

## INTRODUCTION

1. This Peer Learning Activity (PLA) will give participants the opportunity to reflect on *Higher Vocational Education and Training and the role of quality assurance*. During the PLA most of the available time will be dedicated to discussion prompted by short presentations from three Member States: Austria, Cyprus and Ireland; and from UEAPME (European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises), which recently conducted a project on an EU approach to quality assurance in higher VET. This PLA also includes a 'site visit' linked to the topic of the PLA, organised by the host country and integrated into the programme. The site visit will enable direct engagement with staff and learners and contribute to a comprehensive reflection on how quality assurance is used in the institution in the provision of higher VET (HiVET).
2. The PLA has been organised by the EQAVET Secretariat, in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Culture in Cyprus.

## SOME CONTEXT FACTORS

3. In December 2010, the European ministers for vocational education and training, the European social partners and the European Commission met in Bruges to review the strategic approach and priorities of the Copenhagen process for 2011-2020 and agreed to 'develop or maintain post-secondary or higher VET at EQF level 5 or higher, as appropriate, and contribute to achieving the EU headline target of 40% with tertiary or equivalent education'<sup>1</sup>.
4. The OECD, in its report *Skills Beyond School* (2014)<sup>2</sup>, argued also that post-secondary vocational education is a largely 'hidden world' but is of key importance to the development of systems that are able to respond to the increasing demand for higher level technical and professional skills (defined as ISCED level 5 and above)'.<sup>3</sup>
5. The European Commission's *New Skills Agenda for Europe*<sup>3</sup> (2016) has acknowledged that 'Higher level VET provision is steadily expanding and is valued by both learners and employers for providing skills needed on the labour market. Such developments need to be further encouraged and be appropriately integrated into the qualification frameworks and systems'.
6. In 2016, this trend was highlighted in a study on higher vocational education and training in the EU<sup>4</sup> commissioned by the Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, which argued:

<sup>1</sup> *The Bruges Communiqué on enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training for the period 2011-2020*

[http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education\\_culture/repository/education/policy/vocational-policy/doc/brugescom\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/policy/vocational-policy/doc/brugescom_en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> OECD (2014). *Skills Beyond School: Synthesis Report, OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training*. Paris: OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264214682-en>

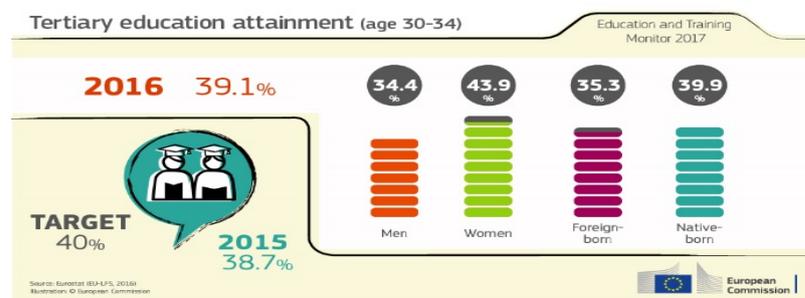
<sup>3</sup> European Commission (2016). Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee of the Regions. *A New Skills Agenda for Europe*. Working together to strengthen human capital, employability and competitiveness. COM/2016/0381 Final.

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0381&from=EN>

<sup>4</sup> European Commission (2016). *Study on higher vocational education and training in the EU*. Final report. <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/cf35147d-0a60-11e7-8a35-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

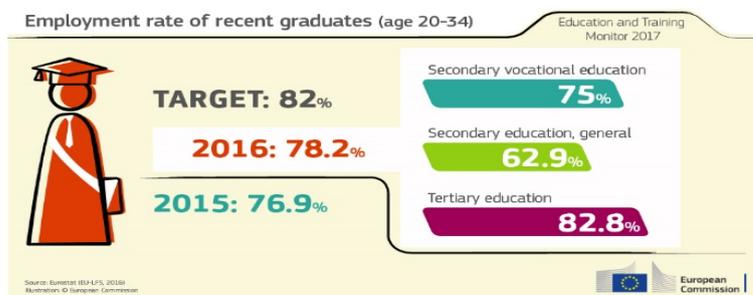
‘Although not all countries have already implemented their NQF and referenced their national qualifications levels to EQF levels, research clearly shows that most countries link qualifications in the area of higher VET to EQF 5. However there are also higher VET qualifications linked to EQF levels 6 up to 8’.

- The *Education and Training Monitor 2017*<sup>5</sup>, reporting on the EU targets in education and training for 2020, shed some light on the progress of education and training systems across Europe. In relation to tertiary educational attainment, the key finding is that higher educational attainment has progressed significantly since 2010, bringing Europe very close to the target of 40% (see below).



Source: Monitor2017-infographics

- However, as stated in the report (page 63) ‘the distribution of students by level of qualification varies considerably between Member States. In half of the Member States a significant proportion of their population with tertiary education attainment qualified with short professional degrees. The largest proportions of 30-34-year-olds with short-cycle degrees are in Sweden, Spain, Ireland, the UK, France and Austria, all of which have rates above 10%.
- As for the employment rate of recent graduates (age 20-34), the report highlights the following trends: ‘The employment rates of recent graduates have improved in most of the EU. Higher education offers the best employability. Despite relatively good labour market outcomes for VET, the number of students enrolling in initial VET has been falling in most countries since 2013. Initial VET may be less attractive compared to the tertiary education due to a less positive image of occupations it leads to’.



Source: Monitor2017-infographics

- In view of this information, it is likely that HiVET has become a relevant policy issue and is perceived to be developing into a subsystem in the European VET landscape. It is therefore a timely moment to further explore QA processes in HiVET, particularly the use of the EQAVET Framework in higher VET.

## WHAT IS HIGHER VET (HiVET)?

- In the past twenty years, the scope and rationale of both VET and higher education have been changing both at Member State and EU level, particularly through the introduction in the 1990s of the concept of lifelong learning. Traditionally, higher education and VET institutions would fall within the definition of ‘single sphere’ institutions which are ‘characterised by high specialisation and work

<sup>6</sup> Ranga, M. and Etzkowitz, H. (nd) *Triple Helix Systems: An Analytical Framework for Innovation Policy and Practice in the Knowledge Society*

centralisation, rigid and inertial institutional boundaries, low interaction with entities of another institutional sphere, etc.’<sup>6</sup>. This is changing.

12. There is no single agreed definition of what constitutes post-secondary or higher vocational education and training. Currently there is a ‘hybridisation’ of vocational education and training and higher education, defined by Graz (2013)<sup>7</sup> as ‘the integration of institutional elements from VET and HE into the structure and practices of a particular organisational form’.
13. In the OECD’s report *Skills Beyond School*<sup>8</sup> ‘post-secondary vocational education and training includes the programmes and qualifications that prepare students for particular occupations or careers that are beyond upper secondary level, and that would normally require at least six months full-time preparation. These programmes provide higher-level, job-specific training for young school leavers; upskilling for working adults in mid-career; second chances for working adults who dropped out of earlier education; and opportunities for career shifts or to support a return to the labour market’.
14. On the other hand, the *International Standard Classification of Education ISCED 2011*<sup>9</sup> (paragraph 53) ‘does not yet define academic and professional more precisely for higher ISCED levels, but opens up the possibility of distinguishing academic and professional orientations in the future, based, for example, on fields of education. At ISCED level 5, the definitions of general and vocational education will be used until definitions of academic and professional have been developed’.
15. UNESCO defines TVET ‘as comprising education, training and skills development relating to a wide range of occupational fields, production, services and livelihoods. TVET, as part of lifelong learning, can take place at secondary, post-secondary and tertiary levels and includes work-based learning and continuing training and professional development, which may lead to qualifications<sup>10</sup>’.
16. The above mentioned study proposes two approaches to defining HiVET:
  - a) a broad definition: ‘all professional qualifications at EQF level 5 and above, including those covered by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This means mostly short cycle, Professional Bachelor and Master degrees as well as apprenticeships at these levels’;
  - b) a narrow definition, i.e. ‘only those professional qualifications that are fully outside the EHEA. This concerns both qualifications from the formal education and training system but also those that are awarded outside it’.
17. Additionally, a recent Cedefop’s research paper on the changing nature and role of VET (2017)<sup>11</sup>, argues that there are two main trajectories of current VET conceptions in Europe:
  - a) strengthening of VET points in the direction of VET as work-based training and expanding to new parts of the education and training system, in particular higher education;
  - b) diversification of VET points in the direction of VET as (part of) lifelong learning.
18. The considerations above suggest that HiVET has been developing both a) as part of an overall expansion of tertiary education in Europe since the late twentieth century as well as b) through the

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<sup>6</sup> Ranga, M. and Etzkowitz, H. (nd) *Triple Helix Systems: An Analytical Framework for Innovation Policy and Practice in the Knowledge Society*

[http://triplehelix.stanford.edu/images/Triple\\_Helix\\_Systems.pdf](http://triplehelix.stanford.edu/images/Triple_Helix_Systems.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> OECD (2014), *Skills Beyond School: Synthesis Report*, OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training, OECD Publishing.

<sup>8</sup> OECD (2014), *Skills Beyond School: Synthesis Report*, OECD Reviews of Vocational Education and Training, OECD Publishing.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264214682-en>

<sup>9</sup> UNESCO (2016) Recommendation concerning Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). Published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Paris, France

<sup>10</sup> UNESCO (2016) Recommendation concerning Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). Published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Paris, France

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0024/002451/245118M.pdf#page=3>

<sup>12</sup> COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (2017/C 189/03)

loosening of ties between institutions and degree types and the blurring of boundaries between higher education and VET. Researchers, however, underline the fact that there is no common understanding of what constitutes higher VET provision in either the EU member States or the European Union.

19. In any event, at European policy level, the development of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for lifelong learning (2008) provided evidence for an emerging new conception of the relationship between VET and higher education. Since 2008, Member States have also developed or are developing national qualifications frameworks based on learning outcomes and are relating these to the EQF through a 'referencing' process. The revised *Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning* (2017)<sup>12</sup> consolidates the EQF as a common reference framework of eight levels expressed as learning outcomes, serving as a translation device between different qualifications frameworks or systems and their levels.
20. As a concluding remark, and for the purpose of this PLA, we define HiVET as **VET that leads to qualifications that are at EQF level 5 and above; which are provided outside the higher education sector.**

## HOW IS QA ADDRESSED IN HiVET?

21. Quality assurance in VET is intended to ensure accountability and bring about improvement of all relevant stakeholders. Quality assurance in VET also serves multiple purposes such as enhancing learning and teaching and building trust among stakeholders throughout the VET system. Accordingly, quality assurance of VET, including HiVET, is needed to build trust in provision and qualifications among users, particularly students and employers, and to ensure continued credibility of qualifications. The public in general, namely employers, want to be assured that people designated as 'qualified' are competent to perform the roles and tasks of the different occupations or careers.
22. High performing VET providers implement quality assurance systems that use strong and systematic data collection on key indicators such as participation rates, feedback from employers on their satisfaction with VET graduates, feedback from learners on their satisfaction with acquired knowledge and skills, destination analysis of graduates. The EQAVET Framework attempts to respond to these requirements by recommending 'a quality assurance and improvement cycle of planning, implementation, evaluation/assessment and review/revision of VET, supported by common quality criteria, indicative descriptors and indicators'<sup>13</sup>.

- address the design of qualifications as well as application of the learning outcomes approach;
- ensure valid and reliable assessment according to agreed and transparent learning outcomes based standards and address the process of certification;
- consist of feedback mechanisms and procedures for continuous improvement;
- involve all relevant stakeholders at all stages of the process;
- be composed of consistent evaluation methods, associating self-assessment and external review;
- be an integral part of the internal management, including sub-contracted activities, of bodies issuing qualifications with an EQF level;
- be based on clear and measurable objectives, standards and guidelines;
- be supported by appropriate resources.

<sup>12</sup> COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 22 May 2017 on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (2017/C 189/03)

[http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615\(01\)&from=EN](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017H0615(01)&from=EN)

<sup>13</sup> 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 (Text with EEA relevance) (2009/C 155/01)

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2009:155:0001:0010:EN:PDF>

23. Both the EQAVET Framework and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) aim to support and strengthen the culture of quality assurance and improvement within VET. Quality assurance of VET qualifications is a shared responsibility among key stakeholders at all levels of the VET system. In relation to quality assurance principles for qualifications, that are part of national qualifications frameworks or systems referenced to the EQF, Annex 4 of the revised Recommendation specifies eight principles that are said to be ‘fully compatible with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area and with European Quality Assurance in VET (EQAVET)’.
24. However, European VET systems, including HiVET, vary immensely in how they are designed. As mentioned in the *Study on higher vocational education and training in the EU* ‘the programmes or qualifications which are **offered outside higher education**, the majority (more than 70 percent) have some kind of accreditation for programmes/qualifications in place. In many cases, the authority for accreditation lies with a relevant ministry. In some countries, accreditation bodies or qualifications bodies are responsible for programme/qualification accreditation<sup>14</sup>.
25. It is against this background that the PLA’s participants have been invited to discuss:
- General issues, e.g. how HiVET quality assurance is addressed in their respective countries; and how the EQAVET Framework can support their efforts?
  - How can quality assurance increase the attractiveness and relevance of HI VET?
  - How does quality assurance of HIVET contribute to ongoing labour market relevance of courses offered?
  - What are the specific needs of providers of HIVET in relation to quality assurance and how can VET systems support them?

## WORKING SESSIONS DURING THE PLA

### Day 1

On the first day of the PLA, there will be a discussion in small groups on whether current approaches to quality assurance in the provision of HiVET are effective and/or useful. Participants will be invited to discuss

- How can current approaches to quality assurance/improvement in higher VET increase the attractiveness and relevance of VET?
- In what way(s) can the EQAVET Framework support countries’ efforts (at system and provider level) to ensure quality of higher VET provision?

On the same day, PLA participants will have a guided tour of a local institution, and a structured conversation with management, teaching staff and students. The objective of the visit is to learn what overall quality assurance/improvement strategies for higher VET are in place and how they are implemented. A few questions will be agreed prior to the visit.

### Day 2

In the morning of the second day, there will be another discussion in small groups. The focus of the discussion will be on the enablers of, and barriers to, the implementation of quality assurance/improvement systems that meet both the expectations and needs of higher VET providers and key stakeholders. Participants are invited to discuss:

- What does the implementation of a QA system entail in practice for HiVET providers, in terms of their expectations and needs?
- How can HiVET providers ensure greater accountability to stakeholders, particularly learners and employers, in terms of relevance and quality of their provision?

## Follow up activity

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<sup>14</sup> For further information see pages 72-73

After the PLA in Cyprus, a short policy brief will be prepared and uploaded onto the EQAVET website. The policy brief will highlight the key issues and conclusions that emerge during participant discussions.