



## Background document

***“The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn” - Alvin Toffler***

Since the last decade, education and training have been confronted – albeit to a different extent – with the effects of globalisation, economic integration, increased academic and professional mobility and persistent structural unemployment such that a structured dialogue and sustainable cooperation is necessary between them. In addition to the above challenges, the 2008 financial crisis has deepened public deficits, cut off education/training funding almost everywhere, prompted large numbers of dismissals in several Member States and discouraged firms from investing in training or from offering work placements to trainees. Against this background, the Higher Education (HE) and VET sectors are being affected by intensified domestic and international competition, an ageing workforce and the constant IT changes in all economic sectors and professions which are forcing both sectors to modernise, open up to society and business, build up cooperation links with a variety of stakeholders and dialogue with each other. We hope to bring about mutual understanding, reciprocal learning and complementarity as a result of our efforts to offer education services that a single education subsystem cannot offer alone. Quality is – or can become – the facilitator and common ground for such synergies.

The European Strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (EUROPE 2020)<sup>1</sup> focuses on five ambitious goals, from employment to poverty reduction and from innovation to a low carbon economy, all of which feature education as a major lever. However education systems all over Europe are under scrutiny and being criticised for not responding to social needs, with the accusation being made that “employers, education providers, and youth live in parallel universes”<sup>2</sup>. Both HE and VET are called upon by the EU strategy 2020 to contribute to growth and jobs and to cooperate with business. While VET has a long experience of working with business in the context of the dual and apprenticeship systems, for instance, more and more HE institutions are now offering dual educational programmes designed and implemented in close cooperation with industry.

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<sup>1</sup> Communication from the Commission. EUROPE 2020 A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth Brussels, 3.3.2010 COM(2010) 2020

<sup>2</sup> Mona Mourshed, Diana Farrell, Dominic Barton (2012). Education to employment: Designing a system that works. McKinsey Center for Government (<http://mckinseysociety.com/education-to-employment/report/>)

There are still clear gaps in different subsystems (including vocational education and training – VET – and higher education – HE), discontinuities in transition phases (e.g. from VET to HE, from education to labour market and vice versa) and, also, lacunae in mutual understanding and permeability. Both HE and VET have developed in specific ways that originate in their cultures and traditions and both sectors “do not need to do the same work in the same way, but they have similar issues and can learn from each other’s experiences”<sup>3</sup>. Both subsystems have unique strengths and can make different contributions to the overall development of the educational systems at EU and national levels. There are already several EU policies aiming at an integrated approach to education, life learning (general education, initial and continuous VET, higher education and general adult learning) and life-wide learning (learning in all contexts – formal, non-formal, informal, including *inter alia* work-based learning, self-learning and micro-learning). Coherence, continuity and consistency between subsystems are required, because one of the main aims for future policies in education is to facilitate the mobility of learners and learning progression no matter the context or level of education.

The present joint expert seminar should be seen as an **extended brainstorming** event to identify ways to move forward by engaging participants in defining **future areas for an enhanced cooperation and joint work, in order to reinforce trust between HE and VET.**

This joint expert seminar does not analyse the current situation in HE and VET. Rather it looks to the future and addresses emerging shared challenges and policy needs related to quality assurance (intended as the chief tool to increase trust, mutual understanding and permeability), particularly those challenges arising from the tension between learning and working. Both subsystems have grown over the last decade, and significant developments and strengthening cooperation between them will add significant value for all stakeholders involved. The three themes proposed for discussion in this seminar are:

- **quality assurance issues related to work-based learning;**
- **quality assurance of new forms and contexts of learning;**
- **quality assurance and accreditation.**

These three themes have been chosen with this purpose in mind: they are of significant interest as they represent new challenges for both subsystems and are the subject of recent developments in both.

The background document is divided into two parts. Part I outlines the state of the art in quality assurance in the two subsystems – HE and VET, enumerates the main concepts, instruments and policies developed at EU level in the last decade and highlights some parallel developments in both subsectors. Part II uses these common issues and concerns as a basis for proposing a “working concept” for the seminar and presents the three selected themes. The background document is complemented by three “Introductory notes”, which will frame the discussion during the seminar workshops.

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<sup>3</sup> Conclusions of the Conference „Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training”, 11/12 May 2004, University of Graz

The objective of the seminar is to identify areas for enhanced cooperation between the HE and VET subsystems and to agree a roadmap for taking this forward. Fundamental to this process is our understanding that **learning from each other is a continuous, never-ending process.**

## **Part I: The European context of quality assurance in HE and VET: policies and recent developments**

### **1.1. Summary of recent policy development at EU level**

The **Bologna Declaration** of June 1999, the **starting point for reforming HE in Europe**, put in motion a series of reforms needed to make European Higher Education more compatible and comparable, more competitive and more attractive for Europeans and for students and scholars from other continents. Three main axes were envisaged: the introduction of the three cycle system (bachelor/master/doctorate), **quality assurance** and the recognition of qualifications and periods of study.

In the Bologna Process, the **European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education** (ENQA<sup>4</sup>, representing the quality assurance agencies in the field of HE), the **European Students' Union** (ESU, an umbrella of national students' unions in Europe), the **European University Association** (EUA, representing universities and rectors' conferences), and the **European Association of Institutions in Higher Education** (EURASHE, representing professional higher education institutions) were asked to develop quality assurance of higher education further. In this field, the main outcomes were (mostly related to the accreditation process):

- The European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance<sup>5</sup>, designed by ENQA in cooperation with ESU, EUA and EURASHE (“E4” Group), as a common reference framework for the quality assurance processes (internal and external) in HE.
- The organisation (by the “E4” Group) of an annual European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF), gathering higher education institutions, students, quality assurance agencies and other stakeholders to discuss current developments in quality assurance.
- The “Crossroads” website<sup>6</sup> which gives access to quality reviews and to information regarding quality assured and accredited higher education in Europe.
- The European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR)<sup>7</sup>, which is a list of trustworthy agencies carrying out quality assurance activities in substantial compliance with the ESG.

We may also add to this list, the European Consortium for Accreditation<sup>8</sup> (ECA), founded in 2003, with the primary aim of mutual recognition of accreditation decisions, even if this was not a direct result of the Bologna Process.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.engq.eu/>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.engq.eu/files/ESG\\_3edition%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.engq.eu/files/ESG_3edition%20(2).pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.grossroads.eu/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.eqar.eu/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.ecaconsortium.net>

The **Copenhagen Process on Enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training** was launched in Copenhagen in 2002, as a European strategy to improve the overall performance, **quality** and attractiveness of VET in Europe. In the field of quality assurance, the main outcomes were:

- A European Common Quality Assurance Framework<sup>9</sup>, issued in 2003, establishing the conceptual basis for future developments.
- A first European Network for Quality Assurance in VET (ENQA-VET – with two Work Programmes, 2004-2006 and 2007-2009, which supported the development of many common tools.
- The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council (June 2009) on the Establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (the EQAVET Recommendation)<sup>10</sup>.
- The EQAVET Network<sup>11</sup>, with two work programmes, 2010-2012 and 2013-2015, both of which are premised on supporting Member States to strengthen their quality assurance approaches in VET and to develop their national approaches to implementing the EQAVET Recommendation.

**Quality assurance is among the top priorities of both the Bologna and Copenhagen Processes** and has been supported by jointly developed common tools in order to enhance mobility of learners in the high quality area of European education and training. The next step is to enhance cooperation on the content of quality assurance between the two subsystems and to ensure their convergence – as underlined in the following most recent EU relevant policy documents.

The Bruges Communiqué of 7 December 2010 on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training for the period 2011-2020<sup>12</sup> stated that “by changing the perspective from an input-oriented learning process to learning outcomes, comprehensive frameworks which include general education, VET and higher education, can help create transparent, permeable and flexible national qualifications systems”. The aim of VET systems in Europe will be “to develop or maintain post-secondary or higher VET at EQF level 5 or higher, as appropriate, and contribute to achieving the EU headline target of 40% with tertiary or equivalent education and to promote flexible pathways between VET, general education and higher education, and enhance permeability by strengthening the links between them”. For this reason, the EQAVET Network, within the EQAVET Work Programme 2013-2015<sup>13</sup>, proposes as one of the main activities, “fostering cooperation with higher education in order to contribute at EU level to the overall goal of making lifelong learning and mobility a reality.”

The response to labour market needs is on the agenda of the European institutions, networks and associations involved in HE. For instance, the main topic of the 23rd Annual

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.eqavet.eu/gns/library/policy-documents/policy-documents-2003>

<sup>10</sup> <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2009:155:0001:0010:EN:PDF>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.eqavet.eu/>

<sup>12</sup> Communiqué of the European Ministers for Vocational Education and Training, the European Social Partners and the European Commission, meeting in Bruges on 7 December 2010 to review the strategic approach and priorities of the Copenhagen process for 2011-2020. [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/vocational/bruges\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/vocational/bruges_en.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> <http://eqavet.eu/gns/library/promotional-materials.aspx>

Conference of EURASHE<sup>14</sup> in 2013 will be linking education, innovation and employability in a knowledge triangle, in which professionally-oriented programmes will play an important role<sup>15</sup>. Regarding the “employability” pole of the knowledge triangle, the Conference will explore issues like employability in a lifelong learning context, recognition of prior learning, dual and work-based learning opportunities – topics with high priority for the VET subsystem, as well.

Last, but not least, the Communication “Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes”<sup>16</sup>, stated that “VET must be able to react to the demand for advanced vocational skills, tailored to the regional economic context. It also needs to be an open door for those who want to access higher education, as well as individuals who need to re-enter learning to upgrade or update skills”. A European Area for Skills and Qualifications is now envisaged and progress in responding to the rapidly developing policy context will require much greater cooperation between HE and VET.

An analysis of these policy documents reveals that both the HE and VET subsystems are facing common challenges such as:

- The “phase shift” between work place requirements (including technology and knowledge requirements) and what education and training offer in terms of knowledge, skills and competencies.
- The permeability among subsystems (VET and HE included), but also between education and the labour market.
- Linking quality assurance approaches and qualifications, particularly in relation to connecting accreditation to qualifications frameworks.

Existing barriers hinder mobility and exacerbate the existing economic problems, particularly youth unemployment. Effective quality assurance is a key part of addressing these challenges. During this expert seminar we will use the quality assurance “vantage point” in order to identify how these common challenges can most appropriately be addressed.

## 1.2. A holistic approach to VET and HE

In this section of the document we focus on common aspects of the approach to quality assurance in HE and VET subsystems.

Firstly, at **principles level**, both subsystems have an **explicit and strong European dimension**, and “the purpose of a European dimension to quality assurance [in HE] is to promote mutual trust and improve transparency while respecting the diversity of national contexts and subject areas<sup>17</sup>”, whilst EQAVET (listed among “recognition and transparency tools” developed at EU level, alongside with EQF, ECVET and others) “should contribute to quality improvement in VET and to increased transparency of, and consistency in VET policy

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<sup>14</sup> European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) <http://eurashe.eu/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://eurashe.eu/blog/2013/01/15/split-annual-conf-2013-knowledge-triangle/>

<sup>16</sup> The Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes. Strasbourg, 20.11.2012, COM(2012) 669 final [http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/rethinking/com669\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/rethinking/com669_en.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> European University Association (EUA). Graz Declaration 2003. Forward from Berlin: the Role of the Universities. [http://www.eua.be/eua/jsp/en/upload/COM\\_PUB\\_Graz\\_publication\\_final.1069326105539.pdf](http://www.eua.be/eua/jsp/en/upload/COM_PUB_Graz_publication_final.1069326105539.pdf)

developments between Member States, thereby promoting mutual trust, mobility of workers and learners, and lifelong learning”<sup>18</sup>. Thus, both quality assurance tools have the same purpose, **to increase mutual trust, to improve transparency and to promote lifelong learning.**

Secondly, in terms of principles, **observing the interests of learners and the general social interest (including that of employers)** is a common nexus of both quality assurance systems. The focus on learners is common to both the VET and HE subsystems while promoting learner mobility is their shared objective. Consequently, the interests of students and other stakeholders, such as labour market representatives, are at the forefront of internal and external quality assurance processes.

Thirdly, both European quality assurance mechanisms conform to the **principle of subsidiarity**. In this respect, both systems are characterised by **recommended guidelines voluntarily adopted by the Member States and institutions**, which form the background for building quality assurance systems (including standards) at national and provider level.

Finally, both quality systems **focus on the provider level** as the crucial level at which actual quality enhancement and development takes place (even if both have additional focal points: for EQAVET, the national level of quality assurance in VET, and for ESG, the external evaluation/accreditation, carried out by independent external agencies, with associated standards).

At the **instrumental level**, both quality assurance instruments have recommended guidelines:

- The existence of **internal quality assurance systems** – the provider’s own policies and procedures on quality.
- **Self-assessment / self-evaluation** as a primary quality assurance mechanism at provider level and as a foundation for successful external review, evaluation, accreditation or audit.
- **Involving stakeholders** in the process of approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards, including the regular collecting of feedback from employers, labour market representatives and other relevant organisations.
- **The quality of staff and of staff development** as major leverages for quality improvement.
- **The focus on assessment of learners, learning outcomes**, and making the improvement of learning outcomes the main indicator of quality.
- The HE and VET providers should ensure **adequate and appropriate resources** in order to support learning and learners.
- **Reliable data and effective information systems** are absolutely necessary for quality assurance and quality improvement.
- The HE and VET providers should **make relevant information** about the programmes and awards they are offering available to the **public**.

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<sup>18</sup> The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council (June 2009) on the Establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2009:155:0001:0010:EN:PDF>

- The follow-up procedures, resulting from constant monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards, should lead to **appropriate actions for quality improvement**.

The most recent developments at EU policy level confirm both approaches to quality assurance. Both quality initiatives have, obviously, common values, principles and goals, even if instruments and focus are not always identical. **In this context, learning from each other is a must.**

## Part II: Looking for areas of mutual interest

The purpose of this section is to identify commonalities in defining “quality education”, for both VET and HE, based on internationally agreed standards, guidelines and policies and to document the choice of the three themes for this seminar.

### 2.1. Towards a working definition

The first common issue, based on the policy documents mentioned above, is the “**qualification**”<sup>19</sup> **function** fulfilled by both subsystems in the national/local labour market notwithstanding their specific economic, social and scientific roles.

The second common issue is **understanding the concept of “quality”**. It is broadly accepted that quality has a cultural and contextual dimension also, and that it means different things to different societies and cultures and at different times. Consequently, it is only natural that the basic objectives and principles upon the European Union has been developed, influence, to a considerable extent, the education policies and the quality systems in Europe. From this perspective, the contemporary definitions of “quality”, in general, and of “quality of education and training”<sup>20</sup> in particular, are variations on two main themes: fulfilling requirements<sup>21</sup> (defined, usually, as standards) and meeting or exceeding the needs and expectations of stakeholders<sup>22</sup>. Consequently, these definitions imply that customers or clients define (or at least influence, to a considerable extent) what quality means and education providers are held accountable for meeting these expectations on the basis of agreed standards.

Looking further ahead, and seeking to clarify how best to address the issue of quality in an education context, we identify the following common features of the quality assurance approaches of for both HE and VET, which will be addressed during the expert seminar:

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<sup>19</sup> “Qualification’ means a formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards (Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (2008/C 111/01)

<sup>20</sup> See for instance, Harvey, L., 2004–13, Analytic Quality Glossary, Quality Research International (<http://www.qualityresearchinternational.com/glossary/quality.htm>), CEDEFOP Glossary. Quality in Education and Training ( <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/17663.aspx>) or the EQAVET Network Glossary (<http://www.eqavet.eu/qa/gns/glossary/q/quality.aspx>)

<sup>21</sup> See, for instance, the definitions proposed by the International Organization for Standardization [http://www.iso.org/iso/home/standards/management-standards/iso\\_9000.htm](http://www.iso.org/iso/home/standards/management-standards/iso_9000.htm)

<sup>22</sup> Usually, by the “excellence models”, such as EFQM (see, for instance, <http://www.efqm.org/en/PdfResources/Overview%20EFQM%202013%20v1.pdf>) or the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (<http://www.nist.gov/baldrige/enter/education.cfm>).

- A focus on the “qualification function” related to the labour market.
- A focus on learners, learner needs and learning outcomes.
- A focus on standards, developed at provider level.
- A dynamic approach, formulated in a lifelong and life-wide learning perspective.
- The EU dimension – the common policies and goals defined by EU policies.

## 2.2. Areas of shared interest

The themes proposed for discussion during the seminar are:

**Theme 1. Quality-assured work-based learning and work-based assessment.** This topic deals with ensuring quality through blending “work” and “learning” in order to meet the needs and requirements of specific qualifications and professions. This theme has always been difficult to define.<sup>23</sup> We use many different terms to describe it, such as “apprenticeship”, “internship”, “work placement”, “workplace learning”, “practice-based learning”, “work-integrated learning” among others, covering the whole range of professional competencies that include knowledge, practice skills and attitudes<sup>24</sup> in real, “close to real” or simulated working conditions. Thus, we adopt here the widest definition possible (“learning by working” / “learning by doing”) in order to cover practices from both subsystems.

This topic is the subject of extended literature, policies and initiatives in both subsystems because it will lead to a better match between the education / training provision and the needs of the labour market but, also, in general, to a better match with society because “apprenticeship”, in its diverse forms, is a very important method of socialisation.

**Theme 2. Quality assurance of new forms and contexts of learning.** This second issue highlights the learning opportunities offered by the tremendous progress in technology and by the “atypical” contexts of learning. When speaking about “new forms and contexts of learning” we consider several dimensions related to quality and quality assurance:

- **Ensuring the quality of new distance and technologically enhanced learning**, with its specific concepts: “e-learning”, “blended learning”, “adaptive learning”, “synchronous / asynchronous online learning etc.
- **Assuring the quality of new forms of learning** – including self-learning, micro-learning, peer-learning / peer-tutoring, coaching and / or counselling or consultation.

**Theme 3. Quality assurance and accreditation.** The third theme, accreditation, is to be considered as a contributor to promoting trust between different education systems and within each of them. Nowadays, there is such a variety of education/training on offer across Europe (and the world) that mechanisms external to the educational institutions which can guarantee that the institutions are “competent to carry out specific tasks”<sup>25</sup> and that they do so “in accordance with the objectives, criteria and standards of the (national/sector) policy

<sup>23</sup> See, for instance, W. Norton Grubb (2006). Vocational Education and Training: Issues for a Thematic Review. Paris: OECD

<sup>24</sup> Terminology of European Education and Training Policy: a selection of 100 key terms. CEDEFOP (2008). <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/13125.aspx> Luxembourg: CEDEFOP/Office for Official Publications of the European Communities

<sup>25</sup> Assuring quality in vocational education and training. The role of accrediting VET providers. CEDEFOP (2011). Luxembourg: CEDEFOP/Office for Official Publications of the European Communities. <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/19074.aspx>

frameworks for quality”<sup>26</sup>, are essential prerequisites for building sustainable dialogue and trust, if not convergence, between different actors and systems. The workshop will refer to accreditation at national and sector levels. It will focus partly on the relation between internal quality assurance and accreditation and on how the latter could contribute to boosting the former, which is often missing or not sufficiently developed within education/training institutions. The workshop will also consider how accreditation approaches in HE and VET could borrow from each other and achieve a level of compatibility that would be beneficial to learners, the ultimate beneficiaries of all education/training actions.

**All three themes are interrelated.** For instance, work-based learning is being reshaped by the new technologies (as “distant learning” / “e-learning” in its multiple forms) and by the new forms and contexts of learning, such as “learning islands”, “learning partnerships and platforms” or “networks of practice”<sup>27</sup>. Moreover, ICT skills are now embedded in work-based learning and “informal learning” tends to be covered by specific recognition and validation mechanisms within work-based learning. Another example is the challenges raised by the accreditation of web-based or blended learning programmes and, also, of different forms of work-based learning.

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This expert seminar provides an occasion for colleagues from different education subsystems (i.e. vocational education and training and higher education) to share ideas and learn from each other. It builds on similar and successful events in the past – namely, the expert seminar on “Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Lifelong Learning” jointly organized by *Hochschule für Wirtschaft und Recht* Berlin (HWR Berlin) / Berlin School of Economics and Law (BSEL) and CEDEFOP February 2011<sup>28</sup>. We hope this seminar will be remembered as a positive (and not final!) step in building mutual learning and trust. Of course, there are a lot of other possible topics for further debate and collaboration – of which we mention only a few, just to show that cooperation between HE and VET must be seen as a long-term objective:

- **Recognition, validation and certification of informal / nonformal learning** and, related to this, the need to develop **quality assured connection bridges** between education and training systems, on the one hand, and between the “world of education” and “the world of work”, on the other. This means removing the artificial and unnecessary barriers between general education and VET, between VET and HE, between education and the labour market etc.
- **Self-evaluation, peer evaluation and external evaluation**, widely used in both subsystems as part of the approach to quality assurance.

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<sup>26</sup> Accreditation and quality assurance in vocational education and training Selected European approaches. CEDEFOP (2009). Luxembourg: CEDEFOP/Office for Official Publications of the European Communities (<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/5007.aspx> )

<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Modernising vocational education and training Fourth report on vocational training research in Europe: background report Volume 2 (2009). <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/14723.aspx> Luxembourg: CEDEFOP/Office for Official Publications of the European Communities

<sup>28</sup> Expert Seminar on Quality Assurance and Accreditation in a Lifelong Learning perspective <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/events/17805.aspx>

- **Stakeholders' involvement:** the involvement of learners, employers / social partners, governments / policy making bodies in quality assurance and in the creation of institutional mechanisms that integrate feedback for quality improvement.
- **Role and involvement of teachers and trainers:** mechanisms for supporting and recognising the participation teaching staff in all possible phases of the definition and the implementation of an internal quality approach within the educational institutions
- **Using common indicators** (including common definitions of indicators). For instance, the destination of the graduates of the HE or VET programmes and the proportion which passes from VET to HE and vice versa.
- **Combining and integrating peer learning / peer tutoring and coaching with WBL and traditional study programmes.** Fewer induction and professional development programmes are using the classical "training" mechanisms.
- **Embedding career guidance in VET and HE in an integrated way.** Supporting professional development and even "transition" phases with professional advice is becoming common practice in VET and HE but is sometimes designed in different ways.
- **Tackling the other functions of HE (e.g. the "third mission") and VET (e.g. developing key competencies) subsystems in a coordinated way.**
- **Creating "WBL triangles" (universities, VET providers and companies),** by integrating different levels of qualifications through common standards and ensuring professional development and a smooth transition between work, HE and VET.