

Evaluation of the ETF networks

Final report

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1. Background to the evaluation

Networks of stakeholders are one of the European Training Foundation's (ETF's) key assets. The ETF works in cooperation with relevant international and regional stakeholders active in the field of human capital development including international and regional donors, and research and civil society organisations as well as private sector actors and social partners. The ETF works systematically with its stakeholders to share information, share expertise and methodologies and identify opportunities for joint methodological development and fieldwork cooperation. Stakeholder engagement is an integral part of the participatory approach of the ETF method of work which enables networks to be built and trust to be established between national and international institutions and the ETF. Networks and networking have been a fundamental component of the ETF's activities since its inception and are at the core of its working method. Therefore, their proper evaluation was necessary to develop an approach how the ETF networks could be used in the light of ETF Strategy 2027 and the Single Programming Document 2021-2023.

This evaluation has been commissioned by the ETF and developed by PPMI. The evaluation aimed to assess the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, complementarity, coherence, sustainability and added value of the ETF networks. The evaluation is based on desk research of academic literature and ETF's documentation, a mapping exercise of the networks, a survey of the members of ETF networks (168 completed answers), and interviews with ETF stakeholders (including members of networks) and staff (40 completed).

Desk research has revealed that the terms 'network' and 'networking' are used frequently in the ETF's strategic documents (single programming documents, annual work programmes), sometimes synonymously. During the mapping exercise, review of internal documents and papers, and interviews with the ETF staff, we found that this terminology (including 'networks', 'networking', and 'communities of practice') is understood and used differently by different staff members. This situation reflects the varying use of the terms in academia and elsewhere.

In the context of this evaluation, we adopt the working definition of networks proposed by the ETF in its concept paper, in which they are understood to be specific, structured interactions "among stakeholders focused on a common good/objective, based on cooperation and participation"¹. Such networks are developed and managed by the ETF to enhance policy learning in the ETF partner countries. Representatives of the partner countries are considered as partners in these networks, working together with the ETF to achieve common objectives.

The ETF networks involve various activities identified by the ETF staff and the evaluators. Again, different typologies were identified in ETF's track record of internal and external strategic documents and in staff interviews. Overall, the networks can be divided into:

¹ Margareta Nikolovska (ETF), Manuela Prina (ETF), Networks and capacity for human capital development: peer learning as a change tool. Unpublished manuscript.

- **thematic activities**, connecting members from different countries on specific topics (narrow scope, high formalisation, closed and stable membership, combining physical and online activities);
- **country-level activities**, involving broader national stakeholder communities, e.g. those taking part in the national Torino process events (broad scope, low formalisation, mixed open and closed membership, mainly physical activities); and
- **online activities**, recruiting and connecting users via online platforms (broad to narrow scope, low formalisation, open membership, focus on digital activities).

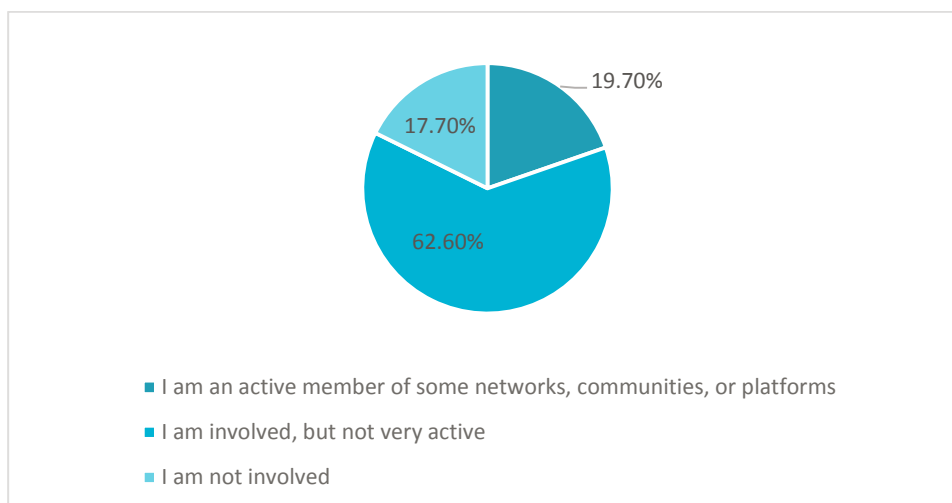
The ETF is also involved in networking activities with various international actors. These networking activities (e.g. the UNESCO Inter-Agency Group) are not managed by the ETF and are a separate type of activity, and have therefore been excluded from this evaluation. The evaluation, while taking a wide view on ETF networks, studied in-depth the Quality Assurance Forum (thematic), the European Alliance for Apprenticeships (thematic), the Qualifications Platform (online), national stakeholder communities (country), and the ETF Open Space (online).

2. Performance of the ETF networks in general

Clarity of network boundaries and membership

The mapping exercise and interviews with ETF revealed that very different types of engagements with varying level of formalisation are considered by ETF staff to be networks. The definition of whether or not a certain engagement was a network was not always shared by what ETF staff perceive to be ‘network members’. Furthermore, even where the engagements were more formalised, the membership of such engagements was not clear. This leads to a situation where not all persons considered by ETF to be members of its networks identify themselves as such. Although the survey carried out within the evaluation was targeted to persons who are considered to be members of its networks by ETF, not all of them identify themselves as network members. 82.3% of the surveyed stakeholders indicated that they are involved in networks, communities, or online platforms of the ETF.² 19.7% see themselves as active members, and 62.6% consider themselves involved but not very active. These results are presented in the figure below.

FIGURE 1. PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO ARE INVOLVED IN THE ETF NETWORKS (N=198)



Source: Stakeholder survey

² In the survey, we asked stakeholders about “networking activities (e.g. networks, communities, online platforms)” because we wanted to make sure that they understand what we mean. Further in the report, we call all of them **networks**. This term encompasses not only networks, but also communities (of practice), and online platforms.

Relevance

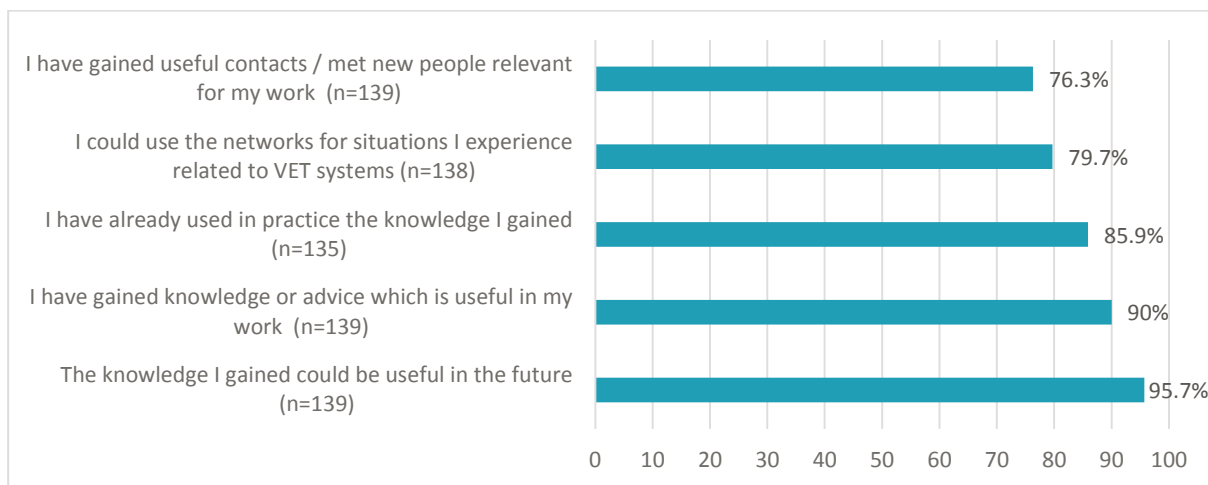
The relevance of the ETF networks is very high. Most surveyed stakeholders (92.8%) agreed that *they meet their professional needs*. This was achieved by focusing on relevant topics and providing relevant ways for them to learn from others. ETF successfully used its networks to support the partner countries through knowledge co-creation, mutual learning, and dissemination. This opinion was subsequently confirmed by the interviews conducted.

Effectiveness

Members of the ETF networks who responded to the survey were very satisfied with the knowledge they had gained—and it was this function that the networks were performing best. The networks were also highly effective at establishing personal and professional connections between their members, with stakeholders agreeing that they had gained useful contacts or met new people relevant for their work. Stakeholders also agreed that they could use the networks to discuss the challenges and situations they experience with VET systems. Many ETF network members perceived notable positive effects directly attributable to the activity of the ETF networks in their country.

The ETF networks in general are effective in achieving their objectives. Most surveyed stakeholders agreed with various effectiveness-related aspects of the networks (see the results presented in the figure below). Primarily, stakeholders are very satisfied with the knowledge they gained. 90% of them agreed that the knowledge and advice they gained *are useful in their work*. 85.9% agreed that they have *already used* this newly gained knowledge *in practice*, and 95.7% agreed that the knowledge *could be useful in the future*. These results indicate that the networks, communities, and platforms produce a real added value because they provide information and experience which is valued by their members. A slightly lower, yet still a high percentage (76.3%) of surveyed stakeholders agreed that they have gained *useful contacts* or *met new people* who are relevant for their work, and 79.7% agreed that they could *use the networks* for discussing challenges and situations they experience in relation to VET systems. These two latter questions are related to the aspect of networking within the networks. This aspect is crucial for many stakeholders: during interviews and in open-ended survey questions, they said they would appreciate more opportunities to collaborate and meet new people, including more opportunities to engage with each other and make real connections during live events. Besides, the surveyed stakeholders were interested in networking not only among network members but also with relevant people outside the formal networks. They expected that ETF would help them in getting new contacts and saw it as one of the most important functions of these networks.

FIGURE 2. PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO AGREE STRONGLY OR MODERATELY WITH THE STATEMENTS ABOUT THE USEFULNESS OF THE ETF NETWORKS



Source: Stakeholder survey

Most surveyed stakeholders are satisfied with the level of engagement by the ETF staff (87.8% said it is appropriate), as well as with the level of engagement by other network members (80.1% said it is appropriate). While these numbers are very positive for both audiences, the slight difference in engagement between the two audiences was also noticed during interviews with stakeholders – while all of them were satisfied with the ETF’s involvement, some mentioned that other members are not active enough, especially on online platforms. The inactivity issue is not easy to solve, as it depends on personal and work-related capabilities of each participant. Also, some interviewed stakeholders admitted that they simply do not have enough time for some activities because of a high workload.

Almost three quarters of surveyed stakeholders (74.3%) said that they have shared their knowledge, or their country’s or organisation’s experience with others, and 72% of them agreed that they were inspired to make or promote changes to VET systems. The former result was also supported by interviews with stakeholders, especially members of different online platforms – they sometimes revealed that they have not posted anything yet and that their participation is “more of reading than interacting”. The lowest, yet a still high number of surveyed stakeholders (68.6%) agreed that the potential of the ETF’s networks is fully exploited. This result shows that the stakeholders see a lot of potential in the ETF’s networks; however, it also indicates that there are still areas that need improvement.

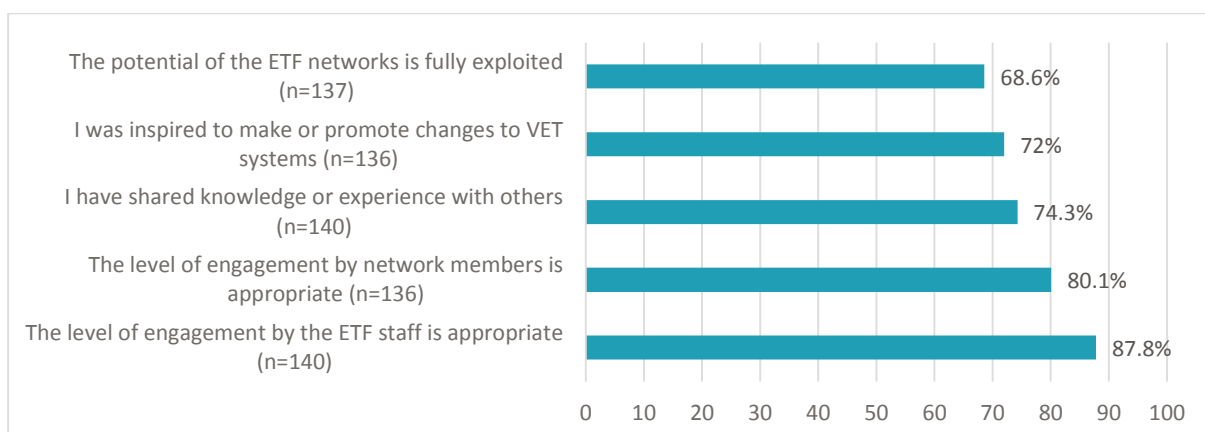
Many stakeholders who participated in the survey or interviews shared their ideas on how to improve the ETF’s networking activities to better exploit their potential. We classified them into five major topics:

- **Developing ways of engaging stakeholders online.** Many stakeholders suggested using various means for online communication. Stakeholders often asked to use online meeting services more often for collaboration and learning – webinars were mentioned as a great way of learning that should be utilised more. However, we should note the importance of choosing interesting topics for sharing experiences online to ensure participation. Besides, it was suggested that online platforms could be exploited as hubs for the development of specific innovative projects aimed at improving VET and qualifications in the ETF Partner Countries.

Some stakeholders also asked for utilisation of different online apps (instant messaging services like Facebook Messenger or Telegram were mentioned) for chatting and discussions. This shows that there is potential for introducing the ETF Open Space as a place for such communication, as it already has private messaging function. Also, mainstream social media platforms can be utilised more as a source of users.

- **Introducing more networking opportunities.** Many stakeholders suggested ideas for additional meetings: both online and face-to-face. These suggestions stem from the need to find new useful contacts and meet new people. The stakeholders expect the ETF to actively promote communication between parties, creating new and strengthening existing relationships. Naturally, learning is seen as part of this process: round table discussions, brainstorming sessions, and other opportunities to discuss lessons from different countries is seen as another objective which is greatly linked with networking (e.g. networking can occur during or after these discussions).
- **Focusing on country-specific information.** Some stakeholders suggested that the information provided by the ETF could be more tailored to specific local contexts. One example provided by stakeholder was a request for more linkage to the reality of VET activities and systems for countries neighbouring Europe. Also, stakeholders often mentioned the need to see all the information for the one country they are interested in.
- **Improving accessibility of information.** Many stakeholders indicated accessibility issues. The main and most often mentioned issue was a lack of content and ability to cooperate in different languages (Russian was the most frequently mentioned language that needs more attention). Besides, some stakeholders negatively referred to the fact that the ETF Open Space requires registration to access information.
- **Providing recognition-related material.** Some stakeholders also said that offering certificates or other recognition documents would be beneficial for increasing participants' motivation. Also, it was suggested that providing such documents could help would provide an opportunity to recognise the competence of participants by the official bodies in their countries (and would probably draw more attention to related topics and processes).

FIGURE 3. PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO AGREE STRONGLY OR MODERATELY WITH THE STATEMENTS ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE WITH THE ETF NETWORKS



Source: Stakeholder survey

Efficiency

Overall, the costs of the networks are not very stable on a year-by-year comparison, with the exception of missions expenditure, the stability of which could be attributed to the periodical nature of missions. Both the T3 expenditure and the FTEs of human resources varied quite significantly, showing the adaptability of the Agency and its ability to allocate resources to the networks which require them the most at a given time.

We have received efficiency-related information on three networks: the Quality Assurance Forum, the Teacher Training-CPD, and the Digital On Line Learning/SELFIE. Regarding financial costs, the Teacher Training-CPD was the network that had the largest costs; however, the Quality Assurance Forum required more human resources (in full-time equivalents). This information is presented in the table below.

TABLE 1. TOTAL COSTS AND FULL TIME EQUIVALENTS OF THREE SELECTED NETWORKS

	TOTAL COSTS	TOTAL FTE
Quality Assurance Forum	553 276,62 €	10,05
Teacher Training-CPD	858 047,25 €	6,25
Digital On Line Learning/SELFIE	205 330,46 €	4,43

Source: financial data provided by ETF

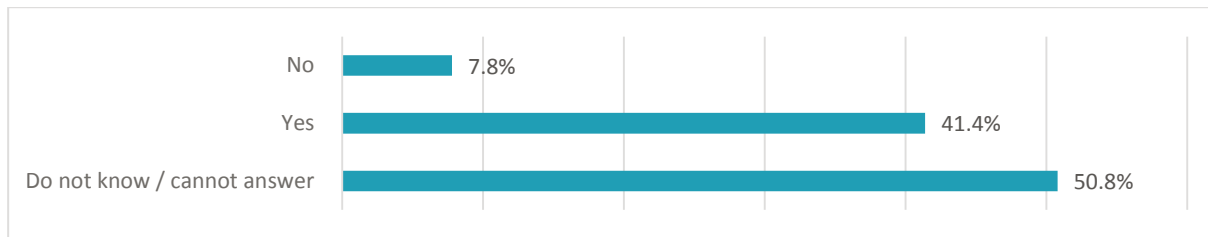
The majority of these costs were allocated to T3 expenditure rather than missions. This is the case with all three networks: the Quality Assurance Forum (€509 533,80 vs €43 742,82), the Teacher Training-CPD (€818 217,15 vs €39 830,10), and the Digital On Line Learning/SELFIE (€178 555,46 vs €26 775,00).

It should also be noted that the networks differed in their T3 budget throughout the evaluation period. All three networks incurred little to no costs in 2014; however, the situation was different in the last three years. From 2017, the costs of the Quality Assurance Forum remained stable (between €97 716,20 and €114 499,33); however, they varied greatly for the other two networks. The Teacher Training-CPD had an increase to €234 781,02 in 2018, and then a steep drop to €64 501,86 in 2019. The Digital On Line Learning/SELFIE had almost no costs in 2017 and 2018, but the costs increased significantly in 2019 (to €127 535,21).

Impacts

There are clear impacts of the ETF networks indicated by many stakeholders. When asked if any of the ETF networks have a notable positive effect (e.g. helped implement reforms or innovations which proved to bring positive change), 41.4% of respondents stated that *there are notable positive effects* of the ETF networks in their country. This could be seen as a very positive result, because usually in public policy evaluations the stakeholders are unwilling to attribute impacts to a specific public policy intervention.

FIGURE 4. PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO SAID THAT THE ETF NETWORKS HAD A NOTABLE POSITIVE EFFECT (E.G. HELPED IMPLEMENT REFORMS OR INNOVATIONS WHICH PROVED TO BRING POSITIVE CHANGE) IN THEIR COUNTRY OR THE ETF PARTNER COUNTRIES THEY WORK WITH (N=128)



Source: Stakeholder survey

Many stakeholders named specific results and impacts, including policy changes, developments and reforms at national level, that could be attributed to the ETF networks. For example, a stakeholder from Egypt said that ETF networks had positively impacted the development of the country's national occupational standards. Meanwhile, a stakeholder from Ukraine said that ETF networks had been instrumental in the creation of the National Agency for Qualifications. While reflecting the difficulty of telling apart the impacts of ETF networks from the overall impacts of the ETF, there is little doubt the ETF networks were instrumental for achieving those due to their ability to bring together major stakeholders and share good practice and cross-country experience and to promote and inspire policy learning.

During interviews and in the survey, the stakeholders described an extensive variety of positive effects of the ETF networks. They can be grouped into such topics:

- Helped to **uncover critical issues** related to the qualifications, quality assurance and VET in the country.
- Helped to **improve the qualifications system**: especially, by developing National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs), but also by helping create the Qualification Agencies, the NQF registers, the NQF websites.
- Helped to **improve or implement the quality assurance system** and to disseminate the quality assurance culture.
- Helped to **introduce and improve the apprenticeship** (work-based learning) **system**.
- Helped to **develop policy documents**, e.g. articles in new laws.

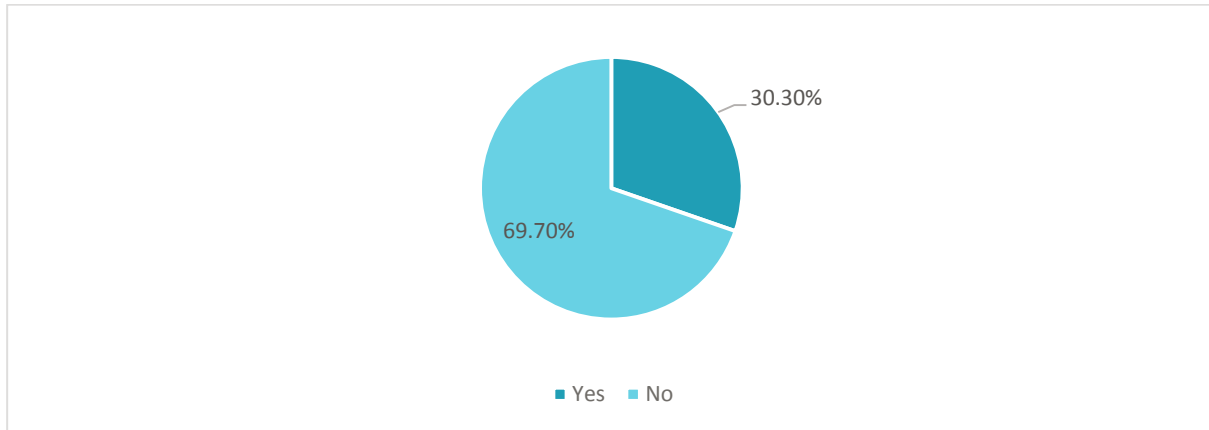
Additionally, as some respondents said, "**positive changes and reforms** in the fields of skills development, entrepreneurial learning etc. started from ETF network activities". Based on this and all the previous comments combined, we can infer that when stakeholders were aware of the impacts of the ETF networks, they assessed them very positively.

Complementarity

Compared with networks dealing with similar topics that are managed by other organisations, the ETF networks operate in distinct domains, so their added value and external coherence is high. The majority of the respondents (69.7%) were not aware of any other similar networks and 30.3% of them knew at least one similar network. The ETF is very well-known among its stakeholders and most of the time it is the only organisation they know which focuses on specific goals related to their work. As

one stakeholder said, “ETF is in a privileged position to communicate because everybody in the VET sector knows about the ETF”.

FIGURE 5. PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO SAID THAT THEY KNOW OTHER INTERNATIONAL NETWORKS OR COMMUNITIES WITH SIMILAR OBJECTIVES AS THE ETF NETWORKS (N=132)



Source: Stakeholder survey

We asked the respondents to describe similar networks from other organisations they know. They described many various networks, but UNESCO-UNEVOC emerged as a leading organisation (centre) having networks with similar goals. The second most frequently mentioned organisation was the International Labour Organization (ILO). Respondents also often mentioned The European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) as an organisation having similar networks. Besides, the Electronic Platform for Adult Learning in Europe (EPALE) (an initiative by DG Education and Culture) was often mentioned as an example of such networks. However, the latter two networks are more focused on the EU Member States. The word cloud below shows the most often mentioned keywords related to similar networks from other organisations.

FIGURE 6. A WORD CLOUD OF RESPONDENTS DESCRIBING SIMILAR NETWORKS FROM OTHER ORGANISATIONS



Source: Stakeholder survey

Interviews with representatives from international organisations (UNICEF and USAID) revealed that the collaboration with the ETF, and the role of the ETF, are positively assessed by such organisations.

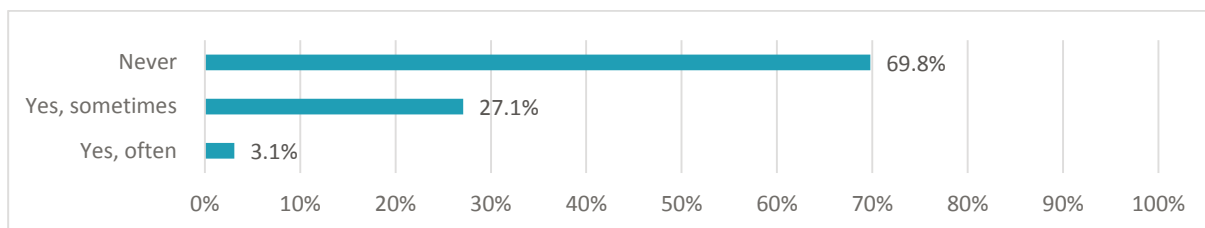
They think that the network work of the ETF is complementary with their own work, and that the information provided by the ETF networks is unique.

Coherence

The ETF networks among themselves do not overlap in terms of their roles, target groups, and themes. Stakeholders who belonged to more than one ETF network could not recall receiving duplicate information from different networks. The evaluation did not identify any significant overlaps between different ETF networks that could hinder the achievement of their objectives.

We asked the surveyed stakeholders if they receive duplicate information from different ETF networks. The question was only addressed to those respondents who earlier selected that they belong to more than one ETF network. 69.8% of respondents did not remember receiving duplicate information from different networks, 27.1% said that they sometimes receive duplicate information, and only 3.1% said that they receive it often. However, most of the respondents who said they receive duplicate information could not identify from which networks they receive it. Documentary analysis did not reveal any significant overlaps which could hinder the achievement of objectives of different ETF networks.

FIGURE 7. PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS BASED ON HOW OFTEN THEY SEE DUPLICATE INFORMATION FROM DIFFERENT ETF NETWORKS (N=96)



Source: Stakeholder survey

Sustainability

The ETF networks in general are sustainable. We inquired the network members if the changes promoted by the ETF are supported in respondents’ countries. The respondents answered positively to this question, but some of them added the changes were not supported several years ago or that they are supported to some extent.

KEY MESSAGES: THE ETF NETWORKS IN GENERAL

- The relevance of the ETF networks is very high. The results surpassed the 75% benchmark by 17.8 percentage points. Additionally, all the interviewed stakeholders agreed that the ETF networks meet their professional needs.
- The ETF networks in general are effective. They are successful in achieving their objectives, and the indicators related to the usefulness of the networks are above the 75% benchmark.
- The ETF networks in general are sustainable as many stakeholders indicated that changes promoted by these networks are supported in their countries.
- There are clear impacts of the ETF networks indicated by many stakeholders.

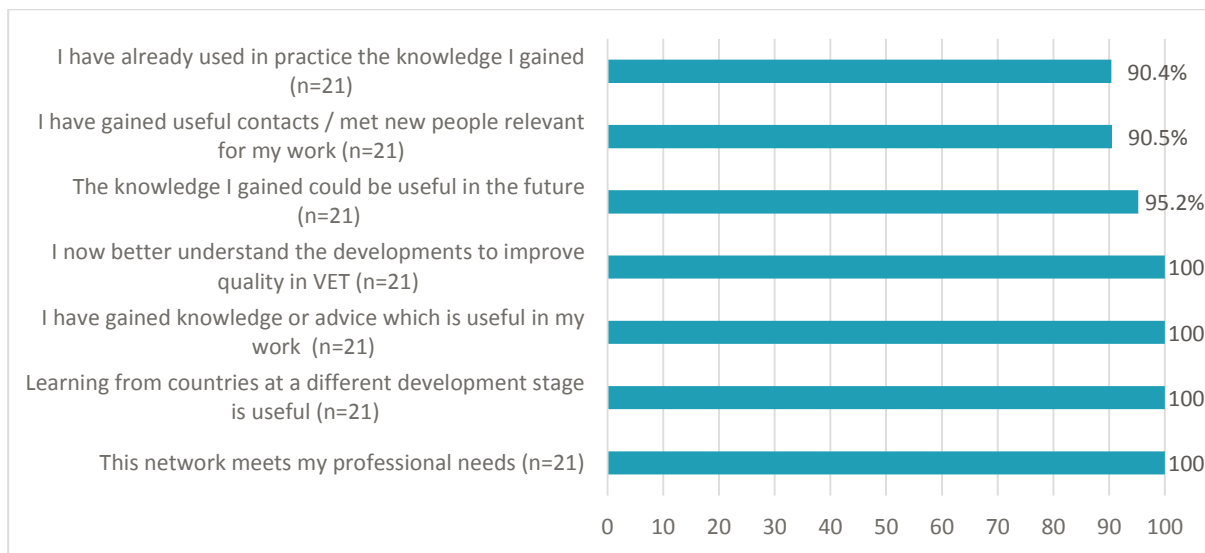
- The ETF networks in general are internally coherent: a proportion of respondents that is slightly lower than 70% said they do not receive duplicative information.
- The ETF networks are complementary with other similar networks: most stakeholders could not identify any similar networks, and even those identified were not contradicting or overlapping.
- The added value of the ETF networks stems from their results and impacts: as described in detail before, many stakeholders were able to name specific impacts which are attributed to the ETF networks. Networks were instrumental for achieving these impacts because of the ETF's ability to bring major stakeholders together and share good practice, cross-country experience with them.

3. Performance of the Quality Assurance Forum

The Quality Assurance Forum is described as “a transnational collaboration initiative between national institutions” with the aim “to support its member countries in modernising and improving quality assurance in VET in line with the development of their VET systems and their own existing policies and practices”³. The Forum involves the ETF Partner Countries and focuses on peer learning. It is a formalised network, with a clear membership based on nomination from countries.

The surveyed members of the Forum are extremely satisfied with the usefulness and relevance of this network. 100% of respondents agreed that the network meets their professional needs, that learning from countries at a different development stage is useful, and that they have gained useful knowledge or advice because of the network and now better understand the developments to improve quality in VET. Also, more than 90% of respondents said that they have already used in practice the knowledge they gained or that it could be useful in the future, and that they gained useful contacts or met new people relevant for their work because of the Forum.

FIGURE 8. PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO AGREE STRONGLY OR MODERATELY WITH STATEMENTS ABOUT THE USEFULNESS OF THE QA FORUM



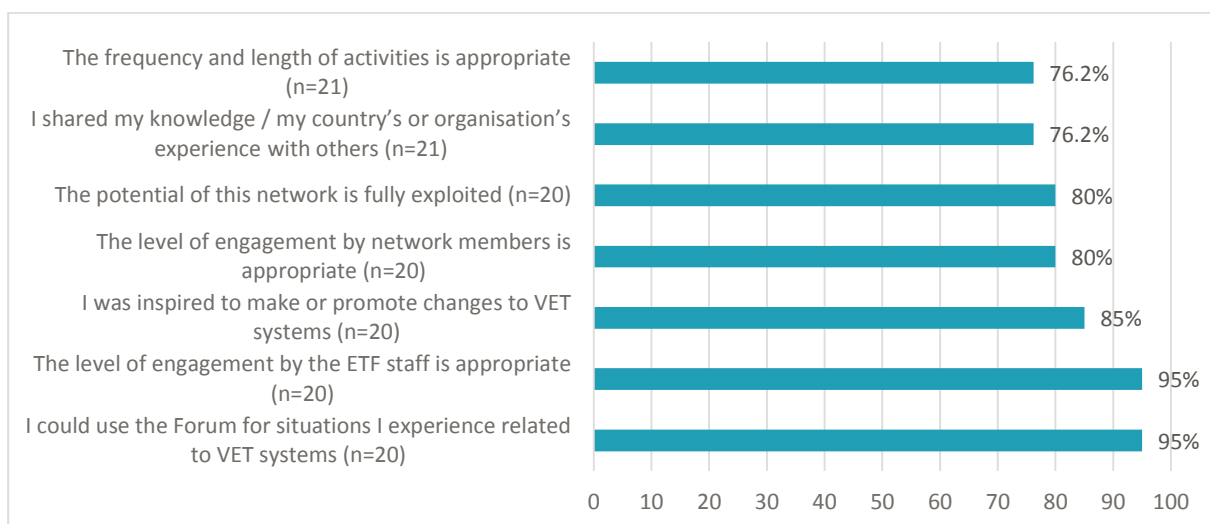
Source: Stakeholder survey

³ Launch of the ETF forum for VET quality assurance. ETF, 2017.

It is important to note that the Quality Assurance Forum is successful even in those aspects that the ETF networks in general needed improvement. 95% of surveyed members of the Forum agreed that they could use the Forum for discussing the challenges and situations in relation to VET systems. Together with a positive result from members who made new contacts, this shows that the Forum is successful in promoting communication and collaboration between members – an aspect that some stakeholders are missing from the ETF networks in general.

Most surveyed members of the Forum (95%) are satisfied with the level of engagement by the ETF staff, but a lower number of them (80%) are satisfied with the level of engagement by other network members. This is in line with some comments from interviews with members of the Forum – they mentioned that not all members are very active and indicated that it would be better if more than one person from each institution could participate. Also, not all members of the Forum (80%) think that its potential is fully exploited. 76.2% of them think that the frequency and length of activities is appropriate, while others mentioned that the ETF should increase the frequency of meetings and peer visits.

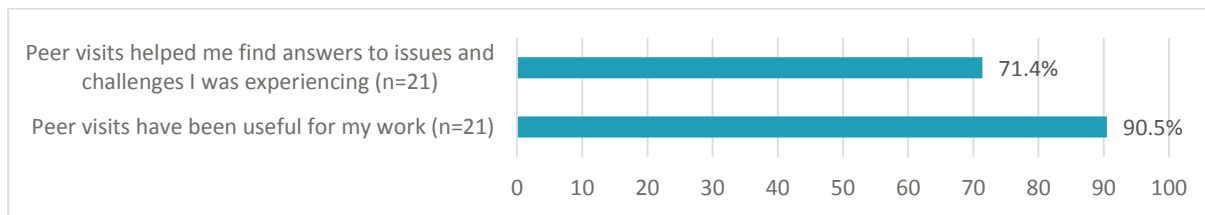
FIGURE 9. PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO AGREE STRONGLY OR MODERATELY WITH STATEMENTS ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE WITH THE QA FORUM



Source: Stakeholder survey

All the interviewed members said that peer visits are a good instrument of learning, some of them even saying that it is the most successful tool in the Forum and were able to provide examples of changes that happened because of the Forum. Their statements are supported by survey results: 90.5% of the surveyed members said that peer visits have been useful for their work (no one said they were not useful, but 9.5% did not answer the questions – they said it is too early to say), and 71.4% said peer visits already helped them find answers to issues and challenges they were experiencing. These results show that peer visits are considered an essential part of the Forum, and potentially the most useful part. Members of the Forum find peer visits useful not only because of learning opportunities, but also meeting new people, collaborating, and building relationships. This understanding fits with the stakeholders' overall views about the importance of networking within the ETF networks. The statements about peer visits are presented in a figure below.

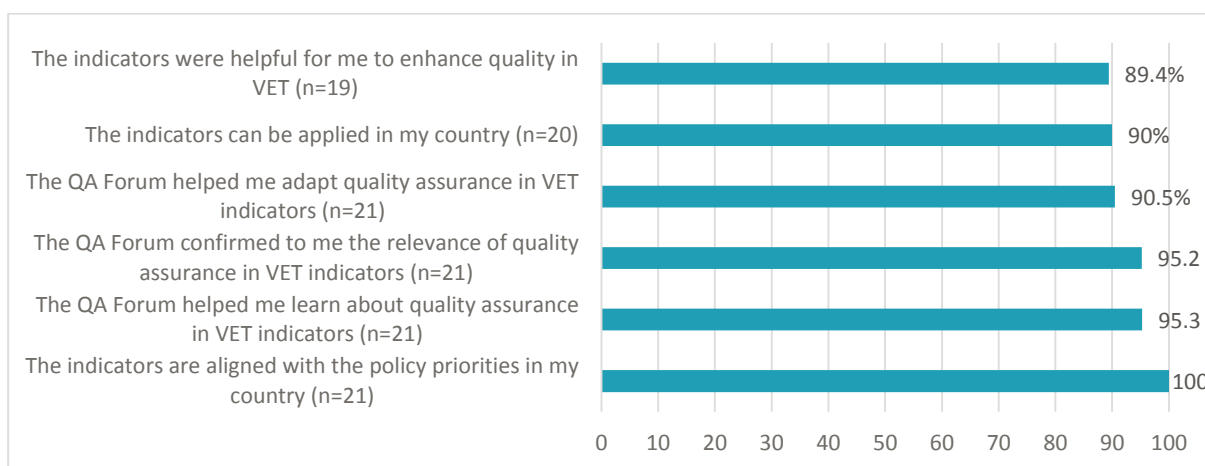
FIGURE 10. PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO AGREE STRONGLY OR MODERATELY WITH STATEMENTS ABOUT PEER VISITS



Source: Stakeholder survey

The survey also revealed positive responses about questions related to quality assurance in VET indicators. All respondents (100%) agreed that the indicators are aligned with the policy priorities in their country, and more than 95% of respondents agreed that the Forum helped them learn about and confirmed to them the relevance of these indicators. Also, 90.5% of respondents agreed that the Forum helped them adapt the indicators. Lastly, 90% of respondents said that the indicators can be applied in their country, and 89.4% said that the indicators helped them enhance quality in VET. This demonstrates that the Forum, through these indicators, has a real impact on its members and helps improve the quality assurance systems in their countries.

FIGURE 11. PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO AGREE STRONGLY OR MODERATELY WITH STATEMENTS ABOUT THE QUALITY ASSURANCE IN VET INDICATORS



Source: Stakeholder survey

KEY MESSAGES: THE QUALITY ASSURANCE FORUM

- Stakeholders are very satisfied with the Forum. They confirmed various statements related to relevance and effectiveness of the Forum, as well as its separate elements.
- The stakeholders were very positive about their improved understanding related to the quality assurance in VET indicators. The indicators were successfully used to enhance quality in VET.
- Peer learning is understood by stakeholders as the key advantage of the Forum. Examples of changes that happened because of the collaboration in Forum were presented by stakeholders.

4. Discussion, conclusions, and recommendations

Success factors of ETF networks

Our findings indicate that those networks which are well integrated into ETF's programming documents (e.g. being mentioned among deliverables and indicators) perform exceptionally well. Among those networks that were analysed in greater detail, stakeholders were the most satisfied with the work of the **Quality Assurance Forum** and the **European Alliance for Apprenticeships**. Both networks are explicitly identified in the ETF's Work Programmes and Single Programming Documents. The Quality Assurance Forum is utilised to support the improvement of VET quality assurance mechanisms in the partner countries, while the European Alliance for Apprenticeships is used to enhance work-based learning in the participating EU Candidate Countries. The best practices from those successful networks could be used in developing or strengthening other ETF networks.

The Quality Assurance Forum draws its success from functioning as a community of practice⁴. Members of the Forum interact regularly, know each other well, and have a strong shared interest in the topic of quality assurance in VET. In between network interactions and peer learning, they apply in practice the knowledge they have gained. Learning from good examples is also helpful in maintaining the interest and determination of participants to improve. Members are satisfied with the usefulness of the knowledge they receive and with opportunities the Forum provides for networking and collaboration. By building knowledge through social interactions, the participants can get inspired by others, making the Forum not only a network of convenience but also a community of like-minded and mutually supporting individuals.

The European Alliance for Apprenticeships is another successful network. It draws its success from allowing members to learn not only from other ETF partner countries, but also EU Member States. Members surveyed are extremely happy with various aspects of the European Alliance for Apprenticeships: relevance, usefulness of knowledge received, and engagement of both the ETF staff and other members. However, it should be noted that the network involves EU Member States and Candidate Countries but it is inaccessible to other partner countries.

Analysis of various ETF networks also revealed that the success of ETF networks can be partly attributed to the overall positive brand image of the ETF. Stakeholders are keen to participate in the networks due to their positive attitudes towards the ETF. Furthermore, the successful activities of its networks can further improve the way in which the ETF is perceived by stakeholders. It is therefore

⁴ As described by Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner (2015), communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, and learn how to do it better by interacting regularly. All communities of practice are networks, but not all networks are communities of practice. So far, not all ETF networks could be described as communities of practice (even those which strived to become such), but the Quality Assurance Forum is a good example of a network that is also a community of practice.

important to maintain the exclusivity and prestige of what constitutes an ‘ETF network’, by building on what works for the most successful examples.

The most successful ETF networks are **more formalised**, for instance having a clearly defined membership (members are formally appointed by their respective organisations), objectives, operational tasks, their owners within the ETF, and performance indicators. In some other networks, low levels of formalisation (particularly in terms of membership, objectives and even the network name) lead to a situation in which not all persons considered by the ETF to be members of a certain network regard themselves as such. These informal networking activities often emerge organically after having been initiated by someone from the ETF. The formal ETF networks and informal networking activities are too different to carry the same ‘ETF network’ name. The priority in allocating ETF’s resources for networks should be given to those where the added value is clear and measurable. The added value of those organic networking activities which are less formalised and do not have clear pre-defined objectives, tasks, and indicators need to be assessed periodically on a case-by-case basis, to determine whether they (a) provide a strong value proposition to become formal networks, (b) there is a clear added value and good cost-benefit ratio of them continuing as informal networking; and (c) if neither is the case, discontinuing activity.

The three networks planned by the ETF under its new initiatives (Skills Lab, the ETF Network of Excellence, and Creating New Learning) are also included in the Work Programme 2021 and aligned with the indicators for various activity areas. In addition, the newly proposed networks will employ two aspects that were deemed very important for the success of other ETF networks: peer learning opportunities (elements of community of practice) and the involvement of experts and practitioners not only from the ETF partner countries, but also from EU Member States. Consequently, even though most of the stakeholders surveyed did not express the explicit need for more networks, there is great potential for the proposed networks to succeed.

Recommendation 1: We recommend increasing the formalisation of the ETF networks. This increased formalisation would not only lead to better results but also enhance the exclusivity and prestige of the ETF brand and the name ‘ETF Network’, and would entail:

- a) Applying a specific name/label of ‘ETF Network’ only to the well-established and formalised networks. This name would be used and recognisable in different contexts, and the list of formal networks bearing this name would be presented in ETF’s strategic documents. ‘ETF Network’ label could also have its own visual identity, which could be used in communication activities related to specific networks.
- b) Each network should possess a single, clearly identifiable name and if needed an abbreviation, which would be known and used by all actors involved, rather than having several different names that are used interchangeably.
- c) Each network should have a clear purpose and objectives connected to a specific ETF activity area and fully integrated into its intervention logic. This purpose and objectives should however stem from the discussions, pledges, and agreements of the network members, so that there is a full ownership by all participants.

- d) Networks should have specific and timed action plans with division of responsibilities, S.M.A.R.T.⁵ objectives and key performance indicators (KPIs). The KPIs could range from simple output-level measurements to complex impact-level measurements. These should also be set and endorsed by the network members themselves. The regular collection of replicable data (e.g. satisfaction surveys after each meeting) is crucial to assessing the performance of ETF networks. Some suggested KPIs are presented in the table below.

Key performance indicator	Level	Data source
Attendance count	Output	Observation / analytics
Total reach	Output	Observation / analytics
Number of contacts (calls, e-mails)	Output	Observation / analytics
Usefulness of the knowledge gained in the network	Result	Member survey
Usefulness of the contacts gained in the network	Result	Member survey
Percentage of network members who would like to continue participating in its activities	Result	Member survey
Percentage of network members who would recommend participating in its activities to colleagues	Result	Member survey
Extent to which network outputs are used in implementing reforms	Impact	Member survey Member interviews

- a) Each network should have a clear owner within the ETF (a network manager) who would be responsible for developing and managing the network, including the preparation of action plans and the formulation and assessment (including alignment with other networks and ETF strategic documents) of its objectives and KPIs which would be based on the ownership of network members.
- b) Each network should have a clear membership count and a list of delegated or appointed members.
- c) Establishing a Network Coordination Group that would be responsible for cross-network coordination to ensure that the ensemble of networks corresponds with the agency's needs, and that the networks are coherent and complementary in terms of topics, engagement of stakeholders (SRM tool should be employed in this regard), and methods of work. The Group could prevent unnecessary overlap in timing of different network activities in the partner countries.

Recommendation 2: Activities that are less formalised and largely ad hoc should not be considered as the 'ETF networks'. They could be called 'networking activities', 'stakeholder engagement' or other informal terms. Such informal activities may be meaningful because they help build good personal relationships, understanding and trust. However, their added value and resources spent should be periodically reviewed, and decisions need to be made whether

⁵ Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-Oriented

such activities could become formal ETF networks, may continue as informal networking, or be discontinued.

Recommendation 3: ETF networks should be clearly embedded within respective ETF activity areas and identified in the annual Work Programmes and the SPDs of the ETF. The use of thematic networks based on the focus theme of a specific activity area can be beneficial, both for the project and for the network members. The general objectives of each network should therefore correspond to the objectives of the specific ETF activity area. Similarly, the KPIs for each network should be part of the area's set of performance indicators.

Recommendation 4: All the ETF networks should evolve into communities of practice or strengthen their relevant elements. The ETF networks should focus on specific topics, be based around peer learning from other members, and should involve members in regular face-to-face and online meetings that encourage member-to-member networking and collaboration towards a joint set of objectives and deliverables.

Recommendation 5: ETF networks that require specific deliverables from its members should have a clear value proposition to them individually. This should include not only access to knowledge shared within the network, but also social interaction with peers from other countries and the ETF experts, including invitations to physical meetings and ETF events outside their home country.

Recommendation 6: We recommend (non-financially) incentivising network members to contribute to knowledge co-creation. Incentives could be recognition-based and commitment-based. The examples of such incentives are:

- a) Providing 'good practice badge' for active contributions to knowledge co-creation (recognition-based).
- b) Organising yearly 'good practice awards' for the strongest contributions to knowledge co-creation (recognition-based).
- c) Establishing a yearly 'knowledge pledge' for network members to commit to a specific, measurable objective related to their future input to knowledge co-creation (commitment-based).

ETF networks in the context of EU networks and frameworks

The ETF single programming documents recognise the importance of bringing the EU frameworks for cooperation in VET closer to the partner countries. This is done either by including the partner countries into the EU networks (e.g. the European Alliance for Apprenticeships) or by developing parallel ETF networks inspired by and loosely coordinated with the EU networks (e.g. Quality Assurance Forum and the EQAVET framework). The evaluation results show that the representatives of the partner countries highly value these links to the EU VET networks and the possibilities that they provide for policy learning between the EU Member States and the partner countries. Therefore, ETF should seek to increase the exposure of the partner countries to the workings of the EU networks and cooperation processes in VET, including sharing of good practices, peer learning, benchmarking and participation in various policy discussion and co-creation events between the EU Member States.

There is potential to enhance the collaboration of the ETF networks in the context of EU networks and frameworks. While peer learning is often understood by stakeholders to be a key practice, the opportunity to collaborate and learn from the experiences of EU Member States can bring additional value. Stakeholders from ETF partner countries sometimes prefer to learn from EU Member States rather than other partner countries. The Candidate Countries have a privilege of taking part in some of the thematic networks both in the EU and in partner country context – e.g. they are members of European Alliance for Apprenticeships and take part both in EQAVET and in the QA Forum. The partner countries which are not EU Candidate Countries have less of an opportunity to learn from EU Member States.

Recommendation 7: Where appropriate, and in cooperation with relevant partners, we recommend the closer collaboration between ETF networks and similar networks of EU Member States. These could include joint events, knowledge exchange sessions, peer visits involving both groups of countries.

ETF networks in partner country national contexts

At national level, the ETF involves broader stakeholder communities, e.g. those taking part in the national Torino Process events. Torino Process was assessed in a separate evaluation. However, it is important to take it into account when concluding on the national networking activities. Torino Process can be described as a two-tier network strongly embedded within one of the ETF activity areas: 1) the network managed by the ETF is formal and includes the networks of Torino process coordinators in each partner country; 2) each of the appointed national coordinators are leading their respective national networks. The latter are formalised to a varying extent.

The evaluation of the Torino Process showed that formalisation of the national networks led to a stronger stakeholder engagement in developing and deliberating the national Torino Process reports and generally greater ownership of their conclusions and recommendations. Thus, the logic and success factors for the ETF national networks are mostly the same as for other ETF networks. The national networks are much more difficult to maintain because ETF depends on the national coordinators to formalise and maintain them. Based on the example of the Torino Process, a key prerequisite to strong national networks is developing a strong well-embedded ETF network of the national coordinators. Moreover, it would be very costly for all ETF activity areas to run their separate national networks.

It is important to note that national networking activities involve different institutions or stakeholder communities that are not directly coordinated by the ETF. Despite such networking activities being carried out in various ways, their performance is assessed positively by stakeholders. ETF actions to support and maintain these activities are regarded by stakeholders as unique, with no clear overlaps with other organisations identified. Besides offering the ability to connect people, the ETF was described as a strong ally, providing technical support and helping to create reforms based on the EU model. The ETF's involvement as a facilitator of national networking activities was also valued because it provides perspectives from other countries and helps to identify those measures that have already been applied successfully elsewhere.

Stakeholders involved in national networking activities prefer to maintain face-to-face contact as much as possible, although many have now improved their online collaboration skills as a result of

the COVID-19 pandemic. This shows that despite ongoing digital transformation, face-to-face contact cannot be fully replaced and will have to be maintained as travel and meeting arrangements become possible again after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another area that could be improved is the management and maintenance of contacts in the context of networks. While most of the country coordinators who were interviewed confirmed that they used the ETF's Stakeholder Relationship Management (SRM) tool, some said that they do not store all of their contacts there. The tool was described as not being user-friendly, making it too time-consuming to add all interactions and contacts. This situation prevents full use being made of the SRM tool, which could benefit not only national networking activities, but all ETF's external communication activities, including the formalised ETF networks.

Overall, this evaluation found that both the thematic networks and country-level networking activities prove to be a better alternative to direct country interventions. Positive changes are brought to countries directly via networks. In addition, stakeholders see added value in learning from others.

Recommendation 8: We recommend sharing the national networks between ETF activity areas. The composition of the national networks could be identical, but they could have distinctive national coordinators (e.g. based on the division of labour between different ministries in a partner country).

Recommendation 9: Despite the importance of online tools, many stakeholders still prefer face-to-face meetings. Therefore, a hybrid approach is recommended. After the pandemic, we recommend organising regular physical meetings with stakeholders for two purposes: relationship building and networking. In such cases, priority should be given to those meetings that offer the greatest potential for establishing valuable new connections between ETF staff and stakeholders, or among stakeholders. In other cases, where the main purpose is the co-creation or dissemination of knowledge, digital collaboration is recommended.

Recommendation 10: We recommend strengthening the use of the SRM tool in the context of the ETF networks and networking activities via a three-step process:

- a) informing ETF staff why it is important for the agency to use the SRM tool (it ensures contacts are up-to-date and always available to everyone; colleagues are able to know when and what was discussed with stakeholders, avoiding duplicate messages between networks and various staff members; etc.);
- b) receiving feedback from ETF staff on which elements of the SRM tool can be improved to make it more user-friendly, and, if possible, making changes to the tool;
- c) after the SRM tool has been made more user-friendly, formalising the use of the SRM tool by making its use mandatory for every member of staff who interacts with stakeholders at national or international levels.

Recommendation 11: We recommend that the SRM tool should be used not only for national networking activities, but also for thematic ETF networks. Because members of different

networks often overlap, network managers could use the SRM tool to ensure that no duplicate information is sent to network members or that they are not contacted too often.

ETF networks in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

The approach of various ETF networks to collaboration is based on two types of interactions: physical and online. In recent years, the ETF has strengthened its digital collaboration activities by building and using online tools. The COVID-19 pandemic has further increased the need to use online tools. The evaluation has therefore been conducted at an opportune moment, allowing the assessment of physical and online activities both before and during the pandemic, as well as indicating possible ways forward in the post-pandemic world. In the light of the pandemic, stakeholders have noted that they understand the value of both face-to-face interactions (building good personal relationships) and innovative digital interactions (meeting quickly and inexpensively).

The pandemic has maximised the need for digital collaboration tools and is transforming the ways in which they are used professionally. Interviews with ETF staff reveal that the use of digital collaboration tools is increasing within the ETF networks, and that stakeholders (including partner country officials in relevant public authorities) who had never used such tools before are now learning to use them and collaborating successfully online. In addition, many stakeholders indicate the need to use more online tools, such as group chats, webinars, and social media platforms. This situation, despite presenting many challenges, can also be viewed as an opportunity. The stakeholders place a high value on the establishment of personal relationships among the network members. Such personal relationships can foster collaboration, trust and engagement within the networks. While the ability to meet face to face has temporarily disappeared, the need to collaborate and interact has not. Therefore, greater use can be made of digital and online tools to foster collaboration. With the help of such tools, even formal events can be organised online.

Recommendation 12: Multilingual digital collaboration tools that offer simultaneous interpreting functions (e.g. Interactio) could be used to ensure that even the most demanding events can be successfully organised online. For example, various members of the Quality Assurance Forum mentioned a peer visit to Montenegro that was due in March 2020, but was cancelled due to the pandemic. With the help of online tools and creativity, the peer learning could still be organised as a series of online video collaboration sessions.

ETF Open Space and integration with ETF networks

ETF Open Space is considered highly relevant by the agency's stakeholders; however, being relatively new, it is not yet regarded as having reached its full potential. Overall, the platform is described as "a step in the right direction", but various stakeholders agree that it needs to be made more user-friendly and marketed more aggressively.

Currently, The ETF Open Space cannot support all networks (e.g. the Quality Assurance Forum) because of inability to create private groups within the platform. However, the ETF Open is a tool that, if improved, could be used as the central hub for collaboration, both openly (maintaining low formalisation) and in closed groups (increasing formalisation).

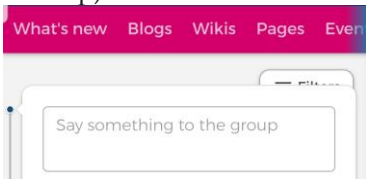
At the same time it should be recognised that, at present, ETF Open Space functions more as a dissemination tool, and that knowledge creation largely occurs outside of it (including on separate online platforms, as is the case with the Quality Assurance Forum). ETF Open Space does, however, have the potential to be used for both purposes. Better integration of the major ETF networks with ETF Open Space would therefore provide a way to increase the use of the platform for various purposes.

Recommendation 13: ETF Open Space could be better marketed to its target audiences. This includes two types of channels: a) owned (channels owned by the ETF); and b) paid (external channels). Marketing ETF Open Space via owned channels would include integrating it into ETF networks and displaying advertisements for and clear links to the platform on the ETF’s website and during events. Marketing the platform via paid channels could include online advertising (search, social media) and the retargeting of website visitors. Specific marketing efforts could also be run in relevant communities at the level of partner countries, e.g. marketing specific country-level groups on the ETF Open Space where all national stakeholders could meet. ETF Open Space could be marketed as a platform for discussing and receiving answers to users’ questions.

Recommendation 14: Following on from the previous recommendation, it is important to elaborate that the potential of ETF Open Space to become a knowledge co-creation platform could be enhanced by providing more digital collaboration solutions to stakeholders, as well as an online structure for the work of the ETF networks. ETF networks should employ a single digital platform for both the creation and dissemination of knowledge. ETF Open Space has the potential to achieve this.

Recommendation 15: We recommend maintaining continuous development and improvement of the platform which could focus on three major aspects: a) conducting user research and usability testing regularly to learn more about the users’ needs and how to improve the tool; b) based on research and testing, working on the design and development to improve the user experience and provide additional functions to the tool (the proposed ‘tactical’ changes are listed in the table below); c) continuing to actively engage users who join the ETF Open Space.

Proposed change	Reason for change	Added value of change
Making it possible to create closed groups, which would only be visible to members of specific ETF networks.	ETF networks do not make use of full potential of ETF Open Space.	Integrating the platform into ETF networks would help to boost the platform and provide a single online infrastructure, potentially contributing to the coherence and complementarity of different networks.
Providing additional functions for collaboration (e.g. chat, integration with webinar and collaboration tools).	ETF Open Space is currently used as a tool for disseminating information but not for knowledge co-creation. Also, there is a need to increase	Users will be able to work together more comfortably, increasing the chances of knowledge co-creation.

	the number of active users on the platform.	
Introducing a video tutorial explaining how to use the platform.	Users complain about not understanding how to use the platform.	Users will be more likely to visit the platform when they better understand it and the benefits it can bring.
Providing solutions to make country-specific and theme-specific information visible to users based on their choices (e.g. choosing to follow topics / countries during registration, building information architecture based on topics).	Users complain about being lost on the platform because too much diverse information is stored in one place. Too much focus on mass messaging instead of targeted messaging was identified.	Users will be more likely to visit the platform when the information they see there is always relevant to their work.
Enabling users to choose to receive notifications on specific topics or countries and reducing the default number of notifications.	Users receive a lot of notifications, not all of which are relevant.	Users will be more likely to open specific notifications if they find they are relevant to their work, and if their quantity is not overwhelming.
Fixing technical issues on the platform (e.g. the current inability to login via Facebook; the fact that not all Latin symbols are shown in the same font).	Technical issues were noted by both stakeholders and evaluators.	Users will be more likely to use the platform if it works smoothly.
Making the platform's less sensitive content accessible without registration (registration is to remain mandatory for posting or commenting).	Potential users do not know what to expect on the platform before deciding to join it.	Allowing potential users to peek inside the platform could help to attract new users, as they would be able to see a snapshot of relevant information within the platform.
Creating an ETF Open Space mobile app	Online traffic is higher on mobile than on desktop. Also, the users have identified technical flaws with the mobile version of the platform (example below – elements overlap). 	Mobile internet use is increasing every year. Creating an app could make the platform more accessible to mobile users.
Introducing badges or other elements to aid the recognition of specific users (e.g. ETF staff,	Currently, users need to visit the profile of specific user to understand the person's status.	Users will be able to quickly understand who they are interacting with.

ministry official etc.)		
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Linking conclusions and recommendations to the Single Programming Document 2021-2023

The ETF Strategy 2027 and the Single Programming Document 2021-2023 indicate three roles (core services) of the agency:

- Being a **knowledge hub** for education and training.
- **Monitoring** and **assessment**.
- Providing **policy advice** and **input to EU external action**.

ETF networks and networking activities are already to some extent used to fulfil all three roles. However, they have potential to be linked to each of these roles even better in the future.

Knowledge hub. Most of the stakeholders said they have received useful knowledge from the networks and themselves shared their knowledge to other members. This evidence on the exchange of information and good practices shows that, through knowledge co-creation and dissemination, ETF networks contribute to the agency being a knowledge hub. The effect is especially strong within the thematic networks, e.g. the Quality Assurance Forum. The afore-mentioned Recommendations 1 and 3 related to the formalisation of networks and their stronger integration into activity areas would be useful to strengthen the ETF's role as a knowledge hub even further.

Monitoring and assessment. ETF networks could contribute to the monitoring and assessment services via their KPIs, as described in the Recommendation 1. For example, the use of network outputs in implementing reforms is an impact indicator that could only be measured through monitoring and assessment. Strengthening the monitoring and assessment of the networks is crucial for two reasons: first, it would help improve the networks and increase their added value; second, it would be a logical data collection strategy because networks involve stakeholders from ETF partner countries who could help collect qualitative and quantitative data related to various indicators, including those outside the scope of a specific network.

Policy advice and input to EU external action. To enhance the contribution of ETF networks to policy advice and EU external action priorities around education and training, the closer alignment to EU networks (as elaborated in Recommendation 7) would be beneficial. In addition, the knowledge created and monitoring conducted in the context of ETF networks could lead to policy advice.