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VIRTUAL COMMUNITY – QUALITY ASSURANCE



FINAL REPORT

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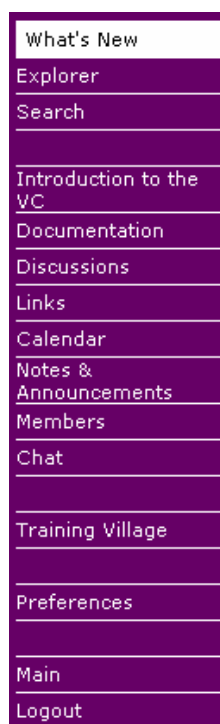
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1. Organisation of the virtual community

In October 2003 the FHVR Berlin was selected by CEDEFOP to take over the moderation and animation for the virtual community in VET and a new team, consisting of Erwin Seyfried, Kim Farschou and Katja Steinbach immediately started with this work. In the light of their experience with quality in VET the team reviewed at first the adequateness of the existing structure of the virtual community. As a result, a re-organisation of the VC concerning certain technical aspects as well as in terms of presentation of the content was seen necessary. Within the meeting of the Technical Working Group (TWG) on Quality in VET¹ on December 1, 2003 in Brussels the project team presented their proposals for a reorganisation of the site structure, and the members of the TWG agreed on the suggested improvements.



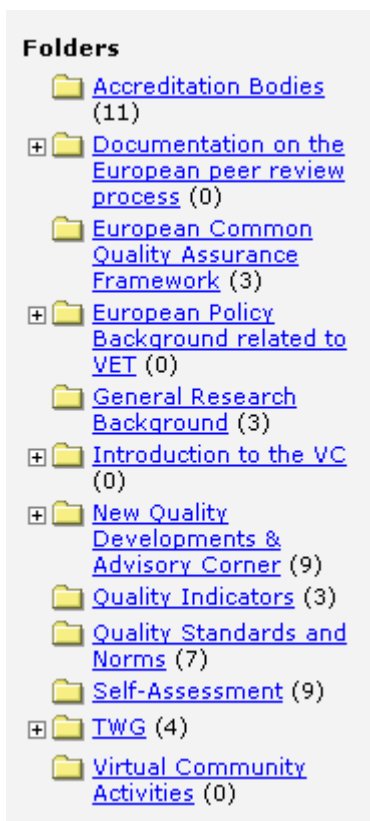
Based on this discussion the navigation bar of the VC has been much more simplified. Functions that were not in use have been hidden to make the platform more user friendly and accustomed to the needs of the members of the VC.

A new section “Introduction to the VC” has been created, where new members can find all information necessary to find their way through the virtual community. In this section, the project team provides new members with basic information, especially on what the virtual community is about, on how to use it, about presentations of animators, about other members, etc..

Furthermore, a section called “links” has been established where links to useful web sites are inserted (for example to Leonardo

da Vinci–projects) dealing with quality issues.

New directories have been created and existing directories have been renamed. As the provision of documents, papers and information is one of the main expectations of the mem-



¹ The TWG was created by the European Commission and the Member States as a follow-up instrument for the Copenhagen process.

bers towards the virtual community, the storage space of the site has been increased. In the navigation bar, “Files” have been renamed into “Documentation”. The directory for “Discussions” has been restructured and contains now the same thematic folders as the “Documentation” directory; i.e. the main directories for contents are structured in a parallel way. The project team has added detailed descriptions to every single folder to provide the members with information on what these topics stand for.

Thus, in summary, the internal structure of the documentation directory has been reorganised according to the demands and the needs of the members of the VC.

The newly created directory of the VC on quality in VET has now the following structure.

Accreditation Bodies	
Documentation on the European peer learning process	Folders <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▲ Matching supply and demand (6) Quality indicators (21) Self-assessment (18 ♦)
European Common Quality Assurance Framework (CQAF)	
European Policy Background related to VET	Folders <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▲ Mandate of the TWG (0) Quality Developments in Higher Education (8 ♦) The Copenhagen Process (10)
General Research Background	
Introduction to the VC	Folders <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▲ General (2) How to use the virtual community (5)
New Quality Developments & Advisory Corner	Folders <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▲ Conference Results - Sinaia, Romania (3) News from Switzerland (4)
Quality indicators	
Quality standards and norms	
Self-assessment	
TWG (accessible by TWG members only)	Folders <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▲ Cross country analysis on standards and norms (1) Peer review on implementation of CQAF in Denmark (1) Peer review on quality indicators in Finland (3) Peer review on supply and demand in France (1) Reporting on self-assessment approaches and peer review in UK (2) ⊕ TWG's meetings (13) TWG Information (8)
Virtual Community Activities	

The application procedure has been discussed by the project team and amongst the Technical Working Group, too. The TWG members proposed to enable an open access (without password) to the VC for general information, whereas only after registration new members should have an access to the discussion area. However, this proposal could not be put into practice by CEDEFOP, as due to the integration of the European Training Village and the virtual communities, a similar procedure for access is used for both.

In the 2nd half of 2004 the process of integrating the virtual communities to the European Training Village (ETV) was started. The most significant change that occurred is that one single login opens access to the virtual communities and to the ETV. The process has reached its final stage in September 2004.

Conclusions

- After having overtaken the responsibility for the virtual community in VET a general reconstruction of its contents has been undertaken by the animators.
- This new structure is now under operation for nearly one and a half year. Meanwhile many developments have taken place, and a lot of new documents have been placed.
- It might be wise, therefore, to review the existing structure once again and to re-organize the contents inserted in the virtual community once again.
- Among the issues which should be considered further one should not forget to address the application procedure.

2. Member profiling and activation

In the beginning, when the FHVR Berlin overtook the responsibility for the VC, information about the members of the virtual communities, their needs and their resources has been very poor. At the same time such information is a precondition to make the VC more attractive for its members and to stimulate active participation. Therefore the project team discussed different options to attain more information on the needs of their VC's members. A questionnaire (see annex 1) addressing the needs and the context of new members applying for participation in the virtual community has been developed. Within the last months 262 questionnaires have been sent to new members. Together with the developed questionnaire a welcoming email has been distributed and in the meanwhile implemented as a routine.

Due to this activities there has been a continuous flow of information from new members of the VC. This has enabled the project team to draw up a profound profile of the VC members, their needs and their resources. The return rate to the questionnaires varied from month to month, altogether it stays with nearly 32% which allows for reliable conclusions. Up to date 83 questionnaires (out of 262) could be taken in consideration for deeper analysis of member profiles.

Table: Baseline for member profiling

Number of sent questionnaires	Number of received questionnaires
262	83

In quantitative terms, the absolute number of VC-members raised from around 150 in October 2003 (when FHVR Berlin was charged with the animation of the VC) to 457 in April 2005, with most of them coming from the new Member States and the accession countries.

And altogether the number of memberships has been raised by more than 200%.

2.1 Analysis of the questionnaires

2.1.1 Main field of activity

The answers we have received show clearly that most of the members of the VC are active both on national level as well as on European or international level. Compared to this overall tendency, only a small part of the members is active on regional and local level.

Table: Main field of activity of the VC-members

International / European	55
National	48
Regional / Local	20

To draw a first conclusion this would mean to strengthen the debates and documentations on national level in addition and besides the European discourse.

2.1.2 Main interest in quality

Development of quality systems	49
Implementation / Application of quality systems	45
Research into quality aspects	40
Others	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• all aspects above in relation to education;• quality standards;• Quality testing based on situation before training (0-measurment), compared with results after training, in function of a fixed knowledge objective;• Develop a quality assurance system for VET;• Specifically, development of a quality system for vocational guidance in Greece;• How to meet regulatory requirements within quality framework;• Be more knowledgeable about quality in VET;• We have just finished a Model of criteriums and indicators for our main work: the VET organization;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • TT in developing and implementing QS • transparency, validation and recognition of qualification; • use of quality criteria in public procurement processes; • Quality assurance through development of certification system (output Quality); • Evaluation; • artistic exercises as part of VET in general; • Quality in vocational training centers; • Training of VET Quality Inspectors; • Self-Assessment
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The majority of new members is interested in practical issues concerning quality management, as they expressed their interests towards the development and the implementation of quality systems. However, the interest in research into issues of quality aspects is nearly as strong as the practical interest, which allows for the conclusion that most of the members are research-oriented practitioners.

2.1.3 Main expectations towards the virtual community

Provision of papers and information	72
Discussion and chats	33
Others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing my documents and ideas for the quality aspects in VET • Hard to anticipate yet • As project manager for a VET project in Kosovo, I have to design a quality system (standards, assessment, and certification) and pilot it in the trades of electrical installation, heating and plumbing. In the different phases I would be able to report on the experience. • To exchange information concerning, and read about new developments. In general to be kept up-dated. • Opinions about prepared materials • CompTIA represents 18,000 members in the ICT industry worldwide. We managed the creation of ICT skill standards and apprenticeship for the US and can bring experience with public / private partnerships, certification and online infrastructure. • Information on papers and events • Providing on-line diagnostic and certification tests. Converting paper-based tests to automatic testing Certification Management

- Questions about implementation of quality systems
- Information regarding the UK competence based system in vocational training. Also attending a study visit to Estonia in May regarding the establishment of a competence based system for vocational training. May be able to provide some international comparisons regarding quality in VET.
- Information about the Dutch System
- I am providing consultancy services, as academic expert, to the European Commission regarding the Working Group “Improving education of teachers and trainers” in the framework of the Education and Training 2010 Process
- Links between vocational standards and quality
- I can send information, how we in Estonia have implemented quality systems in VET.
- I’m working for the project called Strengthening Vocational Education System in Turkey supported by EU. We are, among other activities, trying to establish a quality assurance system for the VET institutions. Therefore what we are doing at the moment is to search QAS implemented in European countries; then we will try to find a proper QAS for the VET institutions in Turkey. In Turkey Total Quality management and EFQM have been implemented, quite new though. The activities started after the Ministry regulation published in 1999, first in the Ministry Units and then in the schools. There is a Unit within the Ministry dealing with TQM and quality activities called Management Assessment and development Unit. I do not know what kind of contributions I could provide to the Virtual Community because I am myself is quite new in this study but I would like to be in touch with you and ready to answer any questions from your side.
- Provision of papers and relevant information
- Discussion, sharing own experience, participation in and/or organisation of workshops
- information about quality assurance in my country (Slovenia)
- Developing quality system (I am consultant of SVET, the project for Strengthening VET in Turkey)
- Sharing thoughts, results of research projects with other representatives (e.g. researchers)
- Materials and responses regarding quality assurance systems in relation to vocational guidance
- Feedback and active participation in forum, chats and when possible, in workshops
- Research information into evaluation studies; Conferences available for sharing of information
- Sharing what are the issues for VET in Australia and

	<p>how we are addressing them, specifically in regards to QA process and systems to manage regulation and policy requirements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operation and organisation of CET insitutions and companies – with regard to quality issues as well as other market orientated aspects of such activities. • Share applied experience – Rise questions – Propose Methods • International VET Research • I am currently working on two projects of interest. One is an analysis of functionalist versus culturally oriented frameworks for evaluating quality- my current case study is a network of learning centres in Scotland, which are accredited using a 'pledge to learners'; these are diverse learning centres in settings including urban areas to remote rural areas. They seek to engage the disengaged individual and employers. I am currently writing up the analysis, and seeking to take up further research- maybe across similar networks in other European countries. The other project is on the history and strategies of private (profit making) training companies in Scotland- and their role in the VET system; very little is known about this sector, and their use of quality systems. • Knowledge of QA-systems in Maritime Education and training • I would be interested to find out how other countries in Europe are addressing issues of quality enhancement in post-school education, and sharing information about the approach in Scotland • Our organisation is involved with training as well restructuring of the security sector (national security) Under PHARE, TACIS and CARDS programmes and we hope to be able to make contributions to your discussion group. We are also extremely interested in putting together a partnership with other members of your discussion group to apply for funding under either LEONARDO, SOC-RATES or FP6 for the development of an EVQ for the security industry - this would cover security sectors such as: Border Police (Blue and Green Borders), Customs etc. If you know of any organisations in your discussion group who would be interested in joining such a partnership to put together a proposal for EU funding we would be interested to hear from them. • We are working around the definition of the idea of quality and quality criteria's since 1997. We have organized indicators to answer the question of "how can we define that a course, seminar, workshop, is a quality product." • Experience from VET in Sweden both in formal and non-formal learning • I cannot know it yet since I have never been a member of a virtual community actively and especially on such a
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	<p>«new issue»</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of information re strategies and implementation of quality, innovative approaches • Sharing ideas, papers and research • Contribution for the mapping of the Greek situation concerning quality aspects in CVT. • Detailed knowledge and (17 years') experience of establishing quality systems and employing continuous improvement processes to resolving quality problems. Also, extensive work on the development of vocational qualifications specifications and regulations to establish coherent standards of learning. • Papers, Chat • An observer. I am an active member of other VCs • I hope to be able to read up on the work of the TWG-Q to date and to join in discussions as they continue. From my first visit to the vc, I can see already that there is a great deal of interesting material to familiarise myself with! I have been a member of the Transparency WG and vc, so perhaps I can make links too. • Effects of public procurements procedures on quality in training; discussion on implementation of quality aspects in procurement • U.S. accreditation system point of view. ANSI and ISO standards system point of view. • Experiences and knowledge gathered in several projects in the field of evaluation. • I am dealing with the actual developments in the Copenhagen Process and drawing the consequences for Switzerland. It could be helpful to have somebody from Switzerland dealing with quality in VET. • Well, at present I am working my Master's Thesis (in TU-Dresden, Germany) in the concept of Quality assurance of VET through development of a certification system (Certifying individual skills): a feedback effect. Anything related to that is of my present interest, and I can contribute on this effect • Providing information • The research work of the e-quality project on elearning • Provision of information on the latest developments in the field for Romania and sharing the outcomes of international projects we are currently involved in. • Overview of global quality discussion; expertise in implementing quality systems • Discussions about indicators on quality in VET • I am working for a project which is part of the European elearning initiative. It is called European Quality Observatory (EQO) and it is about quality approaches in European e-learning. So I can provide comments, etc. on the other member's issues as well as I expect to get input
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	<p>from them.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • papers, discussion • My experience in the accreditation of vocational training centers (almost 300 centers all over Greece – three accreditation periods in a 6-year period). • Experience in national qualification framework implementation and associated processes • Sharing our experience in the development of quality criteria and standards for Vocational Education and Training (In fact most public sector services). Also the training and support of quality evaluators/assessors/inspectors • Experience in development of methods for self-evaluation of schools • Documentation and description of quality systems in DK • Relaying information and contacts • We are willing to serve our expertise to others and develop new tools • Multinational experimental projects towards VET • exchange of good practise • Access to networks of co-workers
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The results show clearly that the main interest of the new VC-members is about getting information on practical developments with the implementation of quality assurance systems. They would like to get information on different national systems and developments in order to compare it with the situation in the country they are active this using this information from other countries as a frame of reference. Besides, again a strong interest into research activities is articulated.

It is also worth to note that many members express their willingness to provide information and papers about their experiences and the developments in their national backgrounds. Some doubt has to be expressed however, in how far this general willingness to provide information is put into practice. According to their resources some of the new members have been asked for inputs and contributions to particular subjects, mainly about their experiences with the practical implementation of quality systems. In practice there have been only a small number of inputs.

For further information see annex 2.

2.2 Analysis of members listed by countries

The VC-team has made an analysis of membership according to the country of residence. This analysis has been made based on the information the members have given by themselves, furthermore the e-mail address has been used for identification. It is without saying, that addresses of members which did not include an extension referring to a certain country could not be taken in consideration. Nevertheless, there is a substantial number of VC-members (n=306) which allow to be included in the analysis according to country residence.

Altogether, the new members represent 45 countries, thus in principle covering all continents but with a clear focus on European countries. Most of the new members of the VC who applied for membership in the last ten month are residents in the UK (n=35), followed by Italy (n=26), Germany (n=23), the Netherlands and Greece (n=18). Compared to the size of the country it should be noted that Austria (n=13), Finland (n=12) and Denmark (n=12) are also quite well represented. Among the new member states Slovenia (n=9) is an extraordinary case, even if one should add that the representation of the new member states is steadily growing with the interim result that all the new member states and the accession countries are represented among the new VC-members. Taken into consideration the size of the country, participation is quite low in France (n=8) and Poland (n=4).

For further information see annex 3.

2.3 Usage development

The usage statistics of the VC also reflect the growing importance and recognition the VC has developed during the last year.

It should be noted that there seems to be a correlation between the activities of the TWG and the number of page views. Thus, for example, in September the number of page views was extraordinary high in the two weeks before the last TWG meetings which took place on 20./21. September 2004 and 07. March 2005 in Brussels.

It is also interesting to note the high number of page views which take place in the beginning of the week, i.e. on Mondays and Tuesdays the number of views is very high compared to the numbers which were achieved on Fridays. This might be due to the fact that on week-ends there is the possibility to get an updating information from the VC.

As a conclusion one might suggest that in the beginning of a new week new information should be inserted in order to take into consideration the informative needs of the VC-members.

For further information see annex 4.

Conclusions

- Most of the members of the VC are active both on national levels as well as on European or international level.
- Many VC-members would like to get information on different national systems and developments towards quality in VET in order to compare this information with the situation in their own country.
- Interest into research issues of quality is nearly as strong as practical interest which allows for the conclusion that most of the members are research-oriented practitioners.
- Many VC-members express their willingness to provide information about their own experiences and developments in their national backgrounds.
- There are some countries which are represented very strongly whereas members from other countries are underrepresented.

3. Discussions

It is one of the potentials of electronically communication platforms that discussions between the members can be take place on-line or off-line. The animators of the VC took this opportunity when encouraging VC-members for active participation in two discussions on the following topics

- a discussion on the relevance of different learning styles of learners and how to consider this aspect in an overall approach to quality. This debate was initiated only recently and is still going on (see 3.5).

- a discussion about the relationship between the ISO 100315 and the CQAF approach to quality in VET on European level developed by the TWG. Here, the authors of an article on ISO 10315 where invited to participate in this discussion. A number of relating documents and articles have been inserted and altogether a very interesting high-level debate took place. However, the number of people who contributed actively to this debate was very small.

3.1 The discussion on the ISO 10015

In late January a discussion was started based on a model for quality assurance quite similar to the CQAF (the common quality assessment framework), as developed by the TWG for European cooperation. This model – the new ISO 10015 – was presented in an article of Raymond Saner and Lichia Yiu, and was the basis for discussions during February and March. The main conclusion in the article is: Manage training carefully like any other major investment. ISO 10015 offers a new and sector specific quality management tool to ensure the link between training and organisational performance needs.

Fundamental for the points of view in the article are the analysis of the answers to the question: why training? The answers seek for the reasons behind an organisational performance gap and shows training a one possible solution among others (e.g. rationalisation, hiring new staff, and job rotation). After identifying the performance gap a input-output process of training is the next step in the work. These steps follow almost the same cyclic logic as in the CQAF proposed by the Technical Working Group on quality in VET:

- Defining training needs

- Design and planning training
- Providing for training
- Evaluating training outcomes
- Monitoring training process

The following discussions were mainly focused on:

The differences and similarities of the ISO 10015 and CQAF

The use of ROI on different levels (from companies to nations)

The levels of competence

The identification of performance gaps

3.2 The differences and similarities of the ISO 10015 and CQAF

The model and the reference framework for quality assurance differs basically on the level the work on: the CQAF focus on national systems of VET and on the level of VET-providers. The ISO 10015 focus on enterprises, and ISO 10015 was written for micro level (training) and secondly for meso level (vocational education) but not for macro-level labour market policies and programmes.

The two models/reference framework can be seen as complementary rather than analogous. This complementarity is substantiated by the TWG's inclusion in its proposed set of indicators an indicator which address the use of QA system by training providers.

3.3 The use of ROI on different levels (from companies to nations)

Return on investment in training can be considered as bridging the gap between the provision of VET and the labour market. The fundamental logic about calculating ROI seems generally accepted at enterprise level, so why not use the principles for both individuals and nations?

During the discussions these matters was debated and some proposals was made in relation to measuring ROI and related aspects. An indicator of the mis-match of VET and market needs was proposed, among the need to find an indicator, which shows the capability on mobility.

A practical example of how a nation can work with ROI on education was resented from France, where a new law seems to stipulate that French enterprises have to spend 1% to 1.5% of masse salary (total personnel costs) on training.

The measuring of ROI was discussed too. In relation to measuring the contributions of VET to individuals, enterprises and societies a need for a more realistic perspective was proposed. Too much is expected of VET which VET cannot deliver alone nor should be held solely responsible for (e.g. improvement of status of vulnerable groups, the unemployed and women). Other factors need to be included in this equation such as laws, tax systems, access to credit etc. It would make more sense to concentrate on what is more easily attributable to VET activities and measurable across Europe.

A two-prong approach for evaluating and measuring the contributions from VET was proposed by Raymond Saner. Our countries should agree on mandatory quality systems to be applied by institutions at macro, meso and micro levels offering optimal cost/benefits results. Such proven QA systems help organisations monitor educational and training. They are not evaluation tools however. Complementary to such QA monitoring instruments, our countries should designate expert institutions to conduct comparative evaluation of VET on a ongoing basis concentrating though on what is more clearly attributable to VET rather than covering larger social and political goals.

3.3.1 The levels of competence

A form of classification of the VET sector was presented as a means to make it easier for us to discuss quality indicators and quality instruments. The classification consists of macro, meso and micro levels of VET namely:

1. Macro level being all the formal VET educational institutions (e.g. called HES, Fachhochschulen, Polytechnics etc).
2. Meso level VET would cover all the training institutions which offer retraining and skills upgrading to adults who have already entered the market or are fighting unemployment.
3. Micro level VET would be at enterprise level but also including public organisations and organisational units of public administrations.

Quality assurance at the three levels differs from country to country but at the same time there are similarities across most European countries.

A part of the discussions on the levels of competence included some answers to the question: "How do we train the competence of mobility?" I was mentioned, that competence on mobil-

ity has two aspects; one is the personal disposition, the willingness to move, geographically or from one job to another. That first aspect could hardly be addressed by trainings. But the second aspect, the personal ability to move could be addressed through appropriate learning teaching approaches.

3.3.2 The identification of performance gaps

Based on many of the first contributions to the discussion Kim Faurschou raised the questions: How can we secure that the organisational performance gap in fact is the right gap and how can we secure, that we find the right reason for that gap?

The replies to the question state a need for a series of different and complementary analysis on the potential organisational performance gaps, before the “right” gap can be isolated. At the micro-level it seems to be possible to find this gap, using the principles in the ISO 10015. At meso- and macro-level it seems more difficult to identify performance gaps.

The mis-match between market demands and the supply and mobility of competencies are a complicated challenge – both for our work and for the work on national and European level. This mis-match can be seen as a expression of the performance gaps.

3.3.3 Outlook to the future

The discussion opened a number of new angels on all the challenges we had been working with in TWG on quality in VET. New materials were added, the CQAF was challenged and supplemented, and arguments were sharpened. The fundamental thinking of the CQAF was supported by the work done on ISO 10015.

We expect the following questions to be a major part of the future work – both in the TWG and at the many different actors interested in quality in VET:

- How do we measure ROI on VET-system level?
- How can we secure that the organisational performance gap in fact is the right?
- How can we use a parallel approach towards improvement of quality in VET?

The working programme of the TWG for 2004 included a parallel approach towards improvement of quality in VET and towards the end of the year we will summarize the impacts which have been achieved. This will be based on the contributions presented at the peer re-

view in Copenhagen October 25th 26th. The parallel approach shows on the one hand continuous monitoring of VET-activities taken place on the meso-level and on the micro-level, an approach which is mainly based on quantitative evaluation; and on the other hand having an additional approach consisting of peer reviews to improve the culture of evaluation of training and education.

3.4 Assessment of the related material which has been inserted

The review of the inserted material has been structured from the three main questions for our future work:

- How do we measure ROI on VET-system level?
- How can we secure that the organisational performance gap in fact is the right?
- How can we use a parallel approach towards improvement of quality in VET?

3.4.1 How do we measure ROI on VET-system level?

One of the purposes behind all the work done in the TWG is to contribute to the political goals about Europe as the leading knowledge economy in 2010. Setting a goal like this requires some kind of measurement of what we in fact achieved. We have in the TWG worked with a number of indicators, but none of these was on the ROI on VET-system level. Inspired by the article about ISO 10015 a number of questions were raised and a number possible solution's was proposed. Other articles added to both the questions and solutions.

Some (Saner & Fasel, 2003) focused on the need for a broader and more trans-national view on education and quality. Others (in an article from Le Monde 16.12.2003) focused on life-long learning and the new French law about how the enterprises shall contribute to this development.

Indicators to measure ROI on VET or at least aspects closely associated to this challenge were discussed. One indicator proposed; address the gap between the VET-standards in competences and requirements in the labour market. Other indicators are still under consideration.

3.4.2 How can we secure that the organisational performance gap in fact is the right?

Basically for the discussion of organisational performance gaps are the definition of competences and levels of competences. Juceviciene & Lapaitė gives a broad introduction to the

topic, and adds to the discussion about the different levels of competences. These definitions fit very well with the work of the TWG.

3.4.3 How can we use a parallel approach towards improvement of quality in VET?

The different articles and the discussions show a need for action. Action that includes a number of different actors and levels at the same time. The proposed actions fit very well with the Working Plan 2004 of the Technical Working Group on Quality in VET. This plan included a number of cross analysis with peer learning visits and TWG-meetings. All activities include a number of different Member states and within each Member state a number of actors from different levels. We can conclude that the work in the TWG fits very well with the proposals from the contributors to the discussions.

3.5 The discussion on the relevance of learning styles

A very interesting discussion about the relevance of learning styles started in spring 2005. This discussion raised a number of questions about the use of different learning styles and the use of these learning styles in VET courses.

Of course, it is also an important question in how far different learning styles can be an issue which is addressed by the approach to quality. The focus of quality systems probably will have to be reshaped all the more the importance of different learning styles will be detected and stressed. In other words: if recognition of different learning styles can be identified as a factor influencing success of training, then, the flexibility of training provision and tailor-made programmes will become all the more important.

The discussions about this important issue has just only begun and so far include contributions from UK, Norway and Denmark.

References to a number of practical tools have already been made.

3.6 Assessment of the discussion activities

The above documented description and analysis of the discussion processes which have been launched on the VC clearly demonstrate the high level of contributions and the added value of this exercise in terms of terminological clarifications, identification of pertinent issues for further debates, and the provision of additional material and information sources

Despite the quality of the discussions process, however, there is little information on the impact which has been caused by this exercise. The active participation of the VC members in the debate was and is still quite moderate, and the (passive) reception of the ideas which have been discussed is out of scope, as there was no other feedback from the members to this debate.

To draw some conclusions should not mean to put into question the relevance of discussions and debates on the VC as such but to put further questions on the format of forthcoming debates. As it has been said, the standards of the discussion have been quite elaborated, with having inherent at least for some VC-members the danger of being seen as too academic.

Given the high interest of new members into questions of practical development and implementation of quality assurance systems, one should consider to launch discussions about questions which are more down to the ground, which refer to practical challenges and which allow the members more to refer to their own experiences with their potential contributions to the debate.

Conclusion

- So far, we have gained little information on the relevance and the potential impact of the discussions which have been held in the VC.
- One could think more about the format of forthcoming discussions. It is one suggestion to put clear practical questions and to ask the members of the VC to contribute to a solution from the background of their own experiences.

4. Review of inserted material

Continuously the VC-team inserted background material and first hand information related to quality issues, like for example the stock-taking report of the Copenhagen coordination group or Commission papers addressing the Lisbon strategy or reporting about the role of the standing group on Indicators and the work on indicators and benchmarks in education and training. At last, the Maastricht Communiqué adopted by the European Council of Ministers for Education to strengthen further European cooperation has been inserted.

In addition to those papers related to the policy background of VET other documents which have been inserted contained results of research activities or reports on developments with quality in different countries. More and more this documents providing information on national developments are becoming a substantial backbone of the VC.

A range of contributions from different authors were inserted to support the quality seminars in Sinaia, Romania, Prague and Helsinki and to contribute to the dissemination of conference results. Other seminars (for example in Ankara, Turkey, in UK and even in New Zealand) were announced and promoted through the VC and the organizers were supported in finding relevant experts to present experiences from the European Member States and the European cooperative framework on QA.

Links have been made to projects dealing with quality issues in the LdV-programme and to a conference which took place in the frame of the LdV-programme. In order to support the VC members in finding relevant partners all over Europe and in supporting the drafting of common applications for the new LdV-Programme, a special contact corner has been created where interested members may insert contact details and ideas. In view of the priority on quality issues in the LdV-programme the achievements made towards a common quality framework on European level have been summarized in a short paper which is now available for all VC members.

In order to retrieve information from the virtual communities and make it available through other Cedefop sources ('Knowledge Harvesting' procedure), Cedefop created a special eLibrary. The animators have been asked to submit a 'content excel file' regularly, where all the documents that have been inserted into the virtual community are listed.

For further details see annex 5.

Conclusions

- There are three strong strands building the backbones of information which is provided by the VC.
- First, there are documents of common interest informing about recent European developments relevant for quality in VET
- There is a growing list with links to useful web-sites all dealing with quality issues.
- There is a growing number of contributions informing about national approaches and developments towards quality in VET.

5. The growing national dimension of the VC

In order to deepen investigations into the national dimension of the VC an additional analysis of the inserted material has been made from a national angle, i.e. the VC-team has analysed the inserted documents according to their national backgrounds.

In annex 6 we provide an overview about the number of inserted documents per country, in annex 7 this information is further disaggregated according to the type of content which can be found for each country.

As demonstrated in annex 6 about one fourth of the documents in the VC is of a general or European character (39 out of 161), which means that three quarters of the documents contain information on national situations. There are 16 documents providing information on the approach to quality in Finland, followed by 12 documents describing different aspects of the Danish approach, 11 documents provide information both from UK and from Germany, 10 documents are available from Austria and 9 from Norway.

First it is obvious that documents from those countries who organized a peer learning visit (Finland, Denmark, UK) are overrepresented as in preparation of the visits information on the national situation was provided to the participants and this information in parallel was widely spread by the VC. Secondly, many documents with national information are available from those countries who participated actively in the peer learning visits. In preparation of the visits they stipulated and distributed information on their national situations. In conclusion it can be stated that the peer learning visits have been a major instrument for provision of information on national situations not only to the participating peers but to all members of the VC thus supporting transnational transparency and the development of mutual trust into the national VET-systems.

This impression is strongly supported if we have a closer look to the available kind of national information which is listed in annex 7. Most of the documents refer to the relevance of the CQAF (38), the quality indicators (36) and self-assessment (25), with this issues having been the topics of the most important peer learning visits.

But one should also look into the indirect impacts and spill-over effects which were created by such documentations, as other countries (not participating in the peer learning visits) have been motivated to give information on their VET-systems, too. Relevant examples are Switzerland who presented the legal framework for VET, or Slovenia and Spain who provided information about the relevance of self-assessment in their countries.

Furthermore, a clear tendency for provision of information in different languages can be observed. This tendency was supported both from representatives resp. members from different countries as well as from the animators of the VC. But both actors inserted different information. The country representatives mostly have inserted descriptions of their national approaches and also translations of certain quality tools, like for example the CQAF-model or the set of quality indicators in their own national languages, whereas the VC-animators inserted European documents relating to developments in the policy background or to research issues in different languages, i.e. in all the languages in which this documents have been available.

There is a clear feedback from the VC-members that the availability of national information on the different VET-systems and approaches to quality as well as of European documents in different languages is highly appreciated. It is suggested therefore to strengthen this dimension of the VC in the future. In this relation it could be one attempt to open up national folders containing information on the relevant countries when restructuring the VC again. Furthermore one could go for national correspondents who would like to update regularly information on developments in their countries. And thirdly one could imagine having discussions in different European languages on recent developments in certain countries and led by native speakers.

Finally, there is a clear correlation between availability of documents providing national information and membership from the relevant countries (see information in section 1.2 of this report), i.e. countries from which much national information is available are overrepresented in terms of membership whereas the number of VC-members is comparably low from countries where only little information on the national situation is available in the VC.

For further information see annexes 6 and 7.

Conclusions

- It can be stated that the peer learning visits together with their spill-over effects have strongly shaped the national dimension of the VC by providing information on the national VET-systems and the approaches to quality.
- The availability of national information situations can contribute to transnational transparency and the development of mutual trust into the national VET-systems.
- There is a clear correlation between the number of available national documents and memberships in the VC from the relevant countries.
- The availability of national information is highly appreciated. It is suggested therefore to strengthen this dimension of the VC in the future. One could think of
 - creating national folders when restructuring the VC
 - creating a network of national correspondents for the VC
 - VC-discussions in different languages.

6. Supporting the peer learning process

Besides the growing number of affiliated VC-members it is the TWG who forms the nucleus for progress with quality issues and for enhanced transnational cooperation on European level. That is why the discussion papers and the documents which have been produced by the TWG have been inserted in the VC continuously.

The working programme of the TWG for 2004 has set a clear focus on certain peer learning visits which consisted of four peer learning visits and a parallel collection of data for cross country analysis of all countries participating in the peer learning visits.

New folders have been opened up in the VC for each of the peer review subjects. These folders helped

- to collect the relevant data for cross country analysis,
- to prepare the peer review visits as all information material is distributed via the VC,
- to provide for the documentation of the peer review processes
- to give detailed information on the approach to quality assurance of the host country where the visit takes place and
- to contribute to the dissemination of good practice examples and lessons learned as a result of the peer learning visits and cross country analysis to the world outside the TWG.

To demonstrate this general approach with an example: All information which has been collected in preparation of the peer review visit in Helsinki on 21-23 June 2004 has been inserted and disseminated via the VC. Thus, information on the national approaches to work with quality indicators is available in the VC for the following countries: Finland, Austria, Denmark, Germany, Italy and Norway. Relevant background information on those countries is available in the file named national advisory corner. A summary of the country reports is available, too.

Most of the information which has been provided in the presentations given by representatives of the host country on the work with quality indicators in Finland during the peer review visit has been inserted and disseminated to all VC members.

- Performance based funding of VET in Finland
- Use of data and indicators in Finland
- Construction of composite performance indicators for VET-providers
- Financing of Education and Training in Finland
- Use of statistics in VET
- Educational system in Finland
- Training of teachers and trainers to ensure quality in VET in Finland
- Adult education and training surveys
- Good practice example for working with quality indicators on VET provider level

Altogether 20 documents are available providing information on a broad range of aspects of the Finish example of good practice in applying indicators to support quality in VET on both the level of VET systems as well as on the level of VET providers.

To sum up, the VC has been a very important tool in the preparation of the peer learning visits and especially in the follow up on the peer reviews in

- Helsinki, Finland, on quality indicators
- Paris, France, on matching supply and demand in VET
- Coventry, UK, on self-assessment as part of a quality system and in
- Copenhagen, DK, on the relevance of the CQAF for the Danish approach to quality.

Conclusions

- All the presentations and papers related to the fore-mentioned peer learning visits are placed in the VC and can be used by many people.
- There have in average been around 10 to 15 papers, giving detailed information and presentations at each peer learning visit – all made accessible at the VC.
- The four peer reviews of the TWG on quality in VET have both contributed to and benefited from the Virtual Community in the last half of 2004 and beginning of 2005. The contributions were mainly background papers for the different peer reviews. The active use of this information led to many new visitors and members of the VC.

7. Distribution of information on the VC

We have during the period since November 2003 presented the VC to a number of different VET-responsible and – interested people both within and outside EU.

In December Kim Faurschou presented the VC to around 200 participants from the Mediterranean countries at a conference in Turin.

In February Erwin Seyfried and Kim Faurschou presented the VC to more than 150 VET responsible in Romania, as a part of a Phare conference on quality in VET in TheRomania.

In April Kim Faurschou presented the VC to more than 100 participants from the new member states and the applicant states at a conference in Prague.

In June Kim Faurschou presented the VC for a majority of Danish VET-providers at a Conference on Quality in VET in Copenhagen.

In February a national conference in Finland was held, which was to support the implementation of the CQAF model and the coherent set of quality indicators in the country.

Conclusions

- Conferences can be used as adequate opportunities to distribute information on the VC to a targeted audience.
- The other way round, the VC can be used to spread information on conferences into quality issues.

8. Linking with Leonardo activities

The VC has been presented at two different Leonardo da Vinci conferences in Brussels. These conferences have been visited of more than 250 people closely involved in the work with projects in the Leonardo da Vinci programme.

The VC have been an important tool for the new round of Leonardo da Vinci projects, due to the fact that Quality and the use of the CQAF was one of the focus areas for the projects. Many visitors have benefited of all the materials about the CQAF that are accessible at the VC.

However, the VC was not used much to make transnational contacts and to identify relevant partners for a common LdV-project, which might be due to the competition amongst the potential applicants.

Conclusions

- Links have been made with the LdV-Programme.
- Interlinkages could be intensified in the future by including hints to the VC in the LdV-documents.

9. New quality developments on national level and advisory corner

There are some countries where national developments and discussions about quality issues in VET are more intense than in others. This is not only the case for the countries which are participating in the peer review visits, from which detailed descriptions about the national political background and the current tendencies concerning quality in VET are available on the VC. This is also the case for those countries where new systems for quality assurance are established on national level; i.e. in the new Member States and in the accession countries. Thus, the VC-team has collected extraordinary documents and discussion papers describing, for example, recent developments in Slovenia as well as in Switzerland.

Other countries have made considerable achievements to implement the approaches which have been worked out on European level, i.e. the TWG on quality. Thus,

- ISFOL has translated the European guide for self-assessment for VET-providers into Italian.
- Romania also has translated the self-assessment guide
- Bulgaria has translated the coherent set of quality indicators developed by the TWG into Bulgarian.

Conclusions

- Translations of European documents in national language and the provision of information on national situations is very welcomed by many VC-members.
- As most of the members work both on national and European or international level this national information is used as a frame of reference for own experiences and thus as a resource to support the developments in the own country.

10. Proposals for further improvement of the VC

The VC on quality assurance in VET is used by a growing number of members from all over the world with a clear focus on European countries and a strongly increasing interest in the new Member States and the accession countries. However, there are some countries from which participation is still low. In these cases one should think about a strategy to contact national organizations who might help to distribute information about the existence of the VC and thus broaden participation in those countries.

An analysis of a questionnaire to new members has shown that most of them are interested in practical developments about the implementation of quality assurance systems combined with researching activities. Most of the members are interested in European as well as in national developments.

Thus, the coherent information about the different approaches to quality assurance in the countries which participated in the peer learning visits seems to be of extraordinary value for all the members of the VC. The information which has been provided as a result of the TWG activities can be used from different angles. One is to have a frame of reference for to compare the developments in ones own country with those in other countries and to make use of the information which is provided from other countries in order to support the reflections in ones home country. Furthermore, the existing information can be used as a starting point for comparative research and reflections as many of the members expressed their interest of being involved research activities.

Altogether, the VC has proven its worth of being a resource centre of data and discussions about quality in VET on national and European level and this should be continued. In some cases, for countries with strong involvement as for example Italy, one should even think of how to strengthen the national branches of the VC, for example by open up corners for national discussions and debates or national exchange of papers and documents.

The format of further discussions should be further discussed and improved. Again national challenges and problems to solve should be considered as a starting point. This would not only gain passive interest among the VC-members, probably a good deal of members would

also be able to contribute actively by having the possibility to refer to their own (national) experiences.

Final conclusions

- The VC has proven to have added value to many of activities within the area of assuring quality in VET. The distribution of information on recent developments in relation to quality in VET is one of its major assets. This information can support the convergence of different developments.
- The work of the European TWG on quality in VET has been strongly supported. The peer learning visits on European level have been documented and spread to a wider audience.
- Different links have been made to useful web-sited providing information on quality developments, among the most important one are
 - Leonardo da Vinci programme and the LdV-projects relating to quality,
 - the web-sites providing information on quality developments in higher education,
 - and here mainly to the ENQA-network of accreditation bodies.
- Condensed information on national approaches to quality assurance has been documented which are welcomed as they support transparency and the development of mutual trust into the different national VET-systems and the approaches to quality.
- Furthermore the information from other countries and European Member States can be used both as a reference point for national developments and a starting point for European comparisons.
- In future, the national dimension of the virtual community should be strengthened by establishing national nodal points or correspondents and/or by opening up national discussions.

Annexes

- Annex 1 Questionnaire to new members**
- Annex 2 Analysis of attained responses to questionnaire (table)**
- Annex 3 Analysis of members listed by countries (table)**
- Annex 4 Usage development**
- Annex 5 eLibrary – Inserted material (table)**
- Annex 6 Numbers of inserted documents per country (table)**
- Annex 7 Content – Countries - Matrix**