

EUROPEAN QUALITY ASSURANCE IN VET TOWARDS NEW ECO SKILLS AND ENVIRONMENTALLY SUSTAINABLE ECONOMY

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to present some results of the project entitled “European Quality Assurance in VET towards new Eco Skills and Environmentally Sustainable Economy” (acronym eQvet-us) financed by European Commission. Have been investigated the current status of implementation of European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF) in partnership countries, the conclusion demonstrating that there seems to be room for improvement in supporting VET providers in implementing quality assurance systems. The main project results are: a) eQvet-us reference framework for sustainable development, an innovative solution, under the new EQAVET recommendations; b) eQvet-us peer learning evaluation method, for evaluation of trainees and VET professional programs quality.

Key words: vocational education and training, quality assurance, sustainable development, reference framework, indicative descriptor, peer learning method

1. Introduction

In order to exit the economic crisis Europe needs smart growth, which requires better skilled people [7], [9]. In this context, vocational education and training (VET), has a crucial role to play as highlighted in a series of recent strategy papers of the Commission. Quality assurance (QA) has an important role in addressing these challenges, in particular overcoming skills mismatches and improving employability of young people [10] so that a shared understanding of VET excellence can finally emerge, facilitating mutual recognition of learning acquired in various countries [1] and thus enabling more mobility and a better response to economic and societal challenges [19].

As the major supplier of skilled and certified labour, vocational and professional education fuels the engine of economic growth [2].

Implementation of an internal quality management system by VET providers can be considered one of the most crucial issues to improve quality at their level [8]. VET providers should be eager to take leadership of their quality approach and continuously shape, check and redefine their organisational profile and their related quality objectives [20].

On the other hand, validation of non-formal and

informal learning experiences in the EU Member States makes an essential contribution to EU's ambition to achieving smart, sustainable and inclusive growth set by the Europe 2020 Strategy [12].

Education and training for sustainable development is a process of learning how to make decisions that consider the long-term future of economy, ecology and society in the workplace and the wider community. Efforts to define exactly what sustainable development is must reflect the varying conditions in different parts of the world and their impact upon national and cultural priorities and values [5].

2. Current status

We have investigated the current status of implementation of European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF) in partnership countries and from a few sources [15], [18], [22] we found that:

- Almost every country has made progress towards national standards for Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers;
- In Germany exist approx. 10 000 VET providers and 8% obtain certification of quality;
- In France, other quality systems are in vigor the labeling system, compatible with EQARF, but not

officially qualified as well (45 of 220 VET state institutions had achieved the quality label GretaPlus);

- In Portugal no political decision is taken in order to attribute a legal national framework;

- In Romania an internal quality management system is not considered a precondition for being accredited; there are few VET providers that have implemented quality assurance systems that combine standards, targets, and conformity assessment procedures for implementing corrective actions where non-compliance occurred [11]. There are few situations where customer feedback is collected systematically and used for improvement; Also structural changes have aimed at reorganizing the education and VET system based on levels and channels of education and training that are better adapted to the new socio-economic context [3];

- On the 26 national VET systems in the EU-26 Countries, providers are using quality standards as a condition of accreditation, which are part of legislation and only 3 countries are using quality standards for guidance;

- On average, VET providers are more often ‘always’ using and implementing the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) indicative descriptors in the PLANNING than in the other phases of the quality cycle: IMPLEMENTING, EVALUATION and REVIEW. This appears to suggest that providers are responding or complying with external evaluation put in place by the relevant authorities. The first three phases are only of value if phase four is thereafter carried out successfully. The review phase, despite its crucial importance, is often the weakest phase [14].

A conclusion of the EQAVET Secretariat report is that there seems to be room for improvement in supporting VET providers: a) identify areas for improvement to quality assurance and implement quality assurance systems in line with the EQAVET recommendation; and b) introduce or develop self-evaluation systems.

Also, there is an integration of the quality dimension in internationalization policies in education and the adaptation of quality assurance policies and practices to an increasingly international environment [13].

In this context 7 VET providers from 6 different European countries have developed the project “European Quality Assurance in VET towards new Eco Skills and Environmentally Sustainable Economy” (acronym eQvet-us) [23], in the framework of the Erasmus+ programme, Key Action: Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices; Field: Strategic Partnerships for vocational education and training.

3. Consortium

The eQvet-us project is promoted by “Petru Maior” University of Țirgu-Mureș (UPM) plus 6 VET partners: Institute for Technology and Quality

Lisbon, Portugal; Institute for Occupational and Personal Training Wien, Austria; “Transilvania” Economic College of Țirgu-Mures, Romania; European Association of Institutes for Vocational Training Frankfurt am Mein, Germany; European Center for Quality Sofia, Bulgaria and IDE Project Alet les Bains, France, all of whom have worked on previous similar European projects. Each partner has specific expertise in Quality Assurance and VET systems areas are VET providers, and have access to stakeholders, policy makers and networks, at national and European, relevant for eQvet-us project.

Moreover, under this partnership, European Association of Institutes for Vocational Training EVBB is a large European network that can involve and integrate its own 50 VET members from 22 European countries, and achieve a larger project scope.

4. Identified needs

Before development of eQvet-us proposal, the state of the art of similar initiatives was mapped by partners, at European level: EQAVET projects [21] and national level, for example in Romania - National Authority for Qualifications (ANC) [16] for ongoing and undertaken projects and concluded that there have been developed a few projects on quality assurance with emphasis on the practical side, but most VET providers face difficulties in implementing effective quality assurance methods.

In this respect the needs identified are:

- Quality is a requirement to generate confidence in the qualifications. In order to establish and implement quality systems in the area of sustainable development, under the EQAVET framework, VET providers need to have an updated and innovative framework and practice set consisting in detailed documentation like: guides, self-diagnostic tools, good practices, strategies for implementation, etc.

On the other hand greening our economy offers new jobs and they require new skills. The VET systems should be adapted to ensure that the workforce can adjust their skills to the labour-market needs of an environmentally sustainable economy founded on competence-based training concepts. The idea of Sustainable Development can be found at the organization-level in the concrete form of Corporate Social Responsibility having as main objectives: the social ethics, environment protection and economical efficiency [4], [6].

- In order to provide Eco skills to the employees, VET providers have a current need of guidelines for scalable Eco skills and sustainable training and evaluation. The short time that is available for the actual interaction between the trainer and the trainees makes it challenging for the instructor to assess trainee's level of knowledge related to the course material and the prerequisite knowledge required about sustainable economy, and almost impossible

the amount of knowledge used in the job, after the training is ended.

The assessments and Eco skills validation usually targets the amount of knowledge retained by the trainees immediately after the course rather than the amount of knowledge applied on the job a period after the course, while the need is for the last one.

In this way the return of investment in VET programs could be determined, which means efficiency of the program as a quality indicator of the VET provider.

5. Target groups

The above identified needs are addressed to final recipients of valorization, the target groups, which are:

- the VET providers in each partner country and at European level, that are officially registered national, for example in RO in the National Register of adult training providers and their VET Quality experts;
- policy-makers in VET: National Qualifications Authority at central level but also in every region/county that are certifying the VET programs, County School Inspectorates and their VET Quality experts;
- Consultancy organizations/certification bodies for quality management systems of the VET providers.

6. Qualeco framework

The eQvet-us project offers an innovative solution, starting from the QUALECO model. Institute for Occupational and Personal Training Wien (BEST) from Austria, was one of the core partners of the 2009 LDV DI Project “QUALECO: Quality and sustainable development for VET organisations” [17], able to transfer QUALECO products under eQvet-us project.

The QUALECO framework offers a guide to help VET providers find out, implement and overcome the challenges of a sustainable quality development. The QUALECO guide is organized in five main parts: Challenges of sustainable development for VET providers; International standardized method with criteria and descriptors based on EQARF; Proposal for Quality Sustainable Development and general concepts; Best practices; QUALECO framework.

We have mapped the impact of QUALECO that was implemented in QUALECO project partner organizations and their networks from SE- 9, IT - 29, GR - 11, FR - 6, AT - 7 organizations including BEST which has demonstrated the necessity to improve the model with the above identified needs of VET providers.

The partners included in the current consortium are different and cover other areas, the model being transferred to new countries: RO, PT, DE, BG.

7. Results

Main results under development in the eQvet-us project are:

a) eQvet-us reference framework for sustainable development, an innovative solution, under the new EQAVET recommendations, composed of:

- eQvet-us framework - contains a list of questions, indicators and examples of means to set up quality assurance systems in different fields oriented to the VET providers needs in the implementing, evaluation and review phases of VET delivery, on 3 pillars of sustainable development: social, economic and environmental;

- eQvet-us practice set consisting in:

- a guide for implementing, evaluation, review; and
- a self-diagnostic tool;

- Implementation and test of eQvet-us framework and practice set in partner organizations, and then elaborate:

- eQvet-us recommendation guide that contains activities related to maintenance of the quality assurance systems implemented by VET providers:

- good practices for implementing, evaluation and review in order to support maintenance of the system,
- strategies to support future implementation, enabling its strengths and weaknesses to be identified and a continuous development plan to be produced in the selected field and area of sustainable development, to boost the implementation and use of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework.

b) eQvet-us peer learning evaluation method, for evaluation of trainees and VET professional programs quality, as part of the sustainable development, composed of:

- eQvet-us methodology for scalable Eco skills and sustainable training evaluation, that provides evaluation on four levels:

- reaction evaluation: measure trainers pre-knowledge and how they thought and felt about the training and learning experience;
- learning evaluation: measure the increase in knowledge or capability before and during the course, in order to provide corrective actions at the end of the course;
- behaviour evaluation: measure the extent of applied learning back on the job (implementation of knowledge);
- result evaluation: investigate the effects on the business or environment resulting from the trainee's performance, and try to assess and validate the return of investment in VET program.
- Implementation and test of eQvet-us peer learning evaluation method, and then elaborate:
- eQvet-us recommendation guide for scalable Eco skills and sustainable training evaluation.
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c) Multiplier events:

- M1-M6: national cascade pilot with eQvet-us framework and practice set in each partner country (RO, PT, AT, DE, BG, FR) - a one day presentation, demonstrations and results from the implementation;
- M7-M12: national training seminar with eQvet-us methodology for scalable Eco skills and sustainable training in each partner country;
- M13: national final conference in Romania.

d) Several marketing / dissemination and exploitation / valorisation initiatives and outcomes.

8. Impact and benefits

Main criteria for eQvet-us project are:

- 264VET providers in the capacity building session and cascade pilot;
- 31 implemented eQvet-us frameworks and practice set;
- 59 employments of eQvet-us methodology for scalable Eco skills and sustainable training in VET courses delivery;
- 3500 stakeholders involved in dissemination;
- 110 VET providers, decision makers and policy makers involved in final event.

Other VET providers from partners' organizations networks can be future multiplier of eQvet-us framework and practice set through the establishment of cooperation protocols with eQvet-us partners.

We envisaged the indirect impact 3000 VET providers benefiting from project outcomes, during and after the end of the eQvet-us project.

9. Conclusion

“Petru Maior” University of Tîrgu-Mureş is coordinator of the project “*European Quality Assurance in VET towards new Eco Skills and Environmentally Sustainable Economy*” (acronym eQvet-us), financed by European Commission, aiming:

- to conduct a comparative analysis between QUALECO model and EQAVET reference framework;
- to develop the innovative eQvet-us framework and practice set under the EQAVET framework;
- to develop the innovative four levels extensive evaluation model for scalable Eco skills and sustainable training evaluation of trainees participating in VET programs as a tool to assess and validate the return of investment in VET programs;
- to implement eQvet-us products in partner organisations;
- to train: (i) partners in QUALECO methodology; (ii) VET providers in the new developed eQvet-us framework, practice set and evaluation methodology in each partner country;
- National and European dissemination on eQvet-us products.

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