

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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CONTENTS

CONTENTS	3
1. INTRODUCTION	5
1.1 National context	5
1.2 Statistics	5
1.3 The Vocational education and Training (VET) system	6
2. QUALITY ASSURANCE IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING	9
2.1 Overview	9
2.2 General information on quality assurance at VET system level	9
2.3 Quality assurance related to key VET areas	10
3. STRENGTHS, DEVELOPMENTS, NEEDS	12
3.1 New developments – in progress / in the pipeline	12
3.2 Needs and challenges	13
4. GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE	13
LIST OF ACRONYMS	15

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 National context

The Republic of Moldova ('Moldova') is a country with a declining population, which accounted for 3.5 million inhabitants in 2019. This lower-middle income economy experienced a positive economic growth up to 2019 – 3.6% of gross domestic product (GDP) growth in 2019.¹ In 2020, GDP is expected to decline by 7.2%, largely due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.²

Education-related statistics indicate an increase in the percentage of the active population with a university degree between 2010 and 2019. In 2019, those with a high level of education represented 27.2% of the adult active population, those with a medium level of education accounted for 55.1%, while 17.7% had a low level of education. The employment level was rather low, with only 40.1% of the adult population being employed in 2019. At the same time, the unemployment rate was 5.1% for the population aged 15+ and 10.4% for the youth population aged 15-24 in 2019.³

The country's economy relies largely on the services and industry sectors, which is also reflected in the structure of employment. In 2019, the value added of the service and industry sectors contributed to 54.1% and 22.8% of GDP, respectively.⁴ Agriculture remains important and provided jobs for 21.0% of the employed in 2019. Finally, Moldova has a large-scale outward migration, and the amount of remittances received is significant for the country's economy, representing 16.0% of GDP in 2019.

1.2 Statistics

TABLE 1. POPULATION

	Size of population	Relative size of the youth population (15-24; %)
2010	3 563 695	22.0
2015	3 555 159	17.3
2019	3 542 708	m.d.

Source: National Bureau of Statistics (NBS).
Note: m.d. – missing data.

TABLE 2. EMPLOYMENT

	Employment rate (15+; %)	Employment rate of the youth population (15-24; %)
2010	38.5	18.0
2015	42.4	19.5
2019	40.1	19.0

Source: National Bureau of Statistics (NBS).

¹ ETF database.

² The World Bank (December 2020), Moldova Economic Update (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/moldova/brief/moldova-economic-update>, accessed on 19/02/2021).

³ ETF database.

⁴ ETF database.

TABLE 3. EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF THE ACTIVE POPULATION (15+; %)

	Low	Medium	High
2010	16.5	60.8	22.8
2015	20.3	56.3	23.4
2019	17.7	55.1	27.2

Source: National Bureau of Statistics (NBS).
Low: ISCED 0-2; Medium: ISCED 3-4; High: ISCED 5-8.

TABLE 4. PARTICIPATION IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING (STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN VOCATIONAL PROGRAMMES AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL UPPER SECONDARY STUDENTS (ISCED 3))

	Upper-secondary (ISCED 3) VET
2010	m.d.
2015	43.4
2019	45.7

Source: Unesco.
Note: m.d. – missing data.

TABLE 5. SPENDING ON GENERAL EDUCATION AND VET⁵

	Spending on ISCED 3-4, all education (including VET) as % of GDP	Spending on ISCED 3-4 VET only as % of GDP
2010	9.2	1.0
2015	7.2	0.6
2019	5.3	0.5

1.3 The Vocational education and Training (VET) system

Governance and management

The key institution responsible for the governance of the education sector is the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research (MECR). In addition, VET institutions in the agri-food and healthcare sectors are under the responsibility of both the MECR and the Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Development and Environment (MARDE) and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Social Protection (MHLSP), respectively.

⁵ Calculations based on data from the Ministry of Finance: <https://mf.gov.md/ro/buget/transparen%C8%9Ba-bugetar%C4%83/bugetul-pentru-cet%C4%83%C8%9Beni>

The responsibility for the development and support to the VET system lies with the Republican Centre for VET Development and the Methodical Centre for Training under MARDE. Their tasks are extensive, including the analysis and promotion of VET policies, development of policy documents and regulatory and normative framework, curriculum and methodological development or the coordination of the continuing professional development of teachers and managerial staff.

In addition, the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research (ANACEC) is responsible for the development and promotion of the culture of quality, contributing to both initial and continuing VET, as well as higher education.

Finally, a number of national bodies and institutions have a consultative role, such as Sector Skills Committees (SSC), established by employers and trade unions at the level of economic sectors, the Organisation for Small and Medium Enterprises Development (OSMED), business associations, the National Employment Agency (NEA), Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCI) and Council of TVET students.

Financing

Public vocational education and training is financed through resources provided by the central government, reflecting the number of students. The calculation of the standard cost per student includes personnel costs, expenses on goods and services and stocks of commodities as defined by Government Decision No 1077/2016 'on cost-per-pupil-based financing of public institutions of vocational technical education'. At the same time, budget ceilings are applied which are reflected in the final rates.

As specified in the Education Code, VET institutions can generate their own income. Significant resources are also provided by donors, who have financed equipment, curriculum development or capacity building of teaching staff.

Regulatory frameworks (examples: legislation, rules, strategy plans)

The key legislation relevant for education is the Education Code (in force as of 2014), which describes the main principles of service delivery in education, including decentralisation, institutional autonomy, public accountability, transparency and the support and promotion of education personnel, for example.

The Education Code is further supported by other regulatory provisions, such as Law 244/2017 on sector skills committees; Government Decision No 193/2017 on the approval of the Regulation on the continuous training of adults; Government Decision No 1199/2018 on the National Register of Qualifications; Government Decision No 1016/2017 on the approval of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) of the Republic of Moldova; Government Decision No 201/2018 on the organisation and functioning of the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research; Government Decision No 70/2018 on the approval of the Regulation on the organisation of VET programmes for dual VET; the Framework Regulation on the validation of non-formal and informal education, approved by MECR Order No 65/2019; and the Methodology for the development of qualifications, approved by MECR Order No 217/2018.

The key document relevant for vocational education and training is the VET Development Strategy 2013-2020, which outlined the reform process and set medium and long-term objectives for the sector. According to the document, VET should be modernised in order to become more competitive and relevant to labour market needs. Thus, the main objectives were the promotion of the competence-based approach, VET restructuring, implementation of the NQF, increasing VET quality through strengthening quality assurance and the quality of teaching staff, and increasing VET attractiveness and access. The achievements following the implementation of the VET Development Strategy 2013-2020 can be found in the 'Informative note on the implementation of the VET Development Strategy 2013-2020'. Around 90% of the objectives set have been achieved, with the remaining 10% still under implementation.

Main provider institution types⁶

There are three main types of VET providers, representing 89 educational institutions (in 2019): 13 centres of excellence (including two private centres), 34 colleges (including four private institutions) and 42 professional schools. Dual training is also organised in both schools and companies.

The centres of excellence are regulated by the provision of the Framework Regulations on the Organisation and Functioning of the Centre of Excellence of 2015. According to this provision, centres of excellence are expected to integrate both initial and continuous VET programmes and become centres of innovation as well as points of reference for didactic, curricular and methodological development and assurance.

The number of students has been declining over the past years. For example, in 2018/2019 the number of students was 44 348, i.e. 4.8% less than the previous academic year. Most students are male, with 55.2% in 2018/2019.

In the context of continuing vocational education and training, short courses are organised by different bodies, such as public VET providers, universities, OSMED, individual companies or private training providers.

Main provision/programme types⁷

VET programmes are provided at both secondary and post-secondary level. Professional schools provide programmes at the secondary VET level. The duration of studies varies from 1 to 3 years depending on the particular specialisation. Such programmes are completed with a Qualification Examination, after which a Qualification Certificate together with a descriptive supplement of the certificate are issued.

Post-secondary programmes are provided primarily by colleges and centres of excellence. Such programmes last for 4-5 years (or 2-3 years after the completion of secondary education). Post-secondary VET programmes are completed with a professional baccalaureate exam, a qualification examination and/or a diploma thesis.

⁶ Examples: public or private educational institution (e.g. school) or company (e.g. car manufacturer).

⁷ Examples: school-based with workshops for skills training, 80% enterprise-based apprenticeships with 20% school-based, 80% school-based and 20% enterprise-based.

In addition, colleges and centres of excellence are also responsible for the validation of non-formal and informal learning through the provision of a certification of prior learning, i.e. regulation on validation of non-formal and informal education.

Work-based learning (WBL) is embedded in all existing programmes. The main types of WBL include on-site learning, i.e. in-school practical training that last for 2-3 days per week and is carried out mostly in VET institutions (in workshops, labs, production sites, greenhouses, etc.). On-site learning is then combined with on-the-job training, which covers internships in companies that last for 12 to 14 weeks. In addition, as of 2014, dual VET has been introduced with the support of donor organisations, which combines 70% of in-company practical training and 30% of theoretical training.

Main qualifications according to ISCED level

The existing secondary and post-secondary VET programmes are provided at ISCED 3 and ISCED 4/5 level, respectively.

2. QUALITY ASSURANCE IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

2.1 Overview

Quality assurance has become an important element for VET in Moldova. The quality management is under the responsibility of the MECR and the ANACEC. This structure has also integrated the National School Inspectorate and the National Council for Accreditation and Attestation.

2.2 General information on quality assurance at VET system level

Quality assurance is under the responsibility of the MECR and the ANACEC, established in 2014. The latter is responsible for the elaboration of national reference and accreditation standards, evaluation methodology of curricula, educational processes and school results. The ANACEC also manages the external quality evaluation which is carried out in both initial and continuous VET institutions every 5 years.

Key documents laying the legal basis for quality assurance in Moldova include:

- Government Decision No 201/2018 on the organisation and functioning of the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research.
- External quality evaluation methodology, defining external quality evaluation criteria, accreditations standards and performance indicators.
- External Evaluation Guide for Vocational Training Programmes in Technical Vocational Education, defining evaluation standards.

The above-mentioned documents describe the status, objectives, tasks and functions of the ANACEC as well as the methodological and procedural framework for quality assurance.

2.3 Quality assurance related to key VET areas

Evidence – statistics and research development

The MECR has a key responsibility for monitoring and evaluation in the field of education. At policy level, there is the intention to establish a monitoring and evaluation framework within the VET Development Strategy 2013-2020, which would include an MECR Board, representatives of the National Coordination Council for VET, sector committees, business representatives, civil society and donors. However, this has not yet been implemented.

Basic statistics on the number of education providers and the number of students and graduates is collected by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). The NBS, together with the National Employment Agency (NEA) are also responsible for the collection of evidence and the monitoring of the labour market situation and trends. The latter gathers administrative data on the registered unemployed, vacancies and data on skills needs collected through a regular employers' survey. Within the NEA, the Labour Market Observatory was set up in 2018 with the aim to implement analysis of labour market situation and trends. It is responsible for the analysis of data collected by the NEA, the NBS and other public institutions in order to provide an in-depth analysis of labour market trends, skills supply and demand, as well as labour market forecasts.

Quality assurance and the qualifications cycle

Professional qualifications are awarded in line with the National Qualification Framework (NQF), as specified by the Education Code. The National Qualifications Framework is based on Government Decision No 1016/2017, and the special Department of National Qualification Framework under the MECR is responsible for its implementation.

The aim of the NQF is to establish an integrated, open and flexible national system covering all levels and forms of professional education. The structure, description of qualification levels and learning outcomes follow the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

The qualification standards are developed within MECR working groups, and input is provided by other line ministries, sector committees, VET providers and employers' representatives. They must meet the requirements of the relevant NQF level descriptors (for knowledge, skills and competences), be validated by the corresponding Sectoral Committee and line ministry, and then approved by the MECR, based on the decision of the National Council for Qualifications.

The qualifications in VET are to be developed on the basis of occupational standards and in line with the European Qualification Framework. The qualification standards also include a chapter on the quality assurance process. Finally, qualifications should be registered in the National Register of Qualifications as approved by Government decision No 1199/2018. However, this register is still not in place.

Quality assurance and VET provision/provider institutions

At provider level, an annual internal self-evaluation is carried out by school administrations. The results of such evaluations are then presented in activity reports that are shared and evaluated by administrative or teaching boards, consisting of directors, deputy directors, an internal evaluation and quality assurance committee and heads of respective departments. To support VET institutions, a

'Quality Management Guideline in VET' and a 'Self-evaluation guideline for internal quality assurance in VET'⁸ were approved by Order No 609 of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Research in 2017.

In addition to internal self-evaluation, an external evaluation of VET institutions and the study programmes offered at initial and continuous level is managed by the ANACEC and carried out every 5 years, for provisional authorisation and accreditation purposes. The evaluation follows the External Quality Evaluation methodology, which specifies the external quality evaluation criteria, accreditations standards and performance indicators. The External Evaluation Guide for Vocational Training Programmes in Technical Vocational Education describes evaluation standards and the mandatory minimum standards to be achieved.

The dimensions assessed during the external quality evaluation cover institutional capacities, education effectiveness including academic progression, the quality of programmes, institutional quality management and the conformity between internal evaluations and the current state of play. In 2018, 16 programmes run by four VET institutions were evaluated.

For each external evaluation procedure, an external evaluation commission is set up, which consists of evaluation experts with relevant knowledge of VET. Firstly, each commission examines self-evaluation documentation and visits the institution. After each visit, an external evaluation report is prepared, which identifies the strengths and weaknesses of study programmes and develops recommendations for improving their quality. Such a report is then shared with the institution assessed. Both reports – external evaluation and self-evaluation – have to be published: the self-evaluation reports are published on the websites of VET institutions, while the external evaluation reports can be found on the websites of VET institutions and the ANACEC.

Finally, the education institutions are then responsible for the development of an action plan, according to which corrective measures are implemented. Such action plans are submitted to the ANACEC. Each school is then responsible for the preparation of implementation reports summarising the progress achieved, which are then presented as part of the self-evaluation dossier required for the (re)accreditation of an institution or programme.

Quality assurance and VET Teacher/Trainer qualifications' standards and continuing professional development (CPD)

Teachers of general subjects, methodologists, psychologists and psycho-pedagogical staff in VET institutions should have completed studies at university level. In the case of teachers of specialised subjects and social pedagogists, studies should be completed in higher education or in post-secondary non-tertiary VET institutions. Master trainers with relevant professional experience can be employed in VET institutions without the necessary qualification, provided that they pass a psycho-pedagogical training module.

In the case of education and business cooperation, each enterprise involved in technical training should have a master instructor/trainer, who should have completed the Training and Certification Programme for Production Masters as approved by the Joint Order of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the MECR of 2017. At present, 79 master trainers have completed such a programme.

⁸ https://mecc.gov.md/sites/default/files/ordin_-_asigurarea_calitatii.pdf

Furthermore, methodology for the evaluation of teaching staff in general and VET institutions was submitted by the ANACEC to the MECR in 2018. This methodology regulates the evaluation procedure of teaching staff and establishes objectives, the annual internal evaluation procedure for teachers, the procedure for awarding and quantifying scores for teachers' evaluation, as well as evaluation tools.

In the case of continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers, the MECR is responsible for the development and monitoring of policies in the field of CPD. The Republic Centre for VET development is in charge of approving and monitoring the CPD programmes. The most important providers of CPD in Moldova are universities, the Institute of Educational Sciences, vocational centres of excellence, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Labour Institute. All providers must obtain accreditation through the ANACEC.

3. STRENGTHS, DEVELOPMENTS, NEEDS

3.1 New developments – in progress / in the pipeline

During the period 2018-2020, the Department of Evaluation in VET and Continuing Education within the ANACEC focused its efforts on organising the external evaluation process of VET study programmes (ISCED 3-5), in accordance with the provisions of MECR Order No 1014 of 2 July 2018 regarding the action plan for the external evaluation of VET institutions. In addition, VET programmes (ISCED 3-5) provided by private educational institutions, not covered by the above-mentioned order, were also included in the process at their request.

Thus, between 2018 and 2020, the department conducted and coordinated the external evaluation process to accredit / authorise the provisional operation of 217 VET programmes.

The results of external evaluations show that educational service providers are striving to increase quality and boost quality assurance measures with regard to the programmes offered. In this context, the external evaluation panels frequently highlight the following strengths:

- VET institutions have renovated educational facilities and laboratories endowed with high-performance equipment;
- internal evaluation and quality assurance committees (CEIAC) are active within VET institutions, which further contributes to the quality assurance of educational processes at institutional level;
- VET students are all provided with places in dormitories;
- VET institutions plan and provide financial support for the development of their own teachers through professional training activities in the field of psycho-pedagogy and specialty.

Work is currently under way on improving and updating the 'Guideline for external quality evaluation of VET programmes and institutions'. Relevant experts are involved in this process.

3.2 Needs and challenges

Based on Order No 1014 of 2 July 2018, approved by the MECR, all the training programmes of VET institutions should have been evaluated by the end of 2020. An analysis of the applications submitted for the external evaluation of VET programmes in 2018-2020 shows that most VET institutions in Moldova did not comply with this schedule. Therefore, this period has been extended by at least 1 year. By December 2020, more than 20 VET institutions (out of a total of 91) had not submitted an evaluation application for any of the programmes provided. The main challenge is to support VET institutions to prepare and apply for external evaluation.

At the same time, following the external quality evaluations conducted so far, the external evaluation panels have also highlighted a number of weaknesses in the system, which are reducing the quality of studies and requiring more systemic and systematic interventions, including:

- ensuring a specific fund for textbooks in Romanian for specialised disciplines;
- promoting academic mobility of students from ISCED 4 and 5 vocational training programmes;
- continuous monitoring of the employment of graduates of vocational training programmes by field of study;
- compliance with the requirements of Law No 131/2007 on road traffic safety in the design and implementation of automotive programmes.

4. GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE

In order to remedy the weaknesses identified during external evaluations of VET study programmes, the ANACEC prepared the 'Procedure for the post-evaluation monitoring of VET, higher education and continuing education study programmes and institutions' and obtained the approval of the Agency's Governing Board (decision of 15 March 2019). This procedure is aimed at ensuring the continuous monitoring of actions and measures to improve the quality assurance process, which should be undertaken by VET, higher education and continuing education institutions as a result of external evaluation.

The procedure describes the steps that educational institutions should follow in the post-evaluation period:

1. Study programmes and educational institutions will be subject to external quality evaluation procedures to be implemented periodically (once every 5 years or at the expiry of the provisional authorisation or accreditation period).
2. At the end of the external evaluation process, educational institutions must initiate and carry out corrective/preventive actions to eliminate the causes of any non-compliance detected or to prevent any future non-compliance.
3. The recommendations prepared by expert evaluators with regard to external evaluation must be applied, optionally, by institutions in follow-up actions for the development of educational programmes or institutions.

4. The educational institutions must elaborate, within 3 months (6 months in the summer period) Corrective Action Plans for the mandatory improvement areas and the recommendations with provisions, responsibilities and deadlines.
5. For accreditation standards, which partially meet the requirements (where 50-90% of the performance indicators correspond to the minimum level set by the Agency), the educational institution must develop a Corrective Action Plan based on the external evaluation panel's mandatory recommendations and areas for improvement noted in the External Evaluation Report. It must also present the actions taken to eliminate any non-compliance found in the external evaluation process until the final decision on the accreditation of the study programme has been taken.
6. In the case of study programmes that have obtained a decision of non-accreditation, the educational institution must present annually a plan of progressive measures taken to improve the quality of its study programmes. In the case of serious non-compliance, the ANACEC reserves the right, with prior warning, to carry out monitoring visits in such an institution.
7. In the case of authorised/accredited study programmes for a period of 5 years, the corrective and preventive measures must be implemented by educational institutions during the validity of the decision of authorisation for the provisional operation or accreditation of the study programmes or educational institution.
8. The Corrective Action Plans must be developed separately for each study programme evaluated, as well as in the case of institutional evaluations. Corrective Action Plans can be included as part of the activity/operational plans of the quality assurance structures at institutional level.
9. The Corrective Action Plans must be submitted (in paper and electronic form) for monitoring to the Agency's specialised department within the deadline previously established.
10. The educational institutions must prepare a report on the implementation of the Corrective Action Plan and preventive measures, in which they must indicate the results obtained, based on the corrective actions.
11. The report on the implementation of the Corrective Action Plan must be submitted together with the minutes of the examination of the observations and decisions taken by the educational institutions, as part of the self-evaluation dossier, at the end of the period of authorisation for provisional operation / accreditation / reaccreditation of the study programme or educational institution.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ANACEC	National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research
CPD	Continuing professional development
CVET	Continuing vocational education and training
EQA	European Qualifications Framework
EQAVET	European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training
ESA	Employment Service Agency
ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross domestic product
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
IVET	Initial vocational education and training
MARDE	Ministry of Agriculture, Regional Development and Environment
MECR	Ministry of Education, Culture and Research
NBS	National Bureau of Statistics
NEA	National Employment Agency
NQF	National qualifications framework
OSMED	Organization for Small and Medium Enterprises Sector Development
SSC	Sectorial skills committee
VET	Vocational education and training
WBL	Work-based learning