

The Romanian National Reference Point

Communication Strategy

With the support of the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Union

A common strategy for communication with all stakeholders is essential in order to implement the European policies regarding quality assurance (mainly the EQAVET Recommendation), but also of other EU Tools – such as EQF and ECVET. From all our researches and analysis, the EU Tools are not widely known at VET providers' level but also among other stakeholders.

Thus, their implementation would be slower in the absence of a powerful Communication strategy. According with this strategy, all relevant documents, practices and tools developed at European level, the best practices identified together with our partners, will be brought closer to the relevant stakeholders by classical and ITC means: documents translated and disseminated at national level via website and printed materials, conferences and workshops etc.

1. Introduction

1.1. European Context

Ensuring convergence, transparency and mutual trust between vocational education and training (VET) systems across Europe has been a constant concern during the past decade at European level. Therefore, the Copenhagen Process, initiated in 2002, supports European cooperation in VET based on four priorities:

- Promote mobility by enhancing the European dimension in VET.
- Improve transparency (concerning VET systems and qualifications), policy-making, information and counselling (especially from the perspective of lifelong learning).
- Ensure the recognition of competencies and qualifications, including establishing a common set of principles for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.
- Develop common instruments for quality in VET, to include addressing the learning needs of teachers and trainers.

Therefore, several common European policies (hereinafter called "European Tools") were initiated to increase mobility, transparency of qualifications and mutual trust between VET systems and providers. Among them, we mention:

- Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) for lifelong learning (April 2008). EQF will reference the various national qualifications framework against a common European reference framework.
- Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET - June 2009).
- Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council (June 2009) on the Establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET (EQAVET Recommendation).
- Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 December 2006 on key competences for lifelong learning, highlighting the importance of these competences both for social and professional integration and for fostering economic competitiveness.
- Europass – portfolio of documents (includes Europass CV, Language Passport, Diploma Supplement, Certificate Supplement, Europass Mobility) facilitating recognition of competences and qualifications, adopted in 2004 and used extensively by millions of European citizens.
- Recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning, identified as European priority since 2004 (General Principles for the validation of prior learning) and confirmed by the Bruges Communiqué.

The EQAVET Framework, adopted by 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, is a voluntary instrument to be implemented progressively and in compliance with the national legislation and practices. The main users of the EQAVET Framework are public authorities, bodies in charge with quality assurance and quality improvement, as well as VET providers. The framework comprises three key elements, useful for the development of quality systems: (1) general recommendations on educational policies – the main body of the document (2) lists of quality criteria and indicative descriptors – at system level and at VET provider level (included in Annex I to the Recommendation); (3) list of quality indicators (included in Annex II to the Recommendation). The Framework also comprises a quality assurance and improvement cycle consisting of four essential stages: (1) planning, (2) implementation, (3) evaluation and (4) review, supported by the common quality criteria, indicative descriptors and quality indicators mentioned above.

The Bruges Communiqué on enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training for the period 2011-2020 supports the main VET development directions set by the "Copenhagen Process". With regards to **quality assurance in VET**, the new document states:

- **Strategic objectives and actions** concerned with fostering the excellence, quality and relevance of both I-VET and C-VET: in order to guarantee improved quality, increased transparency, mutual trust, the mobility of workers and learners, and lifelong learning, participating countries should establish quality assurance frameworks in accordance with the EQAVET Recommendation; in this respect participating countries should – by the end of 2015 – establish at national level a common quality assurance framework for VET providers, which also applies to associated workplace learning and which is compatible with the EQAVET framework.
- The **commitment of all parties** to ensuring the sustainability and excellence of vocational education and training – high quality initial VET (I-VET) and easily accessible and career-oriented continuing VET (C-VET).
- The **focus on results** – an approach based on learning outcomes (including for the VET curricula) and which caters for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.
- The **focus on the quality of teachers, trainers and other VET professionals**.

All the objectives and actions of the Copenhagen process have been supported since 2005 by the European networks for quality assurance in VET: ENQA-VET (by its first and second programme), and **EQAVET** (since 2010). Within the EQAVET network, the European Commission, social partners and member states participate actively in the development of common principles, reference criteria and indicators, guidelines and tools for quality improvement in VET at national, regional and local levels.

The purpose of the **European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training network – EQAVET** -, which replaced ENQA-VET, is to create a structured and sustainable platform for Member States to exchange information and experience, engage in debate and learn from one another. The main activities of EQAVET, listed in the network work programmes for 2010–2012 and 2013-2015, are designed to contribute to the improvement of quality assurance in vocational education and training across Europe. By implementing this work programme, EQAVET:

- Creates a **well functioning community of practice** for the quality assurance of VET at European level, which brings together the Member States, the social partners and the European Commission;
- Provides **technical support** to the Quality Assurance National Reference Points, strengthening their position as main actors in quality assurance in national context;
- Strengthens **links with the Lifelong Learning Programme** (LLP), especially Leonardo da Vinci projects;
- Ensures **cooperation with the other "European Tools"** (indicated above).

The EQAVET work programme for 2013–2015 was published recently (see www.eqavet.eu).

1.2. National Context

Starting from the assumption the Romanian state, by virtue of signatures placed on the documents adopted as Recommendations of the European Parliament and of the Council, asserted the political commitment to adopt the European policies mentioned above, the next obvious step is their operationalisation for implementation in a coherent, unitary and consistent way. There are several strategic documents and legal provisions which provide for the implementation of these European policies.

There are numerous strategic documents and legal provisions which mention or provide for the implementation of the "European Tools". Moreover, the National Education Law no 1/2011 provides at Art. 355, paragraph (2) the main duties of the National Group for Quality Assurance (GNAC), as National Reference Point of the EQAVET Network. GNAC is an informal body coordinating the harmonisation of quality assurance systems in vocational education and training at national level. It is an advisory body for inter-institutional coordination, without legal personality, operating at national level in the field of quality assurance in vocational education and training, based on the written association agreement signed by member institutions. GNAC fulfils its advisory role by **information activities, targeting the main stakeholders, by supporting the development and use of specific instruments, by fostering experience exchange between training providers, by communicating viewpoints and recommendations on quality assurance in vocational education and training.**

Nevertheless, besides strategic and legal initiatives, many consultations at European level, as well as research in the field demonstrated **low awareness of the "European instruments"**, especially among social partners and VET providers. However, communication with stakeholders is **the prerequisite for the successful implementation of any public policy**, both at national and at European levels. Therefore, there is a need for a **common communication strategy with all key stakeholders**, a strategy to provide the necessary relevant information (in Romanian language) for the decision-making process and to create a platform for dialogue, both for decision-makers and the other actors involved.

Such a communication strategy is needed especially since there are different levels of implementation of the "European instruments":

- There is significant progress in the implementation of the Common Quality Assurance Framework (EQAVET) in the initial vocational education and training (provided by the school system), but less in the continuing VET.
- The development of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is only in the initial stages, despite Romania's commitment to have it referenced to the European Framework (EQF) in 2012.
- Notwithstanding Romania's active participation in the activities aiming at the development of the credit transfer system (ECVET), there is still a need for implementation actions, both in initial and continuing VET.
- The EUROPASS instruments (Europass CV, Language Passport, Diploma Supplement, Certificate Supplement, Europass Mobility) are widely used.
- Developments in the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning in the past 5 years targeted mainly continuing VET.
- Development of key competences became a strategic target of the pre-university education, in compliance with the provisions of the National Education Law No 1/2011.

Starting from these findings and from the "Methodology for the implementation of the European Quality Assurance Framework in Vocational Education and Training in Romania" (developed within an ESF funded project), One of the GNAC members, the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education (ARACIP) applied for European funding under the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP, Leonardo da Vinci Programme, restricted call for EQAVET National Reference Points, of July 2010). The project sub-

mitted, with the name "Capacity Building for the Romanian National Reference Point: Promoting Quality – QUALVET@RO" was one of the five projects selected under this call for project proposals.

The aim of the project is to develop and pilot a communication strategy for the EQAVET National Reference Point (GNAC: "National Group for Quality Assurance"), in order to implement the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET), as well as the policies and instruments developed within EQAVET.

The associated **objectives** of the project are:

- **To develop and pilot a communication strategy** – by GNAC, with the contribution of project partners and other relevant institutions and stakeholders.
- **To raise awareness on the importance of implementing European initiatives in the field of quality assurance in vocational education and training**, among all stakeholders.
- **To disseminate the policies and instruments developed by EQAVET and by the project partners.**

2. Strategic Lines

The communication strategy will support decision-makers at national level, social partners and other stakeholders to achieve the European objectives set for quality assurance in VET and the implementation of "European Tools". This strategy will support GNAC in fulfilling its tasks as EQAVET National Reference Point and in reaching the objectives of the EQAVET communication strategy:

- To facilitate the implementation of the EQAVET Framework by enhancing cooperation, strengthening the National Reference Points and supporting the development of specific structures, methodologies and instruments.
- To support the quality assurance and improvement processes in VET, at Member States level and at European level, for the successful implementation of European policies within the "Copenhagen Process".
- To develop concrete quality assurance processes, which are essential for fostering mobility of European citizens in education and on the labour market and for the implementation of other common European instruments, such as EQF and ECVET.
- To encourage decision-makers and training providers to approach quality assurance in a lifelong learning perspective with a view to strengthen the links between VET and the other sub-systems of education and the labour market.
- To implement quality assurance mechanisms at the level of learning processes and in the recognition of qualifications, regardless of where they were obtained: in school, company or in informal learning contexts.
- To support the development of a methodology for quality assurance and improvement in VET, in order to promote mutual trust and partnership between VET and key actors.

Building on the **existing European and national context**, starting from the **GNAC role as national reference point** of EQAVET, considering the **objective of the EQAVET network** (and GNAC) to encourage decision-makers, training providers and all other stakeholders to approach quality assurance in a lifelong learning perspective and in order to strengthen the links between VET and the other sub-systems of education and the labour market and having regard to the **good practices** emphasized by the European partners, **GNAC proposes four strategic action lines in the field of communication.**

1. Informing and consulting stakeholders on the development of the "European Tools".

"Evidence-based decision-making" is one of the keys to the management excellence. Therefore, decision-makers should have access to updated information on the development of "European Tools". Even though each institution with decision-making authority does have information in its own field of expertise, one may often notice a lack of such information for related fields, on the other "European Tools". Therefore, the decision-making process does not rely on all available data .

Although this strategy targets mainly the decision-makers in the field of quality assurance in VET – Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labour, National Qualification Authority and other regulatory bodies – it will also aim at representative organisations of social partners (employers associations and trade unions, sector committees, social dialogue commissions) and the general public, through the mass media.

Starting from these key issues, the goal to **inform stakeholders** should be achieved by **traditional means** (booklets, newsletters, brochures), by **targeted actions** (working groups, regional seminars, conferences), by **IT means** (websites, databases etc.) or by **mass media** (interviews, press releases and conferences etc.).

Best practice examples:

- **Websites** of the EQVET National Reference Points from Austria (www.arqa-vet.at) and the Netherlands (www.eqavet.nl)
- **Newsletters** developed by the National Reference Points from Austria (http://www.arqa-vet.at/kommunikation/newsletter/newsletter_archiv/) and the Netherlands (<http://www.eqavet.nl/publicatie.aspx>)

2. Developing a national platform for dialogue to ensure involvement of all stakeholders in the debate on the implementation of European Tools in VET.

As we highlighted above, stakeholders involvement in the development and implementation of European policies is a prerequisite for their success. Employers, trade unions, training providers, regulatory authorities are the ones who should understand and implement them. On the other hand, their feedback is useful for the necessary adjustments, the fine-tuning of the European policy with the actual situation in each Member State. Considering the wide diversity of the European VET systems, the implementation of the various European policies will be different in different systems. Permanent dialogue with the key actors, especially with the social partners, is necessary in order to define concrete implementation measures.

Moreover, when it is not scarce, dialogue between European policies and initiatives is not structured. Obviously, each national reference / contact / communication point does relate, traditionally, with the actors they deem essential for the implementation of a particular European policy. So far, dialogue between the national representatives of the "European iTools" has not been a priority (as there are no explicit objectives for this). At best, representatives of other European policies are invited as observers (not as actors!) to the respective activities (working groups, conferences, seminars, round tables etc.), and there is no explicit concern for identifying the common elements and the manner they complement one another.

Therefore, in order to ensure coherence and consistence of dialogue with key actors, on the one hand, and between the different European policies, on the other hand, we need to **build systematically opportunities for dialogue, information and views exchange.**

Best practice examples:

- **Advisory EQAVET Group**, set up to support the activity of the Dutch National Reference Point. The Advisory Group is chaired by a representative of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and it includes representatives of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, of the associations of public and private VET providers, of the VET students organisation, of teachers and other employees (through the trade unions).
- **Conference** organised by the Austrian National Reference Point on the development of certification of training of people involved in quality assurance in VET (03.12.2012, Vienna; http://www.arqa-vet.at/arqa_vet/konferenz_2012/)

3. Promoting unity, consistency and coherence in the implementation of "European Tools"

Each European initiative has its own decision-making body, agenda and plan of events but usually these initiatives target the same actors (essentially, decision-makers and regulatory institutions, social partners and training providers). There are also specific key messages of these "European instruments", such as:

- "trust" for EQAVET – meaning the trust of stakeholders in VET programmes;
- "transparency" for EQF and Europass – qualifications included in the national framework should be transparent for employers, training providers and trainees;
- "mobility" for ECVET and Europass – horizontal, cross-sector and vertical mobility of qualifications at national and European levels.

Therefore, there is the danger of a "tunnel vision", of viewing an instrument as an isolated result of a European policy, separate from other European policies and initiatives, with no influence whatsoever on them. Moreover, sometimes different events under various European initiatives are organised within the same period and often the same persons are invited to attend, as representatives of the same actors.

Stakeholders information and development of dialogue between stakeholders should not be seen as isolated, but as interactive activities: The "European Tools" should be tackled as a whole, emphasizing the interactions and how they enhance one another, so as to avoid, at all costs, the tunnel vision described above. Moreover, the key messages of the three "instruments" indicated above are complementary in nature: for example, "trust" derives, among others, from "transparency" and leads to increased "mobility". All these messages should be **identified and communicated specifically** to each category of actors, by presenting the underpinning concepts, principles and methodologies but, most important, by highlighting **the benefits** to be gained by each category of actors following the implementation of the respective "European Tool".

The common approach on "European instruments" will lead to **simplification of procedures and more efficient implementation by decreasing the number of events and resources allocated to this purpose.** A good example in this respect is the joint seminar of EQAVET, EQF și ECVET organised in Bonn, on November 2011. In order to achieve this, there is a need for increased flow of information between the national reference/communication/contact points of the various instruments and GNAC provides a proper framework for this communication process.

Consequently, **the documents on the implementation strategies and policies, the operational procedures, the promotional materials and the events organised should be correlated, with an indication of the contribution of each “European instrument” to reaching the national and European strategic targets in the VET field. Communication with stakeholders should insist on the benefits of unitary implementation of those “European instruments”, as opposed to an isolated approach, on the added value of the joint implementation of “European instruments”.**

Best practice examples:

- The Regional Seminars of the QUALVET@RO project, where the “European instruments were presented” in their interaction. The conclusions of these regional seminars were summarized in the Policy Note “Towards an Integrated Strategy for the Implementation of European Policies in Vocational Education and Training”

4. Involving stakeholders and using their expertise and good practices

There is already experience gathered in the implementation of the above mentioned European instruments, as well as a considerable amount of good practice. Some of it has been achieved in projects implemented in partnership with similar institutions from the European Union, under the Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP). Another source of good practice is in the processes of development and implementation of own national instruments for quality assurance in vocational education and training – many of which benefitted from non-reimbursable European funding. We can also add the outcomes of educational research and of involvement of other institutions providing financial support – such as UNICEF or Roma Education Fund.

These good practices involve strategies to foster participation in vocational education and training, transparent and flexible mechanisms for regular consultation of stakeholders, efficient ways to generate stakeholders trust in vocational education and training programmes etc.

A good communication strategy should provide for the **identification, collection and dissemination of such good practice examples, and should encourage their multiplication, including at the level of system policies.**

Best practice examples:

- Best practice examples on the implementation of the “indicative descriptors” presented in Annex I of the EQAVET Recommendation and of the “quality indicators” presented in the Annex II of the EQAVET Recommendation may be seen on the EQAVET website, for “System level” (<http://www.eqavet.eu/qa/gns/home.aspx>) and for “Provider level” (<http://www.eqavet.eu/qc/gns/home.aspx>).
- Examples of projects funded by the Lifelong Learning Programme aiming at quality assurance in education, with a focus on vocational education and training http://www.qalll.net/good_practice_projects/.

III. Recommended communication activities to achieve the strategic action lines

Communication activities undertaken so far using mainly the resources of the QUALVET@RO project, which have already demonstrated added value:

- The website (which includes a more and more substantial database, of almost 1000 pages) already exceeded 1000 visitors.
- The two leaflets, the four issues of the newsletter "Promoting Quality!" and the three brochures on "Good Practices" were printed in 2000 copies which are being distributed to stakeholders.
- The two project conferences with approximately 200 participants, representatives of stakeholders at national and regional levels.
- The eight regional seminar with almost 400 participants, representatives of stakeholders at regional and local levels.

These activities should be continued, insofar as there are resources, but other activities, with high added value and sustainable with the existing resources, should be identified. Considering the experience accumulated so far as well as the sustainability requirement mentioned above, in the near future GNAC will undertake the following:

1. Improve and update the GNAC website www.gnac.ro (or www.eqavet.ro). This website will continue to be updated and the database will be permanently developed due to contributions of the GNAC members and of beneficiaries.
2. Publish on the websites of GNAC members the events and activities for the implementation of "European Tools".
3. Raise awareness on the "European Tools" in all national and international events attended by GNAC members. Similarly, representatives of other "European Tools" will be invited to participate in events organised for the implementation of a particular "European instrument".
4. Use European funding (Lifelong Learning Programme LLP until 2013, "Erasmus for all" starting from 2014, and the European Social Fund) for the implementation of "European Tools" at national level.
5. Organize regular forums to ensure dialogue between stakeholders on essential topics such as: contribution of "European Tools" to improving the links between training providers and the labour market, communication between promoters of various "European Tools", common elements of the quality assurance systems in VET with participation of the representatives of other subsystems (general education, higher education, adult education etc.).
6. Publish the online quarterly newsletter of GNAC ("Promoting Quality"), using the template developed under the QUALVET@RO project.



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