Synthesis report on study visits 2009/2010

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING
The need for quality assurance (QA) is increasing as education and training institutions enjoy a greater degree of autonomy. Quality assurance is important for the accountability of education and training providers, and it helps to maintain the legitimacy and value of the education system. It also helps to ensure that employers and national authorities can rely on the qualifications that people possess and can assume that they have the knowledge, skills and competencies necessary for a specific job.

Quality assurance in the context of education and training covers a range of aspects from the design of standards and curricula, to teaching, to assessment, certification, validation and financial management of education and training providers. In the context of individual schools and training providers, there is a growing emphasis on internal quality assurance. In the past, evaluation of individual schools and other learning providers used to be carried out mainly through external quality assurance but today schools are expected to put in place internal processes too.

Quality assurance has a central place in EU education policies. Improving quality and efficiency of education and training is one of the strategic objectives for European cooperation in education and training until 2020. In the area of school education, the Commission, the Parliament and the Council have also adopted a recommendation on European cooperation in quality evaluation in school education. This recommendation invited Member States to safeguard the quality of school education as a basis for lifelong learning, to encourage self-evaluation of schools and to clarify the purposes and conditions for self-evaluation. Furthermore the recommendation calls for external evaluation, in addition to the internal evaluation.

In the field of vocational education and training, efforts have mainly focused on the development of principles and indicators for quality assurance. These are presented in a common European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF) for VET. The framework describes a quality assurance and improvement cycle (planning, implementation, evaluation/assessment and review/revision) based on a selection of quality criteria, descriptors and indicators applicable to quality management at both VET-system and VET-provider levels. The aim of the framework is not to introduce new standards, but to support Member States' efforts, whilst preserving the diversity of their approaches.

A network has also been established to support the work of the Member States on quality assurance in VET. The European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) Network promotes European collaboration and comprises representatives of the European Union, Candidate Countries and European Economic Area countries, social partners, scientific advisers and the European Commission. Quality assurance is also an underpinning pillar of many other EU tools, including the European Qualifications

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4 Criteria include: (1) Planning reflects a strategic vision shared by the relevant stakeholders and includes explicit goals/objectives, actions and indicators; (2) Implementation plans are devised in consultation with stakeholders and include explicit principles; (3) Evaluation of outcomes and processes is regularly carried out and supported by measurement; and (4) Review.
Framework (EQF) and the European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET). Developments have also taken place in the field of higher and adult education.

This synthesis report is based on the group reports of the study visits of the academic year 2009/2010 that were dedicated to the topic quality assurance mechanisms in schools and training institutions. The report provides an overview of the main findings of 15 study visits that took place in Austria, Germany, Italy, Estonia, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain and Turkey.

2  SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM THE GROUP REPORTS

2.1 Overview of findings on quality assurance in schools and training institutions

There is an increased emphasis on quality assurance in Europe and the change of pace has intensified since 2000 when European co-operation on quality assurance in education and training began (SV 139, 143, 144, 147). Countries like Germany, Poland and Romania have seen the introduction of brand new external evaluation systems, while internal evaluation has been made compulsory in several countries, including Estonia and Portugal. There is indeed a growing recognition that school evaluation can provide a means to identify strengths of schools and areas on which they can improve. Most importantly, effective school evaluation has the potential of creating a concrete, evidence-based foundation for school improvement to which the whole school community has contributed (SV 139) and which enables schools to become ‘learning organisations’ (SV 147). Effective school evaluation and improvement processes also place the child at the centre and focus on the entitlement of all pupils to a high quality education (SV 140).

Another important development in several countries has been the move away from inspections being the main form of quality assurance. Inspections have normally been seen as a form of supervision to ensure that schools are doing what they are supposed to do. In Lithuania the inspection system has been abolished in favour of external evaluation by shifting the focus away from supervision and towards school development. In other countries new external evaluation systems have been introduced to operate alongside existing inspection systems (i.e. Poland). There is also much discussion about the importance of setting the balance between external evaluation and self-evaluation and increasingly, effective school self-evaluation is being placed at the heart of the process of improvement.

Methods for quality assurance related to the assessment of learning achievements and validation of assessment outcomes vary significantly from one EU country to another. Some countries use centralised examinations for some or part of their qualifications, while some others have adopted a more decentralised quality assurance model relying more on self-regulation under national guidance.

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5 The study visits focused on quality assurance in schools and vocational training institutions. Further information about European developments in the field of higher and adult education can be found in: http://studyvisits.cedefop.europa.eu/index.asp?cid=3&artid=6732&scid=77&artlang=EN [cited 10.07.2010]

6 References to specific group reports are made throughout the report. The numbers in parenthesis indicate the numbers of visits/group reports. A list of visits can be found in Annex 1.

7 Discussions on quality assurance started formally in 2000 with the launch of the European Forum on quality.

8 External evaluation refers to evaluation carried out by persons not directly involved in the activities of the school/provider evaluated.

9 Internal evaluation is more commonly known as self-evaluation, which is undertaken by individuals or groups of individuals who are directly linked to the activities of the school/provider, for example head teachers, teachers, non-pedagogical school staff, pupils and members of the local community.
The trend in the development of QA systems happens alongside the societal changes that affect teaching, learner profiles and needs, and how schools and training institutions are organised. School systems across Europe face a number of common challenges, such as a growing number of migrant pupils/students and the high proportion of young people who leave school early (SV 143, 144, 237). The economic downturn is affecting education and training systems for example through budget cuts and decreases in the number of work placements (SV 138). Schools and training institutions have gained greater levels of autonomy with the decentralisation of school administration and governance (SV 139, 147, 151). These trends need to be taken into account in the development of new and reform of existing QA systems. This is because the concept of ‘quality’ changes over time in response to changes in society and according to the experiences of schools.

Financial resources for the development of QA mechanisms in education and training vary strongly from one country to another. However, in many countries European funding (ESF in particular) has been a key driver (SV 147, 236).

2.2 External evaluation

The areas of external evaluation vary from one country to another depending on the degree of autonomy of schools and training institutions (SV 139, 143, 147, 151). Typically however external evaluation is concerned with both processes and results of education with the goal of evaluating the quality of education offered and to provide schools with assistance and guidance for improving quality. The school environment is also often the subject of evaluation. In some countries external evaluation has a very formal role whilst in others it plays a more supportive role in the process of quality improvement (SV 139, 141, 143, 144). External evaluation can also play a role in validating self-evaluation results.

In many countries external evaluation of schools is carried out by school inspectorates. In some countries they are undertaken by specialised bodies which are independent of the government (SV 139, 140, 143). These include, for example, the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Romania, the National School for Leadership in Education in Slovenia and the Office of Supervision at Regional Level for External Pedagogical Evaluation in Poland. Evaluation is conducted by independent experts in Hungary (SV 139, 140). This shows that the involvement of key stakeholders in external evaluation differs from country to country but there is an ever-greater recognition of the need for learners to have their say in the process (SV 139, 154).

External evaluation is compulsory in most countries, though is not mandatory or a widespread practice in Austria, Finland, Italy and Slovenia (SV 139, 144). Evaluation is normally conducted every four to six years (SV 141).

Methods for external evaluation take many different forms. In most countries the external evaluation process includes the direct assessment of the quality of teaching and student performance through lesson observations (SV 139). This applies for example to Germany, France and Poland. In Hungary lesson observations place an emphasis on professional development and negotiation instead of assessment and evaluation (SV 139). In other countries the effectiveness of teaching is measured and evaluated on the basis of standardised tests without direct insight into the methodological and pedagogical approaches applied in practice (i.e. Wallonia).

In some countries external evaluation is focussed on teachers (i.e. Cyprus), though a trend of a move towards evaluation covering the entire school system has been detected (SV 154). Regional approaches to evaluation exist in Belgium, Germany, Spain, and the UK (SV 147).

Standards can help evaluators make judgements about the quality of school provision in a more transparent manner by helping evaluators to judge the quality of performance against a set of criteria. At the same time over-reliance on indicators should be avoided; it is important to strike a balance between the assessment of qualitative and quantitative
dimensions of school performance (SV 151, 154). Most countries have criteria, indicators and/or standardised tools in place to conduct external evaluation (i.e. Germany, Romania). Others are in the process of standardisation or do not have a standardised system, since external evaluation is not compulsory and/or common practice (SV 139, 143).

2.3 Self-evaluation

School self-evaluation should produce outcomes which help the school to target its planning or initiatives for school improvement effectively. It can make an important contribution to external evaluation and as mentioned earlier, is a growing priority throughout Europe (SV 143, 144).

Schools carry out self-evaluation in most EU countries and it is mandatory, for instance, in the Czech Republic, Estonia, Germany, Portugal and Slovenia (SV 139, 141, 144, 147). Other countries either have no national (or regional) approach, or schools and training institutions are recommended but not obliged to conduct self-evaluation (SV 139). In fact, schools in many countries are allowed to design their own framework and criteria for self-evaluation. A set framework for self-evaluation is in place, for example, in Lithuania and Romania.

Self-evaluation tends to evaluate elements such as management/leadership, teaching and learning, curriculum development, support for students, school atmosphere, professional development opportunities for staff, etc. (SV 144). A range of models for self-evaluation are used with the EFQM model being used widely across the EU (SV 141): Estonia for example has tailored the EFQM self-assessment module to the education and training system (SV 236).

Self-evaluation is carried out by different assessment teams depending on the country. In some countries internal evaluation is carried out by school quality committees (i.e. Romania, Sweden and Portugal) or by the head teacher, school board and representatives of teaching staff (i.e. Czech Republic, Netherlands, Slovenia, Poland and Hungary) (SV 139).

2.4 Use of results

Evaluation can serve a number of purposes and the results can be used by a range of stakeholders. It can be used, for example, by the authorities to review and compare school performance at national, regional and local levels. It is also used to inform the resource (financial and human) allocation policy. Sound processes should yield benefits to other parties too, from students/pupils and teachers to head teachers and individual schools. The fundamental purpose is to raise achievement in schools (academic achievement as well as social and personal development of pupils) and thereby benefit students. Evaluation can however also benefit teachers, for example, by giving them a channel to contribute to school improvement and obtain a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of their school.

Evaluation reports are published in a number of Member States and are thereby made available to the wider public. This applies, for example, to England, the Netherlands and Sweden. In some cases the performance data is published in the form of a scorecard (i.e. England and the Netherlands) (SV 140, 141, 143, 144). In England the results are presented in a form of a league table too. In Denmark, local authorities prepare local education quality reports which provide information about the quality of inputs, processes and outcomes in all local schools. Information is available to all citizens (SV 140). In others,

EFQM stands for European Foundation for Quality Management although it is today known as EFQM Excellence Model. It is a practical tool that can help schools, institutes and companies to perform an initial assessment of their organisation. It can: help organisations to measure where they are on the path to excellence; help them understand the gaps; and find solutions. The EFQM Excellence Model is being used by over 30,000 organisations around the world. Further information can be found at: http://www.efqm.org/en/
evaluation findings are shared with the school only, who decide if the information will then be shared more widely (SV 141, 143, 144, 151).

Those who support the publication of evaluation reports believe that sharing outcomes and discussing the report with school staff ensures that all key stakeholders involved in the delivery of learning receive clear information about the performance of the school (SV 141). Those who are of the opinion that reports should not be made public believe that each school should be able to decide on their own dissemination policy. What is however important is an establishment of an agreed protocol for the publication or dissemination of results (SV 140). This can strengthen the transparency of QA processes.

External evaluation results can have severe consequences. Poor evaluation results can lead to sanctions in the form of a requirement to prepare and implement improvement plans, more intensive follow-up inspections, limits on recruitment of new or additional students and ultimately (but rarely) the withdrawal of funding and/or school closure (SV 143).

In relation to self-evaluation, internal evaluation of schools and training institutions provides an opportunity for the whole school community to reflect on student outcomes and existing development plans, as well as to focus on what the school can do in the future to continue to improve. The value of school self-evaluation results depends on the quality of the discussions and research within the school community; the final report should be a record of the conclusions from these discussions. Results are not typically published to the wider public but are seen as the property of the school (SV 143). Regardless of the publication policy, the results should be used to bring about improvements in teaching, learning or curricula.

3 COMMON CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

During their study visits, participants identify challenges related to QA that are common to their countries and examine possible solutions that can be used to address such challenges. The following challenges were identified by the 2009/2010 study visits on external and internal evaluation.

3.1 Lack of awareness of the importance and value of QA

Quality systems are too often imposed from the top down rather than being seen as a 'shared system' (SV 143). They need to be based on a solid partnership where all stakeholders from school staff to learners have a 'voice' within the system. There is some concern that governments, in their effort to improve outcomes and reinforce accountability, are introducing some instability into their systems, which could increase the burden on teachers but without improving the experiences of students (SV 143). In fact, top-down implementation is seen to cause some problems because it appears to lead to increased paperwork and bureaucracy without contributing to improving quality. Ensuring the buy-in of key stakeholders from local to national level is necessary to support changes and improvements (SV 139, 141, 143, 147, 151). Bureaucracy related to evaluation will also need to be minimised (SV 139, 143, 147).

Schools should also have sufficient information about the criteria for external evaluation and how the results are used (SV 141, 144). Policy makers also need to take into consideration that the introduction of an effective evaluation system for quality improvement takes time; it is not something that can be created or implemented overnight, but the results are usually expected fast, especially by politicians (SV 139, 142).

The involvement of a peer inspector can benefit the external evaluation process in many ways. It ensures that the inspection team includes a person currently working in the sector, enables the school being inspected to feel that they are represented, and adds to the
credibility of the inspection team (SV 141, 151).

The involvement of a senior member of the school staff as a ‘school representative’ in the external evaluation team can yield a range of benefits too (SV 141). It can, for example, strengthen the partnership and dialogue between the school and the evaluation team, and enable a school representative to hear all the discussion about the findings (but not contribute to judgements).

### 3.2 Lack of expertise to design and implement internal QA system

Many head teachers and teachers lack expertise and experience in designing and implementing internal QA systems. This can be an important barrier to the development of a culture of quality and evaluation in schools. Schools need support, such as evaluation frameworks, guidance or training, to enable them to implement such systems (SV 141). Some providers may be resistant to change, which means that they may also need guidance or training to understand the benefits (SV 139, 147). Importantly, schools also need to be able to use the results / data gained through evaluation for the purpose of school development (SV 151).

Study visits and networks enable individual schools and training providers to exchange good practice and share information about effective evaluation methods and approaches (SV 141, 142).

The UK and Austria have developed web-based self-evaluation tools in order to support the self-evaluation attempts of individual schools and training providers. Poland and Germany have structured self-evaluation systems in place (SV 144).

Common tools for self-evaluation at the regional/national level help to make self-evaluation comparable and competitive, for example, in Germany, Portugal, Romania and Spain (SV 139, 147). Romania has developed a unified national framework for quality assurance, covering both internal and external evaluation. It contains a set of criteria and descriptors used to evaluate the different aspects of education and training across the country.

In France, open negotiations are carried out between the state and individual schools in order to sign contracts for on-going school improvement. The key to their acceptability is their transparency and the development of clear (SMART) goals. Consultations typically involve representatives of parents and learners, thus strengthening a sense of “ownership” within the school community (SV 151).

The use of Balanced Scorecards is promoted in countries such as Iceland, Sweden and the UK. The Scorecards are seen to provide a robust and flexible model for producing relevant and realistic aims and clear indicators for assessment purposes (SV 151). In Portugal schools develop their own systems (SV 139). In Norway too every school has its own responsibility to develop an internal evaluation system (SV 171) but there is a system of advising schools through regional advisory corps of experienced teachers (Veilederkorps).

### 3.3 Need to improve the link between internal and external evaluation

Many more schools believe that school improvement cannot be achieved without internal evaluation. It has also been argued that too strong an emphasis on external evaluation (as opposed to a balance between external and internal systems) can lead to a lack of trust, may demoralise teachers and does not build on the capacity for internal evaluation (SV 144).

Many Study Visit participants therefore believe that what is needed is a greater and more synchronised link between internal and external evaluation so that external evaluation can support quality in school and is not simply judgmental in approach. This can take place, for example, through comparable criteria: a common framework can help schools to orientate themselves and create their own framework for internal evaluation (SV 141, 147).
Internal and external evaluation systems have been integrated in Lithuania, Portugal, Spain and Romania (SV 147).

3.4 Self-evaluation does not automatically lead to school improvement and better student outcomes

Self-evaluation does not automatically lead to school improvement and better outcomes for students. Two important challenges remain in schools and training institutions across Europe.

First, simply collecting data, however systematically and routinely, will not itself improve schools. There needs to be a commitment to scrutinise such data, make sense of it and to plan and act differently as a result. Too many schools lack expertise in using evaluation data for school improvement planning or do not prepare an action plan to take forward improvements based on the needs identified in the evaluation. Self-evaluation needs to be recognised as a continuous process that does not end with the production of an evaluation report; instead the evaluation report is a beginning in the process of improvement (SV 139, 141).

Second, self-evaluation is still too often led by the school leadership team, while internal evaluation is not an exercise that can be carried out by the leadership team in isolation. The school self-evaluation is a significant opportunity for discussion, consultation and feedback between all groups within the school community and it is expected that all will have an opportunity to participate. Thus the self-evaluation process needs to be inclusive, involving the wider school community (pupils, parents, carers, members of the school board, local community representatives and both pedagogical and non-pedagogical school staff) (SV 140, 141, 142, 144, 147, 151, 154, 237). The school community needs to understand the concept and potential benefits of evaluation, make an active contribution to the process and take forward improvement plans (SV 140, 141, 147, 151).

In some countries schools are specifically encouraged to establish a working group, representative of the school community, to ensure there is broad engagement with, and ownership of, the process. For example, the working party could comprise the principal, the school council/governing board leader, staff members and parents’ and teachers’ representatives. Involvement of the whole school can lead to stronger ownership of the school’s aims and improvement strategies, while staff attitudes to their work and their role are noticeably more positive (SV 139, 147).

It is also important to explore new initiatives that can attract and involve a broad range of teachers and students in school development. Teachers play a central, critical role but it is important to be careful that the same, committed teachers are not ‘over-used’ time and time again and thereby they do not become over-burdened by their various commitments. Instead, a broader range of teachers and other personnel should be involved without putting the burden on one or two individuals. Furthermore, some have suggested appointing a school improvement post to one teacher (SV 140, 154). This is the case for example in some larger VET schools in the Netherlands which employ quality managers.

The production of action plans emerging from evaluation in Sweden and the UK provide a structure for school development and allow schools and authorities to assess the impact of changes introduced (SV 151).

3.5 Lack of teacher training on QA

As indicated above, teachers need to understand the principles and value of QA and its key methods before they can fully embrace the concept. Consequently, initial and continuing education and training of teachers needs to be delivered in a way that ensures that teachers understand the principles and values of self-evaluation, and that external
evaluation can support self-evaluation (SV 139, 141, 146). This should include developing skills in using evaluation tools, such as questionnaires, lesson observations, interviews, and use of data (SV 147).

4 EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE

Each study visit is expected to provide a relevant sample of good practices highlighting those that are potentially transferable. This part illustrates some of these relevant examples covered during the study visits.

Improving links between internal and external evaluation

In Romania, a national project was funded with PHARE funding to integrate self-evaluation with the external evaluation system. The project was led by the National Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training Development, an agency of the Ministry of Education. The project trained teachers in self-evaluation e.g. how to use the instruments, how to interpret findings and how to plan the next year’s improvements and priorities. This support has motivated head teachers to undertake self-evaluation (SV 141).

Supporting self-evaluation efforts of schools and training providers

In Northern Ireland (UK), the SETAQ Builder has been developed. This is a software package which supports schools with self-evaluation by using pre-determined questions or new questions designed by the school. Analysis is generated automatically, identifying: areas of strength; areas for development; gap analysis; improvement, and, where appropriate, benchmarks. SETAQ Builder was funded by the Department of Education, Northern Ireland and is licensed for use in all schools across Northern Ireland (SV 141).

In 2006, internal evaluation of educational institutions was made compulsory in Estonia. The objective of internal evaluation is to enhance conditions that support children's development and to ensure a consistent development of educational institutions. The management of an educational institution is responsible for carrying out the internal evaluation but all school staff take part in it (SV 147).

Visits and exchanges of experiences among school heads as a method for improving the quality of schools

In the Netherlands, the model of Mutual Visitations (MV) is used as a tool for improving school management. The model features an independent chair and secretary and the results of the visits are presented to the head teacher in a formal report. This has been presented as an example of good practice by study visit participants as it facilitates an exchange of opinions and good practice between individual schools. It also promotes a continuous improvement process and motivation of school staff to get involved in school improvement as the staff and students (and their parents) are involved in the process (SV 143).

Use of international quality management tools

For about eight years, the German school authorities have run a special initiative to improve the quality of vocational schools. The responsibility for education and QA within education and training lies with each Bundesland (county). Different regions use, for example, different international quality tools, such EFQM or ISO 9000 for quality assurance. All vocational schools in the Saarland region are certificated by the ISO 9000. Additionally, teachers of various vocational schools have participated in internal school development programmes aiming at improving the quality of teaching (SV 147).

As part of a Plan for Quality and Continuous Improvement, the Catalan Ministry of Education (Spain) has offered an opportunity for VET schools in the Catalonia region to take part in a quality improvement project (http://www20.gencat.cat/). The project seeks to
design, implement and continuously improve a management system based on the principles of quality. Around 88 centres took part in this project, and today 48 of them have an accredited system based on the ISO standard and 5 have been assessed according to the EFQM excellence model (SV 147).

5 CONCLUSIONS

Internal and external evaluation systems are evolving at a rapid pace in most Member States, with many reforms and improvements being implemented at different levels and sectors. Authorities are motivated to develop school evaluation systems due to the drive to increase transparency and openness and also to ensure accountability of the educational and training institutions. The commitment, understanding and expertise of schools to introduce and further develop their own methods for self-evaluation however varies strongly from one school and country to another.

What is therefore needed is a need to develop an “evaluation culture”, by which is meant that all stakeholders in the educational world need to be committed to evaluation as a feature of quality improvement and to understand the value of quality assurance for improving student outcomes. The acceptance and support of all members of school communities is vital for achieving real school improvement. Teacher training on quality assurance is one way of contributing to this goal.

With regards to the future development of quality assurance systems, such systems need to ensure that associated bureaucracy is minimised and schools and training institutions have sufficient freedom to implement systems that are based on their needs. The ultimate goal of evaluation needs to remain on improving student outcomes, alongside contributing to the development of each individual child.

Although the organisation of education and training systems are the responsibility of the Member States, policy co-operation on quality assurance and associated challenges in this field, can benefit all parties. However, the 2009/2010 Study Visits suggest that awareness of many education and training practitioners on European level developments in this field (such as the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework, EQARF) is weak. Stakeholders at all levels appreciate opportunities to compare their evaluation systems and practices and therefore networks and visits can help to disseminate information and provide an opportunity to exchange experiences in this field.
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