes and other EU initiatives or to bodies set up solely for these purposes.

- 6. Encourage interaction between the respective EU tool management bodies and related ‘communities of practice’ to facilitate the coherent integration of underlying principles in policy and practice. Whilst much is being done to promote the integration of the EU tools, there is also a clear need to do more, and do it better, for example:**
 - better co-ordination practice at EU and national levels;
 - better representation in developments at EU level (social partners, sector associations, all Member States with arrangements for large countries);
 - better assessment of the time needed for change and realistic timescales;
 - better synergy (cross-sector projects, broader based ‘communities of practice’);
 - better and earlier monitoring, analysis, evaluation and dissemination;
 - better responses to unintended consequences;
 - better information and guidance tools and
 - better use of EU funds and projects to support developments.

**(3)
SYNERGY ACROSS
EU TOOLS**

In the context of promoting lifelong learning policies, a more coordinated approach is required regarding the coherent implementation of: EQAVET, EQF and ECVET; other Education and Training 2020 tools; other European Higher Education Area tools and other EU tools that promote the transparency of qualifications, mobility and communication between education and the labour market.

- 7. Focus on strategy planning for the coherent implementation of the EU tools, with emphasis on simplification, synergy and sustainability and initiate cooperation projects based on issues of common interest;**
- 8. The European Commission has a key role to play in providing the right support in this context.**

END NOTES

¹ It is also important to consider the need of drafting learning outcomes for soft skills, a process which should be linked to the EU key competence framework