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ACVT MEETING 4-5 June 2019 – item 2 – future policy agenda

**BACKGROUND PAPER FOR THE DISCUSSION ON
THE FUTURE OF EQAVET AND ECVET**

This note sets the background for a debate on the future of European VET instruments, notably EQAVET and ECVET, as called under the ACVT Opinion on the future of VET. It will be discussed by the Advisory Committee on VET as well as the EQF Advisory Group and the Europass Advisory Group. It builds on the outcomes of the discussion in the ACVT Working Group on EU VET Instruments and takes into account the available evidence from the Commission, CEDEFOP and the ETF and other sources. The results of the discussions will feed into the preparatory work of the Commission for developing its proposals for the post 2020 policy framework in the field of vocational education and training.

1. Introduction

The 2018 ACVT Opinion on the future of VET invited the Commission to “organise a reflection with experts from the ACVT as regards the potential for streamlining existing VET instruments and accelerate the ongoing discussions in order to come up with timely proposals. These discussions should also be carried out in close cooperation with the EQF and Europass Advisory Groups. These should be developed taking into account existing evaluations, studies and stakeholder’s views in relation to the different instruments and the interaction between them and an overarching analysis of these”. In addition, the Opinion also invites to come up with proposal “to simplify the VET governance at EU level notably through increased effectiveness and efficiency of structures supporting the implementation of EU instruments in the field of VET.”

To this end, an ad-hoc ACVT Working Group on existing European VET instruments was established in accordance with Article 8 of the Rules and Procedures of the ACVT (more information on the mandate and composition of the Working Group can be found in Annex). Members of the Working Group met two times. The Working Group focussed on two main questions:

1. Are the objectives of the two tools still valid in the context of the overarching VET policy vision defined in the ACVT Opinion, as well as the overarching objectives pursued under the European Education Area, or do you propose options for their re-formulation?
2. How these objectives can be best pursued by adapting the structure, implementation modes and governance framework of the tools, taking into account their coordination with other tools and initiatives in the field of skills and qualifications?

2. Broader context/Rationale

The two VET specific EU instruments, EQAVET and ECVET were developed over several years, following extensive preparatory work carried out in cooperation with Member States and social partners:

1. The Recommendation on the **European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training** (EQAVET¹) sets a reference framework to support Member States in improving the quality of their VET systems and to contribute to increased transparency of VET policy developments between Member States, thereby promoting mutual trust, mobility of workers and learners, and lifelong learning. It sets a quality assurance and improvement cycle of planning, implementation, evaluation/assessment and review/revision of VET, supported by common quality criteria, indicative descriptors and indicators. It is meant to be applied at both VET system level and at VET provider level. Member States and providers can use these as appropriate to inspire their quality assurance practices, but there is no legal obligation to adopt the complete set of descriptors and indicators foreseen in the Recommendation.
2. The Recommendation on the **European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training** (ECVET²) sets the objective of making VET learning pathways more flexible, allowing learners to obtain qualifications by accumulating credit (assessed units of learning outcomes) earned in different locations, settings and timeframes. The core principle of ECVET is that VET qualifications are made up of components, called 'units of learning outcomes' that can each be assessed and validated independently. To support the application of this principle with particular reference to learners' mobility, ECVET introduces two templates, the Memorandum of Understanding and the Learning Agreement, which defines the duration and expected learning outcomes of each specific learning experience.

The priorities of high quality and flexible VET and of transnational mobility are at the core of the global vision for the modernisation of VET defined by the Ministers in charge of VET 2010 (the **Bruges Communiqué**³). In the 2015 **Riga Conclusions**⁴, a set of 5 priorities⁵ have been defined to support the achievement of this vision.

The 2016 **Skills Agenda for Europe** reaffirmed the importance to increase the attractiveness of VET through quality provision and flexible organisation and announced a review of EQAVET and ECVET as part of actions supporting VET modernisation.

The Skills Agenda also proposed the revision of the **European Qualifications Framework** and **the Europass framework**. On 22 May 2017, the Council adopted the revised Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for lifelong learning with the aim to consolidate the purpose of the EQF, namely to improve the transparency, comparability and portability of qualifications. The revised Recommendation ensures that qualifications with an EQF level are underpinned by common principles for quality

¹ Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training, OJ C 155, 8.7.2009

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32009H0708%2801%29>

² Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) OJ C 155, 8.7.2009

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32009H0708%2802%29>

³ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=20480&langId=en>

⁴ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=20481&langId=en>

⁵ The five Riga priorities are: 1) Work-based learning in all its forms (including apprenticeships), 2) Quality assurance, feedback loop between LM needs and VET provision, 3) Access to training and qualifications for all in a LLL perspective (C-VET), 4) Strengthen key competences in both initial and continuing VET, and 5) Professional development of VET teachers and trainers

assurance (Annex IV) and that common principles for credit systems are used when qualifications with an EQF level are built on credits (Annex V).

The new Decision of the European Parliament and the Council on **Europass**⁶, adopted in April 2018, establishes a platform that will support the documentation and description of skills and qualifications and will offer an e-Portfolio tool for users (e.g. job-seekers, learners) to store information on their skills and qualifications, create CVs and applications. It will also serve as a web portal with information on qualifications and qualification systems, guidance, validation, recognition and other topics related to skills and qualifications. The new Europass service will also support use of authentication services (e.g. digital signatures/certificates).

The priorities of the Skills Agenda are highly relevant for the first principle of the **European Pillar of Social Rights**⁷ proclaimed in 2017.

One of the objectives of the **European Education Area** launched in 2017 is ‘improving the inclusive, lifelong-learning based and innovation-driven nature of the education and training systems’. The **Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad** invites Member States to put in place the steps necessary to achieve, by 2025, automatic recognition of higher education and upper secondary qualifications, as well as recognition of the outcomes of learning periods. The Recommendation stresses the need to further develop quality assurance instruments in vocational education and training in line with the European Framework for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training and its further developments with a view to foster transparency and build trust in each other's secondary education and training systems. To facilitate mobility and recognition of the outcomes of learning periods abroad, the Recommendation also calls on extending the use of the EU tools developed in VET: such as those made available through the Europass online platform and the Memorandum of Understanding and Learning Agreement that are part of the European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training.

The ACVT adopted an **Opinion on the Future of Vocational Education and Training** in December 2018. The Opinion sets the vision for an excellent, inclusive and lifelong VET that meets the requirements of the future challenged by economic, technological and societal changes. It identifies that “*VET systems are expected to develop ‘fast response’ mechanisms of both stable quality assured core qualifications/skills pathways and flexible formats of adding new or higher-level skills, requiring strong governance involving social partners, both employers and trade unions.*” The ACVT also invites the Commission:

- to work towards the adoption of a new Communiqué that will define the vision for VET 2030 and will be endorsed by Ministers in charge for VET, European Social Partners and the Commission
- to prepare a proposal to streamline and consolidate EU VET policy framework, governance and existing instruments in the form of an overarching Council Recommendation. The Opinion also stressed the need to explore the potential for streamlining existing VET instruments, which should be done in cooperation with the EQF and Europass Advisory Groups.

The results of the discussion on EQAVET and ECVET feed into reflections on the post-2020 policy frameworks.

⁶ Decision of 18 April 2018, OJ L112, 2.5.2018. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018D0646&from=en>

⁷ Decision of 18 April 2018, OJ L112, 2.5.2018. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018D0646&from=en>

3. EQAVET and ECVET implementation – achievements and critical points

The Commission launched a dedicated study on the two instruments in January 2018 with two main objectives⁸:

- provide a comprehensive analysis of how EQAVET and ECVET have contributed to national VET developments and the implementation of the European VET policy agenda
- identify and analyse strengths and weaknesses of a set scenarios for further development of EQAVET and ECVET.

The following section summarises the main findings of the study related to the *influence of the tools at national level*.

EQAVET has contributed – at system level – to advancing a quality culture in VET in individual European countries and as a reference framework, it has supported the improvement of quality assurance (QA) arrangements in a large majority of Member States. Twelve Member States have changed their QA policies specifically to implement the EQAVET recommendation, while in most other countries it has been used to review their systems against EU good practice in QA and to inform recent adjustments of their QA systems. Some countries have new QA legislation that refers specifically to EQAVET. However, there is no evidence to show that EQAVET implementation significantly contributed to increasing the transparency of QA arrangements among Member States on European level.

Concerning **ECVET**, the study concluded that it is indeed contributing to make vocational pathways more flexible, but did not lead to the set up of European ‘credit system’ – a set of rules that regulate the allocation and transfer of credit points which keep the same value across programmes and countries. This tension between ECVET’s declared role as a credit system and its actual role as a European reference framework for flexible learning pathways has caused confusion and would need to be clarified. For mobility, the study has shown that ECVET tools, namely the Learning Agreement and Memorandum of Understanding, are widely appreciated by mobility promoters, as their use improves the quality and effectiveness of mobility experiences.

ECVET has inspired or contributed to define a number of system level measures based on units of learning outcomes with the aim to increase flexibility of VET. Units of learning outcomes in VET are now applied in 17 countries (compared to 9 in 2013).

The above-mentioned *study presents options* for the further development of the instruments assessed during the consultations. The study has identified and analysed six possible future scenarios for EQAVET and five for ECVET (for details please see the report).

According to the study, the most positively assessed option for **EQAVET** was the option of strengthening the implementation of the Recommendation by developing a *peer review* process among the Member States of their QA systems. The study concludes that this option may provide greatest benefits in terms of increasing the transparency and quality of QA arrangements while also supporting peer learning and support implementation at national level. This option could possibly also be combined with the option of developing one single integrated policy framework for VET, embedding the peer review on quality assurance in this wider framework. This would also contribute to the implementation of the Council

⁸ The study is now available <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/205aa0ac-460d-11e9-a8ed-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

Recommendation⁹ on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad.

Concerning *ECVET*, the most positively assessed option according to the study was *to integrate ECVET principles* (e.g. units of learning outcomes) in a wider policy framework for VET (Option 3) to reinvigorate the use of these principles to support flexible learning pathways that enhance lifelong learning. This option could also be applied together with Option 2, ensuring that part of the ECVET functions can be delivered by other existing initiatives, namely to further develop the work on credit systems as per the provisions in Annex V of the EQF Recommendation and to strengthen the use of the ECVET Memorandum of Understanding and Learning agreement in transnational mobility in the future Erasmus programme and integrate them in Europass in order to develop one single tool that can support all stages of mobility (preparatory phase with definition of learning outcomes, mobility itself and at the end the recognition of the learning outcomes acquired).

4. Key messages of the discussions in the Working Group on VET Instruments

The following sections summarise the conclusions of the Working Group for the two main questions.

Question 1: Are the objectives of the two tools still valid in the context of the overarching VET policy vision defined in the ACVT Opinion, as well as the overarching objectives pursued under the European Education Area, or do you propose options for their re-formulation?

The Working Group reviewed the relevant EU tools and initiatives, notably the recent developments related to EQF, Europass, Council Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning, the Council Recommendation on Tracking Graduates, Council Recommendation on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad, ESCO, higher education instruments as well as the implementation modes of programmes and funds.

There was a general agreement that the EU tools and initiatives – with relevance to VET - pursue broad shared objectives, which could be clustered around three dimensions, as described below:

A. Flexible solutions for lifelong VET (initial and continuing)

- empowering people to access upskilling and reskilling opportunities
- supporting the transfer and accumulation of learning outcomes achieved in different contexts (formal, non-formal and informal)
- creating systems and learning pathways that enable people to acquire up-to-date, high quality and recognised qualifications based on learning outcomes

B. Building quality, excellence and trust in European VET systems

- contributing to quality improvements in VET at national level
- promoting mutual trust in Member States VET systems

⁹http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13955-2018-INIT/en/pdf?fbclid=IwAR3-sp1kXQ_S12trJfpea9hltXIhhqcqveXP7goEli68y5krYyFdbolpr74

- contributing to transparency of, and consistency in, VET policy developments between Member States

C. Facilitating mobility and free movement of VET learners and workers

- facilitating the transfer and recognition of learning outcomes accumulated during a learning or work-related stay abroad
- increasing the transparency of skills and qualifications
- supporting the portability of skills and qualifications within national and international contexts

The Working Group discussed the added value of EU level VET tools i.e. EQAVET and ECVET. It concluded that the direct EU added value of the EU tools lies in their capacity to support transparency, portability of learning outcomes and qualifications, mobility and movement of learners and workers, building mutual trust among systems which is also prerequisite for recognition of qualifications by implementing, using and referencing to the tools. The EU tools can also provide indirect added value by promoting “upward convergence” related to flexibility, quality and excellence in VET as well as overall effectiveness and efficiency in VET through cooperation, mutual learning and exchanges.

Question 2. How these objectives can be best pursued by adapting the structure, implementation modes and governance framework of the tools, taking into account their coordination with other tools and initiatives in the field of skills and qualifications?

Based on the **broad objectives** that the tools pursue and partly share with other EU tools or initiatives, the group outlined two options on how ECVET and EQAVET could be further developed and supported in the future.

To explore the synergies between EQAVET/ECVET and the European tools and initiatives and to seek for the **simplification and streamlining** of EU level VET cooperation, the Working Group mapped and discussed the following aspects of the implementation framework:

- integration of function: What are the reviewed objectives and core principles of EQAVET and ECVET that should be continued and how they can be aligned to the policy objectives of other instruments/tools/initiatives in the field of VET, skills and qualifications (if possible)?
- integration of content: Which of the concrete elements (e.g. templates, indicators) of the VET tools should be further developed and/or aligned with other instruments (if possible)?
- legislative implications: What are the possible changes to the legal basis of the VET instruments or what other related legislative instruments can support the implementation?
- governance structure: What potential structures for governance can respond to the needs of “increased effectiveness and efficiency” and streamlining at EU level?
- working methods: Which actions at EU and Member State level are necessary to reach the objectives?

- funding: What financial resources are available at EU level to support implementation?

Options for ECVET

In both options for ECVET, the working group indicated that the objectives related to **flexibility** and **learning outcomes** approach in VET are still valid and should be pursued further, but this could also be done through other EU tools and instruments according to the following preliminary conclusions:

- the objectives should continue to be at the core of the VET policy framework as called also under the ACVT Opinion on the future of VET, and the flexibility / LLL objective could be further developed under a new overarching VET Recommendation,
- there is no need for a specific instrument focusing only on VET – the implementation arrangements related to EQF and Validation Recommendation can support the work on these objectives. However, there is a need to continue specific support actions in the field of VET, including for implementing the principles of *groups/units/modules of learning outcomes* and *accumulation and transfer of learning outcomes*
- future work has to build on the achievements so far,
- greater involvement of social partners has to be ensured in the future governance structures both at national and at European level,
- working methods to support national level implementation need to be defined with a view to support streamlining and consolidating on governance level
- links could possibly be created also with the implementation of the objectives pursued through the EQAVET,
- EU level support and the strengthening of mutual learning activities are important for supporting Member States' efforts to increase flexibility in VET.

For **mobility** in VET, there was a general agreement on the added value and impact of ECVET on mobility in VET and that the existing ECVET tools (Memorandum of Understanding and Learning Agreement) should be further developed in the future:

Option 1 foresees that ECVET as such would continue to exist as a *dedicated tool for VET mobility* as part of the future VET policy framework to keep the identity and clear identification of the efforts done in the field of VET: it would be mainstreamed via the new Erasmus Programme.

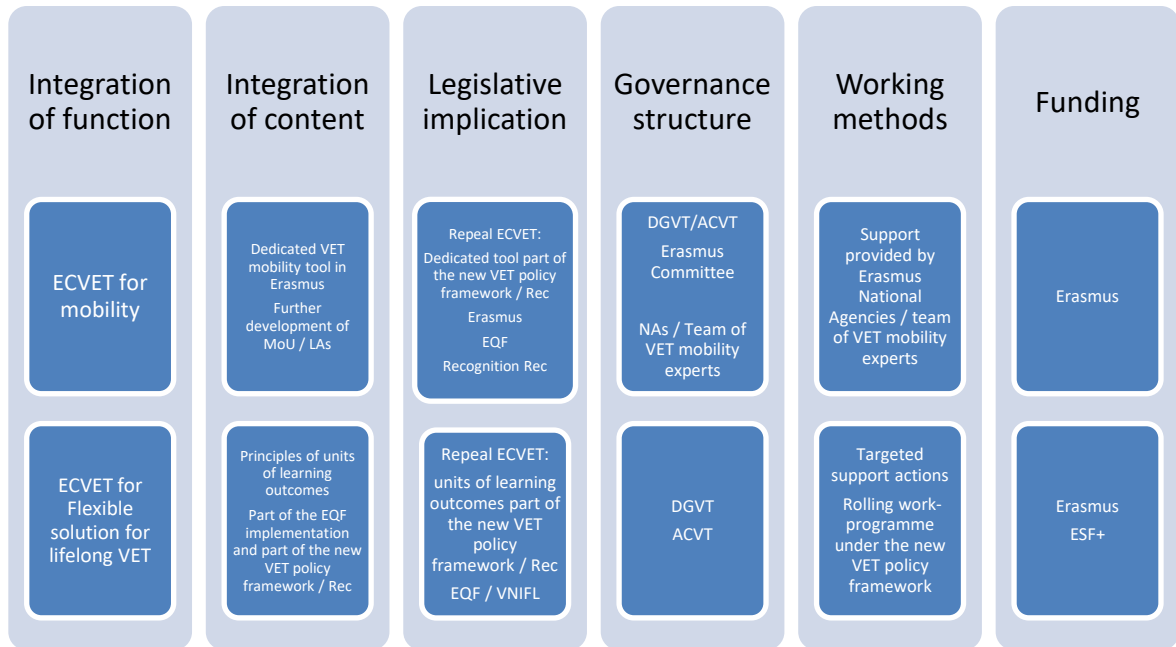
Option 2 proposes to pursue the objective of supporting VET mobility by building on the new developments foreseen for *Europass* and by mainstreaming it through the new *Erasmus Programme* in line with the perspectives for the future programme operating with a double budget according to the Commission's proposal. Most participants favoured a full integration of all stages of VET mobility (from preparation to documentation) in the 2021-2027 *Erasmus programme* (including *Erasmus Without Papers*) and in the future *Europass platform*.

Both options for ECVET would practically mean abandoning the objective of creating a European credit system in VET. However, it would still mean that current credit systems could be maintained and that countries would still have the freedom to implement credit systems.

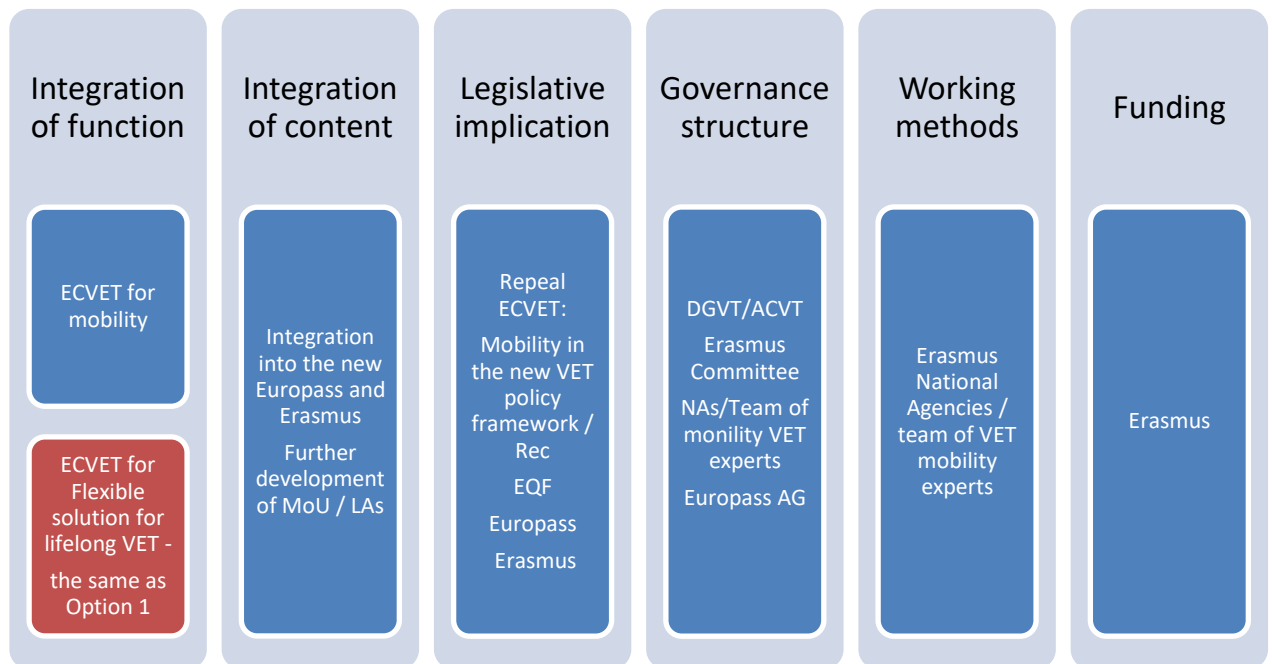
There is also a common understanding that the current objectives of ECVET related to both *mobility* and *flexibility of VET* can be pursued in the future *without the need for a specific Council Recommendation* however still at the core of the new overarching VET policy framework/Recommendation.

The tables below detail the information related to the proposed options of ECVET.

Option 1 for ECVET



Option 2 for ECVET (ECVET for flexible solution for lifelong VET – the same as in Option 1)



Options for EQAVET

Both options for further development of EQAVET would represent continuity and gradual improvement of the tool.

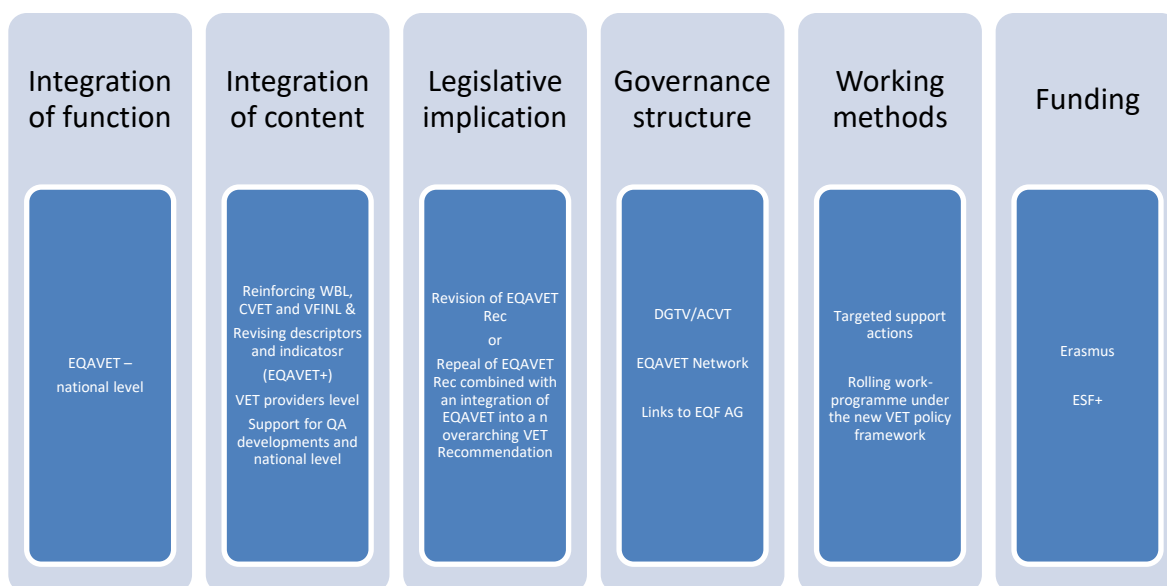
Option 1: There was a strong support to further develop EQAVET at **national level** which would be based on the following conceptual elements:

- support the quality assurance developments at national level and focus more on implementation at VET providers level
- review working methods to promote national level implementation with a view to support streamlining and consolidating of the EU VET tools on governance level,
- extend and adapt the use of the framework to work-based learning, continuing VET, validation of non-formal and informal learning including the learning outcomes approach (EQAVET+ approach)
- revising EQAVET indicators where needed
- focus mutual learning actions on specific aspects of quality assurance in VET, in line with priorities at national level
- review the legal basis of EQAVET with a view to best meet the objective of streamlining and consolidating the EU VET tools and link it to the new VET policy framework/new overarching VET Recommendation.

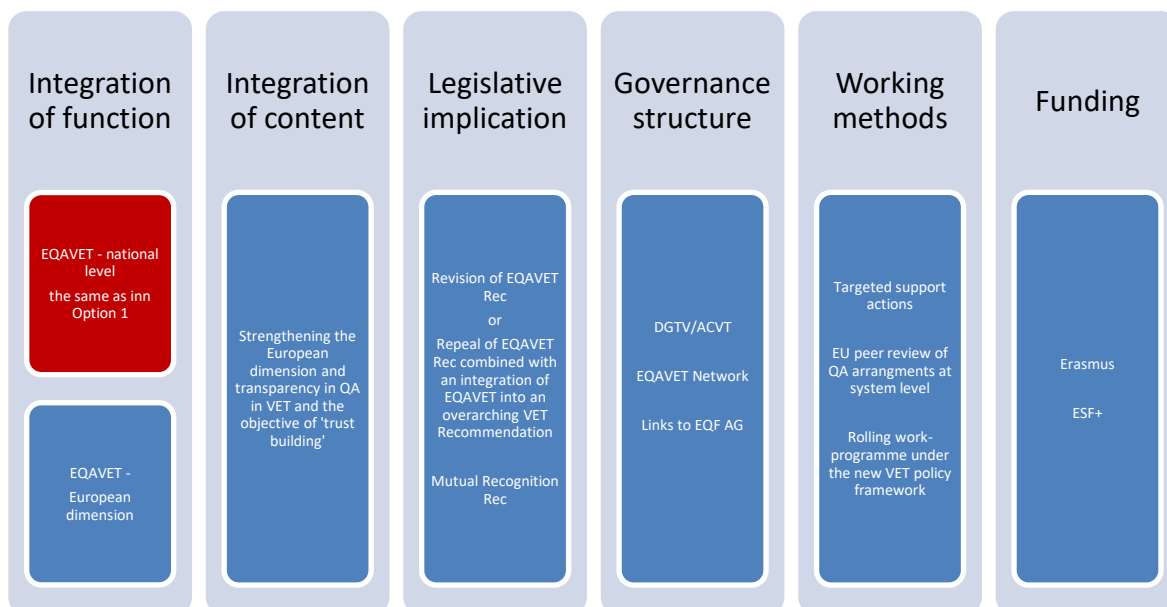
Option 2 incorporates Option 1 and strengthens the **European dimension** of increased transparency and ‘trust-building’ by introducing **peer reviews**. The focus on the European dimension is a logical extension of successful activities which have taken place since the adoption of EQAVET Recommendation in 2009 and which have helped the majority of countries to define, review and refine their QA systems. However, the format and working methods of this reinforced European dimension, aimed at strengthening transparency and trust building, needs to be further discussed:

- Given the great variety of QA arrangements, some participants called for a more ambitious and structured, but still voluntary approach to increase transparency in QA through collaborative **peer reviews** at VET system level. This could build on the new political momentum given to the importance of mutual trust and recognition of qualifications and diplomas as pursued through the European Education Area.
- Some participants were in favour to continue **peer / mutual learning activities** at various levels (systems, providers) to further nurture the culture of QA in VET

Option 1 for EQAVET



Option 2 for EQAVET (includes Option 1)



It was stressed that terminology should be clarified to address concerns over the sensitivity of the concepts being proposed, notably by respecting the subsidiarity principle (e.g. clarifying that peer reviews are not a “certification process” but a means to increase mutual understanding and sharing of best practices).

The following section clarifies the terminology to avoid concerns over the concepts proposed and makes the respect of the subsidiarity principle transparent.

Peer review:

A peer review is a type of mutual learning activity. It is hosted by a country to present and discuss in depth the specific policy responses and arrangements in place to achieve the objectives of the policy area. Both representatives of Member States and independent experts can participate. The peer review was introduced as an ET2020 tool following the 2012 Joint Report and it is used on a regular basis in the meetings of the Directors General for VET.

In the context of the proposed options for EQAVET, a peer review is a type of mutual learning activity focused on the quality assurance arrangements at VET system level. The objectives of these peer reviews are to support the improvement QA at Member State level, enhance the transparency of QA arrangements and reinforce trust between the Member States.

Therefore, peer review is not to be confused with accreditation or certification. In the framework of the EQAVET implementation, EU peer reviews at VET provider level are already frequently carried out in EU funded projects. A specific methodology for a EU peer reviews at VET provider level has been developed in the framework of Leonardo Da Vinci project in 2007 and this methodology is still used in more recent projects (for example in the projects selected in the framework of the 2017 restricted call for proposals of EQAVET NRPs).

The key principles of EU peer reviews at VET system level would need to be determined in cooperation with the participating Member States and could consist of the following features:

- The focus is on supporting countries to improve their QA and creating transparency of QA arrangements in Member States;
- The target group is those officials who have responsibilities for QA of VET at the system level;
- The peer review is not as a technical and/or bureaucratic procedure but as a dynamic and motivating discussion process that engages policy makers at national/system level and increases cooperation at EU level;
- A specific methodology to carry out EU peer reviews at VET system level needs to be defined in cooperation with Member State representatives and social partners.

5. Questions for discussions

Taking into account the information summarised in this note, the ACVT is invited to discuss the following questions:

1. Do you agree with the preliminary analysis of the ACVT working group as regards the future evolution of ECVET and EQAVET?
2. What are the key principles that should guide the formulation of the proposals for the possible review of these instruments and key concerns to be considered in terms of implementation at national level?