



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 EQAVET indicator 6 "Utilisation of acquired skills at the workplace" 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.

Peer Learning
Activity on

EQAVET indicator 6: *Utilisation of acquired skills at the workplace* *In initial and continuing VET*

*Participating countries: AT, BE, CY, CZ, DK, DE, EE, EL, FL, HR, HU, IE, IT, LV, NO, PT, RO,
SI, UK(Nir and Sct)*

SUMMARY

This policy brief is based on the EQAVET peer learning activity (PLA) on EQAVET indicator 6 Utilisation of acquired skills at the workplace, hosted by the Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland – Directorate for Further Education Policy – Belfast, December 3-4, 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 on the implementation of EQAVET indicator 6 at system and provider level, covering issues relevant to both initial and continuing VET. 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 Northern Ireland, Estonia and Greece. This policy brief is not a verbatim report; rather it is an analysis of the issues that were felt to be important in an EQAVET context. It can also provide information to those who are interested in self-assessment but were unable to attend the PLA.

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

POLICY CONTEXT and EQAVET indicator 6

The labour force in Europe is currently facing some crucial challenges:

- the supply of skilled workers is not keeping up with the demand of the labour market
- too many workers have outdated/inadequate skills, and
- rates of youth unemployment are alarmingly high.

These issues explain why, throughout the last decade, European political and business leaders have been voicing the need for a greater awareness of the pressures of global competition as well as the need for cooperation between industry and education in order to create a supportive dynamic that may close the skills gap.

The most recent initiative is the *European Alliance for Apprenticeships*, a joint effort supported by the European Commission, the European Union Council of Ministers and EU trade union and employer organisations, and designed "to improve sustainable transitions from school to work, notably by fostering skills that are relevant to the labour market and improving skill matches"¹.

Within this context, the most significant indicator to assess whether skills/competences acquired are used/useful in the workplace, is EQAVET indicator 6 *Utilisation of acquired skills at the workplace*.

¹ Council of the European Union (2013). "European Alliance for Apprenticeships" Council Declaration. Available at http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/lsa/139011.pdf





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The indicator includes two aspects:

- 6a) Information on occupation obtained by individuals after completion of training, according to type of training and individual criteria; and
- 6b) Satisfaction rate of individuals and employers with acquired skills/competences.

The relevance of this indicator in the current socio-economic situation was clear in the survey undertaken by the EQAVET Secretariat on the implementation of the EQAVET Framework in 2012. 92 per cent of EQAVET members identified indicator number 6 as a priority for cooperation at EU level.

Peer Learning Activity OBJECTIVES

This PLA built on previous work developed by the EQAVET Network² in relation to EQAVET indicators. Its aim was to respond to the need to further investigate

- a) how EQAVET indicator 6 can be implemented, and
- b) the possibility of engaging with end users of VET as part of a structured quality assurance process.

Participants reflected on the following issues:

- how to improve their understanding of the policy and operational issues related to skills utilisation at the workplace across Europe, from both employer and trainee/employee perspectives;
- how to share expertise acquired in measuring skills utilisation;
- the identification of challenges faced by VET systems and providers in implementing this indicator.

EMERGING POLICY ISSUES

Even if the correlation between improved skills and increased productivity does not prove to be as strong as expected, the fact remains that **the acquisition of skills is perceived as one of the most critical factors for economic development and social inclusion in countries all over the world.**

In Europe, interest in this topic has been growing, particularly since the mid-1990s. In addition, the focus of policymakers and business leaders has been shifting from the so-called "supply side" to the "demand side"³.

This paradigm shift highlights **the need for relevant information and data.** Therefore, it is not surprising that the issue of how skills utilisation can be best measured is now at the forefront of European policy for VET, namely through the inclusion of indicator 6 (Utilisation of acquired skills at the workplace) in the *Recommendation on the establishment of a European quality assurance framework for vocational education and training*⁴.

The questionnaire completed by the participants prior to the PLA meeting,⁵ seems to indicate **that existing measurements of skills utilisation:**

- are mostly an *ad hoc* exercise;
- reveal that data are collected at local, regional and national level in many different ways;
- reveal difficulties in harmonising data management mechanisms at national level because of the involvement of multiple actors who have different priorities and perspectives, as well as a likely lack of consensus on/understanding of key definitions, e.g. skills, competences, types of skills, skills utilisation;
- disclose the need for clarification of stakeholder roles and responsibilities regarding data collection at national, regional and local level.

DISCUSSION - DATA COLLECTION & EQAVET indicator 6

ISSUES & BENEFITS

The importance of EQAVET indicator 6 and the collection of data on skills utilisation is well-understood by EU countries.

In fact, data is being collected by most countries, even if on an irregular and ad-hoc basis, focusing on certain sectors and regions.

Most countries, however, seem to lack a concrete policy on how to implement surveys on skills utilisation and how to apply the results of those surveys to VET policy.

The main obstacles to implementing such surveys seem to include:

- participation rates of respondents in skills utilisation surveys (particularly information on the

² For more information on indicator 6, please visit the EQAVET quality cycle on-line tool in the EQAVET 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

³ The European multilingual classification of Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO) presents a common language bridging education and the labour market. It is relevant in this context of EU efforts in relation to coordinate skill monitoring.

⁴ See Annex II in *Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training* [Official Journal C 155 of 8.7.2009].

⁵ For further information, please see the PowerPoint presentation on the analysis of participant responses to the questionnaire. Available at http://www.eqavet.eu/Libraries/Framework_brochures/MEG_Belfast_PLA.sflb.ashx



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occupations obtained by individuals after completion of training and the satisfaction rates of individuals and employers with acquired skills/competences),

- the reliability of collected data
- lack of financial resources and
- lack of awareness on the part of government authorities.

Moreover, to improve data collection on skills utilisation is perceived as requiring policy inputs such as a commitment from VET policymakers as well as from those responsible for labour market and economic policy.

VET providers need a clear understanding of the knowledge and skills needed by employers so that they can ensure that learners receive relevant training.

Information on the success rates of VET graduates in the labour market is vital in order to determine the future direction of VET systems and policy, and whether any reforms are necessary.

In addition, the benefits of implementing EQAVET indicator 6 should be explained to all stakeholders; employers, in particular, need to be engaged through:

- a) cooperation at national level between government authorities, employer associations and trade unions;
- b) cooperation at regional or sector level between ministries and employers;
- c) cooperation between individual VET providers and local employers.

ON-GOING CHALLENGES

In the course of the PLA, two issues were perceived as particularly challenging:

1. identifying the type of skills to measure; and
2. agreeing methodologies for measuring the use of those skills.

Type of skills to measure

It is generally acknowledged that the demand for skills and the utilisation of skills determine a country's productivity and potential for growth. However, although countries may measure links between skills, economic performance and employment/unemployment, it is economic and social contexts, apparently, that determine what skills (e.g. generic, specific, occupation-related skills) and what skills utilisation are measured.

In recent times interest has grown in "employability skills", i.e. those skills that are primarily associated with characteristics such as creativity, initiative, leadership, the capacity to share information as well as the ability to work both independently and in a team.

The challenge faced by policymakers and stakeholders, at national, regional and /or local level, is how to identify the type of skills they wish to see in use at the workplace, not only "here and now" but also in the future. In fact, the present pace of change in the labour market is already having an impact on the kinds of skills needed at the workplace and consequently skills policies will need to link initiatives on skills utilisation with the emerging developments in the globalised economy.

Methodologies for measuring skills utilisation

There is a reasonable number of methodologies to measure skills utilisation, e.g. large scale surveys, sample surveys of target population, dedicated surveys (specific work contexts and/or sectors), supplements/modules to existing surveys at national and or European level (e.g. Labour Force Survey, Household Survey). Each one has its advantages and disadvantages.

The challenge currently confronting national authorities, policymakers and developers is to ensure

- a) that skills utilisation is measured comprehensively and systematically
- b) that data collected is relevant and of sufficient quality
- c) integration with other data collection efforts
- d) availability of resources, and
- e) good communication between stakeholders in order to inform VET quality improvement (at local, regional and national level), in order to respond to labour market needs and learner expectations.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

In relation to the implementation of EQAVET indicator 6, certain issues, particularly the development of an appropriate evidence base on the utilisation of skills at the workplace, were raised and discussed by participants in the PLA.

A well developed evidence base on skills utilisation would benefit:

- a) governments, enabling them to identify mismatches between demand and supply and to develop strategies to minimise mismatches,





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- b) VET providers, enabling them to assess the effectiveness of their provision in terms of preparing learners for employment and benchmarking their performance with other providers,
- c) learners, providing them with information on which skills are in demand which would enable them to make choices about their studies and careers and
- d) employers, enabling them to make more effective use of workers' skills.

Therefore, the implementation of EQAVET indicator 6 (6a and 6b) will require a comprehensive long-term strategy, including:

- An agreed understanding between stakeholders, notably national authorities, policy makers and social partners, on
 - a) the types of skills to be examined,
 - b) what constitutes the utilisation of skills at the workplace in the national context;
- The alignment of VET, employment and economic policies in order to develop a common method to measure the utilisation of skills at the workplace;
- The involvement of a broad group of relevant stakeholders and the definition of their roles and responsibilities in the gathering of data as well as in the use of the data for
 - a) reviewing VET policy,
 - b) forming business strategies and
 - c) benchmarking the utilisation of skills within and between sectors;
- A systematic and systemic gathering of data, i.e. the systematic collection of relevant data at local level and its aggregation at national level in order to increase the complementarity and alignment of initiatives and to reduce the risk of duplication of effort.