



**EQAVET**

European Quality Assurance  
in Vocational Education and Training

Supporting the implementation of the  
European Quality Assurance Reference Framework  
for Vocational Education and Training

# POLICYBRIEF

This series of policy briefs is designed to share the results of the EQAVET sectoral seminars with a wider audience of VET providers, policymakers and other stakeholders. The present policy brief has been prepared by the EQAVET Secretariat on the basis of the discussions at the seminars and the material provided by its expert supporting the development of the sectoral seminar approach. It reflects the opinions of the sectoral seminar participants and does not constitute an official European Commission or EQAVET position.

*On quality assurance in initial & continuing vocational education and training*

**EQAVET  
Sectoral  
Seminar**

## The Construction Sector

Participating countries: BE, BG, CY, CZ, DE, EE, FI, IE, IT, LU, LV, NL, NO, RO, SI, SE

### SUMMARY

This policy note is based on the EQAVET sectoral seminar focusing on the quality assurance of vocational education and training in the construction sector. The seminar was hosted by Formedil (the Italian national organisation for training in the construction sector) and Isfol (the quality assurance national reference point in Italy) and took place at the Centro per la Formazione delle Maestranze Edili ed Affini di Roma e Provincia (Centre for the formation of building workers and technicians [CE.F.M.E](#)), Italy, on 21 and 22 June 2012. The seminar brought together quality assurance national reference points, VET providers, practitioners, policymakers and industry representatives from 16 countries (all the material is available on the website [www.eqavet.eu/gns/what-we-do/sectoral-seminars.aspx](http://www.eqavet.eu/gns/what-we-do/sectoral-seminars.aspx)).

### CONTEXT and INTRODUCTION

#### *EQAVET sectoral seminars and the development of a culture of quality assurance in the EU*

EQAVET sectoral seminars are considered an important tool for promoting and consolidating a culture of quality assurance in vocational education and training (VET) among key stakeholders of a particular sector. They support exchange of experience, expertise, cross fertilisation of ideas and mutual learning between countries, involving quality assurance national reference points, VET providers as well as other players involving: quality assurance national reference points; VET providers, industry representatives, policymakers and social partners. These sectoral seminars play an important role in deepening knowledge of the European quality assurance reference framework (EQAVET Framework) and in promoting a culture of quality assurance in VET.

**Objectives** - The sectoral seminars aim to: **1.** Improve and develop quality assurance in EU VET systems, with a focus on continuing VET; **2.** Reflect on how quality assurance in VET is addressed and managed in a particular industry; **3.** Generalise the outcomes of the discussions during the seminar in order to generate useful policy recommendations; and **4.** Identify messages in relation to the use and implementation of the EQAVET Framework.

The first round of EQAVET sectoral seminars focused on industries which are essential to meeting EU socioeconomic requirements, such as healthcare, tourism and construction. This third sectoral seminar addresses the construction sector, which is a significant driver of the European economy and makes a major contribution to the generation of wealth (it is the largest single economic activity and the biggest industrial employer in Europe) and the welfare of the community – particularly through the provision of shelter and its contribution to Europe’s environmental agenda. Therefore, meeting the needs for future skills (both quantitatively and qualitatively) in the sector is a matter of considerable importance, and VET has an important role to play in this regard. There is a need to ensure adequate investment in education and training in the construction sector – especially in those countries where apprenticeship training is very limited or non-existent.

### The CONSTRUCTION SECTOR in EU

#### An overview

The NACE classification (1.1) defines the construction sector as one which consists of the following three main subsectors:

- Manufacturing of construction materials: Suppliers of building products and components (incl. wholesale);
- Onsite construction: Site preparation, construction of complete buildings, building installation, completion and rental of construction machinery;
- Professional construction services (incl. architects, engineering services, cost controllers and building control bodies).

According to the study conducted by the European Commission DG Enterprise and Industry, unit G5 “[Construction](#),”



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[Pressure Equipment and Metrology](#)", the construction industry is of strategic importance to the EU as it:

- Provides the buildings and infrastructure needed by the rest of the economy and society;
- Represents more than 10% of EU GDP and more than 50% of fixed capital formation;
- Is the largest single economic activity; and
- Is the biggest industrial employer, employing directly almost 20 million people<sup>1</sup>.

In 2007, before the economic crisis hit the EU, the construction sector (directly and indirectly) accounted for 15% of all persons employed in European business, generating 10% of turnover and 15% of value added.

According to the Sector Competitiveness Studies<sup>2</sup>, the key strategic challenges for the construction sector in the EU are:

- Access to finance
- Regulatory environment
- Growing international (global) competition
- Fragmented industry structures
- Weak growth prospects in EU markets
- Demands for convenience
- The major drivers of structural change
- General macroeconomic environment
- Labour market conditions
- Demographic change
- Poor innovation performance in the sector
- Poor productivity levels
- Narrow skill sets

These challenges are linked to the level and quality of education and training.

## VOCATIONAL EDUCATION and TRAINING and QUALITY ASSURANCE

### *Improving human resources for the construction sector through better quality assurance of VET*

The [KPMG Global Construction Survey 2009](#) showed that although the current economic crisis is hitting the sector, skills shortages, i.e. access to a qualified labour force (e.g. project managers), still remains an issue and is considered to be one of the factors likely to influence the future competitiveness of the sector (in a 10-year perspective). In this context, there is a need to improve both quality and productivity of the workforce in the sector.

VET – both initial (IVET) and continuing (CVET) – is central to the formation of the skills needed by the sector and a major factor in improving quality and productivity.

Compared to other sectors, the construction industry presents particular challenges regarding the demand for learning and development and the provision of vocational education of high quality:

- Very often VET in school programmes is not strongly linked to the industry and does not provide a clear and realistic transition into employment. In this sector the right combination of theoretical knowledge and practical experience is of major importance and requires close collaboration between the industry and education and training providers.
- The sector consists mainly of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), associated with the area of 'sub-contracting'. In Europe 92% of all enterprises in the sector are micro-enterprises. SMEs have greater difficulty accessing and investing in training. Moreover, in some countries the sector is characterised by a highly casualised workforce, often with limited or no training, low qualifications and few possibilities for professional development.
- The image of the sector is poor, consequently it does not attract a stable workforce and young talented people. This poor image is related to working conditions, poor career prospects for educated people, low social status, sensitivity to economic cycles, etc.
- The skills required by the sector are not uniform and both hi-tech and low-tech skills are in demand. VET should offer opportunities, training and qualifications for both ends of the spectrum. At the hi-tech end, VET programmes are often seen as subordinate to academic pathways into tertiary education and are not linked to work placements in the industry. At the low-tech end, more attention needs to be paid to generic skills such as problem orientation, problem solving, communication, design and entrepreneurship. These soft skills are critical for cross-occupational collaboration in working teams and for exploiting value-added creativity on the enterprise level. In addition, the provision of opportunities for upskilling the existing workforce who have few qualifications or none should be a focus.

These challenges have been linked to:

1. the significant unmet demand among students for VET placements in construction and the high drop-out rate from VET within the industry
2. the inability to attract sufficient high quality recruits to maintain the competitiveness and standards of the workforce
3. low retention levels of permanent workers

Quality Assurance (QA) in education and training in the sector plays a crucial role in ensuring that VET can respond to these challenges. A VET that is quality assured should:

- Enhance school-based careers advice and VET in school programmes in order to provide a transparent and realistic transition into apprenticeship or employment. These career services need to work with the sector in order to provide up-to-date advice on vocational pathways and career prospects.

- Deliver flexible courses for students and employers (e.g. through the use of online learning), and provide tailored programmes and open career paths at individual student level. This is particularly important for the upskilling of the existing workforce and the recognition of prior learning.
- Offer workers an opportunity to acquire a basic qualification (at least in Health and Safety matters) or to gain more and/or higher qualifications within the sector.
- Include Health and Safety content in all education and training measurements taken by authorities and/or providers. Both IVET and CVET should provide guidance on the recommended training required to ensure that construction students and workers gain awareness and understanding of hazards on the construction site and how they should be managed.
- Ensure that its programmes integrate information technology which would in turn encourage its use by workers on the construction site.
- Provide leadership in the formation of 'green skills'. In collaboration with employers, VET should ensure that its students have the knowledge and skills necessary to adopt and disseminate new tools, technologies and processes. This will improve the perception of the industry, increase motivation and foster innovation in the workforce. Of particular importance is the upskilling of existing workers with 'green skills'.

### The EU FRAMEWORK for QUALITY ASSURANCE in VET - Addressing challenges

QA can provide providers and employers offering work placements with the tools necessary to provide higher quality and up to date education and training; it can improve links with the industry by building appropriate partnerships; and it should ensure that it is focused on the broader needs of the learner.

In this manner, education and training can improve the recruitment and retention of existing personnel, increase competitiveness and enhance the cross-border mobility of workers.

The **European framework for quality assurance in VET** (EQAVET Framework) provides a system-wide quality assurance management instrument for initial and continuing VET and for voluntary work-based learning that is used at EU level. EQAVET includes a set of quality descriptors and indicators for the four stages of its quality cycle (planning, implementation, evaluation and review) to support documentation, development, monitoring and evaluation in order to improve the effectiveness of VET provision and quality management practices.

Irrespective of the state of development or tradition of the national VET system, the EQAVET model provides a reference framework for establishing a QA system which has operationally defined criteria that serve as performance descriptors and indicators for self-measuring QA. It recognises that approaches to VET need to be compatible with national/regional systems and with the needs of the industry and the community, which vary from region to region and country to country. The framework acknowledges that diversity among VET systems and providers is desirable. Despite this diversity, the sector requires a workforce that is very flexible in order to respond to the vagaries of the economic cycle, new technologies and social change. These competences are best acquired by qualified workers who continually upgrade their professional skills and/or who are trained under realistic and practical working conditions.

The ultimate goal is to encourage national governments, VET providers and employers to adopt quality assurance processes for the provision of training that promotes continuous improvement and public confidence that the quality of provision and standards of the construction workforce is being safeguarded and enhanced, regardless of where the learning process takes place.

For more information on the Framework visit the EQAVET quality cycle online tool [here](#).

### KEY FACTORS for developing QUALITY ASSURANCE of VET in the CONSTRUCTION SECTOR

The discussions at the sectoral seminar focused on four key themes of QA within the construction sector, which enabled participants to identify a number of core areas which determine the efficiency of the quality assurance process in the delivery of practical training:

#### 1. **How can the quality of VET be assured and how can VET institutions provide up-to-date education and training?**

Closer and stronger cooperation and links between authorities, providers and the construction industry; and the right mixture of school education and practical training are essential for relevant and quality VET in the construction sector. There are various forms of alternating school-based and work-based training (apprenticeships) among Member States. The key issue is that enterprises be involved in the delivery of

training to ensure that it reflects the conditions prevailing in the workplace. Such involvement would also improve the efficiency of training and facilitate the transition from school to work. In these instances, the VET curriculum should integrate theoretical knowledge and practical experience and be driven by the needs of the construction industry through training packages, which should be responsive to contemporary occupational demands, without neglecting broader employability skills.

Accreditation of providers and the certification of construction workers' competences and skills are considered major tools in ensuring the quality of VET and the industry. In this context, common and harmonised systems of accreditation and certification of VET programmes and courses should be implemented. Tools such as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the European Credit System for VET (ECVET) can support these processes, which, together with the EQAVET Framework, facilitate the mutual recognition of diplomas and professional experiences in Member States for the purpose of fostering mobility.

## 2. How can validation of formal, non-formal and informal learning be further developed?

Lifelong career opportunities within the sector are important in order to attract future students and have a qualified workforce. Traditionally, the sector has employed people with few or no qualifications or formal training. These people have acquired the necessary competences and skills during their working life. Their experience needs to be certified/recognised, which would offer them opportunities to access further education and training. Therefore, there is a need to put in place the right structures and measures that ensure the validation and recognition of formal, non-formal and informal learning. The relevant authorities and the construction industry should be closely involved in these processes. The [projects Trasfobuilding](#), “[Saperi Costruttivi](#)” and the [APL Bud project](#) presented at the sectoral seminar are practical examples of Italian/European projects which focus on assessment and on validation of skills and competences in the construction sector. Check [here](#) and [here](#) for more information on these projects.

On the other hand, the organisation of programmes for further education and training needs to take into consideration the specificities of the sector and provide flexible education and training tailored to the learner’s needs and workload.

## 3. How can the sector be made more attractive?

Attracting more students and reducing drop-out rates are essential for securing an adequate supply of workers. The training of teachers, tutors and instructors, together with a focus on the learner and practical training are key factors for ensuring quality and reducing drop-outs. Also, it is important to ensure sufficient number of training places (incentives for enterprises should be considered). In addition, VET providers should increase support and transparent information with clear career opportunities for students. Finally, promoting a better gender balance is seen as additional way of creating a more attractive environment for learning.

## 4. How can health and safety be ensured?

Health and Safety (H&S) is a basic element in all sectors, but is especially a key challenge in the construction sector, as accidents may be fatal. For this reason H&S must be an integral part of education and training, and a key component of both VET curricula and programmes. On the other hand, a minimum level of training per year in H&S for existing workers should be mandatory. Common and national regulations for H&S training should be promoted. It is important that national systems set up certified courses on H&S, enact H&S laws and regulations and ensure regular updating of teachers and tutors in H&S theory and practice (see [The 16 hours course on Health and Safety developed by Formedil](#); or check [here](#)). A Europe-wide approach is recommended.

### **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS or KEY MESSAGES for POLICYMAKERS and VET PROVIDERS**

#### **Recommendations at system and provider level in relation to apprenticeships and further education and training:**

There are a number of measurements that education systems together with providers can take in order to foster quality apprenticeship in the sector:

##### **At system level:**

- Sustainable cooperation with the industry and close involvement of enterprises
- Enhanced career advice which should be strongly linked to work placements
- Transparent and realistic information about the industry and its career opportunities (self-employment, architecture, engineering, management)

- Increased support for apprenticeships and assistance for employers with paperwork, insurance, counselling care, mentoring and on-the-job training
- Increase employer incentives to take on and retain apprentices
- A harmonised national approach to accreditation and certification of VET providers and programmes
- Promote European mobility and foster the implementation of EU tools (EQAVET, EQF and ECVET)
- A focus on the skills required to handle intelligent and sustainable growth, safe energy, a reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> and the retrofitting of existing buildings.
- Participation in the exchange of experiences and opinions across Member States
- Ensure safety at work by setting up courses on H&S (with certificates), enacting H&S laws and regulations and updating teachers and tutors regularly on H&S theory and practice
- Encourage the employment of qualified employees

##### **At VET provider level:**

- Support networks and cooperation with other providers and enterprises
- Provide apprentices with targeted training programmes
- Encourage experienced workers to mentor trainees/apprentices. Mentors should be offered upskilling opportunities and training in assessment methods
- Assist with the maintenance of accurate records of tasks completed and skills mastered by each apprentice (Formedil has developed a training database which includes a personal development plan, new work practices with new professional profiles and clear assessment procedures; check [here](#) for more information)

**Recommendations in relation to increasing the attractiveness of VET in the sector and reducing drop-out rates:**

- Establish careers convention and skills competitions and demonstrations
- Encourage ownership of European, national and local work-related projects and promote pride among students in their profession and future work prospects. In this context, consider working with trainees on the restoration and/or renovation of buildings of historical interest and showing the results to the public
- Ensure high quality VET through accreditation of providers, programmes and assessors
- Support employers
- Promote role models within the sector
- Focus on the learner and on individual pathways and career possibilities
- Ensure high quality trainers, tutors and teachers
- Focus on the transition between school and training placements and employment
- Introduce work experiences at the end of primary education in order to make students aware of the possibilities that the construction sector can offer;
- Ensure that education, training and work are safe
- Regulate and control in-company training, in order to ensure quality placements for apprenticeship, independent of company size, economic performance or tradition

**Recommendations in relation to ensuring that VET is up-to-date:**

- Establish regular updating of qualifications and curricula in cooperation with the social partners; such updating should be based on current demand and future skill needs
- Ensure that teachers and trainers are re-skilled to respond to future demands. This will require investment in teachers and trainers
- Clarify the roles and responsibilities of the various actors and institutions in anticipating the future demand for skills and competences. A combination of perspectives will be required
- Organise the collection of feedback from employers and employees to support analysis of what competences are needed in the industry. This collection should be centralised and organised by the relevant ministries
- Ensure and sustain active support from the suppliers of new technology in the sector to support training in new technologies
- Set up a clear link between the sector and the educational system

Check [here](#) for information on the Italian approach to this issue

**Recommendations at system and provider level in relation to Health and Safety (H&S):**

- Adapt H&S to individual construction sites and to specific circumstances;
- Support self-monitoring on each building site
- Promote the importance of H&S (e.g. through public marketing campaigns)
- Offer specific training and documentation (e.g. a safety passport) to trainers and tutors
- Provide safety devices from day one at school and at work, and make H&S training obligatory. The involvement of social partners will be crucial
- Undertake H&S inspections on construction sites, taking a positive, constructive and supportive approach to enterprises and staff in cooperation with social partners
- Introduce common labels for companies and workers on H&S issues

**End notes**

<sup>1</sup> [European Construction Industry Federation](#)

<sup>2</sup> [FWC Sector Competitiveness Studies N° B1/ENTR/06/054 – Sustainable Competitiveness of the Construction Sector. Final report \(2011\). P.xii ff.](#)