

EQAVET POLICY NOTE

Strengthening the role of EQAVET national reference points

– Insights from the study of their work programmes developed within the framework of the funding provided under the Erasmus+ programme 2016-2017¹

INTRODUCTION – Enhancing the culture of quality assurance in VET: the work of EQAVET NRPs

19 EQAVET National Reference Points (NRPs) participated in the Erasmus+ Programme key activity 3 (support for policy reform) in 2016: AT, CY, CZ, DE, EL, FI, HR, HU, IE, IT, LT, LV, MT, NL, RO, SI, UK (NI), UK (WIs), and TR.²

The call provided funding for the activities of NRPs to support the implementation of the tasks assigned to them by the EQAVET Recommendation.

The main priorities of the call were: Complementing the current EQAVET Framework; Strengthening mutual cooperation among NRPs; and Deepening the culture of quality assurance of VET.

Who are the EQAVET NRPs?

The EQAVET Recommendation³ invites the Member States to establish a NRP that is linked to the structures and requirements of each Member State and that, in accordance with national practice, brings together stakeholders at national and regional levels, in order to ensure the effective implementation of the European Framework for Quality Assurance of Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) at national level.

According to the Recommendation, NRPs should:

- Keep a wide range of stakeholders informed about the activities of the framework network,
- Provide active support for the implementation of the work programme of the framework network,

¹ Based on the EQAVET Secretariat "Study of the work programme of the EQAVET National Reference Points" prepared by Giorgio Allulli, available at: <http://www.eqavet.eu/gns/library/studies.aspx>

² Austria (AT), Cyprus (CY), Czech Republic (CZ), Croatia (HR), Finland (FI), Germany (DE), Greece (EL), Hungary (HU), Ireland (IE), Italy (IT), Latvia (LT), Lithuania (LT), Malta (MT), Netherlands (NL), Romania (RO), Slovenia (SI), United Kingdom: Northern Ireland (NI) and Wales (WIs) and Turkey (TR).

³ EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND COUNCIL, 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 (2009/C 155/01).

- Take concrete initiatives to promote further development of the framework in the national context,
- Support self-evaluation as a complementary and effective means of quality assurance which allows us to measure success and identify areas for improvement in the implementation of the work programme of the framework network,
- Ensure that information is disseminated to stakeholders effectively.

An NRP has been established in each of the EU28 countries. Many of them are placed within a ministry. Others are situated in external bodies having a specific responsibility for quality assurance (QA). Usually the public agencies which host NRPs are those institutions responsible for VET development in general – i.e. they do not focus specifically on quality assurance and/or inspection. This means that NRPs are deeply embedded in their host organisation and do not have a separate budget and personnel do not only work on specific EQAVET tasks. In many instances they must also perform other duties connected to the mission of the host organisation.

Research has produced significant insights into the work of NRPs; indicating that almost all NRPs are performing information functions; but they are not always supporting providers to introduce or develop self-evaluation systems.⁴ In many instance, the work of the NRPs focuses on institutional, school-based provision (most of initial VET and part of continuing VET), with less visibility in work-based learning and non-formal provision.⁵

ANALYSIS – What was achieved by the funding of NRPs within the Erasmus+ Programme in 2016?

There is an indication that the work of NRPs ‘appears to be a helpful step towards the engagement in the implementation of EQAVET, but not necessarily a sufficient step to ensure active engagement’.⁶

The funding to NRPs from the Erasmus+ Programme encouraged the implementation of multiple activities focused on quality assurance of VET in countries participating in the call. These are:

Activities developed by NRPs

The most recurrent activities implemented were those connected with communication and information. These resulted in the development of policy recommendations and briefings, manuals and guidelines for providers and practitioners; and pilot activities, questionnaires, new instruments and tools; which were useful for the implementation of the EQAVET Recommendation in the countries. Almost all NRPs used the funding to reinforce links and cooperation with other NRPs.

⁴ The results of the EQAVET Secretariat survey 2013-2014 and 2016 on the implementation of EQAVET in the EU-28.

⁵ European Commission, Report to the European Parliament and the Council on the implementation of the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of EQAVET, Brussels, 28.1.2014, COM(2014) 30 final

⁶ The external evaluation of EQAVET commissioned by the EU Commission undertaken by ICF-GHK, 2013. http://www.eqavet.eu/Libraries/2013_Publications/External_Evaluation_of_implementation_of_EQAVET_by_GHK_-_Final_report_12_July_2013.sflb.ashx?download=true

Table 1 - Activities carried out by National Reference Points

ACTIVITY	NRP	NO. OF PROJECTS
Communication and dissemination		
Implementation of the website, Internet platform	RO, IE, CZ, AT, DE, IT, TR, HU, CY, UK(NI), HR, LT, MT, FI, NL, EL, LV, SI	18
Information and promotional material, leaflets, other materials	RO, AT, NL, CZ, EL, IT, IE, DE, FI, LV, TR, HU, SI, HR, CY, UK(NI), MT	17
National/International conference	LT, DE, IT, EL, TR, SI, CY, RO	8
Implementation of national networks	MT, CZ, EL, IT, TR, IE, HU	7
Newsletter	AT, RO, NL, SI, CZ, IE, DE	7
Teachers, trainers and VET providers training on QA	AT, MT, HU, IE, UK (NI), HR	6
Study and analysis		
Seminars, round tables, expert meetings, working groups, workshops,	AT, UK (NI), IE, EL, LT, HU, NL, SI, FI, LV, CZ, TR	12
Reports, surveys, studies	EL, NL, DE, IE, TR, FI, CZ, HR, UK(WIs)	8
Inventories of good practices	RO, SI, HR	3
Development of materials		
Policy recommendations and briefings, guidelines for providers and practitioners, manuals	RO, LV, NL, EL, SI, MT, TR, IE, HU, FI, HR, AT	12
Pilot activities, new instruments, questionnaires and other tools	AT, LT, CZ, EL, LV, HU, FI, NL, CY	9
Links and Cooperation with other NRPs		
Links and Cooperation with other NRPs, study visits	AT, CZ, DE, NL, LT, IE, SI, EL, IT, FI, HR, RO, TR, LV, HU, CY, UK (WIs)	17

Source: Erasmus+ KA3 — Support to the activities of the EQAVET National Reference Points (NRP). Compendium 2016. https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/library/compendium-eqavet-2016_en

The topic most frequently addressed by the NRPs was the implementation of the EQAVET Framework; in particular working on self-evaluation, evaluation and review phases; and the QA of work-based learning.

Table 2 - Topics addressed by the Projects

TOPIC	NRP	NO. OF PROJECTS
Self-evaluation, internal QA	FI, IE, CZ, LV, MT, SI, HR	7
Evaluation and review phases of the QA cycle, continuous improvement	LT, IE, FI, MT HU, HR, IT	7
Quality management, quality culture, Implementation of quality framework, adapt the EQAVET+ Framework	AT, FI, NL, SI, UK(NI), MT	6
National approach, national framework for quality assurance	IT, LV, CY, HU, SI, MT	6
Indicators and data collection	LV, IE, HU, SI	4
External quality assurance, auditing, evaluation	MT, CZ, TR	3
QA of WBL	CZ, DE, HR, SI, TR, EL, FI, UK(WIs)	8
Cooperation between school and companies	CZ	1
Integration other European tools (EQF, ECVET, Euroguidance, Europass, Eures, Eurodesk)	EL, CZ, HU, IT	4
Skills and qualifications, revision of qualifications and assessment standards, recognition of LO based on the EQF and ECVET	CZ, EL, FI, UK(WIs)	4
Visibility and awareness of VET and QA, make VET more attractive	RO, IE	2
Peer Review	IT, UK(NI)	2
Transparency of QA in VET	DE	1

Source: Final Projects' Reports

Only four projects organised specific activities or actions in order to address CVET; although many NRPs developed actions relevant to both IVET and CVET:

Table 3 - Working Area of NRPs

NRP	Relevant to IVET	Relevant to CVET	Relevant to BOTH (without differentiations)
RO	X		
HR	X		
AT	X		
TR	X		
DE	X		
CZ	X	X	
IT	X	X	
HU	X	X	
UK (Wales)	X	X	
EL			X
IE			X
FI			X
SI			X
NL			X
LT			X
UK (NI)			X
LV			X
MT			X
CY			X

Enhancing the role of NRPs - What was achieved?

The funding of Erasmus+ Programme for NRPs:

- Consolidated the role and the image of the NRPs in the national context.
- Promoted dialogue and cooperation among a number of stakeholders at national level.
- Facilitated convergence between EQAVET and other European tools.
- Promoted the creation of international networks on the theme of quality assurance in VET.

On the other hand, it should be noted that:

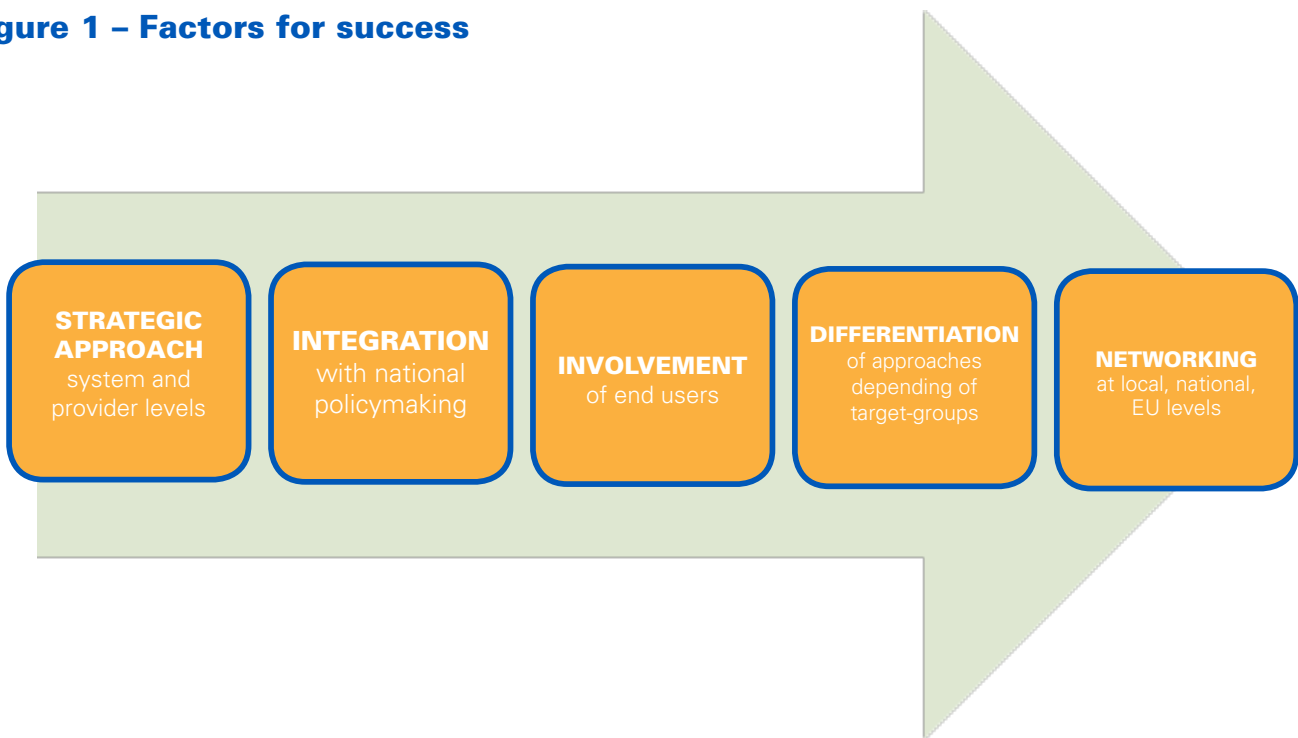
- Participation in the call was incomplete, not all Member States participated.
- Actions taken in relation to the implementation of EQAVET did not always exhibit clear connections with the policymaking process in the countries.
- Most projects focused on IVET and did not look at the needs and requirements of the CVET sector.

However the overall analysis confirms the value of this initiative: as it encouraged and facilitated activities that move forward the implementation of the EQAVET Recommendation; produced new knowledge and insights; and promoted dissemination and networking.

LESSONS LEARNED – WAYS FORWARD

The implementation of the projects by the 19 NRPs which participated in the funding in 2016, provides information on the key issues or strategic criteria that facilitate success:

Figure 1 – Factors for success



1. Strategic approach: performing the task assigned to the NRPs requires careful planning. It is necessary to keep in mind the goals to be achieved, the timespan, the resources available, constraints, possible partners, when the implementation of the EQAVET Recommendation is considered.

The strategic planning should be twofold:

- Top-down planning, i.e. addressed at national/regional stakeholders (policymakers, social partners, etc.) in order to build a common understanding of and engagement in the policymaking process and actions relevant to VET providers/companies,

- Bottom-up planning, i.e. addressed at practitioners, in order to elicit innovative methodologies and approaches at system level, based on real/concrete practice.

2. Integration: NRPs should be embedded within national and local policymaking processes, so that the dissemination of the EQAVET Recommendation becomes an integral part of national education and training policy. One way of achieving this objective could be by establishing, as part of the NRP governance, procedures that set up a board or steering committee which encompasses policymakers and the other stakeholders. This type of group could work on developing a plan for the implementation of the European Recommendation at system level or at VET provider/company level. The group could reflect on implementing initiatives and materials linked to the innovation of national education policies.

3. Involvement: it is advisable to involve the various stakeholders (social partners, associations of VET providers, etc.) and end-users when developing actions and materials. This enhances their awareness and ensures the suitability of the activities; while increasing ownership, which promotes the use and dissemination of the new principles and tools. This approach should also be kept in mind when organising teacher training activities, peer learning activities or other. There is a need to involve:

- as much as possible, associations of VET providers or representatives of other stakeholders which could act as multipliers. This ensures greater impact.
- teachers and learners in the production of materials because this ensures that the learning process is as active as possible.

4. Differentiation: in order to increase the effectiveness of NRP materials and proposals, it is necessary to adjust the various activities and initiatives to meet the needs of different target groups, adopting appropriate language for each – e.g. the challenges faced by a company when organising work-based learning are different from those faced by a school.

5. Networking: this is necessary at national level to set up local and national allies/partners (they may be stakeholders, experts, associations of VET providers or companies). These relationships ensure that the task of disseminating contents and methodologies is shared. At EU level, networking between NRPs facilitates mutual learning, sharing of experience, practices, tips or transfer of actions; which in many cases serves as a source which leads to new actions or identifies risks to be avoided at national level.

These five issues need to be taken into account at national level when assessing the performance of the NRPs. However, it is worth noting that NRPs need to be aware that raising awareness of VET and developing a quality assurance culture at different levels is a long-term ambition which will provide long-term returns. *It is a slow process rather than an epiphany.*

Challenges

The NRPs reported three main challenges when developing their activities:

1. The implementation of EQAVET in a holistic manner, i.e. by implementing all its components. Because this is a challenge, EQAVET users are partially implementing EQAVET. The material and tools developed by the Network are not always helpful as they address the holistic nature of the Framework, rather than focus on very concrete issues that practitioners face on a day-to-day basis.
2. The adaptation of the EQAVET indicators at national level for the use of VET providers.
3. The convergence of the various EU transparency instruments.

Monitoring and evaluating the project and its impact

Given the short time scale of the projects developed, it is difficult to detect real and observable impacts and changes in behaviour among the final beneficiaries of the projects: i.e. VET providers, companies, teachers.

Many projects reported an increase of awareness or knowledge of EQAVET among providers and stakeholders. However quantitative information to support this assumption is not available. It is even more difficult to detect a change in the efficiency and effectiveness of the teaching and learning processes in VET as a result of the actions undertaken by the projects.

It is advisable that this information be requested in future calls. A good example of this is illustrated by the Romanian NRP, which focused its activity on increasing public awareness of opportunities offered by VET, and found that the number of pupils enrolling in VET had increased substantially since the activity was initiated.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The proposal contained in the EQAVET Recommendation of establishing a NRP in each participating country represented a strategic innovation. The objective was to ensure the promotion and implementation of EQAVET in-line with national practices and legislation; and by disseminating content and objectives, and involving national stakeholders.

Based on the information now available on the implementation of EQAVET, we have learned that limitation of resources has curtailed the actions and possibilities of the NRPs. Therefore, the decision of the European Commission to provide financial support to the NRPs, through the Erasmus+ Programme, has been a positive step forward.

The table below provides a synthesis of the main strengths and weaknesses which the Study has identified in the 2016 call and the projects carried out by the NRPs:

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Erasmus+ grant supported the activity of the NRPs, and ensured the promotion and implementation of activities and preparation of materials. Most of the actions developed by the NRPs are significant and relevant for implementing the EQAVET Recommendation in the national context. • The activities carried out have consolidated the role and the image of the NRPs in the national context. • The actions undertaken have promoted dialogue and cooperation among a number of stakeholders involved at national level. • These facilitated steps towards greater convergence with other European tools, i.e. Euroguidance, EQF, Europass, Eures, Eurodesk. • The projects have facilitated national and international cooperation on the theme of quality assurance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The participation in the call was incomplete; not all EU Member States participated. • The CVET sector was not always addressed • The evaluation of outcomes and impact was mainly restricted to the reporting of activities undertaken, material produced or gathering the satisfaction levels of people involved in the activities. Many projects reported an increase of awareness or knowledge of EQAVET by VET providers and stakeholders. However, quantitative information on which to base this outcome is very limited • The links between the actions undertaken on EQAVET and the policymaking processes are not always evident.

Despite these weaknesses, the overall analysis indicates that the Erasmus+ grant is of great value and NRPs benefited from it by implementing activities that increased the knowledge, the dissemination and the implementation of the EQAVET Recommendation.

At European level, these findings demonstrate that will be important to continue financing the activity of NRPs through the Erasmus+ programme, since NRPs represent a strategic instrument for the implementation of the EQAVET Recommendation in each Member State. Clearly focused actions that can address work-based learning and CVET also need to be supported given their policy priority.

There is also a need to stimulate the participation of all NRPs, particularly those who have not yet taken part in the Erasmus+ calls. The work of the EQAVET Network could support these countries by providing individualised support on request or by suggesting appropriate topics in line with national priorities. It is important that the experience and lessons learnt from those NRPs that have already participated are shared.

However, the individualised support provided by the Erasmus+ programme to NRPs does not replace the activities undertaken by the EQAVET Network. Both levels of work are complementary and provide the possibility of increasing capacity of the NRPS to fulfil their mandates at national level while ensuring that the EQAVET Network continues to be a Europe wide reference for the implementation of the Recommendation.