



EQAVET

European Quality Assurance
in Vocational Education and Training

Supporting the implementation of the
European Quality Assurance Reference Framework
for Vocational Education and Training

POLICYBRIEF

This policy brief has been prepared in order to share the results of an EQAVET Peer Learning Activity on how quality assurance processes can be used to make VET more attractive. Peer learning activities, organised within the EQAVET Network, provide a means of discussing, sharing and learning from each other on areas of strategic importance for the successful implementation of the Recommendation on establishing a European quality assurance reference framework for VET. The policy brief reflects the opinions of those who participated in the peer learning activity and does not constitute an official European Commission or EQAVET position.

Peer Learning Activity on

How quality assurance processes can be used to make VET more attractive

Participating countries: AT, BE, BG, CZ, DE, EE, EL, ES, FI, HR, HU, IE, IT, LV, MT, NL, PL, RO, SI, SE, SK, TR, UK (Wales) and the European Training Foundation (ETF)

SUMMARY

This policy note is based on the peer learning activity held in Berlin on 28-29 November 2019. The PLA was organised by the EQAVET Secretariat in collaboration with BIBB (the German Federal Institute for VET) which hosts the German National Reference Point for Quality Assurance in VET. The PLA was held on the premises of an inter-company training centre in Berlin (SHK Kompetenzzentrum).

The PLA brought together colleagues from VET providers and those with a national or regional responsibility for VET policy from 23 countries. Many participants represented a Member State's Quality Assurance National Reference Point (NRP) - these were established as part of the EQAVET Recommendation and have a central role in supporting the VET quality assurance arrangements in their system.

The PLA methodology used by EQAVET provides opportunities for participants to share their knowledge and experiences by using examples of practice and policy implementation. This provides a starting point to reflect on the shared challenges faced by education and training systems across the EU. This PLA looked at how quality assurance can be used to make VET more attractive. The following analysis is based on participants' reflections which were informed by presentations at the system and provider level from Germany, the Netherlands and Spain.

This policy brief is not a verbatim report: instead it is an analysis of the quality assurance issues which were considered important in an EQAVET context. It is intended to inform those who are thinking about how quality assurance processes can contribute to the attractiveness of VET. A background paper for this PLA, the presentations and other information is available on the EQAVET web-site at <https://www.eqavet.eu/What-We-Do/peer-learning-activities>

POLICY CONTEXT

The PLA considered whether:

- different approaches to quality assurance help to make VET more attractive;
- any specific quality assurance activities have encouraged more learners to consider VET.

The background paper for the PLA included the conclusions from Cedefop's research¹ - namely that, in addition to quality assurance, there are several system level initiatives which have made initial VET more attractive. These can be summarised as follows:

- improving the permeability of educational pathways by offering access to other education and training opportunities;
- expanding opportunities to access higher education through double-qualifying pathways;
- promoting work-based learning to attract students who prefer a more practical path or the possibility of learning on the job while working;
- improving access for special groups, including low-skilled, disabled and socially and economically less advantaged young people, older non-traditional students, learners from minority ethnic groups, and migrants to help ensure their employability;
- improving the quality of initial VET by developing and implementing national quality assurance frameworks;
- increasing the transparency of qualifications and programmes, through measures such as developing national qualification frameworks and adopting European frameworks;

¹ Page 112, https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/5539_en.pdf Number 39, Attractiveness of initial vocational education and training: identifying what matters

- recognising and validating non-formal and informal learning by assessing knowledge, skills and competences. This can make new or higher level qualifications more accessible, and open up formal learning opportunities for individuals who would not otherwise be admitted to a particular programme;
- improving guidance and counselling systems so that students have adequate, reliable and up-to-date information before making choices about initial VET programmes;
- emphasising skill development in initial VET through such means as skills competitions and award ceremonies;
- raising the awareness of initial VET through media campaigns that focus on labour market prospects.

The participants noted that Cedefop's 2017 analysis of public opinions² on initial VET shows that the general image of VET is relatively positive in Europe. These findings are important as there is a risk of only considering the challenges facing VET. This analysis shows that around two in three Europeans (68%) think that vocational education at the upper secondary stage has a positive image in their country, while just under a quarter (23%) say that it has a negative image. Within this context the PLA looked at how to strengthen further the attractiveness of initial and continuing VET.

The PLA was informed by system-level examples from the Netherlands, Spain and Germany. In addition there were three case studies from individual VET providers from these countries (a summary of each presentation is included as an annexe to this note). Together these confirmed the findings in Cedefop's research and illustrated what could be achieved at the local level within the context of a system-wide approach which seeks to strengthen the attractiveness of VET and make it a highly-valued career choice for learners. The participants noted that the idea of attractiveness has to be considered from different perspectives: employers, VET providers; learners; and for young learners, their families. A key issue for all these stakeholders is the importance of "telling stories of success" rather than emphasising the challenges.

DISCUSSION

Attractiveness is based on many organisational issues in individual providers (e.g. the quality of the training, the opportunity to complete training in the workplace, the opportunity to learn in a way that meets the needs of individuals etc.), the design and organisation of VET programmes (e.g. is the content relevant to the needs of employers) and the strength of the

labour market (e.g. how easy is it for VET graduates to get a relevant job).

As part of this bigger picture on VET attractiveness, quality assurance has an important role. Effective quality assurance processes help to assure learners (and their parents) that the VET system and VET provision is improving; is meeting their needs and employers' and stakeholders' requirements; and understands that learners want programmes that open up opportunities. This is particularly the case for young learners (e.g. generation z learners who were born after 1995) whose learning needs are characterised by learning through, and with, technology; by doing; and by using creativity. As this generation is often defined by their use and interest in technology, VET providers and system designers need to reflect on how existing and new programmes can be made more attractive to this group of learners.

While not all learners are from this generation, their emerging importance highlights **the need to place learners at the centre of provision** and develop programmes which motivate them. This is a challenge for VET providers and system designers when most educators believe they are preparing post-millennial students for jobs which do not exist today - this view is often shared by younger learners.

The PLA participants stressed the value of a system-wide quality assurance process as this provides the basis for collecting and using evidence and data to reform and modernise practice. These processes can increase the attractiveness of VET: however change needs to be based on the evidence of what works, and it has to be much quicker (e.g. it can take years to introduce a new VET programme because of the time it takes to identify new competences, the needs of the labour market, the consultation with stakeholders, the training of VET staff, the recruitment of new learners etc.). VET becomes more attractive when there is an expectation that the quality of provision should be high, provision is flexible, it offers opportunities for progression and transfer, teaching and learning responds to the needs of all learners, and learners' prior experience and skills are fully recognised.

Within an environment where employment opportunities are largely determined by the buoyancy of the labour market, there is much that can be done to make VET more attractive - and **quality assurance processes can make an important contribution**. At the heart of those actions to increase attractiveness are the need to strengthen VET's connections to employment and employers, and listen to the needs of the learners. These two actions can be monitored and measured, and data from these activities can be used to change practice.

² Page 37, <https://www.feani.org/sites/default/files/CEDEFOP%20Study%20on%20VET.pdf> Cedefop European public opinion survey on vocational education and training

EMERGING POLICY ISSUES

There was agreement that the current quality assurance procedures could provide a means of making VET more attractive. There are a number of areas where the greater use of the quality assurance cycle could enhance attractiveness:

- **CAREERS GUIDANCE.** Decisions by learners (and their families) need to be informed by up-to-date information on the benefits and opportunities in individual occupational areas. And the staff providing this advice (before, during and after a programme) need access to accurate information in order to provide case studies/examples of other individuals' experiences and successes. The quality assurance cycle provides the basis for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the careers guidance system in the field of VET and this can be the basis for making change and improvement;
- as Cedefop's analysis has shown, VET in Europe is attractive. However it is not clear how this positive message is being used to inform practice and **COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES**. The four stages of the quality assurance cycle (including the use of evidence to make changes and review practice) can be used to strengthen the increasingly positive message about the benefits and value of completing a VET programme;
- for some learners it can be easy to drop-out of VET particularly when a decision to take a programme was not fully researched or it was the second-best option. There is much that VET providers can do to understand why learners drop-out, and **DEVELOP EFFECTIVE SUPPORT MECHANISMS TO ENCOURAGE RETENTION**. In addition, at the system-level, there are issues around the design of programmes, the opportunities to complete bespoke/individualised programmes, the provision of incentives to VET providers, and more accurate guidance on progression and transfer opportunities which can be applied. The quality assurance cycle is the basis for monitoring and evaluating the existing arrangements and making change as part of the review process. As part of this support for reducing drop-out rates, there is considerable benefit in working with student and employer groups, and alumni organisations.

Alongside more extensive use of the quality assurance cycle, the PLA participants stressed the need to respond to learners. They require more flexibility; more opportunities to progress from VET programmes; more recognition of prior achievement; more permeability between programmes; more support to reduce potential drop-out rates; more and closer connections with employers; and better guidance on their future employment options. These are not new requests but, in rapidly changing economies, it is increasingly important that they are addressed.

ANNEX

CASE STUDIES - Summary of the six presentations during the PLA

1. VET system in Germany
2. VET system in Spain
3. VET system in the Netherlands
4. VET provider in Spain - IES Río Gallego in Zaragoza
5. Organisation representing the VET providers in the Netherlands
6. An inter-company training centre in Berlin (SHK Kompetenzzentrum) in Germany

1. VET system in Germany

Helena Sabbagh from the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training, (DEQA-VET, German reference point for QA in VET) looked at the German dual system and its challenges, the attractiveness of VET and some current initiatives to modernise VET. The statistics on VET and the dual system highlight its successes:

- approximately 53% of the age cohort (male: 67.1% and female 43.6%) start training in the dual system at some point during their career;
- there are more than 530,000 apprentices who start each year (531,414 in 2018), in total more than 1.3 million;
- youth unemployment is approximately 6.9%;
- approximately 20% of companies train apprentices (there are 450,000 training companies).

Despite the success of the German dual system, there are challenges e.g.:

- demographic changes;
- skills shortages;

- a trend toward advanced qualifications;
- digitalisation;
- increasing heterogeneity of (potential) trainees, refugees (migration backgrounds) drop-outs from the academic system etc.;
- matching problems (regional diversity, unbalanced demand and supply of training, gender typical orientation).

Helena explained three initiatives, which are being used to increase the attractiveness of VET

- revisions to VET act to make it more flexible and responsive to needs. This includes the creation of three levels of continuing VET [Geprüfter Berufsspezialist (EQF 5) Bachelor professional (EQF 6) and Master professional (Betriebswirt EQF 7)];
- implementing the findings from a digitalisation project to look at the impact of new technologies on the occupation “site mechanic of sanitary, heating and air conditioning”. The results from the project are relevant for the modernisation of training regulations for each occupational area in order to respond to new circumstances and demands;
- initiatives with the social partners to promote the attractiveness of VET and the dual system in Berlin.

2. VET system in Spain

Javier Molina Tornero from the Ministry of Education and Vocational Education and Training explained Spain’s decentralised VET system. The system is governed by the Organic Act 2/2006 on Education, modified by the Organic Act 8/2013, of 9 December on the Improvement of the Education Quality. It is mandatory for all the country. The model for the VET system also responds to the principles in the main European tools and this make diplomas transparent and understandable for the business network and facilitates mobility.

The design of VET diplomas is characterised by close cooperation between the production sector and the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training. Involving all stakeholders has been a key element to achieve and facilitate effectiveness, recognition and attractiveness in vocational training.

Spain has developed a competence and work-based learning model for VET. All qualifications must include a minimum of 20% of the total duration of the training cycle in a company. This facilitates the transition of students from school to work and allows learners to complete the competences they have developed in the education centres. In 2012 the Government established the requirements for the development of experimental dual VET projects in cooperation with all the autonomous communities.

The challenge is, on the one hand, to use the analysis of the current situation in dual VET in different regions to agree a set of recommendations which may serve as a framework for a new regulation. And on the other hand, establishing the base for a quality system for dual VET in Spain, in accordance with the European Commission descriptors, as stated in the European Framework for a quality and effective apprenticeship. The intention is to bring together the national, international and sectoral approaches.

Javier outlined each of the building blocks which support quality and make VET attractive, and highlighted:

- the continuing increase in the number of VET learners (see figure 1 below).
- increasingly large number of more mature VET learners and this reflects the recent history of the economy -2017/18 figures for face-to-face tuition (see figure 2 below).
- The situation is similar for higher level VET where the number of mature learners receiving face-to-face tuition is high -2017/18 figures (see figure 3 below)

Figure 1

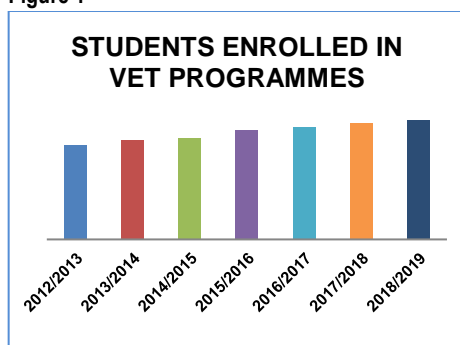


Figure 2

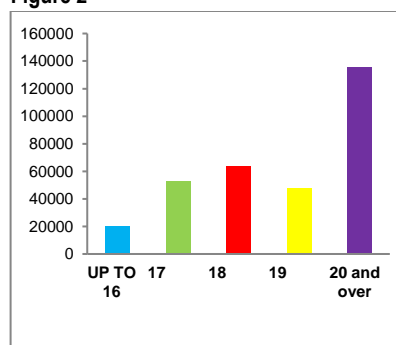
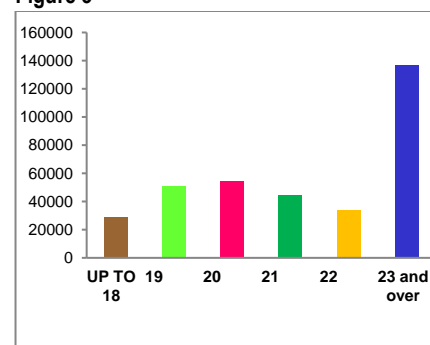


Figure 3



3. VET system in the Netherlands

Rini Romme from the Secondary Vocational Education providers association looked at how quality assurance could make VET more attractive in the Netherlands. He described the range of 'wicked problems' facing the VET system (figure 4) and outlined some potential solutions:

Figure 4



He discussed how to ensure quality in a rapidly changing environment and emphasised ways in which VET providers and the VET system needs to respond. This includes:

- responsibility for quality has to be determined by the VET school in agreement with regional stakeholders;
- VET teams are increasingly responsible for the quality of provision (as some VET providers have many thousands of learners, quality cannot only be the responsibility of senior managers);
- the importance of the current and former students/trainees views on their progress;
- VET schools work within the criteria for quality which are determined by government in agreement with the social partners.

It is the ability of the VET provider to change, to respond to new developments and new demands from learners that helps to ensure they thrive and makes VET more attractive.

4. VET provider in Spain - IES Río Gallego in Zaragoza

María García González from I.E.S. Río Gallego (a state funded secondary school which offers basic, intermediate and higher level VET) in the Aragon Autonomous Community.

María describes the internal and external processes (figure 5) used by the school to quality assure provision.

She also discussed the different approaches which the school uses to increase VET attractiveness from the perspective of the school (and staff), students (and families) and local businesses. Taken together, these measures provide a coherent strategic approach to quality. The school works with a set of 'basic rules' (figure 6) which offer certainty and clarity to all the stakeholders.

Figure 5

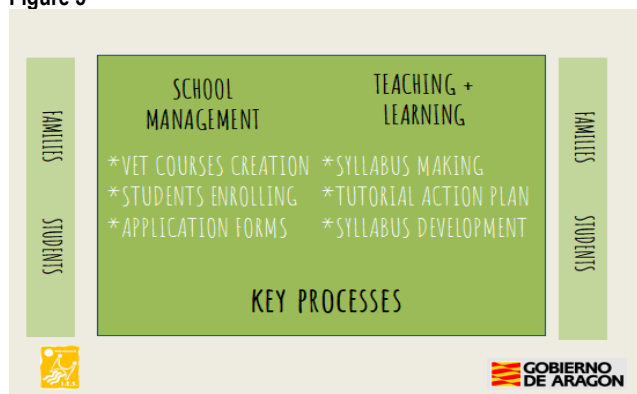


Figure 6



5. Organisation representing the VET providers in the Netherlands

Scilla van Cuijlenborg, from a Secondary Vocational Education school looked at the emerging challenges facing VET providers. Scilla described the value of making the VET provider the centre of the VET community (figure 7) as one way to respond to the rapidly changing labour market environment. Such an approach is dependent on effective partnerships and the VET provider's ability and readiness to respond to the needs of learners.

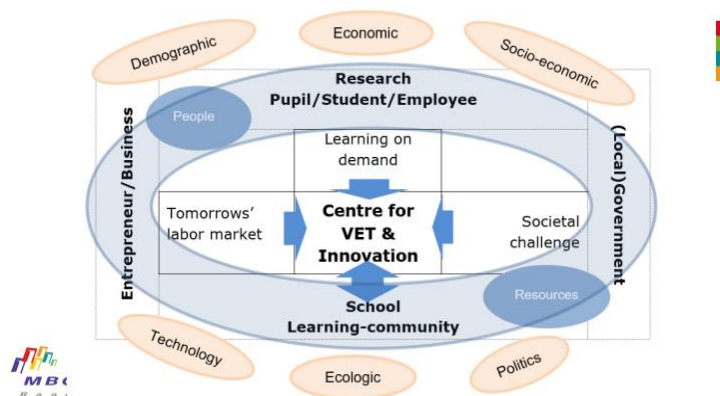
To create this type of platform, the VET provider needs:

- the right people who are pro-active, have drive and connections;
- agreement on the organisation's social/economic values;
- the ability to cooperate (and identify profitable opportunities);

- an organic organisation which is flexible and able to change;
- an understanding that there is a 'right time' to take on new roles;
- shared ownership of activities;
- trust in partner organisations and internal colleagues;
- strong leadership with clearly identified objectives.

In this environment quality becomes a **way of thinking** and the VET provider is constantly considering: How did I do it? Can things be different? Which opportunities are there to improve? etc.

Figure 7



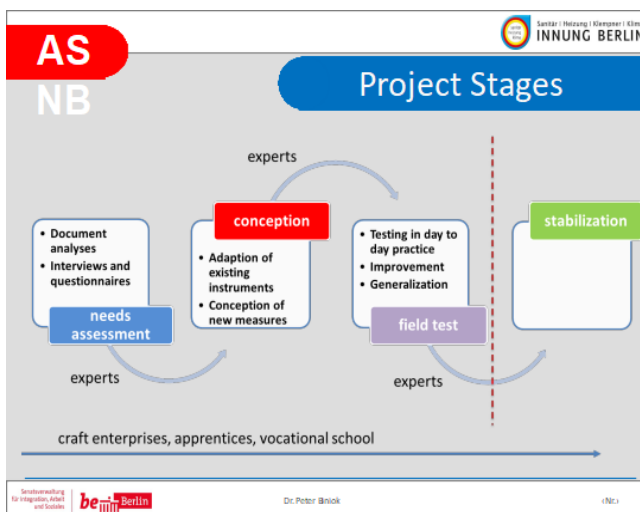
6. An inter-company training centre in Berlin (SHK Kompetenzzentrum) in Germany

Peter Biniok outlined a project to support apprentices in the plumbing and heating sector in the Berlin region. The sector is successful and the number of opportunities for qualified staff is rising but increasingly the apprentices are not completing their programme. The inter-company training centre has designed a research-focused project (figure 8) to understand better the reasons for the drop-outs and what measure can be put in place to support employers and apprentices.

The early work on the project has identified a number of challenges facing the sector. These include:

- on-boarding (early days at work) and probation
 - working in the sector is rarely a childhood ambition
 - apprentices usually start work immediately with little opportunity to 'find their feet'
- the organisation and training arrangements
 - employers do not always have a training plan and they do not provide adequate feedback to apprentices
 - the teaching skills of trainers are not well developed
- appreciation and equality
 - employers demonstrate little enthusiasm of apprentices' achievements
 - the interests of apprentices are rarely considered
 - the sector does not attract enough women

Figure 8



The sector has developed a plan (including new materials and support for employers) to address these issues.