Peer Learning Activity on Quality Assurance in continuing vocational education and training (CVET)

27-28 April 2020 | **Background paper**

1. Context

Continuing Vocational education and training (CVET) is an important part of lifelong learning and helps equip citizens with knowledge, skills and competences required in many occupations, responding both to learners' needs (professional, and personal development) and to the economy and societal needs.

The increased speed of economic and social changes and the recent crises (mostly, the pandemic) impacted the career opportunities for many people in the EU: in the last years the mismatch between the skills demand and offer was increasing and creating flexible and viable upskilling / reskilling pathways becomes a necessity.

Quality assurance policies and mechanisms are essential for CVET, to provide desirable and useful outcomes for learners, employers and the overall society. The Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience, underlines that VET is underpinned by a culture of quality assurance.

During the ten years of its implementation, EQAVET has stimulated reforms in national quality assurance systems, but it was mostly applied in school-based initial vocational education and training. The Study on EU VET instruments (EQAVET and ECVET), published in 2019, showed that there is a general perception across Europe that EQAVET is mostly applied in (school-based) IVET, and to a much lesser extent in CVET and adult learning. In a majority of EU-countries, there is no overarching system-level quality assurance framework for CVET. This was partly attributed to CVET operating in a less regulated environment to IVET. Only in a few countries publicly funded CVET is delivered by the same providers as publicly funded IVET, and quality assurance requirements for publicly funded CVET are identical to those on publicly funded IVET. Similar conclusions were drawn from the EQAVET Secretariat surveys (the last one, from 2018), indicating that the use of the approach, of indicative descriptors and of indicators is different in CVET, compared to IVET.

This EQAVET PLA is designed to create an opportunity for discussion, reflection, and the sharing of knowledge and experience among participants that can feed into the work of the Network in the area of concern: **given the need to increase upskilling and reskilling of adults, how can Member States contribute to increasing the quality of CVET and, in particular, to help all stakeholders better understand what means 'quality CVET programmes'.**

2. Introduction to the topic

Several studies (for instance, the CEDEFOP study 'CVET in Europe: the way ahead', the ICF/GHK Report on Quality Assurance in Continuous VET and on future development of EQAVET or the EQAVET working group paper on the quality assurance approach in adult learning in the context of continuing VET) have shown that CVET supports lifelong learning, integration and inclusion, employability and employment, mobility and better allocation of labour, innovation, productivity, competitiveness and growth. CVET is essential as well, to ensure that learning reflects the real skills needs of the workplaces, standalone or as a necessary complement of higher education and initial VET.

CVET, compared with IVET, has specific characteristics and, consequently, the **quality assurance arrangements (QA) are diverse,** as well, compared to IVET, encompassing **national QA systems** (but with few of them having common QA systems for IVET and CVET), **international QA recognized systems** (e.g., ISO quality standards or excellence awards like EFQM) and **own systems**, mainly major companies having their own training centres and/or programmes.

Quality Assurance, as understood by Annexe IV of the EQF, and reinforced by EQAVET the ESG as well as ISO 9000 family standards, is understood to cover four categories of processes. The first is the internal quality culture or **quality assurance policy of an organisation**, which translates into use of quality in everyday operations of the institution. This is reinforced via procedures for **internal review**, which provide internal checkpoints to identify and resolve issues with quality management. These internal reviews should be complemented by **external reviews**, conducted by independent organisations who assess the internal quality management system against a set of agreed standards. Finally, these independent organisations should themselves be quality assured to ensure their **independence and correct application** of these standards.

2. 1. Quality Assurance in CVET: the main challenges

As a general trait, **CVET is more diverse than IVET in all aspects:** in curriculum (including the proportion between theory and practice, between general and particular contents etc.); work-based learning arrangements; duration (weeks / months *versus* years); human resources involved (teachers, trainers, mentors, sometimes better connected to the industries); providers (it is offered by VET providers, but also by companies); financing (public and/or private); etc.

Another specific trait is the **focus on 'here and now',** on the immediate needs for upskilling and reskilling – of employers (to cope the market needs in delivering new / better products and services) and of learners (mainly adult learners trying to find better jobs or to secure the existing ones). In this regard, the access requirements, the provision itself (work-based learning arrangements included) and counselling and guidance have some specific characteristics in CVET.

CVET raises more challenges regarding **data collection** and the **indicators** used for quality assurance purposes, at system level but, mainly, at provider level. Another challenge is **ensuring continuity, from the lifelong learning perspective**, and progress in career, by avoiding 'dead end jobs', that may be induced by targeting narrow / ultra-specialized skills.

For instance, to cope with the diversity of provision conditions and contexts, it is very difficult to define the **qualifications** provided, based on common occupational or training standards, to establish **common curriculum arrangements** (learning outcomes, contents, infrastructure and teaching aids needed), **common requirements for trainers / mentors** (mainly, for the ones provided by companies) or **common accreditation procedures** for CVET providers. It seems, in this regard, that '**flexibility' and 'adaptability' to the business requirements are the key words**.

The CVET providers, being, generally, **smaller than IVET providers and, a lot of them, operating in market conditions**, **may not have the capacity to implement** complex and sophisticated QA processes, developed at system level. This is exacerbated by lack of management and personnel with **QA-related competences,** often leading to a need to hire consultants to implement quality systems. Moreover, the system level requirements (for instance, the national quality standards) may be different with the requirements of the international or sectoral quality requirements (see below, point 2.2, for some examples).

Financing VET raises, as well, some major challenges for designing and implementing QA systems. The public sector funds, usually, some CVET providers and, hence, national quality assurance requirements are applicable only to a selection of CVET providers. Furthermore, for many CVET providers, the funding is ensured from different sources: national, regional and local; public (employment services, educational institutions) and private; companies; international / EU funding (such as ESF or Erasmus+ Programme), and the different funding bodies may have their own, maybe different, quality requirements.

From a consumer/learner information standpoint there is **poor understanding** of which quality labels apply to CVET and their meaning. While certain industry-specific certifications have high visibility, at a more generic level it is **extremely difficult for users to receive reliable, independent information** as to the quality of a CVET course, or the reputation of a provider. Within online CVET platforms such as alison.com or LinkedIn Learning, the main indicator for quality in terms of transparency is user 'star' ratings.

2.2. The international or company quality labels and instruments: convergence or conflict?

The quality assurance instruments used at provider level (ISO or EFQM quality systems included) tend to **focus on ensuring customer satisfaction, good stakeholder relations and improving business results** by focusing on the quality of processes and of management. The need to use international / industrial quality labels sometimes emerges from requirements set by clients but is often motivated by a desire to obtain a competitive edge over other companies in the field. Given this, providers applying these systems of QA will have an intrinsic motivation to ensure they make the most of the processes and is often seen as a tool for internal development of an organisation.

In contrast, at system level QA systems and instruments **tend to focus on the output/outcomes** (for instance, by relating 'quality' or 'performance' with employability or labour market progression of graduates). Since they are usually mandated by government, they are often reduced to a compliance exercise, done to ensure continued access to markets in which they operate.

The most common set of standards applied **companies** are the family of **ISO Management System Standards** that specify repeatable steps that organizations consciously implement to achieve their goals and objectives, and to create an organizational culture that engages in a continuous (quality) cycle of self-evaluation, correction and improvement of operations and processes through heightened employee awareness and management leadership and commitment. All such standards implement a shared high-level structure and include stands on Environmental Management, Risk Management, Quality Management, Social Responsibility and more. Of particular relevance to the quality assurance of CVET are:

- [ISO 9001:2015](#) defines requirements for creating, implementing, and maintaining a Quality Management Systems (QMS). The ISO 9001 certification provides to customers reassurance that a company or an organization have established a QMS based on [seven quality management principles](#) and including a set of internal rules (policies, processes, documented procedures and records), defining how a company / organization ensures customer satisfaction. In many economies, ISO 9001 **is a precondition for further recognition and certification** – for instance, to be recognized as public services provider or to participate in public acquisition procedures.

- [ISO 21001:2018](#) was developed in response to criticisms that ISO 9001:2015 was too business-oriented and failed to consider particularities of educational systems. Therefore, it describes requirements and guidance for implementing Management Systems for Educational Organisations. It replaces the concept of 'customer satisfaction' with one of 'learner and beneficiary satisfaction', integrates requirements specific to learning design and operations while also referencing relevant standards around social and environmental responsibility.

- The [ISO 29993:2017 standard](#) (Learning services outside formal education — Service requirements) is a more focused standard, limiting itself to describing service requirements, namely advertising, information provided to learners, needs analysis, design, assessment and evaluation, always outside formal education

The ISO approaches to quality are often criticised for being hard to implement and access for organisations, which has led to other approaches to quality including '[total quality management](#) (TQM)' and '[business excellence](#)'. The best-known model of excellence is, in Europe, the one created by the [European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM)](#).

[The EFQM excellence model](#) is a framework for organizational management, based on TQM and designed to help organizations in managing change and improving performance and competitivity, by understanding the

relations of cause and effects between what organisations do and the results they achieve. The model is based around three questions:

- "Why" does this organisation exist? What Purpose does it fulfil? Why this particular Strategy? (Direction)
- "How" does it intend to deliver on its Purpose and its Strategy? (Execution)
- "What" has it actually achieved to date? "What" does it intend to achieve tomorrow? (Results).

Each of these questions is instantiated in terms of quality criteria and actions an organisation should take to realise the criteria.

Both ISO and EFQM emphasise the connection between the purpose and strategy of an organisation and how that is used to help create value or satisfaction for stakeholders. Furthermore, each of them have procedures in place to ensure the provision of all four levels of quality assurance covered above. A common criticism of both is that since the quality standards are heavily copyrighted and only available against the payment of a significant fee, while quality assurance reports by accredited agencies are for the eyes of institutions only, students and consumers have very little visibility as to what the labels actually represent.

Aligning the EQAVET Framework with the EFQM Excellence Model and the ISO 9001 Standard was a topic for the work done by the EQAVET Secretariat (working groups and network), to identify common elements, redundancies, synergies and gaps. The conclusion of this analysis was that the **background/principles**, the **goals & objectives**, the **perspective** (stakeholder needs and satisfaction) and the **methodology** used (the PDCA cycle) are common. ISO 21001 includes an annexe that maps its criteria against EQAVET, allowing for it to be used as a way to implement EQAVET.

In the last decades, driven by the **trans-national, global, character of their activity**, beside the international models described above, some important companies and international professional associations developed their own qualifications which are offered via networks of international franchisees. To ensure the quality standards of such franchisees, they developed quality systems / quality labels, which enjoy an increasing recognition, at national and sector level. For instance (among many other examples):

- Learning Services ('Learning Advantage') owned by Siemens, offering on-demand and instructor-led training for qualifications in automation.
- The Oracle Academy and Microsoft Learn, offering training and professional certification for qualifications in software development and use.
- The PADI Quality Management Program controls the quality of all practically all diving education and diving centres globally.
- The International Institute of Welding (IIW) offers international standardisation and quality through education, training, qualification and certification of individuals and companies in its area of activity.

While these types of quality labels provide for quality assurance of the schools offering the qualifications, the QA/Accreditation bodies are usually not themselves quality assured against agreed standard.

It is obvious that the CVET providers offering qualifications, as free market operators, in the internal and global market, and/or in the most dynamic sectors in the economy, **must observe** the international QA systems requirements and, as well, the specific quality requirements defined by the major global actors in the field. **Thus, the CVET subsystems need more alignment, more convergence and common understanding in designing quality requirements and quality systems**.

2.3. The lifelong / life wide learning perspective: Individual learning accounts

One of the main challenges CVET must face is **ensuring continuity, from the lifelong learning perspective**, and **progress in career** for learners and graduates. CVET needs to focus on the 'here and now', responding to the present and urgent needs of the labour market. This, however, entails a danger of **fragmentation** if the focus is on very specific, narrow, ultra-specialized technical job requirements, and **discontinuity** if there is a lack of possibility for further progress in qualification.

The latest EU documents (for instance the Communication '[European Skills Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience](#)') affirm the need to develop **tools that empower people to participate in learning and to build skills throughout life**. 'It is only by instilling a genuine culture of lifelong learning that we can ensure a competitive economy and cohesive society and bring to life the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning, as spelled out in Principle 1 of the European Pillar of Social Rights'.

There is **growing interest in individual learning accounts and related schemes** as potential instruments to tackle the barriers individuals face when seeking CVET. Individual learning accounts are personal accounts in which training entitlements can be accumulated and spent on quality-assured training, guidance or validation services. They are one way of providing individuals with training entitlements, the main international examples being the *[Compte personnel de formation](#)* in France and *[SkillsFuture](#)* in Singapore.

Many more Member States and social partners have experience with related schemes that **provide individuals with training entitlements** without involving personal accounts. This includes training voucher schemes (often for specific target groups and run by Public Employment Services), and individual learning or personal development budgets which are sometimes also provided by companies for their employees or negotiated by social partners in the context of collective bargaining agreements. For reviews, see the reports by [UNESCO](#), [OECD](#) and [CEDEFOP](#), and the examples from [France](#), [the Netherlands](#), [Singapore](#) and [Slovakia](#) presented at the recent [high-level forum on individual learning accounts](#) organized by the European Commission.

Individual learning schemes have **several potential advantages**: first, they link support for training to individuals allowing them to **consider a wider range of training opportunities**, including those relevant for professional transitions. While stable employment relationships are a strong point of the European social market economy, the digital and green transitions or changing professional aspirations by individuals make it important to also offer support for this type of training. Second, they can **close gaps in access to training for those who are not, or not sufficiently, covered by employer-sponsored training**: this includes those in atypical forms of work, many employees of SMEs, and the unemployed or the inactive who wish to return to the labour force. Finally, they can help to tackle a number of **barriers individuals face when accessing training**, for example:

- The **cost of training**, a huge obstacle, mainly for those not receiving sufficient support from an employer and for vulnerable learners: skills obsolescence is higher and investment in learning is lower among lower skilled.
- **Lack of motivation**, especially among the most vulnerable workers or job seekers. The participants in lifelong learning programmes are, usually employers and workers with higher levels of education and qualification, already willing to invest. Lower educated are less willing to invest because of negative learning experiences in the past, short-sightedness, too low and uncertain payoffs etc.
- **Lack of awareness** of the needs for up-/re-skilling, at workers' level, on one hand, and of the opportunities in education and training existing on the market, on the other hand.
- The **lack of time** for training: most of the potential learners are employed or searching for employment and have families to take care of, increasing the need for flexibility in the timing of training.

The European Commission is considering a **proposal for a Council Recommendation on individual learning accounts**. A future initiative on individual learning accounts will be based on an impact assessment (supported by an ongoing external study). This impact assessment will **draw on the experiences with a broad range of**

individual learning accounts and related schemes used in the Member States and around the world. It will provide a comparative analysis with a view to identifying innovative approaches for inclusion in the initiative.

3. Questions to discuss at the PLA

Introduction: the setup

This PLA is the second one organised observing the COVID19 distancing rules and regulations. As we have communicated previously, in order to observe these rules, the PLA will be organised exclusively online. There will be three sessions, with presentation of case studies and/or of other material and moderated group discussions. The conclusions of the discussions from the breakout groups will be presented in short plenary sessions. To ignite and inform the group discussions, we propose a set of questions for each session (presented below).

Section 1. Quality Assurance in CVET – challenges and solutions

The questions to address for discussion and debate are:
* How can the quality of CVET be improved, taking into account its diversity? Which models and incentives may be used, for providers, companies and learners?
* How can the quality information available to users be improved? How can bad actors be more easily identified?
* How to improve the relevance of CVET, from lifelong and life-wide learning perspective? How to design and measure the quality of outcomes (mainly the learning outcomes) as match between learners' needs and the specific employers / workplaces needs?

Section 2. The use of international Quality Labels/QA instruments

The questions to address for discussion and debate are:
* What is the experience of VET providers with the use of international / company specific QA instruments? Do learners take into account international QA instruments in their choice?
* Do the Governments need to stimulate the use of the international / company specific QA instruments? Should Governments or the Commission specify rules for such QA instruments, similar to those in Annexe IV of the EQF?
* What is the best for CVET quality management systems, to accredit CVET providers nationally, to leave this to the market, or to promote a hybrid approach?

Section 3. Individual learning accounts

The questions to address for discussion and debate are:
* How can QA arrangements be organised in the context of ILAs?
* How to boost participation in CVET using ILAs? How to raise awareness and motivation to participate in CVET, in particular for vulnerable ('hard to reach, hard to motivate') individuals?
* What types of support services (information, guidance etc.) are needed to ensure the effectiveness of ILAs? How can ILAs promote their provision?

3. Concluding remarks

The QA mechanisms and tools, by their potential to foster trust at all levels of the education and training systems, **are the key to increase attractiveness and participation at CVET, supporting, as well, inclusion, innovation, competitiveness and growth**. For these reasons, despite the above-mentioned challenges, the QA systems are more than ever **necessary**.

All the documents analysed highlight the importance of **CVET** in the overall context of the EU VET policies. During the PLA, we will share and discuss, starting from the good practice cases presented, the most important ways, developed at European, national and provider levels, to:

1. Develop and improve QA arrangements in CVET at VET system level and VET provider level in order to enhance the learners' and companies' trust and to boost participation and effectiveness.
2. Analyse the strengths and weaknesses of international / industrial QA systems / labels.
3. Discuss how QA arrangements could be organised in the context of individual learning accounts.