

## LEARNING from SECTORAL APPROACHES to QUALITY ASSURANCE of

### *Work-based learning partnerships & the role of quality assurance*

*This policy note is based on the reflection and discussion that took place at the EQAVET Symposium on learning from sectoral approaches to quality assurance of VET, which focused on work-based learning partnerships and the role of quality assurance. The Symposium was held in Brussels on 24-25 November, 2014; and was part of the [EQAVET 2013-15 work programme](#) which makes provision for activities which focus on the sectoral approach to QA in VET.*

## INTRODUCTION

The EQAVET Symposium brought together key multipliers among policymakers, EU social partner organisations and national employer associations (chambers of commerce and craft, professional chambers, sectoral skills councils, etc), VET providers, government agencies and those with a national or regional responsibility for VET policy. The majority represented a Member State's Quality Assurance National Reference Point (NRP). The NRPs are established as part of the EQAVET Recommendation and play a central role in supporting the VET quality assurance arrangements in their country.

It provided an opportunity to deepen the dialogue between VET systems and labour market actors on the quality assurance aspects of:

- world-class vocational education and training, in order to improve the quality of vocational skills
- work-based learning, including the number and quality of traineeships, apprenticeships and dual learning models, to ease the transition from learning to work
- partnerships between public and private institutions (to ensure appropriate curricula and skills provision)

The results of the work undertaken in the [EQAVET Sectoral Seminars 2011-2013](#)<sup>1</sup> provided a background for reflection by Symposium participants on how a stronger culture of cooperation between labour market actors could improve responses to the challenges faced by VET systems. In addition, the Symposium built on and explored the results of the European Commission [Sector Skills Alliances](#) (SSAs) initiative launched in 2012 to address the current mismatch between the needs of the labour market and the skills supplied by education and training systems in the EU.

**The Symposium was organised around three issues:**

1. Forecasting the needs for skills
2. Work-based learning in a lifelong learning perspective
3. Teacher and trainer skills.

Three *case studies* were presented (from the Netherlands, Italy and Norway) highlighting how one of the issues mentioned above was addressed. The case studies included two parts: a presentation which gave an overview of the

<sup>1</sup> The Sectoral Seminar methodology used in EQAVET provides an opportunity for participants to share knowledge and experiences using examples of practice and/or policy implementation as a starting point for a reflection on how to address some of the shared challenges faced by education and training systems across the EU within key industry sectors.

framework, organisational arrangements, establishment of partnerships/dialogue etc. at national or regional level which facilitate good practice; and a ‘testimony’ element, presented by a key actor (an apprentice, a LLL learner, a teacher/trainer) who personalised the good practice. The presentation of *case studies* was followed by discussion in workshops. The following comments are based on the participants’ reflections on presentations from the case studies.

*This policy note is not a verbatim report; instead it is an analysis of the issues that were felt to be most crucial to the establishment of sectoral partnerships and quality assurance in VET and WBL*

More information on the Symposium is available on the EQAVET website [here](#)

## POLICY CONTEXT

The European Framework for Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) was set out in the 2009 Recommendation from the European Parliament and Council. It invites Member States to promote and monitor continuous improvement in VET by the use of a quality assurance (QA) and improvement cycle based on planning, implementation, evaluation and review. EQAVET is a Framework that facilitates arrangements which can be applied at VET-system and VET-provider levels. It is supported by quality criteria, indicative descriptors and indicators, providing a systematic approach to QA and highlighting the importance of monitoring and improving quality through a combination of internal self-monitoring, external processes and qualitative analysis.

EQAVET is one of a number of European initiatives in the field of education and training which has been designed to support Member States in reforming and adapting their systems. EQAVET can be used to address challenges outlined in the Education and Training strategic framework 2020, the lifelong learning (LLL) programme proposed by the European Commission and the ‘Rethinking Education’ communication in 2012.

Within the broader education and training strategy, VET and work-based learning (WBL) play a crucial role in contributing to the EU 2020 growth and recovery strategy which seeks to respond to increasing global and societal challenges. The EU initiatives ‘Youth Guarantee Recommendation’ and the ‘European Alliance for Apprenticeship’ are intended to support the efforts of EU countries to increase the quality and supply of WBL.

In this regard, the sectoral approach would appear to be the quality assurance strategy that best facilitates the involvement of the business world in VET, contributes to career-focused education and delivers on the LLL agenda that is fundamental to economic and social progress.

## DISCUSSION and REFLECTIONS – why a sectoral approach to QA in VET?

The presentation of case studies on the sectoral approach highlighted the following issues:

1. While **different industry sectors face similar challenges** in relation to developing and assuring the quality of VET, **the solutions are often sector specific**
2. **Partnership arrangements and cooperative relationships** at sectoral level between VET providers and social partners have been instrumental in:
  - reducing the skill gaps in the labour force, which contributes to
  - reducing unemployment and
  - improving employability
  - providing a significant impetus for change and improvement in VET provision fostering transparency of VET.
 All of these contribute to accelerating competitiveness and inclusive growth in Europe
3. There is a need to **foster mutual learning between the QA approaches of different industry sectors to the provision of VET**

The above points indicate that there is a need to develop a systematic and consistent sectoral approach to quality assurance, which would connect the relevant levels and actors and:

- A.** make it easier to forecast the need for skills in the labour market within specific sectors. This would require all relevant stakeholders to conduct common analyses and studies at national and local level on future industry needs and to define relevant objectives and targets, which would then feed into the updating of VET standards, curricula and qualifications, ensuring national consistency
- B.** ensure clearly articulated VET policies and implementation strategies within Member States in order to facilitate cooperation between VET providers and companies
- C.** establish regular and consistent monitoring systems for VET providers which would involve all economic and educational systems and actors.

## EMERGING POLICY ISSUES – Building a sectoral approach to QA in VET

Case studies and discussion highlighted the issues that need to be considered when devising a sound sectoral approach to QA in VET:

- *Why focus on a sectoral approach to QA in VET?*
- *Who should be involved in a sectoral approach to QA in VET?*
- *What would be the key elements of a sectoral approach to QA in VET?*
- *How should stakeholders be involved in a sectoral approach to QA in VET?*

### RATIONALE – Why focus on a sectoral approach to QA in VET?

All sectors of industry need to be directly involved in assuring and developing the quality of VET, because they know their own needs and can therefore offer concrete answers.

When these actors are involved, there is a guarantee that:

- labour supply will match demand
- the skills delivered by VET will be the skills in demand
- trainers and equipment in VET schools will be up to date.

### ACTORS – Who should be involved in a sectoral approach to QA in VET?

Of key importance is the establishment of a network of partnerships which would cover all levels and all actors in the sectors.

- **At national/regional level:** Permanent sectoral bodies/organisations representing social partners and other relevant stakeholders can play a significant role in managing the VET system, analysing labour market needs and setting, monitoring and updating qualification standards. The involvement of these actors would lead to greater recognition for VET qualifications nationally and at European level within the sectors; which, in turn, would facilitate labour mobility and mutual trust. Sectoral organisations should also take a proactive role in supporting the development of the VET system; in particular they should support SMEs, which often encounter difficulties in articulating their needs and/or in organising quality training that can address their needs.
- **At local level:** Local networks, including schools, enterprises, and other partners of a specific sector, should be promoted, in order to pool resources (equipment, laboratories, human resources, competences, etc.). Also, such networks can facilitate the exchange of knowledge and good

cooperative practice between VET providers and companies. Such sectoral cooperation can be useful not only to large companies, but also to SMEs, as it can enable them to avail of technical assistance and of support for innovation. It is crucially important that managers, teachers/trainers and learners in VET institutions and enterprises be involved in these networks. Moreover, the involvement of local networks promotes confidence in the quality of training and in VET generally.

## **FACTORS for SUCCESS – What would be the key elements of a sectoral approach to QA in VET?**

Industry sectors should be involved in all phases of the QA cycle: *i.e. in planning* (e.g. setting curricula), *implementation* (e.g. organising teacher training, and/or work-based learning), *evaluation* (e.g. ensuring a match between labour market supply and demand) and *review* (e.g. improving VET provision in order to meet targets).

A sectoral approach would enhance the EQAVET quality cycle and indicators, by adding a sectoral perspective to QA in VET and setting sectoral priorities (see figure 1 below).

Sectoral cooperation can have a positive impact on curricula, teachers/trainers, equipment, dropout levels and jobs; it can help deliver on the lifelong learning agenda and improve work-based learning, improve the match between the supply and demand for skills in the labour market, and improve the recognition of prior learning.

### **● Delivering on the lifelong learning (LLL) agenda**

The sectoral approach is key to encouraging the LLL perspective. In fact, close links between education and business create the preconditions for continuing training and increase the willingness of firms and workers to update their competences and innovate. Enterprises, in turn, become more motivated to invest in LLL. In this context, the demand of continuing training is best supported by sectoral organisations.

### **● Improving work-based learning (WBL)**

WBL requires close cooperation between VET providers and the labour market, and a clear focus on learners and the learning process. The transition from school to work calls for high quality and efficient education and training which can be utilised for the development of both students and teachers. WBL has been proven to be a powerful instrument for developing curricula based on a competence model, supporting learners' motivation and achievement.

WBL encourages the acquisition of practical knowledge and the right attitudes. It should be complemented by school-based learning which supports the integration of key and soft skills in the curriculum, as in the case of entrepreneurship skills.

Models of WBL, such as apprenticeships (based on a dual system), can help correct the mismatch between labour demand and supply, as they meet the needs of employers, and the training is given in real jobs. However, there are some issues that need be acknowledged: SMEs often find it difficult to offer this type of training and a shortage of training places is reported. Other models can also perform well if they are based on cooperation and partnership between the stakeholders, offering pupils the possibility to train in a real working environment at an early stage of their careers.

Further information on building and assuring a model for WBL can be found at the online [EQAVET tool](#) which provides concrete and practical guidance on the activities that help VET institutions to develop and support a quality assurance approach for WBL in line with EQAVET. The guidance presents six building blocks which are useful in establishing and strengthening QA processes in WBL.

### **● Matching labour market supply and demand**

Education and training should be adapted to meet current and future demands for skills. The sectoral approach allows for skills forecasting while taking into consideration predictions, risks, flexibility and alternatives. Companies know their skill needs, and these can be analysed and communicated through the establishment of

sectoral committees with equal representation from companies and trade unions. The sectoral approach enables the educational system to provide the labour market with the right skills in a timely manner together with guidance for learners regarding career choices.

### ● **Recognising prior learning (RPL)**

RPL remains a challenge in most sectors and educational systems. The process of recognition needs to be independent, based on outcomes and the documentation of formal, informal and non-formal learning.

Common frameworks, which are built on consensus within sector partnerships, permit the acknowledgement and recognition of individual competences, and value prior learning. This supports and enables learners to build up a portfolio, which, in return, can increase national and transnational permeability in the labour market.

However, more work is needed in relation to the training of assessors and the development of valid and reliable tools for RPL.

### ● **Teachers and trainers**

Teachers and trainers are the single most important quality factor in education and training. Cooperation, investment and ongoing training in vocational and pedagogical skills of teachers and trainers are of key importance.

The competence of teachers and trainers can be updated easily through structural cooperation between schools and enterprises working in the same sector. Trainers should build up a personal network with enterprises that can facilitate regular opportunities for practical work in the sector (e.g. by working for a period in an enterprise) in order to update their knowledge. Reciprocally, industry trainers and mentors should be included in the teaching panel and staff activities of schools. Sectoral cooperation can support this inclusion.

Also, the academic skills of teachers and trainers and the labour market experience of those who work in industry should be considered equally relevant in building effective links between VET and the world of employment.

### ● **The central role of learners**

We need more flexible VET provision, centred on the needs of learners, and developed through the sectoral approach: learners should be enabled to personalise their learning pathways to reflect their interests and attitudes, which would enhance motivation. Learners should also receive relevant information and guidance in relation to:

- New and changing careers
- The transition to the labour market
- The benefits of certifying competences (e.g. building up a portfolio).

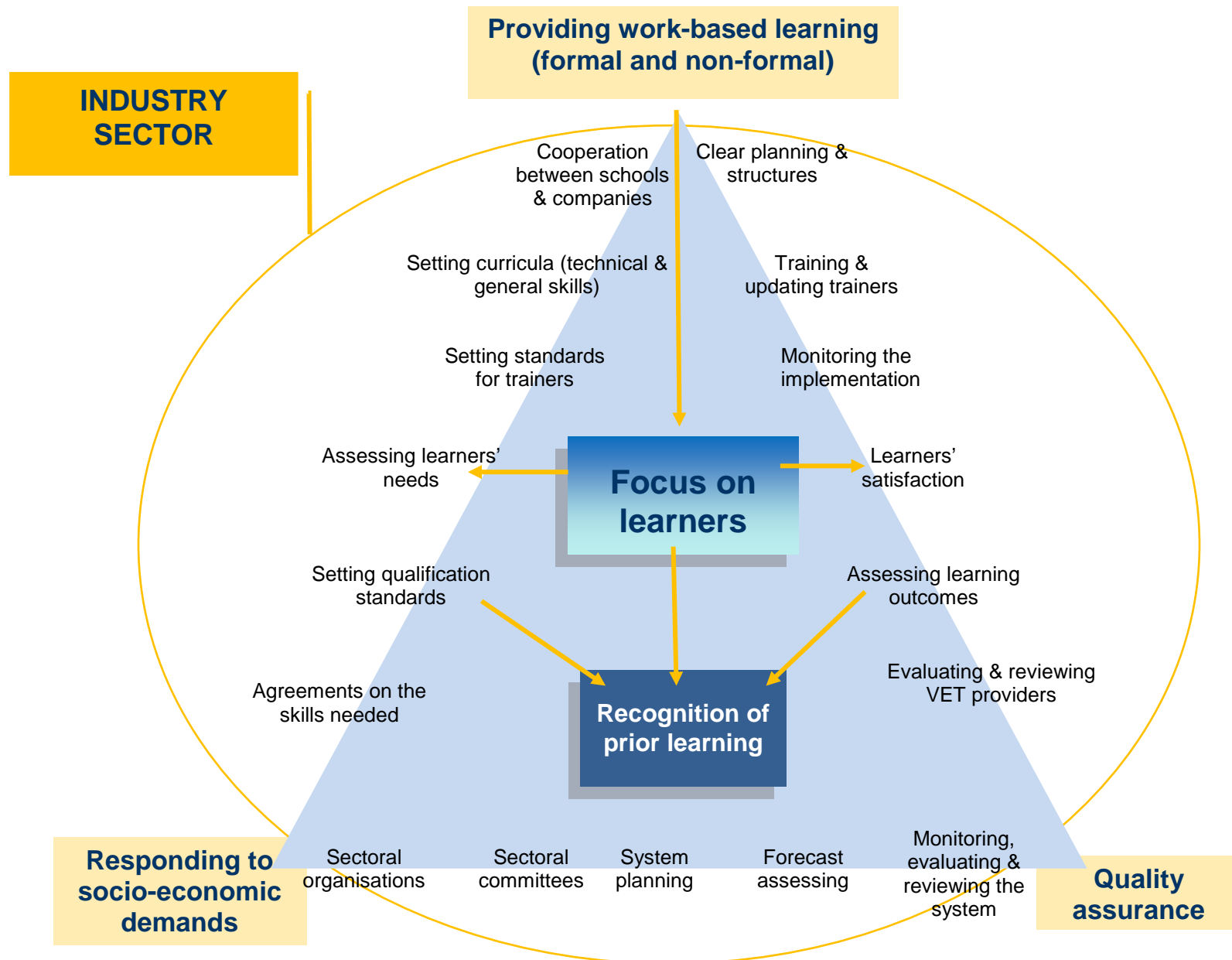
Increasing the role of learner in ensuring the quality of VET provision will require mechanisms to allow learners to influence the various QA processes in place. A learner perspective could also contribute to reducing the drop-out level, by organising more targeted teaching. Local skills competitions may motivate learners and promote excellence, increase attractiveness and prevent dropping out.

### ● **Strengthening and linking the European tools**

Finally, the discussions taking place at the Symposium demonstrated the importance of the European tools (EQAVET, EQF, ECVET, Europass), in supporting mutual trust and recognition of different VET systems. This is so because the EU tools introduce a common language which can make EU qualifications and the recognition of formal or informal learning transparent. This helps to improve mobility, and to reduce the mismatch in the labour market.



**Figure 1: OVERVIEW - THE SECTORAL APPROACH TO QUALITY ASSURANCE IN A LIFELONG LEARNING PERSPECTIVE**



The figure above shows how the sectoral approach (the framework represented by the overall circle) can contribute to the development of VET in a LLL perspective by:

- Addressing the socio-economic needs of EU countries
- Providing work-based learning
- Assuring the quality of the training provided (at system and provider levels).

The figure also presents the activities that need to be established in order to meet these three objectives:

- The left-hand side of the triangle represents the actions that enable us to meet the demand of the socio-economic environment by developing interactions with sectors. This forms a link between the skills and

qualifications required. Additionally, learners' needs should define standards of trainers and the curricula. Finally, once the framework of training has been established, the agreements that follow between companies and training centres will stimulate the provision of WBL.

- The bottom of the triangle represents the activities that respond to the socio-economic environment and to QA of VET. In this context, at system level, the four stages of the QA cycle need to be considered: we need to plan and implement the approach involving sectoral committees, and ensure a match between supply and demand in order to revise/review the training offered.
- The activities that connect the provision of WBL with QA are presented on the right-hand side. At provision level, there is a need to plan, and to establish training and training updates, monitor the progress of these actions, monitor pupils' satisfaction; followed by an assessment, evaluation and review of outcomes.
- At the centre of all actions is the learner, whose prior learning should be recognised

## POLICY CONSIDERATIONS and CONCLUSION

### CALL FOR ACTION - How should stakeholders be involved in a sectoral approach to QA in VET?

Interest in VET and the willingness to cooperate in the provision of VET is not uniform across sectors, countries, regions, VET providers and even across individual managers, teachers and learners. At meso level, partnerships are not established in a systematic manner and are often based on personal relations between the staff of the school and individual enterprises. Large differences are also detected between small and large enterprises: SMEs do not usually have the resources to follow the development of VET, and often prefer to recruit staff with experience rather than train them. On the other hand, large companies have an interest in investing in training and often prefer to provide training for their recruits or to cooperate with schools. In addition, there are substantial differences among sectors, particularly where the comparability and standardisation of standards of training and qualifications are of key importance at national and European level (e.g. transport, health, construction sectors etc.). These differences affect the availability of training placements.

Under these conditions, the main challenge is to motivate industry sectors and VET providers to cooperate. Training is important for enterprises, and can be the starting point of a cooperative relationship. Some sectors have already shown that cooperation enhances the ability to innovate, which, in turn, improves company competitiveness. So, there is a need to show the clear advantages of cooperation.

Industry sectors can be motivated in a variety of ways:

1. There is a need to examine the current situation of QA in VET within industry sectors, which could provide an overview of the ways in which quality in VET is defined and perceived in different sectors. This knowledge should provide key information about the actions in relation to QA taken by particular sectors.
2. A more in-depth examination should be piloted in selected sectors, initially. Those sectors that have shown best practice in relation to establishing cooperation with VET providers should be selected for the piloting phase.
3. As a result, case studies on sectoral cooperation could be produced to support the exchange of practice and knowledge.
4. The dissemination of these practices is important at national and EU level, and should target:
  - Policymakers, in order to promote a sectoral approach to developing VET systems in Member countries.
  - Practitioners in different sectors, to ensure that innovative practices can be disseminated during the

development of sector alliances and the formation of connections between relevant levels and actors.

**5.** There are number of factors of success when we think of strengthening the sectoral approach to quality assurance in VET, These are:

- It is important that sectors cooperate in the transfer of knowledge and innovation in relation to QA in VET
- It is difficult to motivate all sectors. The right strategy seems to be to target one sector at a time, so that all become involved eventually
- It is important to motivate sectors by showing clearly the benefits of this type of cooperation.