



LEARNING FOR DEMOCRACY - DEMOCRACYFOR LEARNING

GOVERNING SKILLS THROUGH QUALITY: KNOWLEDGE, DATA INFRASTRUCTURES AND THE POLITICS OF EUROPEAN VET COORDINATION

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INTRODUCTION



Skills have become a **strategic priority** in European policy as digitalisation, the green transition and demographic change reshape labour-market requirements.

VET systems should anticipate emerging skills needs and support upskilling and reskilling throughout working life.

Skills shortages become not only labour-market problems, but also challenges to competitiveness, resilience and social inclusion.

IN THIS CONTEXT, **QUALITY** BECOMES A **STRATEGIC DIMENSION**: VET MUST DEMONSTRATE ITS CAPACITY TO REMAIN RELEVANT, FLEXIBLE AND RESPONSIVE TO ECONOMIC AND SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATIONS.



European VET Policy: 2020–2025

Between 2020 and 2025, European VET policy developed through a cumulative sequence of initiatives. **The European Skills Agenda**, the **2020 Council Recommendation on VET**, the revised **EQAVET framework** and the **Osnabrück Declaration** linked VET to quality, resilience and the twin transitions.

In 2025, the **Union of Skills** and the **Herning Declaration** further connected skills and VET with competitiveness, attractiveness and quality jobs. Across this policy cycle, skills, quality, flexibility, lifelong learning and labour-market responsiveness become increasingly interconnected.



Research Problem

European VET governance increasingly relies on indicators, benchmarks, monitoring, evaluation, skills intelligence and comparative evidence.

These instruments do more than provide neutral information: they contribute to defining what counts as a policy problem, what constitutes quality and which interventions appear legitimate.

Research question:

How does knowledge production operate as a governing mechanism within contemporary European VET policy?

Rather than assessing policy effectiveness, the analysis investigates how knowledge makes VET systems visible, measurable, comparable and governable while preserving formal national autonomy.



The study combines three perspectives:

- 1. Policy problematisation:** how categories such as skills shortages and quality deficits are constructed as actionable problems (Bacchi; Yanow).
- 2. Governing by numbers:** how indicators, quantification and comparison transform heterogeneous educational realities into measurable objects (Rose; Grek; Nóvoa & Yariv-Mashal).
- 3. Soft governance:** how European coordination operates through common objectives, evidence, networks and peer learning rather than binding harmonisation (Lawn; Grek & Ozga).

KNOWLEDGE

MEASUREMENT

COMPARISON

QUALITY
ASSURANCE

GOVERNANCE



Why EQAVET?

EQAVET illustrates how **quality assurance connects knowledge production** with **governance**.



Its quality cycle links **Planning, Implementation, Evaluation** and **Review**, supported by common criteria, descriptors and reference indicators.



Evaluation generates knowledge about **performance**, which is expected to inform subsequent organisational improvement.



EQAVET therefore does not simply measure an independently existing concept of quality → it contributes to **defining what quality means** and how it should be demonstrated.



This makes EQAVET an important infrastructure of European coordination without formal institutional harmonisation.



MATERIALS AND METHODS



The empirical corpus comprises **32 European policy and institutional documents** published between 2020 and 2025.



Documents were produced or endorsed by the European Commission, Council, European Parliament, Cedefop, ETF and related European actors. Then selected for their relevance to VET, skills anticipation, quality assurance, monitoring, evaluation and European coordination.



National documents and texts addressing VET only incidentally were excluded. Academic literature was not part of the empirical corpus but provided the theoretical and methodological framework used to interpret the European policy documents.



Analytical Strategy

The study combines thematic document analysis, critical policy discourse analysis and interpretive policy analysis.

Thematic coding identified recurring categories including skills, quality, performance, indicators, monitoring and continuous improvement.

Discourse analysis examined how skills shortages and quality deficits are constructed as policy problems and how particular responses are legitimised.

Interpretive analysis explored how indicators and standards contribute to constructing the realities they measure.

Coding combined deductive and inductive categories through a structured manual matrix, codebook, pilot coding and iterative refinement.



1. Constructing the Skills Problem



Between 2020 and 2025, skills shortages are progressively constructed as strategic European problems.

- ✓ The European Skills Agenda connects skills with resilience, recovery and the twin transitions, while the Union of Skills strengthens their relationship with competitiveness and demographic pressures.
- ✓ Employer surveys, forecasts, shortage data and skills intelligence translate heterogeneous labour-market conditions into common categories such as skills gaps, mismatches and future skills needs.



Knowledge therefore does more than describe shortages: it makes them measurable, politically visible and actionable through coordinated policy intervention.



2. Quality Assurance as Governance

EQAVET transforms evidence into organisational action through a continuous cycle of planning, implementation, evaluation and review. Indicators covering participation, completion, placement, skills utilisation and teacher development make selected dimensions of VET performance visible and comparable.



Quality becomes something that must be planned, monitored, demonstrated, reviewed and continuously improved.



The framework establishes common categories for understanding and evaluating performance.

Quality assurance therefore operates simultaneously as **a mechanism of knowledge production** and as a **technology for orienting institutional behaviour**.



3. Governing Through Networks



The EQAVET Network and National Reference Points enable policy knowledge to circulate between European and national levels.



Peer learning, benchmarking, methodological exchange and dissemination of practices support national adaptation while maintaining a common European quality architecture.

Governance therefore does not depend on formal harmonisation. Instead, convergence develops through increasingly shared categories and vocabularies, including quality assurance, evidence, monitoring, performance, skills relevance and continuous improvement.

These networks exemplify soft governance, in which coordination is achieved through knowledge circulation, comparison and mutual learning rather than binding regulation.



4. The Changing Meaning of Quality

The comparison between Osnabrück 2020 and Herning 2025 shows an expansion rather than replacement of the meaning of quality.

Osnabrück connects quality with resilience, excellence, inclusion and the green and digital transitions.

Herning retains these dimensions while strengthening links with attractiveness, competitiveness, innovation and quality jobs.

Quality thus becomes an **organising concept connecting educational, economic and social objectives**. It becomes something that must be made **visible** and **demonstrated** through objectives, indicators, monitoring and evaluation.



5. From Measurement to Governance

The findings reveal a recurring governance sequence:

Problematisation → Quantification → Comparison → Evaluation → Circulation → Self-adjustment

- Skills shortages are constructed as policy problems;
- evidence makes them measurable;
- common categories enable comparison;
- quality assurance evaluates performance;
- institutional networks circulate knowledge;
- and systems are encouraged to adjust accordingly.

EQAVET occupies a **central position** within this chain by connecting European objectives with national processes of evaluation and improvement. European VET governance therefore increasingly operates by defining what should be known, measured, compared and improved: a form of knowledge-based soft governance.



Discussion: What Does Measurement Make Visible?

- ❖ Common indicators can strengthen transparency, mutual learning and evidence-informed improvement. However, every system of measurement produces a selective representation of quality.
- ❖ Completion, placement or skills utilisation can be readily quantified, whereas pedagogical relationships, professional judgement, learner experience and occupational identity are less easily comparable.



The **issue** is therefore not whether indicators accurately or inaccurately represent VET, but which dimensions they make visible and politically relevant. When quality increasingly becomes what can be demonstrated through evidence, the definition of legitimate evidence becomes itself a question of governance.



Final remarks

The study conceptualises European VET quality assurance as knowledge-based soft governance.



EQAVET coordinates heterogeneous systems through shared categories, indicators, evaluation, comparison, peer learning and continuous improvement rather than binding harmonisation.



This architecture can strengthen transparency and mutual learning while preserving national autonomy. However, it may privilege aspects of VET quality that are most easily measured.

The **central challenge** is therefore to combine evidence and comparability with flexibility and plurality, ensuring that quality assurance reflects not only labour-market responsiveness but also the broader educational, professional and societal purposes of vocational education.



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