

This report presents the results of a Peer Learning Activity, which has been prepared by the independent expert named on the cover. The report is based on a peer learning activity where policymakers and practitioners from a number of countries exchanged ideas and experiences on an issue of shared policy interest. This report reflects the opinions of the participants and does not constitute an official European Commission or ENQA-VET position.

Peer Learning Activity on the
Impact of the European Quality Assurance Reference
Framework (EQARF)

ENQA-VET Peer Learning Activity
MALTA 26th- 27th May 2009
Hosted by the Malta Qualifications Council (MQC)

Peer Learning Report
July 2009

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Quality assurance in VET is a major theme. This Peer Learning Activity (PLA), taking place in Malta on the 26th and 27th of May 2009, was meant to exchange experiences on the impact of the Common Quality Assurance Framework. In part it has done so, by looking at the forceful way in which quality assurance has been taken up in Malta and by listening to the examples of all participants. But in most ways, this PLA was about the next phase in quality assurance, through EQARF. Our key recommendations reflect this.

On the EQARF:

EQARF is the next big step, and we welcome it and want to support it, though much still needs to be done in order to turn it into a consistent and viable whole. There are many questions around the working of EQARF and we see imbalances and tensions:

- between more qualitative and more quantitative forms of quality assurance
- between descriptors and indicators
- between a voluntary and a non-voluntary approach
- between indicators relevant to schools and those relevant to social partners

Our *first recommendation* is to address these imbalances and present a clearer and more consistent approach to quality assurance in VET.

On the impact and use of indicators:

- the definitions of the present indicators are not as clear as they can be
- indicators that are most relevant are not always the easiest to measure
- when using an indicator, focus is important. We saw that great leverage can be obtained through a determined effort to pursue a specific result along a single indicator
- indicators should most of all be aimed at learning outcomes
- some indicators are curiously missing. Most of all indicators generating feedback from trainees
- there is no strategy or much awareness when it comes to preventing bureaucracy

Our *second recommendation* is to give priority to the most relevant indicators, not just the ones that are easiest to measure. And then ask ourselves whether these are really the right indicators to be able to steer towards learning outcomes.

On the implementation of EQARF:

- self-evaluation in combination with peer review is the preferred method of quality assurance, but in most countries there is still a way to go
- the best method is in fact dependent upon the specific context and different expectations. There is no 'one size fits all' when it comes to the best intervention
- this could mean that in some countries EQARF should be built into the legal framework of the country and in others not
- exchange of best practices will under all circumstances remain important

Our *third recommendation* is to develop an implementation strategy that takes differences in context and expectations into account.

On communication:

- there is a great need to be informed on EQARF and its consequences
- already there is a demand for training
- keep on involving all stakeholders with a clear and consistent approach

Our *fourth and final recommendation* is to have a clear communication strategy on what can be expected from EQARF and its subsequent steps and actions.

2. INTRODUCTION

At the very end of the Peer Learning Activity in Malta, one of the participants said 'you should only say something if it improves on the silence'.

These are wise words, but who can say that the participants of the PLA lived up to them? With much energy and involvement we presented and discussed each others experiences and views on 'the impact of quality assurance and the role of indicators'. Silence? No. But thoughtfulness, yes. And if this remark means that a PLA should of added value to what has been said before, yes, then this PLA certainly improved on the silence. As expressed by many participants, and certainly by the hosts from Malta, it is our hope that this has not ended with the PLA itself. Through this report we hope to add to the debate and give the necessary impulse to the quality assurance of VET and to VET itself.

More than an exchange of information

This is a report of the PLA as held in Malta on the 26th and 27th of May 2009. It was hosted by the Malta Qualifications Council (MQC). 18 participants from 16 countries took part. A number of representatives from Malta also took part, including a representation from the Chamber of Commerce. Most participants, but certainly not all, had prior acquaintance with CQAF / EQARF. Because of this, and because of other factors connected to the state of affairs in the participating nations, the expectations for the PLA were mixed. Through much exchange of case examples and candidly expressed views, not in the least by our Maltese hosts, something more was attained than an exchange of information about what is happening in the different member states. If communication is sometimes described as 'talking away from each other as close as you can', than we got quite close to each other.

Policy context

The PLA took place in the week after the official launch of EQARF, in line with the Bordeaux Communiqué of November 2008, as part of the Copenhagen process. As such, this PLA was right at the start of a two year period in which EQARF is to be implemented. Because of this, the PLA was primarily focused on EQARF, and not on the previous European Quality Assurance System (CQAF). The EQARF differs from the previous European quality assurance system (the CQAF) in that it:

- includes the need for regular monitoring (including the use of internal and external evaluation mechanisms) and reporting on progress;
- uses common quality criteria and indicative descriptors to underpin the monitoring and reporting arrangements;
- creates common indicators to support the evaluation, monitoring and quality assurance of VET systems and providers

As such, the EQARF provides a European wide system is aimed at helping member states and stakeholders to document, develop, monitor, evaluate and improve the effectiveness of their VET provision and quality management practices. However, for many of the participants of the PLA there was yet little self-evident about the EQARF. Both in term of knowledge and in terms of understanding, especially when it came to the indicators, much was still open to discussion – so: much food for thought.

Lively program

The mix of participants and the policy content of the PLA ensured a lively program. In this report the highlights of the program will certainly be represented, but the main aim is to build up to the conclusions of the PLA. In the process it is hoped that something of the energy in the process will come across. The following elements will certainly be represented:

- the pre-PLA questionnaire and its subsequent exchange of views and experiences on the state of play
- the main presentations as done by the representatives from Malta

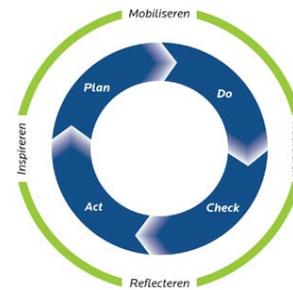
- an impression of the thematic discussion at the end of the PLA and the conclusions that were reached.

Input expert

Added to these are the comments by the expert, Peter Noordhoek¹, also author of this report. The main elements of these comments were all presented in Malta, but not always extensively explained. This will be done a little more in this report, but the experts comment will be recognizable by the **colour** of the words – and by what he brings.

At the heart of CQAF, EQARF and other approaches to quality assurance in VET, lies a simple principle. It is sometimes called the Deming-circle, but most of the time it is just referred to as *P-D-C-A*. It stands for: Plan – Do – Check – Act. Borrowed from system theory, it indicates the way quality grows by reflecting on plans and actions. In the past years there has been increased criticism on the use of the P-D-C-A cycle and the cycle itself. The heart of the criticism is that it does not reflect the way people really think, and is altogether a far too rational approach to describe how people and organizations learn. Simply put: there is a lot of planning in this world, quite some doing, but not much checking or acting upon that. In a recent full review done by the Dutch Quality Institute (INK) of its model, which is based, like CQAF / EQARF on the model of the European Foundation of Quality Management (EFQM). In that review it was also discussed whether the P-D-C-A could still be used. In the end the answer was a resounding ‘yes’. We cannot and should not do without it. But to the P-D-C-A circle another circle was added, now called ‘the inspiration circle’. The P-D-C-A circle tells you *what* you should do, it does not tell you *why* you should do it. So entwined with the old circle a new circle came about, asking these questions:

- ✚ does it Inspire to a good plan?
- ✚ does it Mobilize everyone to do what must be done?
- ✚ do you Value what has been done, positive or not?
- ✚ do you Reflect and learn?



At the PLA in Malta this inspiration circle of Inspire – Mobilize – Value - Reflect (I-M-V-R) was explained, with much emphasis that it should not be used as another model or framework – especially not just one week after the launch of EQARF. But during the PLA we used the four questions to ask ourselves whether what was said about quality assurance of VET worked for us. Just like the reader can ask whether what is written helps to improve the quality and quality assurance of VET.

¹ Peter Noordhoek can be found at www.northedge.nl. He is a specialist in quality development and quality assurance.

3. MALTA FINDINGS

3.1 Goals and expectations

Goal

The goal of the Peer Learning Activity was to analyze the impact of the Common Quality Assurance Framework on Malta's education and training and how such experience can be transferred to a European level. The PLA also aimed to be relevant to all who wish to familiarize themselves with its relevant indicators. The PLA could serve as a forum to discuss how indicators are addressed in Malta as well as in partner countries, leading to shared conclusions and recommendations.

In this PLA the emphasis was put on EQARF, as a more specific way of addressing issues of quality assurance in VET than CQAF. Within EQARF the emphasis was on the (use of) indicators². In short, the present ten indicators are:

1. Relevance of quality assurance systems for VET providers
2. Investment in training of teachers and trainers
3. Participation rate in VET programmes
4. Completion rate in VET programmes
5. Placement rate in VET programmes
6. Utilisation of acquired skills at the workplace
7. Unemployment rate
8. Prevalence of vulnerable groups
9. Mechanisms to identify training needs in the labour market
10. Schemes used to promote better access to VET

The programme touched on all aspects of quality assurance through VET, but was also specifically tailored to encourage discussion on:

- the Quality Assurance Framework in Malta (relevant to indicator 1)
- quality assurance in VET: teacher training for the improvement of quality in VET (indicator 2)
- industry-driven qualifications in the tourism sector (indicator 9)
- schemes to promote better access for the unemployed and vulnerable groups to VET, and destination of trainees six months after training (indicators 3, 4, 7, and 10)
- learning outcomes VET Qualifications and Occupational Standards (indicator 9)

Expectations

From the pre-PLA questionnaire it was clear that most participants expected the PLA to contribute to mutual learning and the exchange of examples. It is relevant to note that there is a need simply to be informed or trained in what CQAF / EQARF stands for and what is meant by the indicators. Participants mentioned that this need was not just with them. There is a wider need. It should also be noted that participants came with different ideas about where the balance should be between discussing quality assurance as such and discussing the content and working of the indicators. The role of the 'descriptors' in all of this remained unclear. It is predictable that in the future EQARF will lead to a lot of debate on the balance between qualitative and quantitative approaches to quality assurance.

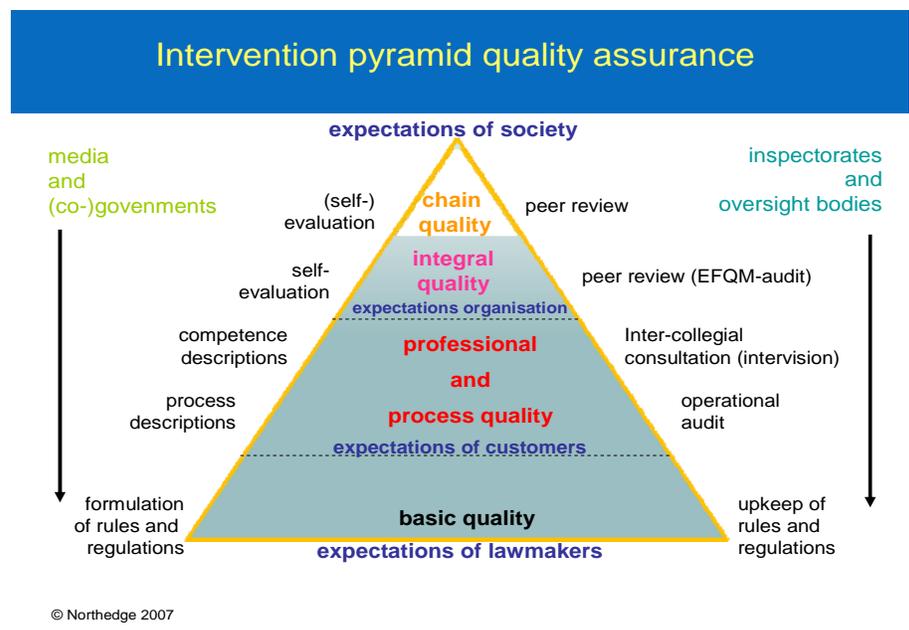
Reflections on the goal

Dr. James Calleja, who was, together with Ms. Doris Mangion, a perfect host to this PLA, set the tone for this debate about quality and quantity in his opening presentation³. In his

² See annex II. A reference set of selected quality indicators for assessing quality in VET. Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training

³ The presentations of Mr. Dr. Calleja and the other presentations can be obtained through MQC in Malta.

thorough presentation of both EQARF and the Maltese approach, he also commented on the progress thus far. Doing this, he compared the Bologna process with the Copenhagen process. Progress is made, but so far the Bologna process has shown more progress and consistency than the Copenhagen process. Whatever the cause, much needs to be done to ensure a coherent approach. For EQARF this means, for example, looking at the way the descriptors and indicators relate to each other. By statements like these, and the subsequent debate among the participants, the goal was not just to analyze the impact of the present quality assurance programmes, but also to debate the dilemmas and challenges the participants are facing in a new phase of quality assurance. Later on the expert would come back to this by introducing an 'intervention pyramid' for quality assurance.



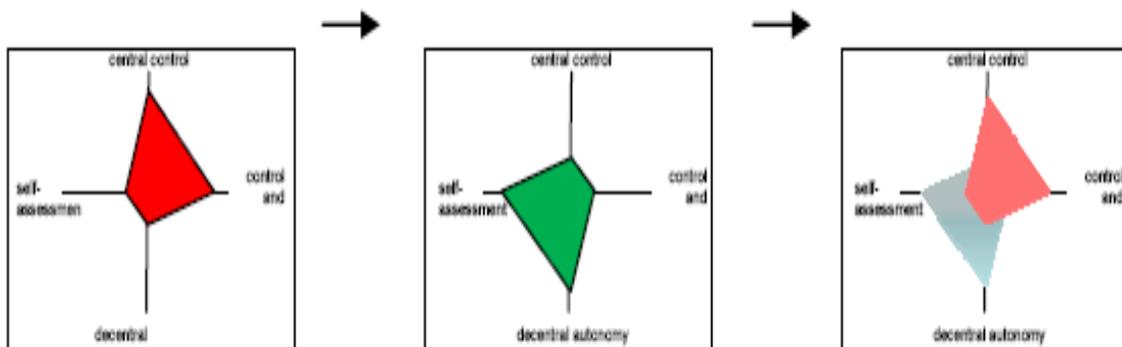
There is no such thing as a single definition of quality. It always depends on expectations, and in a public environment expectations differ by definition. The expectations of society are not necessarily the same of those of the customer / client / citizen, just like the needs of those who write the law may differ from those who are working in a (public) organisation. Still, we often try to develop quality systems and approaches that will address all expectations. In reality this is very hard to achieve. In this PLA for instance, it is hard to reconcile the needs of countries that are still working on basic quality - close to the expectation of lawmakers – to those countries who hope to work on a more integral level. On the left side of the pyramid there are the tools and instruments that can be used to describe or prescribe what is or should be going on for a certain level of quality. On the right side the tools and instruments are – roughly speaking - used to assure that the description is conform reality. The combination of both should ensure quality improvement because it forces to reflect on performance. If it does not, there is a danger of resistance or window dressing. The challenge is to make the right intervention at the right level.

3.2 State of the art

Based on the pre-PLA questionnaire and the discussion of the results during the PLA, it is easy to conclude that a lot of progress is made when it comes to quality assurance in the member states. There are impressive examples of progress, especially in terms of policy development and policy deployment. This goes from good connections between mission and goals, to quality matrixes and the adoption of early warning systems. On a more basic level progress is made in the formulation of national QA frameworks and structural involvement of stakeholders. Of course there are differences between the member states, but enough is going on in terms of 'purpose and plan' to state that quality assurance in VET is high on the national and European agenda: 'a house is being build with quality for each school with a roof of quality assurance on higher levels'. In this, there is inspiration.

There is also much in the process of implementation. Examples abound. From the setting of targets, to legal frameworks and financial performance systems; activities everywhere. Stakeholders are mobilised through different forms of consultations. Transparency improves, as for instance in the case of Finland, where all data are on a website and can be compared. Still, national strategies on the implementation are not seen everywhere. And in the questionnaire, as during the PLA, there was difference of opinion whether to choose the path of legal requirement or that of a more voluntary approach. When asked about strengths and weaknesses, someone wrote in answer to the question about weaknesses: 'What is a weakness? Is it a weakness when no law has been adopted, but there is an approach based on voluntary participation?' The obvious answer is no, but it does show an edge to the debate on quality assurance.

This is, of course, a classic tension. The expert introduced a scheme that shows on the one hand the preference for a top-down approach in combination with controlling methods of quality assurance. On the other hand it shows the preference for approaches that stress autonomy in combination with more horizontal methods of quality assurance, above all self-evaluation with peer review. In practice, true quality assurance come about not through one combination or the other, but through the successful application and convergence of both, with a true self-evaluation of the organisations concerned as the best starting point.



In terms of methods, the introduction of self-evaluations is by far the most mentioned by the participants, often in combination with other methods of external evaluation. It is the preferred method to mobilise schools. Many countries are preparing for a system of peer review – and have questions concerning the best methodology. Only when asked do the participants mention the use of instruments like ISO, Six Sigma or EFQM for quality assurance. The focus, in terms of methods, is firmly on CQAF/EQARF. The need for clear(er) definitions of aspects was mentioned more than once. In terms of getting results, the focus is

firmly on stakeholder involvement and the way in which to involve them. The goal is to have an agreement with stakeholders on long term strategy. This should not only involve social partners, but also evaluating bodies, etc.

Do we get full circle? Not everywhere, though efforts are made. There are many monitoring activities going on, just as there are standard reporting duties in many places, though it is sometimes hard to get the right data (see below). Again, the role of self-evaluation is considered very important and peer review is the logical next step. The role of the inspectorate in a country like the Netherlands is double-edged; a spur for great quality on the hand, and on the other hand perhaps a blockade for schools of taking care of quality themselves. There certainly is quality in the quality assurance. Are these efforts valued enough? No one mentioned the credit crisis as a trend in the questionnaire, but with the participants there was no doubt about the relevance of good quality assurance of VET for the coming years.

Indicators: relevance and measurability

Added to the regular pre-PLA questionnaire were a number of questions concerning data collection and the use of indicators. Discussing the results of these questions immediately brought to light a fundamental worry about the balance between the qualitative and quantitative side of EQARF, but it started out with the 'simple' matter of data collection. It is obvious that a lot of data are collected. Most participants had a better sight or more trust in data at national or European level than at local or school level, depending on the general level of quality assurance in a country – in some countries the amount of data and its use are impressive indeed. The data that Eurostat provides is important to all countries, though there are complaints that the data is sometimes too old to be relevant anymore.

In terms of relevance, indicator 5 (placement in VET programmes) is mentioned the most in the questionnaire, closely followed by indicators 4 (completion in VET programmes), 6 (utilisation of acquired skills) and 9 (mechanisms to identify training needs in the labour market). Less mentioned are indicators 3 (participation in VET-programmes) and 10 (schemes to promote better access to VET). There was one mention for 2 (investment in training of teachers and trainers), 7 (unemployment rate) and 8 (prevalence of vulnerable groups). Indicator 1 (relevance of QA systems for VET) was not mentioned. So there was not much agreement on relevance. Based on the discussion during the first day, this might have more to do with the clarity of the indicators than with a fundamental disagreement on relevance. However, it was found to be important to make a distinction between indicators that take an employers perspective and the others. There was also criticism that indicators that give an indication of what learners are experiencing are missing. This criticism would be strengthened later in the programme. That the national context is important for the interpretation of indicators and its use became more and more transparent during the PLA.

There is this joke about a couple who, late at night, find a drunken man crawling under a lantern post. 'What are you doing?', they ask. 'Looking for my car keys', he mumbles in answer. 'But your car is over there', they point out. 'Yeah, but here's the light'. This 'lantern post dilemma' shows that indicators that are easy to measure are not always the most relevant. This dilemma does not pass the EQARF indicators by.

Coming to the issue of measurability, there was one that stood out in terms of being hard to measure: indicator 6 (utilisation of acquired skills). Evidence of the lantern post dilemma comes especially with indicator 5 (placement in VET programmes), found to be the most relevant of indicators. Also mentioned as hard to measure are 8 (prevalence of vulnerable groups) and 9 (mechanisms to identify training needs in the labour market). All others are mentioned once or not at all. This leads to the conclusion that EQARF-indicators are relevant, but challenging, most of all because it challenges to measure things in outcome terms. It was resolved that the PLA would not go into too much detail when it comes to the

technique of measuring indicators, as this is more for the theme groups, but it was important to note that this outcome perspective and the difficulties with measuring could affect the impact of EQARF.

No answer to the question of preventing bureaucracy

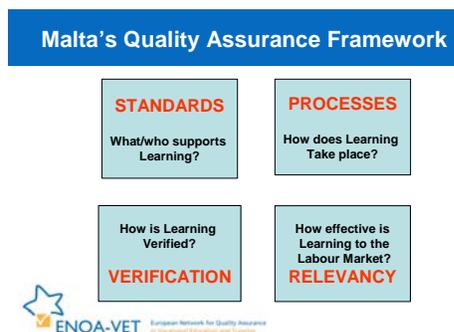
The questionnaire ended with a question on how to prevent unnecessary bureaucracy. Apart from the suggestion to share data, no real answer was there, or in the discussion later on. Words were used like ‘problem’, ‘difficult’, ‘challenge’. Granted that there is no easy way to prevent too much bureaucracy, it is worrying that so little came up by way of solution, as it is known that quality assurance in general, and the use of indicators in particular, can degenerate into too much bureaucracy. Something to reflect – and act - upon.

3.3 Lessons from Malta, lessons in Malta

Hosted on the first day by the Institute for Tourism Studies (ITS), where the great lunch we were served was also the object of an exam for the students, the PLA started with clear statements by Dr. James Calleja of MQC and of Mr. Reginald Abela of ITS. Trying to be brief, here are the highlights of the site visit there and on other locations. Where relevant Q&A’s from the lively discussions are incorporated. The general impression was that the people involved with (quality assurance in) VET in Malta, though diverse in function and background operate like a team. Their commitment to quality was clear and ongoing. As an expression of this, after the PLA Dr. Calleja proposed to all participants to join in the ‘Malta EQARF Network’ to promote good quality assurance in VET.

MQC: aiming for learning outcomes

In addition to general comments on the European quality assurance process, Dr. James Calleja described the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) for Lifelong Learning and explained the referencing process of the MQF to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) . The process consists of 10 overarching principles including: an 8 level system which



captures the level descriptors of the EQF and the QF-EHEA; a credit system which values all learning including contact hours, self-study and assessment and which is used across the framework; learning outcomes qualifications; the validation of informal and non-formal learning especially in the first three levels of the framework. The key competences at MQF level 3 should be a pre-requisite for Further and Higher Education; the qualifications that fit in Levels 4 and 5; that the MQF has one Higher Education made up of academic and vocational degrees; and that a protocol is an official agreement between MQC and the education

and training providers on the MQF and EQF level of their qualifications. In that way it clarifies learning pathways, progression and level ratings. In a model:

In this, a relationship is built between Qualifications Frameworks (QF) and Quality Assurance (QA). QF is a classification device for QA as it spells out the market and the intrinsic value of a classification, and it is also the meeting point of standards and structures managed by key stakeholders. As such it is a referencing process defined in terms of *learning outcomes*. For all this there is a need to develop ‘learning pathways’, to have coherence with levels outside VET in national reform policies and a stronger base for international co-operation. QA/QF can add value to qualifications if there is consistency, transparency, currency and portability. Dr Calleja described how Malta’s Quality Assurance Framework is governed by four principles: the standards to support learning, the process and the relevancy through the provision of learning outcomes qualifications that address labour market needs and a

verification mechanism that safeguards against “window-dressing”. There was a debate on the use of this term as Quality Assurance should actually yield positive results and improvement and not something which is perceived as a theoretical issue.

ITS: raising standards

Mr Reginald Abela, the Executive Chairman of the Institute for Tourism Studies (ITS), followed up the general discussion on the state of play with his view on the state of play of quality assurance in VET in Malta. In terms of the EQARF: he focussed on indicator 9: industry driven qualifications, and its application for Malta’s crucial tourism sector. He explained how ITS is active on three fronts namely: ITS programmes whereby knowledge, skills and competences are outlined for each module and level-rated with the Malta Qualifications Framework; research centre and publications to provoke thought and discussion. Lecturers have first hand experience in the industry and are encouraged to participate in Erasmus programmes to work and teach abroad and return with a baggage of experience to transfer to the students. Although ITS always aimed for excellence ISO certification shows the strong commitment to quality management. In essence Mr. Abela described the key role of quality assurance in significantly raising the standards of the education and getting recognition for that abroad. Perhaps a factor in this approach has been the involvement of people from abroad in the process of quality assurance. As far as content is concerned, they for instance do assessments to see where knowledge and skills are missing. Mr. Abela did broaden the focus in his lecture by stating that not just the classic aspects are important, but also how you deal with the general development of a pupil and how you promote good citizenship.

MCAST: leverage through the training of teachers

The clearest example of the relation between an indicator and the practice of VET was the visit to The Malta College of Arts Science and Technology (MCAST), as presented by Mr. Anthony Saliba, Deputy Principal MCAST. The training of teachers and trainers was the chosen means of improving the quality of VET as provided by the college. This clear focus on teacher training got impressive results, with added ESF-funding as an incentive to do even more. ESF funding supports teachers’ placements at the work place in Germany. This project also provides teacher training and mentoring during the introduction and provision of Higher Education degrees in four of ten MCAST’s institutes. Mr Saliba emphasised that the latest collective agreement links teacher training with salary and career progression. Although training is voluntary, this incentive proved to be a successful measure and translated itself in a higher percentage of teachers committed to continuous professional development. Quality assurance through an approval process, monitoring and independent assessment gave a clear foundation to it all. MCAST was a prima example of the leverage the focus on this indicator of teacher training can have for the quality and quality assurance of VET. Teacher training is directly linked with investing in students

ETC: getting results in the working place

Represented by Mr. Joseph Cutajar, Senior Manager Training Division of the Employment and Training Corporation (ETC), the focus shifted to other elements and indicators of VET. ETC is a government entity that has the legal obligation to match the individuals who are seeking employment and the needs of the employers seeking employees. Not altogether surprising, these were more output and outcome-oriented than that of learning institutes like ITS and MCAST. The talk this time had more to do with indicators like unemployment schemes to promote better access for the unemployed and vulnerable groups to VET, and the destination of trainees six months after training (Indicators 3, 4, 7 and 10). Through his presentation, Mr. Cutajar made clear that there are many schemes and activities going on, closely followed and monitored and, for the trainee, hopefully concluded by certification. The real driver for change may be the close interaction with all parties involved, not forgetting the trainees themselves. Through the intervention of steering committees including ETC, representatives of VET providers and employers, they design VET programmes, define the

entry level requirements and assessment criteria. This may or may not be easier to do in a relatively small country like Malta, but the point of a need for concerted action was made.

MQC: checking results

Before starting the final round of discussion, Ms. Doris Mangion, Senior Manager Standards and Qualifications of the Malta Qualifications Council (MQC), gave a forceful presentation of how MQC worked at learning outcomes through qualifications and occupational standards. She described how education and training providers bind themselves through an agreement with MQC to follow the principles which constitute the MQF such as learning outcomes, Quality Assurance, valuing all learning including the validation of informal and non-formal learning, follow a credit system based on the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS), whereby 1 credit consists of 25 hours of total learning, assessment methods and demand-driven qualifications.

The Learning Outcomes paradigm promoted by the European Qualifications Framework necessitates national reform and leads to a closer relationship between the European countries' qualifications systems. Then she proceeded to describe the added value of learning outcomes qualifications such as the emphasis on employability and therefore on the need for a learner to have knowledge, skills, and competences. These have to be constantly updated and to reflect the needs of the labour market, thus there must be an ongoing dialogue with stakeholders. All in all, the presentation was a transparent way of showing how EQARF could work for us.

So, time for a concluding debate among all participants.

3.4 A carousel of conclusions

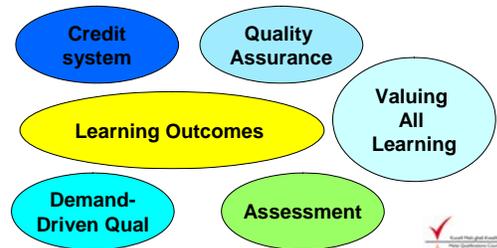
During the PLA there was a continuous exchange of views. This reached a peak at the end of a programme, also because of the use of a 'carousel' method in which the participants exchanged views around four central themes of the visit. These themes were:

- use of indicators
- tools and support of quality assurance
- implementation of quality assurance on school and local level
- implementation of quality assurance on the national and European level

The Carousel is a brainstorming method in which the participants divide themselves over four flip-over, each flip-over with a theme. In the first round there is a brainstorm to gather as much as ideas as possible around the theme. After that, the participants move on to the next flip-over, leaving one person standing to explain what's on the flip-over to the newcomers. In the second round the ideas on the flip-over are structured and new ideas are added, the best one on top. In the third round people move to the next flip-over with a mission to challenge what they will find. The person standing with the flip-over defends what is there. In the fourth and final round the participants look at all flip-overs and indicate priorities.

Education and Training Providers agree on:

The principles behind the MQF:



- *Use of indicators: indicating the use of indicators*

The issue that generated most discussion in the carousel was the theme of indicators. It ultimately resulted in just a few statements, but they did represent some sharp thinking and talking. The main task is to set out a timeframe for the specification of indicators at the national level. For this an operational plan should be formulated. The timeframe should lead to a clear commitment, with a dissemination of targets with a view towards implementation. The use of indicators should be prioritised. To this was added: on a voluntary basis. A compendium of what is being done at EU-level should be published in order to promote mutual learning. Coming to the content of the indicators, there is a clear wish to have an assessment of trainers by trainees. Added to this, there was a proposal to evaluate competences of trainers by independent juries. There was also attention to the motivation of the enterprise to accept trainees and the motivation of candidates to participate in training actions. The rotation of trainees in enterprises and the relation of the trainers with their sector were also thought relevant with a view towards better indicators. There were also conditions: indicators should be used for important things only. Not everything that can be measured should be measured and we should all be aware that 'indicators only indicate'; they do not automatically explain themselves.

- *Tools and support of quality assurance*

More than any specific tool, we need a culture of quality assurance. And when it comes to instruments, we want 'KISS-tools'; keep it simple, stupid! At the same time, it was stressed that there is a need for guidance when it comes to implementation. Training is useful for that, just like the availability of good practices and other good communication tools. The use of these instruments should have the support of central government such as a strong Vocational Training Act.

- *Implementation of quality assurance on schools and local level: paradox rules*

A need for clear objectives at the institutional level is paramount in the eyes of the participants, closely matched to national objectives and should lead to clear dissemination of information. The paradox is that 'adaptation to local needs', in combination with monitoring also scores high for the participants. Looking for the best of both worlds, self-evaluation and competition between schools are also advocated, in combination with regulatory efforts. At the same time it is said that the importance of the involvement of social partners is overstated and that they often do not represent the business community. Let's face it: looking back, the result of this theme shows that, more than anything else, paradox rules.

- *Implementation of quality assurance on the national and European level*

Top of the list is the statement that EQARF should be used to support national systems, with ENQA-VET in a supporting role. In order to achieve this it is necessary to get commitment from stakeholders. This could be done by providing incentives, recognition of successful providers and the publication of clear guidelines. The need to legislate is also on this list of actions. The support of EQARF could be strengthened by the promotion of relevant networks and a focus on beneficiaries with their different needs.

The results of the theme discussions – with sometimes clear and significant, but also with rather abstract or even paradoxal results – led to a plenary discussion that one participant would describe as 'more a brainstorm than a debate'. The intent to get consensus and clarity was clear with all participants, but how to reconcile that with obvious differences in the development and peculiarities of the states where the participants come from?

At this point the expert got back to the pyramid he showed when discussing the state of the art at the beginning of the PLA (page 6). It became more and more obvious that a significant minority of the countries represented at Malta believe they should be aiming for an integral approach, meaning a choice for self-evaluation in combination with peer reviews. This suggests not only much autonomy on the part of the VET-institutes, but also I believe that the

national systems are sufficiently advanced for that – in fact, in many ways beyond what EQARF is asking. Whether this is true or not, it makes for a different approach than the countries who expect a real impulse from a European framework to raise standards, leading for instance to a better case for a legal framework for (the quality of) VET. For those countries, getting the basic quality right is key. Even if you agree – perhaps; most of all when you agree - on the principles that the European efforts aimed at improving quality in VET embody, you will still be caught off guard every time when you get to talk about specifics. Certainly when it comes down to a choice of top-down or bottom-up approaches the question of voluntarism is a divisive one. For that reason and others it might make sense to differentiate between different levels of ambition in quality assurance. The ambition of each country dictates the choice. A condition for that is a (self-) assessment of the level of ambition for each country and a way of following progress.

At a certain moment in the debate, just before or after participants started repeating themselves out of sheer dogged commitment, Dr. Calleja did the helpful suggestion that all participants would write down three major conclusions from the PLA for themselves. After that, the conclusions were collected by the expert. There was quite a spread in the conclusions and the way they were formulated, but some lines could easily be drawn. This then is the list of main conclusions:

- Fit to national circumstances (contextualisation)
 - co-operate at national and European level
 - make added value visible
 - focus on beneficiaries
- Establish a quality culture
 - work on common language
 - have a positive approach
 - prioritise and act
 - make quality assurance of VET transparent
- Communicate:
 - make it user friendly and simple
 - help to digest information
 - do not change the message
 - brief policy officials
 - communicate with stakeholders

This list sums it all up. Yet at the same time it did not satisfy us all. Could we not have gone deeper? For instance, there was no breakthrough at the PLA when it came to the issue of a voluntary approach or not. Dr. Calleja made a strong plea for a common effort to start working on the elements of EQARF. This plea was not denied, but it was also clear that participants wanted to get back to base to see what could be used from this intensive PLA. Thanking the hosts for a job very well done, we said goodbye and went our separate ways. The expert promised to draw some conclusions when writing his report.

4. PROCESS

When it comes to the process of this PLA, much has already been said. A questionnaire provided by MQC showed that the participants were overall very happy with the PLA, even though in some cases not all expectations were met. The most content driven remark was that not enough attention was paid to the definition aspect of indicators (this was referred to the thematic group that deals with this, but even so the criticism is to the point). The official post-PLA questionnaire has not yet been distributed. In order to avoid evaluation fatigue, it was suggested by the expert to ENQA-VET to send this formal evaluation after the report has been published so that the participants can comment on this as well. The result of this evaluation will be in a final version of the report.

On the impact on policy of this PLA

ENQA-VET asks each expert to predict what the impact of the PLA at European, national, local and system level could be. Well, who knows? But if the discussions are any standard by which to measure such a broad question, it should have at least some impact.

Peer learning is always a good thing and we all worked hard at creating an environment for an exchange of experiences. Still, it is the impression of the expert, that many who came to the PLA were most of all there in order to exchange views on EQARF and the indicators, or to learn where they are heading, and only secondly there in order to hear best or worst practices. This does not need to be a bad thing, but it might have been better if some of the participants would have joined the debate in the thematic groups, or that others should have waited until there are trainings in the EQARF framework. As it was, we made the most of it and more, also spurred on by our eloquent hosts. The policy recommendations coming from this PLA should therefore be read not just as a report of the impact of an existing quality approach on VET as demonstrated by Maltese institutes, but as so many shots across the bow for those who are or will be responsible for the further development and implementation of quality assurance in VET. In the history of Malta many shots across the bow have been fired - and more. It was therefore a fitting place for this Peer Learning Activity.

5. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude:

Quality assurance in VET is a major theme. This PLA was meant to exchange experiences on the impact of the Common Quality Assurance Framework. In part it has done so, by looking at the forceful way in which quality assurance has been taken up in Malta and by listening to the examples of all participants. But in most ways, this PLA was about the next phase in quality assurance, through EQARF.

On EQARF

EQARF is the next big step, and we welcome it and want to support it, though much still needs to be done in order to turn it into a consistent and viable whole. There are many questions around the working of EQARF and we see imbalances and tensions:

- between more qualitative and more quantitative forms of quality assurance
- between descriptors and indicators
- between a voluntary and a non-voluntary approach
- between indicators relevant to schools and those relevant to social partners

On the impact and use of indicators:

- the definitions of the present indicators are not as clear as they can be
- indicators that are most relevant are not always the easiest to measure
- when using an indicator, focus is important. We saw that great leverage can be obtained through a determined effort to pursue a specific result along a single indicator
- indicators should most of all be aimed at learning outcomes
- some indicators are curiously missing. Most of all indicators generating feedback from trainees
- there is no strategy or even awareness when it comes to preventing bureaucracy

On the implementation of EQARF:

- self-evaluation in combination with peer review is the preferred method of quality assurance, but in most countries there is still a way to go
- the best method is in fact dependent upon the specific context and different expectations. There is no 'one size fits all'
- this could mean that in some countries EQARF should be built into the legal framework of the country and in others not
- exchange of best practices remains important

On communication:

- there is a great need to be informed on EQARF and its consequences
- already there is a demand for training
- keep on involving all stakeholders with a clear and consistent approach

**The Impact of Common Quality Assurance Framework
ENQA-VET PLA, Malta, 26th- 27th May 2009
Hosted by the Malta Qualifications Council (MQC)**

Day 1: Tuesday 26th May 2009

- 09.00 Welcome and Introductions
- 09.15 Qualifications Frameworks establish Quality Assurance
Dr James Calleja, Chief Executive, Malta Qualifications Council (MQC)
- 10.00 Analysis of the Questionnaires and the ENQA-VET Framework
Chaired by Mr Peter Noordhoek, ENQA VET PLA Expert
- 10.20 Discussion on the 10 indicators and their relevance to:
- employability;
 - making VET attractive;
 - social inclusion;
 - skills needs;
 - knowledge society
- 12.00 Lunch at the Institute for Tourism Studies (ITS) prepared and served by students
- 13.30 QA in VET: Industry driven Qualifications in the Tourism Sector (Indicator 9)
Mr Reginald Abela, Executive Chairman, Institute for Tourism Studies (ITS)
- 15.35 Teacher Training for the Improvement of Quality in VET (Indicator 2)
Mr Anthony Saliba, Deputy Principal, Malta College of Arts Science and Technology (MCAST)
- 17.15 Conclusion: assessment of the results of day 1

Day 2: Wednesday 27th May 2009

- 09.00 Summary of Day 1
- 09.45 Schemes to promote better access for the unemployed and vulnerable groups to VET, and destination of trainees six months after training (Indicators 3, 4, 7 and 10)
Mr. Joseph Cutajar, Senior Manager, Training Division, Employment and Training Corporation
- 10.45 Discussion on the success of such schemes at European Level
- 12.00 Lunch
- 12.45 Learning Outcomes based VET Qualifications and Occupational Standards (Indicator 9) Ms Doris Mangion, Senior Manager, Standards and Qualifications, Malta Qualifications Council (MQC)
- 13.10 Discussion on how the shift to learning outcomes qualifications to make the indicators more effective
- 14.30 Formulating Recommendations
Chaired by Mr Peter Noordhoek, ENQA VET PLA Expert
- 17.00 Conclusions

ANNEX II LIST OF PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the council on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training. Brussels, 2 April 2009. PE-CONS 3746/08.

Early lessons from implementing EQARF. Mr. Keith Brumfitt, rapporteur. Paper for 3rd meeting of the Thematic Group. ENQA-VET, 23 April 2009.

Qualifications frameworks establish Quality Assurance: the impact of the EQARF on VET. Dr. James Calleja, chief executive, Malta Qualifications Council (MQC). Presentation PLA Malta, May 26th 2009.

Quality Assurance in VET: Industry Driven Qualifications in the Tourism Sector. Mr. Reginald Abela, executive chairman, Institute for Tourism Studies (ITS). Presentation PLA Malta, 26th May 2009.

Teacher Training at MCAST (The Malta College of Art, Science and Technology). Mr. Anthony Saliba. Presentation PLA Malta, May 26th 2009.

Schemes to promote better access for the unemployed and vulnerable groups to VET, and outcomes from training. Mr. Joe Cutajar, senior manager, Training Services Division, Employment and Training Corporation (ETC). Presentation to PLA Malta, 26th May 2009.

Learning outcomes based VET Qualifications and Occupational Standards. Ms. Doris Mangion, senior manager, Malta Qualifications Council (MQC). Presentation PLA Malta, May 27th 2009.