

Council conclusions of 20 May 2014 on quality assurance supporting education and training

(2014/C 183/07)

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

RECALLING THE POLITICAL BACKGROUND TO THESE CONCLUSIONS, AS SET OUT IN THE ANNEX HERETO,

WELCOMES:

the progress achieved in developing a culture of continuous quality enhancement in education and training systems across Europe – although in varying degrees due to different starting points – as highlighted in a number of recent Commission reports ⁽¹⁾.

CONSIDERS THAT:

1. As key contributors in the drive towards better jobs, stronger growth and competitiveness, EU education and training systems face significant challenges which continuous quality enhancement can help to address. These challenges include: broadening access; reducing dropout and improving retention rates; supporting innovative learning; and ensuring that learners acquire the knowledge, skills and competences required for an inclusive society, active citizenship, lifelong learning and employability, regardless of their social and economic backgrounds.
2. Quality assurance mechanisms can play an important role in helping education and training institutions and policy makers to meet those challenges, ensuring that the quality of education and training systems and that of individual institutions are fit for purpose. Quality assurance – as part of a range of measures by governments and institutions – increases transparency and underpins trust in the relevance and quality of knowledge, skills, competences, and qualifications, which in turn is based on trust in the quality of the institutions and providers of education and training.
3. European quality assurance instruments, in conjunction with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area and national qualifications frameworks related to these, have all contributed to the development of a quality culture in education and training institutions, which in turn has also facilitated learning and labour mobility across borders and systems.
4. In the light of the experience gained in higher education and in vocational education and training (VET), flexible quality assurance arrangements can support quality enhancement in formal and non-formal learning in all sectors of education and training, as well as cater for growing phenomena such as Open Educational Resources and cross-border education, including franchising ⁽²⁾.

AGREES THAT:

1. Considerable scope exists for more effective approaches to quality assurance across all sectors of education and training, which move away from a 'checklist' approach towards the development of a genuine ingrained culture of quality enhancement in teaching and learning which can raise standards and improve learning outcomes.
2. Quality assurance - within a framework of continuous quality enhancement - should support reforms of education and training systems in line with EU and national reform agendas.
3. In the field of higher education, quality assurance - particularly internal quality assurance - has become increasingly effective in assisting higher education institutions (HEIs) to achieve their goals. The design of external quality assurance differs among Member States depending on national needs and circumstances, with programme accreditation and institutional-level evaluation, amongst others, contributing to increasing

⁽¹⁾ See annex ('Other background').

⁽²⁾ *Cross-border education* encompasses the provision of higher education services abroad through branch campuses or in the framework of franchising or validation agreements entered into between an exporting and a receiving institution.

trust and improving standards. The trend in external quality assurance towards institutional-level evaluation is growing, enabling HEIs to adapt their provision in a more flexible manner which responds to their own needs and those of learners, the labour market and society.

4. In the same field, cross-border cooperation in quality assurance has a vital role to play in building trust and raising quality standards, in supporting learning mobility, in improving the environment for joint programmes and in contributing to the smooth functioning of cross-border and franchised higher education. Opening up opportunities for quality assurance agencies to offer cross-border quality assurance through the European Quality Assurance Register for higher education (EQAR), while complying with national requirements, should help to stimulate a European dimension in quality assurance and to facilitate cross-border evaluation and simpler procedures for joint programmes.
5. In the field of vocational education and training (VET), the guidance tools and training materials developed within the EQAVET⁽¹⁾ network have supported progress towards a quality culture in Member States, and most Member States have either already implemented or are currently developing a national quality assurance approach in line with EQAVET. Increased efforts should be made in particular to ensure that quality assurance arrangements take greater account of learning outcomes and that they cater for non-formal learning and work-based learning in either formal or non-formal settings, as appropriate to the national context.
6. The experience gained with EQAVET could serve as the basis for the development of a comprehensive approach to quality assurance in the field of adult learning.
7. Increased transparency between quality assurance in the different sectors and in arrangements for validating non-formal and informal learning – including all forms of online learning – would also help to build trust and support permeability across sectors and countries.

INVITES THE MEMBER STATES, IN ACCORDANCE WITH NATIONAL PRACTICE AND WITH DUE REGARD FOR SUBSIDIARITY, TO WORK WITH RELEVANT STAKEHOLDERS IN ORDER TO:

1. Develop and promote a culture of quality enhancement throughout education and training, with a view to improving the quality of the knowledge, skills and competences developed by learners, as well as the quality of the learning process, and making appropriate use of European instruments relating to quality assurance.
2. Strengthen the capacity of quality assurance arrangements to handle current and future developments in education and training, such as all forms of online learning, and ensure that the scope of quality assurance bodies is sufficiently flexible in this respect.
3. Ensure greater transparency with regard to the outcomes of quality assessments.
4. Use the funding opportunities under the *Erasmus+* programme to develop innovative transnational projects that enhance the capacity of quality assurance to support sustainable reform across the EU in education and training, and, where appropriate, use European Structural and Investment Funds to encourage the development of quality-assured education and training systems.
5. Encourage through quality assurance the promotion of quality teaching in education and training.
6. Support, within the Bologna Process, the ongoing revision of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, in order to improve their clarity, applicability and usefulness, including their scope, laying emphasis on raising quality standards.
7. Encourage, where appropriate, cross-border cooperation between quality assurance bodies in all sectors and for all forms of education and training.
8. Ensure the quality of education delivered by HEIs which have campuses and franchised courses abroad, with the support of national quality assurance agencies, through strengthened cooperation between quality assurance agencies in the sending and receiving countries, or by allowing EQAR-registered agencies to evaluate institutions offering cross-border and franchised provision with a view to meeting quality concerns and encouraging cross-border cooperation and mutual learning.

⁽¹⁾ European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET.

9. Continue to implement the EQAVET framework with a view to developing a quality assurance culture within and between Member States, including at the level of VET providers, in particular by making efforts to establish at national level by the end of 2015 – in accordance with the Bruges Communiqué – a common quality assurance framework for VET providers, covering VET school-based learning and work-based learning, as appropriate to the national context.
10. Ensure that quality assurance systems, measures and instruments are regularly evaluated in order to enhance their continuous development and effectiveness.

INVITES THE MEMBER STATES AND THE COMMISSION, WHILE TAKING ACCOUNT OF THE SPECIFIC FEATURES AND REQUIREMENTS OF THE DIFFERENT SECTORS AND OF NATIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES, TO:

1. Continue to promote transparency and complementarity between sectoral approaches to quality assurance by building on European principles for quality assurance in a lifelong learning perspective, with a view to ensuring the quality of outcomes for learners and enhancing permeability between education and training sectors. Further developments could include:
 - a) Strengthening the use of a learning outcomes-based approach in defining, delivering and assessing knowledge, skills, competences and qualifications, building on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and on credit-based European instruments, such as ECTS⁽¹⁾ and ECVET⁽²⁾;
 - b) Promoting transparent quality assurance arrangements which draw on existing quality assurance frameworks and support reliable, valid and credible assessment methodologies and tools for the validation of non-formal and informal learning;
 - c) Strengthening links and cooperation between stakeholders in the world of education and training and the world of work, including with a view to developing appropriate skills monitoring and forecasting;
 - d) Involving, where appropriate, relevant stakeholders, including staff, learners and employers – through quality assurance – in strategic decision-making, in qualification design, and in programme development, delivery and monitoring, with a view to ensuring continuous quality enhancement within education and training institutions.
2. Use the potential of quality assurance to strengthen the implementation of national qualifications frameworks linked to the EQF.
3. Draw on the ongoing work within the Bologna Process in higher education with a view to exploiting the potential of quality assurance to enhance mutual trust and transparency as a basis for moving towards the smoother recognition of all relevant qualifications.
4. Endeavour, by taking into account the experience gained in higher education, to increase the transnational transparency of quality assurance arrangements in other sectors and at other levels of education and training.
5. Explore quality assurance arrangements with a view to better addressing the quality of non-formal learning and of work-based learning as appropriate to the national context, by building inter alia on the EQAVET framework as appropriate.
6. Further explore relevant quality assurance issues relating to all forms of online learning, such as the assessment and certification of new modes of learning and teaching.
7. Work – particularly in the light of the Commission's recent evaluation report on the EQF and its progress reports on quality assurance in VET and higher education⁽³⁾ – towards the closer coordination and improvement of EQAVET and European tools for quality assurance in higher education, notably by incorporating a learning outcomes approach and with the support of transparency instruments such as the EQF, Europass and European credit systems.

⁽¹⁾ The European System for Credit Transfer and Accumulation in higher education.

⁽²⁾ The European Credit System for VET.

⁽³⁾ See annex.

8. Within the Open Method of Coordination, explore the scope for Member States to strengthen their own quality assurance provisions and initiatives in the fields of pre-school education, school education and adult learning in the light of the experience gained in other sectors.
9. Continue to promote cooperation on quality assurance at international level in all sectors, through cooperation with international organisations, policy dialogue with key international partners, and partnerships with institutions around the world.

INVITES THE COMMISSION TO:

1. Continue to improve the links and synergies between EU transparency tools that support quality assurance, recognition and mobility, seeking further complementarity and convergence between such tools, including by taking stock of the consultations on a European Area for Skills and Qualifications.
 2. Continue to strengthen mutual learning through European cooperation on quality assurance in all sectors, including with the help of funding from the *Erasmus+* programme.
 3. Explore ways to support Member States in developing their quality assurance arrangements, so as to cater for different modes of learning and teaching or so that such arrangements could also be applied to various sectors and levels of education and training.
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ANNEX

Political background

1. The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2001 on European Cooperation in Quality Evaluation in School Education ⁽¹⁾.
2. The Standards and Guidelines in Quality Assurance for the European Higher Education Area adopted in 2005, and the commitment to revise these undertaken by Ministers attending the Bologna Ministerial conference in Bucharest on 26 and 27 April 2012.
3. The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 February 2006 on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education ⁽²⁾.
4. The Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning, in particular the common principles for quality assurance for higher education and vocational education contained in Annex III ⁽³⁾.
5. The Council conclusions of 12 May 2009 establishing a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training for the period up to 2020 (ET2020) ⁽⁴⁾.
6. 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 ⁽⁵⁾.
7. The conclusions of the Council and of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States, meeting within the Council of 19 November 2010, on the priorities for enhanced European cooperation in vocational education and training for the period 2011-2020 ⁽⁶⁾.
8. The Council conclusions of 28 November 2011 on the modernisation of higher education ⁽⁷⁾.
9. The Council Resolution of 28 November 2011 on a renewed European agenda for adult learning ⁽⁸⁾.
10. The Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning ⁽⁹⁾.
11. The Council conclusions of 15 February 2013 on investing in education and training - a response to *Rethinking Education: Investing in skills for better socio-economic outcomes* and the 2013 *Annual Growth Survey* ⁽¹⁰⁾.
12. The Council conclusions of 25 November 2013 on the global dimension of European higher education ⁽¹¹⁾.
13. Regulation (EU) No 1288/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 December 2013 establishing Erasmus+: the Union programme for education, training youth and sport ⁽¹²⁾.
14. The Council conclusions of 24 February 2014 on efficient and innovative education and training to invest in skills – supporting the 2014 European Semester ⁽¹³⁾.

⁽¹⁾ OJ L 60, 1.3.2001, p. 51.

⁽²⁾ OJ L 64, 4.3.2006, p. 60.

⁽³⁾ OJ C 111, 6.5.2008, p. 7.

⁽⁴⁾ OJ C 119, 28.5.2009, p. 2.

⁽⁵⁾ OJ C 155, 8.7.2009, p. 1.

⁽⁶⁾ OJ C 324, 1.12.2010, p. 5.

⁽⁷⁾ OJ C 372, 20.12.2011, p. 36.

⁽⁸⁾ OJ C 372, 20.12.2011, p. 1.

⁽⁹⁾ OJ C 398, 22.12.2012, p. 1.

⁽¹⁰⁾ OJ C 64, 5.3.2013, p. 5.

⁽¹¹⁾ OJ C 28, 31.1.2014, p. 2.

⁽¹²⁾ OJ L 347, 20.12.2013, p. 50.

⁽¹³⁾ OJ C 62, 4.3.2014, p. 4.

Other background

1. The European Report of May 2000 on the Quality of School Education: Sixteen Quality Indicators.
 2. The Eurydice Study: Evaluation of Schools providing Compulsory Education in Europe, 2004.
 3. The report by the High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education of June 2013 on improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe's higher education institutions.
 4. The 2013 study on quality assurance in adult learning and the report of the Thematic Working Group on Quality in Adult Learning of 24 October 2013.
 5. The report of 19 December 2013 from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the evaluation of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) - Implementation of the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning.
 6. The report of 28 January 2014 from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Progress in Quality Assurance in Higher Education.
 7. The report of 28 January 2014 from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the implementation of the Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of 18 June 2009 on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training.
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