

# Chapter 10 Guidelines for the quality assurance of vocational education and training in EU countries

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## 10.1 Introduction

This chapter contains guidelines for the quality assurance of vocational education and training (VET) in Europe. The guidelines are based on research into quality assurance within case study institutions providing healthcare VET in six EU countries: Denmark, Estonia, Germany, United Kingdom (England), Italy and the Netherlands. This research was undertaken by the EU-funded 'From Review to Improvement' (REVIMP) project team.

### Definitions

**Institutions:** this term refers to schools, colleges, training providers and other organisations (including employers) that have responsibility for provision of VET programmes.

**Quality Assurance (QA):** can be defined as all activities carried out with the intention of ensuring institutional quality (e.g. collecting data on institutional quality and using the data to judge whether there is a discrepancy between the current and the target situation and, in the case of a discrepancy, taking decisions on how quality can be improved and carrying these actions out).

**Quality Assurance Systems (QASs):** this term refers to systems that have been designed and built to support the collection, processing and presentation of data relating to institutional quality.

**Review:** takes place once information about the quality of the institution and the education it provides has been collected. In the review stage of QA, decisions are taken on whether improvements should be made and, if this is the case, what changes should be implemented and how.

### **Use of the guidelines**

The guidelines are a resource for managers of VET courses and their staff. The case study evidence showed that differences between the institutions and their courses were accompanied by significantly different systems and approaches to quality assurance.

As a result, it is understood that guidance for quality assurance must be flexible enough to take account of the varied contexts not just of the institutions studied, but of those institutions across Europe for whom this guidance is intended. The guidelines are therefore designed to be used as a flexible tool in the development and review of procedures for QA.

## **10.2 The guidelines**

### ***10.2.1 General guidelines***

1. QA should be embedded in institutions' general policy, rather being than an isolated activity.

*In the institutions in which this is the case there is no separation between general policy-making and policy-making regarding quality assurance. Quality assurance is part of general policy-making, which means that the quality assurance findings are translated into school-wide measures to optimise the functioning of the institution.*

2. Institutions should state explicitly the main purpose(s) of the QAS, as this has implications for the design of the QAS. The objectives could include: external accountability; institutional and course improvement; certification, or a combination of these.

*Whereas accountability may require a limited number of indicators that reflect institutions' level of performance, institutional improvement will require detailed insight into the location of underperformance and its causes as a basis for the design of the remedy.*

3. It can be helpful to share QA information, practices and tools between institutions.

*This can help institutions to learn from one another, to avoid mistakes and to conserve resources. This requires the creation of links with other institutions and the planned allocation of time and money.*

### **10.2.2 Design of QAS**

4. When working on QA it is important to begin by formulating the institutional and course objectives, then to determine the purpose of the QA in relation to those objectives and, next, to determine the content of the QAS. This ensures that the QAS is rooted in the organisation and the data collected is relevant to the institution.

5. Institutions should consider involving relevant stakeholders such as staff, employers and learners in the design/adaptation of the QAS.

*Involving stakeholders can have advantages for QA, such as enhanced motivation and ownership.*

6. If an externally developed QAS is used it should be adapted to the context of the institution.

*This can improve relevance, ownership and, as a result, usage of the QAS.*

7. Institutions should consider to what extent their QA tools are valid and reliable, and try to improve them if necessary.

*As some institutions will not have access to the skills necessary to determine this, internal staff development and/or external specialist support may be required.*

### **10.2.3 QA Indicators**

8. Institutions should use QA indicators that are appropriate to their context.

*Some examples of indicators are: learner satisfaction with the courses offered; the percentage of learner drop out; employer satisfaction regarding the skills of learners; learner achievement rates; employers' opinions on the quality of the course material used and the percentage of qualified teachers.*

9. Learner-related indicators should constitute the core of the QAS (e.g. learner achievement, learner satisfaction, learner attendance, and other learning-related aspects).

*Institutions whose QA leads to improvements to their programmes of learning have access to a good range of QA information relating to learners.*

10. Learner-related indicators should be supported by a range of other quality indicators.

*Examples of such indicators are: teaching quality; the quality of learner assessment; employer needs, and the quality of resources.*

11. Institutions should consider the relationship between indicators for classroom-based learning on the one hand and work-based learning on the other.

*Institutions should, for example, decide whether they would like to use the same indicators for both contexts.*

12. Where institutions are externally evaluated (e.g. through inspection, certification, or accreditation), they should consider to what extent it is useful to align with external indicators, and to what extent they need additional internal indicators for QA and improvement.

*The benefits of this analysis could be increased efficiency, and the identification of additional indicators that would assist improved QA.*

13. Institutions should consider setting themselves targets against each of the QA indicators.

*Examples of performance targets could be: a specific percentage of learner drop out; desired student achievement levels, or a specific level of student and teacher satisfaction.*

#### **10.2.4 Data collection, processing and distribution**

14. Successful review improvement requires a careful choice of data collection methods.

*Methods may include:*

- learner satisfaction questionnaires
- questionnaires for work placement employers, and for employers who have recruited newly qualified learners
- learner portfolios and workplace diaries
- lesson/training observations
- learner interviews
- peer review (whereby institutions review each other)
- alumni questionnaires and interviews
- teacher and parent satisfaction questionnaires

- collection of information on learners' destinations after completion of studies, and their position in the labour market
- collecting and analysing data on learner completion and achievement rates
- data collection for the creation of] benchmarking indicators (making comparisons with similar institutions on the basis of relevant indicators).

15. Institutions should give full consideration to stakeholders' information needs and whether the same amount and type of QA information is distributed to all.

16. It is important that QA data are distributed promptly and regularly to relevant staff.

*Prompt distribution of data enables timely responses and longitudinal analysis of data. Regular distribution of data helps QA review to become a normal part of staff tasks and duties.*

17. QA information on the quality of a course should, ideally, be available to staff during the course.

*This helps in identifying and dealing with problems quickly, and in responding to learner needs (e.g. ongoing forms or discussion, mid-course attendance and attainment data).*

18. Institutions should consider publishing QA information on their websites for use by staff, employers, learners, parents and other interested stakeholders.

19. QA data should be presented in user-friendly. These could include text, tables and graphs.

20. Staff should be encouraged to interpret and discuss the QA information and, based on that, to develop improvement activities.

### **10.2.5 QA implementation**

21. Institutions should minimise the burden of QA for staff and ensure that there is a clear division of tasks and responsibilities amongst staff.

22. Institutions should inform each stakeholder of the QAS objectives and procedures in relation to their role.

23. As time and resources are limited, a step-by-step approach to implementation is recommended.

*Institutions could, for example, focus on some elements of QA in one year and then add others in later years.*

24. Institutions should try to establish a culture in which staff and students feel responsible for QAS and in which the primary goal is improvement.
25. Institutions should consider which QA staff need to be trained in QA skills such as the interpretation of data, the diagnosis of problems and the development and implementation of improvement activities.
26. As much technical and administrative support as practicable should be provided in QA data collection, processing and presentation.

*Of course, this will depend on the available resources. For example, larger institutions have access to resources at a central level. This allows them to support the activities of units at lower levels.*

27. Institutions should systematically monitor whether the decisions on improvement activities are being carried out, and how much impact they are having.

*Too often plans for QA are developed and implemented only to a certain extent and in a certain way. It is important to monitor whether the whole organisation (instead of only a few units) works according to the plan and, if this is not the case, to correct omissions where necessary. If all units work as planned, the impact of QA is probably much stronger, as the various parts of the institution reinforce each others' efforts.*