



ENQA-VET

European Network for Quality Assurance
in Vocational Education and Training

This report presents the results of a Peer Learning Activity, which has been prepared by the independent expert named on the cover. 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.

**REPORT OF THE
PEER LEARNING ACTIVITY**

**ON THE ROLE OF SOCIAL PARTNERS
IN QUALITY PROCEDURES IN VET**

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**Erwin Seyfried
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Executive Summary

1. European social partner organisations participate in ENQA-VET and in its board and given their crucial role for the development of VET a peer learning activity “On the role of social partners in quality procedures in VET” was organised in Berlin from 7-9 October 2008. Representatives from trade unions and employer organisations from 15 countries participated in this event.
2. This report contains information on the involvement of social partner organisations in the planning, implementation, evaluation and quality management of VET at national level. The report presents the results of the discussions within the peer learning as well as the conclusions that have been made.
3. In most countries that participated in the PLA, involvement of social partner organisations in VET is surprisingly strong. A corporative culture supporting the involvement of social partners in all major issues is prevailing in many European countries.
4. A demand for increased involvement is seen in the area of quality assurance both at VET systems and at VET provider level. The adoption of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF) and following national frameworks for quality assurance is seen as an important step forward.
5. The main challenge for further reform of VET towards improved quality is seen in further decentralization of responsibilities for budgets and implementation according to local and regional needs. In relation to this a more systematic measurement of outputs and outcomes should be implemented as part of a quality circle.
6. The diversity of developments across countries entails a growing need for common European references aimed at increasing transparency and consistency between Member States’ policy initiatives in VET. In this context, the EQARF could help Member States in supporting a continuous and coherent improvement of their VET systems.
7. Detailed information was given on the peculiarities of the German dual VET system and its approach towards quality: Training regulations provide the formal basis for orderly, standardised training in state-recognised occupations and quality of VET is achieved by continuous regulation of standards, that are developed in consensus of employer organisations and trade unions. Social partners contribute also to guidelines for the approval of companies to participate in VET and are engaged in setting up vocational and pedagogical standards for training instructors. Their strong involvement can be seen as a basic principle assuring the quality of the system.
8. Experiences with quality and quality assurance from other national VET systems illustrated the need to attract more SMEs for participation in VET. Additionally there is a challenge to bring VET-teachers closer to the needs at the workplace and to organize practical company-based training in order to keep their competences and skills updated.
9. The EQARF was broadly discussed and was understood as a basic instrument to assist countries in developing their VET systems towards greater effectiveness. A balance should be assured between the European common framework and national peculiarities: National stakeholders should decide on how the implementation of a quality approach is made at provider-level. Quality procedures must be suitable to the national situation and to the preconditions of (particularly small and medium) companies.

10. As a result of an intensive discussion of the set of indicators included in the EQARF, all ten indicators have been accepted given that countries have the freedom to choose amongst them according to their possibilities.

11. The trade unions stressed that for initial VET quality assurance should not only encompass VET schools and training centres but quality should be assured, too, in work-based learning and training. For continuous VET of adults robust quality assurance procedures and processes should be established. Providers for continuous VET should be approved and regularly accredited. A national register of training providers should be established.

12. As a conclusion, social partner organisations agreed, that more sensitisation, dialogue and cooperation in quality issues should be promoted. More social partner organisations at local, regional, and national levels should be informed and included in the procedures for quality and quality assurance in VET.

13. At national level, it should be assured that representatives of employers and trade unions are included in the Quality Assurance National Reference Points. Social partners should be ready to support increased awareness of the EQARF in all bodies and organisations that are relevant for VET.

14. The social partners acknowledged their involvement in ENQA-VET and stressed their intention for active participation. They want to strengthen and to improve the effectiveness of the education and training systems by supporting the implementation of EQF and EQARF. They are willing to continue and to deepen their cooperation within ENQA-VET.

15. The ex-post assessment of the peer learning activity by the participants was extremely positive: “Professionals from different European countries had the opportunity to share experiences of their own cultural environments with enthusiasm and professionalism while contributing directly to the European process towards a common EQARF. Each participant had the chance to get an insight of the quality assurance systems and ‘good practices’ of their European counterparts, ultimately aspiring to be instrumental in getting such or better systems adopted in their own contexts.”

Key Recommendations

1. The social partner organisations represented in the peer learning activity agreed, that their representatives at local, regional, and national levels should be informed and included in the procedures for quality and quality assurance in VET. A secure funding or budget should be available to assist the social partners, to allow improved understanding of quality issues and participation.

2. At national level, it should be assured that representatives of employers and trade unions are included in the Quality Assurance National Reference Points. Detailed information should be distributed on the structure and the working programmes of the National Reference Points, in order to make sure that social partners get involved as much as possible.

3. In all Member States appropriate and coherent structures, processes, procedures and methodologies for quality assurance in VET should be put in place, which should ensure maximum social partner involvement in all respective activities. Social partner organisations should be ready to support increased awareness of the EQARF (European Quality Assurance Reference Framework) in all bodies and organisations that are relevant for VET.

4. The representatives of social partner organisations expressed their interest and their concern to keep the balance between European common quality frameworks being established for VET and national peculiarities.

5. The social partners acknowledged their involvement in ENQA-VET and stressed their intention for active participation. They would like to enhance their role at European level. Learning from good practice examples and European-wide dissemination of good practice for quality and quality assurance in VET is highly appreciated.

1. Context

European social partner organisations participate in ENQA-VET and in its board. ENQA-VET, the European Network on Quality Assurance in VET was launched as an institutional platform for coherent, structured and sustainable European cooperation in October 2005, and the networks' ambition is to support quality and quality assurance in the VET-systems within and across European Member States.

The participation of social partner organisations in the network is based on the principle of European social dialogue, which was included in the Treaty for the European Communities in 1992. Following, in the "Copenhagen Declaration" for enhanced European cooperation in VET it was stated, that "the social partners play an indispensable role in the development, validation and recognition of vocational competences and qualifications at all levels" and that their organisations "are partners in the promotion of an enhanced cooperation in this area".¹

Given their crucial role for the development of VET, the social partners themselves set up a "Framework of actions for the lifelong development of competences and qualifications", which serves as their contribution to the implementation of the Lisbon strategy and as an overall guideline for their activities and their involvement in European cooperation in VET.²

As part of its work programme 2008-2009 ENQA-VET supports the building of capacity for quality assurance within VET systems and providers, and peer learning activities are one of the tools used to achieve this goal.

Peer learning is a process of cooperation at European level which provides an opportunity for policymakers, social partners and practitioners from one country to learn, through direct contact and practical cooperation, from the experiences of their counterparts elsewhere in Europe. Peer learning activities provide an opportunity for participants to engage in a process of learning from others working within systems which have demonstrated particular strengths in the delivery of a specific subject related to quality assurance in VET. They provide a forum for discussion and the exchange and are aimed at sharing best practice.

Against this background, a peer learning activity "On the role of social partners in quality procedures in VET" was organised in Berlin from 7-9 October 2009. In particular, this peer learning activity aimed to strengthen the role of social partners in VET at regional, national and European level by exchanging experiences and good practices for their inclusion in decision making process for quality in VET.

The meeting was hosted together by DGB, the German Trade Union Organisation, and the BDA, the German Employer Association. Representatives of social partner organisations, both from the trade unions and from employer organisations, from 15 countries (Austria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Norway, Poland, Slovenia and Sweden) participated in the event. Furthermore, the meeting was accompanied by representatives from CEDEFOP and the ENQA-VET secretariat and a scientific expert, Erwin Seyfried, the author of this report.³

¹ Declaration of the European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training, and the European Commission on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training. Convened in Copenhagen on 29 and 30 November 2002. http://ec.europa.eu/education/pdf/doc125_en.pdf

² European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), Union of Industrial and Employers' Confederations of Europe (UNICE), European Centre of Enterprises with Public Participation and of Enterprises of General Economic Interest (CEEP): Framework of actions for the lifelong development of competences and qualifications. 28 February 2002. <http://www.etuc.org/a/580>

³ For further details see list of participants.

This report contains information on the involvement of social partner organisations in the planning, implementation, evaluation and quality management of VET. This information was gathered as part of the preparatory activities from the countries participating in the peer learning activity (section 2). The report summarizes additional information and national experiences with the role of social partner organisations in quality procedures, which was exchanged in the peer learning activity (section 3). Also, this report presents the results of the discussions (section 4) and the insights that have been achieved (section 5) within the peer learning activity as well as the conclusions that have been made by the social partner organisations (section 6). Finally (section 7), the assessments of the peer learning activity that have been made by the participants are presented in a condensed way.

2. National starting points

In most of the countries that have been involved in the peer learning activity, involvement of social partner organisations is surprisingly strong. In particular this is true for countries like Austria, Germany, Luxemburg or Poland, where apprenticeship training is a traditional vocational route. Generally speaking, in countries with VET systems that are based mainly on apprenticeship training, the influence of social partner organisation is more profound than in countries with school-based systems. But even apart from these differences, a corporative culture supporting the involvement of social partners in all major issues concerning VET is prevailing in many European countries. Social partner organisations are consulted in the decision making processes for new legislative acts and decrees concerning VET, in many cases the initiative to set up new curricula as well as to adapt existing ones comes from the social partners and their sub-organisations, i.e. the chambers. Social partners are represented in the governing bodies for VET (Ireland, Lithuania and Luxembourg), they are involved in examinations of craft degrees (Poland) or organize these examinations even by themselves. A bare ad-hoc involvement, like in Malta, is rare.

2.1 Current national situation seen in European perspective

When analysing in a European perspective more closely the kind of involvement of social partners in quality issues in VET at Member State level, one can make use of the steps of the PDCA quality cycle (planning, implementation, assessment and organisation of change), where the principles of the CQAF are based on, too. The CQAF (Common Quality Assurance Framework) is a commonly developed European model for to analyse quality assurance practices. In European cooperation it is used as cross-reading instrument and a tool for to structure the exchange of experiences and cooperation on quality assurance in VET.

The CQAF-model takes into consideration relevant experiences and practices in the Member States as well as the key elements of existing models of quality assurance (such as the ISO-models of the International Organization for Standardisation or the EFQM-model). To avoid the risk of creating too complex a model, the CQAF reduced the existing models to their common denominator. Because of its general character the CQAF-model can be applied at the level of VET systems and at the level of VET providers, not as a mechanical tool but to inspire stakeholders at both levels in their own ambitions towards quality.

The CQAF is a circular model that comprises both the measurement of results according to pre-defined goals as well as the resulting change management. The following country experiences are presented according to the main steps of the model:

Planning

- In a number of countries (LI, LU, PL) social partner organisations participate in the planning of political strategies for the development of the VET systems, in FI, IE and IT they are involved in planning at national, regional and local level. In AT, DE, SL social partners are responsible for to set up new curricula, they draft the content of VET courses (LI) or vocational standards (SL).

Delivery

- In the delivery of apprenticeship training (AU, DE, LU, SL) social partner organisation, and in particular employers, fulfil their strongest role concerning the provision of quality in VET. In school-based VET systems (CZ, FI, PL) social partners organize and take part in cooperation between VET schools, regional enterprises and professional bodies. Other

activities of social partners that are closely linked to the practical provision of VET consist of organisation of work placement schemes for VET students (LI) or organisation of practical teacher training in enterprises (LU).

Assessment

- Looking at the assessment step of the quality cycle, it is to discover that social partner organisations (chambers) are (co-) organizers of examinations (AU, DE, LI, LU), that they supervise craft examinations (PL) or control counsellors (LU). In IE they are involved in the governing boards of awarding bodies and IT they participate in consultation processes.

Review and organisation of change

- Being responsible for the introduction of new curricula and the abolishment of outdated educational contents, social partners are strongly involved in review procedures and for the organisation of change (AU, DE, LU, SL). In other countries they are involved in consultation processes for to organize change including all relevant stakeholders in VET. In IT these processes are organized in regions, at the level of VET schools and even in (bigger) enterprises.

Resources

- The resources for participation in quality procedures are coming mostly from public bodies, national ministries, public employment services, regional governments or awarding bodies (IE). In some countries European Structural Funds are the most important resources (IT, LI, PL). Also complaints have been made that resources are too small for to fulfil the complex tasks (FI, LI, MT).

2.2 Trends and challenges for the future

By summarizing these experiences it is to be stated that in general there is a strong involvement of social partner organisations in quality procedures in VET, there is good cooperation in national, regional and sectoral councils and there are positive experiences with the quality of social partnerships between trade union and employer representatives despite some different interests the partners might have.

Nevertheless, there are a number of countries, presumably including a lot of those countries which did not participate in the peer learning activity, where a greater involvement of social partner organisations seems to be necessary.

The main challenges for further reform of VET towards improved quality are to further decentralize responsibilities for budgets and implementation of VET according to local and regional needs. In school-based VET systems there is seen a need for a more demand driven education in order to achieve employability for the graduates.

Although there is a readiness for VET reform in most countries, the implementation of a coherent lifelong learning approach is still prevailing and more exchange of experience on this issue is strongly desired.

A demand for increased exchange of experience is seen also in the area of quality assurance both at VET systems and at VET provider level. Although in several countries (DE, IE, IT) there is a growing number of quality approved and quality accredited VET organisations,

quality assurance is still in an initial phase. The adoption of a European framework and following national frameworks for quality assurance is seen as an important step forward.

In connection with the mentioned shift of paradigm towards increased decentralisation of responsibilities, a systematic output and outcome measurement as part of a quality circle approach has yet to be implemented in a broad and sustainable way.

3. Exchange of experience

3.1 The European dimension

As an introduction to the exchange of experiences between the representatives from different countries, Burkart Sellin and Tina Bertzeletou (CEDEFOP), gave presentations on the European dimension of cooperation in VET, the current state of art, and the topics on the agenda ahead.

Burkart Sellin presented the Lisbon objectives on education and training, addressed the Bologna and the Copenhagen process and the European strategy for Lifelong Learning.⁴ In this perspective he stressed the links between the Higher Education sector and the VET sector. But whereas in Higher Education quality assurance and accreditation are European-wide shared common elements, this is generally not the case in VET and LLL (life long learning). Quality assurance and accreditation in VET is still in an infancy stadium, and a lot of effort is needed to assure quality of VET in a European context.

Tina Bertzeletou presented CEDEFOP's strategic mission in implementing the Lisbon strategy and the 2010 work programme in education and training. Through her presentation it became clear, that CEDEFOP contributes in a complex manner, at many levels and in different fields to the development of European VET systems, but that a lot still has to be done to meet the five education/VET related benchmarks till 2010.⁵ The focus on quality is a key element to meet these objectives and the implementation of the different European tools, like EQF and ECVET, entails the use of quality assurance mechanisms. The diversity of developments across countries entails a growing need for common European references aimed at increasing transparency and consistency between Member States' policy initiatives in VET. In this context, the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQARF) could help Member States to support a continuous and coherent improvement of their VET systems.

Representing one of the host organisations of the peer learning activity, Hermann Nehls, DGB, addressed the social partners role as European key players in the area of VET and quality assurance.⁶ At European level and at national level social partner organisations should face the following challenges:

- How to enable CQAF to become the reference for developing quality on all levels of life long learning?
- What requirements are necessary to implement national quality assurance systems?
- How is it possible to guarantee transparency within the existing complexity of VET provision?
- How to assure the employees' and employers' full participation within the quality related processes?

When analysing the role of social partners in national VET systems and quality assurance procedures, he proposed to ask the following questions:

- Do employees and employers play an active role within the process of QA?
- Who is responsible for regulations and criteria?

⁴ Sellin, B: Education and Training: European Union Progress towards 2010. Ppt-presentation, Berlin 7 October 2008.

⁵ Bertzeletou, T.: Quality within the EU VET package. Ppt-presentation, Berlin 7 October 2008.

⁶ Nehls, H.: Peer Learning Activity European Social partners on Quality Developments in VET. Ppt-presentation, Berlin 7 October 2008.

- What types of responsibilities have employees and employers?
- How far are social partners involved in developing new quality assurance systems in continuing training ?

3.2 The VET system in Germany

As the peer learning activity took place in Germany, detailed information was given on the peculiarities of the German VET system and the role of social partners within the procedures assuring quality.

To illustrate the role of social partners and of employers for the German VET system, it is interesting to note that German companies invest EUR 28 bn. each year into the apprenticeship system for initial VET. Every year 600.000 apprenticeship contracts are concluded, which all are registered at the chambers.

Apart from this overall engagement, the main tasks of social partners consist in developing and modernising training regulations (training standards for content and structure) according to (changing) companies' needs. Many training regulations need a revision after a few years, new skills are needed others should disappear. Social partner organisations also build up a framework for collective agreement, addressing issues like remuneration of apprenticeship training.

The attractiveness of the German VET system is mainly due to the fact that training is provided according to companies requirements, that it is focussed on practical training. For the employers there is the opportunity to choose the best trainees for employment, which means prevention of fluctuation, low recruiting costs, low training costs for newcomers, and highly qualified skilled personal.

The current challenges for VET can be summarized as follows: In general schools the drop-out rate amounts to 8%, amongst pupils with migration background it amounts to 18%. Over 20% of young people leaving the general education system belong to risk-groups with regard to professional success, amongst graduates with migration background the relevant figure is 40%.

Several efforts are undertaken by social partner organisations and in particular by employers to tackle these problems, and to improve the access to VET for young people. The creation of school-business networks has the main tool and so far the promotion of cooperation between schools and companies has created over 450 regional networks. They try hard to improve knowledge about working life, training and occupation, they allow combination of school and internships in companies, and they support transition to apprenticeship.

3.3 Quality and quality assurance in the German VET system

A main factor for quality in terms of outcomes of VET and matching VET with the needs of the labour market can be seen in the fact, that the German apprenticeship system is fully demand-driven. Students apply for VET training in companies, they are not supplied with a place in a VET school. The company provides the apprentice mostly with practical training and the VET-school supplements the workplace-based training with theoretical instructions.

The German approach towards quality in VET is strongly based on regulation with the recently reformed Vocational Training Act (2005) and a corresponding training regulation providing the general backbone that is complemented by the framework curricula defined for each of the state-recognised professions. The Vocational Training Act defines the objective of VET together with the overall criteria and standards for training regulations, examinations and

organisation of VET. Furthermore this legislative document defines the preconditions for the suitability of training premises and the criteria for suitability of trainers at the workplace. Training regulations define minimum standards for knowledge, skills, competencies and the scope of professional experience, which has to be acquired for successful completion of VET in a certain profession. Regarding trainings methods and technical requirements, training regulations are designed flexible and that allows enterprises to include company-specific issues and individually organized training methods.

Close cooperation between all relevant stakeholders involved in the VET-system is one of the secrets behind the effectiveness of the German dual system. Thus, in principle training regulations as well as specific framework curricula are developed jointly and with the purpose to ensure correspondence between the definition of content and scope in the curricula and their practical implementation in VET-courses. The same applies for the continuous modernisation of profiles of training professions, where there is also the intention to reach consensus.

Further elements of quality assurance in the German VET system and in particular the role of social partner organisations in this regulatory framework can be summarized as following:

- Training regulations provide the formal basis for orderly, standardised training in recognised occupations and quality of VET is achieved by continuous regulation of standards, that are developed in consensus of employer organisations and trade unions. This strong involvement of social partners in the planning of VET can be seen as a basic principle contributing to the quality of the system.
- On federal level there are specific legal procedures and guidelines for the approval of companies to participate in the dual education. Thus, trainees may only be engaged by an enterprise, if the nature and equipment of its training premises are suitable and if the ratio between the number of trainees and the number of training places or the number of skilled staff employed is appropriate. Social partners contribute to the definition of those guidelines.
- According to the overall legislative framework for VET, the chambers of industry, crafts, agriculture and trade are defined as the competent authorities for to organize VET, and as such they have to make sure that training premises are suitable and that trainers have the necessary personal and technical qualifications.
- The chambers are responsible for the continuous supervision of training provision in the companies and to this end they appoint training consultants whose task is not only to supervise the quality of training but to provide support and advice to all stakeholders involved, too. The consultants of the chambers are monitoring the quality of training at the workplace by visiting regularly the companies that employ VET-students.
- Trainers and supervisors for trainees at the workplace must proof to possess the necessary personal and technical qualifications which means both the relevant vocational skills, the knowledge and professional qualifications as well as the teaching skills required to give initial training. Furthermore they must have been employed for an appropriate period of time in a practical capacity of their profession. The social partners are engaged in setting up the vocational and pedagogical standards for training instructors and thus contribute to another important factor assuring the quality of training.
- The trainee has to keep minutes of the learning activities carried out in a daily record book, which is counter-checked by the trainer and which is a precondition for applying for the final examination at the chamber.

It will not come us a surprise that in SMEs (small and medium enterprises) you will hardly find an internal quality management approach towards apprenticeship training at the

workplace, therefore cooperation and continuous exchange of experience with the chambers and their consultants is an important tool to assure quality of training particularly in SMEs. Regularly, chambers provide owners of SMEs with continuous training addressing new technological, organizational or economic developments including their impacts on new demands for the training apprentices at the workplace.

Nevertheless, German employers are not happy with the EQARF asking for quality management systems at VET provider level, as according to their opinion it is impossible to for a small company to apply a quality assurance system for their training activities.

3.4 Experiences with quality assurance from other national VET systems

In **Slovenia** quality assurance at the level of the VET system is done in similar way like in Germany and Austria. What needs still to be done is to attract smaller enterprises for participation in VET by offering them a network for providing education in cooperation. Additionally there is a challenge to bring VET teachers in schools closer to the needs at the workplace and of employers, and to organize practical continuous training for teachers.

In **Poland**, social partners are involved in the recognition of the exams done in the craft chambers. Another issue, related to quality is the training of instructors, who receive their vocational entitlement after two years of education and successful completion of the exams.

The **Czech Republic** is in the middle of a clean-up process of the educational system in order to improve its effectiveness. It has proven difficult to achieve the same standards for VET in all Czech regions. Currently, an agency of the Ministry is responsible for drafting an overall framework for the VET system, which resembles the English system.

Austrian companies traditionally contribute with their own payments to the apprenticeship training with an average cost of EUR 40.000-50.000 per student and year. However, financial assistance and tax reductions are given to companies by the government in order to increase the number of enterprises participating in VET. A new element considering quality is going to be included in the use of these funds: The idea is to provide financial assistance for training of trainers, to give incentives for good marks and for a good documentation of training progress. Around EUR 2.000 per VET-student will be paid with the money coming from the budget of the public employment service, to which both employers and employees make their contributions. In order to avoid too much bureaucracy, the administration of the new funding scheme is done by the chambers, they will decide on gratifications for companies and will monitor the whole process.

In **Luxembourg** a certain pressure is felt to react to new developments: Several practices, which have been done since several years are pointed out as a quality assurance approach. A particular quality element can be seen in the organisation of practical training for VET teachers, which is organised and coordinated by the social partners. Regularly, VET teachers have to visit their students at the workplace, when the students are in their internship.

Lithuania has a school-based VET system with 12 weeks of practical training. Examinations are organized by the chambers as well as training for mentors in companies. A current challenge for the quality of VET provision is to have company-based practical training for VET-teachers in order to keep their skills updated.

In **Malta** there are three training-centres with different profiles, all run under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. Examinations are mainly theory-based and taken by British examiners. Chambers do not play a role in the educational system. One factor contributing to quality is that VET-students in hotel and tourism have to go for one year abroad.

4. Discussion of quality and quality assurance procedures

The existence of the EQARF was overwhelmingly welcomed, despite some critics that had been made on the extent of the consultancy process. EQARF was seen as a practical instrument to support the implementation of the other instruments of the European VET-package, i.e. EQF and ECVET. With growing mobility of workers around Europe there is a need for more transparency, at least to start moving forward towards this direction. The European quality framework should be mainly understood as an instrument to assure quality on systems level, but not primarily on VET-provider level. EQARF is understood to assist countries in developing their VET-systems and to make their systems more effective. Every national system should have an approach to assure the quality of VET-provision, in order to increase mutual trust and transparency. National stakeholders should decide, however, on how the implementation of a quality approach is made at provider-level. It was pointed out, that in many countries most of the tools for quality assurance are already in place, although they are differently shaped and applied. In principle, quality assurance procedures should exist at VET school level and in companies, but both procedures can be different and must be suitable to the national situation and to the preconditions of (particularly small and medium) companies.

An agreement of minimum standards for quality in VET was seen to be necessary, but one should be aware of the big differences not only between national systems but in particular between companies.

There was consensus, that the quality of VET provision should be measured primarily towards the outcome, which is employability of graduates and the individual factors leading to employability. Quality assurance should make sure that qualifications in terms of learning outcomes have been really acquired by the students and that the relevant examination procedures are robust.

The discussion of the set of indicators in the EQARF revealed a number of differences (for the set of indicators see box below). The trade union representatives acknowledged all the indicators annexed to the EQARF, and classified this set as a minimum to measure the quality of VET. From the employers side the most important indicators are the placement rate of graduates in employment and the utilization of acquired skill in the workplace as these indicators contribute most to transparency and include the biggest valued added in terms of effectiveness. Nevertheless, for the employers, too, all ten indicators are generally acceptable if countries have the freedom to choose amongst them according to their possibilities.

The European Set of Quality Indicators

1. Share of VET-providers applying QM-systems (by type of used approach)
2. Investment in training of teachers and trainers
3. Participation rates in VET (according to profiles of training programmes and gender / other groups, like migrants, handicapped persons, etc.)
4. Completion rates (according to profiles of training programmes and gender / specific groups)
5. Destination after graduation from training (according to profiles of training programmes and gender /specific groups)
6. Utilisation of acquired skills in the workplace (both from the perspective of the employer and the former VET-student)
7. Unemployment according to specific groups of people (as context variable)
8. Prevalence of vulnerable groups to be defined nationally (as context variable)
9. Descriptor: Responsiveness of the VET-system to adapt to changing demands in the labour market
10. Descriptor: Schemes to promote better access to VET, in particular for vulnerable groups (to be defined nationally)

Whereas employer organisations are oriented mainly towards the effectiveness and efficiency of VET-systems, the trade unions' focus is more on the overall societal implications and how to support people with minor chances in society or people being at social risk.

Although investment in training of trainers was seen as a crucial issue, there were critical arguments about measurement and comparability. Investments should not be seen as a goal but as means to achieve the goal of having better trainers; therefore, increased investments into the training of trainers should be combined with a human resource development plan.

5. Results

The representatives of the employer organisations and the trade unionists discussed in separate meetings their interests, their ideas and their proposals for to strengthen quality issues in the national VET systems and in European cooperation.

5.1 Trade unions' results

For initial VET quality assurance should not only encompass VET schools and training centres but quality should be assured, too, in work-based learning and training. Trainers and mentors in companies should be trained according to certain standards of competence, including not only technical competences but also social and pedagogical ones. A national register of VET trainers should be established. All SME owners participating in VET should have a special qualification for delivering training and teaching VET students in their company.

For continuous VET of adults robust quality assurance procedures and processes should be established. Providers for continuous VET should be approved and regularly accredited. A national register of training providers should be established.

At European level more transparency on quality issues in VET should be created by working on common understandings of VET methodologies, curricula development, standards of competence, levels of qualification and quality assurance procedures.

5.2 Employers' results

Apart from the results which have been addressed in previous sections (see section 4.) the representatives of the employer organisations pointed to the need for inclusion of employers in a bottom-up process for adaptation of training, to strengthen their participation in conducting surveys on the quality of VET, to include their views and opinions in the evaluation of VET, and to strengthen their role in shaping the quality of the system.

5.3 Social partners different views⁷

Trade unions' focus	Employers' focus
Training to support personal development and career path: evolution of workers inside/outside company	Development of individual competences for company performance and competitiveness.
Protection against precariousness: social equality access to education 'for all'.	Worker's adaptation to job: need to make initial education closer to company needs.
Workers needs and training regulations as key aspects to develop.	More responsibility of workers to progress on his/her training process.
Responsibility for cost of training: employers and/or by the public authorities.	Training programmes as necessarily adapted to market needs.

⁷ Nehls, H.: Peer Learning Activity European Social partners on Quality Developments in VET. Ppt-presentation, Berlin 7 October 2008.

Training collectively guaranteed and allows to facilitate transferability of competences (i.e. not only adapted' to job').	Informal training within company should be recognised and focused mostly on the job and comply to company needs.
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6. Conclusions and suggestions

The participants in the peer learning activity classified their meeting as an important starting point for social partners to start closer cooperation on quality issues in VET, providing valuable information on European policy developments in VET, in particular in EQF (European Qualification Framework, ECVET (European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training) and - last but not least – in quality assurance issues.

6.1 Conclusions for the social partner organisations

For the social partner organisations themselves, the representatives agreed, that more sensitisation, dialogue and cooperation in quality issues should be promoted. More social partner organisations at local, regional, and national levels should be informed and included in the procedures for quality and quality assurance in VET.

A secure funding or budget should be available to assist the social partners, to allow improved understanding of quality issues and participation. Some representatives suggested the organisation of training activities for social partners for to professionalize their understanding of quality assurance procedures.

6.2 Conclusions for activities in national VET systems

At national level, it should be assured that representatives of employers and trade unions are included in the Quality Assurance National Reference Points. More detailed information should be distributed on the structure and the working programmes of the National Reference Points, in order to make sure that social partners get involved as much as possible.

In all Member States appropriate and coherent structures, processes, procedures and methodologies for quality assurance in VET should be put in place, which should ensure maximum social partner involvement in all respective activities.

- In order to improve the effectiveness of the national VET systems and to achieve the same standards in all regions of the country, an overall framework for the VET-system should be drafted (see the example of the Czech Republic).
- Close cooperation between all relevant stakeholders involved in the VET-system is one of the secrets the effectiveness of national VET systems (see the example of Germany). Training regulations and framework curricula should be developed jointly and with the purpose to ensure employability of the VET students.
- There was consensus, that the quality of VET provision should be measured primarily towards the outcome, which is employability of graduates and the individual factors leading to employability.
- A particular quality element is seen in the organisation of practical training for VET teachers. In some countries it is VET provision it is a particular challenge to have company-based practical training for VET-teachers (for example Lithuania).

Social partner organisations should be ready to support increased awareness of the EQARF in all bodies and organisations that are relevant for VET.

The representatives encouraged joint training for social partners and government representatives in subjects related to the European VET package and in particular in issues related to quality and quality assurance.

6.3 Conclusions for European cooperation

The representatives of social partner organisations expressed their interest and their concern to keep the balance between European common quality frameworks being established for VET and national peculiarities.

The social partners acknowledged their involvement in ENQA-VET and stressed their intention for active participation. They would like to enhance their role at European level and in particular their involvement and their contributions to the work of the Thematic Groups of ENQA-VET. Another proposal for to strengthen their role at European level is to establish a sub-committee of social partners in ENQA-VET.

The social partners welcomed their participation in the peer learning activities organised by ENQA-VET and would like to be involved even stronger in further activities. Learning from good practice examples and European-wide dissemination of good practice for quality and quality assurance in VET is highly appreciated.

6.4 Suggestions by social partners

As a result and a conclusion of their discussions in the peer learning activity, the participants made the following commonly shared suggestions:

- The social partners welcome all developments and policies to improve quality and quality assurance in VET.
- Social partners want to strengthen and to improve the effectiveness of the education and training systems through the implementation of EQF and EQARF.
- The process of implementing EQF and EQARF should not be used to undermine existing QA practices.
- We welcome all developments and policies to improve quality and quality assurance in VET.
- Social partners are willing to continue and to deepen their cooperation within ENQA-VET.
- The social partners identified a number of key issues that require further discussion and therefore we are seeking further assistance from ENQA-VET.

7. Ex-post assessment of the peer learning activity

This last section summarizes the responses of the participants to a questionnaire asking to make an ex-post assessment of the experiences they made in the peer learning activity, the insights they had gained, their activities towards dissemination of the results and conclusions and an assessment of their potentials for further development of the VET system in their country towards improved quality. The statements of the participants are quoted directly from their individual assessment sheets.

7.1 The added value of participation

“I was made much more aware of the important contribution which the social partners can give towards achieving quality standards expected from VET ... this PLA served as a personal motivation towards systematically including Social Partners in all activities, even from the planning stage.”

“The participation in the PLA gave me the opportunity to clarify and better understand my country education and training system starting from the knowledge of the other European VET systems.” “We can compare our VET-system with others and see European tendencies and problems in VET.”

“Through the peer learning I have got a wider picture of the common European frame for quality and the connection between EQARF/ECVET and ENQA-VET. I realized the state of existing problems that European Union countries are faced with in the field of organization and realisation of vocational training.”

“...discussing the EQARF indicators”

“Getting information, how social partners are involved in the process of EQARF in other countries.”

The “peer learning has helped me in the way that I will advise schools easily and I will be able to help them with more recommendations in the moment when they will be setting up their concrete system of quality assurance (which they are obliged to do according to the law).”

“Professionals from different European countries had the opportunity to share experiences of their own cultural environments with enthusiasm and professionalism while contributing directly to the European process towards a common EQARF. Each participant had the chance to get an insight of the quality assurance systems and ‘good practices’ of their European counterparts, ultimately aspiring to be instrumental in getting such or better systems adopted in their own contexts.”

7.2 Gained insights and their dissemination

“I have gained a deeper insight of the concept ‘Quality’ which has become a buzz-word in all operational aspects, whether it’s a market for products and/or services. It is becoming critical for any service provider, including VET, to assure a high level standard of quality in both its educational aspect and any work-based training. Employers and trade unions play a crucial part in all this, especially if one of the main objectives of VET is to continuously meet industry needs.”

“Without accreditation of VET provides and more investment in training of teachers and trainers it can be difficult to increase transparency and promote trust.”

„I will prepare a report and inform my colleagues in the National Institute of VET, so that they will be able to transmit acquired knowledge in their domain of work. I will also inform the headmasters of VET schools and VET teachers with whom I regularly work in the framework of study groups.“

“The report will be disseminated free of charge to the Ministry’s higher authorities, all stakeholders (particularly trade unions, training providers and employers’ associations) and to other entities with a direct or indirect interest in VET activities.”

7.3 Potential contribution to policy making

The PLA “encouraged the participants to define and provide quality assurance, to improve the quality and tend toward excellence in VET education and training, not only in schools, but also in companies.”

“We can cooperate more closely with other European organisations... Moreover we have realised that QA in VET is a common goal for employers and trade unions. Our self-awareness is growing. Now we have to improve cooperation in that area with our ministry and sensitize other social partners on that matter.”

“I hope to be able to contribute ... towards formulating a QA-policy in education, notably VET. I will also contribute through the design and coordination of projects focused on Quality Assurance.”

The PLA revealed the high potential “of the common indicators and with sharing different experiences.”
“Social partners need further discussion about EQARF indicators.”

“The PLA has greatly contributed towards bringing together around one table representatives of social partners to discuss current and future facets of quality in VET provision. The discussion would probably have been more effective if a representative from both employers and employees side from each country had participated in the PLA since, as could be seen throughout the discussions, perspectives between the two sides differed considerably even though they both agreed that quality assurance is a requisite for the enhancement of VET provision.”

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