



Cedefop workshop on the quality assurance of certification in IVET Thessaloniki, 26-27 March 2015

Background discussion paper

Trust in qualifications plays a crucial role for people. Holders of a qualification who have completed a programme and passed the required exams or assessments must inspire confidence that they have actually acquired the learning outcomes associated with the qualification. In this case their qualification has value and they can use it for employment, further education or training. The certification process becomes particularly important in this context and quality assurance mechanisms are essential to ensure that these processes effectively generate credibility and trust.

There is no common definition of the 'certification process' across Europe. In most VET systems it is understood as the assessment process which leads to the awarding of a qualification. In other cases the understanding of certification process is not limited to the 'final phase of the process of gaining a qualification' and therefore isolating the process of certification from the context of teaching and learning in initial VET is sometimes considered as an artificial task. For the purpose of this workshop and in Cedefop's ongoing study on the quality assurance of certification in IVET, the certification process is understood as the multiple (and sometimes interrelated) processes of 'assessment'¹ and 'verification'² of learning that lead to the 'awarding'³ of a qualification.

The importance of certification is stressed in several European mobility and lifelong learning instruments (EQAVET, EQF, ECVET, validation of non-formal and informal learning), however they do not explicitly set out how to ensure the quality of the certification process. Reporting on the implementation of the EQAVET recommendation⁴, most countries confirm that they have devised a national approach for quality assurance in IVET reflecting their national, political and cultural contexts. These approaches differ in terms of whether countries focus on inputs, processes or on outcomes. Moreover as qualification systems increasingly allow qualifications to be acquired through different learning pathways, the quality assurance of learning provision cannot be the only element underpinning the award of qualifications⁵. In this context the European Commission's report to the European

¹ Assessment is understood as the process of establishing the extent to which a learner has attained particular knowledge, skills and competences against criteria such as learning outcomes or standards of competence.

² Verification and grading is understood as the process following assessment which confirms that certain assessed learning outcomes achieved by the learner correspond to predetermined criteria (standards) which are required for a qualification or a part of it.

³ Awarding of a qualification is understood as the process of officially attesting achieved learning outcomes by issuing a certificate to an individual.

⁴ EQAVET (2014). *Supporting the implementation of European quality assurance reference framework: results of EQAVET Secretariat survey 2013/14*. <http://www.eqavet.eu/gns/what-we-do/implementing-the-framework/progress-report.aspx>.

⁵ Cedefop (2013). *Quality: a requirement for generating trust in qualifications*. Briefing Note, March 2013. http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/9078_en.pdf

Parliament and the Council on the implementation of the EQAVET Recommendation stresses the importance of systematic quality assurance arrangements underpinning qualification design and certification. The definition of qualification⁶ in the EQF recommendation draws attention to the elements of certification which build trust if supported by systematic quality assurance arrangements. These are:

- learning outcomes
- standards
- assessment and validation⁷
- the competent body

Cedefop has examined how certification arrangements are regulated and implemented in 12 European countries⁸. The study investigates quality assurance arrangements of the certification process at three levels: regulatory provisions at national/regional level and agreements with the social partners (macro level), interpretation and implementation of these regulations at the level of VET providers and other organisations which are implementing certification processes (meso level) and actors such as teachers, trainers and assessors who are executing certification processes within these organisations (micro level).

The findings point to a variety of arrangements:

- i. national regulations/requirements refer to assessment standards (e.g. descriptions of learning outcomes to be assessed, methods to be used in assessment, organisation and evaluation of assessment);
- ii. national quality assurance systems/frameworks referring specifically to provisions related to the quality and transparency of exams;
- iii. quality assurance arrangements related to certification within accreditation procedures of VET providers, examination centres and companies offering work placements;
- iv. quality management systems at provider level referring to certification arrangements (e.g. organisational processes/guidelines, definition of roles and responsibilities - including the involvement of external stakeholders, such as other VET providers and external assessors, representatives of labour market etc. – provision of infrastructure);
- v. requirements relating to the profile, selection, and training of assessors;
- vi. VET providers collecting and analysing data on nationally defined indicators and/or at their own initiative;
- vii. national requirements relating to documentation, monitoring, evaluation and review of certification procedures.

These arrangements will be illustrated with country examples and discussed in detail during the workshop.

⁶ Qualification is here understood as the 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 (EQF Recommendation, 2008)

⁷ The term verification is used in this workshop instead of validation to avoid confusion with the way the term is used in the Recommendation on validation of non-formal and informal learning.

⁸ The countries selected for this study are: Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Finland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Slovenia and the UK-England.

Session I:

Implications of the learning outcomes approaches to ensuring quality of certification process

As set out earlier the existence of a standard against which achieved learning outcomes can be compared is a crucial aspect of certification. This standard defines the reference for assessment, verification and awarding⁹. Although countries are at different stages regarding the use of learning outcomes in general and in certification processes in particular, in most VET systems in the Cedefop on-going study on the quality assurance of certification in IVET, learning outcomes are used in the certification process. In several IVET schemes learning outcome-based standards are seen as an important point of reference to ensure the quality of certification and are considered as useful by practitioners and learners/candidates. In IVET contexts where learning outcomes have been used for a long time already, the general acceptance of the learning outcomes approach is relatively high. In contexts where learning outcomes based standards have not yet been fully introduced, assessors usually consider them as useful, or at least partly useful. The benefits and challenges related to the use of learning outcomes in certification processes as identified in the study point to some tensions or aspects for which adequate balance need to be found.

- (a) **Reliability and validity**¹⁰: The quality assurance of assessment frequently refers to dimensions such as validity and reliability. These dimensions are of crucial importance for all assessments and they need to be ensured via methods that are fit for learning-outcomes based assessment in particular in work-based learning. For example centralised and standardised forms of assessment can enhance reliability, but to ensure validity of competence-based assessment and the achievement of professional competences, practice-oriented assessments which are carried out in authentic environments are highly important. However, this implies that assessment situations differ to a certain degree, since assessment tasks have to be adapted to the specific conditions and needs of the work place. Thus, validity is enhanced at the expense of reliability.
- (b) **Common language between the world of education and world of work**: Learning outcomes are widely seen as offering a common language allowing for improved communication and cooperation within education and training and between education and the labour market¹¹. Furthermore, when working life requirements are translated into educational goals (expressed in learning

⁹ Cedefop (2009). *The relationship between quality assurance and VET certification in EU Member States*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/Files/5196_en.pdf, p17

¹⁰ Reliability is about whether the same assessment results can be obtained in a different context or by a different assessor, while validity checks whether the methods and instruments used in assessment measure the knowledge, skills and competences they claim to measure. *Ecclestone, 2006: Understanding assessment and qualifications in post-secondary education and training*.

¹¹ Cedefop (2014). Conference Background Note *STEPPING UP THE PACE The next stage of European tools for transparency, recognition and quality for learning and work*. <http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/events/SteppingUpThePace2014>

outcomes), employers get a better understanding of what to expect from those completing training. Learning outcomes have to be formulated in a way to be comprehensible for assessors, learners and labour market representatives. However the structuring of learning outcomes statements varies and the main dimension of learning domains (illustrated by the knowledge, skills and competence dimensions used by EQF) is approached in different ways, potentially preventing a common understanding between different actors (ibid.).

- (c) **Degree of detail and flexibility:** In order to be meaningful and limit different interpretation by stakeholders involved in assessment processes, learning outcomes need to clearly express performance expectations of learners. Also the context or condition in which the activity will be carried provides important information. However findings of Cedefop's ongoing study on the quality assurance of certification shows that descriptions should also leave sufficient room for flexibility (i.e. for being adapted to local needs) and therefore a balance between a sufficient degree of detail and flexible adaptation is necessary.
- (d) **Alignment of teaching, learning and assessment:** In the study people consider learning outcomes as useful because they provide a reference point and allow for a better alignment of learning objectives, teaching/learning methods and assessment. As a reference point they may also facilitate processes to support students in their learning process and evaluate their progress (assessment for learning). However, learning outcomes are not always written in a way which facilitates assessment; sometimes being very vague or failing to specify performance criteria. In addition criticisms refer to the fact that "only relatively simple learning outcomes are meant to be testable, and tests can also only cover a fraction of what has been learned, the outcome orientation would in fact not improve learning but impoverish it."¹²

To address these issues, participants are invited to discuss the importance of learning outcomes standards as points of reference for the certification process:

- i. To what extent are learning outcomes standards a key requirement to ensure the quality of certification process? What else is important?
- ii. Which are the strengths and challenges when using learning outcomes standards in the certification process in your country?
- iii. How can these challenges be addressed?

¹² Lassnigg, L. (2012). Lost in translation': learning outcomes and the governance of education. *Journal of Education and Work*, 25:3, pp. 299-330. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2012.687573>, p310

SESSION II

Evaluation and monitoring of Certification processes: How to review IVET based on results and experiences from certification processes?

The analysis of results and experiences from certification and the use of feedback to improve the quality of certification is highly important and contributes to better teaching and learning. To make this happen documentation and monitoring as well as evaluation and feedback (e.g. from learners and assessors) is necessary. The information gained can be used for improving the methods applied as well as the learning outcomes which form the basis of a programme or qualification.

Findings from the study show that monitoring and evaluation activities regarding certification processes are not systematically followed in most IVET contexts. Experiences from the certification processes (except for data on completion rate) are only taken into account when reviewing IVET in a very few cases. There are also only a few examples of systematic arrangements to monitor and improve the way learning outcomes are used in assessment in the IVET schemes examined were identified. These findings are in line with the results of the EQAVET Secretariat 2013/14 survey which confirm that only about a third of the countries always carry out regular reviews and that only a few are using the EQAVET outcome oriented indicators, such as 'share of employed learners at a designated point in time after completion of training' or 'utilisation of skills at the workplace'.

To consider these findings, the following questions will be discussed in the working groups:

- i. What information from the certifications process is important to collect for:
 - a. improving tools and methods used in certification,
 - b. improving teaching and learning
 - c. revising the standards used in certification.
- ii. How can these data be collected? By whom?
- iii. Which are the challenges in relation to the collection and use of these data? How can they be addressed at VET provider and system level?