This policy brief has been prepared in order to share the results of an EQAVET Peer Learning Activity on involving teachers and trainers in the QA processes. Peer learning activities, organised within the EQAVET Network, 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**

**Self-assessment for work-based learning in line with EQAVET**

*Participating countries: AT, BE, BG, CZ, DE, EE, ES, FI, HU, IT, LV, MT, ME, PL, RO, SE, SK, SI, UK (Wales), the European Training Foundation (ETF) and the European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (UEAPME)*

**SUMMARY**

This policy note is based on the peer learning activity (PLA) held in Gothenburg on 27-28 March 2019. The PLA was part of the EQAVET 2018-20 work programme and was organised by the EQAVET Secretariat in collaboration with Skolverket, which hosts the Swedish National Reference Point for Quality Assurance in VET. The PLA was held on the premises of a multinational company (SKF) which owns its own VET school.

The PLA brought together colleagues from VET providers and those with a national or regional responsibility for VET policy from 18 countries. Many participants represented a Member State’s Quality Assurance National Reference Point (NRP) - these were established as part of the EQAVET Recommendation and have a central role in supporting the VET quality assurance arrangements in their system.

The PLA methodology used by EQAVET provides opportunities for participants to share their knowledge and experiences by using examples of practice and policy implementation. This provides a starting point to reflect on the shared challenges faced by education and training systems across the EU. This PLA looked at how VET systems set out expectations of self-assessment in work-based learning and how employers use self-assessment as part of their quality assurance process. The following analysis is based on participants’ reflections which were informed by presentations from Sweden, Slovakia, Italy and UK (Wales). A summary of each presentation is included in the Annex.

This policy brief is not a verbatim report: instead it is an analysis of the quality assurance issues which were considered important in an EQAVET context. It is intended to inform those who are thinking about how employers' use of self-assessment can contribute to the quality assurance of VET. A background paper for this PLA and other information is available on the EQAVET web-site at https://www.eqavet.eu/What-We-Do-peer-learning-activities

**POLICY CONTEXT**

The PLA focused on how:
- different approaches to self-assessment can be used to quality assure the work-based learning of upper secondary school students. These students are most likely to be taking an initial, full-time EQF Level 4 qualification;
- the EQAVET Framework can be used to support the quality assurance of work-based learning.

Within this context the PLA sought to take account of the range of approaches which are used to support work-based learning. The examples which were presented and discussed were based on the first two of the following models which are described in the European Commission’s Rethinking Education Communication:

1. alternance schemes or apprenticeships (often referred to dual systems) which are based on the integration of companies as training providers with VET schools or other education/training institutions;
2. school-based VET which includes on-the-job training in companies. On-the-job training typically cover internships, work placements or traineeships that are incorporated as a compulsory or optional element of VET programmes leading to formal education.

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qualifications;

3. integrated in a school-based programme through on-site laboratories, workshops, kitchens, restaurants, junior or practice firms, simulations or real business/industry project assignments. The aim is to create “real life” work environments, establish contacts and/or cooperation with companies or clients, and develop entrepreneurship competences.

Even though there were no examples of the third type of work-based learning, the discussions and policy conclusions can be seen as relevant to all types of provision. The background paper for the PLA² records that across Europe there are systems where the approach to self-assessment in work-based provision is identical to the approach used in school-based provision. However, this is not always the case as some systems choose to use a different approach to the quality assurance of school-based and work-based provision. When a policy decision has been made to have different approaches, a VET provider is much more likely to be working with employers/companies which have developed their own self-assessment system. In these situations employers’ approaches will be less formal, less likely to be documented, less likely to lead to formal reports and action plans, and more likely to be dependent on personal relationships between learners’ mentors/coaches and the learners.

DISCUSSION

The case studies presented at the activity illustrate a wide range of approaches to self-assessment: sometimes this is based on a legal expectation; a compulsory arrangement established by VET providers; a need to respond to external regulatory (inspection) requirements. However, there are many examples where decisions on how to organise self-assessment are made by individual employers; employers organisations (including Chambers); or in partnerships between employers and VET providers.

These different approaches illustrate that responsibility for quality assurance of work-based learning is distributed differently in Member States’ VET systems. The PLA participants’ experiences reflected these different approaches and responsibilities; however, there was agreement that in all systems the approach to quality assurance is strengthened when a partnership approach to the development and use of self-assessment underpins quality assurance.

These are some of the challenges associated with self-assessment in a work-based learning environment:

- the burden that self-assessment places on individual employers. For SMEs this can be a particularly difficult problem. In some systems there are intermediary organisations that help to support SMEs when they become involved in work-based training - and this support can include assistance with quality assurance;
- the connections between school-based and work-based provision. In some systems, VET providers are dependent on employers offering work experience or an apprenticeship to a learner. This dependence can make it difficult for a VET provider to insist that every employer uses a formal self-assessment method (or the same method);
- in many situations businesses use an industry-based quality assurance system such as EFQM or ISO and these systems have different approaches to self-assessment;
- in systems where individual VET providers (including school-based and work-based providers) collect different information and data on the quality and performance of their initial VET provision, it can be difficult to develop policies and reform at the system level. When there are unaligned data sets (e.g. when individual VET providers decide what data to collect and which indicators to use) it can be difficult to comment on the overall quality of provision and identify change which would be useful at the system level;
- in systems where the quality of VET depends both on school-based and work-based provision, it is important to be clear who has responsibility for self-assessment e.g. where work-based learning or work experience is based on goodwill and local connections, it can be difficult for VET schools to challenge their work-based learning partners;
- the level of unemployment in the economy also has an impact on the relationship between school-based and work-based providers - if the level of unemployment is low and businesses are finding it difficult to recruit suitable staff, they may be more responsive to requests for VET schools to use a particular quality assurance and self-assessment system. On the other hand, when it is hard for school-based VET providers to find suitable work-based training or work-experience for their learners, it is more difficult for VET schools to make quality assurance requests.

There were six additional features which needed to be considered:

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1. decisions on how (and whether) to include self-assessment within a quality assurance system are often dependent on financial costs. For employers a formal self-assessment system is expensive, requires formal structures and processes - and where employers have a choice, they are more likely to select systems which meet their needs and can be operated within the available financial resources;

2. the collection of data. Self-assessment systems rely on data collection and while for large VET providers it is possible to use anonymous data and identify trends, for individual employers the data they need is more qualitative and often depends on the effectiveness of personal relationships between mentors/trainers/coaches and trainees/learners. This requires a different set of data to be collected and it is often data that cannot be easily aggregated and measured over time;

3. self-assessment systems need to focus on assessing the quality of the training provided by the employer - rather than the work of the company/employer;

4. for many employers self-assessment focuses on ‘process quality’. This can conflict with the approach used by VET providers who are often heavily focused on the quality of the input or output of training;

5. there is a risk that employers who work in partnership with VET providers are being asked to provide too much data - sometimes greater clarity and a more streamlined data collection exercise can support employers’ engagement with self-assessment. Allocating time to discuss and agree the purpose of data collection during work-based learning is always profitable;

6. learners’ appetite for receiving and giving feedback at work needs to be considered in a self-assessment system. For some learners, and in some countries, direct and full feedback is seen as something to be avoided - the cultural context and a country’s traditions in relation to feedback should be accommodated in a self-assessment system.

EMERGING POLICY ISSUES

There was agreement on the importance and value of self-assessment as part of a quality assurance system. However, the PLA participants stressed that a wide range of approaches can be equally effective e.g. the approach to self-assessment that is used by a VET provider to monitor the quality of their provision could be inappropriate for an employer with one of two learners or a small or medium sized enterprise which does not work with learners on a regular basis. Underlying this flexible approach was the recognition that the needs of the learner (their ‘journey’ through their training programme) should be central to the self-assessment process.

Placing the learner at the centre of the process has a number of policy implications:

- the need to clarify the purpose of a self-assessment system for work-based learning. Employers/companies need to have ownership of their self-assessment process, recognise the benefits that such a system will bring to them and their learners/trainees. If they are merely following a process which has been designed by a VET provider, there is a risk that the approach will not meet their needs and their enthusiasm may be tested;

- throughout the PLA there were many questions of what learner data is needed; who decides what data is collected; who decides the ways in which this data is used to support quality assurance; who collates and analyses the data etc. For those involved in work based learning, it is helpful to streamline data systems and ensure there is agreement on the purpose and use of the data that is collected;

- in environments where employers face recruitment challenges, the benefits of offering high quality training which is supported by self-reflection and ongoing improvements is clear. However not every employer faces a recruitment difficulty and many companies find it easy to recruit new staff. In these latter situations a stronger case needs has to be made for self-assessment. Arguments should focus on the benefits to companies (rather than being focused on meeting obligations) - these can be in terms of recruiting new staff; motivating existing staff; reducing the costs of errors made by trainees; developing the employers’ local reputation; the opportunity to gather new ideas from a younger generation of workers etc.

- the ongoing need to support those organisations providing work-based learning - this can be informal through the work of VET providers or it can be more formal through activities organised at the sector level, by employers’ organisations; by Chambers; by consortia of employers working collaboratively or through legislative expectations.
How Sweden uses self-assessment to support the quality assurance of work-based learning

The Swedish hosts outlined the national approach to initial VET provision for full-time upper secondary students. Students are offered a choice between a vocational programme or preparation for higher education. In the vocational programmes, work-based learning is organised by the VET schools and the school/teacher is responsible for assessing each student. Apprenticeships are offered to approximately 12 per cent of these learners. During the work-based learning, the employer receives financial incentives to train a student (who they may employ) and provides the student with a trainer.

Work-based learning, as it is part of the VET programme, is quality assured using the Swedish national model which is aligned with the EQAVET quality assurance cycle. The approach combines quantitative and qualitative data; shares responsibility between the provider and the system (through inspection) and is supported by the National Agency for Education and other organisations.

The legislative framework which supports self-assessment in work-based learning in Slovakia

In the Slovakian system VET is traditionally organised by VET providers with students completing periods of work-based learning. For each student there is a contract in place between the VET provider and the employer. Developments since 2015 have included the introduction of the Dual system inspired by the German and Swiss models.

Each VET school produces a publicly-available annual report based on its self-assessment. The reports using a standard format which is set out in legislation, includes information on:

- the students
- the ongoing training of staff
- the programmes and training offered to students
- the condition of the VET schools
- the activities undertaken by the VET school
- data from the inspection
- relationships with employers
- information about the VET school's graduates
- the VET school's financial situation

How self-assessment to support the quality assurance of work-based learning is used in UK (Wales)

In Wales there are 19 lead organisations providing work-based learning. Each lead provider works with a number of VET providers and employers in order to manage the provision of training. Working within the Welsh Government’s framework and an external inspection system, the lead providers oversee the self-assessment process, the use of national data as the basis for comparisons and the quality assurance of provision.

Two types of programme are offered - work-based apprenticeships at EQF Levels 2-5 for students aged 16 and older; and traineeships which include work placements at EQF Level 1 for students aged from 14-16. The external inspection framework creates the basis for the internal self-assessment system. This includes collating and analysing employers’ views on the quality of the VET provision. As part of the employers’ self-assessment the lead organisation for work-based learning asks employers to consider:

- whether the training provided to the employer by the VET provider adds value to the organisation?
- whether their employee's existing skills and knowledge is appropriately recognised by their employer?
- are the workplace assessments completed by the employers of an appropriate standard?
- does the work-based training have a good mix of theory and practice?
- is the school-based and work-based training reflecting current industry practice?
- does the learner’s assessor have up to date knowledge of the qualification and vocational activity?

A VET provider’s approach to using self-assessment in work-based learning - the SKF vocational school in Gothenburg

SKF runs its own VET school and has a mission for all its students to graduate; for all its students who want to work in Sweden or abroad to have the knowledge and competence to do so, and for all its students who want to study at university, in Sweden or abroad, have the qualifications to do so.
The school uses a range of measures to assess the quality of its training provision, including the use of official statistics to make comparisons with other VET providers; reports on the quality of the work completed by students; and evaluations of the on-the-job training provided by the company. SKF uses its own app to record each learner’s progress, working hours, completion of work tasks and well-being during periods of work-based learning - the students’ contributions are monitored by their teacher in the VET school and their supervisor at work on a weekly basis.

The school’s evaluation of the effectiveness of their training is based on a three way discussion between the VET school teacher, the supervisor in the company and the student. These evaluations take place during and at the end of each period of on-the-job training or placement abroad and focus on the learning outcomes which have been achieved so far and the next set of tasks.

**A VET provider’s approach to using self-assessment in work-based learning - the Secondary Technical School of Mechanical Engineering, Bratislava**

The Technical School of Mechanical Engineering is a small, specialist institution which offers VET training in mechanical engineering, mechatronics and technical studies. An important aspect of the school’s work includes promoting the value of VET provisions as well as the benefits of training in a school with a long tradition of providing VET programmes. Despite the large number of job opportunities in the region and the sector, it is increasingly difficult to attract students to VET programmes.

Last year the school participated in an international peer review and invited colleagues to examine two aspects of quality:

- the curriculum (with a focus on practical training and the development of soft skills);
- external relations and internationalisation (with a focus on collaboration with stakeholders).

This led to the creation of a development plan whose implementation is monitored during the weekly meeting of the School Board which is chaired by the Head Teacher.

**A VET provider’s approach to using self-assessment in work-based learning - CIOFS-FP, The Salesian VET Centres for Women**

CIOFS-FP is a national organisation of 61 VET providers organised in 11 regions of Italy. It offers apprenticeships, internships, on-the-job training opportunities and work placements as part of a school-based programme. Each year there are approximately 16,000 students on VET programmes - just over half of these learners are aged from 14-18. Self-assessment is a central aspect of the association’s quality assurance processes. Using a set of templates, one of which designed by the Italian NRP, the association collects the views of learners, company-based tutors, school-based teachers and managers in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of what is working well.

Since 2016, the association has been involved in the pilot of the Italian Dual system of VET training. In the following years CIOFS-FP used a survey designed by the CONFAP/FORMA network to evaluate the quality of the training it was providing under the Dual system: the evaluation of the survey results led to the development of a dedicated e-learning space for students; additional training for company-based mentors; and a communications plan to share the lessons from the pilot programme with all 11 regions of the association.