Assuring the quality of VET qualifications

The contribution of the EU tools (EQAVET, EQF, ECVET) to the definition and re-definition of learning outcomes based standards

Report of the EQAVET-ECVET-EQF Joint Seminar
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Introduction

This report presents the results of the joint seminar for national stakeholders involved in the implementation of EQAVET, EQF and ECVET on the impact of the shift to learning outcomes on qualifications-related processes and the influence of the EU tools on those processes in their respective countries.

The seminar was organised by the EQAVET Secretariat hosted by the German Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB) in Bonn, Germany.

In Europe, VET systems are undergoing developments to ensure that VET qualifications meet the highest quality standards and can be built on, refreshed and renewed, in order to maintain their relevance in rapidly changing economies. The shift to learning outcomes is an important facilitator of change. The EU tools: EQAVET, EQF and ECVET endorse the learning outcomes approach and aim to serve as reference frameworks to increase the quality, flexibility, transparency, comprehensibility and currency of VET qualifications in Europe.

This report aims to capture: the dominant issues, key messages and suggestions for future action that emerged from the discussions. Part one considers the impact of the learning outcomes approach on standards for VET qualifications. Part two explores the influence of the three EU tools on the development of VET standards. Part three summarises the main messages that emerged from the discussions and reflects on action that could be considered for the further development of the three EU tools.

1. The impact of the learning outcomes approach on standards for VET qualifications

The focus of the seminar was on learning outcomes based standards for VET qualifications. Standards' development must take full account of all the inter-related processes that result in the attainment of qualifications. All these processes need to be quality assured to safe-guard the reliability, robustness, relevance and usefulness of VET qualifications**.**

1.1. Learning from experience – Three Case Studies

Three case studies were presented at the seminar to demonstrate the benefits of developing qualifications standards based on learning outcomes. The case studies provided examples of: the different functions and application of the learning outcomes approach in European countries; the connectivity between changing qualifications and changing quality assurance needs and the influence or usage of the three EU tools. Presenters drew attention to similarities and differences in the EU regarding the development and renewal of learning outcomes referenced VET qualifications' standards, vis-à-vis: drivers, concepts, stage of development, policies, approaches and practices. They accentuated the importance of: understanding the differences in the type, scope and breadth of 'similar' qualifications in Europe; accepting the principle of 'best fit' when comparing qualifications; the value of establishing 'zones of trust' and the need for robust and reliable frameworks to serve as translation devices. All case studies gave emphasis to the dynamic nature of occupational profiles, the crucial role of labour market stakeholders in standards development and the need to maintain the integrity of VET qualifications.

Case study one
Credit for skills acquired 'on the job' – Butchery

SNAPSHOT

DUNBIA, a lead supplier of meat products in Europe, employs 3,200 people and is based in Northern Ireland. Changing industry standards require changes in training. In-house training is financially and logistically the best option for DUNBIA, which is an approved National Vocational Qualifications Assessment Centre.

The case study demonstrated how the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) facilitated employers and employees by offering a solution to changing industry standards and skills needs and the means to recognise experiential learning. To take full account of employee skills needs in DUNBIA, the company required the development of a qualification unit (described in the box below) on Carrying out boning in meat or poultry. The qualification unit was developed using the existing National Occupational Standards (NOS) which involved working in partnership with the awarding organization and the Sector Skills Council to develop the QCF unit in terms of learning outcomes and assessment criteria.

As a credit framework the QCF enables a small unit of learning, to be assessed and certified. As the unit was developed within the framework of a full qualification, credits acquired count towards a full qualification; this allows for further progression opportunities within the context of the QCF. As the unit was developed in close partnership with the awarding organizations and the Sector's Skills Council and makes use of NOS, it can be used by other enterprises and providers.

Unit: Carry out boning in meat processing
Qualification Framework: The Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF).
The Qualification Title: Diploma for Proficiency in Meat and Poultry Industry Skills Operations.
The Qualification Level: Level 2 (QCF), Level 3 (EQF)
Diploma Total Credits: 37 credits (comprising Group A, B, C type units)
Diploma Guided Learning Hours: 132-338
Unit Title: Carry out boning in meat processing (Group A type unit)
Unit Level: Level 2
Guided Learning Hours: 14
Unit Credit Value: 3
Learning Outcomes: The learner will (1) Prepare to carry out boning (2) Carry out boning
Assessment Guidance: This unit is designed to assess the skills of learners in the workplace, carrying out boning in meat processing. It needs to be assessed on the job. The learner must be able to demonstrate competent performance consistently over a period of time, to meet all of the assessment criteria. This will be achieved by at least two observations of performance in the workplace, and may be supported by witness testimony and other workplace evidence. Observations must ensure that the learner's working practice is at commercial speed and in compliance with standard operating procedures.

Assessment Criterion - The learner can:
- Access and interpret food business operator's (FBO) procedures for boning
- Select, wear and use personal protective equipment for boning operations
- Assemble the knives, tools and equipment to carry out boning
- Check that the work area is clear and ready to carry out boning
- Check that the meat to be boned conforms to required specification and is readily available
- Follow FBO procedures to deal with any preparation problems
- Follow FBO to deal with meat presented for boning that does not meet required specifications
- Follow FBO and use appropriate tools and equipment to bone out meat
- Adhere to quality requirements and maintain the pace of boning to meet processing needs
- Keep waste from boning to a minimum and store correctly for disposal
- Check that facilities are available for handling boned product and waste from boning
- Follow FBO's procedures to deal with any problems when boning out meat.

Source: Adapted from: http://register.ofqual.gov.uk/Unit/Details/F_502_7847

Developing a unit of learning involves addressing the full range of inter-related processes for qualification. Table one includes the processes from the development of the unit to its use and the linkages between these processes and qualifications-, credit- and quality assurance systems.

Table One: VET qualifications – inter-related process

	Standards definition/ development	Curriculum/ Learning provision	Assessment	Certification	Use (individuals, counsellors, employers)
Qualifications' systems/ frameworks	√	√	√	√	√
Credit systems	√	√	√	√	√
Quality assurance	√	√	√	√	√

The learning outcomes for the unit were developed in association with sector experts in accordance with national occupational standards based on Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) descriptors and levels. Assessment guidance suited to learning acquired and assessed 'on-the-job' was integral to the standards development process and related to the QCF. Based on the needs of the enterprise, employees' learning outcomes were immediately put to use in the workplace and credit gained could be accumulated towards a full qualification. Quality assurance involved adhering to set procedures for planning, implementation, evaluation and review and implementing essential public-private partnership processes. The case study demonstrated the advantages of using learning outcomes for all processes but the presenters made it clear that it takes considerable time for learning outcomes approaches to become embedded.

Case study two
Comparing qualifications in Europe – Bricklaying

SNAPSHOT

The European construction industry has a large workforce that is increasingly mobile with urgent needs for qualifications' recognition. The case study presented the results of an industry led research project, funded through Leonardo that evaluated the nature and content of bricklaying qualifications in: Belgium, England, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, and Poland. Its aim was to advance the trans-national recognition of bricklaying qualifications and competences by enhancing their transparency and comparability. The evaluation was based on macro and company/site studies and included different learning pathways (formal and informal), associated curricula and job profiles.

The project revealed the extent to which bricklaying qualifications and competences are embedded within their respective customs, laws and institutions and encompass different ranges of activities and knowledge requirements. Whilst occupational standards tended to be learning outcomes/competence based, in particular standards related to EU Directives (health and safety and environment protection), and more or less universal, there were differences in qualifications (see matrix two).

Countries ranged from being very familiar to unfamiliar with the learning outcomes approach and there were quite different conceptions of learning outcomes and competence, The range of standards for qualification differ, from a mix of occupational and functional to a broader mix of occupational, educational, process and assessment standards, thus the 'bricklayer' profiles and qualifications differ, in terms of scope and breadth. The institutions that provide programmes and the contexts and methods differ. Conceptions of quality assurance differ from being explicit and detached from, to implicit and inherent to, qualification processes. National Qualifications Frameworks differ and are at different stages of development. A key output was a proposal for discussion on a possible agreement concerning mutual recognition of qualifications premised on the establishment of 'zones of mutual trust' (ZMTs) and a sector qualifications-framework.

The case study demonstrated how standards development in different countries, for the 'same' occupation, incorporates sets of expected learning outcomes that can differ in type, scope and breadth. Differences and commonalities are illustrated in Table Two.

Table two: Comparing qualifications in Europe – Bricklaying

	National Curricula	General/ Civic Education	Project Management	School-based route	Dual-Training route	Social Partnership	Qualification Level and Currency
Denmark	√	√	√	minimal	√	√	3+ High
Belgium	√	√	√	√	√	√	3 High
France	√	√	√	Minor	√	√	3 High
Germany	√	√	√	Minor	√	√	3 High
Netherlands	?	√	√ level 3	√	√	√	2 High
Poland	√	√	√	√	Minor	Limited	3 High
England	Narrow			Dominant	Minor	Marginal	2 Low
Italy	Regional variation					Limited	2 Low/ Medium

Source: Clarke, Linda (Bonn Seminar presentation 2011), adapted.

Differences can result in the referencing of related qualifications to different framework levels at national and subsequently European levels that can result in tensions regarding the recognition of qualifications across borders.

To support trans-national recognition of VET qualifications, trust between stakeholders needs to be built, based on a shared understanding of the standards of acquired knowledge and know-how required for qualification at a particular level. Learning outcomes can be used to objectively compare and align qualifications. A key outcome of the study was the value of establishing 'zones of mutual trust'[1] to ensure credible qualifications' referencing, based on agreed descriptions of abilities and activities. Another outcome of the study was that qualifications frameworks' descriptors need to be sufficiently 'nuanced' to take account of differences in the scope and breadth of qualifications.

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[1] Coles, M. and Oates, T. (2004) European reference levels for education and training. An important parameter for promoting credit transfer and mutual trust. Cedefop. (for more information on 'Zones of Mutual Trust')

Case study three
Aiming for a European Occupational Profile - Car Mechatronic

SNAPSHOT

Whilst the European automotive production sector is referenced to global, high quality standards, the automotive services sector tends to be locally and nationally referenced resulting in variations in occupational profiles and quality standards. Significant change has occurred over time in the sector, not least due to EU Directives for: health, safety, environment-protection and consumer-protection, thereby contributing to the continuous evolution of the occupational profile.

For nearly two decades and with almost continuous financial support from EU sources, the European car servicing sector has worked on a long-term research project for the ongoing development of a European core occupational profile – Car Mechatronic.
The global objectives of the project include:

- to extend the profile from an emphasis on technical-scientific contents to embrace work process competence;
- to raise occupational quality standards in the sector in Europe and enhance the comparability of qualifications.

In its current phase (2006-2012) the sector is developing a quality standards framework, based on work processes, and a credit concept, with the aim of inter-relating qualifications with the EQF/NQFs. The concept, approach and core curricula for the occupational profile were developed and adopted with and without variations, or adapted to suit national contexts. In Germany, the project is serving as a 'work process' model for other occupational profiles and qualifications (for example in: logistics, health care, information technologies and off-shore sectors).

This case study complemented the outcomes of the bricklaying case study by demonstrating how 'zones of mutual trust' can work in practice and how sectoral social partners can work at European level to increase mutual understanding of the type, scope and breadth of standards underpinning an occupational profile. Building on shared understanding and facilitated by the use of learning outcomes, more comparable standards can be developed.

The case study demonstrated the benefits of a sector adopting an industry led European-level approach to developing common standards, to deal with the speed of change and sector specificities, but highlighted the need for supportive, responsive and more comparable systemic frameworks at the respective national levels. The case study demonstrated that occupational profiles are dynamic. Over the lifespan of this project quantum change has occurred in the automotive service sector, with regard to: social dialogue, service philosophies, work tasks, work organization, technological challenges and qualification concepts. Much change commonly affects the entire sector in Europe but the national responses to changing sectoral requirements can differ, as can the timeframes within which change occurs.

Defining competences as 'learning outcomes, based on defined work processes' can be considered as a quality standard. Due to their context relationship quality standards are not easily transferable. Accumulation of learning outcomes must be referenced to the quality standards determined by the sector for full qualification, otherwise the employability of the individual may be in question.

Although a common methodology was developed and applied to jointly identify and analyse work-processes relevant for the occupational profile and to mutually define learning outcomes based on the latter, the process for defining learning outcomes orientated to standards was consensually agreed as the task of responsible bodies in the participating countries. In spite of the participation of social partners during the creation of the occupational profiles, in many countries it was difficult to convince VET planners to shift from the technical-scientific contents approach to the process orientated competence development approach.

Differences in national VET cultures can militate against the application of a European occupational profile, e.g. the German dual system guarantees the development of maximum ability, understood as professional competence (berufliche Handlungsfähigkeit) and there is some concern that training profiles might be narrowed due to the EQF related definition of learning outcomes. European sector qualifications frameworks can interact with national qualifications frameworks through processes of dialogue and negotiation however, this occurs at national level

with consequences for the 'European' framework which needs to accommodate national level compromises.

1.2. Learning outcomes – critical issues under discussion

In workshops the debate broadened to consider the impact of the learning outcomes approach on standards for VET qualifications in all countries represented. The issues raised in the case studies guided the discussions.

Learning-outcomes: concepts, benefits and state of play

The learning outcomes approach is not new to VET but it is often more associated with VET pathways that are occupationally specific and have a long tradition of integrated work-based learning, such as apprenticeship. Drivers of the introduction of the learning outcomes approach in school-based VET include shifts in policy towards including more work-based learning in programmes and to facilitate progression to further learning. Adopting the learning outcomes approach can serve the functions of, on the one hand, triggering the role of the State in more decentralised VET systems with a shift towards top-down re-organization of the qualifications system involving the social partners and other stakeholders and on the other hand devolving more autonomy to providers in what were hitherto more centralised systems. The main benefits are perceived to be that the labour market understands and is responsive to the learning outcomes based approach and this helps to create/reinforce links between enterprises and schools thereby increasing the labour market relevance of qualifications. Furthermore, the approach 'opens up' qualifications by making them more transparent for employers and learners.

There is a range of different understandings/definitions of the term 'learning outcomes' across countries, for example, 'learning outcomes' based learning and 'competence' based learning can be considered synonymous in meaning or different. Despite differences in concepts and definitions, participants from countries represented at the seminar reported on measures introduced to develop more learning outcomes referenced VET systems; for many, directly related to the development of national qualifications' frameworks. However, the extent of the 'shift' varies considerably across countries and ranges from being at the starting point of conceptualisation or early policy planning to full application; a large number of countries are at the early stage of defining qualifications' standards in terms of

learning outcomes. A key message from a small number of 'front-runner' countries is that the change is an interactive and iterative process that takes considerable time and that stakeholders at every level require significant support and encouragement.

Learning outcomes and the definition of qualification standards

Qualification standards combine: occupational standards (including professional standards for regulated professions), educational (curricular content and process) and assessment standards. Developing learning outcomes orientated qualifications based on occupational standards that are linked to assessment standards is quite common in European countries. Learning outcomes that are explicit and easily demonstrable lend themselves to the approach whereas "soft skills" or "key competencies" are proving to be more challenging to define and assess in terms of learning outcomes-based standards.

Participating countries, including those that have referenced their national qualifications frameworks to the EQF, or are in the process of doing so, have described qualifications levels in terms of learning outcomes and are at different stages of defining and re-defining standards accordingly. The trend to define standards that facilitate units of learning outcomes is increasing and is regarded as important for the implementation of ECVET. A key message is that processes for standards development must take account of the full range: occupational, educational, process and assessment, in a holistic way.

Learning outcomes, curricula and learning processes

Whilst developing VET standards in terms of learning outcomes can be demanding, the culture change required to ensure the paradigm shift permeates the learning process thereafter, is considered to be much more challenging. Those countries that have progressed beyond the stage of re-defining standards in terms of learning outcomes, exchanged information on their experiences with 'follow-through'. Differences emerged due to the type of system in place and whether change policies and strategies were holistically planned and simultaneously implemented, holistically planned and consecutively implemented or planned and implemented step by step.

Countries differ in their approaches to curriculum development for VET; sometimes within countries different approaches are adopted for initial VET and continuing VET and even for different forms of provision within these two broad sectors. Some

countries set standards based on learning outcomes centrally and then devolve responsibility to providers/teachers to develop curricula based on those standards; this can result in teachers having more control over whether and to what extent they change their practice. Other countries develop standards, curricula and assessment guidance centrally, thereby obliging teachers to change practice at greater speed. Some countries have started to implement the learning outcomes approach and are confronting issues resulting from an information gap between policy-papers that set out 'what ought to happen' (policy objectives) and the needs of practitioners to 'make it happen'.

Across VET, curricula can be implemented by 'teachers', 'trainers' and 'instructors'; each may have different qualifications, formation, status and dedication-time ('instructors' are often full-time employees with work tasks other than training). These 'learning facilitators' require tailored support to enable them to adapt to the learning outcomes based approach as well as support to collaborate more closely. Learners also require support to adapt to the new demands that the learning outcomes based approach makes on them, for example, for articulating their learning needs and self-assessment.

A short list of issues that need to be addressed to ensure that the learning outcomes approach trickles down through the curricula and into learning contexts, include:

- Engaging all stakeholders as partners in developments from the outset and at all subsequent phases;
- Exploring stakeholder concerns and needs with them with regard to needed changes in mindsets related to learning philosophies and the roles and practice of teacher (*the metamorphosis from being a teacher to being a facilitator will not and cannot happen overnight);*
- Enabling stakeholders to develop the necessary know-how and methods to bring about change, including change management skills and capacity building to improve quality cultures in communities of practice;
- Encouraging interaction across communities of practice, for example through common projects;
- Implementing a holistic approach to change management and monitoring the impact of change from the outset and providing constant feedback.

Learning-outcomes and assessment

The differences between teaching input-based standards and learning outcomes-based standards become very evident in the assessment of learning outcomes. In

VET there is a good deal of experience of assessing learning outcomes based on occupational standards. For the most part these outcomes are demonstrated in the work context and assessed by employers. In some countries such as Finland this form of assessment is being built into school based VET in the form of s*kills demonstrations.*

The focus of assessment in the learning outcome approach is the learner, and what s/he is expected to know, be able to do and understand. This shift from the learning context to the learner, and from input to output, facilitates the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Interestingly, some countries are building on experience gained in relation to the assessment of non-formal and informal learning when developing systemic approaches for the assessment of learning outcomes in the context of VET programmes.

Learning outcomes and quality assurance

The shift from defining standards based on teaching inputs to learning outcomes based standards has a significant impact on quality assurance policies and practices. There was general agreement that when the application of the learning outcomes approach resulted in greater autonomy for providers there are greater risks of greater failure at institutional level. Thus, as more responsibility is devolved to providers for curricula, methodologies and assessment, there is evidence that this is being matched by the augmentation of "regulators" at system level and a greater onus on providers to demonstrate effectiveness, which has resulted in an expansion of 'responsible' bodies (quality assurance bodies, accreditation bodies, awarding bodies, examining bodies), or of their tasks, or their volume of work. The cost-benefit ratio related to the proliferation of regulatory bodies, the impact of the processes they introduce, including increased bureaucracy as well as the need to monitor their effectiveness needs consideration.

Quality assurance concepts, management and practice can differ within and across the contexts of work and school. For example, it is the responsibility of the 'Meister' in Germany to ensure the excellence of the work of apprentices and thereby the quality of their learning outcomes. The 'Meister' qualification is highly respected and the holder is trusted to make sound judgements; what may appear as quality assurance by intuition is in fact quality assurance underpinned by the highest levels of occupational and professional competence.

Maintaining confidence in VET qualifications is strongly linked to the judgement of standards by sector specialists. For many countries the very involvement of the economic world in the definition of standards is a quality assurance mechanism in itself.

1.3. Summary

VET systems are steeped in tradition and inextricably linked to national economies. Political decisions determine the role of VET in the society and economy and the type, scope, breadth and currency of VET qualifications. VET qualifications for a particular occupation can thus differ considerably across countries and these differences can be aligned to policies with short term goals, for example, to cater for immediate skills- and/or labour- shortages or long-term goals, including social inclusion and economy forecasts and matters related to, *inter alia*, pay-scales. Thus there can be tension between European goals for enhanced comparability and national realities. Despite this, there is evidence that the principle of basing VET qualifications standards on learning outcomes is being more extensively applied even if those standards differ in scope and breadth.

Learning outcomes describe the results of learning achievement, defining standards for expected results is the start of a long and inter-connected process and therefore is dependent on a 'feedback loop' that safeguards the quality, relevance and suitability of standards for the intervening processes: curricula/contents development and delivery, assessment and awards. There is a need to ensure that explicit and comprehensive quality assurance policy, which balances top-down with the bottom up practice, underpins all processes.

Implementing programmes designed to enable learners to achieve learning outcomes based standards changes the roles, responsibilities and practice of provider institutions and 'learning facilitators'; this shift requires support in terms of familiarization, guidance, training and the provision of resources. There is also greater need for national responsible bodies to safeguard standards, with cost-benefit considerations. A consequence of placing the learner in a more pivotal position is the transfer of responsibility to learner level; they too require supports tailored to their needs.

Participants considered issues for further reflections, including to:

- Analyse and review EQF descriptors in relation to how learning outcomes based VET qualifications standards are developed for occupations as they are defined in different European countries. This may be achieved through trans-national research projects similar to those described in case studies two and three and other *'Tuning'* - type activities.

- Monitor how stakeholders in different 'communities of practice' understand 'quality' and 'quality assurance', how understanding is shared and practice trusted and the extent to which quality assurance policy and practice permeate the VET system.

- Map the inter-related 'communities of practice' and monitor their respective quality cultures and support interaction between them. In this regard pay special attention to collaboration between teachers, trainers and instructors and quality assurance mechanisms that underpin learning and assessment processes.

- Research the needs of all 'learning facilitators' and learners in the context of the shift to learning outcomes. Gather evidence on where and how governments intervene in centralised and de-centralised systems to support 'learning facilitators' and learners to 'fill the competence gaps'.

2. The usage and influence of the tools in developing VET standards

Part two summarizes participants' views and experiences with respect to the strengths and limitations of the three EU tools in relation to influencing national standards-setting processes and underpinning quality assurance. Future action regarding the ways in which the EU tools might be further developed and co-operation enhanced are presented.

2.1. Different points of departure

In order to gauge the extent of the influence and usage of the three tools in Europe it is essential to relate the latter to the national starting point. In this regard representatives identified their countries in accordance with four rough classifications. The function and application of the EU tools differ within and across these country-sets, as demonstrated in the text box below; this makes it difficult to generalise the extent of impact.

Set one: National systems have been based for some time on more or less the same principles as those underpinning all three EU tools and are therefore fundamentally compatible but the features and language of the systems may differ, for example: NQF type (comprehensive/sector, with/without a credit system, levels and descriptors etc.); type of quality assurance etc. The challenge for these countries is to find a 'best fit' solution for the integration and usage of the EU tools.

Set two: National systems have been based for some time on the principles that underpin one or two of the tools but not all three. Set two countries are at advanced stages of planning developments to take account of the outstanding principles and/or are at the early to middle stages of implementation of one or more. The main challenge for these countries is to implement a systematic and comprehensive lifelong learning policy that covers the principles in all three tools.

Set three: National systems are at advanced stages of developments that take account of the underlying principles of all three EU-tools, and are at the early to middle stages of implementation of one or more. The challenge for these countries is to embed the underlying principles in their systems (often assisted by European developments, and this will take time, in order to pave the way for the usage of the EU tools.

Set four: National systems are at the early stages of planning that takes account of the underlying principles; some are still in the conceptualisation and/or initial planning phase, some are testing developments through pilot projects. The challenge for these countries is to convince stakeholders of the benefits of reforming systems, in accordance with the underlying principles, and which could lead to implementing the EU tools.

2.2. Functions and impact of the EU tools

The functions and impact of each of the three EU tools can differ from country to country. The tools can function as:

- catalysts for changing mind-sets;
- drivers of developments needed to support lifelong learning;
- devices to promote co-operation across stakeholders, peer review and benchmarking;
- instruments to speed up reform and maintain momentum;
- references for quality;
- enablers for establishing mutual trust;
- meta-frameworks.

Participants noted that there could be margins between 'expected' and 'actual' functions. Differing views were expressed regarding whether the tools should 'influence' or be applied as 'best-practice' models in national developmental processes.

The impact of the EU tools is linked to their respective function(s) and whether the approach to implementation is 'loose' (principles underpinning the EU tools already underlie policy and practice) or is 'tightly structured' (direct application of the EU tools) or is somewhere in-between. For example, in the case of EQAVET, the principles underpinning the tool may be incorporated in long standing quality

assurance arrangements, in which case EQAVET will have a light impact. When the EQAVET model is implemented as a quality assurance tool the impact will be stronger.

Application of the EU tools

The debate on application focused on, *inter alia*: the voluntary nature of the EU tools *versus* the understanding that the tools best function when universally applied; applying the tools in centralized *versus* de-centralised systems; devolving autonomy *versus* maintaining control; relying on trust *versus* ensuring accountability and the costs *versus* benefits related to application.

As the use of the EU tools is voluntary this can result in different types of management of the tools by different types of bodies. In some instances, promotion/implementation is managed by qualifications' and quality assurance authorities, whereas, in other contexts these responsibilities have been allocated to bodies with other responsibilities or bodies established specifically for this purpose. In the former the emphasis tends to be on applying principles and in the latter on the usage of the tools. These differences in application-concepts can lead to tensions. Additionally, in order to apply the tools, even though this is voluntary, some EU Member States need to pass legislation, with subsequent tensions between "compulsory" application through law enforcement and "voluntary" application on the basis of mutual trust.

2.3 Summary: Coherence and synergy across EU tools

Some countries have adapted, or are advanced in adapting systems to take account of the principles underlying the EU tools in a way that is coherent and maximises synergy between them. Other countries are either planning an integrative or tool-by-tool approach to application or are still undecided.

It was suggested that a more developed picture of the status quo in Member States would be beneficial. Table three offers a format to map the influence of the EU tools on VET qualifications and gauge the synergy between them.

Table Three: the influence of the EU tools on VET qualifications

	Standards definition/ development	Curricula/ Learning provision	Assessment	Certification	Use (individuals, counsellors, employers etc.)
EQF					
ECVET					
EQAVET					

More information on good examples of what works well, regarding tool coherence and synergy, would be beneficial. Additional to the agreement that enhanced co-operation to ensure improved coherence and synergy was necessary, participants concurred that this must extend to other related European tools[2].

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[2] Other tools developed for VET, in the context of the 'Copenhagen Process' (validation of non-formal learning, guidance etc.). Tools developed for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA): the Qualifications Framework-EHEA, ECTS and European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. Tools that promote the transparency of qualifications, mobility and communication between education and the labour market (ESCO, Directive on Professional Qualifications, Europass, etc.)

3. Future action: How can the EU tools, and their implementation, be improved?

Modernising systems of long and valued tradition takes time as beliefs, norms, cultures and behaviours are challenged. Change is unsettling and tends to be resisted as individuals fear the loss of what is known when the gains are not yet visible. 'Communities of practice' need to be consulted and motivated to engage in debate in order to better understand the reasons for, and benefits of, integrating the underlying principles of the EU-tools in policy and practice. 'Communities of practice' require support to develop and take ownership of the processes needed to bring about change.

Where the EU-tools have been discretely introduced and applied there will be a need to encourage interaction between 'communities of practice' in order to facilitate the coherent integration of the three EU-tools in policy and practice. Once introduced into dynamic change processes the EU tools can not remain static or they will lose their relevance. Thus, constant monitoring of how the EU tools are being applied and the impact they are having and reviewing this from time to time is essential. Participants agreed that national strategies for the coherent implementation of the three EU-tools should aim to reduce complexities, enhance co-operation and synergy, improve monitoring and review processes, balance the cost-benefit ratio and ensure sustainability.

3.1. Simplification and synergy

The articulation of the tools with related national policy and practice is vital. If the tools are applied in parallel to existing practice they will be perceived as difficult. For example, attempting to implement ECVET in VET systems that are not learning outcomes based and have neither a credit system nor a qualifications' framework may not have an added value.

Co-operation and synergy at all levels needs to be strengthened. At the level of governance, key actors at European and national level need to foster an integrated approach for the implementation of the three EU-tools, in relation to other related EU tools in Education and Training 2020.

Communication between those responsible for managing the implementation of the EU-tools and the end users needs to be coherent and co-ordinated. More emphasis must be placed on concrete benefits and this can only be determined by more

rigorous monitoring and evaluation. Through collaboration, the benefits of applying the tools can be promoted more holistically, efficiently and effectively.

There is a need for capacity building at all levels. Teachers, trainers and instructors, in particular, require continuing professional development to manage change.

In some countries the bodies appointed to implement the EU tools are not the responsible bodies for related systemic policy, for example a National Contact Point for ECVET may, or may not, be a national qualifications or awards body with authority regarding the transfer and accumulation of credits for units of learning. Improving understanding of who is responsible in the different countries for the governance and management of VET quality assurance and qualification/credit systems and of each of the EU-tools may help to facilitate trans-national co-operation. Table four offers a format.

Table Four: national bodies for VET systems and EU-tools

	Systems and EU-tools	Governance	Management
Qualifications' systems and/or frameworks	National VET Qualifications' System		
	National Qualifications' Framework		
	EQF		
Credit systems	National VET credit systems		
	ECVET		
Quality assurance	National VET quality assurance		
	EQAVET		

3.2. Monitoring

The implementation of each of the three EU tools is being monitored individually. Due to the voluntary nature of the tools there are no obligatory indicators or benchmarks, thus the monitoring process is 'soft' and focuses more on possible usage and expectations of benefit. Two actions were considered to be of potential value: firstly, collective monitoring of the three tools and secondly, monitoring the integration of the tools in national level policies at governance, management and implementation levels. A third area that required more attention was to improve the selection of, and the monitoring of, relevant Leonardo projects at both EU and national levels and to ensure that good practice filters into systems and lessons learned can be addressed in national policy developments.

3.3. Sustainability

To maintain confidence and momentum and to provide the necessary support and guidance to implement and embed underlying principles of the EU tools in a way that is appropriate, efficient and effective, strong European co-ordination and guidance is needed. The activities and processes conducted through the open method of co-ordination were perceived to be crucial. Access to experiences gained in 'front-runner' countries was essential, not only to help guide policy and practice but to demonstrate concrete benefits of reform. Whilst it was agreed that much was being done, there was also a clear need to do more, and do it better, for example:

- better coordination at EU and national levels;
- better representation in developments at EU level (social partners, sector associations, all Member States with special arrangements for large and federalised countries);
- better synergy (cross-sector projects, broader based 'communities of practice');
- better and earlier monitoring, analysis, evaluation and dissemination;
- better responses to unintended consequences;
- better assessment of the time needed for change and realistic timescales;
- better information and guidance;
- better use of EU funds and projects to support developments.

Conclusion

The seminar facilitated important discussions related to progress with regard to the shift to learning outcomes in qualifications related processes and the implementation of the EU tools. All the dominant issues, key messages and suggestions for future action that emerged from discussion are presented in this report.

With regard to the EU tools and in summary:

- Learning outcomes based qualifications frameworks are starting to become reference points for the development and renewal of VET qualifications standards at national level. Implementing the EQF speeds up processes.
- The trend to make awards and/or give credits for units of learning outcomes, for transfer and progression purposes, within the national context, is growing. The principles underpinning ECVET are generally taken into account in such developments.
- Measures to quality assure processes for the development and renewal of VET standards are advanced at national level but these processes are often implicit, based on long tradition and inextricably linked to quality assured processes at many different levels. EQAVET co-operation processes are achieving success in improving the transparency and comprehensibility of national quality assurance systems.

In the context of promoting lifelong learning policies, a more co-ordinated approach is required regarding the coherent implementation of: EQAVET, EQF and ECVET; other Education and Training 2020 tools; other European Higher Education Area tools and other EU tools that promote the transparency of qualifications, mobility and communication between education and the labour market.

Future action needs to focus on strategy planning for the coherent implementation of the tools with emphasis on simplification, synergy and sustainability. Co-operation and co-ordination based on issues of common interests, such as the theme of this seminar can be fruitfully pursued. A Commission proposal to organise a similar joint seminar in 2012 was welcomed.

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