



GATSBY

THE EU'S ROLE IN EUROPEAN VET QUALITY ASSURANCE

A REPORT TO THE GATSBY FOUNDATION

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INTRODUCTION AND GENERAL REMARKS

Vocational education and training (VET) has been a policy focus of the EU since it was founded. VET became an EU area of competence in 1992¹ and has been a policy priority for the last 23 years. However, it is important to note that the EU has no legislative power in relation to education matters, including VET, rather it develops and implements policy on the basis of the open method of consultation.² As Méhaut and Winch explain:

*Since the beginning of the new century, European Union (EU) policy has been focused on 'making Europe the most competitive economy in the knowledge society'. The agenda includes improving education and training systems, lifelong learning and the international mobility of workers and students. The EU, however, has no power and capability to act directly on national policies for the enhancing of skills and competences.*³

To this end, the EU has developed an outlook on VET and a set of policy tools to promote that position. In particular, the EU has encouraged a learning outcomes approach⁴ to VET in pursuit of labour market transparency – the idea being that skills and qualifications, both those required by employers and those possessed by employees, should be readily available to each party. In this way, transparency of qualifications and skills will be achieved and Europe-wide labour mobility will be promoted.

At the same time, the EU has sought to promote dialogue between the stakeholders in different national VET systems. A transnational labour market that relies on the transparency of qualifications and the unambiguous identification of skills needs a large measure of trust in the outcomes of the national VET systems concerned, particularly in the originating countries from which the labour is migrating. VET qualifications can only be trusted when the curricula, pedagogies, resources and assessment practices that lie behind them are trusted by all the other national stakeholders who receive their qualified employees. This cannot be achieved through legislation, but must proceed via consultation, consensus and cooperation. This is the basis on which quality assurance in VET in the European space is grounded.⁵

1 EU areas of competence are set out in the EU Treaties. EU competence in an area is agreed by the member states and it gives the EU the power to act in specific, defined ways. The EU's role in education is to support and supplement action taken by member states. It does not have a legislative role.

2 The open method of consultation is where 'different member states agree on approaches and ways of implementing them'. Winch, C. (2023) *Learning outcomes: the long goodbye: vocational qualifications in the 21st century*. European Educational Research Journal, 22(1), p.27.

3 Méhaut, P. and Winch, C. (2012) *The European Qualification Framework: skills, competences or knowledge?* European Educational Research Journal, 11(3), p.369.

4 The learning outcomes approach can be defined as 'Focusing on what a learner is expected to know, be able to do and understand at the end of a programme or course, outcomes-based qualifications provide students, teachers and labour market stakeholders with a common reference point, potentially allowing for improved and active learning processes, better quality teaching and more relevant qualifications'. Cedefop (2016) *Application of learning outcomes approaches across Europe: a comparative study*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop reference series, No 105, p.6.

5 For more on how such trust can be achieved, see Brockmann, M., Clarke, L., Winch, C., Hanf, G., Méhaut, P. and Westerhuis, A. (2011) Introduction: cross-national equivalence of skills and qualifications across Europe? In, Brockmann, M., Clarke, L. and Winch, C. (2011) *Knowledge, skills and competence in the European labour market. What's in a vocational qualification*. pp.1-22. See also our accompanying reports on Norway, the Netherlands and Germany, which characterise their quality assurance systems in terms of consultation, consensus and collaboration.

EUROPEAN VET POLICY TOOLS

Before we look at quality assurance, it is important to consider another area of EU VET policy activism to place our discussion in an appropriate context. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, in pursuit of transparency and labour market mobility, the EU came to the conclusion that a learning outcomes approach to the development and classification of qualifications was most appropriate. It would avoid the complications of comparing curricula, pedagogies and assessment methods, and also promote transparency. The European Qualification Framework (EQF) was created in 2008:

The EQF is an 8-level, learning outcomes-based framework for all types of qualifications that serves as a translation tool between different national qualifications frameworks. This framework helps improve transparency, comparability and portability of people's qualifications and makes it possible to compare qualifications from different countries and institutions.⁶

All members of the EU have adopted the EQF and many member states have designed or redesigned their national qualification frameworks to ensure compatibility with the EQF. However, it is not clear how widely the EQF has gained significant recognition within national and international labour markets – there is little evidence of widespread adoption. But it is important to keep in mind that the EQF is an educational instrument, designed for use in both educational and labour markets and was developed by the Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture of the EU.

By contrast, European Skills, Competences and Occupations (ESCO) is a multilingual classification relevant to both the European labour market and to education and training.⁷ Development on ESCO began in 2011 by the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, which is now also responsible for the EQF. ESCO recognises 13,890 skills and 3,008 occupations that are relevant to the European labour market. Like the EQF, it is intended to support labour market transparency and mobility and can also function as a format for describing qualifications through its qualifications pillar.⁸

The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) is responsible for promoting and researching the EQF and ESCO, as well as having the wider remit of promoting and researching European VET. However, although the EU has a distinct policy agenda for VET that is pursued through Cedefop, it cannot promote that agenda through its quality assurance practices and institutions. These must be based on consensus between all the national parties and many, if not most, national VET systems are not readily compatible, in particular with ESCO. There is also little evidence of plans for future engagement by the national VET institutions we consulted. For example, some member states are concerned that

⁶ Europass (accessed 2023) *The European Qualifications Framework*.

⁷ European Commission (accessed 2024) *What is ESCO?*

⁸ ESCO is organised in three pillars:

- the occupations pillar;
- the knowledge, skills and competences pillar;
- the qualifications pillar.

These three pillars are interrelated with each other: Overall, this three-layered structured approach allows ESCO to organise terminology for the European labour market and the education/training sector in a consistent, transparent and usable way.

CCEA Regulation (accessed 2024) *European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO): the structure of ESCO*.

using ESCO to develop qualifications may lead to a European 'lowest common denominator' of qualifications.⁹

THE EUROPEAN TRAINING FOUNDATION (ETF) AND EUROPEAN QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (EQAVET)

We turn now to the two EU institutions that are directly concerned with VET quality assurance and examine their relationship with each other and the EU. Alongside promoting VET in the EU, the EU has also had a role in promoting VET in non-EU countries to assist them in further developing and improving their VET systems. The European Training Foundation (ETF) is the organisation responsible for this task. Because it largely operates outside the EU it is not constrained by potential national objections to the development of its own concept of quality in VET – in fact it has been quite explicit in doing so.

The ETF, founded in 1994, has developed a particular methodology of peer visits in which all its partner countries (which include EU countries) can participate. All peer visits are based on mutual agreement and usually focus on specific topics. According to one of our informants, peer visits work as follows: the host country requests a visit and specifies the topic they wish to focus on. The peer visit lasts about three days during which there are round table discussions and meetings with key stakeholders. At the end of the process, feedback is given to the host country. Partner countries can also contact the ETF for advice or consultation on specific issues.

International consultation on VET is quite a crowded space with several of the participants, including state actors and powerful international bodies such as the World Bank, having their own agendas.¹⁰ The ETF has limited resources for advocacy and consultation, which limits its influence. However, the ETF does have a seat on the European Quality Assurance for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) board and can influence its activities through the experience that it has gained in working with countries beyond the EU, including those that aspire to join. Perhaps the most striking feature of the ETF is that it offers its own definition of quality in VET as a topic for debate with partner countries. They are invited to consider it and to think about which parts of it are suitable for them and which are not. This definition is formulated in terms of overall educational aims (with an implicit value stance). This can be done because the ETF does not need consensus from all EU countries to set its aims, although they may have an indirect influence on EU VET policy. It is worth stating them in full:

'Good VET' has five key features:

- *responds to labour market, societal and individual needs;*
- *leads to nationally, or even internationally, recognised qualifications or credentials;*
- *provides access to decent jobs and sustainable employment;*
- *is attractive, inclusive and accessible, i.e. all citizens have access to VET;*
- *fosters capabilities that enable progression to further learning.*¹¹

9 Mottweiler, H., Görmar, G., Gutschow, K., Jordanski, G., Le Mouillour, I., Schaal, T., Schneider, T., Spillner, G. and Weigel, T. (2023) 2.2.342 - Controlling effects of supranational classification systems: a comparative analysis of the significance of the European classification system ESCO for curricular issues and design principles [EUKLASS]. Research project: final report. Bonn, 2023.

10 Elfert, M. (2021) The power struggle over education in developing countries: the case of the UNESCO-World Bank co-operative program, 1964-1989. International Journal of Educational Development, 81, March 2021, 102336.

11 ETF (2015) Promoting quality assurance in vocational education and training: the ETF approach. p.14.

These principles can be seen as aspirational rather than operational – so although they present a view of what high-quality VET should be, they do not provide measurable indicators of whether a country has achieved them. As already stated, the European quality assurance system for VET, EQAVET, cannot do this as it is beyond the EU's mandate. Instead, EQAVET operates strictly within EU policy constraints and its operational principles leave the overall aims of VET as implicit.

Definitions of quality in ETF and EQAVET and how they differ and/or complement each other

The ten EQAVET indicators to assess the quality of VET are:

- *Indicator 1: Relevance of quality assurance systems for VET providers*
- *Indicator 2: Investment in training of teachers and trainers*
- *Indicator 3: Participation rate in VET programmes*
- *Indicator 4: Completion rate in VET programmes*
- *Indicator 5: Placement rate of graduates from VET programmes*
- *Indicator 6: Utilisation of acquired skills at the workplace*
- *Indicator 7: Unemployment rate in the country*
- *Indicator 8: Prevalence of vulnerable groups*
- *Indicator 9: Mechanisms to identify training needs in the labour market*
- *Indicator 10: Schemes used to promote better access to VET and provide guidance to (potential) VET learners¹²*

The EQAVET principles are operational ones. They apply at both system and provider levels and whether they are attained or not can be measured statistically.¹³ Although they are not value-driven like the ETF indicators, they are mostly compatible with and sometimes reflect them. For example, ETF indicator 4 ties in with EQAVET indicators 3, 4 and 8, but there are some unexpected mismatches. ETF 5 suggests progression routes within education, for example through 'permeable' VET qualifications,¹⁴ but none of the EQAVET indicators invite statistical measurement of continued study. ETF 2 mentions the international recognition of credentials, which is not part of the EQAVET indicators. Given these differences, the worry could be that EQAVET does not look sufficiently at the quality of vocational qualifications.

Our ETF contact made the point that partner countries do not necessarily adopt all five indicators. Although he claimed that the ETF value-driven indicators informed the operational EQAVET ones, there is a suggestion that they have not all been adopted by the EU. This is surprising since the aim of the EQF is to promote the international recognition of qualifications. Further investigation may be necessary to understand this apparent mismatch, but it is outside the scope of the current study.

It is not entirely true that EQAVET does not have an implicit approach to a preferred form of VET. Although all member states must agree its principles and operations, the EU itself, through its open method of consultation, promotes certain features of VET that it encourages member states who engage with EQAVET to think about.

¹² European Commission (accessed 2024) *EQAVET framework: the EQAVET indicators*.

¹³ European Commission (accessed 2024) *EQAVET framework: the EQAVET indicators*.

¹⁴ Permeable VET qualifications enable learners to move between vocational and academic routes and between upper secondary, apprenticeship and higher education as they wish. Cedefop (2012) [Briefing note] *Permeable education and training systems reducing barriers and increasing opportunity*.

These are:

- qualifications based on learning outcomes
- the promotion of micro-credentials¹⁵
- the promotion of work-based learning

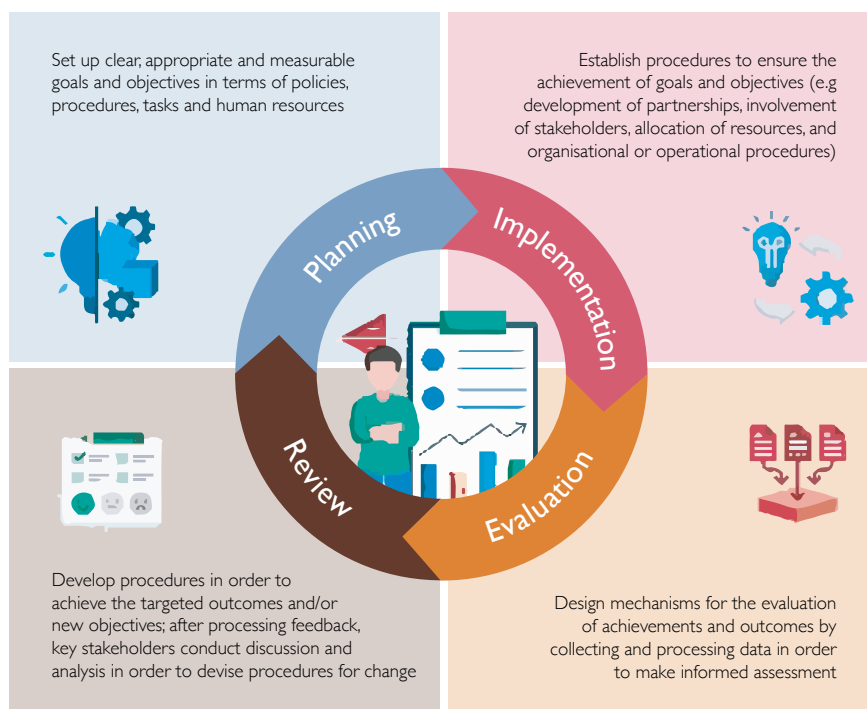
It is not difficult to see how these preferences relate to EUVET policy tools. Learning outcome architecture is explicit in the EQF and is the intended approach for qualifications constructed according to the ESCO skills pillar.¹⁶ In addition, this skills pillar approach fits comfortably with the construction of micro-credentials. Work-based learning, as well as receiving support from the EQAVET process can also call on another related EU agency, the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (EFAA) for advice and support.

EQAVET methodology

EQAVET is an EU body that has representatives from all member countries, but its executive has representatives from five member states and the ETF. EQAVET is not a distinct agency like Cedefop or the ETF, it is a board with a specific mandate and methodology.

EQAVET is based on Japanese and Anglo-American approaches to quality assurance and is underpinned by the Deming cycle. Pioneered by William Deming in the post-war period, this is a four-phase cycle of planning, implementation, evaluation and review (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Deming quality cycle described for EQAVET¹⁷



¹⁵ 'A micro-credential is the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. These learning outcomes have been assessed against transparent and clearly defined standards. Courses leading to micro-credentials are designed to provide the learner with specific knowledge, skills and competences that respond to societal, personal, cultural or labour market needs'. European Commission (2021) *A European approach to micro-credentials: what is a micro-credential*.

¹⁶ European Commission (accessed 2024) *The ESCO classification: skills & competences*.

¹⁷ EU Commission (accessed 2024) *EQAVET quality assurance cycle*.

Deming-style quality assurance contrasted with quality control, where defective outputs were eliminated at the finishing stage. Deming-style quality assurance was intended to ensure that the system was functioning properly through what eventually came to be known as 'total quality management', so that assessment of outcomes was only one part of a holistic process that scrutinised all the stages of the creation of a product or service. Deming also maintained that although measurement and statistical data were important in effective quality assurance, it was crucial to involve management and the workforce in ensuring that a quality assurance system was effective.¹⁸

It is important to note that Deming-style approaches to quality assurance are by no means universally adopted within EU states, a point that was made to us by German officials responsible for liaising with EQAVET (Germany's Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training, DEQA-VET). Nonetheless, because EQAVET only functions when there is consensual agreement between the partner countries and EQAVET, it means that, as a quality assurance mechanism, it has a lot in common with those national approaches that depend on stakeholder involvement and consensus.

Operation of EQAVET

Use of EQAVET is voluntary. Member states can choose to participate and to what extent. It is also elective, in the sense that member states can choose which aspect of their VET system they want scrutinised. All the countries we researched had their own national quality assurance approach. They draw on EQAVET when recognising the need for external scrutiny of an aspect of their system or processes. For example, the German quality assurance approach is not based on the Deming cycle but on a consensual process based on multi-stakeholder evaluation, but Germany thought it would be useful to have an external review of quality assurance in continuing vocational education and training.¹⁹

Before the peer reviews are carried out by partners and the EQAVET secretariat, the country does its own review of the aspect of VET they want to be looked at. Typically four or five partner countries, with experts on the aspect of VET the review is focusing on, will visit. The self-assessment is used as the basis of the peer review. There are in situ meetings, a feedback session and a report that includes non-mandatory recommendations.²⁰ Recommendations are tailored to the specific needs of the country being reviewed and are not meant as a catch-all solution to issues raised. It is thus recognised that a recommendation beneficial to country A may not be beneficial if applied to country B.

There are similarities between the ETF peer visits and the EQAVET peer reviews methodology. They are both voluntary, they focus on an aspect of a country's VET system and a number of country representatives are involved in the review – the number varying depending on interest and expertise located in particular member states.

EQAVET was first introduced in 2009. In 2020 it revised and updated its procedures following recommendations made by the Council of the European

¹⁸ Winch, C. (1996) *Quality and education*. Oxford: Blackwell. Chapter 2.

¹⁹ BIBB (accessed 2023) *DEQA-VET events: EQAVET peer reviews*.

²⁰ European Commission (2022) *The EQAVET network's approach to VET system level peer reviews: a manual*.

Union.²¹ Now, as well as looking at national VET processes, it includes VET system reviews in its visits, as well as elements relating to digital and green developments in the economy, the role of social partners and teacher educators. EQAVET has no mandate for change and its representatives stress there is no intention to impose EU or other national preferences for VET in its procedures. Policy advocacy for learning outcomes-based approaches to VET occurs through Cedefop and the EQF and ESCO policy tools, which operate independently of EQAVET.

EQAVET has limited personnel. An EQAVET secretariat supports the European Commission but it is actually a consultancy appointed and steered by the Commission. The EQAVET secretariat helps organise peer reviews, which can be time-consuming. The secretariat can also appoint an expert who helps the country being reviewed to set up the peer review.

Participation in EQAVET

At a national level, participation in EQAVET among member countries is quite high. The EU survey of 2022 found that:

Among EU27 countries, 24 of the 28 countries use the EQAVET quality cycle, 19 use EQAVET indicative descriptors and 21 use EQAVET indicators.²²

This may seem puzzling, because the descriptors are actually operationalisations of the indicators.²³ It is likely that the individual descriptors are used by partner countries in an ad hoc way, possibly at process rather than system level, to address specific issues in their VET systems. However, there are cases, such as Norway, where the Deming cycle is already used for quality assurance purposes. It is notable that eight countries (excluding the UK) do not use the EQAVET indicators either at process or system level. This suggests that EQAVET is still far from being universally accepted by EU states.

The influence of EQAVET on individual countries

The national reports that are companions to this report show that the influence of EQAVET is low-key and implicit, once one moves through the system beyond the National Reference Points (the national agencies responsible for liaising with EQAVET). It may even be non-existent at the regional, local and practitioner levels. However, our EQAVET informant maintains that EQAVET is a 'back office tool' that is not intended to be explicitly disseminated for use by practitioners. There was some discussion at the EU level in 2013-14 about whether there should be an EQAVET quality stamp to be awarded to national providers, but this idea was dropped (although Portugal, alone among the EU partner countries, does have such a scheme). So EQAVET is a back-office tool that is intended to suggest changes to systems and processes at the national level through the peer review process. It is the responsibility of national agencies to implement the recommended changes without necessarily attributing the changes to an EQAVET peer review.

21 The Council of the European Union 'negotiates and adopts new EU legislation, adapts it when necessary, and coordinates policies. In most cases, the Council decides together with the European Parliament through the ordinary legislative procedure, also known as "codecision". Codecision is used for policy areas where the EU has exclusive or shared competence with the member states. In these cases, the Council legislates on the basis of proposals submitted by the European Commission'. European Council (accessed 2024) *The Council of the EU: the decision-making process in the Council*.

22 EQAVET (2023) *Supporting the implementation of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework: results of the EQAVET secretariat survey 2022*. p.iv. See Related documents at the bottom of the page for PDF of the report.

23 EQAVET (accessed 2023) *EQAVET+ indicative descriptors: EQAVET network paper on complementing EQAVET*. EU working paper.

To test this claim, we would need to analyse the sequences of events in partner countries after their national peer reviews to determine if recommendations were implemented at system, provider and practitioner levels. To our knowledge this has not been done, with the above mentioned exception of Portugal.

CONCLUSION: HOW STRONG IS THE INFLUENCE OF EQAVET ON NATIONAL VET?

As National Reference Points engage with EQAVET and set up peer reviews, at the national level EQAVET undoubtedly has an influence on national systems and possibly on their processes. However, the degree of this influence is difficult to establish empirically without some detailed analyses of particular countries. Suffice it to say at this stage of our enquiry that we have seen little evidence that EQAVET has had an influence on national providers and practitioners. At the national level however, in those cases where recommendations from an EQAVET peer review have resulted in recommendations and those recommendations have been implemented, it is safe to say that there has been some direct influence, at least at the system level. However, we do not have direct evidence that this is the case. Whether this percolates to regions, providers or more localised quality assurance processes is altogether more difficult to gauge at this stage.

Our conclusions are therefore tentative. The EU has a well-developed and extensively used quality assurance mechanism for VET at both system and provider levels. Both the values and the ideological underpinnings are implicit although discernible. Although EQAVET is recognised and used at a national level to some degree by more than three quarters of EU countries there is limited evidence of its influence within national systems, although we cannot eliminate the possibility that this influence is indirect and implicit.

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