

Peer Learning Activity on “Balancing Self-Evaluation with External Evaluation in VET Systems Across the Europe”

21 -22 January 2019

Background paper

Context

In the overall stage set by the strategic framework "Education and Training 2020" (ET 2020) [The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council \(June 2009\)](#) on the Establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) invite Member States to develop their VET systems, to increase trust, transparency and mobility, at national and EU levels, by using a quality assurance improvement cycle based on planning, implementation, evaluation and review.

EQAVET can be applied both at VET-system and VET-provider levels, and is supported by quality criteria, indicative descriptors and indicators. The systematic approach to quality assurance provided by the EQAVET framework underlines the need to develop appropriate evaluation mechanisms (internal and external, at system and provider levels), to ensure continuous quality improvement and to enhance accountability.

The EU documents on VET development reinforce the importance of **closing the quality cycle, by using evaluation and data from evaluation for accountability and improvement purposes**. For instance, the [Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training \(ET 2020\) "New priorities for European cooperation in education and training"](#) (from 2015) encourage Member States, in order to ensure sustainable investment, quality and efficiency of education and training system, to use evidence-based policy-making, including the evaluation and assessment of education and training systems.

The same, the [new Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning \(EQF\)](#), from 2017, mentions, in Annex IV (the Quality assurance principles for qualifications), that "consistent evaluation methods, associating self-assessment and external review" are essential for quality assured qualifications in line with EQF.

Taking into consideration all these aspects, the [EQAVET Work Programme 2018-2019](#) ("Collaboration – the key to improvement and success") highlights the importance of enhancing cooperation among VET system and of exchanging best practice – one of the main instruments being the Peer-Learning Activities (PLAs). This PLA, organized by the Institute for Vocational Education and Training (CPI) from Slovenia, is a part of a project co-financed from the Erasmus + Programme¹.

During the PLA, prompted by presentations of experiences from six **Member States** (Austria, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Netherlands and Slovenia), the participants are encouraged to **reflect** on their own policies and practices on quality assurance, to **discuss** and to **share** knowledge and experience with other participants.

¹ Action Grant 2017 – Support to the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training National Reference Points (EQAVET NRP).

Introduction to the topic

The EQAVET framework provides a systematic approach to quality assurance and, for evaluating the outcomes and processes of VET provision, “relevant, regular and coherent data collection must take place, in order to measure success and identify areas for improvement, and appropriate data collection methodologies should be devised”. Moreover, “in providing for concrete means to support an evaluation and quality-improvement culture at all levels, this recommendation contributes to the use of evidence-based policy and practice, as a basis for more efficient and equitable policies”.

For this purpose, the programmes and actions undertaken under the **EQAVET Work Programme 2018-2019** will focus on the “Evaluation” and “Review” stages of the Quality Cycle.

The EQAVET quality assurance and improvement cycle, mainly the Quality Criteria and Indicative Descriptors (Annex I of the EQAVET Recommendation) offers instrument for measuring the effectiveness of VET provision and, mainly, its relevance for the needs of the labour market and of the society. In this respect, the descriptors devised under the Evaluation and Review phases of the Quality Cycle, propose a coherent framework for designing evaluation systems, at system level and at VET provider levels, both for external and internal evaluation (see, below, a selection of indicative descriptors):

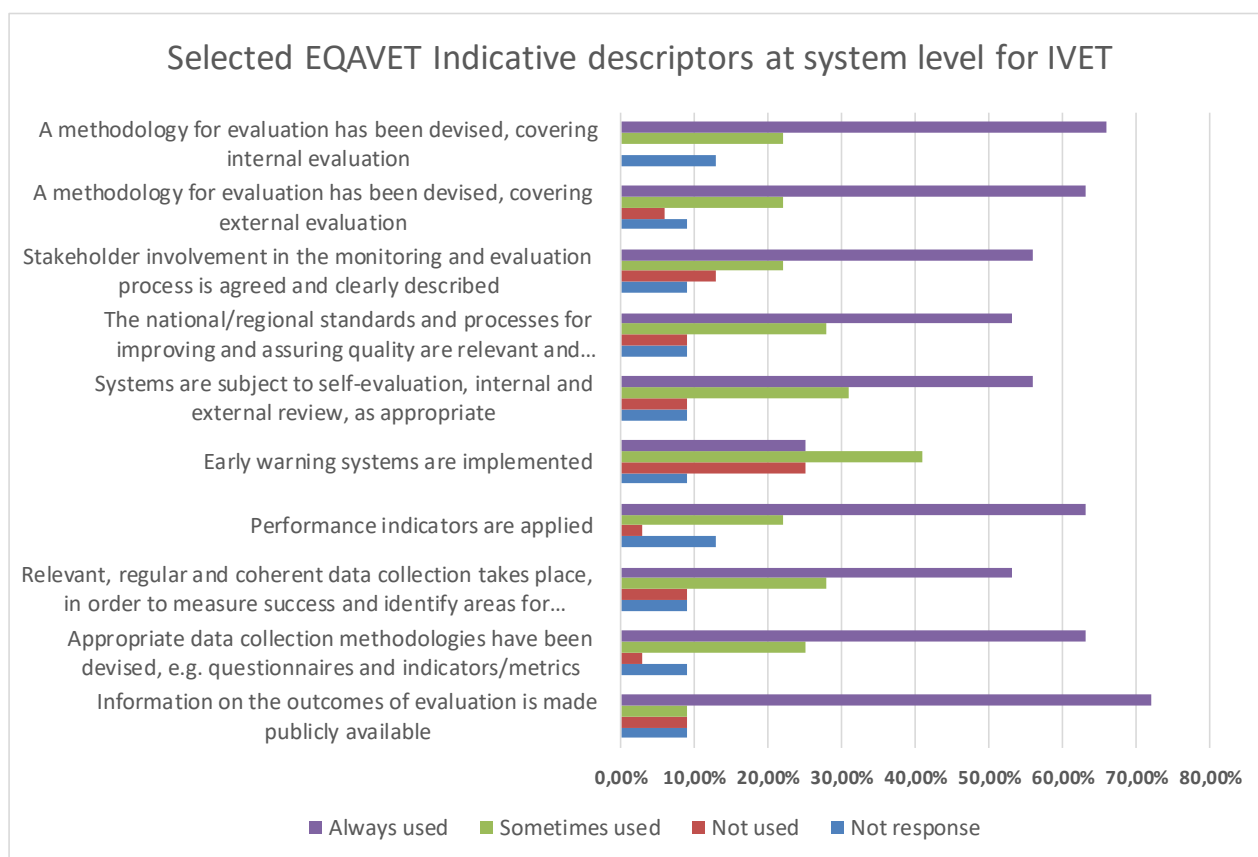
Quality Cycle Stage (Criteria)	System level	Provider level
Evaluation of outcomes and processes is regularly carried out and supported by measurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A methodology for evaluation has been devised, covering internal and external evaluation. Stakeholder involvement in the monitoring and evaluation process is agreed and clearly described. The national/regional standards and processes for improving and assuring quality are relevant and proportionate to the needs of the sector. Systems are subject to self-evaluation, internal and external review, as appropriate. Early warning systems are implemented. Performance indicators are applied Relevant, regular and coherent data collection takes place, in order to measure success and identify areas for improvement. Appropriate data collection methodologies have been devised, e.g. questionnaires and indicators/metrics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-assessment/self-evaluation is periodically carried out under national and regional regulations/frameworks or at the initiative of VET providers. Evaluation and review cover processes and results/outcomes of education including the assessment of learner satisfaction as well as staff performance and satisfaction. Evaluation and review include adequate and effective mechanisms to involve internal and external stakeholders. Early warning systems are implemented.
Review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information on the outcomes of evaluation is made publicly available. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Results/outcomes of the evaluation process are discussed with relevant stakeholders and appropriate action plans are put in place.

These descriptors are useful for devising evaluation systems connecting the VET provision, in a convergent way, at EU level, with the needs of the labour market and of society. For this purpose:

- The evaluation system should be designed in a coherent way, at system and provider level, by combining self-evaluation with external evaluation, and aiming both continuous improvement and accountability.
- All main stakeholders (employers, teachers, students, parents, local and national authorities) must be involved in the evaluation process.
- The evaluation process must use agreed information and data collection systems to measure progress in a systematic and consistent way. In this regard, performance indicators and benchmarks (including for early warning purpose) should be designed (e.g. using the Indicators provided in the Annex II of the EQAVET Recommendation).
- The results of the evaluation should be publicly available and discussed with the stakeholders mentioned above, in order to devise improvement policies, strategies and plans, at system and at provider levels.

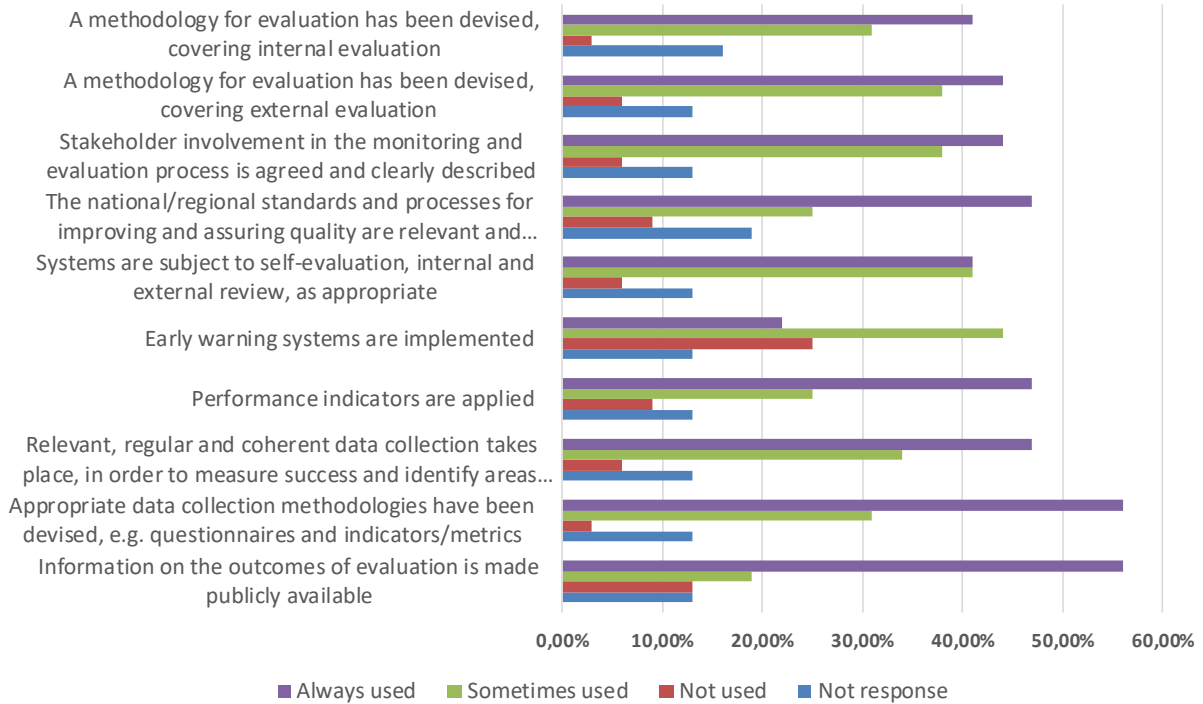
The [EQAVET Secretariat Survey 2016 - 2017](#) indicates that the “Evaluation” and “Review” stages of the Quality Cycle are less developed, than the “Planning” and “implementation” ones. We present, in the graphs below, the situation of the indicative descriptors mentioned above, for initial VET (IVET) and continuous VET (CVET) at system level and at provider level:

A. VET System level:



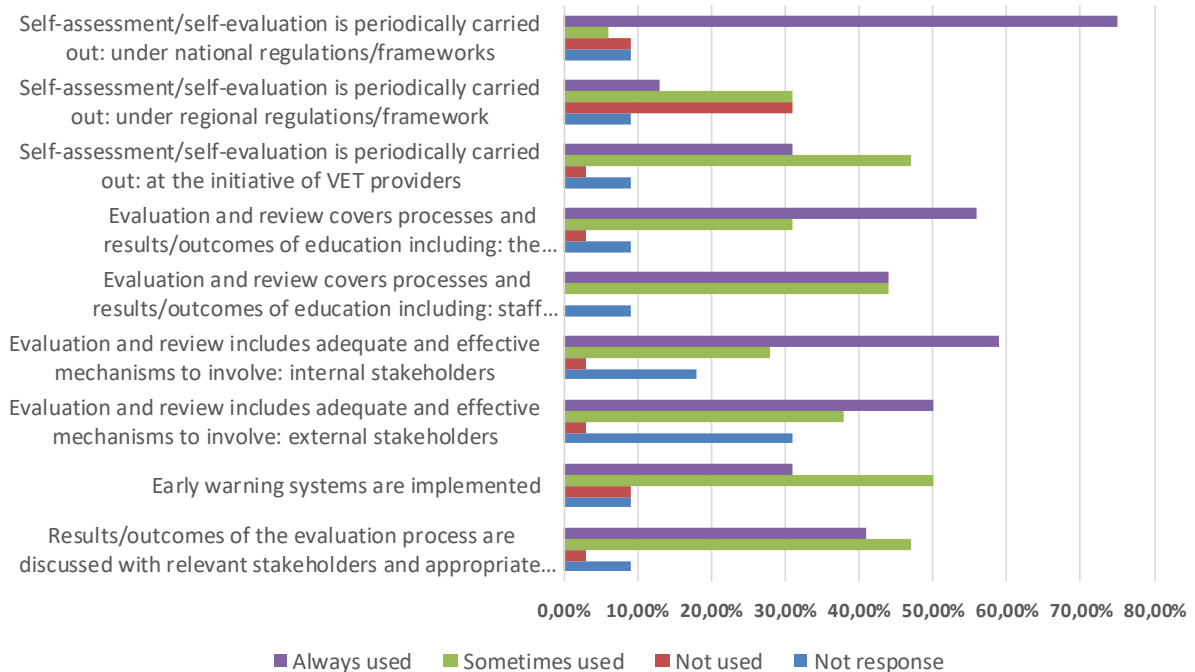


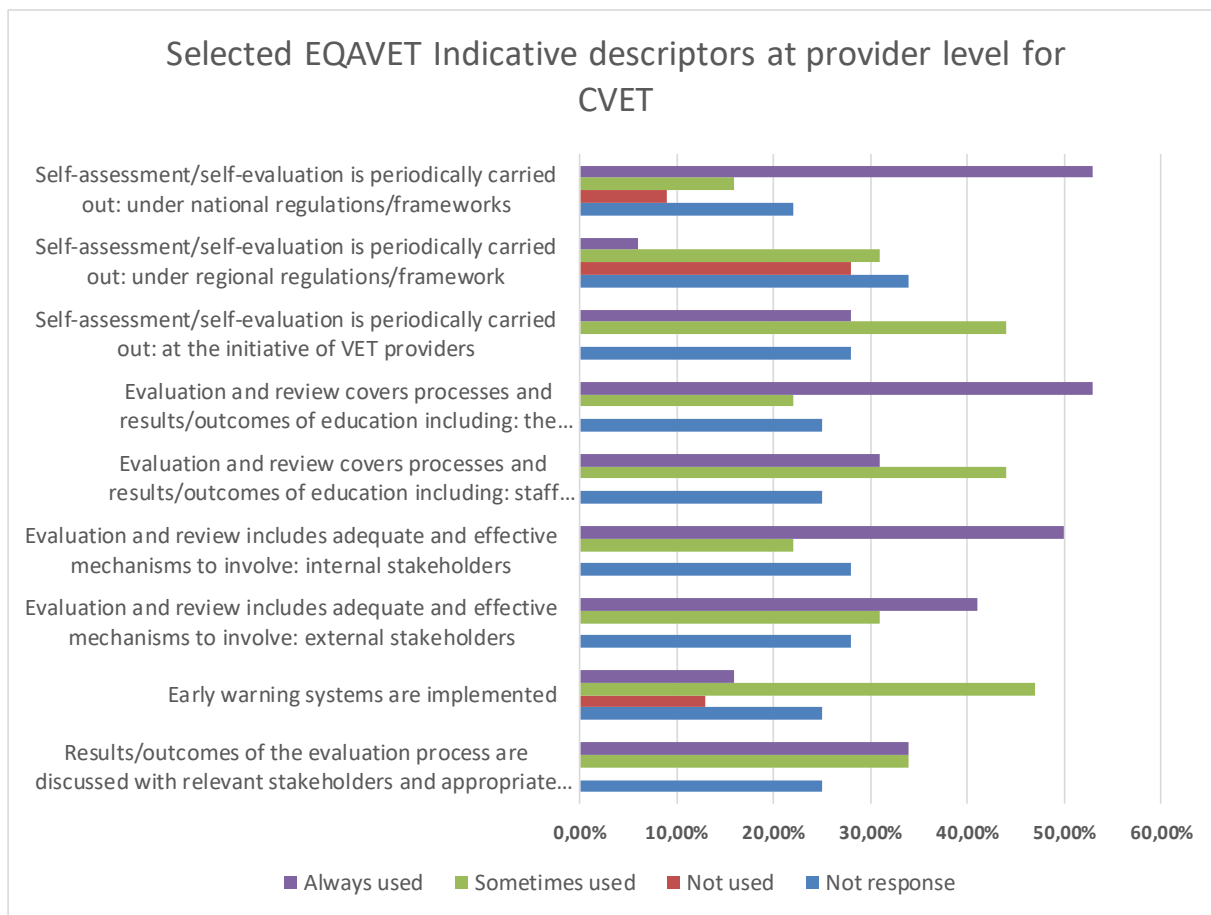
Selected EQAVET Indicative descriptors at system level for CVET



B. VET Provider level:

Selected EQAVET Indicative descriptors at VET provider level for IVET





Analysing the data provided by the EQAVET Survey, we may find that:

- At **system** level, for **IVET**, **almost all** descriptors are **always used** in more than 50% of the participating systems. The exception is the establishment of early warning systems.
- At **system** level, for **CVET**, **only two** descriptors are **always used** in more than 50% of the participating systems (“Appropriate data collection methodologies have been devised, e.g. questionnaires and indicators/metrics” – Evaluation Phase – and “Information on the outcomes of evaluation is made publicly available” – Review Phase).
- At provider level, for **IVET**, **only three** descriptors are **always used** in more than 50% of the participating systems (“Self-assessment/self-evaluation is periodically carried out: under national regulations/frameworks”; “Evaluation and review includes adequate and effective mechanisms to involve: internal stakeholders”; “Evaluation and review covers processes and results/outcomes of education including: the assessment of learner satisfaction”).
- At provider level, for **CVET**, **only two** descriptors are **always used** in more than 50% of the participating systems (“Self-assessment/self-evaluation is periodically carried out: under national regulations/frameworks”; “Evaluation and review covers processes and results/outcomes of education including: the assessment of learner satisfaction”).

Discussions at the PLA

The increased diversity of societies and mobility of workforce and trainees, the digital transformation of the economy and the speed of technological, economical and societal change, put pressure on the way the decision makers shape policies, strategies and plans for education and training.

In this context, one of the main challenges is to enhance the evaluation “added value”, in order to inform, better and timely, the reform processes: the evaluation must be based on data collection and other evidence gathering, faster and leading to quality improvement and increased accountability at system and provider levels.

There is an obvious need for greater coherence and synergy in quality assurance, by correlating internal with external mechanisms of quality assurance (tools, processes and actors) – in order to ensure that they best serve development, innovation and adaptation to the changing needs of learners². To achieve its full potential, the various components of assessment and evaluation should generate synergies between components, avoid duplication, prevent inconsistency of objectives and align evaluation and assessment with educational goals³.

Evaluation of education and VET provision may include different mechanisms and tools, among which **self-evaluation**⁴ and national or regional **external evaluation**. These mechanisms should be, ideally, part of a coherent, integrated approach in which the different mechanisms support and reinforce each other. They will provide data on aspects such as school climate; the well-being and professional development of all members of the learning community; effective teaching and learning; and the impact of innovations⁵.

For this regard, it is not productive to analyse **only** the mechanisms and tools for external evaluation, and we might also consider the coherence and integration among all types of evaluation components and with other policy components. For this reason, this PLA is organised into three sections:

- The first one will deal with **the external evaluation** (standards, methodologies, actors, consequences etc.).
- The second will analyse **the link between external evaluation and self-evaluation** and how VET providers use the results of self-evaluation and external evaluation.
- The third one will try to highlight **the use of the results of external evaluation** for quality improvement at system level.

Section 1. External evaluation

In this section, the participants at the PLA will be asked to reflect on the issues and common challenges in relation to the status and overall management of external evaluation, and to share their experiences and best practice in:

- The systematic and/or mandatory character of external evaluation and its consequences, if any.
- The actors (institutions, internal / external evaluators etc.) and other stakeholders involved.

² European ideas for better learning: The governance of school education systems (2018). Brussels: European Commission. Directorate-General Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Schools and multilingualism (Produced by the ET 2020 Working Group Schools - <https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/downloads/Governance/2018-wgs6-Full-Final-Output.pdf>)

³ Synergies for Better Learning. An International Perspective on Evaluation and Assessment (2013). Paris: OECD - http://www.oecd.org/education/school/Evaluation_and_Assessment_Synthesis_Report.pdf

⁴ We consider “internal evaluation” and “self-evaluation” having the same meaning.

⁵ European ideas for better learning: The governance of school education systems (2018). Brussels: European Commission. Directorate-General Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Schools and multilingualism (Produced by the ET 2020 Working Group Schools) - <https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/downloads/Governance/2018-wgs6-Full-Final-Output.pdf>.



- The methodology for external evaluation.
- The involvement of relevant stakeholders in data collection.

The questions we ask, to ignite discussion and debate, are the following:

- **Which is the status of external evaluation? Is it compulsory or optional?**
- **Who are the main actors? Are there specialized Agencies or other institutions (such as Inspectorates) for external evaluations?**
- **What evaluation methods are used (observation, inquiry – with questionnaires and interviews –, document analysis)? Are there specialized evaluators / inspectors? How do they get this status?**
- **Which are the consequences of external evaluation for the VET provider, in each case (compulsory / optional)?**

The external evaluation of schools⁶, at EU level, has some common features and approaches⁷:

- Usually, a central/top level body (“Inspectorate” or “Agency”) is responsible for carrying out external evaluation. In some of the systems, regional bodies have some evaluation responsibilities.
- For being inspector / evaluator teaching qualification and a certain number of years of professional experience in a school, as a teacher or in a management position, are required to apply for the post. In some systems, candidates with a broader range of qualifications, acquired in fields such as education, research, or psychology, and more diverse professional backgrounds, may become external evaluators.
- The criteria used in external evaluation are often highly standardised. In most cases, external evaluation focuses on a broad range of school activities, encompassing educational and management tasks, student outcomes, as well as compliance with regulations.
- The procedures for evaluation are based on a structure which consists of three basic steps: (1) analysis; (2) visit; and (3) reporting.
- Risk-based approaches and profile-raising activities are practiced in a very limited number of countries.
- Usually, the external evaluation reports are focused on weaknesses, in a limited number of systems external evaluation having, as purpose, raising the visibility of the well performing schools.

Section 2. The links between external evaluation and self-evaluation

In this section, the participants at the PLA will be asked to reflect and share experiences and best practice on the issues in relation to the relationship between self-evaluation and external evaluation in:

- The systematic and/or mandatory character of self-evaluation and its consequences, if any.
- The methodology for self-evaluation.
- The actors (departments, evaluators, auditors etc..) and sharing the outcomes of evaluation with relevant stakeholders.
- Publishing (How? How much?) the results of evaluation.
- Using data for improvement or change (at provider level).

⁶ There were no surveys or analysis undertaken specifically for the external evaluation of VET providers, especially for the continuous VET sub-sector. Because schools are, in most of the systems, providers for initial VET, we assume that the surveys and analysis done for schools can be applied to initial VET providers, as well.

⁷ Assuring Quality in Education: Policies and Approaches to School Evaluation in Europe. Eurydice Report (2015). European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union - <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/4a2443a7-7bac-11e5-9fae-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

The questions we ask, to ignite discussion and debate, are the following:

- Which is the status of self-evaluation? Is it compulsory or optional?
- Are there specialized departments / other bodies / persons in charge for self-evaluation?
- Are there common standards and methods with external evaluation?
- Which are the consequences of self-evaluation for the VET provider?
- How the VET providers use the results of self-evaluation for quality improvement?

Self-evaluation (coupled with teacher appraisal) is paramount to take direct action to those areas most in need of improvement. Moreover, self-evaluation supports the development of the quality culture, by developing a common language and shared understanding among internal and external actors able to support development⁸.

The data generated in evaluation processes can also support teachers and trainers to identify what is working well and where improvement is needed in teaching / training and learning processes, and the external evaluators may aid this process. For coherence, there may be set common frameworks and reporting structures in place to ensure alignment between self-evaluation and external evaluation⁹.

Thus, the results of the evaluation processes, alongside other relevant information regarding the labour market, should be¹⁰:

- **Visible:** the system should be easy to read and easy to act upon.
- **Continuously fed:** the system should allow time series analysis to spot processes under way.
- **Consistent:** the system should allow comparison over time and geography.

In Europe, over the last ten years expectations on self-evaluation in Europe have grown and we may find some common features¹¹:

- Self-evaluation is, usually, structured by central/top level authorities to various degrees.
- Almost all countries put support measures and tools at disposal of schools for self-evaluation.
- In most of the education systems, schools both carry out self-evaluation and are examined by external evaluators.
- Together with other sources of information, self-evaluation findings often enable external evaluators to elaborate on the profile of the school to be visited and better focus their work.
- Self-evaluation can have different characteristics and be either a process highly informed by top-down strategies or have a more bottom-up dimension. But in most of the systems education authorities influence the content of self-evaluation in many ways, for example by issuing recommendations on using a predetermined list of criteria, by providing guidelines and manuals, or through the production and dissemination of indicators enabling schools to compare with others.

⁸ European ideas for better learning: The governance of school education systems (2018). European Commission. Directorate-General Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Schools and multilingualism (Produced by the ET 2020 Working Group Schools) - <https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/downloads/Governance/2018-wgs6-Full-Final-Output.pdf>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Řihová, Hana (2016). Using Labour Market Information. Guide to Anticipating and Matching Skills and Jobs. Volume 1. European Training Foundation / European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training / International Labour Office. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union - http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/2215_en.pdf

¹¹ Assuring Quality in Education: Policies and Approaches to School Evaluation in Europe. Eurydice Report (2015). European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union - <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/4a2443a7-7bac-11e5-9fae-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

Section 3. The valorisation of the results of external evaluation

In this section, the participants at the PLA will be asked to reflect on the issues and common challenges regarding the use of the results of external evaluation for quality improvement at system level, and to share their experiences and best practice in:

- Reporting and publicizing the outcomes of external evaluation – mainly the use of external evaluation for reporting at national level.
- The effective use of external evaluation results for quality improvement in different areas (standards and curriculum, teacher and management training) aiming a better match with the needs of the labour market.

The questions we ask, to ignite discussion and debate, are the following:

- Are there produced National Reports on quality of VET provision? How often are they released?
- Are there these National Reports based on the results of external evaluation and/or self-evaluation?
- How are they used? For new / improved regulations? For curriculum improvement? For better correlate VET with the labour market? For other purposes?

School evaluation is increasingly considered as a lever of change that could assist with decision making, resource allocation and school improvement. On the other hand, there is a lack of research into the impact of external school evaluation on improvement at school / provider.¹²

Three common factors are identified as being **levers for school improvement**¹³:

- External evaluation sets expectations on quality level (i.e. with evaluation criteria and standards indicating a “good school”).
- The results of external evaluation are shared with stakeholders (board / management, parents and students). The stakeholders, sensitive to the results, put pressure for improvement.
- External evaluation promotes and stimulates improvement of self-evaluation processes.

The use of evaluation findings reveals different conceptions regarding accountability¹⁴. In this regard, there are two ways of thinking:

- **Government-based accountability** is based on the assumption that the state, or the relevant public authority, is responsible for the quality of education and must therefore ensure that each school / provider delivers to established standards. In government-based accountability systems is largely based on top-down pre-defined rules applied to all, and information on school quality needs to be primarily accessible to those that take decisions over the system.
- **Market-based accountability** aim to provide learners and other stakeholders (e.g. parents) with greater choice regarding the school / provider. This concept has two pillars - access to information, and learners' / parents' freedom of choice.

Usually, the external evaluation systems are considering, in different amounts, both types of accountability, and there are few systems considering only one perspective.

¹² Synergies for Better Learning. An International Perspective on Evaluation and Assessment (2013). Paris: OECD - http://www.oecd.org/education/school/Evaluation_and_Assessment_Synthesis_Report.pdf

¹³ Ibid.

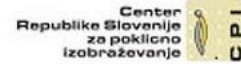
¹⁴ Assuring Quality in Education: Policies and Approaches to School Evaluation in Europe. Eurydice Report (2015). European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union - <https://publications.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/4a2443a7-7bac-11e5-9fae-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>



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So, in order to build a coherent and useful evaluation system, in order to improve education and VET provision and to increase accountability, the mechanisms devised on both micro and macro levels must ensure complementarity of information, with a sufficient detail for each level¹⁵.

On the other hand, collecting more and detailed information, especially if the reports and surveys are made public, issues such as data protection and the impact on stakeholders require consideration¹⁶. Moreover, the external evaluation may have unintended impact – such as: extensive preparation for external evaluation and paying less attention to the teaching and learning process; the bureaucratic burden for providers (preparations for external evaluation may be being stressful and time consuming); potential limitations on diversity and innovation, via a “teaching to inspection” phenomenon.

AS A WAY OF CONCLUDING ...

“All of the top-performing systems also recognize that they cannot improve what they do not measure”¹⁷.

¹⁵ European ideas for better learning: The governance of school education systems (2018). European Commission. Directorate-General Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Schools and multilingualism (Produced by the ET 2020 Working Group Schools) - <https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/downloads/Governance/2018-wgs6-Full-Final-Output.pdf>

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ How the world’s best-performing school systems come out on top (2007). McKinsey and Co. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/social-sector/our-insights/how-the-worlds-best-performing-school-systems-come-out-on-top>