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LEARNING PROVIDERS AND THE COMPETITIVENESS CHALLENGE : PROMOTING QUALITY IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING DELIVERY AT EU LEVEL

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BACKGROUND NOTE

In the area of education and training, the observed expansion, diversification and decentralization of the learning offer requires quality assurance mechanisms to promote mutual trust between learning institutions, and between them, the labour market and the citizens/learners. Quality assurance (QA)¹ has also become a tool for monitoring and coordinating players through setting targets and standards, without prejudice to their autonomy and institutional decentralisation². In addition, the recent economic crisis and budget restrictions tend to reinforce the accountability function of quality assurance. But above all, QA in education and training ensures reliability and validity of learning outcomes and assessment processes.

These roles of QA are all the more important as education and training are facing new challenges. Learning modes are evolving and increasingly pushing towards technology enhanced learning (TEL). Professions, sectors and labour markets convey changes in occupations, qualifications, skills and competences, and urge for adaptations in learning contents and methods. Furthermore, the globalisation process is generating global skills and trends to global learning standards, bringing on national learning scenes a diversity of multinational companies and other international players, and increasing competition in the education and training arena. Accrual flexibility is required from learning providers as former

¹ 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: *Glossary/Glossar/Glossaire on Quality in education and training*, Cedefop, 2011

² Cedefop, *Assuring the quality of VET systems by defining expected outcomes*, Panorama series; 158, 2008

unidimensional approaches and divides become obsolete³. Educational providers whether in HE or VET have to become adaptable to changing labour markets realities and to learners' diversified needs and values. The European educational landscape is evolving towards greater flexibility while safeguarding relevance and continuity through the EU transparency tools. Quality and QA are key factors for safely navigating these uncharted challenges and make learning more attractive.

1. THEMATIC COVERAGE

The seminar will address the needs and priorities of learning providers in relation to flexibility and the role quality is playing in it.

1.1. Linking General/Higher Education and VET

Constant change and deeper integration characterize the European learning sector through strongly integrative policies based on networking and fulfilling common objectives. In the field of quality evidence suggests that it is possible to bring the HE and VET sub-sectors closer and to develop a “commonly shared vision and language”. For instance, Romania and Malta have developed a unique set of standards for accreditation in (pre-university) General Education and IVET, and set a unique state authority ARACIP and NCFHE respectively in charge of coordinating the accreditation process. In Hungary and the UK/England, a common framework for accreditation applies to both VET and Higher Education, bringing them closer. Despite these achievements, it is true that a sustainable cooperation between HE and VET is still lagging behind and generalising such practices could benefit both: could a common framework for accreditation (including quality assurance) in the perspective of lifelong learning be envisaged? Or should jointly defined QA principles be preferable? Could HE and VET providers develop joint projects for Erasmus+ related to QA and based on their experience of the Bologna and the Copenhagen processes so far?

1.2. Further internationalisation of education and training area

Persistent unemployment, aging societies, increased international competition and skill mismatches call for a concerted response based on the increased and sustainable cooperation between education/training and the world of economy and work. “Intensifying cooperation between VET policy and other relevant policy areas” is

³ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on *New priorities for European cooperation in education and training* COM(2015) 408 final

one of the Bruges Communiqué strategic objectives⁴ and the same need is felt in what concerns the HE universities/business partnerships.

Educational cooperation transcending national borders helps the learning sector to better cope with changing economic and learning environments and renders the EU an attractive learning destination for foreign students. In the context of QA and more specifically in accreditation there are cases of substantial cooperation among foreign accreditation bodies and national authorities. Accreditation in HE and in specialised areas/sectors is or can be awarded by foreign or international agencies and endorsed by national authorities. What could the advantages for learning providers be to seek accreditation from foreign agencies? What would be the requirements? In the VET-subsector more specifically: What could the marketing potential of existing quality labels (e.g. “*Lycée des métiers*” in France’s IVET and *GretaPlus* in its CVET) be? Could they attract (VET) students from abroad? Could internationalisation further strengthen mutual recognition of accreditation in VET between European Member States as it is the case with HE?

1.3. Learning providers and internal quality management

QA can be achieved basically through two ways: an internal one and/or an external to the institution approach both complementary to each other. Cedefop recent work shows that internal quality management within learning providers promotes excellence, favours external recognition and accreditation, strengthens coordination of teaching in classes, makes learner assessment more transparent, and increases student satisfaction⁵. Prolonging this work, the workshop will discuss further issues such as: What are the necessary competences for an effective quality management? What is the role of an internal quality management system in creating a quality culture within a learning institution? How to lead the personnel of the institution and develop its capacities? How to involve teachers and trainers for greater ownership of the quality process? How to develop cooperation and networking with external stakeholders as recommended by the Riga Conclusions 2015 of the Council⁶? How to

⁴ Strategic objective 9. However, despite initiatives such as the VET-Business Forum more work is needed to bring them closer

⁵ Cedefop, *Handbook for VET providers. Supporting internal quality management and quality culture*; Reference series 99, 2015

⁶ http://www.izm.gov.lv/images/RigaConclusions_2015.pdf

respond to the internationalization challenge for a more competitive labour force?

1.4. Providers' accreditation and quality of learning

QA can be also achieved through external to the institution approaches, in particular accreditation⁷. Cedefop recent work on it has shown that accreditation clears the market of education and training, ensures a minimum standard of quality, and enhances providers' image with their 'customers'⁸. Within learning providers, accreditation pushes for quality culture, result orientation and customer focus. It exerts a mobilisation effect through setting concrete objectives which create internal dynamics. Yet, accreditation is time and effort consuming and therefore costly, so one should not expect to make economies through it. More familiar to HE where it is mandatory, it has been further reinforced with the last revision of the European Standards and Guidelines. At VET level, accreditation is progressively used under certain circumstances, like for instance obtaining public funding or the right to deliver nationally recognized qualifications whereas rare are the cases of countries using a single overarching QA and accreditation framework for both the HE and VET sub-sectors, like Malta, for instance.

The seminar will reflect upon: How to avoid red-tape and unnecessary costs in seeking accreditation? How to develop accreditation into a driving force for improving the quality of the educational provision? How to define the right balance between QA and excellence and between internal and external evaluation so that they do not focus only on accountability and do not drain up providers' human and budget resources?

1.5. Rewarding quality

How are providers with an outstanding quality rewarded? More specifically for VET, can a European Excellence Label for Quality in VET be established? Could other ways of recognition of VET providers' excellence be envisaged and even preferable? And at a more comprehensive level, how could good quality help improve the

⁷⁷ Process of QA through which accredited status is granted to an education or training provider, showing it has been approved by the relevant legislative or professional authorities by having met predetermined standards, Cedefop, Glossary 2011

⁸ Cedefop, *Assuring quality in vocational education and training. The role of accrediting VET providers*; Reference series 90, 2011

attractiveness of all levels of education and training and “allow Europe to retain a strong global role”⁹ ?

1.6. Quality in the new forms and contexts of teaching and learning

Following the evolution of professions and labour markets, e-learning is rapidly gaining ground. Borderless by nature e-learning transcends national education systems and deeply rooted divisions between education and training, formal and non-formal learning, higher education and VET, and between learning, creativity and innovation. It constitutes a major dynamic factor for rendering systems permeable, reinforcing inclusion and access, and a greater articulation with workplace learning. This in turn could bring Higher Education and VET sub-sectors closer to each other and support employability of graduates¹⁰.

The European context however is that of a diminishing and ageing teaching workforce. Many countries report teacher shortages. At the same time, the teaching community is asked to provide “the high quality instruction needed to excel in knowledge-based societies”¹¹. Cedefop had organized in 2014 an expert workshop on the quality requirements for the new forms/environments of teaching and learning that TEL (technology enhanced learning) is shaping world-wide. The seminar focused on how to further infuse quality in self-guided learning, informal learning, non-formal learning, as well as e-learning. This time, the following two issues will be discussed:

1.6.1. E-learning and the changing role of teachers and trainers: how can we coordinate better pedagogical preparation and e-skilling?

Meeting the challenge of e-learning requires enabling teachers and trainers to customise learning scenarios for all categories of students/learners; act as coaches and facilitators for increasingly autonomous and empowered students/learners; provide learners with tailor-made didactic material; shift from mono-directional to multilateral communication modes. Today the ITT preparation of teachers is mostly adequate for classroom-based teaching but not for the non-conventional teaching environments or groups of learners e-learning tools allow¹². Consequently, teachers and trainers need to be

⁹ Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (“ET 2020”), (2009/C119/02)

¹⁰ The number of digital jobs at HE level is growing by more than 100.000 per year; EU Commission launches grand Coalition for Digital Jobs, IP/13/182, Brussels, 4 March 2013

¹¹ UNESCO Mobile Learning Week 2014, Empowering teachers with technology

¹² UCU submission to the Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning

trained and supported for more effectively coping with these new challenges. What is the state of play? What can we learn from existing experiences in that area? What are the challenges and the ways forward?

1.6. 2. Redefining quality in e-learning

Offering and delivering e-learning impacts on the training organization itself and its internal quality management system. Which changes are incurred, and how can these be handled? How can we translate these changes in terms of a quality framework? How can we interpret them in terms of accreditation of programmes/courses and provider organizations? And could / should such a framework be common to Higher Education and VET sub-sectors?

2. SEMINAR OBJECTIVES

This seminar is addressed to education and training providers, accrediting and labelling bodies, teachers and trainers, quality and e-learning specialists, learners' associations, social partners, European and national policy-makers, and researchers in the field of quality of learning.

The seminar is intended to allow for exchange of experiences and debates on current challenges related to quality and QA in education and training provision, including the specific topic of e-learning. Both General/Higher Education and VET perspectives are invited, as well as views from institutions, practitioners, users, policy-makers and experts. The objective is to provide participants with insights on the state-of-play, challenges and ways forward in this area. The seminar should also open perspectives on approaches and works developed in the wider community of policy, practice and research in quality of learning.

This seminar will be an important milestone towards the creation of an interactive platform for exchanging information and experience, and organising mutually beneficial seminars on quality assurance in education and training in close cooperation with the main stakeholders and actors in the field.