

EQAVET peer review on ‘the external quality assurance accreditation manual for further education institutions’ - Flash Report

The peer review

This online peer review took place on 4th and 5th December 2024. It was hosted by the Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA) which manages the work of the EQAVET National Reference Point in Malta. Six EQAVET Network members from the French Community of Belgium, Croatia, Hungary, Italy and Romania acted as peer reviewers.

The peer review focused on the draft handbook developed by MFHEA to support the initial licensing and subsequent re-accreditation of further education institutions and centres. This handbook (*The External Quality Assurance Provider Accreditation Manual*) describes the following seven key areas of a VET provider's provision which will be reviewed as part of the licensing and accreditation processes:

- Management, Governance and Strategic planning;
- Quality assurance and Enhancement;
- Teaching and Learning (including work-based learning);
- Design, development of programmes, awards and accreditation;
- Student admission, progression, recognition and certification;
- Data and information management;
- Internationalisation.

The manual covers further education which is seen as all non-compulsory formal learning aimed at obtaining a qualification classified up to, and including, Level 4 of the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) or a comparable foreign qualification. It is applicable to any VET provider which could be an individual or corporate entity licensed by the MFHEA to deliver educational services within or from Malta.

Prior to the development of this handbook, the MFHEA had common guidelines for the licensing and accreditation of higher and further education providers. Following a review of this previous system, the MFHEA decided to develop separate guidance for higher and further education providers. This handbook is one of the outcomes of this decision.

The external quality assurance provider accreditation manual

The manual sets out what a VET provider needs to demonstrate to offer training which leads to an award or qualification on the Maltese Qualifications Framework. Organisations seeking to gain the license make their application to the MFHEA. For organisations which successfully complete the licensing process, there is a re-accreditation process every five years. For each of the key areas, the manual describes the required standards for licensing and re-accreditation - the standards for re-accreditation are higher than those that apply at the licensing stage.

The licensing and re-accreditation processes are based on three stages:

- preparation where institutions gather and submit the necessary documentation for the External Quality Assurance audit;
- the External Quality Assurance audit, which includes on-site visits, interviews and evaluations;
- the post-audit arrangements, where institutions receive feedback, and an official report with recommendations for improvement.

The focus of the peer review

The peer review included presentations from the MFHEA and discussions between the panel members and colleagues from Malta. After each presentation, the peer reviewers had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss how the manual would be used. The presentations highlighted how the new approach (based on seven key areas) would simplify the previous system and require VET providers to develop an annual self assessment review which would be considered as part of the external quality assurance audit.

As the licensing and re-accreditation process considers seven key areas of provision, there would be a judgement of each of these areas. For each key area, the VET provider's approach would be judged as: fully compliant; substantially compliant; partially compliant; or not compliant. As part of the peers' reflections on the manual, there was some discussion on how many of the key areas needed to be 'at least partially compliant' in order for the MFHEA to be confident to license or re-accredit a provider. Peers also reflected on how the expectations associated with the licensing decision could differ from those of re-accreditation.

The peer reviewers commented on the thoroughness of the licensing and re-accreditation processes, and welcomed the simplification of the new manual as it specifically focuses on the needs of VET providers. There was some discussion on how best to organise the external quality assurance audits which would be completed by independent peers who are selected and trained by the MFHEA. These peers will have a lot of responsibility and will be required to examine an extensive amount of evidence which is produced by the organisation seeking licensing or re-accreditation. While the peers do not make the final decision on licensing or re-accreditation, their views and their report will inform the decisions of the MFHEA's Quality Assurance Committee.

Alongside general discussions on the licensing and re-accreditation processes, the peer reviewers considered the following guiding questions:

- Are there any other quality areas that should be included? If yes which ones and why do you believe they are important?
- What is your feedback on quality descriptors for accreditation (at licensing stage)?
- Are there any points or suggestions you would like to make on the confirmation for accreditation (re-accreditation)?
- What are your overall thoughts on the new accreditation Manual for FEIs, and how do you think it can be improved?

Next steps

At the end of the meeting, the peer reviewers thanked the hosts and shared their initial feedback on the licensing and re-accreditation processes for VET providers. The full report of the discussions will be shared with the hosts. The feedback from the peer reviewers' report will help to inform the development of the final version of the '*External Quality Assurance Provider Accreditation Manual for Further Education Institutions and Centres*'.

The EQAVET system level peer review initiative

The [2020 Council Recommendation on VET](#) called upon the EQAVET Network to develop a specific methodology for EQAVET peer reviews, with the objective to support the improvement and transparency of quality assurance arrangements at system level in Member States. Over the course of 2021, with the support of DG EMPL and the EQAVET Secretariat, the EQAVET Network agreed on a joint methodology and prepared a Peer Review Manual. A first cycle of peer reviews took place in 2022-2023. Quality Assurance National Reference Points (EQAVET NRPs) from 21 Member States took part in this EQAVET Network's peer review initiative.

Following a review of the Peer Review Manual, a second cycle of peer reviews has been planned for 2024-26 with 20 participating NRPs. The peer review in Malta was one of five peer reviews that took place in 2024. Nine further peer reviews are planned to take place in 2025 and six in 2026.