

Quality assurance in higher VET

An increasing number of people today acquire qualifications in the field of higher education. Despite this educational expansion, many EU Member States sometimes have very high unemployment rates, also among young people with an academic qualification. At the same time, many companies in the EU are complaining about skilled labour shortage and about job applicants frequently not having suitable qualifications.

To tackle these challenges effectively, education and training programmes need to be geared more strongly towards the specific qualification demands of companies. The educational reform steps taken in many Member States mainly focus on initial vocational education and training (IVET), however. In view of the far-reaching changes in the world of work due to globalisation and digitisation as well as increasing requirements made on employees, upskilling programmes should also be considered in the reform plans. To date the discourse in connection with higher qualification has been restricted to academic tertiary education. But hardly any discussions are held about vocational tertiary education – or higher vocational education and training. Here it would be necessary to establish higher VET as an equivalent supplement to academic tertiary education or enhance visibility of this sector, thus also providing qualifications of this sector with a higher degree of perception and appreciation. This is because a knowledge- and innovation-driven national economy needs both: graduates of study programmes with a focus on general education and an academic orientation as well as skilled workers who are highly qualified in their profession and guarantee the transfer of research findings to marketable products and services.

One fundamental reason why higher VET has to date played a subordinate role in the educational policy discourse can be found in its heterogeneity. Academic tertiary education, which is perceived as being much more homogeneous, has a uniform qualification structure (bachelor, master, PhD) and common quality standards (i.e. Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, ESG). In addition, academic qualifications are acquired at universities and other higher education institutions. All these “common elements” cannot be found in higher VET. Therefore no common understanding of higher VET has developed in many EU Member States, but also at the European level overall.

With the aim of encouraging such a common understanding and achieving more clarity on what distinguishes this sector and which joint features there are, a project consortium comprising six institutions has drawn up “European Guidelines on Quality Assurance of Higher VET” on the initiative of UEAPME, the European Association of Craft, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises, as part of an Erasmus+ project. The Guidelines describe the key quality features which characterise and distinguish higher VET and take account of the logic of higher VET as it is understood in this project and by UEAPME. Here three aspects are essential:

- Ensuring proximity to the labour market: higher VET is demand-driven. One characteristic of the quality of higher VET is the involvement of representatives from professional

practice in the entire “lifecycle” of a qualification – from the needs analysis onto the implementation of measures aiming to improve the qualifications on offer.

- Governance structure with close ties to the economy: the close connection between companies and higher VET is also reflected in the governance structure. This is characterised by the institutional cooperation of organisations with close ties to the economy, such as chambers, professional associations and – depending on the context – social partners as well as responsible state authorities and ministries. This ensures that higher VET is geared towards the specific requirements of the companies and the labour market, both conceptually and in practical implementation (“qualifications from the economy, for the economy”).
- Safeguarding transparency: transparency creates understanding, understanding strengthens trust, trust leads to appreciation and recognition. To safeguard transparency it is important to structure all the processes and procedures throughout the “lifecycle” of a qualification and communicate information clearly.

These aspects are part of a total of twelve quality features that are defined in the Guidelines. These quality features are structured along the “lifecycle” of a qualification, i.e. from the needs analysis, development and implementation onto evaluation and the derived steps for improvement.

The Guidelines aim to create a common basis and enhance the understanding of higher VET. Similar to the ESG, the quality features are meant to be understood as European reference points which stakeholders in higher VET can use to check their own quality assurance systems, mechanisms and instruments and improve them if necessary.

More information:

Erasmus+ project “QA HiVETnet”: <http://www.qa-hivet.net/>
European Guidelines on Quality Assurance of Higher VET: [Download](#)