

EQAVET Annual Network Meeting 2020: Full summary report

Date: 14-15 December 2020

Venue: Virtual meeting

Introduction

The EQAVET Annual Network Meeting provides the strategic direction for the work of the EQAVET Network and responds to the ongoing policy needs concerning the quality assurance of VET. It provides the opportunity for discussion, allowing for different perspectives while striving for common solutions which benefit all Network members.

This EQAVET Annual Network Meeting 2020 was organised by the European Commission and its contractor ICF as an online event. The meeting was attended by representatives from 23 EU Member States, plus Macedonia, Montenegro and Turkey. Apologies were received from Finland, France, Luxembourg, and Poland. The Social Partners were represented by the European Trade Union confederation (ETUC). The European Training Foundation (ETF), the European Network for VET providers (VET4EU2), OBESSU and Cedefop were also represented. A full list of participants to the meeting can be found [here](#).

The thematic focus of the EQAVET ANM 2020 was on the new [Council Recommendation on Vocational Education and Training \(VET\) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience](#), which was adopted on 24 November 2020. The EQAVET Network discussed the implications of this new legal basis for VET on EQAVET and on the work of the EQAVET Network.

Welcoming words

The meeting was officially opened by Chiara Riondino, Head of Unit E3 at DG EMPL, European Commission, who announced that the Council Recommendation on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience was adopted on 24 November 2020. The Recommendation is the result of a long joint preparation process that involved all VET stakeholders in Europe. It integrates the two 2009 Council Recommendations of ECVET and EQAVET, puts a strong emphasis on digital transitions and highlights the importance of flexible pathways in VET. One of the aims is to strengthen quality assurance measures, in order to create a good qualification system and good learning environment, hence the Recommendation has a direct impact on the work of the EQAVET Network.

Chiara Riondino underlined that this is the first ever Council Recommendation that focuses specifically on the VET sector which is a big step forward. In the new multiannual financial framework and in the next generation of EU funds, investment is foreseen in vocational education and training, in skills, reforming of VET and skills systems. At the same time there is also an increased demographic pressure and a complex context (e.g. Brexit). Amid these challenges it is important to work together to grasp the opportunities available.

In that context, Chiara Riondino welcomed the opportunity to discuss the new VET Recommendation with the EQAVET Network at the EQAVET ANM 2020.

The 2020 Council Recommendation on VET

The Council Recommendation was then introduced in detail by Jan Varchola and Koen Bois d'Enghien from DG EMPL Unit E3. They further stressed the key ideas behind the VET Recommendation, which is based on four pillars:

1. **A joint vision for VET in Europe:** this is largely inspired by the opinion of the ACVT from 2019, which stipulated that inclusion and excellence should equally underpin VET systems in Europe. VET needs to respond to labour market needs, but also needs to equip a person with skills for life, so that they can take care of their personal needs and become an active citizen.
2. **A set of concrete principles to achieve inclusion and excellence, that should be followed on national level:** The focus here is on IVET as well as on CVET and on the increasing need for investing in upskilling and reskilling. There is also the idea to have a more proactive VET, co-creating the structural changes taking place in the economy, being a driver for innovation and growth.
3. **A set of support actions at European level.** There are several ideas about support actions that can be taken at the EU level, such as the Platforms of Centres of Vocational Excellence, the digitalisation of VET (including SELFIE tool), support to reform strengthened support to apprenticeships, European vocational core profiles (the idea is to see if there is a potential to look for commonalities on vocational qualifications across Member States) worldwide reference of VET learners, Peer reviews on quality assurance.
4. **Three quantitative objectives:**
 - a. the share of employed graduates from VET should be at least 82 %
 - b. 60 % of recent graduates from VET benefit from exposure to work-based learning during their vocational education and training
 - c. 8 % of learners in VET benefit from a learning mobility abroad

These are long-term strategic goals that underline the importance of effective quality assurance methods. In an Annex to the VET Recommendation, the updated EQAVET Framework is presented (including the EQAVET+ indicative descriptors).

DG EMPL further highlighted that the key goals of the VET Recommendation are complemented by another very recent strategic policy document: the [Osnabrück Declaration](#) from 30 November 2020 that aims at revitalising the Copenhagen process, and underlines the role of vocational education and training as an enabler of recovery and just transitions to digital and green economies.

The full slide deck presented by the European Commission at the meeting can be found [here](#).

Working Group discussions

Following the introductory presentation, the EQAVET Network members discussed two topics emerging from the VET Recommendation in more detail: digital VET delivery and flexible learning pathways.

Topic 1: Quality and inclusiveness of digital VET delivery

The COVID-19 crisis entailed the sudden need to offer remote learning, blended learning and other digital solutions at an unexpected and unprecedented scale. VET providers, employers of apprentices, and other key agencies have made remarkable efforts to put emergency measures

in place, thereby ensuring the continuity of learning. Finding themselves ‘thrown in the cold water’, they had to address the following needs:

- Adaptation of the curricula
- Development of basic pedagogical and didactical approaches to digital VET delivery
- Expansion of the methods of examining and assessing the course content
- Availability of hardware equipment and bandwidths to all students
- Financing issues

Yet the crisis also revealed the challenges ahead and showed that VET providers as well as learners are currently not yet sufficiently prepared for the digital transition, and there is little quality assurance in place. For instance, there is a need to

- Discuss the need for legal adaptations in national training regulations to accommodate distance learning
- Launch a discussion at VET provider/employer level to better define the quality of digital skills
- Differentiate and define the demand for digital skills in view of different types of qualifications
- Undertake research in dialogue with VET providers and the labour market, e.g. to discuss digitalisation in relation to technological developments like robotics and artificial intelligence
- Broaden the scope for digital assessment methods and quality assurance of the outcomes
- Secure funding for the required developments (e.g. through support from private companies).

Topic 2: Quality assurance of flexible learning pathways

In the second workshop, EQAVET Network members discussed the different ways how VET training pathways are made more flexible and what this means for quality assurance. A wide range of different actions are in the process of implementation which are increasing flexibility to individual learners and to employers. These included operational changes as well as systemic changes.

- Operational changes, for instance, can include
 - Improving transitions so learning is recognised before courses are chosen and started
 - Starting courses a different times throughout the year
 - Providing blended and online alternatives
 - Skills assessments
- Systemic changes were found to include
 - Unitisation and transfer/stacking of learning outcomes but more recently recognition of micro-credentials and partial qualifications
 - Personal budgets for adult learners replacing or augmenting provider budgets
 - Integration of different parts of adult learning (standard approaches) and guidance services
 - Recognition of work-based learning on the job as part of a unit or certification

Challenges for quality assurance can include:

- How are course quality standards maintained for different pathways? How can standards for class-based learning be applied for work based and online learning?
- How can the quality and assessment of learner capabilities be maintained through different approaches? How can employers be assured that certification by every pathway has the same value to them? How can providers in other areas/countries and in other education sectors (primarily higher education) be assured that certification by non-conventional pathways matches standards?

- How can the accumulation of units and other unconventional ways of building up competencies towards a certification be as transparent as traditional ways?
- How can relevance be tested, and outcomes measured through so many routes and short learning experiences by individuals?

Stakeholder panel

In a panel discussion, key stakeholders and European Agencies shared their views on opportunities and challenges arising from the new VET recommendation and the related policy initiatives. The five discussants were:

- Tamer Atabarut from the European VET-provider umbrella organisation VET4EU2
- Mounir Baati from the European Training Foundation ETF
- George Kostakis from the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, Cedefop
- Bicca Olin from the Organising Bureau of European School Student Unions, OBESSU
- Agnes Roman from the European Trade Union Confederation, ETUC

Their contributions are summarised below.

Tamer Atabarut, VET4EU2, expressed his delight with the fact that VET appears to be gaining a new momentum with the new updated European skills agenda and the VET recommendation. VET4EU2 are convinced that inclusive VET is not only needed for the competitiveness of the European companies but also for supporting the green and digital transitions of Europe. The EQAVET framework is especially important in this regard as quality and inclusiveness of VET are very important factors, and this needs to be based on transparency and an involvement of stakeholders and social partners and to include an innovative dimension as well. VET4EU2 are strongly supporting flexible learning pathways that include formal education, mobility and workplace learning, as well as recognition of learnings from previous opportunities. Tamer Atabarut stated that he hopes EQAVET can help to develop and promote quality assurance that considers all forms of learning. He further referred to a [position paper](#) which underlines that VET4EU2 wholeheartedly supports the goals of the Osnabrueck Declaration and is happy to play a part in its implementation.

Agnes Roman, ETUC, reminded the Network that before the Covid-19 crisis workers were already facing difficulties related to upskilling and reskilling for the digital transitions of the industry. With the COVID-crisis and changing work environments, this need was increased multi-fold. In the current climate, job seekers risk to stay unemployed for a long time and to lose their skills. Those that are already low-skilled need extra support to improve their basic skills and to reintegrate into labour market. The 2016 recommendation on Upskilling Pathways should be a priority, and adults and young graduates who are struggling should not be left alone either.

Agnes Roman also underlined employer responsibility for providing job-related trainings and guaranteeing equal access to training to all employees.

Skills development should further be considered a social responsibility. The European Pillar of Social Rights states that everybody should have the right to quality and inclusive training and lifelong learning. It would be important to develop strategy to ensure these rights. The current initiatives point in the right direction, but more needs to be done and skills provision needs to be combined with job security.

Digital and green transitions are important, and there are many offers for adults to improve basic digital skills. Yet regarding green skills, concepts appear to be less well developed. There should

be a competence framework for green skills, as this might motivate training providers to support the development of green skills. Work-based learning is still not available for everyone, and should include laboratories, workshops, practices in school and apprenticeship in companies – for young learners as well as for adult learners.

Agnes Roman went on to reflect briefly on the topic of modularisation and micro credentials and stated that trade unions are very critical about this. Micro credentials can be useful if they are added to qualifications, but not to replace them. So far experience shows that modularisation does not help to bring jobseekers in employment if the modules cannot be accumulated to lead to a higher qualification. Where this is not the case the owner of one or several modules is still considered low-skilled.

This shows that for all these new initiatives in VET, quality assurance is an important element, and European collaboration is highly important in that regard.

Agnes Roman further referred to the [ETUC Position on the European Skills Agenda and future skills strategies](#) paper, which gives additional insights into the ETUC point of view. The [Social partners agreement on digitalisation](#) is also recommended reading.

Bicca Olin, OBESSU stated that when thinking on how to shape VET in the future and ensure its quality, learners should be at the centre, and they should be involved in shaping the course of action in training and workplace. Young learners want to be part of the discussion. At the moment, students feel that this is not sufficiently the case, and there are not enough initiatives of hearing learners' voices. This could be facilitated through surveys, e.g. after COVID it would be important to gathering students' views and experience with remote learning and what they appreciated or found challenging.

Bicca Olin expanded on this thought by highlighting students' high level of awareness that workplaces and work environment are rapidly changing. Constant update and acquisition of new skills should be a key priority for everyone. The current crisis affects everyone, and the low skilled are most vulnerable. Upskilling and re-skilling needs to ensure that VET can quickly and flexibly respond to digitalisation and support geographic mobility and should enable life-long-learning solutions.

At present, young learners are particularly keen to make sure all initiatives are based on the key concepts of sustainability and green transition. Innovation is important, but in OBESSU's view, workers' contributions to innovation are underutilised. Workers could contribute more to the search of innovative ideas if there were better established links between their experiences and the research, design and innovation departments in companies.

OBESSU has also published a recent [position paper](#) on these questions, which gives further insight into OBESSU's views on shaping change in VET.

George Kostakis, Cedefop, also underlined that the transformations in the labour market make constant updating and acquisition of new skills a key priority. The current crisis affects everyone, but low-skilled adults appear to be by far the most affected group. This requires a strong call for a Social Europe and the effective implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, and all stakeholders need to get involved in the realisation of those rights. CEDEFOP can contribute to some of the key goals of the VET Recommendation, e.g. by exploring the links between micro-credentials and qualification frameworks, or by establishing comprehensive frameworks that point out links between VET (higher VET) and higher education.

George Kostakis highlighted that the VET Recommendation foresees a reporting to the Council on its implementation in 5 years, hence in 2025, and reflected on the design of a monitoring strategy for the objectives set out in the Recommendation and the revised EQAVET Framework.

More and better skills intelligence is needed that should be based on big data and artificial intelligence. To obtain such data, it is important to involve all stakeholders and put arrangements for collaboration and data exchange between all the key players in place. Attention should be given to the complexity of such a joint reporting exercise, which should be supported by a general strengthening of the evaluation and review phase of the quality cycle.

Peer Reviews are important to ensure quality going forward as the experience in some countries can inform other countries and improve trust and transparency. Peer Reviews can also strengthen national networks, as they can be platforms for gathering the views of different associations at the ground whose support might be critical, for instance VET providers. Companies also need to be involved, and corporate responsibility should be stimulated, e.g. to improve the quality of apprenticeships and other forms of work-based learning.

Mounir Baati, ETF, provided further reflections on the monitoring of the goals set out by the VET Recommendation. On a positive note, he underlined that the key objectives of the Recommendation are quantitative, hence can be measured. In his view, one of the challenges will be to determine how EQAVET can support quality assurance in work-based learning, as the framework has focused mostly on school-based training so far. Given the recent explosion of different forms of remote and online learning in VET, it will also be important to establish clear quality criteria for virtual learning and link them to specific learning outcomes as well as learning environment (hence schools as well as the workplace).

Mounir Baati also sees a need to be more proactive in developing quality assured lifelong learning strategies and support the flexibility and permeability between VET and upper secondary as well as Higher Education. More flexibility is required in terms of certification and acquiring a qualification. Micro credentials should be explored in that regard but are also important for learner mobility.

Similar to his colleague from Cedefop, Mounir Baati also supports the view that Peer Reviews should be the main tool for collaboration in the EQAVET Network; and adopting a tailored approach to Peer Reviews should be a priority for the EAVET Network going forward.

For more information on these ideas, Mounir Baati and George Kostakis referred to the discussion paper [‘The importance of being vocational: challenges and opportunities for VET in the next decade’](#), jointly prepared by Cedefop and the ETF, that puts forward key challenges and opportunities for VET which have emerged from the intelligence, research and evidence collected over the years by the two agencies, each within its own remit and geographic scope (inside and outside of the EU).

Developing an EQAVET peer review concept

The next agenda point was the discussion of a peer review concept for VET at system level. The aim is to have an EQAVET peer review concept ready for discussion at the next EQAVET Annual Network Meeting in June 2021.

As specified in the VET Recommendation, *a peer review is a type of voluntary mutual learning activity with the objective to support the improvement and transparency of quality assurance arrangements at system level not leading to accreditation procedures, based on a specific methodology to be developed by the European Network for quality assurance in vocational education and training.*

The VET Recommendation further invites the NRPs to *engage in EU level peer reviews of quality assurance to enhance the transparency and consistency of quality assurance arrangements, and to reinforce trust between the Member States.*

A considerable amount of exploratory work on this topic has been done by the EQAVET Network already: this includes a [study on 'Peer Review and the work of the EQAVET Network'](#) that was published by the end of 2019. Peer Reviews have been undertaken at national level, in collaboration with other countries, and ETF has piloted and tested a [peer review concept](#).

In an introductory presentation, Kim Faurschou, EQAVET expert, reminded the EQAVET Network that the purpose of peer reviews is to support countries with the implementation of the EQAVET framework.

The Peer Review methodology is a well-established mechanism. Peer Reviews are a form of 'Mutual Learning' where both sides – the host country as well as the visiting countries should be able to take away learning points. Peer Reviewers should be regarded as 'critical friends', and the process is a dialogue that can help to improve certain practices in the country. Peer Reviews should be built on trust and confidence. Experiences show that the host countries benefit the most when they are open about issues and challenges related to certain practices and features of their VET system.

The Network then moved on to discussing what the most appropriate approach to a Peer Review of VET at system level would be. The following key points emerged:

- The EQAVET Network underlined that Peer Reviews should be voluntary, and the initiative should come from the 'peer reviewed' country that can suggest topics and practices or questions to discuss with peers.
- Several examples were given (NL, SI) where peer reviews at provider level were carried out with great success. It was mentioned that PRs at system level will be completely different, and it will be crucial to decide what the target is and who will be peers. Moreover, support from the political level might be needed.
- The success of peer reviews depends to a large extent on the information available at preparatory stage. Detailed information of policy at system level and legislation is needed, as the peers need to know the system in depth to be able to provide useful feedback to the host's questions. This requires a high level of preparatory work and it will be important to have support available for this.
- The European Commission specified that funding to countries could be made available through the call for EQAVET projects that will be launched in early 2021. In the framework of this call for proposals specific resources could be allocated to participate in PRs.
- Network members raised the question of transparency of results. Will the results of the PR be made public? This might be an issue in some countries.
- This leads to the question on what type of follow-up on changes in the country would take place. Would there be some sort of monitoring on whether the country has effectively changed something as a consequence of the PR?
- It was suggested that NRPs might benefit from training on the topic. A pool of experienced peer reviewers (e.g. from NRP's that have already implemented Peer Reviews) could be trained up to work with the methodology to be developed.

The European Commission, Koen Bois d'Enghien, clarified that further discussion shall take place in the EQAVET Steering Committee meeting planned for February 2021. Then a concrete proposal with a specific methodology and procedure for the preparation process will be submitted for discussion at the next EQAVET ANM meeting in June 2021. A first series of pilot PRs could be implemented in the second part of the year and continue across 2022 and 2023.

Expert Group on Graduate Tracking: Outcomes

Nadia Manzoni from the European Commission, DG EAC, presented an overview on the outcomes of the work of an Expert Group on Graduate Tracking. The Expert Group has finished its mandate, and there is now a good understanding of what is available in the countries.

- In 24 of the Erasmus countries' education systems, graduate tracking is either a legal obligation, or a well-developed practice despite not being a legal obligation.
 - Twenty countries have system-level graduate tracking in HE and VET.
 - The remainder have considerable grounds to catch up on.
 - The countries where graduate tracking is a legal obligation, tend to have well-established tracking systems. However, a legal basis is not a necessary condition for regular graduate tracking.
- The most common indicators used are linked to employment status, salary, further education, satisfaction with study and job.
- At provider level, most higher education institutions undertake some form of graduate tracking, mostly surveying own graduates 1 year after graduation, for quality assurance purposes. In VET, graduate tracking is less common.

However, the available data are currently not sufficiently comparative across countries which hinders the implementation of the 2017 Council Recommendation on tracking graduates. This led to the development of a European Graduate Tracking Initiative. As a result of the initiative, it is expected that the Council Recommendation can be implemented partially (80%) by 2025 and fully (100%) by 2030.

The European Graduate Tracking Initiative will be rolled out through three key activities.

1. The implementation of a Capacity Building project, which consists in a national stock-taking exercise and the development of strategic national roadmaps. The project was launched in October 2020. An assessment of the overall state of readiness of the individual countries for a European graduate tracking mechanism is expected to be available by mid-2022.
2. The development of a European Network (National Coordination Centres) and a governance structure, including a Steering Committee and a Secretariat. The Network will support the European collaboration as well as the monitoring of the implementation. The call to set up the centres will be launched in January 2021. The EQAVET network was invited to work closely with these National Coordination Centres.
3. The gradual roll-out of a European Graduate Survey, with the following goals:
 - 50% countries in the European Graduate Survey for higher education by 2022 and 100% by 2025 (minimum 16 countries)
 - Linking harmonised administrative data and combining with shorter survey (EQF 4 to 8)

Three options available to integrate national graduate tracking with the European survey:

- a. Replace the national graduate survey with the European Graduate Survey in the year that it is carried out or run the two surveys in parallel.
- b. Add a national module to the European Graduate Survey, with questions that are of national interest.
- c. Satisfy the data requirements with data gathered through the national survey or administrative data, while guaranteeing comparability and high quality of data.

In the first quarter of 2021, three key actions will be launched:

- A Call to set up National Coordination Centres;
- A Call to express interest in taking part in the first wave of European graduate survey;
- Set up of the Steering committee of the graduate tracking initiative (Membership: elected representatives of the Network, the Secretariat/European Commission, Eurostat, European agencies, European level social partners).

The full slide deck presented by Nadia Manzoni at the meeting can be found [here](#). The final report and recommendations are forthcoming.

Highlights from two EQAVET NRPs (AT and HR)

The last Agenda point consisted of the presentation of highlights from the work of two exemplary NRPs in 2020: Austria and Croatia.

Insights into the work of the Austrian NRP in 2020

Franz Gramlinger presented highlights from the work of the Austrian NRPs in 2020. He stated that in the last two-three years, Austria has implemented significant changes in their VET system. This includes a new governance structure when it comes to the division and coordination of general and vocational schools.

In the last year, the Austrian NRP, in cooperation with the Ministry for Education, worked on developing a new integrated QA system that merged two previously different systems – for general and vocational schools - into one. This included the development of a new quality framework as well as a new quality management system. The new quality framework for schools (QABP) concerns 9700 schools in Austria with 1.2 M students and will be rolled out on 1st January 2021. The new quality management system will start in September 2021.

Franz Gramlinger stated that the EQAVET Framework was very useful for the development of the QM framework, and the Austrian NRP benefitted strongly from the international experience.

A recording of Franz Gramlinger's presentation can be found [here](#). The slide deck is available on the [resource page](#) created for the meeting.

Insights into the work of the Croatian NRP in 2020

Nino Buic presented an overview on the activities of the Croatian NRP in 2020. He stated that despite the disruptions by COVID-19, the Croatian NRP managed to implement a broad range of activities at national level, as well as activities in joint cooperation with other countries represented in the EQAVET Network.

- At national level, activities included a national conference on QA, and the promotion of QA and EQAVET in the Croatian VET system. Topics discussed included guidance and support to learners as well as new insights on how to improve the Croatian self-assessment methodology. The NRP further continued activities on VET Graduate Tracking, that were started in previous years. Experiences with the piloting of a methodology in three schools were evaluated, and a reviewed version of the method will again be piloted in three to five additional schools. In a next step, building on the piloting, Croatia will try to develop a national approach to graduate tracking for its VET schools.
- At EU level, activities include a joint activity with Finland, Slovenia, Austria and Estonia on promoting the use of transnational peer reviews; and another joint activity with Slovenia and Greece on graduate tracking system (which feeds into the national piloting).

A recording of Nino Buic's presentation can be found [here](#). The slide deck is available on the [resource page](#) created for the meeting.

Meeting Close

Koen Bois d'Enghien closed the meeting by highlighting that 2020 was a successful year for EQAVET 2020 as an updated EQAVET framework was developed which is integrated in the new VET Recommendation, hence forms an integral part of the Recommendation.

The EQAVET work programme for the next three years will be developed early 2021 with the new EQAVET Secretariat that will start its work in January. The work programme will contain a broad range of mutual learning activities but will also include networking and capacity building activities. The topics discussed at the meeting will be further explored, together with others (e.g. the concept of individual learning accounts). A call for proposals for NRP projects will be launched at the beginning of next year as well.

At this stage, confirmed dates for meetings and events in 2021 are:

- **9 February 2021:** Meeting of the EQAVET Steering Committee
- **23-24 March 2021:** Peer Learning Activity on Quality Assurance in CVET
- **1-2 June 2021:** EQAVET Annual Network Meeting 2021.

Due to ongoing travel restrictions, the events are planned as virtual meetings.

Koen Bois d'Enghien thanked all participants for their attendance of the EQAVET Annual Network Meeting 2020 and closed the meeting.

More info

Background papers, information material and the presentations from the meeting (as mentioned above) can be revisited on the [resource page](#) created for the meeting.