

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on a Proposal for a recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training

COM(2008) 179 final — 2008/0069 (COD)

(2009/C 100/24)

On 23 April 2008 the Council decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 262 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on a

Proposal for a recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 11 September 2008. The rapporteur was Ms HERCZOG.

At its 448th plenary session, held on 21, 22 and 23 October 2008 (meeting of 23 October) the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 59 votes to two with four abstentions.

1. Executive summary

1.1. The EESC strongly supports the Commission's proposal to create a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (hereinafter referred to as EQARF), as quality vocational education and training (VET) is a key and integral aspect of the revised Lisbon strategy⁽¹⁾, designed to promote the knowledge-based society, social inclusion and cohesion, mobility, employability and competitiveness.

1.2. The EESC feels that the EQARF, if implemented, would help strengthen the European dimension of VET and enhance the mobility of learners and workers as well as contribute to transparency and mutual trust between and within national VET systems. It would also help overcome current unemployment problems by addressing the gap between labour market needs and qualifications of labour force.

1.3. The EESC is of the opinion that the EQARF is useful as it gives a particular emphasis to the improvement and evaluation of the 'outputs' and 'outcomes' of VET in terms of the three key EU policy priorities: increasing employability, improving the match between supply and demand for training, and promoting better access to lifelong training (especially for vulnerable groups).

1.3.1. The EESC invites the Commission to further focus on the end-users, learners, workers, institutions - VET providers and companies alike. Particular attention should be paid to those at risk of educational and labour market exclusion (e.g. early school leavers, young people and older workers facing high unemployment rates, people with special needs, people with

an immigrant background etc.) and their (re-)integration into the training.

1.4. The EESC feels that past achievements⁽²⁾ in European cooperation on quality assurance in VET represent a suitable basis for the continuation of current work and for further developments. Serious commitment from the European Parliament and the Council to the EQARF will significantly help ensure that a culture of continuous quality improvement is spread as widely as possible⁽³⁾. This can also inspire and promote the implementation of EQARF at national level.

1.5. The EESC welcomes the solid commitment from Member States to continuous improvement of the quality of VET, currently embodied in the European Network on Quality Assurance in VET (ENQA VET) which was set up in 2005 to ensure the long-term sustainability of the process, involving active and effective cooperation between 23 countries over the past few years.

1.5.1. The EESC recommends that the Commission consider how (in which fields, using which approaches and which practical instruments) the ENQA VET, supported by the Quality Assurance National Reference Points (QANRP), could act even more efficiently and effectively in promoting and supporting EQARF implementation in Member States, a process which will continue until (or beyond?) 2010.

⁽¹⁾ Lisbon Strategy (2000).

⁽²⁾ Council Conclusions on Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (28 May 2004). Copenhagen Declaration (30 November 2002), 'Promoting cooperation in quality assurance with particular focus on exchange of models and methods, as well as common criteria and principles for quality in vocational education and training'. Maastricht Communiqué (14 December 2004); Helsinki Communiqué (5 December 2006).

⁽³⁾ Helsinki Communiqué (5 December 2006).

1.6. The EESC considers it vital to provide consistency between the EQARF and the other European initiatives based on mutual trust such as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) ⁽¹⁾, and the European Credit System for VET (ECVET) ⁽²⁾. There is a need for closer harmonisation of activities and identification of specific interlinks between these common European reference tools, at both European and national levels, in order to enhance mutual benefits and synergies, as well as to create the conditions for qualifications to be accredited and transferred across Europe.

1.7. Vocational education and training is a public good, and quality in VET needs control for the sake of the citizens and the society as a whole. Control should be monitored / implemented by public bodies which themselves should also be quality assured. The EESC deems the role of these bodies – designated by governments in the majority of Member States – to be of fundamental importance, and recommends that the Commission strengthens the role of these bodies.

1.8. The EESC urges all stakeholders — institutions, employers, trade unions, sector organisations, chambers of commerce, industrial and professional bodies, providers of employment services, regional bodies, organisations of social economy, etc. — to assume their particular responsibilities and contribute to the achievement of the joint objectives. Bottom-up cooperation in the field of VET quality assurance should be stepped up in all stages of the work.

1.8.1. The EESC calls for more active involvement of the organised civil society and would remind the Commission of the need to cooperate closely with civil society in the field of quality assurance in VET, in order to make the system more inclusive and build it on existing networks and positive experience. The lack of such cooperation and dialogue in many countries is holding back the successful introduction of such a quality culture.

1.8.2. The EESC feels that the social partners, as the main stakeholders in the labour market, should have an important role in reaching the four main objectives in VET (mobility, accessibility, attractiveness and social inclusion), and should also play a central role in defining and controlling the quality of VET systems at European and national levels. It is only with the active participation of the social partners that the system could be adaptable to the changing labour markets, a precondition for any quality in VET approach.

⁽¹⁾ Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualification Framework.

⁽²⁾ Establishment of the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training.

2. Introduction

2.1. Given the diversity and complexity of the VET systems and the quality approaches within and across Member States, there is a need for common points of reference to ensure transparency, consistency and portability between the many streams of policy and practical developments across Europe, in order to increase mutual trust.

2.2. Following a long period of preparation and consultation, the European Commission has put forward a proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training.

2.3. The recommendation aims to support efforts in the Member States to continuously improve the quality of VET systems and programmes by implementing a common European reference tool: a quality assurance and quality evaluation framework — EQARF.

2.4. The main function of the EQARF is to provide agreed cross-country references that help Member States and stakeholders to document, develop, monitor, evaluate and improve the effectiveness of their VET provision and VET quality management practices.

2.5. The EESC's position on the Commission's proposal is essentially based on its accumulated knowledge and experience ⁽³⁾.

⁽³⁾ See the following EESC opinions:

- 'Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning', rapporteur: Mr RODRÍGUEZ GARCÍA-CARO (OJ C 175, 27.7.2007)
- 'Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on key competences for lifelong learning', rapporteur: Ms HERCZOG (OJ C 195, 18.8.2006)
- 'Proposal for a Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on Transnational mobility for education and training purposes: European Quality Charter for Mobility', rapporteur: Mr CZAJKOWSKI (OJ C 88, 11.4.2006)
- 'Proposal for a Recommendation of the Council and of the European Parliament on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education', rapporteur: Mr SOARES (OJ C 255, 14.10.2005)
- 'Training and productivity', rapporteur: Mr KORYFIDIS (OJ C 120, 20.5.2005).

3. The EESC's comments

3.1. The EESC agrees with the Commission that common quality assurance reference criteria are necessary if we want to set and reach common goals in European VET policy.

3.2. The EESC welcomes and emphasises the positive features of the Commission's proposal on EQARF which are: voluntary commitment of the Member States to use the Framework, its adaptability to different national systems in accordance with national legislation and practice, as well as the need for decisions on its implementation to be taken at national, regional and/or local level.

3.3. The EQARF is based on and improves the Common Quality Assurance Framework (CQAF) which was itself based on best practices from the Member States. The EESC is pleased that the EQARF has been made simpler than the CQAF, with more specific and clearer quality criteria and indicative descriptors, which should make it significantly easier for Member States to interpret, understand and use.

3.4. The EESC is of the opinion that the novel and modern quality assurance criteria and indicative descriptors in Annex 1 to the Recommendation, developed through consensus, make the EQARF a valuable tool in the continuous improvement of VET quality at European and national levels. These quality criteria and indicative descriptors, reflecting fundamental aspects of work on VET quality, enable proactive planning, implementation, evaluation and further development of quality assurance activities at national and institutional (i.e. VET provider) levels. They also allow for steps to improve transparency and consistency between policy measures and initiatives undertaken by individual Member States in the field.

3.5. The EESC feels that it is especially important for the Commission to have access to reliable data based on objective facts on progress towards achieving agreed quality assurance objectives, in line with the three main (policy) objectives (see Point 1.3). The EESC is therefore pleased that Annex 2 to the Recommendation sets out a proposed initial set of common system-level indicators for measuring and evaluating VET quality at national level.

3.6. Indicators are of key importance to good governance and quality of VET systems, since they back up evidence-based policy-making and promote cross-country benchmarking. However, the EESC would remind the Commission that the methods of collecting and compiling data for EQARF indicators

should be harmonised or standardised across the Member States (uniform definitions, interpretation and calculation methods) so that data are more reliable and comparable.

3.7. The EESC feels that it is especially important to encourage VET stakeholders at various levels to undertake systematic self-evaluation (if possible, in combination with an independent external evaluation, for example in the context of the regular European Peer Review). Dealing with areas identified by self-evaluation helps to ensure high quality training provision, thus meeting the expectations and interests of the partners involved (both participants in training and employers). Self-evaluation provides regular feedback on the partners' satisfaction with training provision and educational services, on the needs of the labour market, as well as on employees' skills and competences acquired through training.

3.8. One feature of the EQARF with particular added value is that it encourages the use of common quality criteria, indicative descriptors and indicators, as well as it promotes quality improvement based on regular self-evaluation, both in VET systems and in VET service providers/institutions. The EESC would like to remind stakeholders that quality development at system level in particular countries can only be achieved if the EQARF is introduced not only in VET institutions but also at VET system (management) level. In addition, using common quality criteria, indicative descriptors and indicators also enables comparison between VET management and VET provision practices across the EU.

3.9. The EESC would like to remind the Commission that the most important element for achieving the common objectives is a genuine commitment from Member States to implementing and applying the EQARF. This should involve translating the common basic principles, quality requirements and indicative descriptors into specific objectives and practical initiatives, and consistently implementing such objectives and measures.

3.10. The EESC urges the Commission to encourage and support the use of the EQARF, as well as its continuous improvement at European and national levels. The Commission, in order to foster and support the use of EQARF, should in future find the means to finance the relevant schemes and should likewise raise existing and new quality partners' awareness about funding opportunities at all levels. The Commission should also cooperate more closely with and support the European Network on Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training in its task of continuously adjusting and improving common quality principles, quality criteria, indicative descriptors and indicators.

3.11. The EESC is pleased that the proposal includes a significant quality guarantee in the form of a regular review (at three-year intervals) and an evaluation of how the EQARF is being introduced at national level; the results would also provide input for the subsequent review of the Reference Framework at European level. In the EESC's view, the evaluations should focus on the actual impact of the EQARF on VET quality at national and European levels, on the identification of areas where developments or improvements have taken place, as well as on changes in implementation and their extent.

3.12. The EESC recommends extensive information dissemination and improved communication on the EQARF, to reach as many potential participants and stakeholders as possible. A communication plan and strategy should be drawn up to publicise and emphasise the benefits and likely achievements of using EQARF at all levels, for VET providers (institutions) in particular. Action at various levels is needed to ensure effective communication at European and national levels on the one hand, and at system and VET provider levels on the other. Together with the Commission, the ENQA VET could play a significant role in communication at European level, whereas this could be assured at national level by the Quality Assurance National Reference Points.

3.13. In line with its opinion on training and productivity⁽¹⁾, the EESC would once again like to emphasise the need for closer coordination between the various levels of the education and training systems at European and national level as regards lifelong learning. This also calls for coherent approaches on quality assurance and quality evaluation across education and training sectors.

3.14. The EESC is confident that VET should be developed at all levels as an essential and integral part of lifelong learning. It

is important to ensure that VET ties in closely with preceding and subsequent educational levels, particularly with general education and higher education. The different age groups – including young children – should be provided with the necessary development opportunities and infrastructures, and be evaluated according to lifecycles.

3.14.1. Quality evaluation should apply to all forms of education and educational establishments from early childhood onwards, as education in early childhood enhances subsequent academic and professional performance; it should also apply to primary education, to ensure that pupils acquire the basic competences before moving on to a higher educational level. Evaluation of VET will be less credible and effective if it only takes into account the period of VET itself, without looking at academic performance at school, which affects subsequent performance and career paths. The EESC believes that it is important for the Commission to be aware of the links between individual educational levels, taking into account implications and circumstances which are extrinsic to education, and also of their combined influence on the quality of vocational education and training.

3.14.2. The EESC would like to emphasise the importance of strengthening the links between quality assurance and quality evaluation in VET and all sectors included in education, with the aim of improving communication, thus increasing mutual trust as well as finding a common perspective for quality assurance and joint developments. The EESC welcomes that the cooperation on quality assurance has begun with higher education and suggests that this cooperation should be continued and strengthened. Also the implementation of the EQF calls for coherent quality assurance approaches, particularly between VET and HE, since the promotion of lifelong learning is a theme common to both sectors.

Brussels, 22 October 2008.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Mario SEPI

⁽¹⁾ See the EESC opinion 'Training and productivity', rapporteur: Mr KORYFIDIS (OJ C 120, 20.5.2005).