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REINVENTING UNIVERSITY.

THE DIGITAL CHALLENGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Edited by

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3. SELF-ASSESSMENT IN VET AND HIGHER EDUCATION: LINKS AND FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS¹

by Laura Evangelista* and Concetta Fonzo**

Abstract: *Despite the already existing self-assessment methodologies and tools in place, Education systems need to further invest in quality assurance measures that can guarantee a quality culture. Quality Assurance Frameworks and, more specifically, quality criteria and indicators are increasingly important for all Education providers, and Education authorities as well. The overlapping and redundancy of self-assessment tools and methods in different education and training settings created the condition for an integrated approach that can provide synergies among different systems and a solid base for further implementations and improvements. The paper reports a critical review of quality assurance measures and instruments already existing and used by both the Vocational Education and Training and the Higher Education systems in Europe. Moreover, the research results of a national experimentation will be illustrated to show how the European Peer Review methodology can be considered an agile method for different learning settings since it adapts swiftly to diverse training and education needs and provides quality learning opportunities for those who use it. Finally, the paper places a strong focus on the increased flexibility of the European Quality Assurance for Vocational Education and Training (so-called EQAVET) Framework and other EU quality assurance tools, reinforcing the idea to further explore*

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opportunities for their adaptation to enhance quality and guarantee a continuing improvement of measures in line also with the digital readiness required by the technological revolution and the digital transition that affect the different systems – from School to Higher Education.

Keywords: quality assurance, higher education, vocational education and training, self-assessment, peer review.

Abstract: *Nonostante le metodologie e gli strumenti di autovalutazione già esistenti, i sistemi educativi necessitano di investire ulteriormente in misure di assicurazione della qualità che possano garantire una cultura della qualità. I quadri di garanzia della qualità e, più specificamente, i criteri e gli indicatori di qualità sono sempre più importanti per tutti i fornitori di istruzione e anche per le autorità educative. La sovrapposizione e la ridondanza di strumenti e metodi di autovalutazione in diversi contesti educativi e formativi ha creato le condizioni per un approccio integrato, in grado di fornire sinergie tra sistemi diversi nonché una solida base per ulteriori implementazioni e miglioramenti. Il presente contributo riporta una revisione critica delle misure e degli strumenti di garanzia della qualità già esistenti e utilizzati sia dai sistemi di istruzione e formazione professionale che dai sistemi di istruzione superiore in Europa. Inoltre, verranno illustrati i risultati di una ricerca sperimentale nazionale, per mostrare come la metodologia della Peer Review europea possa essere considerata un metodo agile per diversi contesti di apprendimento, dal momento che si adatta rapidamente alle diverse esigenze di formazione e istruzione e offre opportunità di apprendimento di qualità per coloro che la utilizzano. Infine, si pone un forte accento sulla flessibilità del quadro EQAVET (EQAVET Framework) e gli altri strumenti europei per l'assicurazione della qualità, rafforzando l'idea di esplorare ulteriormente le opportunità per un loro adattamento al fine di rafforzare la qualità e garantire un miglioramento continuo degli strumenti di qualità in linea anche con la prontezza digitale richiesta dalla rivoluzione tecnologica e dalla transizione digitale che interessano i diversi sistemi – dalla scuola all'istruzione superiore.*

Parole chiave: garanzia della qualità, istruzione superiore, istruzione e formazione professionale, autovalutazione, peer review.

Introduction

Over the last decades, the European quality assurance initiatives in the Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training (VET) fields were key in the European policy agenda. They had a clear impact on the “European dimension” of quality assurance in Education and Training Systems in Europe. Stakeholders belonging to both fields perceived the need to support the quality assurance policies through the experimentation of new tools and methodologies, making a clear difference between external and internal quality assurance measures.

Moreover, the continuous engagement and collaboration of stakeholders from different levels – European, national and local – drove the quality assurance agenda in both sectors: Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training.

On one side, in the Higher Education sector, a group of European stakeholder organisations which include the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA), the European Student Union (ESU—formerly ESIB), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and the European University Association (EUA), boosted the European collaboration on quality assurance issues. From the beginning of the Bologna Process, these organisations formed the E4 Group and developed common tools for quality assurance in Higher Education, like the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2005), the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) and the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF).

The ESG contain measures that relate to both internal and external quality assurance and standards for external quality assurance agencies. The ESG also state that external quality assurance agencies should be reviewed every five years and establish a register of approved quality assurance agencies and a European consultative forum for quality assurance in Higher Education (which is the ENQA). Following the ESG, European countries are expected to adhere to specific requirements:

- internal quality assurance. In fact, Higher Education institutions should have policies and procedures related to internal quality assurance. In particular, there should be approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards and institutions should have effective management systems to collect, analyse and use relevant information, such as student progression and success rates, employability of graduates, student satisfaction with the programme, effectiveness of teachers and profile of the student population;
- external quality assurance. Indeed, external quality assurance authorities should review the “quality” of Higher Education institutions’ internal quality assurance systems. In particular, countries should employ clear and transparent external processes where the aims and objectives are determined in advance; formal decisions made through external quality assurance should be based on explicit procedures and applied consistently. And quality assurance agencies should periodically produce system-wide summary reports presenting their general findings from their reviews;
- external quality assurance agencies. These agencies should apply national external quality assurance procedures that meet the requirements described above. The quality assurance agencies should be recognised as competent public authorities responsible for quality assurance with an established legal

basis and external quality assurance activities should be undertaken on a regular basis. In particular, the processes, procedures and criteria adopted by quality assurance agencies should be pre-defined and publicly available. A self-assessment or equivalent process, external reviews through site visits, conducted by a group of experts and possibly student members, with the publication of reports and follow-up procedures should be foreseen.

Thanks to strong European cooperation, considerable progress was made in strengthening and assuring quality in Higher Education institutions and programmes, in connection also to other Bologna action lines, such as qualifications frameworks, mutual recognition procedures and use of learning outcomes, contributing to a paradigm shift towards student-centred learning and teaching.

In 2012, with the Bucharest Communiqué, the Ministers responsible for higher education in the countries of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) invited the E4 Group in cooperation with Education International, BUSINESSEUROPE and the EQAR to prepare a proposal for a revised ESG “*to improve their clarity, applicability and usefulness, including their scope*”. Hence, the ESG were revised and improved, and the version adopted in 2015 is currently in force.

A key goal of the ESG is to contribute to the common understanding of quality assurance for learning and teaching across borders and among all stakeholders. Institutions and quality assurance agencies use the ESG as a reference document for internal and external quality assurance systems in Higher Education; moreover, they are thought to be used by the EQAR, which is responsible for the register of quality assurance agencies that comply with the ESG.

It is relevant to stress that the ESG are not quality standards; as such, they do not define quantitative criteria or

indicators or regulate the implementation process. The ESG are guidelines that define the main areas that need attention to ensure quality in Higher Education and an effective teaching and learning environment. The ESG should be considered in a broader context that includes qualifications frameworks, ECTS² and diploma supplements which contribute to promoting transparency and mutual trust in higher education in the EHEA. More in detail, the ESG have the following purposes:

- to set a common framework for quality assurance systems for learning and teaching at European, national and institutional levels;
- to enable the assurance and improvement of quality of higher education in the European Higher Education Area;
- to support mutual trust, thus facilitating recognition and mobility within and across national borders;
- to provide information on quality assurance in the EHEA.

These purposes provide a framework within which the ESG may be used and implemented differently by various institutions, agencies and countries. Broadly accepting all standards is a precondition for creating a common understanding of European quality assurance. For these reasons, the ESG need to be at a reasonably generic level to ensure that they apply to all forms of provision.

On the other side, in the Vocational Education and Training sector, the National Reference Points of the EQAVET³ network, promoted by the European Commission with funding

² ECTS stands for European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System and further information is available on the European Commission's website: <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/inclusive-and-connected-higher-education/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system>.

³ EQAVET is the acronym of European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training.

provided through the European Programmes in Education and Training, played a key role in advancing the policies around quality assurance mechanisms for VET.

The EQAVET network was established with the aim of promoting and developing joint basic principles for quality assurance in vocational education and training in Europe. Based on strong European cooperation, EQAVET followed a Recommendation adopted by the European Parliament and Council on 18 June 2009, which marks the date of the foundation of the network.

In 2020, the EQAVET network started to support the implementation of the Recommendation on Vocational Education and Training for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness, and resilience, which replaced the previous EQAVET Recommendation 2009. The key elements of the 2020 VET Recommendation are the following:

- the description of 10 indicators, which include metrics for measuring activities that support the high quality of national/regional VET systems and/or VET providers (e.g., investment in training of teachers and trainers, schemes used to promote better access to VET and provide guidance to potential VET learners) and the output measures (participation rate in VET programmes, completion rate in VET programmes, etc.);
- the promotion of a quality cycle, using indicators and indicative descriptors, based on four stages (planning, implementation, evaluation and review);
- the expectation that there will be internal (self-assessment) and external (by Peers) assessment of VET, at provider, system and qualification level.

The EQAVET network comprises National Reference Points (EQAVET NRPs), located in different countries, which bring

together relevant stakeholders at national, regional and local levels, developing a common understanding, agreement and application of the European quality criteria and indicators. From its establishment, the EQAVET network fostered the enhancement of a “quality culture” and supported the use of the “quality cycle” for quality assurance and improvement in VET. This cycle corresponds to the Deming cycle, a well-known quality management instrument comprising four main phases: Plan – Do – Check – Act (PDCA).

Even before establishing the European network, several National Reference Points contributed to identifying a selection of descriptors and indicators applicable to quality management at both the VET system and provider levels. Thus, the EQAVET NRPs contributed to the enhancement of the EQAVET Framework, which includes quality criteria, descriptors and indicators, and the “quality cycle” as its core component. As for the ESG, it is important to underline that the EQAVET criteria and indicative descriptors are not quality standard; they are intended to be guidelines that define the main quality indicators that need attention to guarantee quality at the stage of VET provider and system.

In synthesis, this large plethora of European initiatives, dedicated to quality assurance in Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training, created a transnational forum for continuous discussions and exchanges of good practice between European, national and institutional policymakers and stakeholders. Fostering a European debate around the quality assurance systems and measures to put in place and to enhance the attention of stakeholders and experts focused on the adaptation and implementation of European tools for internal and external quality assurance in higher education and vocational training. Through research, studies and experimentations related

to both the ESG and the EQAVET Framework (European Commission, 2019), deep analysis related to the main forms and tools of their implementation was carried out, including also methodologies linked to self-assessment (Invalsi, 2022 and 2020). Moreover, the analysis was in line with the movement inspired by the school self-evaluation which aimed to promote school improvement through a systematic change of internal processes (Harris, 2001). As a matter of fact, in the last decades, in order to ensure quality of education and training, in many educational systems, school self-evaluation became a key procedure, next to external evaluation (OECD, 2013). And, as regards this type of assessment, the primary intent was to improve school procedures, supporting the capacity for change through the valorisation of self-evaluation tools (Hopkins, 2001).

1. Quality assurance as a strategic element in the reforming process of Higher Education and VET systems in Europe

In an international context, the establishment of the European Higher Education Area was meant to make Higher Education in Europe more attractive and competitive, more inclusive and accessible and, more in general, to facilitate student and staff mobility and to foster collaboration and cooperation among Higher Education institutions.

The creation of the EHEA started with the Bologna Process, launched by the Bologna Declaration of 1999, and nowadays it is based on a voluntary aggregation of 49 Countries. Under the Bologna Process, the European Countries participating in the EHEA jumped into a reforming procedure aimed at building cross-border cooperation, mutual trust and recognition among different Higher Education systems across Europe. The Bologna Process

also provided a forum for dialogue about enhancing quality of learning and teaching. In fact, as part of the European Higher Education Area, all participating countries agreed on three key commitments: a three-cycle higher education system compatible with the framework of qualifications of the EHEA and first and second-cycle degrees scaled by ECTS; the mutual recognition of qualifications and learning periods abroad in compliance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention; and a system of quality assurance in line with the ESG. Regarding the third key Bologna commitment, related to quality assurance in EHEA, it was stated that the Higher Education

“institutions granting degrees assure the quality of their programmes leading to degrees within the three-cycle system following the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015). External quality assurance (be it at programme or institutional level) is performed by Agencies that have demonstrably complied with the standards and guidelines stipulated in the ESG. This is best ensured where only those agencies registered on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) are allowed to operate in the country (Paris Communiqué, 2018)”.

For the implementation of the Bologna key commitments, “*a structured peer-based support*” was adopted. A coordinating body, the Bologna Implementation Coordination Group (BICG), was established to organise three Peer Groups, one for each key commitment. Later, the thematic Peer Group C, dedicated to key commitment 3 on Quality Assurance in compliance with the ESG, was set up. The thematic Peer Group on “Quality Assurance” had the task to tackle topics such as a legislative framework in line with the ESG, the effectiveness of internal quality assurance arrangements; the use of quality assurance results in the decision-making process and quality culture as well as its links to learning

and teaching; the role and engagement of stakeholders (students, teachers, employers) in internal and external quality assurance; the cross-border quality assurance and the European accreditation of joint programmes approaches.

The pressure given to rising quality assurance within and after the Bologna Process “lead to a need to develop a quality culture, while addressing the challenges of globalised higher education (Smidt, H., 2015: 626)”.

As in the European Higher Education sector, over the last two decades, at the same time frame, the European institutions invested also in quality assurance initiatives and policies for VET systems. Like in Higher Education, the support for quality assurance in Vocational Education and Training was intended to make VET more attractive for learners, more effective and better and to strengthen European cooperation in VET. Rising international cooperation in VET means increasing transparency and mobility, promoting mutual learning and consensus building and supporting quality assurance at national and local level.

In Vocational Education and Training, a specific focus on quality assurance started with the Copenhagen Process, which aimed to agree on a Declaration about enhanced European cooperation in VET. This Declaration responded to a request from the Barcelona European Council in March 2002 to take action in the field of vocational training, similar to that taken under the Bologna Declaration in Higher Education.

The Copenhagen Process was an accelerated measure to improve the quality and effectiveness of VET, followed by the Bruges Communiqué in 2010, the Riga Conclusions in 2015 and the subsequent EU Recommendations related to various policies of VET (e.g., apprenticeship, graduated tracking, etc.) aimed at ensuring and enhancing quality in European Vocational Education and Training systems.

From a European perspective, during the past twenty years, the attention and the pressure on quality assurance at education and training providers level and at programme level, was high. As revealed during the sessions on quality assurance at the Future of Higher Education Conference in Bucharest in 2014, this pressure needed work in continuous progress. Moreover, discussions at European level

“also indicated that the perception of quality assurance is very multi-dimensional and contextual and that a gap exists in the view between professionals in quality assurance and academic staff and students. The presentations at the conference showed that quality assurance is applied very differently in Europe, as is reflected in the policies and practices in the European countries. Practices vary between accreditation driven systems and quality enhancements driven systems, and in some systems, the distinction between external and internal quality assurance is not evident for academics and administrative staff (Smidt, H., 2015)”.

So, the policies and initiatives related to Vocational Education and Training focused on developing a quality culture at the VET providers level, building on promoting the EQAVET Framework (EU Recommendation, 2009), its quality criteria and indicators and a European evaluation methodology called Peer Review.

In conclusion, based on the European Quality Assurance Framework for VET (EU Recommendation, 2009) and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2005 & 2015), education and training institutions approached quality assurance within a European dimension through a national and local implementation.

2. European tools for quality assurance in VET and Higher Education: from theory to practice

Despite the structure, the function and the usefulness of the European tools (EGS and EQAVET Framework) for quality assurance were well-documented and promoted by European stakeholders' organisations and networks, widespread use and full implementation of the reference frameworks is still under construction (EU Recommendation, 2020).

The literature indicates that accreditation remains one of the main quality assurance measures for both the Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training fields (CEDEFOP, 2011). Accreditation and external quality assurance have moved between a focus on programmes and institutions, supporting quality development and enhancement also at policy and system level (Evangelista L., 2016).

Furthermore, it appears that the ESG and other European quality assurance indications guide national and institutional practices for quality assurance while, at local and provider level, the European frameworks are not commonly referenced or known (Evangelista L, Carlini D., 2020). At the same time, quality assurance methods based on self-assessment and external evaluation procedures, like the Peer Review methodology (Gutknecht-Gmeiner, 2008), were developed and tested at different levels but still vary greatly in terms of approach and usage, needing further adaptation in different contexts. In particular, the European Peer Review methodology at provider level, promoted by the EQAVET network, is based on a quality assurance approach at institutional level. In VET, the peer review relies on a methodology tested by the EQAVET NRPs in Europe. It is based on the combination of the self-evaluation of VET institutes or centres (VET providers) with the external evaluation of the Peers. The

European Peer Review methodology can support each VET provider in developing, evaluating, and improving their VET provision following self-assessment and continuous improvement plans.

In Italy, the Peer Review at the level of VET providers is adopted voluntarily and has a training as well as organisational and professional empowering function (Capogna S., 2019) aimed at promoting the development of quality assurance. The assessment activities of a Peer Review include two main moments: the self-assessment by the VET provider that undergoes a Peer Review and the evaluation carried out during a visit – the so-called Peer Review visit – to the institution subject to assessment, conducted by an external group of experts. This external group of assessors, the Peers group, are called to evaluate the quality of the VET institute or centre, using quality areas and indicators (usually based on the EQAVET Framework). Although external to the VET institutes or centres, Peers work in a similar context to that of the organisation being assessed and have specific experience and professionalism in the subject being evaluated, thus, placing themselves “on an equal basis” concerning the subjects and contexts to be evaluated. The Peers create a climate of openness and mutual learning by encouraging a process of mutual trust between the participants, the institutions and the systems involved in the Peer Review visit. The added value of the European Peer Review methodology is the use of the EQAVET Framework (EU Recommendations, 2009 and 2020), which includes reference descriptors and indicators that can help VET institutes or centres to analyse their quality assurance level and measure the progress made in improving the quality of their provision.

From a methodological point of view, as set down in the European context of the EQAVET network, the European Peer Review is a mix of internal and external evaluation procedures for

quality assurance in Vocational Education and Training systems within various European countries (among which Italy is included).

Based on the evaluated organisation (or hosting organisation) self-assessment, a Peer Review is an external evaluation carried out by Peers (a group of 4 Peers is usually involved), i.e., colleagues working in similar institutions or environments who participate in a Peer Review visit at the premises of a Peer Review host which is the organisation evaluated by the Peers. For the Peer Review visit, the host organisation prepares a Self-Assessment Report, which is the starting point for the peer evaluation. At the end of the visit, the Peers will draft a Final Peer Review Report that gathers the final evaluation of the Peer Review.

Regarding the European Peer Review, the Italian EQAVET National Reference Point hosted by Inapp⁴ carried out several national experimentations over the last fifteen years, defining and detailing the methodology of Initial Vocational Education and Training (IVET) (Tramontano & Allulli, 2012) and analysing the adaptation of the method also concerning Adult Education. While the EQAVET Peer Review is based on quality areas and indicators elaborated for VET providers, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area are a set of indications which are the results of European cooperation aimed at supporting the quality practices of the quality assurance agencies and Higher Education institutions in Europe. Undoubtedly, the ESG are the most significant outcome of the

⁴ Inapp is the National Institute for the Analysis of Public Policies in Rome, Italy. It's a public research institute supervised by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, which deals with the study, research, monitoring and evaluation of public policies in the fields of labour, education and training, social protection, active and passive labour policies, the third sector, social inclusion and policies that produce effects on the labour market. Further information about Inapp is available online at: www.inapp.gov.it.

Bologna Process quality assurance agenda. And, like the Peer Review, the ESG have a twofold dimension as their implementation takes place at two levels: the quality assurance agencies (system level) and the Higher Education institutions (institutional or provider level). As other European guidelines and recommendations (an example are the same EQAVET Recommendation 2009 and the VET Recommendation 2020), the adoption of the ESG is not, in the strict sense, mandatory, but declining to adopt the ESG represents a loss of opportunities, especially for national quality assurance agencies, in terms of possibly not being granted full ENQA membership and not being listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education. Moreover, from a practical and operational point of view, the non-compulsory nature of the tools and the autonomy of ESG users (both quality assurance agencies and Higher Education institutions) in choosing which elements of ESG to use, adapt and implement in their quality assurance systems, models and procedures, make these instruments similar to those used in VET such as the EQAVET Framework. This also means that during accreditation, review or audit panels the use of both the EQAVET Framework and the ESG (or elements thereof) in review and assessment practices depends on national systems, legislative frameworks as well as specific domestic approaches to quality assurance which have a prominent role in the implementation of these tools. Besides, both the ESG – for the Higher Education field - and the EQAVET Framework – for the Vocational Education and Training field - provide a first step for actions aimed at evaluating quality, such as self-assessment (essentially conceived as internal evaluation) and Peer review (basically understood as external review or external evaluation). Finally, this means that both the EQAVET Framework and the ESG can be considered agile and flexible tools that need

transposition and “translation” in the context where they can be used.

3. Self-assessment from the experimentation in the General Education and VET field to the adaptation in the Higher Education area

In 2019, Inapp launched a research project related to the establishment of a national network of schools and vocational training centres, aimed at testing a new Peer Review model that involved both VET providers (namely Vocational Training Centres) and Education providers (namely schools).

Inapp’s research was based on several goals; among the main general objectives were the following:

- to facilitate the relationship, comparison and integration between the education and vocational training systems, which use similar tools for quality assurance within each specific context. This relationship and integration were also planned among different bodies which deal with similar targets in terms of age and training needs, with a view to mutual growth;
- to verify the applicability of the European Peer Review model, widely experimented by the EQAVET network at VET provider level, in a “mixed” context of a public-private relationship which is typical of the Italian interrelation between public schools and private VET centres;
- to raise the quality of the provision of education and vocational training;
- to further experiment the European Peer review methodology and to disseminate operational tools aimed at encouraging continuous improvement of the quality of the training supply:

in particular, self-assessment of education and training providers and external evaluation among Peers.

The research project included different phases and activities planned to achieve the goals set for a nationwide experimentation carried out by Inapp. More in detail, the planned activities were based on the following actions: the revision of the European Peer Review methodology, promoted by the EQAVET network, based on a Peer review visit of Peers that act as assessors; the implementation of a national network of actors in line with an integrated education and training system; the training of teachers and trainers on a new integrated Peer evaluation methodology; and, the exchange and integration between education and training structures operating in completely different territorial and regulatory contexts.

The precondition for the experimentation of the integrated Peer Review method that allowed the comparison between two systems – general education and vocational education and training -, was the revision of the existing assessment tools used by the European Peer Review methodology. In other words, to ensure effective implementation of the European Peer Review methodology in different learning and teaching contexts and to avoid duplication and redundancy among the different assessment tools (like, e.g., ISO quality certification) already applied, the pilot research consisted of an extensive and in-depth revision of the quality assurance devices used. Hence, the entire methodological framework was revised. This framework is based on the self-assessment of institutes and bodies that undergo a Peer visit and the external assessment carried out by Peers who use a set of ad hoc instruments. Special attention was dedicated to identifying the quality areas and indicators which needed to be used by both the education and the training actors.

Moreover, the assessment tools of the European Peer Review used at VET provider level were revised, integrated and modified to make them consistent with what has already been achieved within the Italian National Evaluation system⁵, also looking at what is going on in the Higher Education area in Italy.

Based on the Peer Review methodology elaborated for IVET, the national experimentation included the revision of existing tools, which include the gender mainstreaming – checklist, the Self-Assessment report, the agenda template for the Peer visit, the interview report, the fundamental rules for Peers, the Peer meta-evaluation form, the Final Peer Review report and the document providing the Quality Areas and indicators used for an integrated Peer Review. The latter required the greatest and most detailed work, representing the basic document on which the whole self-evaluation rests. To create a comprehensive list of Quality Areas and indicators, the work consisted of integrating the Quality Areas and indicators of the IVET Peer Review, identified by the Italian EQAVET National Reference Point, with the indicators used by the National Evaluation System for the self-assessment carried out by schools that belong to the Italian General Education sector. From a broader point of view, the analysis was finalised to compare and merge the Self-Assessment report of the Peer Review for IVET with the Self-Assessment report used by schools, the so-called RAV - *Rapporto di Autovalutazione* (Poliandri *et al.*, 2016; Poliandri *et al.*, 2019), to maintain the structure of the latter in order to facilitate the adoption and dissemination of the integrated tools in the education environment.

⁵ The National Evaluation system implements the quality assurance process in school education, from the primary to the upper secondary level (DL 5/2012), and the National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education system (*Istituto Nazionale di Valutazione del Sistema di Istruzione* – Invalsi) is responsible for the supervision, coordination and monitoring of the system.

The review process was based on a solid metrological framework structured according to specific indications, which included:

- the need for the adaptation of the evaluation tools based on the PDCA (Plan – Do – Check - Act) cycle used for quality assurance procedures, integrating the improvement aspects that emerged from the experience of two evaluation systems – Education and VET -. Therefore, the first revision proposed represented the basis for proceeding first to a further “on-desk” review and then to a subsequent phase based on the experimental implementation of the tools in the new proposed form;
- the qualitative enrichment of the indicators framework used for the RAV, thanks to the specific nature of the European Peer Review methodology which searches for and analyses both quantitative and, above all, qualitative evidence, taking care to include the point of view of all stakeholders (teachers, students, administrative staff, parents, etc.);
- the variety of indicators provided for each dimension of the Quality Areas, which constitutes an effective learning tool for all the professionals (teachers, trainers, head of schools, etc.) involved in the quality assurance process;
- the further possible sources that take into account the methods of implementation of the Peer evaluation methodology and are able to return the qualitative dimension of the evaluation;
- and the integration of different reference frameworks and guidelines (included those used by the Higher Education sector) which made it possible to identify indicators and sources for some Quality Areas for which currently data is not provided nationally.

At the end of the desk research, finalised to create a new toolbox for the Peer Review methodology as an integrated method between the VET and Education systems, the different instruments were tested during several pilot Peer Review visits among schools and Vocational Training Centres.

From 2021 to 2022, a total of 14 Peer visits took place according to a pre-defined programme. The Peer visits involved a mixed group of 14 schools and training centres and 41 Peers. As required by the procedure, the Peer Review visits took place with a daily schedule of 2.5 days. To train the Peers (mainly teachers and trainers) and make them familiar with the integrated methodology and tools, both in presence and online training sessions were organised. The training of each Peer lasted an average of 12 hours, with a specific dedicated agenda. At the end of all the training sessions, 69 teachers and trainers from 22 different institutions, including schools and vocational training centres, were trained. The piloting of the integrated toolbox ended up with positive feedback from all the involved parties, identifying consequently suggestions and areas for improvement, which can be synthesized through the following points:

1. the Quality Areas and indicators related to the purposes of Peer Reviews, should be better described, detailed and simplified, keeping also in mind the guidelines and indications that are used in other fields like in Higher Education. In the case of the latter, self-assessment and, in particular, Peer Review are not new in terms of approach and methods for evaluating elements inherent in teaching and learning contexts. Peer review is commonly used in Higher Education and its use expanded later to VET;
2. the Quality Areas and indicators have proven to be malleable, flexible, adaptable and transferable to different sectors – in the specific case of the piloting to the education and training

fields –, so it would be particularly interesting to explore them in alternative and new learning contexts. In this regard, a reflection has been initiated on the possibilities of starting a new experimentation whose objectives could be to use the results of the integrated Peer Review also in the Higher Vocational Education and Training (HVET) sector or sectors at similar levels (like e.g., Higher Education);

3. the Quality Areas and indicators, revised and integrated for their use in two sectors – education and training, made it possible to avoid overlapping by streamlining the existing methods and tools and highlighting the importance, in an evaluation process, of being able to be used by Peers from different learning environments. The added value of the integrated Peer Reviews was precisely having a group of Peers coming from educational realities based on different logics and accustomed to using different evaluation parameters and variables (quantitative rather than qualitative). Consequently, other crucial aspects in relation to the idea of extending, comparing and including a different dimension - such as HVET, in the integrated Peer Review, could be the involvement of professionals and experts belonging to Higher Education in the future.

Conclusions

From both sides – Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training –, continuous additional impetus comes for advancements in the implementation and development of National Quality Assurance systems. However, policymakers and stakeholders, as well as providers from all levels and sectors, often need external evidence and motivation to initiate positive changes

and achieve important results in terms of quality assessment and assurance. In line with the above context, at European and national level, there are discussions about how to use the EQAVET and the ESG in an integrated and open way. The reflections start by investigating the differences and synergies between the two EU quality assurance frameworks for VET and HE (Kelly, 2010). The EQAVET instrument is based on setting expectations for VET providers and national authorities to collect and use performance data to support VET provision. The ESG also include expectations of the quality of Higher Education provision. This comprises learning and teaching assessment expectations and the availability of learning and teaching resources. Therefore, there are significant similarities between the EQAVET policies and ESG indications. These connections concern the performance of internal and external assessment of providers, the use of specific identified elements for monitoring performance and an expectation that assessment results are available for the evaluated institution or organisation and for those authorities responsible for monitoring the quality of local, regional and national systems. However, there are also significant differences between the two frameworks. In particular, the governance of the two quality assurance measures is different: ESG is monitored by ENQA, a group comprising national quality assurance agencies, while EQAVET is promoted by the European Commission with support from the EQAVET Secretariat. There is also a register for Higher Education institutions and quality assurance agencies that adhere to ESG requirements, whereas a similar tool does not exist for EQAVET.

Another difference is related to the fact that the ESG does not make specific reference to the need to collect and use data through specific Quality Areas or indicators (e.g., those indicators related to the utilisation of acquired skills at the workplace, the unemployment rate according to individual criteria and the

prevalence of vulnerable groups, as these indicators are generally considered more relevant for VET providers).

Based on the above considerations and Inapp's research results, there are several benefits that can be obtained by increasing the synergies between VET and Higher Education quality assurance systems. Some of these benefits are related to ensuring a more consistent application of the standards and guidelines and to improving mutual trust in what constitutes an effective quality assurance practice at system and provider level, which means that people will have a greater understanding of how quality is guaranteed and maintained in education and VET systems. The purpose of increasing the alignment of VET and Higher Education quality assurance tools and mechanisms has to face some risks and challenges. Central to these is that the quality assurance tools and mechanisms may subsequently lose some of the specific features that make them effective for a sector or sub-sector. An example could be that they may not give sufficient focus to the need for VET to meet the labour market needs and for Higher Education institutions to create high-quality research. A challenge to consider could be whether quality assurance arrangements for Higher Education institutions would also be appropriate for some smaller VET providers. These smaller providers may not have the organisational capacity to implement the quality assurance measures needed by larger institutes or organisations. Therefore, further investigations and more in-depth experimentations will be needed to explore the potential of the European methodologies and tools for quality assurance. Thanks to their adaptability and flexibility, the current guidelines and indicators can contribute to new and positive trends in quality assurance all over Europe, thus contributing not only to the improvement of the provision of education and training but also to the enhancement of the institutional and system level. As an

example, the European Peer Review methodology promoted by the EQAVET network has shown its usefulness at VET providers as well as at system level. Besides, Inapp's experimentation has fully highlighted the opportunities and strengths of the Peer Review methodology, which each of the Peers has directly acted on and personally confirmed. Among the main added values of the Peer Review methodology are included: a friendly approach, low costs (especially about external audits or accreditation procedures), immediate feedback about context-related and usable data and information, sharing of constructive points of view and broadening of the horizons of the organization involved in the evaluation process.

An argument, placed at the centre of reflection in the conception and implementation of the integrated Peer Review in Italy, was the possible cultural and linguistic gap between the world of education and the world of vocational training, which could have forced the peer group to a preliminary negotiation of meanings or a tiring "simultaneous translation" of the sectoral specific vocabulary – that of education rather than of vocational training – used by the Peers. By carrying out the activities it was possible to ascertain that this generally did not occur. The central moment of the methodology, that of the visit on which expectations, hopes and fears are concentrated, was the most agile and fruitful moment. Facilitated by the preliminary online meetings which stress also how relevant is the use of virtual channels and digitalised tools for a Peer Review, the visits took place within the foreseen times and methods and with the interested participation of teachers, trainers, stakeholders and students interviewed.

In conclusion, the piloted Peer Reviews succeed in bringing around the table people who act in different regulatory and institutional contexts but who speak the same language and who

move within the same horizon of understanding. This allows a real evaluation, not only between institutions (as always happens in Peer Reviews) but also of systems that enrich each other, in a logic of contamination between public and private, between education and training. These are also the elements that can be valorised when transferring the European Peer Review from IVET to HVET providers and from VET to Higher Education. Hence, in the Plan-Do-Check-Act logic that characterised the research project carried out by Inapp, the next step could be revising the Peer Review methodology at training providers' level, considering the completed action. The working hypothesis goes toward developing new experimentation about an integrated Peer Review between IVET and HVET (involving also Higher Education institutions) that takes up the scheme of the European Peer Review to allow for possible comparisons but which has its conceptual autonomy. In order to take this further step and unearth the potential offered by European tools and methodologies for quality assurance, it will also be crucial to investigate more the use and usefulness of ESG and other quality assurance measures that are the framework in which Higher Education institutions are located.

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