



**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 policy brief has been prepared in order to share the results of an EQAVET peer learning activity on 'The impact of quality assurance systems in IVET' with a wider audience of VET providers, policymakers and other stakeholders. EQAVET peer learning activities 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

## The impact of quality assurance systems in initial VET

*Participating countries: AT, BE (Fr), HR, CY, CZ, DK, EE, FN, FR, DE, EL, HU, IT, LT, LU, LV, NL, NO, PT, RO, SI, SK, SE, UK (WIs)*

### SUMMARY

*This policy note is based on the peer learning activity (PLA) held in Vienna on 19-20 May 2014. The PLA, which is part of the [EQAVET 2013-15 work programme](#), brought together colleagues from VET providers, government agencies and those with a national or regional responsibility for VET policy from 24 countries. Some of the participants represented a Member State's Quality Assurance National Reference Point (NRP). The NRPs 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 in EQAVET provides an opportunity for participants to share knowledge and experiences using examples of practice and/or policy implementation as a starting point for a reflection on how to address some of the shared challenges faced by education and training systems across the EU. This PLA aimed to identify existing approaches to reviewing the impact of quality assurance and highlight the issues to consider when planning to measure impact. The following comments are based on the participants' reflections which were informed by presentations from Austria, Sweden, the UK (Wales) and the Netherlands.*

*This policy brief is not a verbatim report; instead it is an analysis of the issues that were felt to be important in an EQAVET context. It is intended to inform those who are thinking about the impact that quality assurance is making at a system level and those who have decided to measure this impact but are unsure about the most appropriate approaches. The PLA was informed by a background paper and an analysis of a questionnaire based on participants' interests and opinions on the best way to measure the impact of quality assurance.*

*More information on this PLA is available on the EQAVET web-site [here](#)*

### POLICY CONTEXT

The European Quality Assurance for VET Framework (EQAVET Framework) was set out in the 2009 Recommendation from the European Parliament and Council<sup>1</sup>. It builds on the earlier work at a European level which began with the 2002 Education Council resolution<sup>2</sup> to enhance European cooperation in vocational education and training with the development and use of a Common Quality Assurance Framework.

The EQAVET Recommendation invited Member States to promote and monitor continuous improvement in their VET systems. It proposed this was done through the use of a quality assurance and improvement cycle based on planning, implementation, evaluation and review. EQAVET is a Framework that allows individual Member States to develop arrangements which meet their requirements.

EQAVET has been designed to support Member States in reforming and adapting their quality assurance systems. EQAVET can be used to address challenges outlined in the Education and Training strategic framework 2020, the lifelong learning (LLL) programme proposed by the

<sup>1</sup> Recommendation of the European Parliament and 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).

<sup>2</sup> Fundamentals of a 'common quality assurance framework' (COAF) for VET in Europe. Council resolution of 19 December 2002 on the promotion of enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training (2003/C 13/02).



European Commission (Erasmus + which has streamlined the current EU programmes for education, training, youth and sport) and the 'Rethinking Education' communication in 2012. Within the broader education and training strategy, VET plays a crucial role in contributing to the EU 2020 growth and recovery strategy which is responsive to increasing global and societal challenges. The Copenhagen Process which supported reform in VET provided the basis for addressing specific issues concerning the challenges faced by European societies. In this context the Bruges Communiqué<sup>3</sup> (adopted in 2010) provided an agenda for improving the quality of VET over the coming years.

A number of reports are available on the EQAVET Recommendation. The first to be published was the progress report prepared by the EQAVET secretariat<sup>4</sup>. This provided a 'snap-shot' of the progress countries had made in developing their national approaches to the implementation of the Recommendation. In 2012, according to this survey:

- 23 respondents from VET systems in the EU-27 Countries (there were 33 replies because some countries have more than one system) had devised an approach to quality assurance in VET at a national level in line with the EQAVET Framework;
- six of the 33 respondents identified that they were preparing their approach;
- four of the 33 respondents said they were planning to introduce a national approach by 2013.

## Peer Learning Activity OBJECTIVES

This EQAVET Peer Learning Activity (PLA) focussed on how to measure the impact of the quality assurance system; it did not review whether the systems were the best they could be. The emphasis was on considering ways to measure the effectiveness of the existing systems and not whether there was merit or value in changing the arrangements. The PLA was set within the context of the EQAVET Recommendation and sought to consider issues of impact at the system level in initial VET. It sought to answer four key questions:

- what is effective practice in measuring the impact of quality assurance?
- what aspects of quality assurance have changed at the system level?
  - how have these changes had an impact on quality assurance?
  - how have learners benefited from quality assurance?

The focus was on quality assurance rather than quality. This meant that the discussion did not explicitly cover the EQAVET:

- indicators which can be used to measure the quality of provision; and
- indicative descriptors which can be used to describe quality.

## CASE STUDIES

The case studies presented at the PLA highlighted that a range of approaches were being designed (or considered) in relation to measuring impact. These included ways of looking at:

1. the quality of the implementation of a system-wide approach. This was more about how well a system had been introduced rather than whether the actual system was effective
2. whether the system-wide approach was accepted by stakeholders and VET providers
3. whether the system-wide approach had led to a measurable impact on the quality of provision – this was judged in many ways including student feedback on the quality of their training; VET providers' feedback or inspection/self-assessment results; and changes in the EQAVET indicators over time
4. whether VET providers complied with the quality assurance system.

### THE AUSTRIAN CASE STUDY

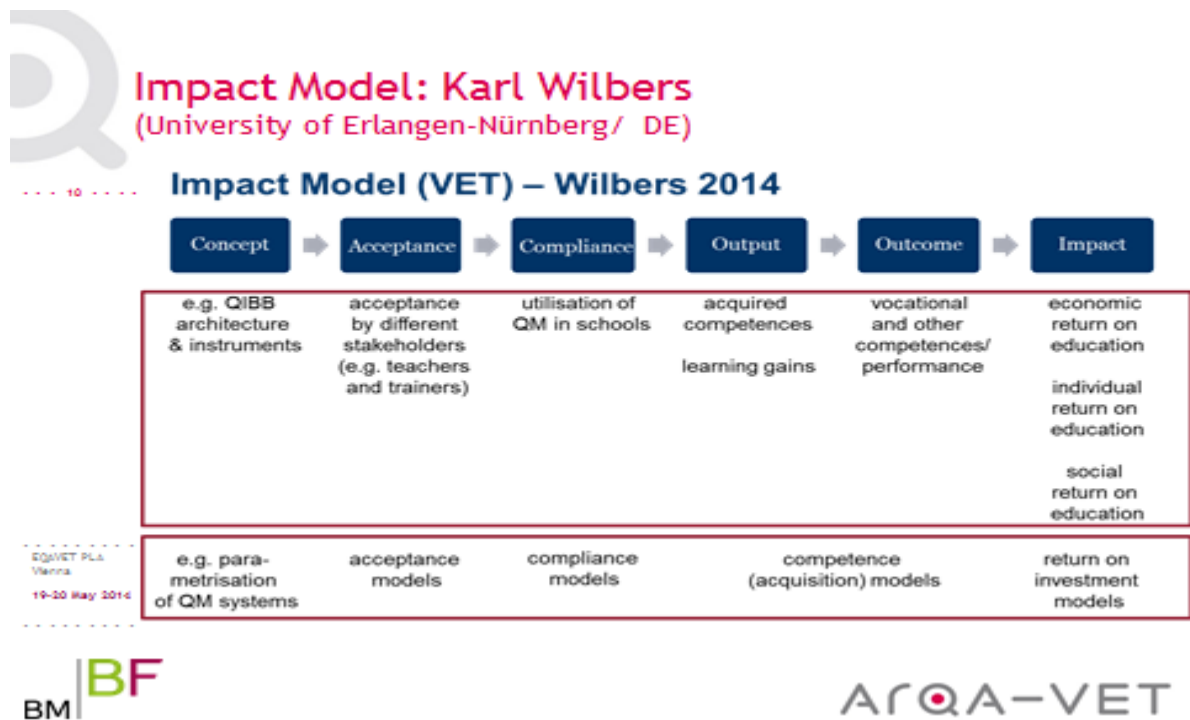
The Austrian hosts presented an analytical approach to measuring impact. This model set out a way of categorising impact which ranged from setting out a clear expectation; acceptance of the approach; compliance with the approach; improvements in outputs; improvements in outcomes; and making a long term impact (see figure 1). The model, developed to support a discussion on measuring impact, highlighted the difficulty of moving beyond acceptance and compliance on the spectrum. And even compliance could be hard to measure without robust and reliable data on whether individuals 'knew about' or 'understood' the quality assurance approach. Discussion of the conceptual model (and its explicit gradations in term of impact) led to questions about whether change was the consequence of a quality assurance system (e.g. if the economy improves, more learners will gain employment and the quality of VET will be seen to improve according to some of the EQAVET indicators<sup>5</sup>); the extent of the unintended compared to the intended impact of a quality assurance approach; and how a system could decide whether the quality assurance system was good enough.

<sup>3</sup> For the full text of the Bruges Communiqué, visit [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/vocational/bruges\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/vocational/bruges_en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.eqavet.eu/Libraries/Annual\\_Forum\\_2013/Results\\_of\\_EQAVET\\_Secretariat\\_Survey\\_2012.sflb.ashx](http://www.eqavet.eu/Libraries/Annual_Forum_2013/Results_of_EQAVET_Secretariat_Survey_2012.sflb.ashx)

<sup>5</sup> E.g. EQAVET indicator number 7 on the unemployment rate and indicator number 5 on the placement rate may be more influenced by the state of the economy than the quality of a quality assurance system in initial VET.

Figure 1



### THE NETHERLANDS CASE STUDY

A second approach, presented by the Netherlands, was very different. Here the focus was on the students and the learning processes they experienced. In this model the impact was seen through changes to the way VET staff organised and reviewed their own learning. The focus was not just at an institutional level, it had to include the teaching team and the individual tutor. It was their understanding and use of a quality assurance approach which would demonstrate impact – through improvements in the learners’ experiences. As the link between the quality of training and the prevalence of a good quality assurance system is not easily proven (and some argue that the links may not be causal) impact would only be seen from the learners’ perspective. This model reflects a de-centralised approach to quality assurance where individual VET providers have considerable autonomy and the leadership teams in each provider is responsible for promoting quality through their own decisions on what type of quality assurance processes to use.

This case study led to questions and debates about whether

- the evidence pointed to a clear correlation between quality and quality assurance and whether the quality of training can be good when quality assurance is weak;
- a good quality assurance system at an institutional level automatically means there is high quality at the team and individual level;
- data about the outputs from VET gave you enough information about the quality of the processes of learning e.g. the effectiveness of pedagogy to enable individuals to learn (not whether the content of the curriculum had been taught);
- the leadership team can know enough about what is happening at the level of an individual trainer to be confident that the quality assurance processes are leading to improvements in quality. There was some agreement that this was possible if the leadership team and managers ask the right questions as this leads to improvements through the use of the quality assurance cycle at the team and individual level.

### THE WELSH AND SWEDISH CASE STUDIES

The final two case studies highlighted some of the difficulties facing those seeking to make changes to the quality assurance systems. In the Swedish case study there was also a discussion on some of the practical and conceptual difficulties in finding the best way to measure the impact of quality assurance. Each of these two case studies recognised that decisions on what is good quality VET is determined by the political system as the choice of indicators provides the flexibility to define, and therefore measure, success in a way that works for an individual system.

## DISCUSSION &

All four case studies highlighted that there is often a great deal of information and data available on VET provision, its quality and its outputs. There is less confidence that this information is



routinely used in a systematic way to drive improvements.<sup>6</sup>

## REFLECTIONS

The complexity of VET is not in doubt – even within one system, there is a great deal that needs to be understood. In this context there were a number of questions on the cost effectiveness of measuring the impact of a quality assurance system. Participants were confident that particular processes are valuable e.g. self-assessment; reflective practice; co-operation and mutual learning between VET providers; a strong and enduring commitment to work with the labour market; and measuring employer satisfaction. However it is important to ask whether a more evidence-based approach to analysing the impact of quality assurance would identify other factors for success – and, if it would, were the benefits worth the cost.

In most systems, VET covers a very broad range of activities: providing a second chance for learners; offering continuing professional development; recognising non-formal and in-formal learning; preparing young people for the labour market or university-level study; working with apprentices on employer-run programmes etc. And sometimes it is not clear what is wanted from the VET providers – asking them to do so much can make it hard to measure impact of a quality assurance system. Identifying what the system expects from VET providers in terms of quality is an important pre-requisite for measuring the effectiveness of any quality assurance approach.

## EMERGING POLICY ISSUES

There was agreement that the taxonomy suggested by Professor Wilbers' model was a valuable way of conceptualising the options for measuring impact (see Figure 1).

In some systems the research question was about whether VET providers knew about, agreed with or complied with the quality assurance approach. Few participants thought the research question was situated at the higher end of the taxonomy – namely in the area of output, outcome and impact (see Figure 1).

This was felt to be a disappointment and many thought their system ought to be able to go further. Finding a clear and acceptable methodology to be more ambitious proved to be difficult. There were many who wanted to consider commitment to quality assurance rather than compliance as this would help to go further towards measuring impact. This would need to involve individual, team and institutional level measures if it was to provide useful information. However there were no evidence-based conclusions about why commitment to a quality assurance process led to, or was related to, improvements in quality.

The causal connection between quality assurance and the quality of VET was considered as problematic. There was a strong sense that an improving economy was like a 'rising tide that lifted all boats'. If the economy improved the quality of VET as measured by indicators associated with the labour market would rise. However this was not a uniform view as many indicators (such as labour market satisfaction with the skills and competence of learners, investment in teachers and trainers, and non-EQAVET indicators such as the prevalence and appropriateness of learners' soft skills) could be unaffected by the state of the economy. This discussion reinforced the earlier reflection that the measure of quality, and what level of quality is good enough, are often determined through a political process. In these circumstances measuring the impact of quality assurance approaches is not always welcomed.

## POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

The pre-PLA questionnaire completed by participants in advance of the PLA identified that there was uncertainty about selecting a conceptual approach to measuring impact. In many Member States work had started on impact – however there was no clear consensus about the next steps and the following range of approaches highlights this:

- impact has not been looked at, and there are no plans
- impact has been considered through indirect or other activities
- a new quality assurance approach has just started and it is too soon to measure impact
- the impact of quality assurance has been measured
- some parts of the system have been reviewed
- we are thinking about this
- we have planned to do this but we have not finalised the approach.

When we look at the methods that are used to measure the impact of a quality assurance system, a wide range is evident. These include:

- external review by a government agency or inspectorate
- an independent study

<sup>6</sup> The Background paper had highlighted the research by Weiss which had shown that relevant information is valuable but its availability is an insufficient precondition for triggering improvement-oriented behavior because:

- evaluation results may not be disseminated among the target group;
- users may not understand, or believe these;
- they may have no idea of how the results can be changed;
- and/or lack the skills, competences for utilising the evaluation findings;
- the required changes may be too controversial to accomplish them.

View the background paper [here](#)



- as part of an evaluation of other projects
- external review by external experts
- student feedback
- through the analysis of self-assessment data
- feedback from employers
- through an analysis of data provided by indicators

When the PLA participants considered these approaches, they found that there were a [number of conceptual models underpinning the specific approach](#). Six models, plus a combination of the six, were identified:

1. a [questioning model](#) which was based on questionnaires and interviews in an attempt to understand the impact. These were sample-based approaches where the questionnaires were piloted before being used more widely
2. an [impact indicator model](#) where indicators of impact were designed and agreed with stakeholders (these are different to the EQAVET indicators). Evidence was then sought to identify whether these indicators had changed as a result of the introduction of a quality assurance system
3. an [investment based model](#) which looked at the costs and benefits associated with using a quality assurance system
4. a [model based on 'factors for success'](#). This is a more intuitive approach which is based on evaluating successful VET providers and distilling what has made them successful in terms of quality assurance. It starts by assuming there are common factors across a range of VET providers – and these can be identified, analysed and shared
5. a [conceptual model](#) which is based on creating a theoretical understanding of how better quality assurance systems lead to improved quality of VET. Once the theoretical model is developed and tested for relevance, it is used as a basis for measuring impact
6. an [implementation based model](#) which is based on 'just doing something' without being too prescriptive about what quality assurance measures have been taken. Impact is measure by judging whether VET providers have done anything or not to introduce a systematic approach to quality assurance

There was a strong recognition that [the impact of quality assurance had to be experienced by learners](#). This helped to make VET more attractive and should lead to learners being more able to develop the skills and competences that are needed by the labour market. Experiencing the benefits of quality assurance requires VET providers and systems to [use](#) the results of student feedback to improve quality; it is not sufficient for data to just be [collected](#). A similar point was also made in relation to [employers' feedback](#); it had to be used and not just collected at the VET provider or system level. In both contexts the 'review' stage of the quality assurance cycle in the EQAVET Recommendation was seen as central to improving effectiveness and impact.

As with all measuring arrangements, the decision about what to measure changes behaviour. This can lead to unintended consequences which need to be managed. If an impact study focuses on student or employer feedback as a mechanism for changing quality, it can be at the expense of other measures. While the ['law of unintended consequences'](#) leads to arguments for a balanced approach to measuring impact, it is important to avoid bureaucratic and burdensome arrangements where the benefits are not significant..

## CONCLUSIONS

In many ways this was a first opportunity to reflect on the impact of quality assurance. Ideas were in the process of being developed – though in some Member States it was thought to be a premature discussion – and there was no consensus on the most appropriate methodology.

As a reflective exercise, the PLA enabled participants to explore new ideas and approaches; consider the benefits and costs associated with measuring impact; and review the conceptual models which underpinned possible theoretical approaches.

At this stage in the discussion participants were keen to keep things manageable and they wanted to be more confident that [any measure of impact would be more than a token exercise and would help to improve the quality of VET provision](#).

In addition to thinking about the impact of quality assurance, there was a lot of interest in [further promoting and encouraging the use of quality assurance](#). There was a feeling that, in many systems, the idea of quality assurance had not reached everyone. More needed to be done to secure the acceptance and benefits of systematic quality assurance.

For those participants whose system had decided to review the impact of quality assurance, there was an on-going debate on clarity – being clear as to why the impact was being measured, how the results would be used, what benefits could be expected from analysing impact, and what future improvements could be expected. Beneath a lot of this analysis was a fundamental question of whether the benefits outweighed the costs. In this



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context, once agreement to review impact had been made, there was a further debate as to which areas of VET are the priorities – work based, initial, continuing, non-formal, informal, school based, provider or system level etc. On this secondary question, there were no clear decisions.

The debate on impact and its measurement is just beginning. Undoubtedly it will continue and, once some Member States begin to measure the impact of their quality assurance systems there will be a lot more that we can all learn from their experience.

