

# POLICY BRIEF

This note summarises the results of a Peer Learning Activity, which has been prepared by an independent expert. 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)***

**Countries taking part:** AU, DE, EE, ES, FI, HU, IE, MT, NL, RO, SI, UK

### SUMMARY

*This policy note is based on the peer learning activity (PLA) held in Santa Lucia, Malta, in May 2009. It brings together the contributions made by 12 European countries reflecting on the impact of the European Recommendation for a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework as a tool for the management of quality in vocational education and training (VET) - full PLA report is available on the Network's website at ([www.enqavet.eu](http://www.enqavet.eu)).*

<p><b>INSTRUMENT</b></p>	<p>ENQA-VET's peer learning activities are an important tool in promoting quality assurance (QA) in Vocational Education and Training (VET), supporting mutual learning between Member States, and play an important role in the implementation of the ENQA-VET work programme.</p> <p><b>Peer learning is a policy learning strategy that includes knowledge sharing and utilises local experience on a relevant policy topic.</b></p> <p>PLAs should be viewed in the context of the Open Method of Coordination which is based on promoting mutual trust by disseminating best practices, respecting subsidiarity in the education field and reaching greater convergence among Member States towards the achievement of European goals.</p>
<p><b>PLA OBJECTIVE</b></p>	<p>WHY A PLA ON IMPACT OF THE EQARF (CQAF)?</p> <p>This peer learning activity aimed to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• promote cooperation in quality assurance (QA)</li> <li>• build on common methodological approaches; and</li> <li>• disseminate best practice on the implementation of The EQARF (CQAF)</li> </ul>
<p><b>OVERVIEW OF THE SUBJECT MATTER</b></p>	<p><b>Quality assurance</b> is a means of achieving effectiveness and efficiency in education and training provision in meeting the evolving needs of society, the economy and individuals. It is an instrument for continuous improvement of VET by regularly evaluating, monitoring and improving, on the basis of evidence.</p> <p>The <b>EQARF</b> constitutes a European reference framework to ensure and develop QA in VET, with the objective of improving provision and facilitating learners and labour mobility within and across European countries. Thereby, the Framework will foster transparency, mutual trust, recognition of competences/qualifications and confidence in national VET systems.</p> <p>The framework presents a core of set of quality criteria which includes defining indicators that facilitate the monitoring and measurement of achievements at each stage of the quality cycle.<sup>1</sup></p>
<p><b>EMERGING POLICY ISSUES</b> from PLA on the Impact of EQARF</p>	<p><b>The key requirements in ensuring the ongoing development of The EQARF implementation as a tool to ensure QA in VET provision among Member States are:</b></p> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To develop a consistent and comprehensive implementation strategy that:             <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. takes the different national contexts and experiences into account</li> <li>2. reflects and prevents, as much as possible, the bureaucracy involved in the implementation process</li> <li>3. increases communication and awareness among key stakeholders</li> <li>4. promotes self-evaluation in combination with external evaluation as a method of supporting a culture of QA</li> </ol> </li> <li>• Central government support (e.g. by introducing new legislation)</li> </ul> <p>In relation to the indicators attached to The EQARF quality criteria model, the requirements are to:</p> <hr/> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. develop the right balance between qualitative and quantitative approaches to QA</li> <li>2. clarify the roles of both descriptors and indicators</li> <li>3. be aware that indicators relevant to providers differ from those relevant to social partners</li> </ol>
	<p><b>The common issue related to the implementation of The EQARF is the realisation that QA methods have different impacts in different VET systems as they are determined by specific contexts and expectations. This implies that:</b></p> <hr/> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) The EQARF model should be flexible enough so that Member States can apply the model according to their different operational environments</li> <li>b) In some countries such as those expecting The EQARF to improve VET system standards, The EQARF should be built into the legal framework of the country. In others this may not have the same degree of urgency as their national systems aim to achieve a more integrated and/or voluntary approach more suited to their specific contexts</li> </ol>

1. The EQARF list of indicators (Annex II):

1. Relevance of quality assurance systems for VET providers

4. Completion rate in VET programmes

7. Unemployment rate

10. Schemes used to promote better access to VET

2. Investment in training of teachers and trainers

6. Utilisation of acquired skills at the workplace

8. Prevalence of vulnerable groups

3. Participation rate in VET programmes

5. Placement rate in VET programmes

9. Mechanisms to identify training needs in the labour market

**POLICY  
RECOMMENDATIONS**  
At European level

**To enhance the efficient and successful implementation of The EQARF across Member States' VET systems there is a need to:**

- Establish a QA culture by working on a common language/terminology and promoting opportunities and conditions for cooperation and exchange of good/effective practices across Europe
- Increase awareness of The EQARF and develop a public communication plan<sup>2</sup>
- Introduce mechanisms that help to adapt common processes and instruments into the institutional structure of national VET education systems
- Strengthen the evaluation and assessment phases of the quality cycle as The EQARF model/process seems to be strong on planning and implementation and weaker on evaluation and assessment
- Recognise the significance of the so called 'the inspiration circle', which pays attention to the consistent interrelation of the four phases of The EQARF quality cycle<sup>3</sup>
- Design a plan in order to minimise the bureaucracy attached to the implementation of the framework and/or the use of indicators and data collection
- Consider both quality enhancement in addition to QA. In such circumstance, QA improvements takes place when top-down/central control is combined with horizontal/ decentralised methods of QA
- Implement gradually

**Recommendations on The EQARF' set on indicators:**

- Indicators should steer toward learning outcomes
- Further specifications of indicator 1 ("*Relevance of quality assurance systems for VET providers*") is needed
- There is a greater sense of trust and consistency in data which is collected centrally. Therefore, there is a need to promote the use and collection of a common set of indicators across Europe in order to foster confidence in National VET systems
- Indicator: '*feedback from trainees*' could also be considered as a useful indicator

**At National**

**To support the efficient and successful implementation of The EQARF in Member States there is a need to:**

- Increase awareness on The EQARF among relevant stakeholders
- Provide clear guidelines and recognise successful/pilot providers
- Build and promote a shared vision for QA across institutions and relevant stakeholders within a national system
- Agree on a cooperative long-term strategy with stakeholders (including evaluating bodies)
- Consider self-evaluation of VET providers as the best starting point in the development of QA improvements, in particularly the peer review evaluation tool
- Combine internal self-evaluation on a voluntary basis with mandatory and voluntary external evaluation
- Make outcomes of the QA procedures transparent and public
- Set clear responsibilities for the different components of QA within the system
- Trust and empower VET providers in the QA process by setting the scope for autonomous decision, action and reflection based on common standards
- Promote relevant networks and focus on the different needs of the beneficiaries

**Recommendations on the implementation of The EQARF' set of indicators:**

- Formulate an operational plan that:
  1. sets out a time frame for the introduction and national use of the indicators
  2. states clearly the division of responsibilities and targets with a view to implementation
- Prioritises the use of indicators
- Strengthens the voluntary and tool box aspect of the indicators

2. The Communication plan should:

a) include all relevant stakeholders; b) be user friendly and simple; c) help to digest information; d) not change the message; e) include brief policy officials; j) foster stakeholders' commitment.

3. The "inspiration circle" is the underlying circle that connects successfully the four phases of the quality cycle. Rather than it tells you what you should do, the "inspiration circle" tells you why you should do it. The "inspiration circle" entwined with the four quality cycle phases in order to guarantee the proper interconnection of each phase with the others (mobilise, value, reflect and inspire are the "inspiration circle" stages).

<p><b>At VET provider</b></p>	<p><b>To enhance the efficient and successful implementation process of The EQARF among VET providers there is a need to:</b></p> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set clear objectives aligned with the national objectives</li> <li>• Develop transparent and public processes in which the outcomes of QA procedures, including self-evaluation results, are reported</li> <li>• Establish procedures to ensure accountability by actively involving relevant and representative stakeholders in organising the QA system</li> <li>• Be aware of the importance/benefits of QA and train staff and stakeholders for QA processes</li> </ul>
<p><b>ANALYSIS: Use of The EQARF to report on progress among Member States</b></p> <p><b>Purpose and Plan</b></p> <p><b>Implementation</b></p> <p><b>Assessment and Evaluation</b></p> <p><b>Feedback and Procedures for Change</b></p>	<p><b><i>The PLA on quality assurance procedures for evaluation provides an interesting example of the use of The European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF) as an instrument to exchange experiences and capture best practices. The following emerged:</i></b></p> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All countries have made significant progress in policy development in QA and/or have formulated national QA frameworks (which are focused on The EQARF and have established Quality Assurance National Reference Points)</li> <li>• Increasingly, the involvement of relevant stakeholders is part of the methodical structure of QA frameworks and initiatives</li> <li>• Several countries have developed and implemented early warning systems as a means of connecting the quality criteria phases from mission to goals</li> </ul> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Member countries have set targets inspired by European developments</li> <li>• In general, stakeholders are mobilised through different forms of consultation</li> <li>• Significant development has occurred toward transparency (i.e. publication of data in the web)</li> <li>• Very often, countries use performance-based finance systems and/or pilot projects as instruments to promote QA</li> </ul> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Member States recognise the important role played by self-evaluation in their QA programmes</li> <li>• Many countries are preparing systems for peer reviews</li> <li>• Some countries have good statistical data collection at national level</li> <li>• In many countries the inspectorate is a major player in evaluation</li> <li>• The use of national indicators for evaluation of quality is common practice</li> </ul> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequently, reports and reviews are aimed at monitoring</li> <li>• In many cases, the process of monitoring is required by law or conducted by an inspectorate or independent institutions</li> <li>• In some countries VET providers have the freedom to decide on how utilise evaluation results</li> <li>• In some instances, countries have in place meta-evaluation procedures - through which the quality of the quality assurance system is assessed</li> <li>• Procedures for complaint are established and well known by the actors involved; however, in general, there is a lack of use of feedback at both national and VET provider level</li> <li>• Evaluation of information does not always lead to agreement on policy</li> </ul>
<p><b>CHALLENGES for the implementation process of The EQARF</b></p>	<p><b>Participants identified the following major challenges which should be addressed in the implementation of The EQARF:</b></p> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulties in agreeing on a shared vision of QA based on shared European values when very often these values are established across national, language and even individual institutions' boundaries</li> <li>• How to introduce change into established quality assurance processes</li> <li>• There is a need to ensure effective bridges between VET and higher education</li> <li>• There is a need to provide training that is relevant to labour market needs</li> <li>• Lack of investment for the implementation process</li> <li>• There is a need to evaluate/recognise prior learning and establish QA procedures for it</li> </ul>