



EQAVET

EQAVET Annual Network Meeting 2023

Full summary report

15-16 June 2023

Venue: Stockholm, Sweden

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Welcoming words.....	3
Update of the EU VET policy context and presentation on policy developments relevant for the context of quality assurance in VET	3
The European Year of Skills	3
Skills for the digital transition	4
CEDEFOP's and ETF's work on quality assurance of VET	5
Updates from the host country	6
Quality and gender equality in VET: Collaboration for upper secondary school between the Swedish National Agency for Education and the National Programme Councils.....	6
Quality in Swedish higher vocational education	8
Workshops.....	10
Topic 1: Quality assurance in CVET/professional further education.....	10
Topic 2: Improving the monitoring of VET through a graduate tracking mechanism.....	12
EQAVET Community development sessions	14
Topic 1: EQAVET Network for beginners.....	14
Topic 2: The visibility and communication tools of the EQAVET Network – EU level and national level	14
Panel discussion on digital skills, use of digital tools in VET and blended learning.....	15
Highlights from the work of four EQAVET NRPs	16
Meeting close.....	17

Introduction

72 participants from 29 countries (26 Member States and 3 non-Member States) gathered for the EQAVET Annual Network Meeting in Stockholm, 15-16th of June 2023. EQAVET National Reference Points (NRPs) as well as staff members from the European Commission (EC), European Training Foundation (ETF), Cedefop, social partners and thematic experts addressed a range of topics linked to quality assurance (QA) of Vocational Education and Training (VET) via presentations and interactive discussions. For example, digitalisation and the European Year of Skills, QA mechanisms for both General Education and VET as well as gender equality in VET programmes.

Several EQAVET NRPs had an active role in the ANM by facilitating interactive sessions, participating in panel discussions, and presenting highlights from their work in the past year. The ANM follows an active year for the network, with 21 Peer Reviews, updates of the country factsheets etc., and thus, the meeting allowed participants to take stock of recent achievements and to plan for upcoming actions.

Welcoming words

Anette Curth, EQAVET Secretariat, welcomed the participants to the 2023 Annual Network Meeting (ANM) and thanked the Swedish NRP for hosting this year's ANM in Stockholm.

Anna Westerholm, Department for National Curricula, Sweden, opened the ANM by stating that efforts to improve the quality of VET is a priority in Sweden, particularly in the context of a growing skills matching problem on the labour market. Westerholm provided a brief overview of the Swedish education system. She explained that Swedish schools (including the private-led ones) are tax-funded, and school attendance is free of charge for students. In recent years VET programmes have been strengthened by enhanced cooperation with the private sector. Efforts have been made to increase trust between stakeholders and to foster a quality culture. All Swedish schools (including the VET sector) apply systematic QA processes, which, however, are not regulated in detail. The school inspectorate monitors the Swedish education system based on quality criteria and its reports feeds into the measures taken by the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education.

Koen Bois d'Enghien, European Commission (EC), introduced the European Year of Skills and emphasised that skills are a top priority for the EC. There are several Commission-led initiatives in the VET sector, interlinked to other policy initiatives such as the digital and green transitions. Another key initiative mentioned was the Learning Mobility Framework, on which a public consultation aiming to inform a more evidence-based approach and the update of the framework planned for autumn 2023, has been launched.

Update of the EU VET policy context and presentation on policy developments relevant for the context of quality assurance in VET

The European Year of Skills

Koen Bois d'Enghien, European Commission (EC) introduced the context and state of play of the European Year of Skills (EYS). Several countries in the EU are currently facing skills shortages with 28 occupations employing 14% in the EU workforce (27 million workers)

classified as shortages in 2020. Some sectors are unable to find workers with the required skills, as attested 77% of the companies looking for employees in 2019. The adult learning participate rate is also low (37%). In this context, the European Commission adopted in 2021 an action plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) with quantified objectives for 2030:

- 78% of the population aged 20 to 64 should be in employment (73.1% in 2019);
- 60% of all adults should participate in training every year (37.4% in 2016); and
- the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion should be reduced by 15 million.

The European Commission launched on 9 May 2023 the EYS, which will run until 8 May 2024, to further promote a mindset of reskilling and upskilling. The EYS will focus on increasing investments in skills, ensuring the relevance of the skills taught for the labour market needs, matching the aspirations of the targeted workforce and attracting third-country talent.

Various stakeholders will be involved in the EYS, including the European institutions, Member States, which were asked to appoint [national coordinators](#) to harmonise the actions, existing networks and platforms such as EQAVET and international actors. EYS ambassadors will also contribute to raise awareness and promote the EYS.

The EYS has been designed to be complementary to other existing initiatives within the European skills agenda, such as the Pact for Skills. Tools available to Member States include individual learning accounts, micro-credentials or Europass. Several funding instruments can support national skills policy: the European Social Fund Plus, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the Digital Europe Programme, Erasmus + but also InvestEU.

In the framework of the EYS, the Commission will launch a package on the recognition of professional qualification of third-country nationals, a proposal for a Council Recommendation on updated learning mobility framework and a Talent Pool.

Skills for the digital transition

Michael Horgan, European Commission (EC), highlighted the importance of digital skills, which have been one of the six priorities of the current European Commission. Over 90% of the jobs in the EU require digital skills but only 54% of the adult population has basic ones. The EC aims to increase this rate to 80%. According to 7% of the companies, the lack of staff with adequate digital skills is an obstacle to investment. There is a need to upscale the workforce: there are currently 9 million ICT specialists and digital experts in the EU and the objective of the EC to increase to 20 million, with a specific focus on women who only represent a fifth of the workforce in the digital field.

The EU strategic policy framework on digital skills is based on European Skills agenda, as a common thread for the development of digital skills in the adult population, the EPSR, the Digital Education Action plan, which calls for concrete measures to adapt education and training for the digital age and the 2030 Digital Compass. The EC has adopted several policy initiatives which are relevant to increase digital skills, such as the Council Recommendation on VET, the Osnabrück declaration, the Digital Skills and Jobs Platform but also more recently the two Council Recommendations on micro-credentials and the individual learning accounts.

Several tools have been developed at the EU-level to support digital skills:

- The [Digital Competence Framework](#) was updated as DigComp 2.2. The framework offers 5 skills and 25 competences to better comprehend topics such as teleworking, AI, disinformation etc. A feasibility study for a [European Digital Skills Certificate](#), based on DigComp, is currently underway, and a pilot with five Member States was launched.
- [SELFIE](#) is a self-reflection tool designed for schools to assess their use of digital technology and bring perspectives from school leaders, teachers and students together. New versions of SELFIE have been developed for work-based learning to support VET schools and companies and for teachers. SELFIE aims to actively involve learners and develop their digital skills. Some Member States have used SELFIE as an inspiration to design more specific tools adapted to the national and/or regional context.

Unprecedented funding is dedicated to the financing of digital skills with the ESF+ dedicating, 2 billion to digital skills in the 2021-2027 period, the Recovery and Resilience Facility dedicating 25.7 billion to digital skills and education, Erasmus+ dedicating 400 million to 100 Centres of Vocational Excellence and Digital Europe programme dedicating 580 million for advanced digital skills.

In April 2023, the EC adopted a package of flagship initiatives related to digital skills to support a more coherent and comprehensive approach in the Member States. The package includes:

- A proposal for a Council Recommendation on the enabling factors for successful digital education to ensure universal access to digital education;
- A proposal for a Council Recommendation on improving the provision of digital skills in education and training at all levels of education including VET and adult learning;
- The pilot for the European Digital Skills Certificate with a few Member States to identify building blocks for an EU certificate and
- The Cybersecurity Skills Academy.

CEDEFOP's and ETF's work on quality assurance of VET

George Kostakis, Cedefop, presented Cedefop's work on monitoring and analysing national implementation plans (NIPs) in the framework of the VET Council Recommendation and Osnabruck Declaration where Member States have committed for the first time to develop detailed plans for VET with quantitative targets. Most NIPs were prepared in 2022 with a few still under preparation and are based on national strategic documents for VET systems reforms as well as the European Semester reform programmes and the Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRF) for 18 countries. Stakeholders including especially social partners are involved in the NIPs. All Member States but the Netherlands will finance reform with EU funds through RRF (e.g. modernisation of infrastructure), ESF+ (e.g. upskilling and reskilling), Erasmus+ (e.g. mobility), ERDF (e.g. infrastructure of VET schools) and the Just Transition Fund (e.g. entrepreneurship). Cedefop has developed a dashboard to monitor the progress in the Member States.

Measures in the NIPs focus on:

- Agile and resilient VET adaptive to labour market needs;
- Attractive VET, based on modern and digitalised provision;
- Innovative and excellent VET;
- Inclusive VET, promoting equal opportunities;
- Flexible VET providing progression and lifelong learning opportunities;
- VET underpinned by quality assurance.

Mounir Baati, European Training Foundation (ETF), explained that the ETF is the EU agency supporting countries surrounding the European Union to reform their education, training and labour market systems. Its mission is to help transition and developing countries harness the potential of their human capital through the reform of education, training, and labour market systems, in the context of EU external relations policies.

ETF's activities are structured around three main services: knowledge hub, monitoring, and assessment as well as policy advice to its partner countries and EU services.

In the area of quality assurance, on 2017 ETF established a forum on quality assurance in VET which is a transnational collaboration initiative between national institutions with VET quality assurance mandates in 22 ETF partner countries. The purpose of the Forum is to support its member countries to modernise and improve quality assurance in VET by providing the context and means for peer learning through transnational cooperation. One of the main working tools of the Forum is the peer visit, which is a form of external feedback from peers, with the aim of supporting a Forum member acting as the host. So far, the forum organised four peer visits and is planning a fifth one in the Autumn.

In addition to that, ETF provides targeted support to its partner countries in modernising their QA system. i.e.: to Georgia on the use of EQAVET indicators, to Uzbekistan on "aligning" its QA system to the EQAVET framework and to Kazakhstan in reviewing its QA system.

Updates from the host country

Sweden has IVET programmes in upper secondary education, adult education, and programmes for people with special needs and HVE (CVET) programmes. Swedish VET is embedded in a decentralised system with both public and private actors. IVET programmes are advised by national programme councils in which industry representatives take part, and HVE programmes are governed by a managing board where industry representatives are in majority. All VET providers have systematic QA processes with a high level of autonomy and considerable efforts is going into creating a quality culture amongst the providers. HVE programmes are directly designed based on the needs of the labour market and over 90% of the HVE graduates get a relevant job after graduation. Few students apply to VET programmes and there is a considerable gender divide between different types of programmes (i.e., electricity and constructions have mainly male students and social care programmes have mainly female students).

Quality and gender equality in VET: Collaboration for upper secondary school between the Swedish National Agency for Education and the National Programme Councils

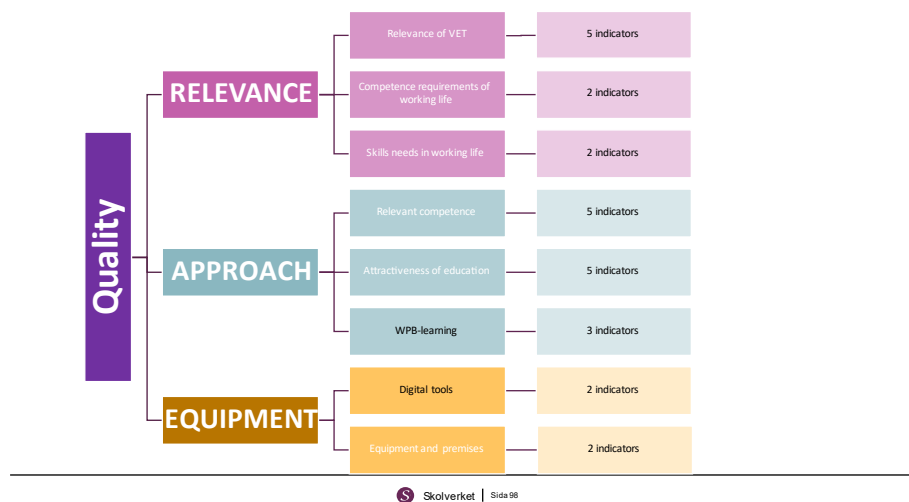
Linda Mildner, Mikaela Zelmerlööv and Gunilla Rooke from the Swedish National Agency for Education shared insights to their work on quality and gender equality in VET in upper secondary school via collaboration between the Swedish National Agency for Education and the National Programme Councils (see definition below).

Sweden has 12 VET programmes in upper secondary education with a total of 105 000 students in 2022 (out of a total of 360 000 upper secondary education students). IVET programmes are also provided via special needs programmes and within municipal adult education. Each IVET programme has a National Programme Council with the task of monitoring the programme and supporting the National Agency for Education, which is has

the national responsibility. The councils have industry representatives and meetings twice per year to ensure that the needs of the labour market are met. Practical tasks vary across regions, but the council can include supplying Work-Based Learning (WBL) spots and to provide advice on skills needs.

Sweden has implemented an Erasmus+ funded project focused on quality based on the EQAVET indicators to assess and identify new indicators. The indicators (overview is visible in the figure below) being developed will not be compulsory; it is up to schools to decide if they want to use it.

Figure 1: Quality indicators - Swedish VET education

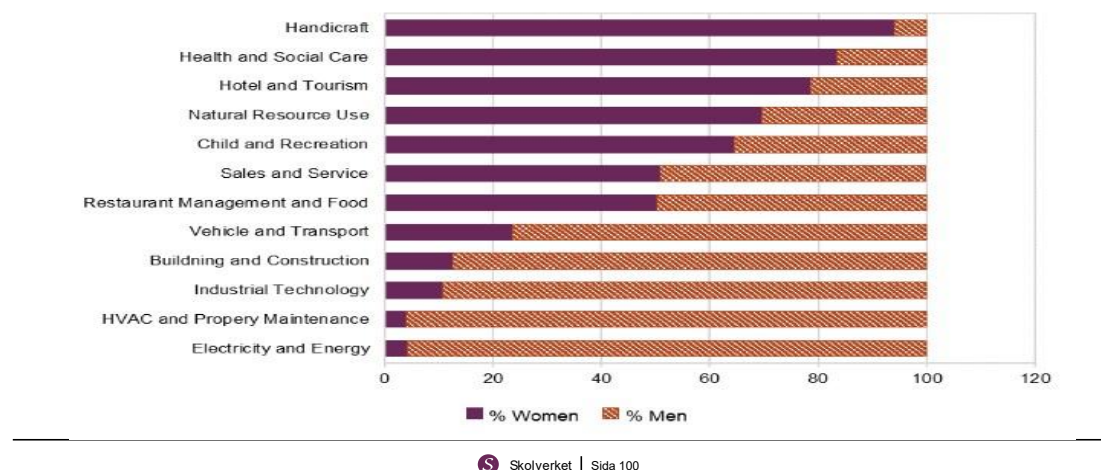


Source: PowerPoint presentation by Linda Mildner, Mikaela Zelmerlöw and Gunilla Rooke from the Swedish National Agency for Education

Sweden has a growing need for VET professionals but only around a third of the upper secondary students choose VET education. There are several challenges to overcome, for example, students tend to have limited knowledge of VET and students need to receive more guidance linked to norms that influence decisions and choices, with particular emphasis on gender impact. The figure below illustrates the gender divide between different IVET programmes in Sweden:

Figure 2: Women and men in upper secondary vocational programmes

Lock year 22/23. Gender distribution in percent.



Skolverket | Sida 100

Source: PowerPoint presentation by Linda Mildner, Mikaela Zelmerlööw and Gunilla Rooke from the Swedish National Agency for Education

The presenters explained how Sweden has worked to address the larger gender disparities but with little results. Career guidance is an important tool, and the responsibility is shared between many stakeholders including teachers. A new project to address the gender divide has been initiated, focus on equal working life during 2022-2025 in which a study visit to Iceland has taken place.

The Swedish presentation received attention from other participants. Participants were wondering what the reasons for the large gender differences between programmes and if there is a different situation for Higher Education (HE) programmes. There are several reasons for this, including women not feeling comfortable in a very male dominated culture and many women do not know what an electrician is doing. The situation is a bit better in HE. Thus, it is imperative to address this in compulsory education level; you cannot choose an education that you do not know. Another aspect is to have gender balanced teaching force.

Quality in Swedish higher vocational education

Hans Almgren and Maria Hedlund, National Agency for Higher Vocational Education shared a presentation on quality in Swedish Higher Vocational Education (HVE). HVE is directly developed to respond to the needs of the labour market in Sweden and a programme is approved for a total of five starts (i.e., often for 5 years since a cohort starts once per year but sometimes twice per year, and then hence, for 2.5 years) to ensure that all provided programmes remains relevant to the needs of the labour market. There are around 20000 HVE students enrolled per year in Sweden and the students tends to be a bit older, the average age is 31 years old.

A HVE programme is always initiated by industry stakeholders and then an education provider is responsible for submitting the application to the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education. Education providers can vary and includes for example universities and municipalities. A HVE programme is led by a managing board in which labour market representatives hold most of the seats and also includes student representatives and the

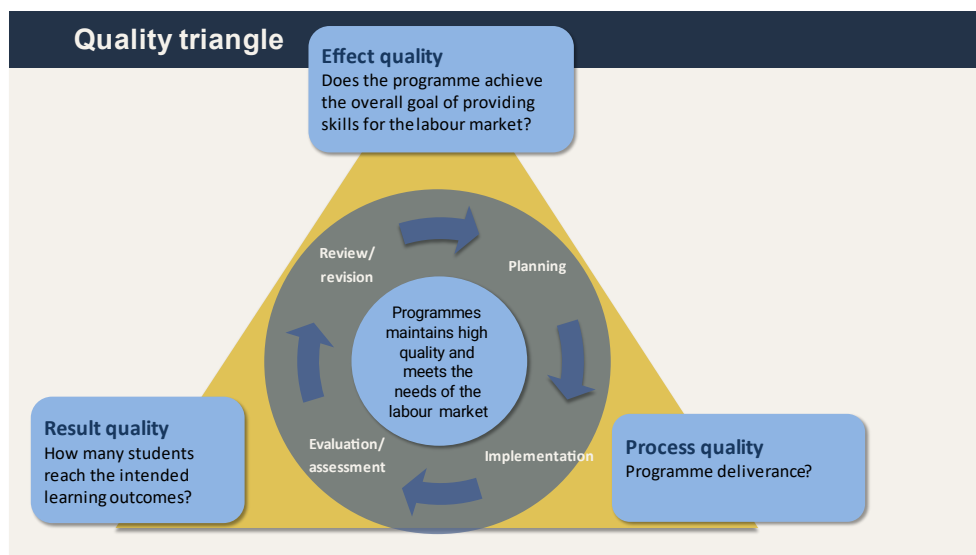
education provider. This managing board has the responsibility to establish the curricula, the supply of Work-Based Learning (WBL) and the formality of graduation.

If compared, the Swedish IVET (EQF 4) has a wider perspective and aims to build a foundation for lifelong learning whereas HVE (EQF 5-6) is more linked to the labour market. More than 90% of HVE graduates have a relevant job within one year after graduation.

The National Agency for Higher Vocational Education works on quality assurance on programme level and are also continuously looking for good practices and areas for improvement which can contribute to the assessments of future applications. The EQAVET framework is not really used in detail, but the Swedish QA approach is rather similar.

In 2009, the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education started with explorative reviews focused on WBL which was then expanded to a review of managing boards in 2013 and then developed into comprehensive reviews in 2016. The reviews are being graded and followed up with calls. Since 2020, the Agency has included a focus on quality promotion via a self-assessment tool (on a voluntary basis) for education providers to internally check that they are on track and this tool then generates an action plan with tasks and focal points. Thus, the steps for quality assurance in Swedish HVE are now: self-assessment, review by the Agency and follow up. In a way, the Swedish approach looks at more dimensions than the EQAVET circle, as shown in the image above, they have incorporated a triangle. The increased dialogue (on a weekly basis) between the Agency and the providers have resulted in improved quality.

Figure 3: Quality triangle



Source: PowerPoint presentation by Hans Almgren and Maria Hedlund, National Agency for Higher Vocational Education

Lacking quality and negative results were often due to low involvement of the managing board and students, limited focus on analysis of evaluation, no connection to the improvement plan and limited documentations and follow up support. As of 2022, the National Agency for Higher Vocational Education started to work more directly with students' involvement in QA processes.

Stock-taking from the EQAVET peer reviews and looking forward to the next round of peer reviews

The EQAVET Secretariat reflected on the first cycle of Peer Reviews 2022-2023 at system-level organised by the participating Member States. 20 countries already organised their Peer Review with one last to take place in Portugal in July 2023. 153 peers have participated in the Peer Reviews, making an average of 7-8 per Peer Reviews. Participants include NRP staff and government representatives for all Peer Reviews, while national VET stakeholders attended 18 out of 20 Peer Reviews as part of the country delegation and 8 out of 20 as peers and social partners attended 11 out of 20 Peer Reviews as part of the host country delegation and 3 out of 20 as peers.

Results from the feedback survey circulated in three rounds to hosts and peers demonstrate satisfaction with the overall method and the outcomes, the usefulness of the Peer Review for the organisation and country both for the hosts and peers, the quality of the oral feedback and the feedback report.

Key observations from this first Peer Review cycle include that:

- The EQAVET framework has a high added value as it constitutes a useful common reference point to discuss and have a clear understanding of the topic.
- Peer Reviews allowed for increased transparency for peers by improving their understanding of the VET system and quality assurance arrangements of other countries. They could identify systemic similarities, common issues and differences.
- The level of satisfaction differs between face-to-face and online Peer Reviews, with a preference for physical meetings.
- The satisfaction rate has increased between the rounds with the experience. If during the first round of feedback, peers had higher levels of satisfaction than hosts, the average value for usefulness of the outcomes has harmonised in the later round.

When it comes to challenges and success factors, the quality of the feedback has depended to a large extent on the level of experience and expertise of the peers with the specific topic at hand. Peer countries sometime struggle to find experts. For the upcoming round of Peer Reviews 2024-2025, it is advised to plan more time for the preparation phase and to set a clear framing of the topic and questions to be discussed. Host countries have also stated that they especially benefitted from countries with similar context and VET systems. However, it was noted that countries with a different background also provide added value.

The second round of Peer Reviews will start in the spring 2024. 20 Member States will take part in this new round 2024-2025. The EQAVET Secretariat will work with the participating countries to define topics, timeframes and match hosts and peers in the summer/autumn 2023.

Workshops

Topic 1: Quality assurance in CVET/professional further education

Lea Maiczack, from the German NRP (BIBB), presented elements that contribute to the quality assurance system in CVET/professional further education in Germany. CVET offers are market driven. In case of state funding, the provider has to be certified (AZAV) or to use a specific quality management system (AFBG).

The German qualification framework (DQR) covers qualifications from level 5 to 7 and is directly connected to IVET. Professional further education falls under the BBiG (Vocational Training Act) and HwO (Crafts Regulation). The latest BBiG amendment introduced new standardised qualification designations for the further training levels as equivalent to the already existing specialisations in formal CVET: occupational specialist (level 5), bachelor professional (level 6) and master professional (level 7) which are equivalent to bachelor's and master's degrees in the university pathway.

To gain a further training qualification, providers must respect certain criteria that are inscribed in the BBiG regulation. Further training regulations can be developed at federal or regional level. The training regulation only contains the content of the examination but not the curricula. At federal level, there are three main phases:

- Initiation: a new or updated regulation is proposed, generally by umbrella organisations of the social partners,
- Procedure phase: a draft of the training regulation is elaborated and sent to the relevant Ministry, with involvement of social partners, and can take up to 12 months,
- Hearing of the regulation by the BIBB main committee which leads to a remission procedure by the competent federal ministry and the publication of the new or updated regulation in the Federal Law Gazette.

As of December 2022, 219 regulations were adopted at state level and 1430 of competent bodies. Regions are allowed to apply regulations adopted in other regions if they find them useful, which is beneficial to the upscaling of measures.

Participants then exchanged on their experience of public funding linked to quality assurance and good practices to regulate further education:

- In France, training providers should be certified (Qualiopi) to access public funding. Qualiopi is granted by certifying bodies upon the respect of certain criteria and indicators.
- In Hungary, a licensing procedure is in place. Each training provider should obtain a license to start their training activity. The law requires providers to demonstrate that they have a quality management system in operation. External evaluation is performed every four years.
- In Italy, CVET providers should be accredited to get public funding. Accreditation can be performed by regions.
- In Malta, the funding is not linked to quality assurance. However, VET providers are obliged to produce a self-assessment report every year and are submitted to external audit every five years.
- In the Netherlands, there is no institutional framework to regulate CVET. Work-based learning gives more space to acknowledge prior learning. The government provides fund, but examination is performed by external bodies.
- In Austria, the system is rather similar to Germany where further training is mostly financed by companies. A quality label exists with certain criteria to be respected.
- In Finland, providers must respect criteria to obtain public financing and take part in external evaluation from the Finnish Evaluation Centre.
- In Croatia, providers of adult education issuing nationally recognised certificates must respect guidelines. They should apply internal quality assurance and are evaluated externally as well.

Topic 2: Improving the monitoring of VET through a graduate tracking mechanism

Tom Muller from the Ministry of Education, Children and Youth, presented the EQAVET Erasmus+ Project (2021-2023), which aims at implementing the EQAVET Quality Assurance Framework at system level (i.e. centralised VET system), improving data-driven monitoring as a basis for decision-making at policy and programme level and improving monitoring of learners' pathways in IVET through an integrated approach that combines quantitative data analysis and graduate surveys.

The existing graduate tracking mechanism in Luxembourg is based on a longitudinal graduate tracking study introduced in 2012, a quantitative study based on administrative data collected in the first year after school. The results demonstrate the impact of education access, gender and diplomas/certificates obtained on the access to and retention of employment and on the job quality, for each reference year.

With the EQAVET Erasmus+ Project (2021-2023), the introduction of surveys' data pursue the objective of better understanding the reasons behind the administrative data collected, of taking into account also the learners' perception of the use of acquired skills in the workplace. The introduction of the graduate surveys will also contribute to producing swifter results than existing curricula evaluation and revision procedures, detecting demand of employers for additional skills in changing work environments, allowing for quick policy response and to the analysis of the match between learners' and employers' view.

The design of Luxembourg's VET graduate tracking survey to complement the existing data was discussed during the EQAVET peer review, held on 12-14 October 2022. The outcomes of the peer review highlighted the value of combining quantitative and qualitative data, the opportunity to build on existing VET networks and arrangements, the strength of a phased approach and the inclusion of the learners' voice. The main challenges identified were related to the significant resources required, the early involvement of stakeholders to build trust, the creation of a shared understanding of the purpose of the research and the benefits of the findings for the schools, as well as data protection and data ownership issues.

After the presentation participants had an interactive discussion focusing on the following questions:

1. What challenges have you identified in relation to a VET tracking system based on administrative data?
2. How have you addressed these challenges?
3. How would (or do) you use data from a VET tracking system?

During the discussion, participants highlighted some challenges they identified in relation to setting up a VET tracking system based on administrative data, such as the limits set by GDPR for using the data. The need to provide incentives to graduates to share data was also highlighted as an important element. The final part of the discussion focused on how data from VET tracking systems can be used, for instance to redesign curricula, redefine programme areas, change programmes and carry out strategic reforms. Data can also be used for career guidance, to provide information on what type of skills are actually used in different jobs.

Topic 3: QA of the system of validation of non-formal and informal learning

Lubica Gálová from the Slovak NRP opened her presentation stating that validation is often described via four steps: identification, documentation, assessment, and certification.

Slovakia does not have a comprehensive system in place for validation of informal education nor for education, employment and youth work. The system has previously been focused on certifying certain trades. Validation is an important component for addressing skills shortages, the Slovak labour market is focused on mechanics and lower qualified jobs, and reskilling/upskilling efforts are needed to not be negatively affected by the digitalisation and automatization. Validation can lead to formal qualification and will become more demand-driven, and employers are getting an increasing role in this.

Slovakia is currently implementing the VNFIL, an ESF-funded project in line with EU guidelines and they used their EQAVET Peer Review to look deeper into the outcomes of this project. The review had the following objectives: to align the Slovak system with the EU standards, assess the QA mechanisms for the validation system to ensure that they are sufficient and effective as well gaining a state of play overview of the system. Based on the peers' feedback, the Slovak NRP drafted an action plan based on three pillars:

- Establish new lifelong learning act and adult learning act (component 1);
- Set up QA rules and mechanisms (component 2) and;
- Strengthening counselling and support service for clients (individuals who want to get their competences validated) (component 3).

The first component can be impacted by the upcoming Slovak national election. The third component can be considered as the weakest point and needs to be improved since the individuals are essential in validation and this will become reflected in the legislation. The peers' feedback was useful and then followed up by the updates of the VNFIL EU guidelines being updated. In 2023, the Slovak system has also benefited from the Inventory report.

After the presentation, participants were invited to discuss validation of informal learning, focusing on QA arrangements, including which actors are involved, the different steps of validations and the outcomes, as well as if NRPs saw needs for additional actions to ensure quality control. Participants agreed that validation is often a complex assignment and thus, creating relevant quality assurance can be challenging.

The discussion focused on the creation of learning outcomes and how, if well-designed, it can guide the whole approach to validation. Participants agreed that it is crucial to involve social partners to ensure that the approach to validation reflects the labour market. Moreover, it is important to consider if validation is targeted on informal training or informal learning on an individual level. In Malta a regulation on validating non-formal learning is in place since 2012. A council was set up to identify skills gaps and local centres then focus on validation services on this and based on guidelines on how to deliver tests etc. The building sector was presented as an example: a skill card, which can be obtained via validation of formal or informal learning, is necessary to work in this sector. Greece's validation system is currently implemented in adult trainers' qualification. However, efforts are being made to transfer the process to a wider system with more sectors. Sweden distinguishes between formal and non-formal learning validation. The sectors sometimes struggle with defining the standards. While there have been many trainings provided on how to write learning outcomes and how to link it to validation, the most effective approach seems to be that sectors learn from each other. For validation linked

to municipal adult education (formal IVET education), students have the right to get validation services. Validation is also a right in HEI, but it does not work in practice. HVE-flex is a new Swedish fast-track initiatives where students can combine validation and individual learning plans for complementing education. In Estonia validation mostly focuses on prior learning VET system rather than professional learning, while there is no recognition of non-formal learning. In Finland VET providers identify competences based on professional skills described in the qualification requirements. This is supported by an open online system where users can see what competences they are missing to upskill to a new profession etc. Validation professionals decide which methods to apply, for example: if no certificate is available, the user needs to show it in practice. Competence recognition is always focused on a particular qualification and there are established working life committees responsible for monitoring the quality of validation. In Lithuania's VET providers carry out validation for competences relevant to EQF levels 1-5 and for non-formal learning. They use a common validation method and the final assessment falls under the responsibility of an accreditation institution. If the final assessment is positive, the VET provider issues a diploma. However, there is a lack of method references and tools, there is no awareness raising campaign. There is an increasing need to recognise non-formal learning and several initiatives are being implemented, including an ESF-funded project where an expert developed a methodology for validation services at workplaces. Together with 16 partners, Lithuania implements a project to standardise the competence profiles. Latvia is developing competences and providing support to VET providers for work in the future (e.g., creating guidelines on how to use the tools).

EQAVET Community development sessions

Topic 1: EQAVET Network for beginners

During this session, EQAVET network members had an opportunity to get an introduction to the concept and objectives of EQAVET, and the key developments on EQAVET since its introduction in 2009. The EQAVET Secretariat gave an overview on the [EQAVET framework](#), including the indicators and indicative descriptors. Progress with the implementation of EQAVET was discussed, with a special focus on the role of the EQAVET Network.

Topic 2: The visibility and communication tools of the EQAVET Network – EU level and national level

During this session, the EQAVET Secretariat heard how the NRPs are raising awareness of EQAVET and communicating with different stakeholders. NRPs, including Bulgaria and Czechia, provided concrete examples on how they have conducted communication activities, some of the challenges and learning points. Participants also shared the different communication activities and tools that they are using. These include:

- Dedicated websites;
- Social media, including dedicated pages on LinkedIn;
- Awareness raising events, and thematic seminars; and
- Face to face meetings with VET providers, training providers and VET teachers.

It was also mentioned that in Slovenia there is an established 'Quality week' which promotes the importance of quality in VET. In addition, some NRPs reported that they translate materials that are available in English to their languages to ensure that they can be used at provider level. Underpinning the different communications activities, some NRPs specifically noted that

they have a communication strategy that brings these activities together and provides a comprehensive framework for all communication activities.

NRPs highlighted that it is important to select an appropriate communication tool/channel for each audience, and tailor the activities and key messages to the needs of the target group. Across all communication activities, particularly those that cut across different target groups, it is important to explain what EQAVET is in clear and concise language, avoiding using jargon. Participants also mentioned that it is important to incorporate feedback from target groups so that communication activities can be improved over time. For example, this is sometimes done by using focus groups when developing new content or revising content (e.g. in the case of websites). Some NRPs also noted that it is valuable to bring in external expertise to review, design and improve specific communication activities, such as websites, to gain an external perspective.

The EQAVET Secretariat can support national communication activities via the EQAVET newsletter and having up-to-date information available on the web pages. It was also suggested that a flyer or brochure could be produced to explain the quality cycle, indicators and descriptors and this could be shared at face-to-face events in the future.

Panel discussion on digital skills, use of digital tools in VET and blended learning

The panellists, Concetta Fonzo from INAPP (Italy), Marge Kroonmäe from Estonian Quality Agency for Education/ Estonian Education and Youth Board (Estonia) and Ivan Markovic from the Centre for Vocational Education and Training (Montenegro) highlighted how their VET providers had responded to the rapid increase in on-line and blended learning over the past two years. Each presenter explained how a series of development had become necessary as a result of government lockdowns associated with COVID 19.

Following the short presentations, participants were invited to use Sli.Do to raise questions, reflect on their own experiences of increasing the availability of digital learning, and make suggestions in relation to quality assurance.

Several areas were highlighted during the presentation and in the participants' comments:

- Blended or hybrid learning in VET will continue. As such it is important to identify how the EQAVET framework can be used to quality assure this provision;
- The importance of VET teachers' and trainers' confidence about their digital skills, access to equipment and ability to use pedagogic approaches which are most suited to on-line and blended learning;
- How to develop learners' self-confidence and 'soft skills' when the amount of face-to-face tuition is reduced;
- The move to on-line and blended learning affects students differently. VET students from less advantaged social or economic backgrounds find this change more difficult
- Rapid progress has been made in understanding how best to offer VET provision through on-line and blended learning;
- Providing support, training and guidance to VET teachers and trainers (and leaders in VET institutions) is essential to the quality assurance on-line and blended learning;
- Recruitment and retention of specialist IT staff in the VET sector is difficult. Each presenter highlighted different strategic approaches to meeting a potential shortage of specialists.

Highlights from the work of four EQAVET NRPs

A key objective of the EQAVET ANM was to take stock of recent national developments and to exchange learnings and experiences. NRPs from Italy, the Netherlands and Austria presented during the ANM.

Laura Evangelista and Concetta Fonzo from the Italian NRP presented a national experimentation of creating an integrated Peer Review at provider level for VET and General Education (GE).

Italy analysed existing tools (e.g., schools are already writing self-assessment reports, and these were analysed to identify synergies with the VET provider's self-assessments) and created a joint methodology and integrated tool for joint Peer Reviews. Efforts were put on reducing redundancies as well as aligning documents and indicators. EU related tools were also reviewed, and, in the end, Italy decided to focus on 4 out of the total 14 EQAVET areas to be able to create alignment between the different education providers (e.g., some of the other areas were deemed to be too VET specific).

The initiative took considerable time since it involved two different ministries (Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labour) and the fact that GE is generally provided via public schools and VET provision often is private and is also linked to regional legislation.

In addition to this, a network of schools and VET providers was established. In the pilot peers from eight GE schools, and seven VET schools received training on the methodology and participated in the Peer Reviews. A total of 14 Peer Review visits were carried out.

Based on the pilot testing, the developed tools were revised, and an integrated tool was established. The peers found that the methodology was easy to understand and use as well as economical. This was the first time that Italy implemented Peer Reviews within the education sector, and they found it interesting to see how the developed approach was applicable for both General Education and VET. A future idea is to also test the Peer Review methodology on HVE providers.

An important learning from this pilot initiative was linked to the digital approach since these Peer Reviews were implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic. The learning was that Peer Reviews are more successful if implemented in person but some of the follow up could have been done in an online format.

Nina van Veldhuizen and Daisy Termorshuizen from the Dutch NRP shared lessons learnt from a trajectory for policy advisors of quality assurance working in Dutch VET. The trajectory focused on mutual learning between Dutch VET providers and policy makers related to developing needs, responsibilities of VET providers, useful interventions, and reflections on forward steps. Indeed, the aim is to create a shared understanding between institutions and stakeholders via mutual learning progresses.

The sessions are linked to a tool listing intervention actions and behaviours; highlighting roles and what can be done to reach improved quality. There is a big demand for more exchange and to learn how QA works and what could be new solutions to support national development. The Dutch NRP organised two rounds last year and an additional two are scheduled for this year.

The approach is to involve around 12 participants from 8 institutions in 4 sessions with the following objectives:

- Session 1: focusing on developing needs and what stakeholders want;
- Session 2: understanding the responsibility of stakeholders and their conditions for success;
- Session 3: discussions on useful interventions;
- Session 4: reflections and agreeing on the way forward.

The Dutch NRP is using a tool book with different interventions and logics. A lesson learnt has been that it can often be useful to also address bad practices (often good to build trust in mutual learning) and how those can be improved. Another finding was the importance of discussion different roles and responsibilities as well as reflection on what are initial versus underlying problems.

Franz Gramlinger from the Austrian NRP focused his presentation on a recent Austrian reform (2021-2024) that introduced an integrated QA mechanism for VET and GE. The development started in 2018.

Austria has a history of two divided QA system, and it was therefore a challenge to build a QA mechanism that would benefit both sectors. The education system comprises of 5000 schools of which, 700 are VET schools.

The idea was to build on the existing system and to be careful to not create any 'losers, but it was a challenge to create an approach that would benefit both GE and VET. The new quality framework was designed to fit all schools and included a new evaluation platform with a lot of supporting materials.

The solution was to focus on learners and teachers, as well as sharing of existing strengths: while VET providers are experienced in data collection, GE schools are working more directly with data analysis. A new approach was to allocate more time for teachers to support school directors in working on quality and this changed the culture around working on quality (now working in teams instead of alone). With the new approach, the focus on quality generated a more evidence-based approach since it included working more with data collection and analysis.

This change is also linked to an update of the Education Reform Act in 2017, since then, there are teams of school inspectors, and they cover all schools (GE and VET) and school directors from all schools gather in regional meetings. The EQAVET framework still fits with the merge, and there are some VET related indicators such as WBL but what is more concerning in Austria is the difference between larger and smaller schools.

Linked to this presentation, a participant from Ireland explained how they had gone through a similar process of merging QA mechanisms for GE and VET in 2012 and how they now, 10 years later, see that it made VET programmes more attractive.

Meeting close

The European Commission thanked the participants for their attendance and announced that the 2023 EQAVET Annual Network meeting is expected to take place in June 2024 in Belgium.