



# TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED QUALITY ASSURANCE MODEL: INSIGHTS FROM EUROPEAN CENTERS OF VOCATIONAL EXCELLENCE

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# BACKGROUND



The **Italian EQAVET National Reference Point (NRP)** was established in 2006 and is placed in **INAPP**, in Rome.

The Italian **National Reference Point** promotes a **National Board** which includes delegates from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, the Ministry of Education and Merit, 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 **National Reference Point** encourages the application of the **EU Recommendations** and supports the national process for the implementation and **development of a National QA strategy in VET**, 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.



## European VET Recommendation 2020 – the relevance of the Centres of Vocational Excellence

A Quality Assurance National Reference Point for vocational education and training brings together all relevant stakeholders at national and regional levels to:

- take concrete initiatives to implement and further develop the EQAVET Framework;
- **inform and mobilise a wide 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 with respect to digital readiness of VET systems and institutions;
- participate actively in the European network for quality assurance in vocational education and training;
- 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 to reinforce trust between the Member States.



## Definition of Center of Vocational Excellents (CoVE)

*“Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) are formed by networks of partners that develop local "skills ecosystems" to provide high quality vocational skills to young people and adults, and contribute to regional development, innovation, industrial clusters, smart specialisation strategies and social inclusion. CoVEs stimulate local business development and innovation, by working closely with companies (in particular SMEs) on applied research projects, creating knowledge and innovation hubs, as well as supporting entrepreneurial initiatives of their learners”.*

CoVEs are expected to go far beyond simply providing a quality vocational qualification. CoVEs' success include:

- being integrated in frameworks of regional development, innovation and smart specialisation - allowing synergies to be identified between policies and amongst stakeholders.
- strong and enduring relationships between stakeholders - including VET providers (also at the tertiary education level), **Higher Education Institutions** and businesses, in which interactions are reciprocal and mutually beneficial.
- integration of activities - building on the expertise and activities of each partner to provide both young learners and adults with skills and opportunities for professional and personal development.



## Different types of CoVEs

CoVEs have the freedom to adapt to local/regional and sectoral needs in terms of structures, stakeholders and activities, with the aim of increasing VET's responsiveness. Notwithstanding this diversity, **two broad types of CoVEs can be identified:**

1. CoVEs that are “purpose built” or designated entities as part of national/regional arrangements for vocational excellence;
2. CoVEs that are individual VET providers, functioning as CoVEs for a region, sub-region or sector.

→ Each CoVE and each CoVE network is unique, reflecting factors such as the structure of the industry and the underlying VET system. Furthermore, each CoVE offers a unique mix of activities.

CoVEs vary in their sectoral coverage. Since CoVE networks reflect national and regional economic priorities, they tend to cover sectors undergoing rapid technological and innovation-driven change that countries and regions wish to develop.

**European Commission, *Mapping of Centres of Vocational Excellence, 2019***



## How EU support **Centres of Vocational Excellence**

The European Union aims at introducing a European dimension of vocational excellence by:

- encouraging Member States to establish CoVEs that contribute to create skills ecosystems responding to local needs;
- supporting international collaborative networks bringing together CoVEs that share a common interest in developing skills ecosystems.

The European Union supports the CoVEs through:

- the **Erasmus+ Programme funding for Centres of Vocational Excellence**;
- the **International Self-Assessment Tool for Centres of Vocational Excellence**



## COVE – Centres of Vocational Excellence

The **precondition** for the national pilot research of the Quality Assurance tools implemented and used by CoVEs that allowed a first overview about quality management and control, was the mapping **of the quality assurance and monitoring tools** used by Italian CoVEs Partners, starting from the tools available by the project Partnership/Consortium.

The aim was to gather and map the quality assurance measures and tools in the different contexts of the CoVE and to analyze the existing approaches (including also other QA tools such as, ISO quality certification and accreditation) already applied.

The idea was to see what and how the CoVEs approach quality assurance with the aim of making the QA provisions more consistent with what has already been achieved at sectoral level.

RQ1. What are the measures, procedures and tools for quality assurance in place and/or developed by CoVEs?

RQ2. What are the similarities and what are the differences among the tools used by the CoVE Partnerships/Consortiums/Partners for quality assurance?

RQ3. And, most importantly, what's the importance of using these tools and/or using common tools at CoVE level?



In 2023, INAPP launched a national pilot research **establishing a group of experts**, aimed at mapping QA mechanisms and tools with the following objectives:

- to facilitate the relationship, comparison and integration between the education and vocational training system, among different bodies - indeed - but which deal with similar targets in terms of age and training needs with a view to mutual growth;
- to verify the QA mechanisms and tools in the models of CoVEs;
- to raise the quality of the supply of education and vocational training;
- to disseminate new operational tools aimed at encouraging continuous improvement of the quality of the training supply: in particular, self-assessment and external evaluation by Peers.

The **activities** planned for achieving the **goals** set for the **national pilot research** were the following:

- **Identification of experts and actors** in line with the already approved CoVEs projects/partnerships/consortiums;
- **Establishment of a common language and understanding** related to QA in relation to single CoVEs and CoVEs as a network);
- **Exchange and integration** between education and training structures operating in completely different sectoral, territorial, managerial and so on contexts.



# RESULTS



By focusing the participants' attention on the presentation and description of the approaches and tools used by their coves for quality assurance, both internally and externally, many reflections were gathered which deserve further investigation and analysis.



**Focus groups** with national experts and representatives and **in-depth interviews** with selected high-level experts on QA of coves took place.



**At the end, a total of 16 high level experts from 13 different institutions**, including the world of higher education, were involved.



The focus groups and interviews were run from **May 2023** to **April 2024** according to a specific calendar.



As required by the methodology, the national reference point elaborated a **semi-structured questionnaire**, conducted the focus groups through 2 online sessions and the online in-depth interviews





The focus groups and interviews allowed for a **quick overview** and an initial snapshot of the information available at the level of the Centres of Vocational Excellence and their focus on Quality Assurance measures and systems.



**The qualitative research approach included the following results:**



- identification of experiences, examples and practices on the basis of a specific outline used for conducting the pilot research;
- use of the knowledge and expertise of the group of experts and representatives during the research;
- deepening and comparison of theory with practice by INAPP researchers interested in the topic "quality assurance in CoVEs".



**Missing a dedicate Quality Assurance measure and/or tool specific for a CoVE.**



## RESULTS



Concerning the topic of Quality Assurance (QA), the first significant element that emerged was the use by CoVEs of well-known and widespread QA devices such as, for instance:

- the **standards for ISO certification**;
- the **accreditation of institutions** that constitutes a consolidated reference for both training and training-related activities, both in European and national contexts, used following well-defined operational procedures.

It emerged that within the CoVE bodies and organisations there is generally **an office or team that deals with certification and accreditation**, implementing and updating the procedures from time to time. Thus, all phases of training courses, from design to delivery to evaluation and review of the results obtained as well as a possible redesign, are subject to this procedure.



Experts stressed that, initially, it was quite challenging to integrate QA procedures into the work processes without emphasising aspects perceived as overly burdensome bureaucracy.

In other words, over time, organisations have managed to adapt their quality procedures to meet their organisational needs and have tried to **harmonise their internal quality system with the requirements of providers**, both public administrations and private companies, through accreditation and the acquisition of ISO certifications.

Alongside articulated, well-structured but also complex devices, such as standards for quality certification, focus group participants emphasised the **use of simpler, less elaborate tools, for instance the indicators and standards used in European projects and programmes** – such as the Erasmus+ programme itself, for example – which require the identification of specific indicators for a given "target group", with the aim of measuring at the end of a training course the impact it has had on people at work, training or personal level.



The mapping exercise enabled the formulation of a deeper understanding of quality and quality assurance in relation to vocational excellence, and higher education more in general, that takes into account:

- a) how QA is currently understood across Europe, where there are different approaches to QA tools and where Quality Assurance sits in different contexts;
- (b) the ambitions expressed by CoVEs and other strategic actors, such as HEIs, to improve the quality and excellence of Education and Training provision.

On this basis, vocational excellence involves going beyond what Education and Training would normally be expected to do.

→ **Excellence and Quality means going beyond provision that is well tuned to the needs of the labour market, and which meets the needs of citizens for professional career pathways through lifelong learning.**



**Excellence and Quality means** having in place strategic and systematic Quality assurance plans and processes for engaging with local and regional agendas for sustainability, social and economic development.

**It means moving from a position of passive responsiveness to the needs of stakeholders, to being a proactive player in Quality management and control and the formulation and implementation of continuous development and innovation strategies.**

Distinctions between sectors (VET, Higher Education and Adult Education) disappear, while pathways to higher levels of education and training are widely available and easily accessible.

In CoVEs, there is a systematic approach to QA management and improvement. The idea is to test and pilot also other European tools for QA at sectoral level, such as: the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) and the EQAVET Framework and the Peer Review methodology as well as other self-assessment tools.





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**THANK YOU FOR YOU ATTENTION**

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