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From Quality Standards to Evaluator Competences: A Competence Mapping Framework for Evaluation in Education

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CONTEXT

- The **Italian EQAVET National Reference Point (NRP)** was established in 2006 and is placed in **INAPP**, in Rome. It promotes a **National Board** which includes delegates from the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Education, the Regions and the Autonomous Provinces, the Social Partners as well as training experts and representatives belonging to the Italian Vocational Education and Training providers.
- The Italian **NRP** encourages the application of the **EU Recommendations** and supports the national process for the implementation and **development of a National QA strategy in E&T**, through the dissemination of a technical-scientific Quality Assurance culture and the circulation of practices and tools for the adoption of a continuous improvement process.



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CONTEXT

- Since the last decade, the European Commission has strongly urged Member States to implement national policies that consider **Education and Training systems** as key **instruments of social and cultural cohesion**, as well as a valuable investment in Europe's future.
- **Improving the quality** of Education and Training, by optimizing the match between resources and needs to combat the imbalance between the **supply and demand for skills**, is the main driver of development for the future of Europe and plays an important role in promoting **active citizenship, equal opportunities and social cohesion**.



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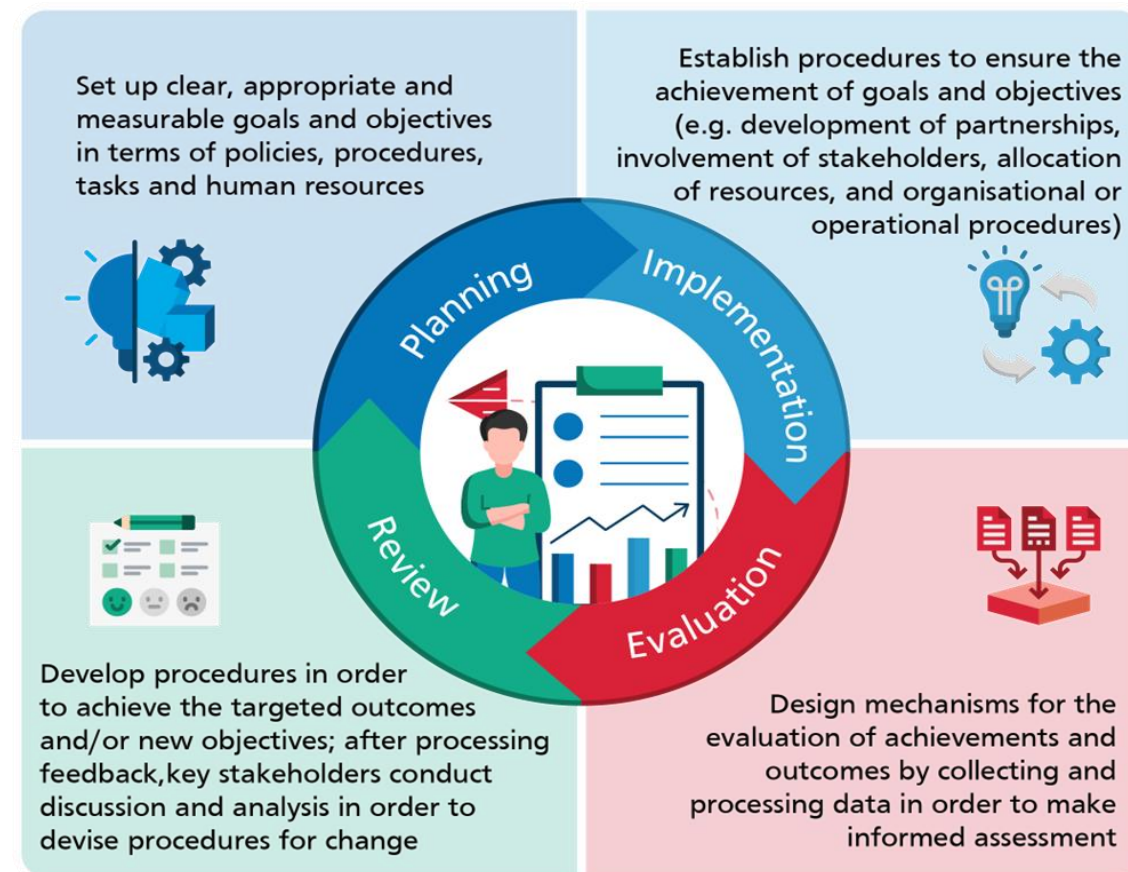


The EQAVET Quality Assurance Cycle

- **EQAVET** supports quality assurance in Education and Training across Europe through a **continuous improvement cycle**, which helps systems and providers enhance education and training.
- It provides a flexible framework based on a quality assurance and improvement cycle, including planning, implementation, evaluation/assessment, and review/revision-along with a **selection of quality descriptors and indicators** applicable to quality management at both VET system and provider levels.



The Quality Assurance Cycle





The EQAVET Quality Assurance Framework

- The **European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET)** emerged from the **2009 Recommendation** *on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework*, a European wide framework to support quality assurance in Education and Training across Europe.
- **EQAVET** does not prescribe a particular quality assurance system or approach but provides **a framework of common principles, indicative descriptors and indicators** that may help in assessing and improving the quality systems and provision.





The **2009 Recommendation of the EU Parliament and Council** launched the **European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training** (EQAVET) as a European wide framework to support quality assurance in Education and Training across Europe.



On November 2020, the European Council launched the **2020 Recommendation on vocational education and training for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience** in order to modernize EU VET policy.



CONTEXT



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- The **2020 Recommendation** calls on Member States to promote measures to equip youth and adults with the knowledge, skills and competences needed in the labour market for **green and digital transitions, promotes inclusiveness and equal opportunities and builds on a culture of quality assurance.**
- In particular, the Recommendation presents the complete **EQAVET Framework** and describes how EQAVET can be used to strengthen the quality of initial and continuing VET.



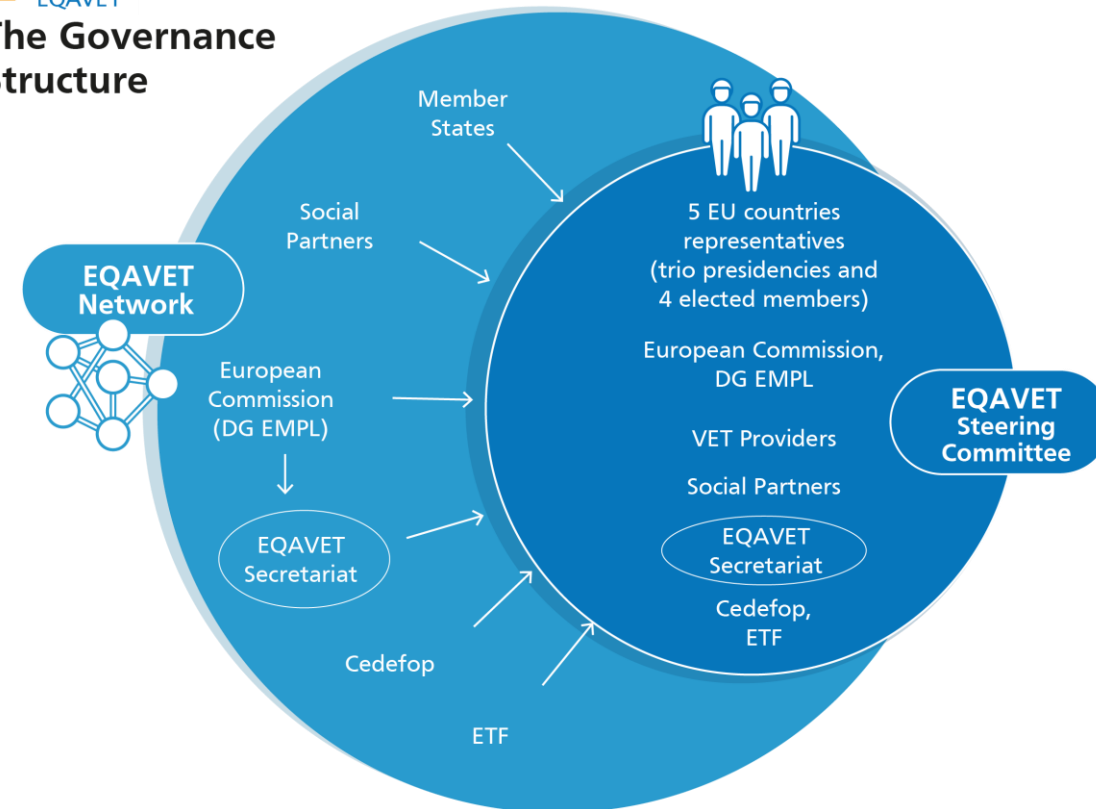


The EQAVET structure

In 2020, with the **EU VET Recommendation for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience**, the EQAVET framework was extended from IVET to CVET. The EQAVET Framework can be used by providers and in systems to support the quality assurance of:

- **all learning environments** (e.g., school-based provision, work-based learning, apprenticeships, formal, informal and nonformal provision);
- **all types of learning contexts** (e.g., digital, face-to-face and blended);
- **all public and private sectors;**
- **awards and qualifications at all levels of EQF.**

The Governance Structure





In accordance with national legislations, **NRPs bring together relevant key stakeholders** at the **national and regional levels** to support, implement and disseminate the network's activities, in particular with the aim to:

- take concrete initiatives to implement and further develop the EQAVET framework;
- inform and mobilise a range of stakeholders, including Centres of Vocational Excellence, to contribute to implementing the EQAVET framework;
- **support self-evaluation as a complementary and effective means of quality assurance to allow the measurement of success and the identification of areas for improvement, including digital readiness of VET systems and institutions;**
- actively participate in the EQAVET network;
- provide an updated description of the national quality assurance arrangements based on the EQAVET framework;
- **engage in EU level Peer Reviews of quality assurance to enhance the transparency and consistency of quality assurance arrangements and reinforce trust between Member States.**





The **2020 VET Recommendation** defines a peer review as ‘*a type of voluntary mutual learning activity with the objective to support the improvement and transparency of quality assurance arrangements at system level not leading to accreditation procedures, based on a specific methodology to be developed by the European Network for quality assurance in vocational education and training.*

It involves a combination of internal and external evaluation: quality control and continuous improvement, as a flexible tool to be adopted in different contexts.

Peer Review at provider level	Peer Review at system level
It is based on the combination of the self-evaluation of VET institutions or centers and the Peers external evaluation, and support providers in reviewing their approach to quality assurance in order to improve their provision.	It gives the countries involved an opportunity to analyze and recalibrate their system and ensure the quality of education and training, critically reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of quality assurance systems and measuring ongoing progress.





- **A Peer Review is carried out by Peers**, colleagues working in similar institutions or environments.
- **Peers will act as “critical friends”** by encouraging a process of mutual trust, confidence and learning among the participants, institutions and systems involved.
- Before the Peer Review visit, the evaluated organization sends a **Self-Assessment Report** to the Peers, as a fundamental document for the evaluation, and appoints a "facilitator" as an internal contact person for the Peer Review.
- A Peer Review lasts an average of 2.5 days and, at the end of the visit, Peers draw up a final report, as a result of their reflections on the organization weaknesses and strenghts.







Peer Review has become an established formative external evaluation methodology in which trained professionals conduct collegial evaluations of VET providers against a shared set of quality standards (Gutknecht-Gmeiner, 2007; EQAVET, 2023).

The methodology is organised around sixteen **Quality Areas**, which operationalise institutional quality through evidence-informed evaluation and continuous improvement processes.

However, evaluation cannot be reduced to the application of procedures or technical standards. As argued in the literature on professional judgement and reflective practice (Schön, 1983; Stake, 2004; Eraut, 1994), evaluative activity requires the integration of domain knowledge, methodological expertise, critical reflection and context-sensitive decision making.

- Despite the widespread implementation of Peer Review across European VET systems, the profile of the **Peers** remains conceptually underdeveloped.
- Existing documents primarily describe procedural requirements, whereas the scholarly literature provides only fragmented accounts of the competences that enable Peers to produce reliable, evidence-based and professionally grounded evaluations.

This gap is particularly relevant because the quality of evaluative judgements ultimately depends on the competences of those who formulate them. Accordingly, the present study addresses the following research question: **Which competences define the profile of a Peer within the Peer Review methodology for Vocational Education and Training?**





As highlighted by **Gutknecht-Gmeiner (2013)**, the methodology combines a **participatory approach** — grounded in **collegial dialogue** and **mutual learning** — with the requirement to produce evaluations that are methodologically rigorous, credible and capable of supporting institutional quality improvement.

This tension reflects a broader challenge in professional practice: **balancing procedural consistency with context-sensitive judgement**.

Research on professional competence consistently shows that expert performance cannot be explained solely by the application of formal procedures; rather, it emerges from the integration of domain-specific knowledge, methodological expertise, reflective practice and adaptive decision-making (Schön, 1983; Eraut, 1994; Shavelson, 2010).

Although the Peer Review provides evaluation criteria, it offers limited guidance regarding the competences and skills required to enact those criteria in authentic evaluation contexts. Consequently, **the competence profile of the Peer remains largely implicit** and has not yet been systematically operationalised.





Research Objectives

To address this gap, the present study pursues three complementary objectives:

- a) first, it reconstructs a **structured competence framework for Peers** through a systematic review of literature on educational evaluation, quality assurance, professional competences and evaluative expertise;
- b) second, it systematically **compares this framework with the requirements of the Quality Areas** in order to identify patterns of competence coverage, structural gaps and priorities for professional development;
- c) third, it lays the theoretical foundations for the **development of a competence assessment tool** designed to measure the competences required by Peers.

The proposed framework is intended to support the construction and future validation of a multidimensional scale that can be used for competence assessment, professional development and evidence-based selection of Peers.

Rather than conceptualising competence as the possession of isolated knowledge and skills, the study adopts an **integrated perspective, viewing competence as the capacity to mobilise cognitive, methodological and interpersonal resources** in order to formulate valid, context-sensitive and professionally grounded evaluative judgements (Le Boterf, 2001; Mulder, 2014).





- The Peer Review methodology organises institutional quality into sixteen Quality Areas, grouped into three complementary domains:
 - a) the first domain comprises **four core Quality Areas**, directly concerned with *teaching and learning: curricula, learning and teaching, assessment, and learning outcomes*;
 - b) the second domain includes **ten organisational Quality Areas**, covering *institutional governance, strategic planning, human resources, infrastructure, external relations, inclusion, gender mainstreaming and quality management*;
 - c) the third domain consists of **two strategic Quality Areas** — *Digital Transition and Environmental Sustainability* — which reflect the most recent European policy priorities.
- These Quality Areas should not be interpreted as merely technical assessment criteria. Rather, they operationalise the principles underpinning European quality assurance — including transparency, participation, accountability, inclusion and continuous improvement — and therefore require evaluators to mobilise a broad range of professional competences beyond procedural expertise.





- The conceptualisation of Peer Review adopted in this study is grounded in evaluation theory. According to Stake (2003), responsive evaluation requires evaluators to integrate methodological competence, substantive domain knowledge and reflective professional judgement.
- Similarly, Gutknecht-Gmeiner (2013) distinguishes three ideal types of Peer evaluators:
 - a) the **amateur**, characterised by limited methodological preparation;
 - b) the **expert**, whose technical specialisation may reduce collegiality;
 - c) the **reviewer**, who combines disciplinary expertise with methodological rigour and collaborative practice.
- The VET Peer Review methodology explicitly aligns with this third model. However, although the Peer Review has been theoretically defined, the literature has not yet translated it into a systematic competence framework capable of informing Peer selection, training and professional development.





- So far, the study includes a ***two-stage qualitative research***:
 - 1) the first stage consisted of a **systematic review of international literature** on evaluation theory, quality assurance in VET and Peer Review methodology. To strengthen the analytical framework, the review was complemented by the INAPP Atlante del Lavoro, the Italian national reference framework for the description of professional competences. The outcome of this stage was a competence framework organised into four macro-categories.
 - 2) The second stage involved a **systematic matching process between this competence framework and the sixteen Quality Areas**. Competence descriptors were compared with the official criteria and evidence indicators contained in the Peer Review Manuals (EQAVET, 2023; Inapp, 2026).
- The purpose of this analytical mapping was twofold: to identify areas of competence coverage and to reveal domains where significant gaps persist.





- The literature review led to the identification of four complementary competence domains:
 - 1) the first domain, ***Contextual Knowledge of the VET System*** (CK-VET), encompasses knowledge of VET governance, legislative frameworks, organisational structures and labour market ecosystems;
 - 2) the second, ***Method-Specific Competences in Peer Review*** (MS-PR), includes knowledge of Peer Review methodology, the evaluator's role, data collection procedures, Quality Areas and quality assurance processes;
 - 3) the third domain, ***Methodological-Evaluative Competences*** (ME), refers to evaluation planning, qualitative and quantitative research methods, evidence analysis and report writing;
 - 4) finally, ***Transversal Competences*** (TC) comprise communication, teamwork, critical judgement, intercultural competence, ethical awareness and reflective capacity.
- Together, these four domains constitute the analytical framework used to examine the competence requirements associated with each of the sixteen Quality Areas.





This study contributes to the literature in three ways:

- a) first, it proposes a **replicable methodological approach** for systematically linking competence frameworks with quality evaluation standards, which can be adapted to different educational and organisational contexts;
- b) second, it advances the **conceptualisation of Peer competence** as a multidimensional construct, integrating contextual knowledge, methodological expertise and transversal competences required for professional evaluative judgement.
- c) third, it provides a **theoretical foundation for the professionalisation of Peer Review**, supporting competence-based approaches to Peer selection, training and continuous professional development.

Overall, the findings suggest that effective Peer Review depends not only on methodological procedures but also on the integration of cognitive, interpersonal and reflective competences that underpin high-quality evaluative practice.





Key Message: The competence requirements of Peer Review are multidimensional and unevenly distributed across the Quality Areas. This finding supports the need for a comprehensive competence framework — and, ultimately, for a psychometrically validated instrument — to assess and develop Peer competences systematically.

From this perspective, strengthening Peer Review involves three priorities:

- **defining a clear competence framework** for Peers;
- **developing competence-based training pathways;**
- **promoting reflective and ethical judgement** as a core component of professional evaluation.

The competence mapping presented here provides the conceptual foundation for these developments and, more importantly, for the future design of a **psychometrically validated instrument** to assess, develop and support the competences and skills of Peers.





Limitations

- ❑ **The proposed competence framework is theory-driven.** It has been derived from literature and analysis and has not yet been empirically validated with practising Peers or other stakeholders.
- ❑ **The framework is intended as a conceptual model rather than a proficiency model.** It identifies the competences required for Peer Review but does not yet specify proficiency levels or account for the evolving competence demands associated with digital and green transitions.

Future Research

- ❑ **Empirically validate and refine the framework** through psychometric studies and participatory research involving Peers, trainers and quality assurance practitioners.
- ❑ **Operationalise the framework into a competence assessment model**, by defining proficiency levels, observable behavioural indicators and alignment with European competence frameworks (DigComp, GreenComp and EntreComp).





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THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!

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