



Aligning HE and VET instruments

**PR1. Comparative analysis of HEI and VET quality assurance
systems**

Comparative Summary

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SZKOŁA GŁÓWNA
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PROJECT CONSORTIUM

P1	PL	Szkoła Główna Gospodarstwa Wiejskiego	 SZKOŁA GŁÓWNA GOSPODARSTWA WIEJSKIEGO
P2	GR	Dimitra Education & Consulting SA	 ΔΗΜΗΤΡΑ εκπαιδευτική συμβουλευτική
P3	SW	Stiftelsen Kursverksamh Eten Vid Uauniversitet	 Folkuniversitetet
P4	IT	Tiber Umbria Comett Education Programme	 TUCEP TIBER UMBRIA COMETT EDUCATION PROGRAMME International network for knowledge and job
P5	CY	A & A Emphasys Interactive Solutions Ltd	 Emphasys CENTRE

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Comparative analysis of HEI and VET quality assurance systems

The objective of PR1 was to conduct a comparative analysis of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and Vocational Education and Training (VET) quality assurance systems. As part of this task, we provided a general description and comparison of both education quality systems (I). Subsequently, we performed an in-depth analysis by identifying both systems' main similarities, differences, strengths, and weaknesses (II). Taking into account the ongoing project objectives, we then described the state of implementation of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) and European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) frameworks at national and provider levels (III), along with best practices (IV) and recommendations (V) (highly relevant in terms of the developing of the Quick Scan Tool).

I. Context, regulations, and a general comparison of ESG and EQAVET at the EU level

- Developing robust quality assurance systems is crucial for developing high-quality and inclusive education in the European education area both in Higher Education (HE) and Vocational Education and Training (VET). Although the ultimate goal of education is to train employees following the needs of the labour market, it turns out that significant differences characterise both education systems. HE generally focuses on knowledge, theory, and thinking skills, while vocational education focuses more on job-specific skills.
- HE and VET also have different quality assurance systems and operate based on different regulations, making comparing and cooperating difficult. The main act regulating quality assurance in HE is the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), which aims to contribute to the common understanding of quality assurance for learning and teaching across borders and among all stakeholders. Apart from providing general guidelines, the ESG also comprises other aspects (e.g., qualifications frameworks, European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System - ECTS, or diploma supplements) promoting transparency and mutual trust in higher education in the EHEA. It comprises a set of indicators classified into three categories constituting the three parts of the ESG: internal quality assurance, external quality assurance, and quality assurance agencies.
- The way quality assurance processes at the universities are aligned with the ESG within all Bologna signatory countries is reflected in the external QA activities of

European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) registered quality assurance agencies (QAA). The responsible organisation at the EU level is the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), which supervises the activities of QAA.

- The European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET (EQAVET) aims to support quality assurance in VET across Europe. It helps VET institutions and training providers document, develop, monitor, evaluate, and improve VET quality. It defines the quality assurance cycle: planning, implementation, evaluation, and review at both system and provider levels. The EQAVET Framework includes ten reference indicators supporting the evaluation and quality improvement of national/regional VET systems.
- The European Commission chairs the EQAVET Network, supported by the EQAVET Secretariat. The EQAVET Network works with a 'bottom-up' approach, encouraging members to own the activities and decisions through active involvement of the EQAVET National Reference Points (EQAVET NRPs) and EQAVET national representatives from ministries and other responsible bodies.
- The most significant difference between these two systems is that in the case of universities, the assessment of the quality of education is obligatory and formalized, while VETs have more freedom and diversity, which makes the results of quality assessments for different VETs incomparable. It should also be added that universities in the EU, despite their diversity, have a more homogeneous character than vocational education units.
- Regarding the latter, the EU set out potential approaches of both EQAVET and European credit system for vocational education and training - ECVET to increase alignment with HE.

II. Key similarities, differences, strengths, and weaknesses between HE and VET quality assurance frameworks (European and country levels)

Similarities

- The ESG and EQAVET are systems used to improve the quality of education and training, with a particular focus on continuous improvement.
- The ESG and EQAVET systems are flexible and adaptable, tailored to the needs and priorities of individual countries, and implemented according to national policies and regulations.

- Both frameworks require using the quality cycle, external assessments, and indicators related to providers having internal QA systems, spending on staff development, increasing participation, achievement, and progression, and the degree to which their program corresponds to labour market needs.

Differences

- The HE and VET systems are implemented based on guidelines from European regulations. Regarding management, the ESG is monitored by The European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The ENQA consists of a group of national QA agencies. On the other hand, EQAVET is managed by the European Commission with support from a secretariat.
- A register also exists for HE providers and QA agencies that follow the ESG standards, but there isn't one for EQAVET.
- Another difference is that EQAVET does not have deep specificity on the nature of external reviews. It only recommends that external reviews cover processes, educational results/outcomes, and the involvement of internal or external stakeholders. However, ESG requires the external body to publish results from inspections and to produce and publish clear assessment criteria that should be independent. Also, HE explicitly assesses the research quality, which is not generally the case for VET providers, given the technical aspect it has.
- Indicators and standards for HEIs' quality assurance also comprehend scientific research results (projects, publications, scientific conferences), while VET providers' quality assurance relies mainly on the labour market needs.
- The stages of the quality cycle process may differ between ESG and EQAVET, with the planning stage focusing on higher education-specific or VET-specific goals and objectives, the implementation stage involving evaluations specific to the system, and the evaluation stage involving reviewing the results of the evaluations and identifying areas for improvement. The improvement stage involves implementing new policies and procedures specific to the system.
- All HEIs follow an external evaluation, yet VET institutions are mainly being evaluated internally (in the form of an informal summary report).
- HE focuses on academic programs, research, and theoretical knowledge, while VET emphasises vocational programs, practical skills, and specific occupations.
- HE quality assurance evaluates criteria like research output and academic staff qualifications, while VET quality assurance emphasises and is more focused on industry relevance, vocational skills development, and employment outcomes.

European Level

Strengths

- The ESG gives specific attention to external evaluation and review. It is reflected in the second part of the ESG, which provides the necessary description and recommendations on the essence and process of external assessment. The standards for external quality assurance set the framework for establishing aims, objectives, and processes and provide the methodology for their implementation by institutions considering the regulatory environment and stakeholders' expectations.
- Many EQAVET indicators are labour-market oriented and align with the VET education system's practical and technical nature. This is mainly reflected in indicators 5 and 6, which account for the percentage of VET graduates who get jobs and measure the degree of utilisation of acquired skills in the workplace. In addition, indicator 9 concerns mechanisms to identify training needs in the labour market.

Weaknesses

- ESG should account for vulnerable groups and their access to HE. Improving social mobility, equality, and access to HE is essential.
- Compared to EQAVET, the ESG does not account for or mention the need to collect and use data on indicators 7-10 (unemployment rate, prevalence of vulnerable groups, mechanisms for meeting labour market needs, and schemes promoting better access).
- For EQAVET, it could include more specificity on external evaluation and its nature. Also, in terms of indicators, they should account not only for employment rates and technical skills. It should also consider and assess soft skills.

National Level

Strengths

- The scope and content of the ESG and EQAVET enable maintaining and aligning country-specific standards, procedures, and indicators for external and internal quality assurance in higher education and vocational training. It helps the countries adjust the external and internal evaluation criteria according to the stakeholders' requirements in the national and regional environment.

- According to both frameworks, national agencies elaborate on the rules and standards for external quality assurance evaluations in higher education and vocational training. In most cases, external quality assurance processes are performed through external evaluations conducted by independent groups of experts. Under the external assessment, the auditors issue an opinion and report on the state of quality assurance, which is available to the general public.
- Internal quality assurance is performed on the institutional level and involves the stakeholders from the local environment. The strengths of internal quality assurance standards and procedures impact the results and procedures applied during the external quality assurance process.
- Coherence and flexibility of internal quality assurance promote the continuous improvement of education and training through a quality cycle process, encouraging institutions to work on the quality of their programs and services constantly.
- Both ESG and EQAVET facilitate better cooperation of the national educational institutions with employers and maintain their reaction to the labour market trends.

Weaknesses

- The institutional actors stress the complexity of ESG and EQAVET standards and the workload related to establishing internal quality assurance policies.
- In some cases, the external quality assurance processes are limited by strict rules adopted by the national agencies and lack of flexibility and adaptation to the institutional specificity of the educational establishments.
- Institutional actors point to the insufficient level of integration between ESG and EQAVET standards that substantially deteriorates the consistency of evaluation criteria for qualification levels and negatively impacts the transition between qualification levels.
- In some cases, the agility of the quality assurance standards and indicators used for institutional evaluations do not match the requirements of local and regional labour markets.

III. State of the implementation of ESG and EQAVET frameworks at national and provider levels (including opinions from focus study)

- In all the countries under the comparative study, the ESG and EQAVET systems are adopted by the national authorities and implemented by national agencies.
- In all the participating countries, higher educational establishments are more familiar with the ESG standards and quality assurance cycle than their VET provider counterparts to the EQAVET standards. It is explained by a higher level of conformity and centralisation for the ESG standards that are mandatory for implementation and supervised by national agencies.
- Compared to VET providers, HEIs have more developed procedures for internal and external quality assurance determined by unified criteria that allow for independent comparisons among particular HE providers on a national level.
- The implementation process of quality assurance standards by VET providers lacks mandatory and generally accepted criteria on a national level and is often supervised by regional agencies. It promotes flexibility and agility in designing procedures and indicators for quality assurance on the institutional level and results in higher responsiveness to stakeholders' requirements, focusing on the expectations of students and employers.
- Additionally, decentralizing the quality assurance supervision for VET providers reduces the pressure to implement EQAVET standards among participating countries and promotes the higher differentiation of quality assurance procedures and indicators on the institutional level.
- The lack of unified standards for quality assurance in VET results in less motivation for exploring the EQAVET framework among stakeholders, VET providers, and employers. This creates the possibility of different quality indicator interpretations, (chaos) and gives the opportunity for weaker institutions to position themselves better, while the better ones can remain in the shadows.

IV. Good practices in countries HEIs and VETs

- Generally, implementation of ESG and EQAVET standards enhances the measurement of the quality assurance level, the assessment of relevant procedures, and their adjustment to the stakeholder's expectations.
- In all participating countries, HE providers particularly stress the importance of internal quality assurance towards continuous improvement of provided education

and services. The HEIs strategies for internal quality assurance include collecting students' opinions on the quality of the educational process and tracking graduates' careers and interactions with the labour market to fit the educational tracks to the employers' expectations. A significant part of internal quality assurance is the preparation of self-assessment reports by HEIs.

- All participating countries underline the great importance of cooperating with different groups of stakeholders both on the HE and VET levels. It facilitates their interaction in elaborating new educational programs and services and forms the base for external quality assurance evaluations.
- Moreover, all participants stress the importance of better communication and cooperation between VET providers and local employers, and other stakeholders, enabling lifelong learning and acquiring valuable practical qualifications.
- The internationalisation of HEI and VET providers is considered to be an essential step for promoting and maintaining ESG and EQAVET standards in the national educational systems.

V. Key recommendations on aligning the ESG and EQAVET systems (European and country level)

- The key recommendation for the booth system is to develop a universal language (definitions, crucial terms, and concepts such as learning outcomes, assessment, and quality assurance) that can be applied to both systems. It will help reinforce the consistency of qualifications.
- To ensure that both systems are aligned, it is important to develop common indicators that can be used across both systems. It could involve the identification of key performance indicators (KPIs) relevant to HE and VET institutions, such as student satisfaction, graduate employment rates, and learning outcomes. Common indicators can help to ensure that quality is measured consistently across both systems and can facilitate the sharing of good practices and benchmarking.
- Strengthening collaboration between European and national bodies responsible for ESG and EQAVET implementation is needed. HE and VET institutions should cooperate to share best practices and create standard methods for quality assurance. This could entail collaborating on training and development initiatives, creating networks and partnerships, and exchanging resources and knowledge.
- All participant countries indicate that VET providers can benefit from the experience of HEIs in establishing QA procedures and periodic internal evaluations. On the other hand, HEIs can learn more from VET providers regarding

matching the realities of the labour market and employers' involvement in different phases of the educational process and even after graduation.

- Encourage partnerships between industry stakeholders, VET providers, and HEIs to align programs with industry needs. Promote cross-sectoral dialogue and coordination between HEIs and VET institutions to share best practices and resources.
- The different natures of the two educational systems should always be considered. It means that any convergence in HE and VET QA systems does not dilute the quality expectations of each sector. HEIs will remain more research-oriented while trying to ensure the quality of their system. At the same time, VET will remain more oriented toward the needs of the labour market.
- Compared to HEIs, VET collaborates more closely with the employer. This would be beneficial for HEIs to implement to get a better alignment with the labour market needs, especially for HEI graduates pursuing a non-academic career. Hence, this has to be better reflected in the quality assurance indicators that better measure employers' involvement in different phases of the educational process and even after graduation.