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Quality of VET: The EU[1] dimension

Introduction

Vocational education and training (VET) plays a central role in developing human capacities for the labour market and in so doing makes an important contribution to social cohesion. The excellence and appropriateness of human knowledge and know-how are paramount to the success and competitiveness of business and industry, which contributes to a healthy economy. In the EU, local, regional and national economies are inextricably linked. Thus, the quality of VET, in its various forms and contexts is as much an EU policy issue as it is at Member State level from policy through to provision.

Since the foundation of the EU over 50 years ago, enhancing and protecting the quality of vocational training has been enshrined in EU Treaties with the dual aims of developing human capacities and facilitating geographical occupational mobility. Since 2002, when the EU Council set the target of making EU training systems a world reference for quality, the EU spotlight has focussed persistently on quality issues with regard to VET.

EU-level co-operation responds to this goal by pioneering joint actions, from policy through to provision. To assist partnership processes, a range of reference frameworks have been developed that enable collaborators to 'speak the same language', facilitate the processes of comparative analysis and peer learning and ultimately provide an infra-structure for an EU area for VET.

1. What we mean by VET in the EU

VET in the EU in the 21st century is a wide and deep continuum of learning. Both economic and social forces drive VET and depending on the primacy of one force over the other, the needs to which VET responds, how it is governed and organised and its goals, can be quite different.

Within and across the Member States of the EU, VET is variegated and we must guard against considering VET as a homogeneous entity. When we use the term VET we must be sure that we fully acknowledge the wide range of different VET purposes and pathways in relation to, inter alia:

- Which aims are paramount: employability and economic competitiveness or personal development and social cohesion?

- Which has the main policy-making role: the State or business and industry?

- Which standards are dominant: educational or occupational?

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[1] For convenience, in this presentation the term EU refers to the Community of European Member States (and its institutions) in its different configurations since the Treaty of Rome 1957.

- Who decides on and develops inputs and assesses outcomes: primarily public servants or industry representatives?

- What is the main function of the learning facilitator: educator or skills developer?

- What status and currency is attached to qualifications acquired: in relation to job procurement and advancement and/or further learning?

- What are the resource requirements for different forms of provision and how are they met?

These, and other, features that differentiate the VET pathways that respond to the purposes of VET have a bearing on how the quality of VET is managed and assured.

2. What we mean by QUALITY in the context of VET

A common understanding of quality is 'being of value' and this makes quality relative: of what value; value for whom and value for what? Accordingly, we need to consider quality in terms of context, where judgments are made. This means that there is no global, absolute, objective measure for quality rather it is something agreed upon by 'communities' (however defined and whatever their composition): whether they be scientific communities or communities of practice.

These communities may define quality procedures and processes and/or quantitative benchmarks for mutual implementation and attainment.

When we consider the quality of VET we need to consider the communities that have a bearing on a particular VET pathway within the continuum of VET and whether the dominant standards by which they will measure quality are primarily educational or primarily occupational.

It is important that communities make their agreements on quality standards clear, and how they are met and measured, transparent. This facilitates a degree of 'objective' understanding and measurement of quality and value, and helps to support the promotion of the attractiveness of VET. This is also of importance in the development of strategies to support lifelong learning.

3. Why the quality of VET is an issue for EU-level action

Since the inception of the EU, high quality and relevant vocational training has been considered a key factor in the advancement of the Community's national economies and the development of the Single Market. Whilst the development of human capacities for **employment purposes** and the facilitation of the **geographical occupational mobility** of workers comprise the two main issues for EU action in the field of VET, increasingly the role of VET in attaining **social goals** has become a major cause for EU action[2].

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[2] The successful development of the Single Market is closely related to the development of a cohesive and inclusive society. VET is expected to respond positively to social inequalities by attracting individuals into VET who are unskilled or under-skilled, including early school leavers, unemployed persons and persons with special needs, and providing them with employable skills. Quality development and quality assurance in these VET pathways is of no less concern at EU level.

The success of the EU Single Market depends on the competitiveness of all its Member States. Competitiveness hinges on a favourable social, political and economic infra-structure and within this context human capacities play the key role. The development of human capacities for employment purposes is the purpose of VET and we are reliant on VET for their excellence. In this context, EU action aims to support quality development in VET throughout the Member States.

The geographical occupational mobility of workers to address skills needs and skills shortages as they arise in national economies can also contribute to the success of the single market. Increasingly, VET systems and arrangements are expected to prepare individuals for mobility: vertically and horizontally within VET and across vocational training and education, and within and across Member States occupationally. To take account of, and respond to the exigencies and impact of geographical occupational mobility implies that VET needs to ensure that individuals have, inter alia:

- Relevant vocationally orientated knowledge, skills and competences responding to high quality standards, including mobility related competences;

- Transparent qualifications so that their competences can be understood;

- Portable qualifications with international currency and/or mechanisms for the recognition of their competences and certificates;

- Access to vocationally orientated information and guidance;

- Access to VET for up-skilling and re-skilling purposes.

In this context, EU action aims to support quality assurance of VET across the Member States.

4. How the EU supports quality in VET

Policy making at EU-level

EU policy with relevance for VET (acquis communautaire) has been accumulating for nearly half a century. The Community Vocational Training Policy[3] provides the basis for EU co-operation. Policy making in the context of the European Social Fund and, more recently, the European Employment Strategy also makes an important contribution to policy-making for quality VET. EU VET policy is both derived from quality developments in Member States and contributes to quality developments by creating a need to transfer, adapt and improve good examples of policy. This results in more comparable policies across the EU for VET systems and arrangements.

Action Programmes

The introduction of EU Programmes for the improvement of VET in the mid 1980s led to a more bottom-up approach to tackling EU goals. Initially, separate Programmes (Petra, Comett, Force etc) facilitated sector specific[4] VET communities and from the mid 1990s a single programme (Leonardo) has facilitated the combined VET communities to improve quality

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[3] The Council Decision for the implementation of the Common VTP (1963) Treaty on European Union (Maastricht) Community VTP (1992)
[4] Pre-VET, IVET, CVET, Advanced VET

through exchange of good practice, the development of trans-national innovative action and mobility. The ESF also supports initiatives that facilitates trans-national co-operation for the improvement of VET (Employment, Adapt, Progress).

The main outcomes of this form of co-operation was the opportunity to put EU policies for the improvement of VET into practice, introduce a EU dimension into VET, open up VET systems and arrangements and make them more transparent and enhance understanding of the quality of VET practice through peer learning. Trans-national projects contribute to establishing "zones of mutual trust"[5].

Policy Programmes and Processes

More recently, Member States have committed to the policy programme: Education and Training 2010 Work Programme[6] (2002) and the policy process: Copenhagen (2002), with its emphasis on the quality, transparency and portability of VET competences and qualifications and their recognition in different contexts. The Programme and Process respond to the Lisbon Strategy, which recognises the important role of education and training as a policy lever for strengthening Europe's competitive power worldwide, and as a guarantee for ensuring the cohesion of our societies and the full development of its citizens, and the Barcelona goal to make VET a world quality reference. These initiatives have the development of the quality of VET at their core and have stepped up co-operation at every level to assist in the achievement of this goal.

Quality VET is now central to the success of the European Employment Strategy. Member States are asked to invest more in the training of individuals (Guideline 23) and continually adapt VET to take into account new competence requirements (guideline 24). The European Social Fund 2007-2013 reinforces this central role dedicating 50% of its €75 billion budget for VET related actions.

5. Quality as the key to make VET in the EU a world reference

EU action to support cultures of quality for the development of VET and the visibility of quality assurance includes; policy documents, multinational quality development networks and partnerships, and reference frameworks.

The European Network for Quality Assurance in VET (ENQA-VET) and its related network of Quality Assurance National Reference Points (QANRPs) focus on VET quality development. The proposed European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQARF) aims to provide a blueprint for the transparency and comprehensibility of VET quality assurance, across the EU.

Visible and trusted quality assurance is also a pre-requisite for the success of other important common instruments under discussion for the improvement of VET: EQF, ECVET and the European principles for non-formal and informal learning as well as EUROPASS, which requires built-in quality assurance, as does the European Mobility Charter. These instruments are based on the adoption of a learning outcomes approach in VET provision and their success is

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[5] Mike Coles QCA
[6] The Future Objectives Programme has become known as this, since 2005

dependent on mutual trust in the quality of the learning outcomes that comprise compe-tences and qualifications.

6. Challenges

Decision-making regarding the implementation of the EQARF is currently under debate. In this regard, some of the questions Member States may wish to consider include, whether the EQARF:

- Takes full account of the diversity of VET;

- Is of relevance to the full range of VET stakeholders;

- Reflects the experience and expertise of the scientific communities and communities of practice that heretofore determined the quality goals for different VET pathways in different cultural contexts;

- Is compatible with the full range of VET quality assurance arrangements in the EU;

- Supports the development of "Cultures of quality", which are dynamic and <u>cause</u> quality, rather than <u>control</u> it, by prioritizing procedure over process;

- Supports the attainment of the highest degree of quality for the different VET path-ways, rather than 'the lowest common denominator' with which all can easily agree.

7. Conclusion

VET quality development and quality assurance are in the hands of the Member States and their institutions. EU-level actions support the Member States in their endeavours.

The continuous improvement of the quality of VET, ensuring the transparency of arrange-ments for quality assurance and building trust in them are demanding challenges. Joint act-ions, such as: relating quality development and quality assurance arrangements (national, re-gional, sectoral, institutional) to a commonly agreed reference framework (EQARF); the cross-fertilisation of information on policies and practices that work, within and across VET nationally and trans-nationally; peer learning and peer review contribute to enhanced under-standing and trust and help the EU to move closer towards the goal of attaining world-class VET.

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