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**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND
THE COUNCIL**

**on the implementation of the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the
Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance
Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training**

(Text with EEA relevance)

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1. INTRODUCTION

In order to exit the economic crisis Europe needs smart growth¹, which requires better skilled people. The Cedefop forecasts confirm that the demand for low skilled will decrease, while the demand for higher skills will increase, and the highest demand will be for medium skilled people².

In this context, vocational education and training (VET), has a crucial role to play as highlighted in a series of recent strategy papers of the Commission. Despite the strong political focus that has been put on VET, the challenges are still significant: increasing its attractiveness, embedding stronger work based learning, enhancing labour market relevance, developing stronger career and education guidance, implementing teachers and trainers professional development, and improving recognition and transparency of VET learning outcomes between countries and across different education pathways.

Quality assurance (QA) has an important role in addressing these challenges, in particular overcoming skills mismatches and improving employability of young people so that a shared understanding of VET excellence can finally emerge, facilitating mutual recognition of learning acquired in various countries and thus enabling more mobility and a better response to economic and societal challenges.

This is the first report on progress of quality assurance in VET in the European Union, following the adoption of the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training³ (hereafter the EQAVET Recommendation). It summarises the experience gained and presents the Commission proposals for the way ahead.

The EQAVET recommendation establishes a reference instrument to help Member States to promote and monitor continuous improvement of VET systems. The framework should contribute to quality improvement in VET and to increased transparency of, and consistency in, VET policy developments between Member States, thereby promoting mutual trust, mobility of workers and learners, and lifelong learning.

The framework comprises a cycle of four phases (planning, implementation, evaluation and review); each supported by quality criteria and indicative descriptors⁴, to be applied at the VET-system, provider and qualification awarding levels. It provides a systemic approach to quality and gives strong emphasis to monitoring and improving quality by combining internal and external evaluation, review and other processes for improvement, supported by measurement and qualitative analysis.

The framework should be regarded as a "toolbox", from which the various users may choose those elements that they consider most relevant to their specific systems. The indicators proposed for measuring VET quality improvement concern data such as investment in training of teachers and trainers, participation, completion and placement rate in VET programmes, utilization of acquired skills at work place, unemployment rate, prevalence of

¹ Communication from the Commission, 'A stronger European Industry for Growth and Economic Recovery', COM(2012)582 final of 10.10.2012.

² Cedefop, *Roads to recovery: three skill and labour market scenarios for 2025*, June 2013.

³ OJ C155, 8.07.2009, p.1.

⁴ E.g. for the planning stage at system level the descriptors provide milestones such as describing long and medium term objectives of VET system in consultation with stakeholders, defining targets and indicators for monitoring, identifying training needs.

vulnerable groups, mechanisms to identify training needs in the labour market and schemes used to promote access to VET.

The Recommendation invited Member States to devise a national approach aimed at improving quality assurance systems at national level, designate a Quality Assurance National Reference Point (NRP) and participate in the European network (EQAVET network).

2. ACHIEVEMENTS IN QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

2.1. Quality assurance mechanisms at VET system level

VET excellence at system level implies a strategy of continued skills development, targeting high quality learning outcomes, mobility, mutual recognition and permeability, as well as putting in place evidence based policies which improve effectiveness and efficiency of the system; it also implies cooperation and co-investment and integrating VET in the general education and training system⁵.

According to the results of the EQAVET secretariat survey⁶ and of the external evaluation⁷, more than 20 countries have consolidated their quality assurance approaches and EQAVET has directly contributed to shape the national system in 14 countries (BG, CZ, EL, HU, HR, MT, RO, FYROM, and BE fr, ES, IT, LV, LT, SI where reforms are underway). The majority of approaches cover both initial VET⁸ and continuing VET⁹, and mostly publicly funded, institutional provision. Some countries already had EQAVET compatible approaches and therefore did not need to significantly modify these.

As of today most EU national education and training systems have quality standards for VET providers¹⁰ which are mainly used as a condition for funding, accreditation and/or are required as part of legislation.

Almost all Member States collect data to improve effectiveness and efficiency of their systems and have devised for this appropriate data collection methodologies e.g. questionnaires and indicators/metrics. However, this does not automatically mean that processes are regularly reviewed and that action plans for change are devised, as the survey shows that only about a third of the countries always carry out regular reviews and devise action plans. In most cases Member States publish information on the outcomes of available evaluations¹¹.

As regards the use of indicators, practices across countries are quite varied. While some indicators appear to be used by a majority of Member States (e.g. participation and completion rate in VET programmes) other key outcome oriented indicators, such as 'utilisation of skills at the workplace' or 'share of employed learners at a designated point in

⁵ Commission Staff Working Document, SWD(2012)375 of 20.11.2012, p.38.

⁶ EQAVET, *Supporting the implementation of the European quality assurance reference framework: Results of the EQAVET Secretariat Survey*, 2012, p.20. Available in the website of the EQAVET secretariat, <http://www.eqavet.eu/gns/what-we-do/annual-forum.aspx>

⁷ ICF GHK, *Evaluation of implementation of EQAVET Final report*, (hereafter External Evaluation) 2013 p.51.

⁸ "Vocational education and training carried out in the initial education system, usually before entering working life" inspired by Cedefop, *Terminology of European education and training policy*, Luxembourg, OP, 2008

⁹ "Education or training after initial education and training – or after entry into working life [...]", Cedefop, idem above.

¹⁰ EQAVET, Secretariat Survey, cit. , p. 29.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 68: BE (nl), BG, DK, DE, EE, IE, ES, LV, LT, NL, AT, PL, RO, SK, FI, SE, UK, HR.

time after completion of training' are less used, even though they could provide key evidence on how to ensure a better alignment with labour market needs. In general, these indicators are the ones for which data are the most difficult to retrieve.

According to a recent survey among the National Reference Points for EQAVET, 75 % of them would find it useful to increase EU cooperation with the view to working towards benchmarking conditions using one or more EQAVET indicators¹².

The same survey notes that EQAVET indicative descriptors are used for quality management in 22 systems of initial VET. The external evaluation mentions the difficulty of comparing national QA measures with the EQAVET descriptors because the descriptors are very general and often cover aspects that are not covered by specific QA measures but feature rather in VET policies and policy-making approaches.¹³ However this global approach also helps to move away from the toolbox approach towards a quality improvement culture.

A VET system of high quality is also facilitating continuing skills development, mobility and permeability between VET and higher education (HE). Around half of the countries claim that quality assurance in their VET systems does help to gain access to higher education through different mechanisms: quality assured VET qualifications are either recognised as a normal entry qualification to HE (e.g. IE, NL) or have a double status, educational and vocational (e.g. PT). However, this also points to the fact that in many countries permeability is still just an objective and significant efforts need to be made to put this into practice.

The vast majority of countries have established mechanisms and procedures to identify training needs in Initial (IVET) and most of them do have such mechanisms also for Continuing VET (CVET)¹⁴. However, an in-depth analysis is needed to assess the efficiency of such systems, their synergies with the EU Skills Panorama¹⁵ and whether the involvement of the professional field (in particular professional organisations and enterprises) occurs in a collaborative/deliberative way¹⁶ as this has proven to be important for designing high quality learning outcome based qualifications answering labour market needs.

2.2. Quality assurance mechanisms at VET provider level

High-quality learning support and teachers and trainers, and efficient leadership by a skilled school leader are all important factors, but VET providers are better at delivering excellent VET also when there are strategic linkages and networking with the broader economic community at regional, national and international level.¹⁷

Most countries do have or are in the process of acquiring a common quality assurance framework for VET providers that would be compatible with the European reference framework for quality assurance in VET. Almost all countries have in place statutory external evaluation of VET providers, while 22 countries¹⁸ require VET providers to have internal quality-assurance mechanisms and in further six countries (BE fr, BG, FR, IT, LT, SK) this is voluntary but encouraged.

The most frequent form of external review is inspection. In general these are schools inspection services and cover both IVET and general education. There are other forms of

¹² EQAVET Secretariat Survey, cit. Ch. 5.

¹³ External Evaluation, cit., p.32.

¹⁴ EQAVET Secretariat Survey, cit. p. 61 and p. 72.

¹⁵ Cf. <http://euskillsparorama.ec.europa.eu/>.

¹⁶ Several FP7 research projects addressed CVET and adult education. Cf: “*Adult and continuing education in Europe. Using public policy to secure a growth in skills*”, European Commission 2013.

¹⁷ SWD(2012)375, cit. p. 38.

¹⁸ AT, BE nl, CY, CZ, DK, EE, FI, HU, IE, LU, LV, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, UK, HR, IC and FYROM, EQAVET Secretariat Survey, cit. p. 24.

external evaluation used, but most typically in CVET and there are less common in IVET. For example some *Länder* in Germany require providers to implement quality management systems such as Q2E, EFQM, QZS or ISO 9001. Malta requires providers to undergo quality audits by external experts. Some countries have specific quality assurance or evaluation agencies, e.g. in the Flemish Community of Belgium, the Agency for quality assurance in education and training covers the whole education and training except higher education, the Danish evaluation institute – covering the whole of the education system, and the Spanish National Institute for evaluation of education and training.

In many countries legislation requires VET providers to evaluate systematically their activities, as well as the quality and effectiveness of the training they offer. In BG, HR, the CZ, DK, EE, HU, RO, SI and SK this includes mandatory self-assessment reports and plans for improvement that inform external evaluations. Although not mandatory, self-assessment is widely used by IVET providers in Austria.

A key rationale for self-assessment at provider level is the development of a culture of quality within education and training institutions. There are also positive effects in terms of accountability and governance of VET providers, who are made responsible for delivery of quality outcomes. Since the context of each VET provider is different, self-assessment enables each organisation to develop a framework and a set of measures that are suitable to its context and reality.

There is great variety of practices regarding internal review in the Member States. Some countries require VET providers to focus the internal review on specific areas of activities. Others give no guidance as to how quality assurance should be undertaken, while several countries have developed manuals, methodologies or web-sites to support this process¹⁹. Some countries have in place a form of peer review/learning among VET providers, in most of the cases based on a European methodology developed under a Leonardo da Vinci project²⁰.

In general VET providers tend to make less use of the descriptors than is evident at system level²¹. VET providers often go through an accreditation²² and external or internal reviews process, but widespread use of the EQAVET cycle is not common. This shows that there is still room for improvement in reaching the VET provider level, notably through multipliers. In that sense the EQAVET projects could serve as good practices. As an example, the Maltese QA-VET project resulted in guidelines for VET institutions to apply the indicators; a Dutch project developed a bottom-up approach towards QA by working with VET providers and promoted a quality culture²³.

One significant challenge for quality assurance is the work based learning dimension. The training of trainers is often not guaranteed and there is often poor overview of such arrangements.

The EQAVET criteria, descriptors and indicators do not provide specific guidance on quality assurance for work-based learning. This relative weakness has been addressed at political level through the Bruges Communiqué which invites participating countries to develop by 2015 a common quality assurance framework for VET providers, applicable also to associated

¹⁹ External Evaluation, cit.p.25

²⁰ <http://www.peer-review-education.net/>

²¹ EQAVET Secretariat Survey, cit. p.104.

²² The word "accreditation" in this document is to be understood as educational accreditation and not in the sense of "accreditation" as used in the Reg. (EC)765/2008.

²³ Cf. <http://eqavetprojects.eu/>

workplace learning and compatible with EQAVET²⁴. The EQAVET network has set up a working group and is currently developing guidelines in this respect.

3. CHALLENGES TO BE OVERCOME

The EQAVET survey and external evaluation show that some features of EQAVET are well embedded in the QA cultures of the Member States. However, significant room for improvement remains for reaching a shared understanding that would greatly facilitate mutual recognition of qualifications and increased mobility.

3.1. EQAVET contribution to transparency in VET

That the potential of EQAVET for transparency purpose – supporting mutual trust, mobility across countries and lifelong learning – is not yet fully exploited can be seen from the limited synergy with European tools specifically addressing the transparency of qualifications and competences: the European Qualification Framework (EQF)²⁵, the European Credit transfer system in VET (ECVET)²⁶ and the Europass framework²⁷, which focus on the outcomes of the learning process – what people know and are able to do. While quality of the outcomes is the final criterion to decide about the quality of a learning opportunity, this aspect is not really addressed by EQAVET, which does not specifically cover the quality assurance of qualification design, assessment and certification, though the Recommendation provides that the framework should be applied also at qualification-awarding levels. This, points to the need for a closer relationship with qualification frameworks at national and European level.

Arrangements for facilitating mutual recognition exist for VET (international certifications for some occupations) and HE (ENIC/NARIC networks). However, it is clear that these arrangements have not yet reached maturity. Another potential area of development would be tightening the links between EQAVET and ECVET. Indeed one of the aims of EQAVET originally was to support the setting up of ECVET. However, only a few countries have developed VET credits systems (FI, IE, UK, EE, SE, SL and LU, IT for IVET)²⁸ and ECVET is in most countries still at a development stage²⁹.

The issue of mobility between education subsectors is crucially important. Permeability towards higher education represents a major element for VET attractiveness and in view of striving towards VET excellence. As of today, there is still room for development in this respect. The European standards and guidelines (ESG) for quality assurance in the European higher education area³⁰ contain common principles, but allow for different operational approaches and little coordination between the tools is to be observed. Nevertheless, dialogue and cooperation have increased recently with the organisation of several joint events. The

²⁴ Cf. *Bruges Communiqué on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training*, 7.12.2010, strategic objective 2b.

²⁵ Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April, OJ 2008/C 111/01 of 6.5.2008.

²⁶ Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009, OJ 2009/C 155/02 of 8.7.2009.

²⁷ Decision 2241/2004/EC, OJ L390/6 of 31.12.2004.

²⁸ EQAVET, Serban Iosifescu, *Quality assurance procedures in the processes of certification, curricula setting, accreditation and training of trainers in European VET systems*, 2011.

²⁹ Cedefop, *Trends in VET policy in Europe 2010-12*, 2012, p. 59.

³⁰ ENQA, *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, 2005.

EQF annex 3 proposes common quality assurance principles for both higher education and VET but refers explicitly neither to the ESG nor to EQAVET³¹.

An appropriate development of the EQAVET model, possibly with a stronger focus on the quality of learning outcomes, is a measure suggested by the European working group on quality in adult learning (therefore also in continuing VET), with a view to an overarching lifelong learning quality assurance approach in a longer term³².

3.2. Governance

While the EQAVET recommendation calls for the involvement of all stakeholders throughout the whole cycle of quality assurance, at European level the governance structure appears to be composed mostly of representatives from the initial VET sector. When it comes to national governance structures, the EQAVET secretariat survey indicates a need to ensure improved and sustained involvement of certain stakeholder categories, notably learners, higher education sector, employers and labour market actors as well as regional and local authorities.

To the extent that EQAVET has contributed to better quality assurance in VET national systems, it has also facilitated communication and exchange between them, promoting the consistency of VET developments across countries. This to some degree contributes to the general objective of promoting transparency of, and consistency in, VET policy developments between Member States.

However, this has not led to easily comparable descriptions of national quality assurance measures, which often are not presented in comprehensive documents and do not necessarily adopt the EQAVET structure. Countries mostly describe their quality assurance systems by making reference to internal and external evaluation of VET providers, system level evaluation for policy development purposes, and the quality of qualification design and award.

To some extent this is due to the flexible approach of the EQAVET Recommendation, which allows countries and VET providers to select tools and elements from a wider array and to adjust them. This has on the one hand proven effective in spreading the use of such tools, but on the other hand it has not resulted in the cross-country adoption of a common approach to describe quality assurance measures and VET developments.

Direct use of EQAVET as a reference to describe national measures may also prove difficult because EQAVET proposes different terminologies for quality of the VET system and at VET provider level³³. This does not fit with practice at national level, where a classic measure such as inspections can address both the system and the individual provider.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

4.1. Evaluative conclusions

The considerations in the previous sections can be summarised as follows:

³¹ Though EQAVET did not yet exist as such, there existed already a Common Quality Assurance Framework for VET.

³² *Final report of the Thematic Working Group on quality in adult learning*. Cf. the parallel study on quality in adult learning, http://ec.europa.eu/education/adult/doc/qualityannex_en.pdf.

³³ This marks a significant difference between EQAVET and the ESG which only address the institution level.

- EQAVET has contributed to advancing a quality culture in VET in European countries, as well as to its practical implementation, through the development notably of quality operational measures within the EQAVET network³⁴.
- However, such measures have focused on institutional, school-based provision (most of initial VET and part of continuing VET), with less visible impact on work-based learning and non-formal provision (which makes up most of continuing VET but could also play a key part in Initial VET in dual systems);
- The flexible approach of EQAVET, making available tools for selection and adjustment, has facilitated its use, but at the same time has reduced its potential as a common language and conceptual framework across countries.

A clear need emerges therefore for enhanced cooperation with other European instruments for quality assurance and transparency.

EQAVET implements a reference framework that allows a flexible use. It may be explored to what extent the framework dimension is needed to organise quality criteria, descriptors and indicators – as their use is flexible anyway. The experience of the European standard and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education (ESG) could be taken into account, also as concerns the scope (the ESG specifically support the quality of institutions, not the system), while being aware of some of the ESG shortcomings.

4.2. Completing EQAVET

The final aim of quality measures in education and training is the quality of the outcomes of the learning process – that is, VET learners should acquire good vocational and transversal skills. The relevance of skill levels has been recently highlighted by one specific finding of the Survey on Adult Skills (PIAAC): across countries, adults holding qualification at the same level demonstrated skills at significantly different levels³⁵.

More explicit attention to the quality assurance of qualification design and award, liaising to the EQF, ECVET and the Europass Certificate Supplement, might allow EQAVET to better address non-formal and work-based VET but also tackle the emerging issue of open education resources (OER) or massive open online courses (MOOCs) and improving its impact on transparency and mutual recognition, taking into account the principles set out in the Council Recommendation for the validation of non-formal and informal learning³⁶.

The Commission plans to undertake, involving the relevant national authorities and stakeholders, the following action towards a more comprehensive implementation of EQAVET:

- Develop descriptors, indicators and related guidelines to better address the quality and the appropriate proficiency level of outcomes acquired by learners in VET. This requires coordination with other quality assurance initiatives and transparency instruments, and cooperation with the relevant bodies and networks.
- Develop and test guidelines for policy makers and providers, along with supporting checklists, descriptors and indicators geared to the diverse reality of continuing VET and to the specific features of work-based learning. This requires cooperation with diverse stakeholders and coordination with developments related with quality in adult learning.

³⁴ <http://www.eqavet.eu> – See in particular the Quality cycle IT tool.

³⁵ OECD, *Skills Outlook 2013*, in particular p.204.

³⁶ Council Recommendation (2012/C 398/01).

- Test the opportunity for European arrangements to make national quality assurance measures more transparent across countries. This could include developing an information supplement to facilitate common understanding of national accreditation processes of VET providers, promoting common guidelines on how to describe quality assurance procedures compatible with EQAVET, or go towards a common template for accreditation of VET providers also drawing on the experience of the European quality assurance register for higher education (EQAR)³⁷ and the national reports on referencing to the EQF³⁸.

Through Erasmus+, the EU will provide:

- Support for cross-border cooperation in QA in VET through strategic partnerships and sector skills alliances that support meaningful involvement of broad range of stakeholders, and enhanced cross-sectoral dialogue with higher education and adult learning on the theme of QA
- Support for further dialogue at European level through:
 - the EQAVET network on developing quality culture by supporting working groups, seminars, Peer Learning Activities involving interested stakeholders in quality assurance in VET;
 - the development of support materials such as IT tools and manuals;
 - innovative projects to enhance the capacity of quality assurance to support improvement of VET.

Through Horizon 2020, the EU will:

- Advance knowledge about the effectiveness of public policies on CVET and other forms of adult education (including quality assurance aspects) in the EU and their complementarity with the dynamics of the private markets.

Finally, the Commission notes that a certain number of countries are aiming to use a share of the European Structural and Investment Funds for financing reforms of VET systems. It is vital that in taking forward these initiatives, strengthening the quality assurance of VET plays a central role.

4.3. Beyond EQAVET

Citizens increasingly move between systems – both in the traditional initial education pathway and to upgrade and widen their knowledge and skills throughout their lives. More and more learning opportunities no longer fit in conventional classification arrangements. Learners are increasingly offered – and rightly so – the chance of assembling their learning pathway by selecting opportunities from different sub-systems and forms of delivery, including via learning resources delivered through ICT, and they need to be able to trust their quality.

The emergence of quality assured qualification frameworks for lifelong learning, strongly promoted by the EQF, calls for reflections on a sector-based approach to quality assurance and on whether it is possible to identify some basic principles and guidelines valid across sectors and applicable to all qualifications. To address such challenges, it would be valuable to discuss EQAVET within a comprehensive context of all instruments for transparency and quality assurance. The case for closer coordination of all European instruments for

³⁷ Cf. <http://www.eqar.eu/>.

³⁸ Cf. http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/documentation_en.htm.

transparency and quality assurance is being explored by the Commission as a way to achieve a full European area of skills and qualifications³⁹.

In that light the Commission plans to undertake the following actions towards better European cooperation in quality assurance for lifelong learning:

- Consulting stakeholders on the findings of this report and on the need for and feasibility of improving coherence between quality assurance in different education sub-sectors, as part of the forthcoming public consultation towards a European area of skills and qualifications, seeking further synergies and convergence of EU transparency and recognition tools.
- Examining how the objectives of EQAVET could be pursued through a comprehensive approach to quality assurance for lifelong learning:
- In coordination with other quality assurance initiatives and with transparency instruments, exploring the practical requirements related with the development of cross-sector principles and guidelines for quality assurance of lifelong learning and the conditions to safeguard specificities proper to sub-systems or national situations.

³⁹ Communication of the Commission, *Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes*, COM(2012) 669 final, 2012.