

19TH ESPANET ITALY CONFERENCE

"GROWING INEQUALITIES IN THE TRIPLE TRANSITION: CHALLENGES FOR THE WELFARE STATE"

EVALUATION AND MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE IN VET: EVIDENCE FROM THE EQAVET NETWORK

CONCETTA FONZO, LAURA EVANGELISTA AND MARIANNA FORLEO, INAPP

10 SEPTEMBER 2026 · SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY OF ROME



Co-funded by
the European Union



CONTENTS

BACKGROUND

LITERATURE AND RESEARCH
QUESTIONS

METHODOLOGY

FINDINGS

DISCUSSION AND
CONCLUSIONS



BACKGROUND



European vocational education and training (VET) is a policy field characterised by substantial institutional heterogeneity and a distribution of responsibilities across European, national, regional and provider levels.

This complexity is compounded by labour-market transformations, the digital and green transitions, and the growing need to adapt skills and qualifications to rapidly evolving needs.

In this context, the capacity to produce and use evidence becomes an essential component of the governance of education and training policies.

The EQAVET network is a particularly interesting case because it connects different national systems through a common quality assurance framework. For this study, its relevance lies not only in its quality assurance tools, but also in the opportunity to observe how data, indicators, evaluation, feedback and peer comparison can enter policy processes and contribute to improving VET systems.



The Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 consolidates the role of EQAVET within European VET policy, extending its application to initial and continuing vocational education and training, different learning environments, and both system and provider levels.

The framework does not merely define quality standards; it proposes a cyclical approach based on planning, implementation, evaluation and review. This is relevant because it gives evaluation a function directly linked to improvement.

Data collection, the use of indicators, stakeholder involvement and the analysis of results should feed into subsequent review processes and the definition of new actions. This creates a cycle in which objectives, evidence, evaluation, feedback and review are interconnected.

The key question is whether, and under what conditions, this cycle can actually influence decision-making processes.



The study interprets the EQAVET case by integrating three theoretical perspectives.

1. The first concerns policy evaluation and evidence-informed policymaking, shifting attention from the mere production of evidence to the ways in which it is interpreted and used by decision-makers.
2. The second is multi-level governance, particularly relevant to a sector in which competences and responsibilities are distributed among European institutions, national and regional administrations, providers and social partners.
3. The third perspective concerns policy learning and European soft governance.

EQAVET does not impose a uniform model for VET systems; instead, it promotes coordination through indicators, peer review, peer learning and the exchange of practices. This leads to the central hypothesis: EQAVET's contribution to evaluation lies primarily in building capacity, common languages and learning circuits, rather than in standardising the performance of national systems.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS



The study is structured around three closely related research questions.

1. The first asks to what extent the tools and indicators promoted by the EQAVET network support an impact-oriented evaluation of VET policies.
2. The second shifts the focus from the production to the use of evidence, asking how the evidence produced is used by policymakers across different national contexts.
3. The third concerns the conditions that make this process possible: which institutional and organisational factors facilitate or hinder the integration of evaluation into policy cycles?

The overall objective is to contribute to the debate on the role of European networks in promoting a culture of evaluation and strengthening administrative capacity. The aim is not to causally estimate the “impact of EQAVET”, but to analyse how a European quality assurance infrastructure can strengthen systems’ capacity to produce, interpret and use evidence.



METHODOLOGY



The study adopts a qualitative approach based on documentary analysis, aimed at reconstructing the tools, processes and mechanisms through which evidence is produced and circulated within the EQAVET network.

The starting point is the 2020 VET Recommendation and the related EQAVET framework, used to reconstruct the institutional and evaluative architecture of the system.

These sources are complemented by documents produced by the network and the Secretariat: work programmes, documents on system-level peer reviews, materials on the future development of EQAVET, and results from Annual Network Meetings.

The corpus is analysed across several dimensions: evidence production, monitoring, circulation of information, comparison, feedback, use, learning and policy adaptation.

The objective is not to rank countries, but to identify the mechanisms through which evidence can become a resource for decision-making.



FINDINGS (1)



Regarding the first research question, the analysis shows that EQAVET has helped strengthen VET systems' capacity to collect information, observe processes and outcomes, and develop self-assessment and external evaluation practices. Common indicators therefore provide an important information infrastructure and encourage greater attention to the relationship between objectives, implementation and outcomes.

However, important limitations emerge. The availability of indicators is not equivalent to causal impact evaluation. Observed outcomes may be influenced by macroeconomic, institutional and territorial factors outside the training system. Moreover, the substantial diversity of national systems makes direct performance comparisons problematic.

For this reason, there is no strong demand within the network to use EQAVET indicators to rank systems. Their value appears greater as tools for diagnosis, monitoring, self-assessment and improvement, capable of highlighting critical issues and guiding subsequent evaluation questions.



FINDINGS (2)



The second research question concerns the transition from the production of evidence to its use.

The analysis shows that the network's tools perform different but complementary functions. Surveys make it possible to observe implementation of the framework over time; indicators structure monitoring; peer-learning activities allow experiences and solutions adopted in different systems to be compared; peer reviews provide more contextualised feedback on specific policy problems.

EQAVET data show that the framework is widely embedded in national systems, but also reveal persistent problems of data fragmentation, uneven implementation and institutional capacity, particularly in continuing VET.

This leads to an important finding: evidence does not become valuable to policymakers simply because it is available. It becomes usable when it is interpreted, discussed, contextualised and translated into feedback on a concrete policy problem.



FINDINGS (3)



The analysis of the third research question leads us to view EQAVET as a multi-level circuit for the production and circulation of evidence.

Information, experiences and problems emerge within national and regional systems and are brought into the network through National Reference Points. Surveys, peer reviews and mutual-learning activities then make it possible to aggregate, compare and reinterpret this knowledge. In this process, the EQAVET Secretariat can be understood as a knowledge broker: it not only produces documentation, but also supports information collection, facilitates comparison across countries, analyses feedback and helps feed knowledge back into the network.

A potential pathway therefore emerges: national or regional evidence → European comparison → feedback → learning → possible policy adaptation. Multi-level governance thus also becomes knowledge governance.

Its effectiveness, however, depends on the capacity of national and regional actors to bring this learning back into their own decision-making processes.



The findings allow us to critically examine the relationship between quality assurance and impact evaluation.

EQAVET is not a tool through which the causal relationship between a specific policy and observed outcomes can automatically be identified.

Conflating monitoring, quality assurance and impact evaluation would therefore risk attributing to the framework a function it does not have.

Its contribution can be identified at a different, but no less relevant, level: building the institutional conditions needed for evaluation to become firmly embedded in policy cycles.

Data availability and quality, attention to outcomes, stakeholder involvement, administrative capacity, feedback and comparison across systems are essential elements of this evaluation infrastructure.

The central issue therefore becomes the relationship between the production and use of evidence. The findings suggest that evidence does not automatically generate learning: actors, skills and organisational mechanisms are needed to transform it into knowledge that decision-makers can use.



CONCLUSIONS



The EQAVET case highlights a gradual evolution of quality assurance towards an approach in which monitoring, evaluation, feedback, review and learning are increasingly interconnected.

The network's added value therefore appears to lie not primarily in standardising or ranking national performance, but in building a shared capacity to observe systems, identify critical issues and compare possible responses.

EQAVET's contribution to impact-oriented evaluation is therefore mainly indirect and institutional: strengthening an evaluation culture, supporting evidence production, and creating circuits through which evidence can be discussed and transferred across levels of governance.

Finally, the case suggests a broader consideration for public policy: the quality of evidence is a necessary but not sufficient condition. The real challenge is to build institutions capable of turning evidence into learning, and learning into policy change.



THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION



www.inapp.gov.it