Background note

Promoting quality in learning delivery: the way ahead

Following the outcomes of the December 2015 seminar ([1]) and in the perspective of supporting the **development of an active community for quality culture among EU learning providers**, the workshop will reflect on a joint work programme between learning providers and Cedefop for the period 2017 to 2020. It aims to promote quality in learning delivery further, following the directions set out in the 2015 Riga conclusions of the Council ([2]).

Four areas for reflection and action will be considered.

> **1. Learning providers and labour market needs:** creating sustainable connections
> **2. Learning providers and societal values:** promoting soft skills, European citizenship and democratic values
> **3. Learning providers in Europe and beyond:** internationalisation of VET and education
> **4. Learning providers and the challenge of technology-enhanced learning (TEL):** enhancing teachers' skills

1. Learning providers and labour market needs: creating sustainable connections

Nowadays mechanisms to ensure sustainable labour market intelligence form part of providers' strategy to raise the relevance of their educational offer and play a prominent role in their communication with external stakeholders and the surrounding community. Often, they are integral parts of providers' quality management approach.

Learning providers have developed their own approaches towards establishing contacts with economic actors to get both timely information on the skills they need, and feedback on their learners' performance. Reflecting on approaches developed by learning providers to understand and meet labour markets needs, and on what makes some approaches more effective than others and under which conditions, could be of shared interest in the light of today's fast-changing professions and of learners' diversified needs and values.

The workshop will discuss possible work objectives in this area including:
- mapping and analysing successful tools and approaches for gathering labour market intelligence and for matching learning provision and jobs;
- developing quality guidelines for the relationships between learning providers and the labour market;
- developing approaches to feedback mechanisms, i.e. what is efficient? Under which conditions? Which stakeholders to involve? How to share outcomes with society effectively? What about early warning systems? Which are the preconditions for, and

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([1]) Seminar 'Learning providers and the competitiveness challenge: promoting quality in education and training delivery at EU level', Cedefop, 10 and 11 December 2015.
([2]) http://www.izm.gov.lv/images/RigaConclusions_2015.pdf

limitations of, 'open communication' (^{3}) within the organisation? And finally, could feedback be part of the quality design of providers' management approach?

2. Learning providers and societal values: promoting soft skills, European citizenship and democratic values

Education and training cannot be limited to the mere acquisition of knowledge and cognitive skills. Learning providers can contribute to acquiring the skills and values that could enable learners to find jobs and their place in society. Skills refer to the so-called 'soft/transversal/social' skills common to all levels of education. Values help learners to become civic-minded members of society. Although soft/transversal/social skills are invariably related to employability, and civic spirit to active citizenship, they are interdependent; emphasising civic spirit and behaviour, without at the same time giving the keys for access to employment and social life, can only undermine the credibility of the civic message.

Whatever the definition of social skills and values (^{4}), a big challenge for education systems and providers relates to their very nature, namely that skills and values are more experience-based and incrementally built than academic knowledge. In other words, they can be developed and learned but not trained and fit into concrete timetables and curricula. They require both time and specific assessment methods as they cannot always be measured. And, above all, learners have to be genuinely convinced of their relevance. Another important challenge is preventing xenophobia and racism from causing disintegration of the European civil society. Both UNESCO (^{5}) and the EU Commission (^{6}) emphasise the importance of a true education for active citizenship to increase social cohesion and reduce the democratic deficit across Europe (^{7}).

The task for learning providers is huge because democratic citizenship is less obvious and natural to people as it incorporates 'democratic values, mutual respect and human rights' (^{8}) and requires significant preparation and efforts on their part. It demands from society and educators a critical rethinking of our values and capacity to share them effectively.

Possible work objectives to be discussed include:

- mapping and analysing student-centred methods and pedagogies developed by learning providers which promote learners' social skills, critical thinking, openness to other cultures and adherence to democratic values;
- how to promote, through education and training, further integration of communities of different origins in host Member States? What about promoting those communities' participation in the shaping of the host countries' society and culture? What could the role of culture be and how could education, training and culture come closer to promote commonality of perceptions and acceptance of differences? Can we learn from the experiences and approaches of other actors in the field, such as civil society groups? What about involving youth organisations and civil society? And more generally, what about developing quality guidelines in this area?

(^{3}) Reina and Reina label this as trust communication when information is regularly and truthfully shared among all stakeholders involved.

(^{4}) Some include self-confidence, learning how to learn and adaptability among them. In its publications the European Commission makes use of a group of five clusters: personal effectiveness skills, relationship and service skills, impact and influence skills, achievement skills, and cognitive skills broken further down into 18 skills. European Commission (2011). *Transferability of skills across economic sectors.*

(^{5}) UNESCO (1995). *Declaration and integrated framework of action on education for peace, human rights and democracy.*

(^{6}) *The characterisation of active citizenship in Europe*, EUR 23995 EN, JRC Scientific and Technical Reports.

(^{7}) The Paris declaration on promoting citizenship and the common values of freedom, tolerance and non-discrimination through education, adopted at the informal meeting of EU education ministers on 17 March 2015 in Paris (8496/15).

(^{8}) *The characterisation of active citizenship in Europe*, opus cited.

3. Learning providers in Europe and beyond: internationalisation of VET and education

European cooperation in education has proved to be a powerful mechanism for bringing European people closer and for speeding up convergence of systems, as it accelerates transfer of expertise from one Member State to another. This convergence is promoted by setting common benchmarks to be attained, common structures to be adopted (the three-cycle university in HE-Bologna process) or by translating education and training into learning outcomes (LOs) promoting a common understanding and language in relation to education.

Cooperation among EU learning providers also serves as a lever for further defining and sharing the so-called 'European identity'. Although there is no single definition of it and the identity is under construction, it is steadily gaining in importance. The Maastricht Treaty has explicitly demanded to bring 'the common cultural heritage to the fore'. This common cultural heritage is meant to shape the (supra-national) European identity and be shared by EU citizens through policy initiatives mainly in education and culture.

Traditionally, international cooperation has been a core activity of universities ([9]) given the cross-border nature of research and disciplines and their open-door recruitment policy.

Although less developed in VET (since training has always been more closely related to regional/local labour market needs), the Europeanisation of the sector is advancing and has been systematically promoted by the Copenhagen process since 2002. As both processes consider QA among their main priorities ([10]), it is almost natural to choose quality as the vantage point from which to identify common challenges, to exchange experiences on what works and what does not, and to elaborate common responses to shared challenges.

The Europeanisation or the European dimension of quality is expected to develop following the Europeanisation movement of education and training. There are other factors, too, that call for European rather than national responses to education and training and its quality, such as student mobility, which requires further cooperation and alignment among institutions involved and a certain level of quality guarantee across the EU.

The workshop will discuss possible work objectives in this area, including:

- mapping and analysing cases of successful cooperation between providers within the EU and beyond;
- is internationalisation an issue for VET? Internationalisation is admittedly more advanced in HE: how could HE share its experience with VET?
- what are the quality-related dimensions of internationalisation/Europeanisation (such as standards)? Are good cases of internationalisation/Europeanisation available? Are guidelines for internationalisation/Europeanisation available? What could we learn from them and how (perhaps through a comparative study)?
- could the development of quality standards for international cooperation be a way to support European cooperation among learning providers? If yes, what could those quality standards cover: mobility or exchange of VET/HE students and/or teachers? Joint development of curricula or of common building blocks in curricula offered by VET/HE providers from various Member States? Awarding of joint diplomas issued by VET/HE-providers from two or more Member States?

([9]) Since their foundation, universities were 'international' institutions. Internationalisation in HE 'is the process of developing a multilateral and multicultural learning and research environment through, for example, redesigning curricula, engaging non-local staff, encouraging students to study abroad and attracting overseas students' (Lee Harvey (2004). Analytic quality glossary. *Quality research international*). However, with the creation of the common market, followed by the single market and then EU integration, the European dimension of HE has prevailed over the international one. Due mainly to the Bologna process, we can now consider HE as an 'Europeanised' sector that the European area of higher education will consolidate.

([10]) At HE level under the form of European standards and guidelines (ESG) and at VET level under EQAVET.

- are the existing three frameworks – the European quality charter for mobility (2006), the EU Council recommendation on youth on the move (2011), and the Erasmus+ quality charter (2013) – sufficient to address emerging issues such as refugee participation in VET and HE?

4. Learning providers and the challenge of technology-enhanced learning (TEL): enhancing teachers' skills

Providers are interested in how teaching staff can guarantee quality in learning delivery within the context of TEL. Consequently, we could focus on teacher-related skills and on how to develop these.

Technology-enhanced learning (TEL) ([11]) is a relatively new area of attention and a major challenge for both providers and teachers. The rapidly developing technologies create new forms and contexts of teaching and learning and demand constant follow-up and update. From providers they demand new infrastructures, usually costly and too often rapidly outdated. From teachers they require new approaches to teaching and interacting with students/learners. Teachers need to know learners' prior learning and experience to be able to integrate and build flexible learning scenarios onto them. Blended learning is needed that includes traditional face-to-face learning, video lessons, and virtual classrooms.

More used in HE since HEIs have been offering e-based learning as part of their university curricula from as early as 2000, TEL is now penetrating the world of VET and learning at the workplace, following the shift from mass production to flexible production methods that require, *inter alia*, handling and producing new information and 'problem solving within technology-rich environments' (TRE) ([12]).

Although 'technology is not good or bad per se, when used, it is not neutral' ([13]) and educators have to take care to reinforce e-learning advantages and minimise its disadvantages. E-learning may also impact negatively on students with poor e-exposure, often from poor socioeconomic backgrounds, deepening the so-called 'digital divide' between them and well-educated students and learners. There is an urgent need to increase vulnerable groups' access to technology and to promote their digital literacy through a series of palliative measures, including customised learning scenarios and teaching. There is also a need to consider how best to use e-learning for attracting NEETs back to learning and reduce their persistently high numbers ([14]). Finally, the effectiveness of TEL depends greatly on the level and quality of the interaction between learners and teachers.

Possible work objectives to discuss include:
- mapping and analysing cases of teachers' further up-skilling in TEL;
- defining the decisive parameters that enhance teachers' e-skills;
- defining the supportive measures needed for delivering effective blended learning to various categories of learners;
- in virtual classes teachers are also expected to play the roles of coaches and facilitators: what are the necessary pedagogical skills for assuming those roles successfully and how could teachers best acquire and exercise them?

([11]) Called also blended learning, adaptive learning, e-learning, distant learning, synchronous/asynchronous online learning, media-driven teaching and learning.

([12]) 'Problem-solving is an important part of work and daily life. The labour market now places a premium on higher order cognitive skills that involve processing, analysing and communication information […] In addition, the widespread diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICT) has transformed ways of working, learning and interacting. As a result, the capacity to manage information and solve problems using digital devices, applications and networks has become essential for life in the 21st century', OECD (2015). *Adults, computers and problem-solving: What's the problem*?

([13])Ibid.

([14]) Young people not in employment, education or training; The EU average NEET rate for 15 to 24 year-olds is 13%.

- assessing learning outcomes has always been among teachers' competences: does web-based learning demand new assessment methods and do teachers need support in defining and implementing them?
- how could teachers be assisted in promoting better access to TEL for 'groups at risk' and convince young NEETs to (re-)engage with learning? How could the media be used in the classroom to encourage student engagement in learning and boost their creativity, including students of disadvantaged groups? How could TEL contribute to strengthening sociocultural cohesion and fighting against intolerance, racism and xenophobia?
- e-learning is more developed in HE; how could the sector share its experience with VET?
- do/could providers develop their own approach to evaluating the quality of programmes, teachers and new learning tools or should/could public authorities be responsible?
- would it be interesting for HE and VET providers to collaborate in developing quality guidelines for further training of their teaching staff/personnel?

Working principles: the following guiding principles are proposed for reflection and agreement**:** 1) focus on the work priorities proposed by the representatives of the European VET-providers networks earlier this year (by 20 March 2016); 2) share knowledge and experience among participants; 3) take stock of Cedefop's and European VET-providers' work done so far; 4) focus on results achievable between 2017-20 subject to members' availability; 5) keep things as simple as possible.

Output: create jointly a European quality framework in learning delivery consisting of quality guidelines/standards on the four areas mentioned above.

Cedefop support: the community could meet biannually and its members could contribute through participation and sharing of the wealth of knowledge and experience they already possess. Cedefop could assume the organisation of the meetings and any other related activity, such as peer-learning activities, if considered of value. Any necessary form of additional support can also be considered.

Annex

Glossary of terms used

Active citizenship advocates that members of […] nation-States have certain roles and responsibilities to society and the environment, although those members may not have specific governing roles […] The implication is that an active citizen is one who fulfils both their rights and responsibilities in a balanced way. Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia.

Bologna Process is the overarching strategy for reforming HE in Europe which considers QA as one of its three fundamental mechanisms together with the three-cycle system (bachelor/master/doctorate) and the recognition of qualifications and periods of study.

The **Copenhagen Process** on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training was launched in 2002 as the European strategy to improve the overall performance, quality and attractiveness of VET.

Employability: combination of factors which enable individuals to progress towards or get into employment, to stay in employment and to progress during their careers. Cedefop (2014). *Terminology of European education and training policy; a selection of 130 key terms.*

The **European Community course credit transfer system** (ECTS) is a systematic way of describing a HE programme by attaching credits to its components (modules, courses, placements, dissertation work), to: make study programmes easy to read and compare for all students, local and foreign; encourage mobility of students and validation of learning outcomes; help universities to organise and revise their study programmes. Cedefop (2014). *Terminology of European education and training policy; a selection of 130 key terms.* ECTS aids the transfer of education credits across European HEIs; it requires consistent quality of inputs and outputs for the programmes of a certain HEI to be explicitly recognised by the rest of HEIs participating in this scheme.

Feedback is the 'transmission of findings from the evaluation process to relevant parties and may involve collection and dissemination of findings, conclusions, recommendations and lessons gained from experience'. OECD (2002). *Glossary of key terms in evaluation and results based management related terms.*

Learning outcomes (LOs): statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process, which are defined in terms of knowledge, skills and competence. Cedefop (2014). *Terminology of European education and training policy; a selection of 130 key terms.*

Mobility is the ability of an individual to move and adapt to a new occupational or educational environment. Cedefop (2014). *Terminology of European education and training policy; a selection of 130 key terms.*

Permeability in education and training is the 'capacity of education and training systems to enable learners to: access and move among different pathways (programmes, levels) and systems; validate

learning outcomes acquired in another system or in non-formal/informal settings'. Cedefop (2014). *Terminology of European education and training policy; a selection of 130 key terms*.

Quality assurance refers to all planned and systematic activities implemented within a quality system and which can be demonstrated as needed, to provide confidence that an institution fulfils the requirements for quality. Cedefop (2014). *Terminology of European education and training policy; a selection of 130 key terms*.

Quality assurance framework definitions

Frameworks within the EU policy, are tools inscribed in the current context of power-decentralisation and increased autonomy that give 'actors in the field' – the learning providers in this case – not only greater freedom to organise their work the way they choose but also greater responsibility and accountability towards authorities, learners and community in general.

According to EQAVET the terms QA approach and QA framework are the same and used interchangeably. By QA approach we mean 'a strategy or plan which defines what systematic measures need to be taken to further develop quality assurance in VET. This is contained in an explicit strategic document which describes the steps necessary for the improvement of national quality assurance systems or, at a minimum, clearly states the intention to strengthen quality assurance in VET. This strategic document can cover other aspects of VET policies besides quality assurance' (Report of the EQAVET Secretariat survey 2013-14 at http://www.eqavet.eu/Libraries/Secretariat). A Cedefop study considers as fundamental elements of such a framework the existence of 'clearly stated objectives for further development, which need to be continuously reviewed and adapted, according to experiences gained in technological and pedagogical innovations and ongoing evolution of work […] a quality framework presupposes agreement on several methodological and procedural principles, which will guide its implementation'. Cedefop (2011). *Assuring quality in vocational education and training. The role of accrediting VET providers*. Cedefop reference series; 90.

The 2015 version of the European standards and guidelines (ESG) distinguishes QA standards as internal, external or referring to QA agencies but it considers all three parts to be 'intrinsically interlinked and together form the basis for a European quality assurance framework'. http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf

In relation to the content of the QA framework under consideration, we could discuss and agree on the quality-related issues shared by both HE and VET that could come under it. Any further reflection on content could be guided by a value-added principle: we could agree to focus on these problematic or grey zones that our cooperation could help clarify or elucidate, even partially.

Quality culture: there is no single definition of what is, it would be relevant to reflect on its contents and meaning for learning institutions; J.P.Nel maintains that quality culture refers to the state of mind of those involved in quality culture and it is possible when all stakeholders accept ownership of the QA process and work together towards best practice learning provision. Lee Harvey defines it as 'a set of group values that guide how improvements are made to everyday working practices and consequent outputs'.

Quality management approach is any integrated set of policies, procedures, rules, criteria, tools and verification instruments and mechanisms that together ensure and improve the quality provided by a VET institution. Quality management can refer to a level internal or external to the institution, or to both, and can focus on one or all of the planning, implementation, checking/controlling and reviewing/adapting stages of providers' quality approach. The quality or PDCA (plan, do, check, act) cycle known as the Deming wheel/cycle: an interactive four-step problem-solving process used for process improvement and which is the basis of most quality approaches.

Student mobility is the 'ability of an individual to move and adapt to a new occupational or educational environment' and can be geographical or functional and can contribute to increasing employability. Cedefop (2014). *Terminology of European education and training policy; a selection of 130 key terms*.

The 17 sustainable development goals form the United Nations 2030 agenda, replace and extend the previous millennium development goals and are broken down to 169 targets to be reached through 'partnerships for the goals'. These partnerships are defined as those which aim at 'effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels' and 'multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilise and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources'. This multilevel definition of partnerships gives them a far-reaching and comprehensive scope, beyond the usual simple or temporary forms of cooperation we are mostly accustomed to. The partnerships are strategic in the new governance needed for achieving the following three objectives: end extreme poverty, fight inequality and advance social justice, and fix climate change. We refer to them because education plays an essential role in achieving these objectives and because they call for world-large participation and cooperation.

Transversal skills: there is no single definition of the term. Often transversal skills are called transversal and basic skills, closely linked to the labour market and defined as 'entrepreneurial initiative, digital skills and foreign languages' that increase employability'. *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and Committee of Regions on rethinking education: investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes* (COM/2012/0669 final).