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Lifelong learning : Education and Training Policies

**Vocational training and adult education**

**EUROPEAN NETWORK ON QUALITY ASSURANCE IN VET**

**GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND GOVERNANCE**

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## I. CONTEXT

The Council Resolution and Declaration<sup>1</sup> on 'Enhanced Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training', involving Member States, the EEA-EFTA countries, candidate countries and the Social Partners, gives priority to:

*'Promoting cooperation in quality assurance with particular focus on exchange of models and methods, as well as common criteria and principles for quality in vocational education and training.'*

The Resolution invited the Member States and the Commission to take the appropriate steps necessary to implement this priority, building on and adapting relevant structures and instruments.

Following the Council Resolution the European Commission established, as part of the Copenhagen Process, a Technical Working Group (TWG) on Quality Assurance in VET. The Group consisted of representatives from Member States, associated/candidate countries and Social Partners. CEDEFOP provided technical and scientific support to the Commission, DG Education and Culture, with regard to the implementation of the TWG's Work Programme, including the assignment of external experts. The European Training Foundation (ETF) liaised with and supported the then candidate countries.

Having fulfilled its mandate the Technical Working Group was phased out in 2005. In parallel a sustainable means of ensuring European cooperation on Quality Assurance has been sought. The creation of a European Network on Quality Assurance in VET, acting as a platform of exchange of experience, debate and consensus-building on concrete proposals at European level, appeared to be an appropriate answer to this concern.

The European Network on Quality Assurance in VET was established by the Commission following the favourable opinion of the Advisory Committee for Vocational Training (ACVT), at its meeting in June 2005. Its establishment follows on from the process of **enhanced cooperation in VET** launched at Copenhagen<sup>2</sup>, and is part of the follow-up to the Maastricht Communiqué<sup>3</sup>. The Network will take stock of and build on the work experience and outputs of the former TWG.

Likewise the Network itself, the activities of the Network's Work Programme follow on from the process of European co-operation launched at Copenhagen and are part of the follow-up to Maastricht Communiqué.

## II. PURPOSE

The European Network on Quality Assurance in VET will build sustainable co-operation in the field of Quality Assurance in VET across Member States and assist in the development and improvement of the quality of VET structures at national, regional, sectoral and local levels.

The Network provides a platform for co-operation at European level allowing for structured exchange of information and experience, debate, mutual learning and consensus building on common priority issues. It will foster concrete initiatives, maximise and disseminate outputs and results, including from a range of education and training European programmes.

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<sup>1</sup> Council Resolution (19 December 2002, JO 2003/C 13/02) and Declaration (adopted in Copenhagen on 29 and 30 November 2002) of the European Ministers of Vocational Education and Training on the Promotion of Enhanced European Co-operation in VET

<sup>2</sup> please see: <http://communities.trainingvillage.gr/quality>

<sup>3</sup> 'Communiqué' on the Future Priorities of Enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training, (December 2004) following the Council Conclusions of 29 October 2004: it went on to detail how priorities at National and European levels, defined by the Education Council Conclusions should be put into practice

The Network will contribute to raising awareness among the relevant stakeholders by incorporating and reflecting the interest of all sections of VET including initial, continuing, adult, public and private, as appropriate to the national context. It will also serve as a bridge linking Higher Education to VET.

While fully respecting Member State competencies and the diversity of Quality Assurance systems, the Network will promote increased transparency and consistency of initiatives across Europe, thereby contributing to enhancing the status of VET within and across Member States/Countries.

### III. GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Both the Council Resolution and Declaration of 2002 on the Promotion of Enhanced European Co-operation in VET (*'Copenhagen process'*), define the principles underpinning European co-operation in this context:

- 'co-operation should be based on the target of 2010, set by the European Council in accordance with the detailed work programme and the follow-up of the Objectives report';
- measures should be voluntary and principally developed through bottom-up co-operation;
- initiatives must be focused on the needs of citizens and user organisations';
- co-operation should be inclusive and involve Member States, the Commission, candidate countries, EFTA-EEA countries and the Social Partners'.

These principles are confirmed and expanded in the Maastricht 'Communiqué' which provides further implementation guidelines to the Council Conclusions of 29 October 2004, reviewing and giving continuity to the 'Copenhagen Declaration'. Such principles remain therefore the founding principles underlying European cooperation in VET and the Network's work.

As regards the role and operation mode of the Network itself, while inspired by the principles that underpinned the functioning and activity of the Technical Working Group, the Network's approach compared to the TWG, should be progressively elucidated.

### IV. MEMBERSHIP

**As part of the process of European co-operation in VET, the members of the Network are designated by** Member States, the candidate countries and the EFTA-EEA countries, as well as the Social Partners. The Commission, DG EAC, is also represented.

CEDEFOP participates in the Network as technical and scientific adviser, as part of its task of assisting to **the Commission's work in this area**. The ETF also participates and liaises with candidate countries.

The Network members have been identified by National authorities and European Social partners, following a request from the Commission (DG EAC), of July 2005. The members of the Advisory Committee on Vocational Training were then invited to make the necessary arrangements in order to ensure a consensus-based proposal from each country and European Social Partners group concerning the membership of the network. This was to include up to two representatives from each Member States/Country and three representatives from both Social Partner Groups.

To ensure appropriate and effective participation the following criteria for membership were devised:

- members will combine effective expertise and institutional capacity both to contribute to the activities of the network and to disseminate its achievements to the relevant national stakeholders in VET.

- members designated by countries can represent (i) ministries responsible for quality assurance in VET; and/or (ii) inspection, approval, evaluation and accreditation bodies;
- members must be able to relay the work and outcomes of the network to competent structures/organisations at national level.

Following specific requests from some countries, membership was opened up to other relevant stakeholders such as representatives from training providers' organisations.

To date, 22 countries became members, together with representatives from both groups of European Social Partners. The list of members remains open enabling possible nomination of members from countries which are not yet represented.

## **V. NETWORK STRUCTURE/GOVERNANCE**

### ***General Assembly (GA)***

It is proposed that the Network members be referred to as the Network's General Assembly. Besides Cedefop and ETF representatives, designated external experts will also participate in the GA, as appropriate.

The General Assembly's role is to:

- agree a Work Programme (WP)
- agree a 'governance' terms of reference paper
- elect the members of the Board from among its members
- organise the implementation of the WP's activities
- follow-up, monitor and assess the WP's implementation
- link with stakeholders at national level
- maximise outputs and results
- inform on ongoing developments at national level

General Assembly's meetings:

The General assembly will meet twice a year. A Commission representative (DG EAC) chairs the GA meetings, assisted by the Board's chairperson.

The following points will always be present in each meeting's agenda:

- information on policy related developments at European level (Commission, DG EAC);
- Board report
- discussion of a specific topic, commonly agreed and -based on the results of a prior activity
- 'tour de table' on initiatives taken by participant countries and Social partners
- reporting on thematic groups and peer learning's outcomes.

A draft note with the main conclusions of the meeting will be forwarded to the GA not later than three weeks after the meeting.

Communication channels:

The Board and the Commission (DG EAC) will coordinate the flow of information to the Network on governance and the Work programme's implementation issues.

The Virtual Community, run by Cedefop, provides to Network Members a specific communication platform allowing for exchange of information and other work activities.

### *Board*

The Board is the Networks executive. It coordinates and facilitates the Networks activities and membership. In this perspective, the board will:

- propose/review the Work Programme
- coordinate the implementation of the overall WP's activities
- clarify/identify the respective roles of all parts involved
- clarify appropriate funding arrangements
- prepare the Network meetings
- encourage Network initiatives to foster systematic cooperation on QA in VET across countries
- link with International Organisations active in the field

The Board comprises up to eight elected members of which: (i) six are appointed by the GA's country designated members, from among participating Member States, candidate countries, EFTA-EEA countries; (ii) two, are appointed by the GA's European Social partners designated members, from among each participating group. Additionally, a member of the 'Presidency country' is automatically associated to the Board, for the 6-months period of the Presidency. The Commission, DG EAC, is also represented. CEDEFOP participates as technical and scientific adviser, as well as ETF.

External experts designated to support specific Networks activities, will participate in the Board meetings, as appropriate.

Other occasional persons can participate in the Board meetings, whenever thematic activities require it, as may be outlined in the Work Programme.

The Board elects a Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson from among its appointed members. They will give appropriate follow-up to the implementation of the Network's Work Programme. The Chairperson and Vice-Chairperson will chair the Board's meetings.

The Board will be elected for twelve month time periods. After each period, the GA elects a new Board, ensuring both renewal and continuity of action. In this perspective, the former Board's Chairperson automatically becomes a member of the new Board. Each Board member can only serve for no more than two consecutive years.

The Board will meet up to 4 times a year, as appropriate. Two out of the four meetings should take place at the occasion of the GA's meetings.

The governance arrangements can be reviewed by the end of 2006. Changes would require a qualified vote (two thirds).

### ***Thematic groups***

To implement the Network's Work Programme, interested members could form thematic groups, on a voluntary basis, and aiming at devising common principles, guidelines and criteria on priority issues.

The thematic groups will define the scope of their work plan as well as their organisational and operational frameworks.

In this context, a limited number of working meetings could be financed by the Commission (DG EAC), subject to prior agreement on an annual work plan. Likewise, some technical and scientific support at community level could also be envisaged, inasmuch the available resources allow for it.

The thematic groups will report to the GA at its meetings.

### ***The Virtual Community (VC)***

The Virtual Community on Quality assurance in VET can be seen as one of the elements of the Network's structure and governance, in which it fulfils a number of key functions. Set up and run by Cedefop, the VC provides a communication platform for the Network and for a wide range of stakeholders from different countries, including outside Europe.

The VC acts as a storehouse and dissemination tool on the Network's activities and outputs. This includes, among others, information on national approaches to enhance the quality assurance of VET collected through peer learning visits carried out within the Network's WP, and results of studies.

The Virtual Community fulfils also a supporting function in the implementation of the Network's WP, in particular to the peer learning programme, and in strengthening synergies with the LdV programme. It acts as a European forum for discussions on QA in VET.

Stakeholders from Member States/Countries and the Social Partners have access to and links with the Network through the VC - both in terms of inputting to its work and benefiting from the outcome/materials developed. The VC plays therefore a key role in giving visibility and raising awareness among relevant stakeholders to the process of European cooperation in the field of quality assurance in VET.

## **VI. NATIONAL 'QA REFERENCE POINTS'**

The European Network should be anchored on national 'QA reference points' that ensure follow-up of initiatives and efficient dissemination of information at different levels. Such reference points will liaise and involve a wide range of relevant stakeholders representing the national level.

Each participating country needs to consider how best to set up a 'QA reference point' and the arrangements will vary according to national contexts. In principle the reference points will be based on/bring together existing relevant bodies and stakeholders. Nevertheless, their institutional and financial support needs further consideration, as well as the way of involving them in the European Network's activities.

At this stage, the Network identified the main tasks of the reference points, as follows:

- Keep the relevant stakeholders informed on the European Network's activities
- Provide active support to the implementation of the Network's Work programme
- Foster practical initiatives to enhance quality assurance and development in VET, using the CQAF as guidance and supporting tool

- Take concrete initiatives to promote the adaptation of the CQAF to specific contexts, namely through the development of practical guides, technical and methodological aids/guidance materials
- Raise key stakeholders' awareness of the benefits of using the QA principles, methods and criteria proposed by the CQAF
- Coordinate the organisation of peer learning visits agreed on the Network's WP.

The organisational setting and functioning arrangements of the QA reference points will be of their own decision. The VC could offer a suitable platform for discussion and exchange of experiences between reference points across countries.

Identifying a QA reference point in each Member State/Country is central to the success of the Network. It is anticipated that over time, while voluntary, a significant number of Member States/Countries will designate an appropriate 'QA reference point' to back up the European Network's activities.

## VII. WORK PROGRAMME

The Network has a biennial based W.P. This is agreed by the General Assembly, following a proposal from the Board and taking into account the possible funding arrangements.

Based on the priorities and activities outlined in the Work Programme, an Operational Plan has been prepared by the Board for 2006-7. The Operational Plan will be updated regularly in line with the Work Programme. The most up to date version of the Operational Plan will be available on the VC website in order to keep the Networks members informed regarding new developments.

Cedefop will assist **the Commission's work in this area, by giving its technical and scientific support to the Network's activities, according to the terms agreed in Cedefop's Work Programmes.** ETF will, as far as possible, liaise with candidate countries.

## VIII. FINANCING

The financing arrangements supporting the implementation of the Network's WP should be comprehensive and transparent. A budget statement on direct and indirect costs is to be considered as part of the Network's activity report.

Moreover, in order to assure the effectiveness and sustainability of European cooperation, the Network should be able to define aims and plan activities on a mid-term perspective. Financing is therefore a critical issue that needs clarification over time.

Along with the implementation of each WP, the European Network as such and the Network members as well should devote some activity to forward planning towards a mid-term Work Programme and elucidate the necessary arrangements to make in this regard, at European and national levels.

## IX. REPORTING

The Network will draw-up an annual activity report. This will be the basis for its contribution **to the** biennial report on "Education and Training 2010", on progress and results with regard to the implementation of the Network's Work Programme.

In addition, a member of the Network's Board will, as appropriate, report regularly to the General Assembly, to the Directors General of Vocational Training (DGVV), the Advisory Committee for Vocational Training (ACVT) and the Education & Training 2010 Coordination Group (ETCG).

