

# The EQAVET experience in Malta: Using similar indicators for different sector and size of VET provider

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Kim Fauschou is director of FACO a consulting company focused on quality in education. He is expert in the area of quality assurance in vocational education. Having been involved in the drafting of the Copenhagen Process in 1999, he has since been supporting the European Commission in the development and implementation of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF) for vocational education. He has also worked for a number of Educational Ministries across Europe (including Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Austria, Romania, Finland) and a number of national and international organisations like CEDEFOP, Greece and the European Training Foundation (ETF) in Turin.

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## Introduction

European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET), is today a familiar acronym within many vocational education institutions across Europe. Implementing EQAVET is a challenge at both national and institutional level. The sectors in vocational education are many, with institutions of different size, and training programs, making the implementation of harmonized quality assurance systems difficult for both regulators as well as training institutions. This chapter shares the experience of a national project (in Malta) funded within Leonardo da Vinci of the Lifelong Learning Programme which aimed to adapt EQAVET as national standards, pilot it in different sectors and type of providers, and based on the experience, develop a manual to support other VET institutions in implementing EQAVET. The experience provides insight not only with respect to the project outputs: the standards and the manual produced, but also on the best way different stakeholders, in this case regulator and provider, can work together for the benefit of ensuring quality provision to learners.

Work on quality assurance at European level was initiated by the Lisbon Strategy 2000–2010 (European Commission, 2000) which started the systematic and focused work on quality in VET. The objectives for VET were formulated in The Copenhagen Declaration (European Minister of VET and European Commission, 2002) and have since, through a number of working groups achieved the principles, tools and methods in the European Quality Assurance Framework. The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council (European Parliament and Council, 2009) on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training established the ground for the next phase of European cooperation within quality in VET: national implementation of EQAVET.

Europe is now facing the challenge of implementing the quality cycle model, on which EQAVET is based, at National level the by Member States. In supporting this next phase, the European Commission had issued a call for Leonardo which focuses on the national implementation of EQAVET. The EQAVET Malta project is one of these projects, and has helped Malta work towards the national implementation of EQAVET. This chapter shares this experience.

## 1 What is Quality?

Before moving on to the project details, and the lessons learnt from the process and outputs of the project, it is important to first reflect on quality and what it means. Quality is difficult to define due to its subjective nature. What is of quality to one person may not be of acceptable standard to

another. The actors involved in vocational educations and training are many and consequently the so are the resulting points of view held.

The Cedefop definition of quality includes 'Activities involving planning, implementation, evaluation, reporting, and quality improvement, implemented to ensure that all education and training (content of programmes, curricula, assessment and validation of learning outcomes, etc.) meet the quality requirements expected by stakeholders' (CEDEFOP, 2011) . Cedefop's definitions of quality are taken from ISO 8402 and ISO 2000, respectively and define quality further as 'all characteristics of an entity that bear on its ability to satisfy stated and implied needs' or 'the degree to which a set of inherent characteristics fulfils requirements' (ISO, 2000). It can thus be noted that quality is based on what particular groups, the stakeholders involved, agree on what they consider to be of quality. This means that what is considered to be of quality today may not be considered so in the future, as needs and expectations change. Quality is a thus a construction created by a number of actors under some given conditions and context. It is not an absolute concept and can have a number of different meanings as well as evolve and develop with time. Quality is a construction, a way of thinking, an attitude and a philosophy. But it needs to include shared meanings. The changing nature of quality emphasizes the need for all the stakeholders involved to communicate and share their opinions to keep the concept of quality continuously evolving.

Work on quality at European level has helped develop a shared concept of quality in VET. Sections 10 and 11 in the Recommendation of The European Parliament and of The Council of 18 June 2009 (European Commission, 2009) on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training presents a number of dimensions that can be considered as elements in a quality definition for VET. It also suggests the main mechanisms and characteristics which a quality assurance system should have.

The communication highlights how the quality assurance system should be based on a quality assurance and improvement cycle of planning, implementation, evaluation/assessment and review/revision of VET, supported by common quality criteria, indicative descriptors and indicators. The monitoring processes, including a combination of internal and external evaluation mechanisms, are to be defined by member states in order to reflect and identify the strength of systems, processes and procedures as well as areas for improvement. There is emphasis on the use of measuring tools which provide evidence of effectiveness to regulators, but also to other stakeholders such as the learners, employers, governments.

The quality assurance framework should not only exist at provider level but be directed at the VET system, VET provider and qualification-awarding levels. This ensures a systemic approach to quality, covering and interrelating the relevant levels and actors. The framework should give strong emphasis to monitoring and improving quality by combining internal and external evaluation, review and processes for improvement, supported by quantitative measurement, and enhanced by qualitative analysis. The framework should thus be a basis for further development through cooperation at European, national, regional and local levels.

The Quality Assurance methodology proposed within EQAVET and which needs to be implemented within VET provision at national level is based on three main aspects:

- a quality cycle consisting of four phases (planning, implementation, evaluation and review) described for VET providers/systems;

- quality criteria and indicative descriptors which feed into each phase of the cycle to direct providers on how to implement the quality cycle; and
- Common indicators (quantitative and qualitative) for assessing targets, methods, procedures and training results at both system and provider level.

### **The quality cycle model**

The thinking behind quality assurance and quality development in VET are relatively simple, and based on the model of Planning, implementation, evaluation and review phases. The planning phase sets the goals and objectives to be met and worked against. The implementation phase covers all the activities made in order to fulfil the objectives, like the daily teaching and learning activities, the tools and methods used, the teaching and learning environments, the competences, skills and motivation of the complete staff. The evaluation phase compares the realities and achievements with what was initially planned. The review phase connects the findings in the evaluations with the original plans and involves decisions about what to change and what to keep.

This simple but effective and efficient quality cycle PDCA (plan–do–check–act or plan–do–check–adjust) is an iterative four-step management method used in business for the control and continuous improvement of processes and products. It is also known as the Deming circle/cycle/wheel, Shewhart cycle, control circle/cycle, or plan–do–study–act (PDSA). The EQAVET quality model within vocational education and training builds on the Deming principles and are further developed in order to assess, secure, document and develop the quality of vocational education and training on all levels and for all actors.

The complete process is essential in assuring and developing quality in VET at all levels, and can be used at both system provider and classroom level.

### **Why is quality so important?**

Quality assurance is not just an idea thought up for its own sake. It is basically a means of ensuring that learners receive quality training. Quality assurance actually ensures much more. It promotes the recognition of qualifications across borders, enabling persons studying in one country to look for and find work in another country. In the case of Malta, the Malta Qualifications Framework (MQF) is pegged to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The framework thus allows qualifications to be recognised and understood across all Europe. This creates many possibilities for mobility of workers within the European labour market. Quality Assurance thus plays a crucial role in enabling and maintaining this cross border recognition of learning as it is the tool through which different Member States build mutual trust leading with respect to the recognition of qualifications.

Students, employers, governments and Europe all benefit from quality assurance in VET. VET institutions, who bear the administrative burden which a quality assurance system brings will benefit too overall, as it is the mechanism through which they can show through evidence that they provide good quality service. Quality Assurance can help institutions attract more students, funds and better

teachers, helping growth both nationally and internationally as with recognition, VET providers can open doors to all learners across Europe.

## 2 The EQAVET project in Malta

### 2.1 *Background to the project*

This Leonardo project, called EQAVET Malta, aims to develop a Quality Assurance tool which will help vocational training institutions to check the different aspects and requirements for quality assurance of their institutions and their courses as indicated in the EQAVET documents. The project involves the participation of four vocational institutions in Malta, which, with the coordination of the National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE) reviewed their own quality assurance systems and then piloted them how they could implement EQAVET with the requirements of EQAVET. In order to open the process to a European perspective and be careful to avoid an insular approach to education reform, the partnership also included professionals from other European partners. Partners come from Italy, Greece, and Romania.

The project involved the development and piloting of the Quality Assurance tool as part of the national implementation of the European Quality Assurance Framework (EQARF) to the context of Malta. This project was conceived to have a multiplier effect. The project, in fact, had a wider aim than that of helping the four partner vocational institutions to adapt their Quality Assurance systems to EQAVET. It is the intention of the National Commission for Further and Higher Education to use the experience of the piloting exercise, to understand better the main changes that vocational training institutions need to undergo. Based on this experience, the project will produce the main project output: a manual - the Quality Assurance Tool for VET programmes and institutions, which will provide guidelines and support to other vocational institutions in reviewing and restructuring their quality assurance systems.

NCFHE has recently been given the legal remit of licensing and regulating vocational education and training institutions in Malta. This output of this Leonardo project will thus serve as the basis for its regulatory work, helping identify the quality assurance standards that it will require for licensing as well as ensuring the implementation of EQAVET at national level.

The main aims and objectives of this project were thus the following:

- to review quality assurance standards for a number of local VET institutions and to compare these to the EQAVET indicators adapted to the context of Malta;
- to pilot an exercise in aligning existing Quality Assurance system to these indicators;
- to develop a manual which VET institutions can use to first review their existing Quality Assurance system, and then to implement changes which will ensure alignment the required alignment; and
- to raise awareness among local IVET and CVET training providers, as well as for VET provision within compulsory education about the importance of Quality Assurance for VET training programmes as well as the European standards developed and identified within EQAVET.

The outputs of the project varied in nature and target group. One of the first steps produced a review of the level and quality of existing quality assurance systems for the partner VET training institutions to provide insight into the existing problems and challenges in implementing EQAVET. This led to the identification of the main strengths and weaknesses of the partners in terms of quality assurance standards. The project was also involved in disseminating the importance of quality assurance for training courses and institutions in the VET sector as well as the indicators and standards in EQAVET at both IVET and CVET level. The final and major output of the whole project exercise led to the development of a manual, the Quality Assurance Tool for VET programmes and institutions for use by local, and potentially also other European VET providers.

The National Commission for Further and Higher Education (NCFHE), as the coordinator of the project, could only achieve this 'Quality Tool' with the support of four local VET institutions in Malta which included:

- The **Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST)**, the umbrella structure in Malta for state provision of vocational education and training at post-secondary education level. MCAST currently houses ten institutes. Courses offered vary in the type of study, level of study, and in the amount of work experience offered. VET qualifications offered by MCAST vary from Level 1 to Level 6 on the Malta Qualifications Framework, some of which are home-grown while others are awarded by BTEC. As from 2009, MCAST also started to offer the first vocational degrees.
- **Institution of Tourism Studies (ITS)**: provides full-time training courses in tourism, ranging from foundation level to Level 5 on the Malta Qualifications Framework. The Institution of Tourism Studies also provides a range of evening part-time courses;
- **Employment and Training Corporation (ETC)** is a training organisation offering a wide array of training courses for both unemployed and employed people who want to upgrade their skills. The Corporation also runs a series of apprenticeships and traineeships, which are developed by the ETC and other VET institutions with employers, their associations or other professional bodies. Training offered by ETC is outsourced to private training providers.
- **Clear Dimension Ltd. (CDL)** is a private training institution providing specialised IT training and consultancy services in Malta. Clear Dimension's mission is to promote and facilitate the integration of accredited IT qualifications and in specialised areas of IT directly or through joint venture partnerships;

MCAST and ITS are state initial vocational education and training (IVET) institutions, but both also offer VET courses as evening classes, supporting continuous vocational education and training (CVET). ETC is an example of CVET provision as is Clear Dimension in ICT.

The project was also supported by other three European partner organisations that provided feedback on the work developed as well as insights into international experience as inspiration and good examples to learn from. These partners included: National Centre for TVET Development (CNDIPT) Bucharest, Romania; Istituto per lo Sviluppo della Formazione dei Lavoratori (ISFOL) Rome; and Youth and LifeLong Learning Foundation, Athens, Greece. The valid contributions of the local and

international partners fed into the project. The local partners shared their experiences and examples of good practice. The expertise of the international partners, together with the input by the external evaluator provided insights and valid advice from similar experiences across Europe.

## **2.2 Regulation of VET provision in Malta**

The National Commission for Further and Higher Education is responsible for licensing, accrediting and quality assuring all further and higher education institutions, including VET institutions operating in or from Malta.

NCFHE was officially launched on the 14th September 2012 and founded through the revised Education Act which came into force on the 1st August 2012. NCFHE replaces the Malta Qualifications Council which was set up in 2005 and the National Commission for Higher Education (NCHE) in order to focus the regulation of education provision within one institution rather than have it diluted to two separate ones.

The work plan of the new Commission is far-reaching and ambitious. The Legal Notice 296/2012 strengthened the Commission's role by giving the national remit on licensing, accreditation and quality assurance of Further and Higher education in Malta. Further education refers to all formal education of persons above the compulsory school age, generally up to MQF level 5. Higher education includes activities and programmes of teaching, training and research at tertiary level at and above MQF level 6. The importance of quality assurance is not limited to this national legislation but is also ingrained in the Bologna and Copenhagen processes, endorsed by NCFHE.

With the licensing legislation, all Further and Higher education providers in Malta require a license to be able to operate in Malta. A licence for a Further and/or Higher education institution is issued on the basis of the following four criteria:

- (i) accredited programmes on the Malta Qualifications Framework or a recognised foreign qualifications framework;
- (ii) qualified academic staff with relevant experience in the field in question;
- (iii) a fully functional internal quality assurance mechanism; and
- (iv) MEPA certified premises that are fully compliant with the latest health and safety regulations that are fully accessible for disabled users.

The Legal Notice has made it a requirement for vet institutions to have a quality assurance system in order to obtain a valid license to operate. Before August 2012, Further and Higher Education Institutions were not legally bound to have an internal quality assurance system in their institutions, NCFHE felt the need of assisting providers in this area and thus the EQAVET Malta project and the creation of the Quality Assurance Manual for VET providers were planned to support the reforms taking place.

As the Quality Assurance Agency in Malta, NCFHE will be auditing internal quality assurance systems every five years to examine the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes used by the providers, including an examination of the system's structure, the documentation it produces and the evaluations of quality conducted by the provider, including VET providers.

The introduction of these quality assurance measures will enhance inclusion, competitiveness and excellence. These crucial measures will prepare a solid workforce for economic growth. They will benefit training providers to ensure that their qualifications obtain the prestige and value they merit both at a national and a European level.

### **2.3 *The overall structure of working within the project***

Getting the regulator to work and develop tools needs time and human investment as it is not natural for the regulator and providers to collaborate closely. This is what the project wanted to achieve and eventually managed to build a network of VET providers who know each other well and have learnt to share their practices as well as concerns for the benefit of all.

The project was built round a system of regular meetings. In order to promote collaboration, the hosting of these meetings was rotated, with the partners hosting a meeting at their own institution. Going to the different VET institutions was a good experience as trust between the partners was built slowly into strong collaborative relationships. While at the beginning the partners tended to be careful what to disclose about their institution, and to question statements and assertions made by the others, the atmosphere changed to one of sharing of ideas and perspectives based. The project showed how important it is for VET institutions to communicate and share practices with each other in order to develop mutual trust.

## **4 Development of the manual**

The ultimate output of the project was the manual for VET providers. Getting there was not easy but presenting a great challenge of having the partner institutions deciding which indicators to work with, and to have them implemented in their institution as part of the quality cycle. All this took two years of work and collaboration and has taken the partners through a journey involving a process of familiarizing themselves with EQAVET and the tools that it promotes, stocktaking their own systems to ensure quality, and then work towards aligning themselves to the agreed standards. The final achievement was the manual which compiled the process of implementing Quality assurance. The richness of the manual lies in the many practical examples which were provided from the partners' experience and which gave a practical view of what VET institutions can do.

### **4.1 Deciding on the indicators**

The first step in the whole process involved first familiarizing the partners with developments at European level about the Copenhagen process and the work done in the area of quality assurance. It has to be said that this exercise was facilitated by one of the partners from Romania who had been involved in the process and could give a good and close presentation of what the European tools aimed to achieve. This was the point at which the indicators at European level were introduced.

There was immediate consensus on the importance of the quality cycle in quality assurance. The step which then followed included that of deciding which of the indicators in EQAVET were to be adopted at national level. This latter aspect did not create particular difficulties as NCFHE already had a strong opinion on the importance to adopted EQAVET well. This view was supported by the partners and the discussion focused mainly round which indicators needed to be implemented immediately and which of the indicators could possibly be implemented within a certain time-frame. A point of discussion was whether all indicators should be compulsory for all VET institutions, provided that the local VET context varied in terms of sectors covered, but mainly in size of institutions. On review of the European indicators, it was felt that all provided valuable insight into quality of training provision. Based on this consensus, a total of 11 main indicators, with sub-indicators for each were adopted. These indicators are close to those developed within EQAVET. These indicators are to form part of the next phase, stock-taking existing quality assurance structures in VET providers. The indicators considered by the Maltese Project Partnership to be relevant to Malta were the following:

1. **Investment in training of teachers and trainers:** referring to the share of teachers and trainers participating in further education and training and the funds invested for such purpose. It measures institutions' commitment to providing up-to-date training to learners;
2. **Involvement of teachers and students in QA:** This refers to the involvement of students, academic staff in the planning, development and decision-making related to Quality Assurance. It also refers to the students' and staff's involvement in the development of mechanisms for collecting feedback on the learning experience and environment created;
3. **Participation rate in VET programmes:** the percentage of annual student cohort starting formal IVET programmes at upper secondary level and the percentage of active population (15-74 years old) entering CVET programmes;
4. **Completion rate in VET programmes:** This indicator refers to the percentage of students completing an IVET programme(s) and obtaining certifications, compared to those who started the programme(s); and the percentage completing (i.e. attaining a formal qualification) a CVET programme(s), compared to those starting the programme(s).
5. **Placement rate in VET programmes:** refers to what learners do after completing the VET course/s, and the rate of students who find work according to the training received.
6. **Utilization of acquired skills at the workplace:** This indicator refers to the extent to which the skills acquired through the VET course/s are being used in the workplace e.g. percentage of VET graduates working in relevant occupations within 12-36 months from completing the VET course. It can also be measured through the percentage of employers satisfied with the competences of their workers.
7. **Mechanisms to identify training needs in the labour market:** This indicator refers to mechanisms used to update VET programmes to better address future labour market needs and to provide stakeholders with the most recent information on the future needs of the labour market.
8. **Schemes used to promote better access to VET:** This indicator refers to schemes used to promote better access to VET. Of particular interest are vulnerable groups. This indicator provides a measure of how much a VET institution is making efforts to help and support vulnerable groups to access VET.

9. **Self-Evaluation:** This indicator refers to periodic self-evaluation as well as to the use of external evaluators. Periodic self-evaluation can involve a process of evaluation through which staff within a VET institution evaluate their provision of VET through a reflective exercise. External evaluators are experts from outside the institution who are invited to review either specific aspects of training or else to review the quality assurance management system of the institution and give an independent opinion. Self-evaluation also includes mechanisms related to early warning signs about problems related to quality in provision.
10. **Transparency of QA System:** This indicator refers to the degree of which outcomes of a review are widely and publicly available and whether they are discussed with the relevant stakeholders.
11. **Trans-institutional Relations:** This indicator refers to cooperation initiatives with other VET providers and/or other relevant stakeholders, both local and foreign.

These are the indicators which the project have worked with.

## 4.2 The stocktaking phase

Taking stock of what is already existent in an organisation is no easy task. In this exercise one needs to include in one single document all the information about those systems that are already in place. Many times one person is not enough to complete such exercise, but rather a team of people would find it easier to know about all the different systems that exist at different levels and for different purposes.

The partners were provided with guidelines on how to complete the table with the indicators. In completing the template about the quality systems, the project partners filled in columns to include descriptions of the systems that exist as well as identified any challenges that could be faced should this system be developed further. The template started by first asking if the institution possessed a quality assurance policy and then moved on to the individual indicators. Overall the template gathered the following data:

- The structures and processes the institutions had or lacked for each of the indicators identified;
- What evidence (policies/reports/studies/minutes of meetings etc.) they had to show that the process is present and that there is a documented trail of the work done.

In order to provide support to the VET institutions involved in the project, NCFHE, as coordinator, organised a number of meetings where the partners could discuss the meaning of the different indicators and whether their systems provided for them. Keeping these aspects in mind enabled the partners to go beyond identifying their existing quality assurance system. It enabled them to obtain information about the state of their system in terms of the evidence that is produced since EQAVET emphasises that an institution also needs to have sources of information about the data gathered in order to show that it is ensuring quality.

The next step involved analysing how many QA aspects the institution actually already had in place as well as a measure of the degree of work needed to develop it in order to reach the required

standards. The template filled in thus provided a snapshot of the institution's current state of QA by taking stock of what mechanisms are already in place ;what mechanisms need to be improved; and what mechanisms need to be built from scratch.

### Using the traffic light system

This system was used to obtain the snapshot referred to above. It allowed an evaluation of the filled in template to be carried out. It achieved this as it provided a clear picture of the state of 'readiness' for the implementation of EQAVET for each VET institution.

The traffic light system asked the VET providers to assess the state of each and every sub-indicator that they had documented in the template. The traffic light system consists of three levels. Each of these levels is colour coded as shown below.

|   |
|---|
| Nothing or little is in place   |
| Elements of the Indicator are present but need to be improved further |
| Indicator is implemented as required with little need for development |

- RED indicates that no or few mechanisms as yet are in place with respect for the sub-indicator. The organisation thus needs to build and develop new structures from scratch;
- AMBER indicates that although the sub-indicator is currently not yet in force, there are initiatives, even if to a small degree, which can be further developed and improved to fulfil the required indicator. The indicator still needs to be developed to ensure the full implementation;
- GREEN indicates that the sub-indicator is in full force at a level which is acceptable and that, if necessary, only a little degree of improvement is required.

The result of completing this exercise resulted in a page full of colours, but one which indicated to the VET providers immediately which were their strengths and which their weaknesses. The VET institutions had to take a good look at the state of their QA system and obtain a holistic impression of how much they needed to do and how big/small was the challenge for their institution. If there were mainly green areas, the institution could consider itself in a good position and would only need to develop the current system a little further. However, this could not mean that nothing much is needed, as all institutions need to keep in mind that the quality assurance system has to develop further, and this in itself means that the institutions need to continually invest in developing their existing system. If there large areas of red and amber, then much more work would be needed. It is highly probable that institutions may need to invest in developing and implementing new systems. They will thus also need to invest in training their staff in using these new mechanisms and to be rigorous when inputting any data and following procedures implemented. A lot of reds should not

make VET institutions give up, but can help them to focus first on their weakest aspects and from there to move on to the less immediate problems of quality assurance.

### 4.3 Piloting the implementation of EQAVET

This phase of the project required that the VET institutions to go back and to plan and start implementing changes to their system. This was not easy as, like many other VET institutions, they did not have additional human resources to allocate the required work to. This problem would also be significant particularly in cases where the indicator had to be implemented from scratch. This issue was encountered often with respect to mainly the tracer study required. The amount of resources required a large increase in the budget of some of the institutions who had to decide what changes and improvements they could do straight away and what had to be planned for future development.

This experience was fed and translated into information for NCFHE which then realized that potentially, asking that all the indicators are in place as from the first day may prove to be challenging, particularly for smaller VET providers. NCFHE, although it hasn't as yet developed the requirements for the purpose of licensing, now has direct knowledge of the main problems which VET providers may encounter as well as which indicators are overall not difficult to implement and which ones require financial investment.

### 4.4 Development of the manual

All the experiences of the partner VET institutions provided real examples which could then be included in the Quality Assurance manual that had to be drawn up. Having people look up information or solutions with respect to the task of implementing a quality assurance system may motivate people to read through the manual. But, it is also the case that many will only use it if they run into difficulties. In view of this, the manual was designed to be brief, practical and to the point. It was divided into three main sections: background; the stock-taking exercise, and implementation of the Quality Assurance system.

The background was intended to provide the reader with the basic knowledge necessary about EQAVET and quality assurance in VET. It was written in a question and answer format to allow readers to choose what to read about and skip questions if not relevant to their case or they do not have enough time to dedicate. The second and third sections, on the other hand take the reader through a journey and helps the reader to carry out the process of implementing the quality assurance system.

The experiences of the VET partners in the project fed into the manual and made it possible to provide practical examples which help the reader contextualize the indicators. In the case of the stock-taking exercise, in explaining the meaning of each indicator and helping the reader to try and identify his/her institution's system, questions to direct reflection were provided. These were then enhanced by the examples provided by the partners. The reader could thus see what type of student feedback form was used, or else what committees had been created in order to ensure the participation of the different stakeholders in curriculum design. The aim of such approach is to

provide the reader with a degree of support while also indicating that other similar institutions have managed to do the exercise and thus it is not impossible to achieve.

The last section of the manual provides first a background to the six building blocks and the quality cycle, illustrating which indicators can be used for which phase of the cycle. It then provides the reader with another table which helps record and plan the level of implementation of the indicators as well as how these are to be used at each phase of the quality cycle. The emphasis here goes beyond that of ensuring that the indicators are in place, but helps the reader to understand how they can be used accordingly in each phase of the cycle.

The main outcome of the manual is for it to accompany VET institutions and help them upgrade and align their quality assurance system so that they would not have any problems to obtain the required license, but more so, to be able to ensure that the training provided by VET institutions is of good quality and thus would be beneficial not only to the learners, but to the employers who would have skilled workers, and to the country's economy by ensuring a supply of good and capable workers.

## 6 Conclusion

The EQAVET Malta project was ambitious as the final aim was to manage to implement quality assurance systems based on the European standards of EQAVET. The added challenge was that of defining one set of standards which then could be implemented in different sectors of VET provision; in training institutions of different sizes, also including micro size in some cases; and adaptable for both IVET or CVET.

A number of lessons were learnt and are to be shared as a result of the piloting process carried out. It was realised that it is very important to ensure that there are quality assurance indicators implemented in all the phases of the quality cycle: planning, implementation, evaluation and review. It is, for example, of value to ensure that courses drawn up at the planning stage respond to needs in the labour market. Vocational education providers also need to check that the teachers and trainers keep up-to-date with developments in the field so that there is effective implementation of the training courses. The students' view of their learning experience should provide feedback on the quality of the training provided. And, finally, providers need to take action to tackle weaknesses identified and improve their service in reviewing their training. These are but a few practical examples which highlight the importance that the indicators play in ensuring quality assurance in all the phases of the quality cycle.

The planning phase was considered of particular importance with respect to making the training goals clear and possible to document. The use of learning outcomes to identify competences to be gained, as well as specifying the knowledge and skills to be developed, play an important role in curriculum design. These learning outcomes, however, have most value if they reflect actual labour market needs, and this can only be achieved through stakeholder participation. Quality assurance indicators enable training providers to obtain a measure of the degree of input by the different stakeholders, and thus that training provided responds to labour market needs. The planning phase is also of great importance to secure that all actors agree on and know the goals set for training courses, as well as their role in achieving these outcomes, whether they are trainers, employers or the learners themselves.

The feedback mechanism was also found to be very important to ensure quality in VET. Very often the feedback aspect tends to be completely missing. Feedback is not there to judge the trainers' performance, but rather to provide insight into the quality and value of the learning experience of students. Feedback can be obtained from students, as well as through peer review. However, there can only be improvement if the outcomes of the evaluation process are used in the planning and implementation phase.

Many are those who remain sceptical about the need to so many procedures to ensure quality provision. The evaluation tools are often too many, too complicated and not used at the proper point in time..The secret lies in keeping processes simple. If one is to develop frameworks and include additional detail, the complex model developed would be less flexible and/or adaptable than a simple version. Keeping it simple does not jeopardise quality or standard. It mainly provides a framework which allows more space for adaptation.

At the end of the day, the quality of the quality assurance system will be reflected in the quality of the training provided and the credibility of the qualifications issued by the VET institution. It also has to be realized, that the manual just takes the reader to the first step of quality assurance, that of setting it up. This is just the beginning and it would take time and effort for VET institutions to develop their quality assurance systems to provide better insights and controls and to also observe the impact of such investment.

This experience can easily be transferable to other European countries as it provides a simple solution to a complex situation. It is a good starting point for the implementation of EQAVET at National level. Malta's next challenge is to apply this experience to developing the quality assurance requirements and supporting all training institutions in their implementation so that quality assurance becomes part of the daily business of vocational education and training.

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