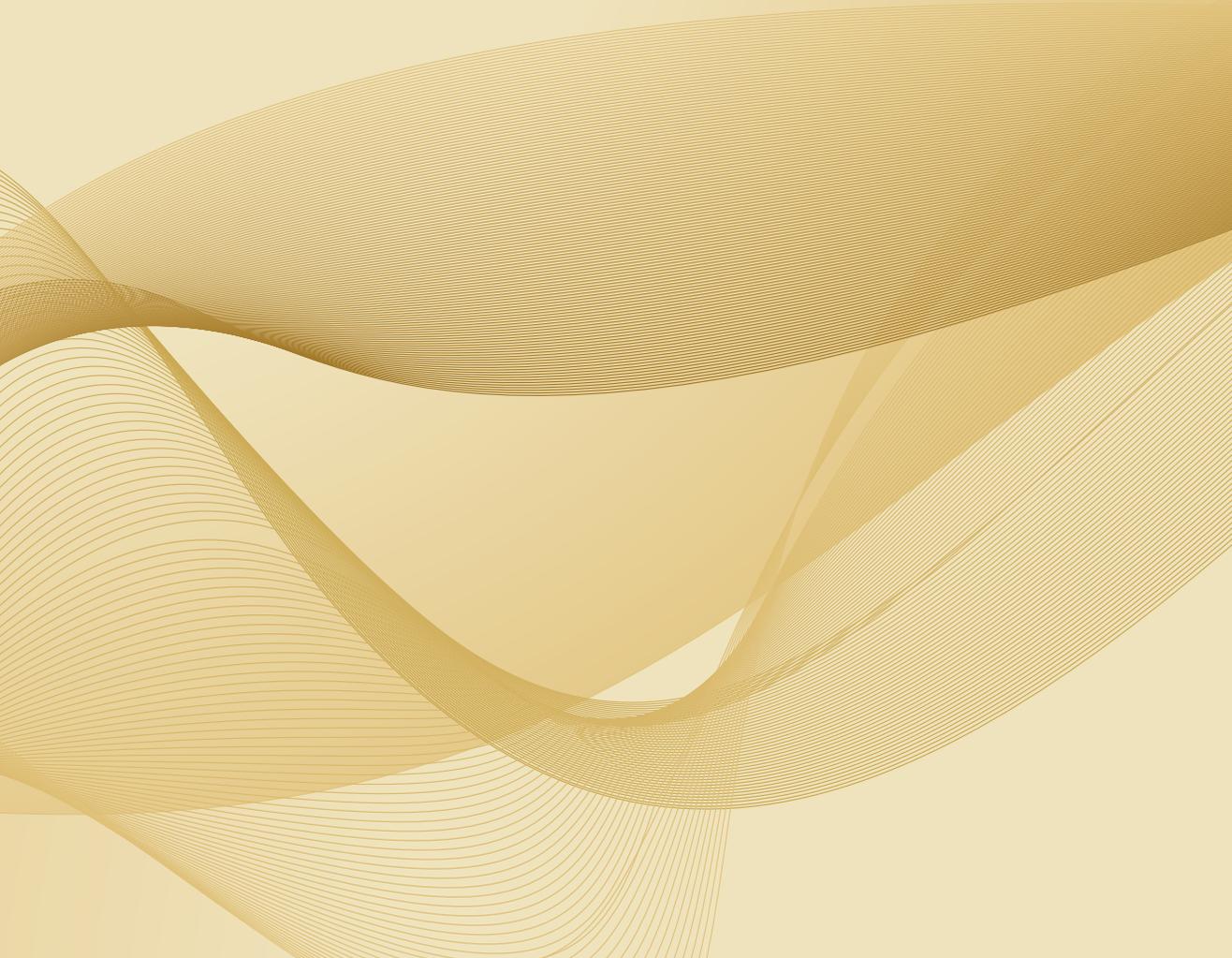




**CEDEFOP**

European Centre for the Development  
of Vocational Training

EN



# **Accreditation and quality assurance in vocational education and training**

**Selected European approaches**





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Selected European approaches

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is available on the Internet.  
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# Foreword

In line with the objectives of the Lisbon Council of 2000, and the commitments of the Bologna and Copenhagen processes of 2002 to implement them in higher education and vocational education and training (VET) respectively, education and VET in EU Member States are undergoing reform with the aim of becoming 'a world quality reference by 2010'.

For VET, the Copenhagen process has created the policy context for voluntary and sustainable cooperation between Member States to promote common trust, transparency and recognition of competences and qualifications. These are preconditions for increasing students' and workers' mobility within the EU, aiding the free movement of persons established by the Treaty of Rome.

Intensified cooperation between stakeholders has led to a range of complementary tools, the so-called common European tools for VET, which aim at shaping a proper European VET area in a field where legislative competence remains with the Member States.

This process has made quality and quality assurance a policy priority for VET, confirmed by the adoption in May 2009 of the recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of a European quality assurance reference framework for vocational education and training (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2009).

Quality assurance is a way of focusing changes within VET systems on outputs and recognition of their achievements. This is particularly important in current times, with national budgets dealing with other political priorities such as galloping unemployment and the fierce competition from third countries.

Accreditation – the formal recognition that a body or a person is competent to carry out specific tasks (Cedefop, 2003) – assesses compliance with predefined objectives and permits regular examination of progress made.

Cedefop decided to focus on the issue of accreditation because of its importance for evidence-based policy and for accountability in VET. In addition, the Centre has noticed that accreditation in VET is less widespread than in higher or general education in all Member States. Further, it is still not sufficiently covered by the work on quality in VET done so far at European level.

The present Cedefop publication analyses several national approaches to accreditation and draws comparisons between them. Some sectoral examples are also included.

This work builds on the common quality assurance framework (CQAF) as developed by the European Commission's technical working group (TWG) on quality in VET (2003-05) and as further consolidated by the ENQA-VET network (2006-07), with the substantial technical and scientific support of Cedefop.

This publication precedes a more substantial comparative study – currently in progress in Cedefop – on accreditation of VET providers in assuring the quality in VET. The study will be published in 2010, marking Cedefop's 10 years commitment to promoting VET quality in full cooperation with European Commission (Directorate-General Education and Culture), the Member States and the social partners.

Aviana Bulgarelli  
*Director*

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# Executive summary

## European context

The Council resolution adopted in November 2002 in Copenhagen (Council of the European Union, 2003) and the Declaration of the European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training on the promotion of enhanced European cooperation in VET was a fundamental step towards commonly agreed objectives. Both policy documents provided the initial impetus for the so-called Copenhagen process, a strategy that aims to improve the performance, quality and attractiveness of VET and which focuses on the development of a single framework for the transparency of qualifications and competences, credit transfer in VET, and quality assurance. Together, these priorities aim at promoting mutual trust in training provision and transparency and recognition of competences and qualifications, thereby establishing a basis for increasing mobility in the European Union. These priorities have been successively confirmed by the Maastricht (2004), the Helsinki (2006) and the Bordeaux (2008) communiqués as well as by the recently approved Council conclusions on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020).

Quality assurance can play a decisive role in modernising European VET and improving performance and attractiveness, achieving better value for money. Many European countries need to increase VET responsiveness to changing labour market demands, increasing the effectiveness of VET 'outcomes' in improving the match between education and training demand and supply. Across Europe we also need to achieve better levels of employability for the workforce and to improve access to training, especially for vulnerable labour market groups.

These political priorities were also the guiding principles for recent European level work, starting with a European quality forum and subsequently in a technical working group for quality in VET (TWG) set up by the European Commission to carry through the Copenhagen process. Both groups comprised representatives from Member States, the social partners and the European Commission and have worked in partnership. With the launch of a European network on quality assurance in VET (ENQA-VET) in October 2005, an institutional platform for coherent, structured and sustainable cooperation

was created, with the ambition of embedding quality assurance in VET systems within and across EU Member States, and building on the achievements of previous activities (European Commission, 2005).

A major output of these previous activities has been the development of a common quality assurance framework (CQAF), the principles and approach of which were endorsed by the Education Council in May 2004, inviting the Member States and the European Commission, within their respective competences, to promote the CQAF voluntarily and together with relevant stakeholders (Council of the European Union, 2004).

Based on an inventory of quality assurance systems in the EU, and with the intention of supporting Member State VET reform, the CQAF is a common and systematic approach to quality assurance (European Commission, 2006). By reflecting key issues in quality assurance the framework offers better understanding of similarities and differences of national, regional, local and sectoral approaches to assure and to improve the quality of VET provision. In Chapter 5 the capacity of the CQAF and its inherent elements are analysed more deeply in relation to accreditation.

## Current trends in EU Member States

Many national VET systems in Europe are undergoing modernisation and transformation towards more effective management. This is characterised by a change in management both at systems and at provider level away from input steering and control and towards output orientation and recognition of achievements. Quality assurance is used to steer this transformation and accreditation is a complementing tool, allowing assessment of compliance with (nationally) agreed standards and regular examination of progress achieved (<sup>1</sup>).

The political objectives for the development have been met in many Member States and other countries by devolution policies designed to achieve greater involvement by regional and local actors in policy delivery. This has resulted in a new area of work: the responsibility for setting up national frameworks for quality assurance that can give VET providers guidance when assuring and improving the quality of their services. In many countries these efforts have been complemented by certification or accreditation procedures,

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(<sup>1</sup>) See for example: Euler, 2005.

which aim to make sure that appropriate progress is made. Thus, accreditation is primarily understood as an assessment tool, which is applied not by the VET provider himself but externally by a body officially recognised for this task. While policy frameworks for quality are the driving forces behind the VET improvement, with their role to define the objectives, criteria and standards to be pursued, accreditation procedures must determine whether vocational training programmes are implemented in accordance with those objectives, criteria and standards.

Frequently, accreditation and certification are used synonymously and what is called accreditation in one country might be called certification in another. They are both about external verification of quality but they have a slightly different focus. Certification is about compliance with the standards, rules and criteria as defined by a methodological framework for quality assurance, such as the ISO-9000ff standards. Accreditation normally will encompass certification: in Italy, for example, a provider certified according to ISO-9000ff will be accredited by the regional authorities for education and training. In other cases, accreditation will require more than compliance with the principles of quality assurance frameworks. Since it means recognition by a public body, the accreditation process may also consider public concerns such as the adequacy of a training programme for the regional labour market or its relevance to certain policy objectives. Going beyond certification, accreditation additionally will ask if certain policy objectives are met by the respective programme.

As this report demonstrates, accreditation is organised in quite different ways, reflecting not only the national, regional and sectoral traditions and structures of VET but also the nature and the current state of the relevant quality frameworks. In some contexts the existence of accreditation might be even denounced, although external assessment procedures are taking place. Such cases might be named certification, approval, inspection or licensing instead of accreditation. There is, however, a common denominator in all these activities: they consist of external assessments in relation to predefined requirements (objectives, criteria, standards of quality) for VET programmes or the provider organisation, they lead to reasonable judgements, and finally to a decision with implications for the VET provider and/or the quality of the training programme, dependent on what has been assessed. According to national and sectoral contexts those implications are quite different again. Positive external assessment might result in registration, licensing or even a quality label for the provider and/or the training course. Critical assessments could lead to a referral or to binding obligations for quality improvement,

whereas other cases may confine impacts to informal recommendations for improvement. It is an interesting question, therefore, how accreditation procedures contribute to the quality of training programmes; this is addressed in detail in Chapter 5.

## VET accreditation and quality

Whatever the concrete profile of accreditation, in whatever context, there is a common quality assurance challenge for all external assessment procedures. They never can replace internal monitoring and assessment done by the VET providers themselves, although they often tend to produce replacement effects. External accreditation and internal approaches to quality management should complement each other. Effective improvement of VET provision will have to build on both top-down and bottom-up elements, although there is always a certain tension between internal and external elements of quality assurance.

Clarifications of terminology are required. There are four or five terms – quality management, quality assurance, quality control, quality assessment, quality improvement – which are often used as substitutes for one another but have slightly different meanings from a scientific point of view. Being precise and systematic, quality management should be considered an umbrella term, encompassing the specific notions of the others. Quality assurance aims to avoid unfavourable developments and so prevent poor quality. Quality control is oriented towards the collection of information to correct unfavourable developments and thus is a necessary precondition to quality assurance. Quality assessment goes beyond and is about the measurement of outputs and outcomes based on predefined objectives for quality. The term quality improvement is understood as continuous change and improvement of processes and performance to fulfil better the quality objectives.

To meet the overall top-down political objectives for European VET system development, there is also the need to encourage bottom-up processes by VET providers towards quality. To assure, to change and to improve VET quality, the ownership of the process must belong to the actors themselves and to the local and regional networks of stakeholders they are part of. That is also why across Europe there is increased recognition of the demands and a continuous trend towards involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the development.

## Study aims and approach

One of the most interesting questions on accreditation is how to bridge internal and external assessments and how to bring top-down and bottom-up approaches together. This study on accreditation in different European countries aims to understand:

- what types of external assessment of VET providers and/or VET programmes are carried out in a number of European countries;
- how the relationship between internal assessment of VET providers and external assessment by accreditation bodies is organised in those countries;
- how the different accreditation contribute to quality assurance (QA).

The study includes an analysis of accreditation practices from the following countries:

- Germany;
- Ireland;
- Italy;
- Sweden.

Some sectoral approaches to accreditation are also included and analysed, mainly in relation to their implications for a European approach to accreditation. Reference is also made to developments in other European countries.

The final aim of the study is to identify similarities and differences between the approaches to VET quality and accreditation and to come to conclusions and a proposal for common European guidelines for VET accreditation.

# The accreditation process

The following section offers a general model for the accreditation process to illustrate its different elements and the tasks to be fulfilled by participating parties. There are quite different meanings of accreditation in the VET systems of the EU Member States but there is at least one core element in relation to quality and accreditation which is generally accepted. This is the need for external assessment of the quality of training provision. Given this element as a starting point, there must be two different parties involved in this process: the VET provider and an external body which is recognised to perform the external assessment and to award accreditation as a result of (positive) evaluation.

It is accepted that whenever an external assessment or evaluation takes place, some criteria and standards must be applied to arrive at a positive or negative decision. In the following illustration the tasks of the VET provider and the tasks of the body recognised to accredit VET organisations or VET programmes are described step by step.

As one of its first tasks, the accreditation body has to elaborate the criteria and standards which have to be met by the VET provider to achieve positive external assessment. Some guidelines are also needed for VET providers on how to prepare for accreditation: the criteria and standards for accreditation will vary widely between different countries or according to the specific field of training. Nevertheless, those criteria and standards are not drafted for individual cases but will always apply for a certain type of VET provider or VET programme, to allow also comparisons, exchange of experience and eventual benchmarking. For the criteria and standards to be met, there might be defined minimum requirements but also grades or levels of excellence.

Anticipating the examples from practice presented later in this report, it can be stated that an internal self-assessment of the VET provider and/or the implementation of an internal quality management system is a precondition for all accreditation procedures. Further, internal quality systems at provider level must reflect the criteria and standards defined by the external accreditation body, although providers are usually free to design their internal quality system according to their specific local needs.

Before applying for an accreditation the VET provider will have to make sure that organisation staff are adequately motivated to contribute to the process, as any application involves self-reporting and self-assessment.



After the VET provider has submitted an application for accreditation to the relevant body, an external evaluation follows. In a number of countries, including Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands and the UK, self-assessment reports written by VET providers are used as a starting point for the external evaluation. There is no imperative that the accreditation body carries out the assessment on its own; in most cases this task will be delegated to a group of VET experts in the field of training. Sometimes those independent experts will include also peers, i.e. representatives from other VET providers in the same field. Other members of the evaluation group may represent the learners, the social partners, gender organisations or other groups representing civil society.

If the result of the evaluation is negative, accreditation will be denied and the VET provider will have to prepare and apply again after having improved its organisational structures and the quality of its training. The decision of the evaluating body will normally include advice and recommendations on necessary changes; in some countries an external body, linked to the accreditation body, may offer professional support to providers in overcoming identified deficits. In other cases, when the result of the external evaluation is critical but not too negative, some additional improvements will be required from the VET providers. Those requirements either could be of a binding character or, when less serious, consist of recommendations for improvement only. In both cases the VET provider will have to demonstrate in an improvement report that relevant changes will be made so that a positive proposal for accreditation can be made by the body charged with carrying out the external evaluation.

Following a positive evaluation and proposal for accreditation, the VET provider will be awarded its accreditation and the organisation or the VET programme in question will receive a quality certificate. This certificate can be used for marketing activities of the VET provider to potential customers.

A quality certificate is never issued for an unlimited period of time. A renewal of accreditation has to be made after a specified time span, normally around five years, although this renewal is often a lighter procedure than for the initial accreditation. In renewal procedures it is mainly the adequateness of the internal self-assessment or quality management system of the VET providers which are assessed.

# National and sectoral examples of accreditation

The following section describes some national examples of accreditation and their current state of implementation. This information is used in Chapters 4 and 5 for systematic analysis of similarities and differences.

## 2.1. Germany

In Germany, reform of the employment system through the Hartz laws has also affected the context for vocational training in general and in particular for publicly-funded continuing training. Reorganisation of VET has been undertaken to create more competition and greater transparency among VET providers and to improve the quality of continuing training.

Both amendment of the Vocational Training Act and European level to increase transparency of certificates, skills and quality in VET have contributed to making quality and quality assurance hot topics of discussion <sup>(2)</sup>.

Since July 2004 VET providers are obliged to have an internal quality management system and must be assessed against a number of quality criteria by a recognised body (Vock, 2003). Detailed criteria have been established by a regulation of the Federal Ministry of Economy and Labour (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Arbeit) for both external assessment of VET providers and to regulate bodies permitted to carry out this assessment (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Arbeit, 2004).

In Germany a two-step accreditation system has been put into practice, consisting of certification and accreditation procedures. In the regulatory framework the external assessment of VET providers and their training courses is called 'certification' and 'licensing', and the bodies which do the licensing are called 'certification agencies' (*Zertifizierungsstellen*) or 'centres of expertise' (*fachkundige Stellen*). To carry out their activities, these agencies or centres have to be 'accredited' first by the Federal Agency for Labour (Bundesagentur für Arbeit), the former public employment service), which acts

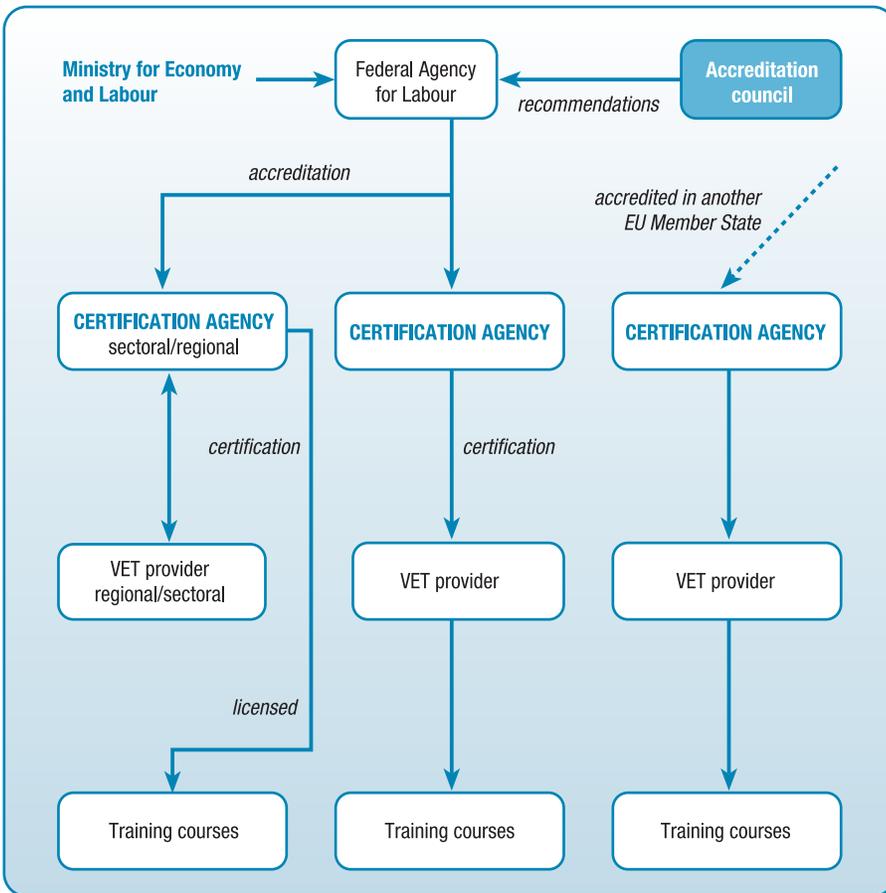
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<sup>(2)</sup> For an overview, see: BIBB – Bundesinstitut für Berufsbildung, 2006.

as the overall body for accreditation (*Anerkennungsstelle*; see overview).

VET providers have to apply for their certification and for the licensing of their courses to a private agency, which must be accredited by the national body. Certification agencies can apply for nationwide accreditation but also for accreditation that is limited to a specified economic or educational sector or regional territory. Accreditation of certification agencies is temporary, only for a period of three years at the most. Additionally, every year the system for quality assurance and quality development has to be verified by the national accreditation body.

Figure 2. **The German framework for quality assurance and quality development in VET**



Source: Erwin Seyfried.

An accreditation council (*Anerkennungsbeirat*) has also been established to advise the national accreditation body and to draft recommendations for accreditation and certification procedures. This council has nine members: representatives from both the Federal Ministry of Economy and Labour (Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Arbeit) and the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung), a representative from the *Länder*, trade unions, employer organisations, organisations of VET providers, and three independent scientific experts.

To benefit from public funding, VET providers must be certified by an accredited certification agency and their training courses must be licensed. VET providers can apply for nationwide certification, for training activities in certain economic or educational sectors or for training activities in certain regions. To pass the certification procedure, VET providers have to prove their financial efficiency and educational capacity, and to fulfil a number of detailed requirements, including:

- (a) the capacity to support the integration of their trainees into employment;
- (b) the qualifications, professional experience and participation in further training of teachers and trainers;
- (c) an efficient system for quality assurance and quality development including:
  - (i) customer orientation;
  - (ii) continuous evaluation of training courses based on the use of indicators and measurement;
  - (iii) continuous improvement of training provision;
  - (iv) cooperation with external experts for quality development.

Providers have to demonstrate that they fulfil further criteria for licensing training courses to be funded with public money, having taken into consideration:

- (a) the preconditions of proposed training target groups;
- (b) their perspectives for integration into employment;
- (c) organisation of learning processes preparing for a recognised graduation, or at least part of this;
- (d) clearly defined time frame for the training course, including adequate practical working experience.

The certification agency determines which VET providers are to be certified and licensed. In the case of a negative decision, the VET provider can subsequently improve the criteria which had not been accepted within three months; if not, the application will be rejected. Following a positive decision, a certificate is granted by the certification agency and can be used by the VET

provider as a label for quality in its information and marketing activities.

Certification is always limited for a maximum period of three years. Every year, however, a 'monitoring audit' has to be carried out by the certification agency, focused on the VET provider's quality management system.

From a European perspective it is interesting to note that agencies accredited in a similar procedure in another EU Member State are of parallel status to agencies certified in Germany. In the German system the State or semi-State organisations are not involved in accreditation of VET institutions, offering opportunities for further deliberations on the education system <sup>(3)</sup>. Together with the possibility for VET providers to choose freely the certification agency they would like to cooperate with, the German system is quite advanced as a highly self-governed educational system. With the recognition of certification agencies accredited in foreign countries, it can be classified as being fit for a European approach.

## 2.2. Ireland

In Ireland, the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act of 1999 created a new legislative framework for a more coherent high quality VET system. In 2001, the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) was established as the single national awarding body for further education and training (Cedefop, McGinn, 2005).

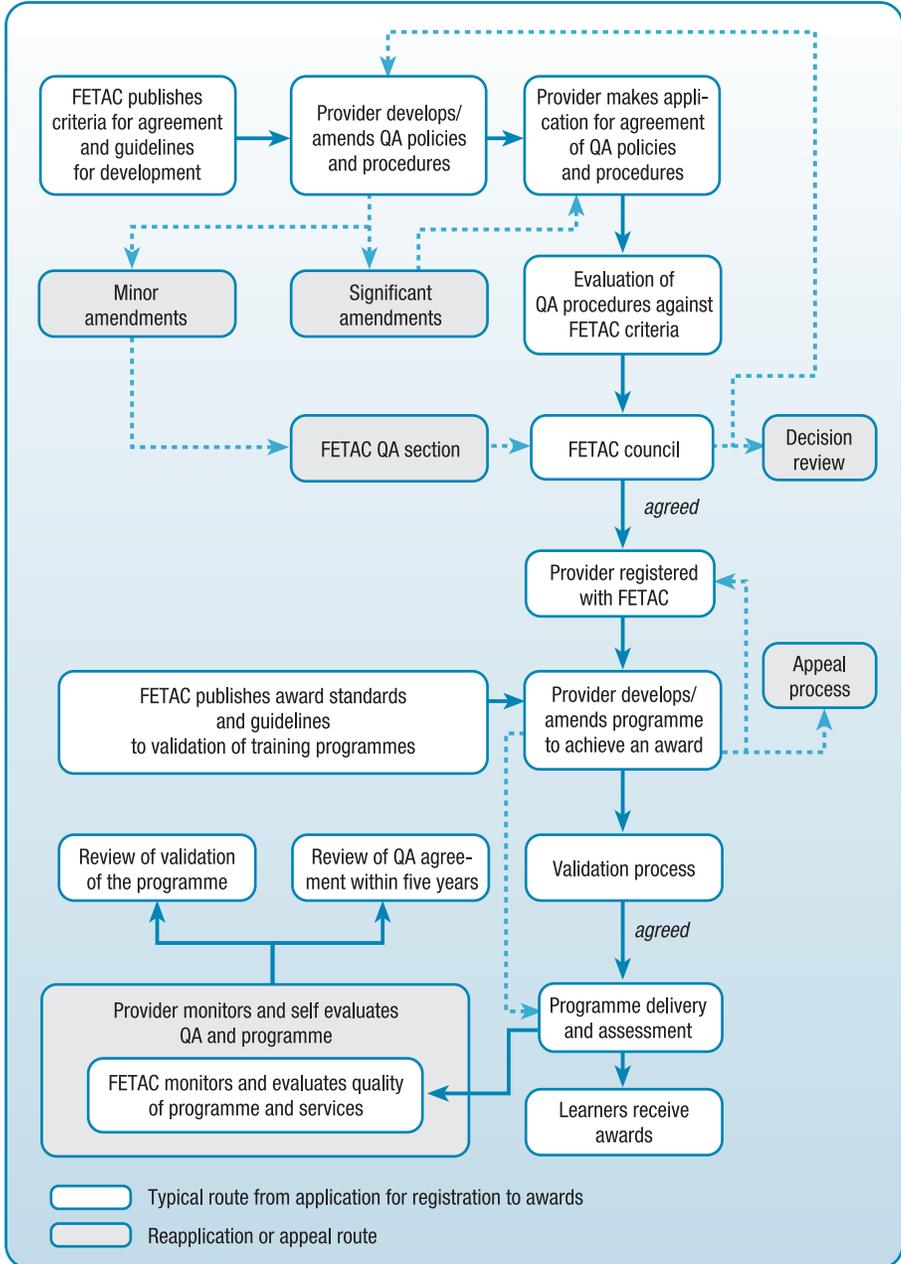
The awards are publicly recognised qualifications of the national qualification framework (NQF). FETAC makes awards to learners on a broad range of programmes offered by different types of VET providers and has a comprehensive strategy to assure the quality of the programmes leading to its awards. This strategy involves three coordinated separate functions, including elements of quality assurance, formal accreditation and continuous monitoring (FETAC, 2008, p. 5):

- (a) all VET providers offering FETAC awards are required to have a quality assurance system agreed by FETAC. A provider must be able to demonstrate its capacity to monitor, evaluate and improve the quality of programmes and services it offers to learners. Providers who demonstrate this capacity are registered with FETAC and may offer awards from the national framework of qualifications (at levels 1 to 6);

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<sup>(3)</sup> See for example: Contreras, 2005.

Figure 3. The Irish framework for quality assurance and accreditation



Source: FETAC.

- (b) FETAC validates programmes submitted by VET providers whose quality assurance procedures have been agreed. Validation is seen as the process by which a programme is evaluated, before it is delivered, and to ensure that the programme can provide a learner with the opportunity to achieve a specific award;
- (c) FETAC monitors and evaluates programmes along and after their delivery by providers. Monitoring consists of multifaceted information on providers' programmes, services and the quality assurance systems which support them. If the evaluation of this information indicates it is necessary, either validation of the programme or agreement on the quality assurance procedures can be reviewed.

An overview of the Irish accreditation system, including the three subsystems for quality assurance agreement, programme validation and national monitoring, is given in the following illustration.

The Irish policy is to agree VET provider procedures for quality assurance where those procedures demonstrate the provider's commitment and capacity to maintain and improve the quality of its programmes and services. This approach is intended to give the providers both increased autonomy and responsibility. The capacity to assure the quality of a programme forms the basis of registration with FETAC.

Providers with agreed quality assurance procedures can register with FETAC and apply for programme validation. This is a specification of how that provider will enable a group of learners to achieve a particular award. Another critical aspect of the programme relates to how the learners in the programme will be assessed. FETAC examines the programme to ensure that the requirements for the award are included and that it is a valid programme; this is done before that programme is offered to learners. In this respect, validation has a preventive function, removing problems before they happen and improving the programme design whenever necessary.

A registered provider with a validated programme delivers the programme within its own internal quality assurance systems. This leads to assessment of the learners followed by certification. The provider's internal quality assurance must continually monitor the quality of provision. In addition, regular evaluations of the programme by staff and learners should be done by an external person. Further, these evaluations must link to a continuous improvement plan.

Finally, FETAC monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of a provider's quality assurance procedures, placing particular emphasis on the validity, fairness and consistency of its assessment procedures and output. Monitoring

activities carried out by FETAC do not try to alter the importance of a provider's own quality assurance, but seek to support it and want to ensure that it is achieving its purpose of quality maintenance and improvement.

Using this information, FETAC will review each provider agreement for registering within a maximum period of five years from the date of initial agreement.

### 2.3. Italy

In 2001, the Italian Ministry of Labour approved a decree on the quality of VET, introducing an accreditation system for VET providers financed by the regional authorities. Compulsory minimum requirements have been defined at national level with the cooperation of all parties concerned and regional governments have put this system in place over recent years.

Regional VET in Italy is largely based on a market system. Every year, regional governments tender for VET providers able to run courses for initial and continuing training which meet the demands of students and employers. This system is very flexible because it is changed each year to meet new demands. However, it is difficult every year to build a structure that can accommodate more than 500 000 students and to choose the best VET providers among the broad supply.

Previously, the Italian VET system had not established precisely parameters for how training activities should be performed nor standards of reference for either supply or output of training. Apart from a few exceptions in certain regions which had adopted certain forms of regulation, Italy's VET system was extremely varied. A number of training bodies, especially in northern Italy, had overcome this shortcoming by obtaining certification under ISO-9000 standards. However, while this type of certification offers some guarantee of management of the processes, normally little is said about the quality of training outputs. Further, it was felt that the ISO-9000 certification requires a series of procedures that threaten to introduce too much bureaucracy into the training structures, mainly with disadvantages for smaller VET providers.

The solution was to draw up a set of minimum national criteria for the accreditation that regional governments could add to or expand according to regional or local needs. The aim was to ensure that all training providers applying for funding from regional governments are able to perform vocational training activities according to minimum quality standards. These minimum

quality standards apply to three major types of training and vary accordingly:

- (a) full-time initial training and apprenticeship training for students up to the age of 18 years;
- (b) higher training: all initial training pathways for students over 18 years of age;
- (c) continuing training, which also includes apprenticeship training for students over the age of 18.

The minimum requirements that training providers must fulfil to be accredited relate to the following aspects:

- (a) general management of the institution;
- (b) financial situation of the institution;
- (c) staff characteristics for teaching, training and administration;
- (d) effectiveness and efficiency of previous training activities;
- (e) links and contacts (to schools, employers, employment services, municipal authorities, NGOs, etc.) at local level.

For each of these five criteria the national decree sets down quantitative and qualitative indicators that have to be measured and assessed, parameters stating the level of the quantitative data and the characteristics of the qualitative information, and indices setting the thresholds of the quantitative parameters or fixing requirements and conditions for the qualitative parameters.

It is up to the regional governments to assess whether these requirements are fulfilled. Only the VET providers that can successfully demonstrate that they achieve the minimum level required are allowed to take part in regional tenders. They enter a regional register of accredited institutions that is updated each year and vocational training activities will only be assigned to providers appearing in that register.

The Lombardy region identifies best performing providers and has a ranking system, moving from accreditation based on minimum standards towards competition and improvement in quality (De Nardo, 2008).

## 2.4. Sweden

The Swedish Agency for Advanced Vocational Education (Myndigheten for Kvalificerad Yrkesutbildning) is responsible for approving and accrediting continuing training courses according to quality standards. The agency, which is independent but steered by the Swedish government, operates nationwide and supports recognised training courses with its financial grants. It must also

ensure that every curriculum maintains the proper level of quality at all times <sup>(4)</sup>.

The accreditation consists of several steps taken in sequence within a given time frame:

- (a) formal approval of the course;
- (b) general quality inspection;
- (c) follow-up survey;
- (d) general quality revision.

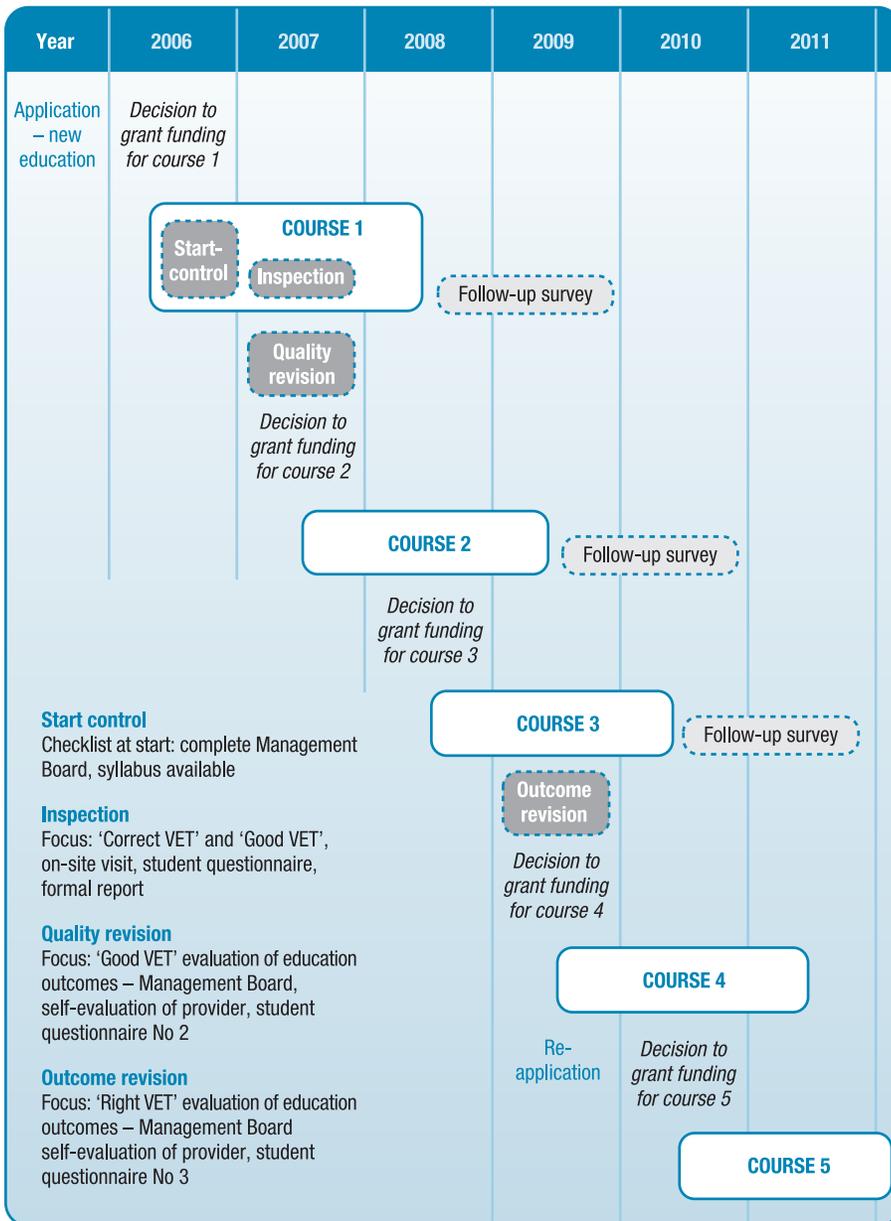
Before a new course is started formal approval has to be given so that the agency will pay grants to students and to providers. Each application is independently rated (and cross-checked) by two members of the agency according to different criteria, with the existence of a provider internal quality management system being a precondition. Further, there must be an educational board, with both external stakeholders and students represented, for each VET provider. For continuing training there is no explicit verification but an implicit mechanism which assures that the need for a certain training course is approved. Continuing training is based on cooperation between potential employers and VET providers, which quite often are the municipalities.

The advantage of this collaboration is that potential employers know what needs they are likely to have, and VET providers know about the educational requirements needed to meet those needs in the best way. The VET provider applies for grants but the content and the curricula for new training courses are developed by including the most relevant stakeholders, namely local employers, the municipalities and even representatives from higher education. Thus, courses are highly customised. Before being approved, the VET provider is screened for competence in addressing gender policies and the specific needs of socially disadvantaged groups, such as through application of adapted recruitment strategies.

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<sup>(4)</sup> For further information see:  
[www.ky.se/engelska/home/advancedvocationaleducation.4.ec54705116620ddcef80001787.html](http://www.ky.se/engelska/home/advancedvocationaleducation.4.ec54705116620ddcef80001787.html)  
[cited 30.6.2009].

Figure 4. Quality assurance in advanced vocational education in Sweden



Source: Swedish Agency for Advanced Vocational Education (Myndigheten för Kvalificerad Yrkesutbildning).

After one year general quality inspection takes place which takes into consideration a self-evaluation report from the provider, with assessments from the students an integral part. Other sources for this second step of the accreditation process are a report from the education board as well as feedback and complaints from the students who might have directly contacted the agency.

In the second year, after the first course has come to an end, a follow-up survey including all students is carried out by the agency addressing their degree of satisfaction with the training, their employment situation after the course and the usefulness of the acquired skills at their workplace.

Finally, after four years of practice a general quality revision of the relevant course, its contents and curriculum is undertaken, in which all available data are reviewed and evaluated.

Approved training courses receive a label which serves as proof for potential customers that the course is quality-assured by the national agency. The reports and the ratings of the agency are made public and thus might be used by customers as additional sources of information.

To date, there are no benchmarking activities in Sweden between VET providers and training courses and no links are made between the output achieved by the VET provider and the amount of public funding.

## 2.5. Sectoral examples

There is an interesting and challenging development taking place in continuing vocational training (CVET), where accreditation and labelling are increasingly organised by VET providers and institutions themselves. In several sectors and branches VET providers have collaborated to form their own umbrella organisations which then function as accreditation bodies for providers. Sometimes these networks or sector organisations of VET providers are active at European level; they have developed their own accreditation systems and accreditation procedures, and are creating their own quality labels without the inclusion of any public bodies. As welcome as these self-initiated efforts of VET providers to achieve quality and visibility for their customers may be, the resulting plethora of quality labels may prove problematic and ultimately become an obstacle to clear customer orientation.

In vocational training for people with disabilities a European quality rehabilitation mark has been created by the European Disability Forum, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Council of Europe. This mark

is awarded to rehabilitation centres applying an internal quality assurance system and can be found in Ireland, Portugal, Romania and the United Kingdom <sup>(5)</sup>.

A Leonardo da Vinci project coordinated by the Finnish National Board of Education developed an accreditation model for training programmes in hotel and restaurant services (Finnish National Board of Education, 2006). The aim of this project was to produce models, tools and measures for assessing and improving the quality of educational institutions in the hotel and restaurant sector in general and particularly for training programmes for restaurant cooks, waiters and waitresses and hotel receptionists.

The accreditation model was developed for relevant training programmes completed within the European Union, encompassing at least 80 credits or lasting two years. To allow for benchmarking and exchange of good practices between VET providers active in the same field, the criteria for accreditation follow the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) model. They include quality aspects of leadership, policy and strategy, staff, partnerships and resources, processes, results for customers, staff and society, and refer to process planning, self-evaluation and external assessment as main procedural tools.

Where the quality criteria and requirements are achieved, the accreditation body awards the VET provider a certificate planned to be valid for a period of five years. Certification is awarded to those training programmes for which accreditation was applied, not to the organisation, but the organisation is entitled to use the certification logo in its marketing activities.

In the banking and financial sector the European bank training network (EBTN) has set up a certification system together with its national partner organisations as a response to the need for common competences and qualifications frameworks as a precondition for increased mobility of employees in the EU and beyond. The European foundation certificate in banking (EFCB) consists of both a comprehensive system for certifying employee competences and for accreditation of training providers in financial services. When disseminated and applied widely in this sector, the system represents not only a tool for improving the quality of training provision but could also function as a benchmark model.

Accreditation is by a special committee and according to a set of minimum requirements including adequate qualification and the provision of certain standard banking skills. Up to date, certified training is available in 10

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<sup>(5)</sup> For further information, see *The European platform for rehabilitation* at: [www.epr.be](http://www.epr.be) [cited 30.6.2009].

European countries and in 12 accredited institutes (European bank training network, 2006). With the progressing accreditation of bank training organisations, EBTN has made decisive steps towards becoming the accreditation and certification body for the European financial services sector.

# Self-assessment in accreditation

There is a strong relationship between internal self-assessment by the VET provider and external assessment procedures. In the following section this relationship is considered in more detail by including further national experiences. This broader examination is possible because experience of self-assessment is more widespread in the EU than of accreditation, and there are many publications providing practical support for training organisations wishing to carry out internal reviews consistently and effectively <sup>(6)</sup>.

## 3.1. Self-assessment

There are two main approaches to self-assessment. In several countries there is no obligation for VET providers to make use of self-assessment or to have an internal quality assurance (QA) system; as accreditation usually demands internal quality assurance, this is the case only in countries without an accreditation system. In such countries self-assessment is purely voluntary but there are others without an officially recognised accreditation system where VET providers must have self-assessment. In contrast, there are several European countries, such as Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK, where it is stipulated by law that VET providers must have an internal system for quality assurance, and this sometimes is understood as self-assessment or – with the same meaning – self-evaluation.

Self-assessment is both the starting point for better quality and, through continuous application, one of the most effective methodological tools for improvement. This is confirmed by the examples from practice described in the previous section. In recent years, therefore, European cooperation to support quality in VET has focused on developing a common European guide on self-assessment for VET providers (Cedefop, Ravnmark, 2003). This guide is based on different experiences with self-assessment in the Member States

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<sup>(6)</sup> See for example: Investors in people, 2005.

and so is not a prescriptive instrument. It is primarily addressed to VET providers across Europe and aims to assist them in better managing the quality of their training provision. It contains detailed quality criteria and explanatory statements illustrated by examples from national VET systems, and examines existing frameworks for self-assessment used in different settings.

In most of the contexts where providers have to run internal quality assurance they are free to choose their own approach and so self-assessment encompasses a broad variety of approaches to QA. Depending on their size and their financial potential, providers might favour accreditation according to the ISO-9000 standards, whereas others might apply a less rigorous quality system or even a self-created self-assessment approach.

In a growing number of countries, national professional bodies have been, or are being, created to provide guidance to VET providers on how to make use of self-assessment or how to set up an internal quality system. As with the accreditation process described in Chapter 1, one of the major tasks of those bodies is to provide national guidelines for VET providers to support use of a quality system. Usually these national guidelines do not prescribe how to carry out quality assurance, but the existing national frameworks normally define a number of priority areas for QA which must be taken into consideration by the VET provider. Experience has shown that providing national guidelines to support self-assessment is highly desirable, as this contributes to the building up of relevant capacities in local VET institutions.

Self-assessment is carried out under the responsibility of the VET provider itself, the main difference between this method and the accreditation, where an external body with decision-making power is involved.

Experience of self-assessment in practice has shown it to be a useful and effective instrument for contributing to VET organisation quality assurance. Self-assessment can rely on the 'intangible knowledge' of the providers' staff which is difficult to detect from the outside; based on this information even hidden conflicts and blockades can be tackled, offering an advantage over any kind of external evaluation.

Following Ikujiro Nonaka (Nonaka et al., 2001) new organisational knowledge is always generated from two sources: implicit and intangible knowledge, based on experiences, opinions and construction of reality, has to be combined with 'explicit knowledge' consisting of data, standards, indicators and instruments. It is by cross-fertilisation of both sources that dynamics for generating new knowledge and innovation in the organisation will be created (Nonaka et al., 2001).

Self-assessment is suitable for all types of VET organisations. Compared to accreditation it is an inexpensive tool which can also be used by small VET providers.

The involvement of the senior management and active participation of all members of the organisation is a precondition for success, and self-assessment will develop its full potential only when it becomes an integral part of the management standards and the organisational structure of the VET provider.

Under no circumstances should self-assessment become an end in itself; this would just be a waste of time. Self-assessment becomes all the more powerful when results are transformed into a development plan. This plan should define the areas and problems that need to be changed, as well as the objectives, procedures, resources and those people personally responsible for the change process. The relationship between these two elements can be stated in the following terms: self-assessment is for measurement, the development plan is to improve quality.

Transparency of the processes and results is not automatically assured for external clients and customers, which is why self-assessment needs to be supplemented by an active publication and communications strategy. It has become standard in several European countries for VET providers to publish the results of their self-assessments on their organisation's website. However, an official obligation to make the results of the self-assessment available to customers only exists in relatively few cases.

To sum up, self-assessment alone is not a guarantee of quality. It will become a powerful tool in this respect when it forms an inherent part of a quality approach at VET system level, providing guidance for VET providers on how to apply self-assessment coherently and ensure the transparency of the results.

Finally, there is growing consensus that self-assessment also needs to be counterbalanced by a view from outside, by external evaluation as part of an accreditation process.

### 3.2. Types of external evaluation

In many countries, self-assessment is combined systematically with external verification of the quality of VET provision. Self-assessment or an internal quality management system is often a necessary starting point before applying for accreditation and self-assessment reports written by VET providers are often taken as a basis for assessment by external bodies.

Providers may be obliged to have an internal assessment system to measure regularly the quality and the effectiveness of their VET provision. The quality of this system will be examined regularly by an external body. Self-assessment thus refers to the activities undertaken by the providers themselves to ensure and develop quality, whilst external assessment measures the quality and the effectiveness of the providers' activities.

Various measures can be included in the term external evaluation, designed to ensure that the QA systems of VET providers are effective in maintaining and improving the quality of their training. Depending on the context, tradition and practical procedures of the external evaluation, the individual measures in Member States may be termed approval or licensing, inspection or external evaluation; finally they may lead to official accreditation. Further, external assessments are carried out at different times, adding to difference in function and in terminology.

### 3.2.1. Approval and registering

Most countries have their own approval or registering procedures for providers, at least for initial vocational training and when public funding for training is involved. These procedures are based on national laws and regulations which define certain framework standards to be fulfilled by VET providers before starting their training programmes.

Approval and registering are related to an initial phase, usually a one-off application, which if successful will result in the VET provider being officially registered; this recognition results in the right to grant awards to the learners in the training programmes or to public funding of those programmes. As in the Irish case, see Chapter 2, registering is accompanied by other measures for external assessment, such as validation of programmes which will follow at a later stage.

As a general rule, approval follows once certain compulsory minimum requirements have been fulfilled. These requirements normally consist of certain input standards (qualification of personnel, availability of standard equipment) and/or process standards (curriculum demands, levels of competences to be achieved, examination standards). National standards might have been drawn up by the relevant ministry or an intermediary body; in some cases they are defined autonomously by the social partners or in cooperation between the social partners and the national government. Normally these standards will exist for all programmes which lead to publicly recognised award of qualifications.

This qualitative initial approval is often accompanied by a regularly renewed quantitative one, which is mostly the case when public money is involved in the relevant training programme. In these cases, often called licensing, before public financing is finally approved an additional comparison is made with existing needs in the employment system, namely whether and to what (quantitative) extent the relevant qualifications or training programmes are actually needed. In this case the amount of funding will depend on a forecast of relevant demand. In Germany, for example, each year the number of participants in publicly-financed continuing training programmes is determined by the employment agencies according to the employment prospects for the relevant qualification profiles. This is to ensure that public money is put to efficient use and that supply and demand are adequately matched, and in particular to avoid the production of skills excesses which can not be absorbed by the labour market.

Approval and registering are traditional approaches, used nearly everywhere as a starting point whenever public funding is involved or officially recognised awards are granted to learners. The main focus is on input and process criteria. Successful approval is not an explicit sign of the effectiveness of training provision but rather a guarantee that certain (minimum) requirements have been fulfilled and this represents the main difference from other measures of assessment and evaluation by external bodies. The overall tendency in Europe is towards the greater inclusion of regional stakeholders, fewer standards relating to input and curricula, and national frameworks with more flexibility and options for VET providers to adapt training programmes to local needs and demands.

### **3.2.2. Inspection and external evaluation**

In a number of countries, initial approval is followed by additional evaluation activities as an external measure in publicly supported VET systems to complement self-assessment and assess the delivery of programmes and services. These activities usually take place as a continuous cycle with an average time span of about five years. In the Netherlands and UK an inspection approach is compulsory and based on national inspection frameworks with extensive criteria and indicators, communicated in guidelines for VET providers on how to draft the relevant self-assessment reports. Thus, the inspection framework and the self-assessment reports have a common structure, and the reports of the providers are part of the inspection as they are used as starting points for the external evaluation procedure.

In the case of non-compliance with quality standards, negative consequences of external evaluations resulting in the withdrawal of licences are rare. This follows the changing role of inspection and evaluation, which is less about control but carried out as part of a dialogue with the VET providers, which aims to support their efforts to improve quality. In Ireland, FETAC regularly monitors and evaluates the quality of programmes and services delivered by VET providers.

Feedback is given on the provider's monitoring and self-assessment reports and to the programme improvement plan; external assessment reports are made available to providers. Most providers find the process of external evaluation quite valuable as it helps them continuously improve the quality of their work.

Development plans are often discussed between external evaluators and providers. Experience has proven that providers that are performing well also tend to undertake self-assessment well, whereas poor providers often do not have the skills to accurately their own performance.

There are different policies on transparency and the publication of inspection results. In Ireland, FETAC publishes a report on the findings of the evaluations of programmes. In the UK, inspection reports are published on the website of the national institution (ALI, Adult Learning Inspection) responsible for the inspections, whereas in other countries it is the VET provider who can decide to what extent the results of the external assessment of its QA system are published.

### 3.3. Accreditation

Accreditation is not only a process consisting of several steps as described in the blueprint of Chapter 1. It is also the result of an external assessment of the quality of VET providers, used in a number of Member States to make sure that the whole organisation or a particular training programme adheres to certain predefined criteria and standards. Quality labels are not awarded forever but must be renewed in a continuous cycle with an average time span of about five years.

Accreditation often results in a (recognised) quality seal or quality label which can be used in communication processes with customers. In some countries, for example Germany, where quality labels have been created at national level, but award processes increasingly take place also at sector level

(as a result of quality systems of VET providers active in the same branches) or in certain parts of the VET system only.

The accreditation of university programmes has become a European standard itself. In some countries, three different degrees of accreditation are in use:

- (a) new university programmes that have not started yet, may be accredited as a 'peer approved programme';
- (b) university programmes that have been in place for one year at least can be classified as 'preaccredited programmes';
- (c) those programmes with at least two cohorts of graduates are classified as a fully 'accredited programme'.

In some Member States accreditation is not only used in higher education but also in VET as a substitute for former inspections. Achieving accreditation is quite an extensive procedure and, in some cases, this characteristic marks the difference between accreditation and compulsory inspection processes by public authorities.

For a provider, accreditation is not only connected with costs but also offers certain benefits. In Ireland, accreditation is the precondition to offering awards from the national qualification framework. In Italy, accreditation is a precondition for VET providers to participate in tendering processes in which publicly-financed training programmes are allocated.

# Similarities and differences in accreditation

Referring to the national and sectoral examples presented in Chapter 2 of this report, the following section analyses the similarities and variations in these different approaches. In certain points reference is also made to developments in other European countries.

## 4.1. Objects of accreditation

Given that accreditation is a multistep procedure, objects of accreditation vary in different stages along this process. In the first approval the focus is mainly on input standards and process criteria but the external evaluations carried out in later stages concentrate much more on the effectiveness and efficiency of programme delivery and thus on output and outcome.

First approval regularly addresses the organisational infrastructure and technical equipment of VET providers or VET programmes, the qualification of teachers and trainers, the contents of the training programme, its duration and the kind of examinations which must be passed by learners to achieve a certain qualification award.

The external evaluation of the self-assessment and/or internal quality system of the VET provider is the only continuum, addressed with the same emphasis in all stages of the accreditation process. This argues for close links between quality and accreditation.

A second difference in accreditation object is between VET programmes and the VET providers' organisation. Many accreditations to date focus on VET programmes whereas overall accreditation of the VET providers' organisation apart from programme delivery is quite rare.

In some countries, the first approval is focused on the organisation and the VET programme is evaluated along with its implementation.

## 4.2. The accreditation body

Traditionally, the Ministry of Education or Labour is formally responsible for recognition of VET providers and/or VET programmes, in particular when public financing is involved. In most countries ministries will not undertake accreditation by themselves but make use of an organisation closely linked to the ministry. In many countries ministries are supported by semi-public agencies fulfilling a broad range of operational tasks with approval or accreditation of VET providers being included in their mission.

As a general tendency in many European countries accreditation tasks are nowadays no longer carried out by the ministries responsible for VET themselves but by external bodies which act in cooperation with the ministries or which have independent status (see Chapter 2). Germany is an example where self-regulation of accreditation by private organisations has become a feature.

A list of national bodies for accreditation from different European countries is provided in Cedefop's virtual community for quality assurance in VET <sup>(7)</sup>. It is interesting to note that the relationship of these bodies to VET is quite different. Some of them are of very general character, like the Belgian Belcert <sup>(8)</sup>, the Dutch RvA <sup>(9)</sup>, the Portuguese IPQ <sup>(10)</sup> or the British UKAS <sup>(11)</sup>; they carry out accreditations of products, systems and persons across all sectors, private and public. They also function as national umbrella organisations accrediting those institutions which are to carry out external assessments and evaluations. The Italian Association of the Independent Bodies for Certification and Inspection (AIOICI) represents the collective interests of the national bodies for certification and inspection and has its main focus on marketing activities to promote and to increase public appreciation of certification and inspection.

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<sup>(7)</sup> Cedefop's virtual community on quality assurance in VET is an interactive electronic platform for information and expertise sharing among experts on quality in VET. It contains mostly documents related to quality in VET at EU level and access is free of charge. To register, click on <http://communities.cedefop.europa.eu/quality>.

<sup>(8)</sup> Belgian accreditation system for bodies operating certification of products, quality systems or persons.

<sup>(9)</sup> The Dutch Council for Accreditation works in all sectors, private and public.

<sup>(10)</sup> IPQ, the Portuguese Institute of Quality is the public entity for the coordination of the Portuguese quality system, the accreditation of economic agents and for metrology.

<sup>(11)</sup> UKAS, the United Kingdom Accreditation Service, is the authority for the assessment and accreditation of conformity of the assessment bodies against internationally recognised standards.

The French CNE (*Comité National d'Évaluation*) already comes closer to VET as its role is to evaluate public sector policies with a certain focus on initial and higher education. The same applies for the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) which initiates and conducts evaluations of teaching and learning from primary school and youth education to higher education and adult continuing training.

Other accreditation bodies listed in the virtual community concentrate on quality assurance and accreditation in higher education. This applies to the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council and to the Catalan Agency for Quality Assurance in the University System, both of which initiate and conduct evaluations in higher education institutions. Both State-owned organisations also have the task, at national or regional level, to encourage quality policies in universities and so contribute to the development of higher education in their country/autonomous region.

Although exercising similar overarching functions, the German *Akkreditierungsrat* is an independent organisation responsible mainly for accrediting those agencies which are to carry out accreditation of higher education institutions and programmes in Germany. Acquin (Accreditation, Certification and Quality Assurance Institute), a private agency, is an example of such an organisation. The Portuguese Inafop (*Instituto Nacional de Acreditação da Formação de Professores*) is a specialised institute to assure and improve the quality of teacher training programmes in higher education.

Most of the accreditation bodies listed in Cedefop's virtual community on quality assurance in VET, and especially those with an overarching function, engage in international cooperation and developing relations with similar institutions in other countries, and with international or European organisations.

To date, the Irish FETAC and the Swedish *Myndigheten for Kvalificerad Yrkesutbildning* are the only (semi-public) agencies especially designed for accreditation of VET providers and VET programmes (see Chapter 2).

#### 4.3. Standards, criteria and indicators for accreditation

The information from different countries and sectors on standards, criteria and indicators applied in accreditation processes is difficult to summarise and to compare. Sometimes the range of information is quite restricted and there are often large differences in concepts and definitions.

In Italy, for example, the national framework for accreditation, applied by the regions, includes the following criteria and indicators:

- (a) management of the institution;
- (b) financial situation;
- (c) characteristics of teaching and administrative staff;
- (d) efficiency and effectiveness of previous training activities;
- (e) links and contacts with the VET institution at local level.

In many regions, support is provided for VET institutions to prepare for accreditation, in particular to draft the necessary self-assessment reports. The presentation of such a report is a necessary precondition for accreditation. The accreditation procedure consists of a review of the self-evaluation of the VET organisations and of other documents giving evidence on the criteria and indicators given above. The document review is complemented by a visit to the premises of the VET organisation. In meetings with staff and students a team of experts in assessment and evaluation will check the given information and collect additional information. In many cases, peers from other VET organisations will be part of the assessment team; students may also be part of the team. Based on their personal impressions gained in visiting the VET organisation, the team will draft a report which then is compared with the self-assessment report by the accreditation body. In case of substantial differences between these two documents, the VET organisations will be asked to clarify the situation, before a decision is made on whether accreditation of the VET programme or the VET organisation is possible.

#### 4.4. Results of successful accreditation

Successful accreditation can have different implications. Where accreditation is a precondition for legal provision of training and education, it will be the most important result for the VET organisation that this requirement is fulfilled. Further, successful accreditation might give the provider organisation the right to participate in public procurements, as in Italy, and result in financial support or funding from public sources.

Successful accreditation can also lead to a publicly visible (quality) label, which can be used for marketing issues and in communication with potential customers. The relevance of such a label is still small in comparison to the legal and financial benefits inherent in successful accreditation. It is only in continuing training that quality labels are gaining greater importance as this sector is driven much more by market forces than initial training, which

depends more on governments and public support. Whenever the market is to play a stronger role, the award of quality labels will become more attractive for providers (see Hascher et al., 2006).

#### 4.5. Publication and dissemination of results

Whereas in HE the results of accreditation are published widely, on the websites of the accreditation agencies, there are no general guidelines for VET on how to make accreditation results publicly available. Often results are kept by the accreditation body with no dissemination to the public and it is up to the VET provider to decide on details for publication. Some providers might give the full picture of the external quality assessment; others might publish their strengths only or just their improvement plans.

A major challenge in both the quality process and in accreditation is making the results of the quality assessment available to the public and engaging the relevant stakeholders in an open discussion about which factors have led to specific results and where the potential for future improvements can be identified.

# Accreditation and quality assurance in VET

In this section we analyse the relationship between accreditation and quality assurance in VET. Does accreditation support the quality of training provision? Does accreditation provide added value to quality? Are there possibilities for accreditation that could be exploited more efficiently in the future? Or does accreditation tend to be a bureaucratic demand creating more negative and counterproductive effects instead of pushing for improvements?

When looking for answers to these questions we use the common quality assurance framework (CQAF) as a reference to determine the potential contribution of accreditation to the quality of training provision and thus to its possible added value.

## 5.1. The CQAF as a European quality tool

The CQAF, developed at European level by the technical working group on quality in VET considered relevant experiences and practices in the Member States as well as the key elements of existing models of quality assurance, such as ISO-9000ff or EFQM.

To avoid the risk of excessive complexity, the existing models have been reduced to their common denominator. This offers a strategic management tool not only in the field of VET but in practically all walks of life. The main purpose of the CQAF is to provide a fairly simple and easy to use framework which because of its general character can be applied to VET systems and providers, not as a mechanical tool but to inspire stakeholders in their own quality ambitions. In keeping the model simple it should also allow the sharing of best practice and common learning. The specific purpose of the CQAF is threefold:

- (a) to serve as a tool for policy developers and practitioners who want to improve the quality of VET services and training provision;
- (b) to act as a bridge across the various models and approaches already in use for quality assurance;
- (c) to aid exchange of experience, common learning and (in a longer-term

perspective potentially also) benchmarking between VET systems and VET providers all over Europe.

The CQAF is a circular model that comprises goal-setting and strategic planning, the measurement of results according to predefined goals, and using results in the management of change and an adapted goal-setting and planning, thus starting the cycle again. The CQAF has the same structure and consists of the same steps as the PDCA cycle (plan-do-check-act) that was originally developed in the Japanese car industry to assure and improve continuously products quality.

The model comprises the following steps:

- (a) planning;
- (b) implementation;
- (c) assessment/evaluation;
- (d) change.

Quality is always linked to specific policy, institutional and/or individual objectives which are to be achieved. Therefore, the first step of the model, planning, relates to the setting up of clear and measurable objectives regarding policies, procedures and tasks to be fulfilled. Objectives should be formulated in clearly understandable terms and, as far as possible, they should be combined with definitions of measurable indicators as this allows checking the achievement of the planned objectives.

The second step, implementation, relates to the regulations via which the formulated goals are to be achieved. This may take place in various ways: via the creation of national common guidelines for the VET providers, via appropriate regulations and the stipulation of criteria and standards corresponding to the objectives, or via corresponding financial incentives.

The third step, assessment, covers the collection and evaluation of process and output data, both for learners and the entire organisation. This data must correspond with the predefined objectives and with the indicators which refer to the objectives and allow the degree of achievement to be measured. The greater this correspondence, the more the collation of data will be focused on the information which is really needed to assess the quality of training provision.

The last step is comparing the results achieved with the original objectives, analysing the strengths and weaknesses of the system, identifying the lessons to be learned and putting the necessary conclusions for a revision of planning and the other quality assurance steps into practice <sup>(12)</sup>.

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<sup>(12)</sup> Further information on the CQAF can be obtained on Cedefop's virtual community for quality assurance in VET at: <http://communities.cedefop.europa.eu/quality> .

Compared to a fully developed total quality management approach, the CQAF is a 'light' model, particularly suited to giving fresh impetus to people and organisations towards assuring and improving the quality of their services. It can be assumed that any provider that intends to go further will select one of the more detailed models. The CQAF has the advantage of being compatible with these models and so may be a first step into the quality cycle.

## 5.2. Challenges in using the CQAF

The CQAF is a blueprint for quality assurance and improvement. It is a representation of the most basic aspects that must be present for the quality process to arrive at satisfactory results. Using the CQAF provides policy-makers and practitioners in VET with a powerful framework to initiate a process of continuous improvement.

However, the CQAF alone is not at all a guarantee of achieving positive results. Aiming for quality requires measurement and comparison before and after a certain activity is carried out, based on a number of indicators. The function of indicators is to define the crucial areas of training provision where quality should be assured or improved (Blom, 2003). In its third step the CQAF asks for 'assessment and evaluation' but using indicators and measurement is not an explicit demand. In addition, applying the CQAF model does not automatically make use of a coherent set of indicators reflecting context, process, output and outcome of VET. Keeping a balance between the variables influencing training provision is a precondition if positive effects in one area are not to be at the cost of negative or counter effects in another area (Cedefop and Seyfried, 2007). For example, focusing on context and input might neglect output and outcome, and vice versa. One of the key tasks of the emerging accreditation bodies is to define criteria and indicators for quality and to provide VET institutions with the respective guidelines for self-assessment. As those guidelines usually suggest or ask for an indicator-driven self-assessment, accreditation contributes to making more professional and improving the internal activities of VET providers for quality assurance.

Accreditation means including an external view of all stages of training provision and quality assurance. It is a general lesson of life that an external view can help to get a broader and clearer picture of one's own situation.

Accreditation requires an internal quality management system and so combines internal and external efforts towards quality. Regulations for

accreditation normally require that VET providers intending to be accredited have to set up an internal quality management, which in further accreditation undergoes regular external assessment. Thus, accreditation can make sure, that self-assessment is not an end in itself but that certain standards are applied ensuring that change and improvement will happen. A key role for the accreditation bodies is to help provider organisations make better use of their internal quality management systems.

The main danger, and potentially negative effect, of accreditation is that it becomes a bureaucratic process and that the VET providers lose the ownership of their quality process. This possibility never should be underestimated. Quality will be improved only by self-motivated people, by teachers and trainers, by learners and all the other VET stakeholders. Improvement strategies and interventions will only have sustainable impact if they are owned and led by the VET providers themselves. Providers must be aware of their own improvement needs, understand where change is needed, and be actively seeking ways forward. If this impetus does not come from the VET organisation itself, change is likely to be limited. Quality must encompass the whole institution: the more people are involved and actively participate in the quality process, the more it will become effective.

### 5.3. The added value of accreditation

Whereas in self-assessment it is up to the VET provider alone to decide on the criteria, indicators and procedures for quality, accreditation makes sure that a common core of criteria is applied by all provider organisations aiming to be accredited. This will ensure certain minimum standards in quality management are met but will give VET providers enough flexibility to follow their own profiles and directions.

Accreditation makes sure that certain criteria are met but also that that transparency of processes and results is ensured. Based on the CQAF only and its self-assessment guide, the movement towards quality tends to be too much an internal process mainly taking place inside VET institutions, with the outside world being involved to a minor degree. Formal accreditation will help to make the link to society and include the public by providing transparency of quality procedures and enabling discussion of results.

Applying the CQAF using self-assessment only would put no obligation on the provider to arrive at any conclusion as a consequence of the assessment procedure, even if the results are not satisfactory. In contrast, accreditation

always asks for change and improvement when deficits in the quality of training provision are detected (Rogge, 2004).

Both (external) accreditation and (internal) self-assessment taken together can be expected to form a powerful package to supporting the reform and modernisation of national VET systems and strengthen European cooperation in parallel (Doerr et al., 2002).

Thus, accreditation turns self-assessment into a serious process. In their drive for better quality, providers can be assisted in arriving at respectable and recognised results.

# European accreditation

The initiatives for accreditation launched in various European countries and in a growing number of VET sectors may be specific to the countries or sector organisations themselves, but there is a growing tendency towards a common European language.

## 6.1. Common starting points

Despite the variations that exist between the different procedures for accreditation, there are common features and understanding:

- (a) accreditation is concerned with quality of VET programmes and/or VET institutions (the objects of accreditation);
- (b) accreditation follows transparent standards, regulations and rules;
- (c) accreditation is a process of external quality review used to scrutinise VET programmes or VET organisations for quality assurance and quality improvement;
- (d) accreditation implies clearly defined consequences and, in most cases, formal recognition (right to award qualifications) resulting from formal decisions.

Based on these common elements and understood in broad terms as external evaluation of training provision, accreditation can be a focal point for developing the quality and accountability of vocational education and training:

- (a) accreditation is closely related to the institutional framework for governance of VET systems as it implies the creation of specific independent bodies to evaluate and to promote the quality of training provision;
- (b) accreditation is a lever to extend autonomy, responsibility and a culture of self-assessment in training organisations;
- (c) accreditation asks for discussions and decisions on quality objectives and quality concepts to be applied, as well as on stakeholders and actors to be involved in decision-making processes;
- (d) accreditation allows for evaluation of training programmes according to their usefulness and effectiveness for the labour markets and the national

economy, their adequacy for the students and their efficiency for the country;

- (e) accreditation seeks the necessary quality tools to assess the inputs (for example: equipment, qualification of trainers) and processes (curricula), the results (certificates) and the outcomes (employability) of training;
- (f) accreditation supports transparency when mechanisms to communicate and disseminate the results and outputs of training provision are set up.

The emergence of national agencies and councils for VET accreditation emphasises the importance of quality in training provision. In 2005 a European network for quality in VET (ENQA-VET) was created to develop a coherent, structured and sustainable basis for quality assurance in VET systems across EU Member States (European Commission, 2005). The launch of the ENQA-VET, following lengthy European cooperation, can be seen as crucial to increasing consistency between the quality initiatives of Member States and across Europe. The network provides a European platform for structured exchange of information and experience, debate, common learning and consensus building.

At national level the ENQA-VET is anchored on reference points to ensure coordination of national stakeholders and dissemination of information from European to national level and vice versa. The promotion of these national reference points is a key condition in striving to achieve greater transparency and coherence of European, national and sectoral approaches in QA, to support innovation in VET and to create sustainability in QA development. At the same time it is also central to the success of ENQA-VET.

Further, ENQA-VET intends to serve as a bridge linking developments in higher education to those in VET. In HE a similar network has been operating successfully for several years and remarkable progress has been made in developing commonly agreed standards, criteria and guidelines for accreditation of higher education institutions <sup>(13)</sup>.

The immediate challenge is to bring together the achievements in accreditation in HE with ENQA-VET and with the national and sectoral developments on VET accreditation. As with developments in HE, in several European countries semi-public agencies or sector-based private organisations are acting as accreditation bodies for VET providers or VET programmes. However, there are no European criteria, standards and rules for recognising accreditation bodies active in VET.

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<sup>(13)</sup> For further information see: [www.enqa.eu](http://www.enqa.eu)

## 6.2. Common European guidelines for accreditation?

With the CQAF model and the newly adopted European quality assurance reference framework (EQARF) recommendation (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2009), a common basis for quality assurance has been developed at European level <sup>(14)</sup>. For a number of European countries that have developed a national framework for quality assurance, the CQAF has already served as a guiding instrument. Denmark, Hungary, Norway, Romania and Finland explicitly refer to the European framework in their own national QA systems. Italy has passed a quality charter for initial vocational training that also takes into account the principles of the CQAF.

The CQAF has value as a tool for quality assurance across European VET systems and as reference framework for a better understanding of different approaches towards quality in VET. In spite of its overall feasibility, and to make better use of its possibilities, adaptations and improvements could be made in the light of the experience of accreditation in EU Member States. The existing common framework could be developed into a stronger European instrument if combined with additional elements and standards for external accreditation mainly.

There is a need for a set of criteria, standards and rules for the procedures according to which VET providers and programmes should be given accreditation. This should not be an overly complex manual of rules to be followed but consist of a number of basic requirements for how to carry out accreditation; European cooperation could support the streamlining and downsizing of the criteria and rules for accreditation that are currently used in different contexts.

Common European guidelines defining criteria and rules for accreditation could be developed by Member States or a European accreditation council and applied by the national or any other VET accreditation agencies. Based on the insights gained in this study, European guidelines for accreditation procedures could seek:

- (a) the existence or establishment of an internal quality management system respecting the CQAF principles in the VET provider organisation asking for accreditation;

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<sup>(14)</sup> The recommendation, adopted in May 2009, foresees the creation of an EQARF network to replace the existing ENQA-VET one.

- (b) the application of a set of commonly agreed indicators focused mainly on the measurement of outputs and outcomes of training programmes;
- (c) the participation of independent experts and peers in external assessment of quality.

Whereas in self-assessment there is no obligation to include the learners' perspective, European guidelines for accreditation should ask for participation of learners and other stakeholders in the internal processes of quality management.

Common European standards for publication of results of accreditation procedures could also be established and applied by the respective accreditation agencies. This will help improve quality, as VET providers will try to avoid being 'named and shamed' for bad quality. With publication of results they will strive to keep to standards and try even more to deliver good quality.

In a medium-term perspective there are a number of additional challenges and options for common accreditation guidelines that could be tackled at European level. To date, accreditation comprises a yes/no decision. An attestation is given that a certain degree of quality is achieved by a programme or a provider but no incentives are given for improvement of quality. Given the ambition to make European education and training systems a world reference, different levels of quality should be defined. If such a classification system for quality is developed and applied by the European accreditation agencies, this would encourage competition among VET providers and their striving for excellence.

Independent experts and/or peers are involved in most accreditation processes but few profiles describing the necessary competences and skills to fulfil this task have been designed. As VET should seek similar standards in all countries, a competence profile for quality assessors in accreditation processes should be developed at European level.

Given the tendency towards increased accreditation, in the near future a growing number of experts will be needed to carry out appropriate tasks. The development at European level of common training modules for quality assessors in VET would ensure the comparability of accreditation procedures. Assessors, having participated successfully in the respective training programmes could be formally recognised by a European accreditation council for VET.

These suggestions are parts of a European approach to accreditation in VET that could be developed step by step. All activities would contribute to assuring and increasing the quality of training provision in VET. Finally, the

creation of European labels for VET quality could be an organic result of this development and a signifier of the success of European VET cooperation.

The first and most important issue for strengthening European cooperation, however, is the accreditation of VET programmes and providers according to commonly agreed criteria, standards and guidelines. This would support common trust in the results of accreditation as well as in the quality of training provision in VET.

Finally, in many EU countries the financial support of the European Social Fund could be used to build up institutional capacity for accreditation and quality assurance as a core part of reform and modernisation of national VET systems. According to Article 3, (d) of the regulation for the new funding period of the European structural funds 2007-13, one of the priorities of the ESF is to improve 'human capital, in particular by promoting: the design and introduction of reforms in education and training systems' (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2006).

# List of abbreviations

<b>CQAF</b>	Common quality assurance framework
<b>EFQM</b>	European Foundation for Quality Management
<b>ENQA-VET</b>	European network on quality assurance in VET
<b>FETAC</b>	Further Education and Training Awards Council (Ireland)
<b>QA</b>	Quality assurance

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## Selected European approaches

The Lisbon strategy, adopted in 2000 to face major economic and social challenges, set as one of its objectives Europe's transformation into a knowledge-based society. It assigned a key role to vocational education and training (VET).

The Barcelona European Council of 2002 decided to make Europe's education and training systems a work quality reference by 2010, putting the quality issue at the heart of the respective European policy agenda.

Accreditation is the mechanism for external assessment of VET providers, certifying their compliance with predefined objectives, criteria and standards. In this respect, accreditation encourages conformity rather than, ideally, improvement.

Quality is considered a modernisation factor for VET systems. Quality assurance renders the system accountable for effectiveness, also promoting common understanding and trust.

Accreditation is testified by a certificate/label with marketing value as it positions its holder within the steadily expanding VET market. There are currently many labels and certificates. The present Cedefop publication aims at shedding light on some issues common to accreditation approaches in VET within the EU.

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