POLICY BRIEF

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

Participating countries: AT, CZ, EE, FI, HR, IE, MT, NL, RO, SE, SI, SK, TR

SUMMARY

This policy brief is based on the peer learning activity (PLA) organised by the Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education and Training (CPI, the EQAVET National Reference Point for Slovenia), in Ljubljana, 21 -22 January 2019. The PLA is an activity realized within a project co-financed from the Erasmus + Programme (Action Grant 2017 – Support to the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training National Reference Points - EQAVET NRP). The PLA brought together representatives of national or regional responsibility for VET policy from 13 countries, some of them representing Member State's NRPs). The NRPs were established as part of the EQAVET Recommendation and have a central role in supporting the vocational education and training quality assurance arrangements in their system.

The PLA methodology used allows participants to share knowledge and experiences, by using examples of practice and/or policy implementation. This provides a starting point of reflection on how to address some of the shared challenges faced by education and training systems across the EU. This PLA focused on the issues and common challenges in relation to:

- *the status and overall management of external evaluation and self-evaluation, as quality assurance tools;*
- *the links between self-evaluation and external evaluation;*
- *the use of the results of self-evaluation and external evaluation, to improve VET policies (at system level) and VET provision (at provider level).*

This policy brief is not a verbatim report, rather an analysis of the issues that were felt to be important to EQAVET. The following comments are based on participant reflections, which were informed by presentations from Ireland, Estonia, Austria, Slovenia, Finland and The Netherlands and by a site visit to a VET provider from Ljubljana (Intercompany Training Center KULT 316)

More information on this PLA is available on the [Slovenian EQAVET NRP website](#).

POLICY CONTEXT

The European Recommendation on the establishment of a Quality Assurance for VET Framework (EQAVET Framework) builds on earlier work at European level, and seeks to enhance European cooperation in vocational education and training.

The **EQAVET Recommendation** invites Member States to promote and monitor continuous improvement in their VET systems, through the use of a quality assurance (QA) cycle based on planning, implementation, evaluation and review. EQAVET is a framework that **allows individual Member States to develop quality assurance systems which meet their specific requirements**. It provides a systematic approach to quality assurance and covers all aspects of VET in both the initial and continuing education sectors.

Peer Learning Activity OBJECTIVES

This EQAVET Peer Learning Activity (PLA) focuses on three aspects: the external evaluation, the links with self-evaluation and the use of the results of self-evaluation and external evaluation for quality improvement at VET system and VET provider levels. Accordingly, the PLA was organised in three sections, corresponding to the three aspects mentioned above.

The focus of the **first Section** was **the external evaluation** (standards, methodologies, actors, consequences…), and the discussions were prompted by the experiences from two Member States (Ireland and Estonia), presenting the mechanisms and tools developed at system and provider levels for this purpose. The presentations were followed by group and plenary discussions, trying to find answers at several questions:

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

The **second Section** of the PLA approached the **links between external evaluation and self-evaluation**. As starting points, there were four presentations, from Austria, Slovenia, Finland and The Netherlands, and the guiding questions for the discussions following the presentations were:

- 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?

The **third, final Section** was dedicated to **the valorisation of the results of external evaluation.** After a general presentation, describing the international experiences (from Eurydice Network and OECD), the discussions among participants were prompted by several questions:

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

CASE STUDIES

The case studies (CS) presented at the PLA highlighted different approaches to external evaluation and self-evaluation, as a part of quality assurance mechanisms. All presentations are available **here**.

Section 1. External evaluation (standards, methodologies, actors, consequences)

CS 1 Ireland: External Evaluation in VET: Standards, Methodologies, Actors & Consequences

The presentation presented, after describing the VET systems, the current external evaluation practices:

- The main actors involved and the Role of QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland).
- The content of the Guidelines developed by QQI for all VET providers.
- Differentiation of guidelines for different stakeholders (Core Guidelines / Sector Specific Guidelines; for Apprenticeship Programmes; for Blended learning Programmes.
- The life cycle of the QA system approval.
- The role of Periodic Review of the QA systems at provider level.
- Some key questions and challenges for the Review Model in Irish Public VET sector.

CS 2 Estonia: External Quality Assessment of VET

The Estonian presentation described the existing regulations and practices related to external evaluation:

- The objectives of external quality assessment, as a formative assessment.
- The process of quality assessment and the role of different actors (including the national institution in charge, EKKA).
- The role of external assessors and the requirements for becoming external assessor.
- The consequences of the external assessment.
- The main areas for assessment (study programme and its development; learning and teaching; teachers) and the criteria developed for each of the three areas.
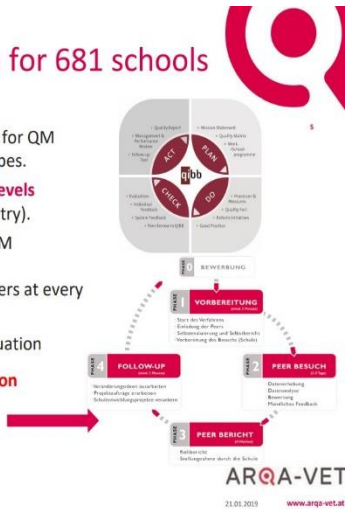- The main challenges for the external assessment system.

Section 2: Links between external evaluation and self-evaluation

CS 3 Austria: (Self-) Evaluation in QIBB

The Austrian presentation described the self-evaluation processes, as a part of the national system of quality improvement for VET (QIBB):

• The role of the Austrian NRP (ARQA-VET) in supporting school quality management, within the overall Austrian school system.

• A description of QIBB (a QM system embraced by 681 schools).

• Self-evaluation as integral part of QIBB.

• The evaluation plans, as main tools for self-evaluation.

• The two roles of self-evaluation in providing feedback: system feedback (supporting organisational development) and individual feedback (supporting individual development of persons, for example teachers, principals, school inspectors).

• The lessons learned and the challenges issued from the latest developments and reforms at system level.

CS 4 Slovenia: Self-evaluation and external evaluation as part of QA and QD of VET in Slovenia

The presentation from the host country, Slovenia, described the national framework for QA in education, within the Slovenian Education System:

• The link between school autonomy and responsibility, and the state responsibility, and thus, the need for internal and external evaluation.

• The methods for QA of VET providers.

• The questions answered by the QA system for education.

• The levels of QA system – school level and system level.

• The five areas of achievement described by standards and measured by indicators.

• The correlation of the Slovenian standards and indicators with the EQAVET framework.

CS 5 Finland: The links/relationship between external evaluation and self-evaluation in VET

The Finish presentation focused on the use of QA as a tool for development at VET provider level:

• Without a school inspectorate in Finland, the VET provider is the main responsible for QA and evaluation. Thus, self-evaluation is the main tool for quality evaluation.

• The institution in charge for national evaluation (Finnish Education Evaluation Centre - FINEEC) evaluates, usually, the QA systems of providers, including how providers make their own self-assessment.

• The results of self-evaluation are used for quality improvement at system level.

• The national institutions (FINEC and the Finnish Board of Education – EDUFI – , the Finnish NRP) offer support for QA development at provider level.

CS 6 The Netherlands: Dutch education system
Quality assurance

This presentation described how a very decentralised system uses self-evaluation as a QA tool:

- The standards established by the Dutch Ministry of Education are used in self-evaluation of VET providers and in external evaluation (inspection).
- The VET providers are responsible in establishing a QA system.
- The School Inspectorate is the external supervisor of quality. There is an inspection framework and inspection processes established at national level.
- There is a risk based inspection: when quality assurance is at risk, supplementary ad-hoc inspection visits and special monitoring measures may be undertaken.
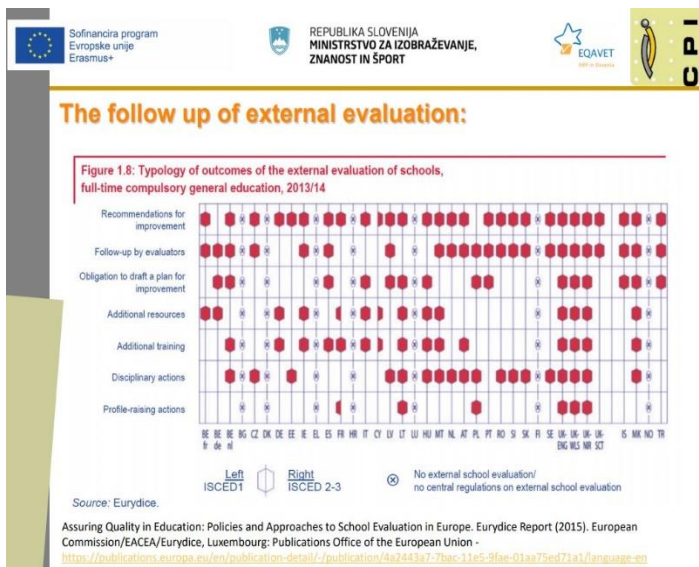

The Inspection Framework

Inspectie van het Onderwijs
Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap

Indicators:
1. Educational processes
2. Examination
3. Rate of return
4. Quality assurance
5. Compliance with legal requirements
6. Quality of teaching staff
7. Financial stability

- All EQAVET indicators are used
- The renewed Inspection Framework (2017) aims to assess the quality of VET providers and programs and supports the institutions to comply with the minimum quality standards
- CVET: indicators 5, 6, 7 not applicable

Section 3. The valorisation of the results of external evaluation

Sofinancira program Evropske unije Erasmus+

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The follow up of external evaluation:

Figure 1.8: Typology of outcomes of the external evaluation of schools, full-time compulsory general education, 2013/14

Source: Eurydice.

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

Using the results of external evaluation – international experiences

The discussion in this section were prompted by a presentation prepared by the PLA facilitator. The few international studies regarding the use of the results of external evaluation for QA improvement at system level led to some conclusions:

- There are two competing purposes of external evaluation – accountability and improvement and there is a need to balance the two purposes and not to neglect improvement.
- Generally, there are benefits of external evaluation for the VET providers.
- There might be, as well, unintended negative impact of external evaluation (e.g. stress, increased bureaucracy, diminished innovation).
- External evaluation has impact at system level (by using the results for general reporting purposes and policy making) and at provider level (recommendation for improvement, additional resources and, in some systems, disciplinary actions).

The input for discussions and the exchange of ideas was complemented by a site visit to Intercompany Training Center KULT 316, a VET provider from **Ljubljana**.

The main **objectives** of this site visit were:
- **Understanding** QA and self-assessment processes developed at provider level.
- **Observing** the cultural aspects: to what extent QA and self-assessment are embedded in the organisational culture.
- **Discussing** (among participants and with the VET provider representatives) solutions to enhance quality at provider level.

The case studies and the study visit highlighted that **all systems and providers are concerned with the three issues raised during this PLA (the importance of external evaluation, the link between self-evaluation and external evaluation, and the use of both forms of evaluation for quality improvement at system and provider levels).** On the other hand, **ways of dealing with these issues are very diverse.**

Despite this diversity, participants at the PLA agreed that it was important to share practices and learn from the all experiences and challenges encountered by each VET system (the issues identified by the participants, during discussion, are grouped around the questions mentioned above).

Section 1. The external evaluation (standards, methodologies, actors, consequences…)
- Which is the status of external evaluation in your country? Is it compulsory or optional?
  - External evaluation is compulsory in most of the participating systems – only a minority having external evaluation as optional.
  - In all circumstances, external evaluation is regulated and data based and, in most of the cases, is standard based.
  - In some systems, external evaluation is used for accreditation purposes.
  - In some systems, external evaluation is risk-based: the VET providers at risk or with weak results are evaluated more often.
  - There are different ways of implementing external evaluation – e.g. monitoring visits, inspection, peer reviews etc.
  - There are different levels of provider involvement in external evaluation, reporting and follow up.
- Who are the main actors? Are there specialized Agencies or other institutions (such as Inspectorates) for external evaluations?
  - Usually, the Ministry in charge or a central agency or an inspectorate has the role of external evaluator.
- What evaluation methods are used (observation, inquiry – with questionnaires and interviews, document analysis)?
  - In most of the cases there are site visits.
  - Usually, the self-evaluation reports are the starting points for external evaluation.
  - Data is collected in different ways – using quantitative methods (data from documents, reports and statistics) and qualitative methods (observation of the learning process, questionnaires and/or interviews with stakeholders etc.).
  - Even if the purpose of external evaluation may differ, the overall process is very similar in all systems, with three main stages: preparation, site-visit, reporting.
- Are there specialized evaluators/inspectors? How do they get this status?
  - The evaluation panel is made, mostly, from experts / evaluators and representatives of different stakeholders (e.g. the VET provider, employers, learners etc.).
  - In some systems, the external evaluators / inspectors are the employees of the Ministry / Agency / Inspectorate, in other cases they are independent experts, addressed, when needed, by the institution responsible for external evaluation.
  - Usually, the external evaluators are selected (criterion based) and trained to undertake external evaluation.

Section 2. The links between external evaluation and self-evaluation
- Which is the status of self-evaluation? Is it compulsory or optional?
  - Self-evaluation is compulsory in most of the participating systems – only a minority having self-evaluation as optional.
  - Usually, there are common elements (standards, templates, procedures, indicators etc.) used for both forms of evaluation (external and self-evaluation).
  - Yearly self-evaluation is the general rule, as a part of QA arrangements.
- Are there specialized departments/other bodies/persons in charge for self-evaluation?
  - In some systems, the VET providers have to establish their own permanent or ad-hoc departments / teams in charge with self-evaluation.
  - In some systems the VET providers may choose what kind of personnel they use: external consultants, peers, members of the quality networks they are in, own school personnel etc. Usually, the director / the principal is responsible for self-evaluation.
  - In most of the systems, the national body in charge for external evaluation or, in general, for education and VET, is, also, responsible for issuing guidelines and providing support (usually, training for evaluators and for the persons / teams in charge with self-evaluation).
  - In most of the systems, the stakeholders' representatives are involved in self-evaluation (usually: students, teachers, parents, employers, trade-unions).
- Are there common standards and methods with external evaluation?
  - In some systems, there are regulations and/or standards set at system level for self-evaluation.

- o In other systems, even if self-evaluation is compulsory or standard based, the VET providers establish their own priorities, methods and procedures for self-evaluation.
  - o Usually, the same methods used for external evaluation are used for self-evaluation, as-well.
- Which are the consequences of self-evaluation for the VET provider?
  - o Usually, self-evaluation reports are made public (as a whole or selections).
  - o Self-evaluation reports may improve the image of the school / VET provider, in the community.
  - o In some systems there is no follow up when the results of self-evaluation are not good or even satisfactory.
  - o In other systems, the self-evaluation reports are collected by the competent authority, who may take some measures, for instance to undertake external evaluation or inspection, to monitor, more closely, the VET provider or to support improvement programmes (sometimes, with extra resources).
- How the VET providers use the results of self-evaluation for quality improvement?
  - o The VET providers are supposed to approach, by quality improvement programmes, the aspects considered as unsatisfactory (against the standards and / or the own specific goals of the VET provider).
  - o Usually, self-evaluation helps stakeholders to better understand internal processes, strengths and development needs.
  - o The results of self-evaluation are widely used, by the VET providers, for benchmarking: to improve, in time, their own performance, by comparing it with its own previous performance and with other providers.
  - o Self-evaluation supports the development of the culture of quality at provider level (for instance, to think in terms of plan-do-check-act).

Section 3. The valorisation of the results of external evaluation (results of the Brainstorming activity and of the group-work)
- Are there National Reports on quality of VET provision produced? How often are they released?
  - o At system level, there are, annual (periodical) reports regarding the results at national examinations and/or the state of the overall system and/or of some subsystems (e.g. IVET, public providers etc.), based on a wide range of data sources.
  - o Other periodical reports have as purpose to show the state of the arts in implementing the national strategies.
  - o Some reports are public, some are not (only for internal use of policy makers).
- Are National Reports based on the results of external evaluation and/or self-evaluation?
  - o There are few systems using, systematically, the results of external and/or self-evaluation for general reporting at system level. On the other hand, these reports are widely used by schools / VET providers for benchmarking.
  - o In some systems, there are specific reports on the state of the quality of education (for the whole education system or for some subsystems), based on self-evaluation and/or on external evaluation.
- How are they used? For new/improved regulations? For curriculum improvement? To better correlate VET with the labour market? For other purposes?
  - o For highlighting good practices, promoting effectiveness and improvement. Indirectly, influencing policy makers.
  - o For confirming quality and fostering stakeholders' confidence in VET and VET providers.
  - o For improving curriculum, the correlation with the labour market and the cooperation school/provider-employers.
  - o It is very difficult to assess the impact of the national reports.
- Are there other ways the results of external evaluation are / should be used?
  - o Identifying trends and needs for further VET development (e.g. infrastructure planning).
  - o Benchmarking development of VET providers.
  - o Fostering public awareness regarding the quality of VET and building a quality culture.
  - o Increasing stakeholders' involvement in external evaluation and, subsequently, in VET development.
  - o Informing funds allocation (mainly public financing).
  - o Informing self-evaluation.

CHALLENGES and POLICY CONSIDERATIONS	There was agreement among participants that external evaluation and self-evaluation are very important quality tools, at system level and at provider level, as well. The main **challenges** identified by the participants, regarding teacher and trainer involvement and their professional development are:

- Using more the results of self-evaluation in devising educational / VET policies and in evaluating their implementation and results. The external evaluation and self-evaluation provide a lot of data, useful for policy makers and, in general, for evidence-based policy making.
- Using more the results of external evaluation and self-evaluation to inform the decision making regarding the reform programmes and their implementation.
- Finding the right balance between the two purposes of external evaluation (accountability and improvement).

- Increasing the stakeholders' engagement (mainly students) in self-evaluation and external evaluation. For this reason, there is a need to investigate how all stakeholders (and VET providers) feel about self-evaluation and external evaluation.
- Increasing the impact of external evaluation and self-evaluation at classroom level (i.e. teaching, learning, assessing learning outcomes). Nowadays, the impact of evaluation is visible mainly at school/provider level.
- Increasing the responsibility for self-evaluation and for follow up measures of the top management of the school/VET provider.
- Reducing the time lag between evaluation (external and self-evaluation) and the use of their results for quality improvement.
- Balancing the need for greater flexibility (in order to meet the demands of the labour market) and quality requirements (including formal and firm procedures).
- Finding the right balance between school/provider autonomy and control.
- Addressing the time-consuming character of evaluation processes (in both forms). Thinking about deregulation, decentralization and debureaucratisation.
- Providing training and other support for internal and external evaluators and ensuring their independence.

At EU level, there is a need to support, including by providing resources and financial support (for instance, from the Erasmus+ Programme), for the development of external and internal evaluation tools and for cooperation and exchange of best practice in these areas.

The discussions at the PLA confirm, as well, that EQAVET (as a framework) is a useful tool that can respond to existing diversity in VET provision. Given this diversity, identifying and sharing best practice is a major strength of the EQAVET Network.