

4/28/2014



This project is funded by the
European Commission

*European Union Programme for Central Asia
Central Asian Education Platform (CAEP)
EuropeAid/131004/C/SER/RSCR*

**QUALITY OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION
AND TRAINING (VET) AND HIGHER
EDUCATION (HE) IN CENTRAL ASIA**

Working Paper



Claudio Dondi, Senior STE | on behalf of the EC and GOPA

AIM AND STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

The present document is produced in the framework of the Central Asia Education Platform (CAEP) project and illustrates the purpose, the objectives, the research questions and the results of the Study on Quality of Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education (HE), identified as one of the priorities by the Needs Assessment Report.

Based on the Needs Assessment Report and on stakeholders consultations conducted in the framework of CAEP, the theme of “Quality of VET and HE” was identified as one of the areas for the support of policy dialogue in the Region and, therefore, a theme on which to conduct a specific study.

The Needs Assessment Report and the Terms of Reference of the Study made clear that the purpose of the study was not primarily to collect and compare information on Quality Assurance systems in place, but to take a broader approach to Quality, focusing, in particular, on a core aspect of quality: the capacity of VET and HE systems to respond to -and even to anticipate- the qualification needs of individuals, employers, economy and society.

In particular, three specific issues are included in the paragraph of the Terms of Reference that refers to the content of the study:

- stakeholders involvement in VET and HE;
- development, maintenance and management of qualifications;
- development of curricula for qualifications and training of teachers to deliver them.

Keeping this in mind, the main purpose of the study was “to find innovative approaches for permanent matching of VET and HE programmes to the labour market needs, based on a modern system of qualifications” involving stakeholders in the process of description, evaluation and recognition of the learning outcomes, and making sure that teachers and trainers adopt a “learning outcomes” approach in their daily praxis.

The study has first defined the core research questions to be addressed (Section 2) and the methods to collect information (Section 3) both at the national level of the four involved countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) and at the EU level, in order to identify possible grounds for fruitful regional and bi-regional collaboration.

The study has not only a descriptive nature but, given its purpose, the analytical/diagnostic dimension was developed at all levels in order to identify priorities for future collaborations. Section 4 provides an overview of VET and HE in the four countries, their relationship and the common elements in their respective modernisation agenda, also compared to the EU developments in this field.

Section 5, which is the core of the descriptive report but also the most important contribution to the analysis of priorities, focuses on substantial quality gaps and quality assurance systems in place in the four countries and in the two sectors.

Section 6 relates the developments in Quality Assurance in relation to the innovation agenda of the two sectors, trying to answer the question of how much QA systems can be coherent and supportive to innovation and responsiveness of education to the needs of society and the labour market, including the issues of status and qualification/competences of teachers in the two sectors.

Section 7 summarises the state of the art of QA and innovation agendas in the two sectors in the European Union and identifies similarities and differences with Central Asia as grounds for possible future collaboration.

Finally, Section 8 contains the main conclusions and recommendations emerging from the study.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This last section presents the main findings of the Study at the Regional level, since conclusions and recommendations at national level are contained in the Country Reports of Part Two. In spite of the national specificities some common problems and common points of strength can be identified, so that a set of recommendations can be defined for further debate and further action.

Strengths and critical issues concerning the Quality of VET and HE systems in central Asia

The four countries studies have different economic dynamics and labour market conditions, but they share a strong demographic development and an urgent need to address the growing demand for education while guaranteeing the quality of provision and a high level of employability to the people completing Higher Education and VET.

Each country report presents a set of conclusions and recommendations, in this section we focus only on the common points of strength and on the common challenge, adopting a Regional perspective and a focus on quality assurance (QA) and quality.

The following appear to be the main strengths:

- in all countries the level of policy attention on education and training is quite high, and the proportion of public expenditure in the sector is relatively high;

- the issues of quality, transparency of qualifications and responsiveness to labour market needs are high in the policy agenda and the object of recent legislation/regulation and pilot initiatives, frequently supported by European and international programmes;
- the trend towards internationalisation of High Education and, to a lesser extent, Vocational Education and Training is gaining ground and enhancing the adoption, not only at policy level, of concepts and practices (such as the Learning Outcomes approach, the involvement of stakeholders in decision-making and the empowerment of educational institutions to run internal Quality Assurance processes) that are part of the modernisation agenda of education at international level, and specifically in Europe;
- the diagnosis capacity at system level is very well developed in the four countries, and encompasses all sectors of education (including, of course, VET and HE), so that common priorities for intervention are well identifiable across the Region.

The critical issues to be addressed, that we can find in all four countries, are more classifiable as “delays” in implementation rather than “areas of stuckness” still to be addressed, and are, as a consequence, closely related to the points of strengths:

- a strong “implementation gap” can be observed, particularly but not only in the field of Quality Assurance, between the principles and provisions contained in recent legislation and the observable development within education and training institutions. A significant part of the new regulations (e.g. internal Quality Assurance units in HEIs and training providers) is only formally or not really implemented for the lack of adequate competences and/or support by specialists;
- the issue of teachers’ and trainers’ qualification and professional development (in some countries also status and wage –affecting the core issue of attractiveness of the teaching profession) is recognised as a core concern in all countries;
- the infrastructure for HE and, even more critically, for VET is rather old and often insufficient to guarantee the provision of up-to-date skills required by the labour market;
- the level of collaboration actually achieved between education and the labour market representatives, particularly at the individual institution levels, is often still far from what is foreseen and desirable, a cultural gap still needs to be filled, the result is frequent mismatch between supply and demand, especially for Higher Education;
- Quality Assurance is still mostly organised around compliance and control of input elements rather than effort towards the achievement of excellent outcomes, improvement of processes and responsiveness to the labour market and the students’ needs;
- the many promising pilot projects in the field of quality and innovation of education have serious difficulties in scaling up after the end of funding (by international cooperation, mostly) and producing a serious impact at system level;
- the concrete collaboration between VET and HE is also not very developed in the field of QA (VET, like in Europe, is still very much linked to inspection and accreditation while HE is

evolving in the direction of a combination of external and internal Quality Assurance based on ENQA principles and relying on a growing level of autonomy of HEIs);

- the issues of transparency of qualifications and permeability between HE and VET is present in the policy agenda but still far from being fully implemented at a system level and in the current practice of the relationship between HEIs and VET providers.

Open issues for further analysis

The study was aimed to study a broad but relatively specific issue (QA and quality development) in four countries in which the collection, organisation and provision of educational data is not homogeneous.

We had to rely on existing statistics that are progressively becoming more comparable also thanks to the effort done by the so-called Torino process, but most of the sources of information were policy documents and interviews with stakeholders, then validated by stakeholders sessions.

While the policy effort to improve and assure quality of education is evident and easy to document, it is clear that much work remains to be done to get a more precise and comparable image of concrete quality developments in this Region.

Among the suggestions to increase reliability and comparability of data, we strongly recommend the standardisation of data collected by the Ministries of Education and the generalisation of employment surveys for all students leaving VET and HE.

More information already available to the Ministries of Education on the qualification of teachers and their professional development activities - should be publicly made available in all countries to allow not only comparison, but decision making based on evidence.

Recommendations for future action at national and single institutional level

1. The already started processes for the development of transparent National Qualification Frameworks should be strengthened and accelerated while keeping (or increasing) the involvement of labour market stakeholders in order to offer a clear reference point for Quality Assurance and quality development.
2. The level of independence of Quality Assurance should be increased while, at the sometime, the capacity of HEI and VET providers to organise internal Quality Assurance should be strengthened by training managers and teachers on a permanent, long-term basis including support to project work an institutional level and constantly available on-line courses.
3. The professionalization level of teachers should be massively enhanced (not only to implement Quality Assurance procedures, but to be able to work for a changing society and

labour market in collaboration with external stakeholders). The use of ICT and Open Education Resources to this purpose should be systematically explored considering the urgency and the size of the challenge.

4. Learners should be more involved in the Quality Assurance systems of HE and VET, their contribution has provided to be of fundamental value in the European Union experience to guarantee that education systems become more student-centred and less supply-led.
5. Cooperation between VET and Higher Education should be increased, particularly in the field of Quality Assurance, Qualification Transparency, and validation of learning outcomes in view of increased permeability of the two systems for students completing VET or dropping out from one of the two systems (a circumstance quite frequent in the four countries studied).
6. Innovative pilot projects should be thoroughly evaluated and, if their results are good and potentially scalable, should be supported in their further development and generalisation. Frustration deriving from a good pilot project not followed-up may undermine the continuity of the innovation desired and defined at policy level.

Recommendations for policy dialogue at regional and bi-regional level

The previous parts of this Report have made clear not only that similarities exist among the four countries in spite of very significant structural differences, but also that some of the priorities for intervention correspond, to a large extent, to fields that are very important in the European Union modernisation agenda for education and are not to be considered as “already solved problems”.

In order to maximise the impact of future collaboration, it is advisable to concentrate on a few very visible initiatives, addressing new areas - in which the temptation to follow the existing routine does not exist - , and to choose those actions that have the highest potential for integration among the subsystems of education.

As a “synthesis of the synthesis” we recommend the three following issues as very promising grounds for further collaboration at Regional and Bi-Regional level:

- a large collaboration initiative to professionalise education managers, teachers and trainers making systemic use of ICT and Open Education Resources, with a view to accelerate the implementation of already existing policy developments, but also to create the long-term capacity, at the grass root level, to combine quality assurance understanding and change management capability;
- the widespread adoption of self-assessment, benchmarking and international peer review, to involve the largest possible number of people in HEIs and VET provider organisations in a large scale quality enhancement and innovation exercise; this will also contribute to accelerate policy implementation and offer the ground to immediately apply the newly

acquired competences of the previous point to concrete developments in the education and training organisations;

- the development of a Central Asia network for Quality Assurance, Innovation and Equity, covering both HE and VET, federating the existing bodies responsible for Quality Assurance, Inspection and Accreditation in the four countries and associating them to the main EU networks involved in QA, innovation and equity. This third initiative will complement the previous two by providing the necessary institutional support –at system level- to the effort to improve quality in the provision of HE and VET while participating in innovative and inclusive education policies.