

VOCATIONAL SCHOOL SELF-ASSESSMENT TURNING SCHOOLS INTO LEARNING ORGANISATIONS

This policy briefing builds on the experience of the European Training Foundation's (ETF) Community of Practice in Quality and Quality Assurance¹. Between 2009 and 2011 a number of activities were implemented in the ETF regional mutual learning programme. The community of practice² was used for knowledge-sharing across participating countries³. The main objective was to create a network for policymakers and vocational education and training (VET) experts, and to enable the exchange of information and experience, debate and mutual learning on quality assurance in VET. To facilitate the work, the ETF applied the key characteristics of policy learning while the 'learning platform' focused on quality in VET.

Through four face-to-face peer learning meetings which took place in Italy (May 2009), Turkey (November 2009), Hungary (September 2010) and Montenegro (September 2011), a workshop was organised to brainstorm and discuss the most recent developments in VET, such as policies for quality including the role of key indicators, self-assessment in vocational schools and links with external evaluation. A number of peer sessions were held in which community members could reflect on, critique and summarise major issues and draw conclusions. These findings will be useful for policymakers concerned with quality in VET, and who are considering vocational school self-assessment as a policy choice for the transformation of schools in their country ●

THE PROCESS IN THREE STEPS

What is a vocational school self-assessment? Cedefop (2011) provides the following definition:

'Any process or methodology carried out by a VET provider under its own responsibility, to evaluate its performance or position in relation to two dimensions: an internal dimension ("micro level") that covers services, internal staff, beneficiaries or clients, policy and/or internal organisation, development plan, etc.; and an external dimension ("macro level") that covers analysis of the educational offer of this institution compared to others: relationship with the territorial system of actors (local decision-makers, unions, local governments, type of labour market and needs of VET, information network, type of populations interested in a learning offer and evolution of the needs, main results of work at national and European levels in the VET sector).'

This conception of vocational school self-assessment provides an opportunity to evaluate a range of factors that influence the performance of the school. Many factors are internal, while others are external, such as VET policies, developments in the labour market and the attractiveness of the vocational profiles offered, as well as the availability of job placements – all of which have an impact on quality.

Vocational school self-assessment is a process that starts with a set of criteria against which the school can measure its performance. In more

practical terms, self-assessment follows a similar logic in all the schools in which it is implemented. It is a process of looking at specific areas and collecting evidence about the school's performance in these fields, measuring how quality has been achieved. It looks at three areas:

- What are the challenges and opportunities for the school?
- How well is the school doing?
- How can the school be improved?

In other words, a vocational school self-assessment is concerned with building the staff's awareness of the challenges and opportunities confronted, and identifying possibilities for change to address these challenges and enhance performance ●



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¹ This community includes representatives from education ministries, VET agencies and vocational schools, as well as education inspectors and social partners.

² A 'community of practice' is a learning forum where motivated and skilled participants share their experiences of a specific practice and then work together to improve that practice. In doing so they mutually develop new procedures, models and tools that they will go on to share with the wider community (Wenger & Snyder, 2001). For more information on the ETF's use of communities of practice, see Nielsen (2011).

³ Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo (so-called without prejudice to position on status, and in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence – hereinafter 'Kosovo'), Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey.

INFORM

THE FOCUS OF QUALITY IMPROVEMENT POLICIES

The nature and extent of the challenges in turning a vocational school into a learning organisation are also dependent on the *goals* that a particular policy, or set of policies, sets out to achieve. Experience with policy implementation suggests that there are some education goals which are more difficult to realise than others, and which are likely to meet with more resistance from the school-level actors who have to put them into practice. Therefore, it is important to consider the diverse ways in which policy goals present implementation challenges (Sultana, 2008). There are a number of similar developments throughout the countries of the region which, to a significant extent, integrate vocational school self-assessment into their education and training policies.

In the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the government strategy for education identifies three priority areas for policy action: decentralisation, improving the quality of education and promoting social inclusion and cohesion. Since the school year 2008/09 vocational school self-assessment as an approach to quality has been compulsory by law. At the heart of the process are seven priority areas: teaching plans and programmes; student achievements; teaching and learning processes; support to students; school climate; school resources; and issues of leadership and management. A number of quantitative and qualitative indicators have been developed for measuring quality. Based on the self-assessment process, the vocational school prepares a report, which is the starting point for a comprehensive evaluation of the school.

In Montenegro, recent changes in education legislation favour vocational school self-assessment as a tool for quality development, linking it with external evaluation. According to the General Law on Education, which came into force in August 2010, maintaining and improving the quality of vocational school work should be done through self-assessment: each year an assessment should be conducted in several areas of education and training services, and every two years a

complete and comprehensive self-assessment should be carried out. There are three institutions in Montenegro in charge of quality in education: the Bureau for Educational Services, the Examination Centre and the VET Centre. The VET Centre, through its Evaluation Department, is in charge of the external evaluation of vocational schools. According to its methodology for quality evaluation, VET Centre advisors assess each school's achievement of standards in the key areas and prepare a report, describing the situation in the school and providing recommendations. On this basis, the school prepares a plan for quality improvement over a period of four years. The report is submitted to the Ministry of Education and Science and Educational Inspection.

In Croatia, quality is one of the main issues in education and training policy. As a principle it is enshrined in both strategic and legal documentation. While the Act on Primary and Secondary Education regulates the external evaluation and self-assessment of primary and secondary schools, the VET Act, adopted in February 2009, regulates the external evaluation and self-assessment of vocational schools. Hence, all vocational institutions are obliged to conduct a self-assessment, followed by an external evaluation (VET Act, Art. 11). The key institution responsible for the development of

quality in VET is the Agency for VET and Adult Education.

In Albania, the piloting of vocational school self-assessment, led by the National Agency for VET, started in 2010. Bosnia and Herzegovina is in the process of strengthening its education institutions, and various reforms are targeting quality in schools. Kosovo has initiated VET quality improvement reforms, with a focus on measuring school performance based on a set of indicators. Quality improvement in vocational schools through the introduction of a number of quality standards is an important policy in Serbia.

In Turkey, total quality management⁴ (TQM) is used in vocational schools. The Ministry of National Education initiated its implementation back in November 1999, through the adoption of the so-called Total Quality Management Implementation Directive (MoNE, 1999). TQM is not compulsory for all schools. However, in order to motivate schools to be involved in quality development processes, the ministry introduced an award for quality in education, based on criteria published in the Manual of Award for Quality in Education. TQM implementation at school level starts with vocational school self-assessment⁵. Self-assessment reveals the 'strengths' and 'improvable aspects' of the school.



photo: Purdue

⁴ According to the main principle of TQM, quality does not depend on the control of the product after its production, but rather on continuous improvement, which is built into different organisational processes. In the case of vocational schools these processes will refer mainly to teaching and learning, and communication with stakeholders.

⁵ In the case of TQM in vocational schools in Turkey, the so-called Excellence Model developed by the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) has been applied as a basis for the continuous improvement of those areas of concern that emerge from the self-assessment process.

After several years of experience with TQM applications based on self-assessment activities in vocational schools, the results were evaluated. According to the study, those teachers who were involved in self-assessment teams and TQM processes gave positive views about their effects on improving the feeling of belonging to the team and the emphasis shifted from personal achievement to school achievement (moving from 'me' to 'us'). The study concludes that the teachers who actively participated in TQM and self-assessment in vocational schools were more open to 'making an attempt to be a part of the solution rather than the problem', and made more optimistic evaluations when compared to those who did not take part in TQM. It is believed that the main reason for the success of TQM-based vocational school self-assessment is the possibility it affords to move quickly to practical implementation.

Vocational school self-assessment is also a policy option for improving the school as an organisation. While its primary feature is the fact that it is based on dialogue among staff, it also incorporates a review process. This helps the school to analyse the challenges it faces. It is a process for improving the quality of VET in the schools, and it has the potential to turn the school into a learning organisation. Nevertheless, no development is possible without the appropriate policy framework.

Today vocational schools in different countries are invited to undertake self-assessment as part of national policies for VET quality development. At the EU level, the use of self-assessment is further encouraged through the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF)⁶. The EQARF is based on the idea that self-assessment is linked to the development of quality both at the VET-system level and at the school level. Thus it provides a systemic approach to quality, incorporating and interrelating the relevant levels and actors ■

⁶ The European Commission's Directorate-General for Education and Culture has established the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) Network and, since May 2010, the EQARF for VET has been adopted as a basis for cooperation between Member States. The EQARF describes the various elements in a quality model and raises a number of key questions to be considered by the major stakeholders.



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OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The ETF community of practice visited a number of vocational schools in Turkey, Hungary and Montenegro, which had introduced self-assessment. A common feature was the emergence of new development projects and initiatives as a result of teams of teachers under strong leadership working together. Vocational school self-assessment puts a firm emphasis on the change that comes from within a school, rather than through external projects or regulations. This means that a school sets its own development goals, identifies areas for improvement, implements necessary actions and reflects on how problems and challenges can be solved, while, at the same time the progress towards achieving development goals becomes measurable. Discussions with management and teachers in the schools confirmed that self-assessment helped to raise awareness of both individual and collective responsibility. The innovative approach and creativity of the vocational school as a learning organisation becomes a crucial parameter for survival, promoting adaptability in the face of a demanding future, and creating the conditions for growth.

The starting point for teams working on self-assessment in vocational schools is the identification of the challenges and opportunities that the school faces. In other words, self-assessment needs to take into account a broad set of data that goes beyond the examination results of students and administrative information. Team decisions need to be made on relevant areas for improvement. It is essential to agree on development objectives, including how to measure the achievement of the objectives. The team must then launch development projects in the school.

Visits to the vocational schools also confirmed that self-assessment is quite a demanding exercise. The major challenge is how to introduce the process into schools. No manual for vocational school self-assessment can help if the foundations have not been correctly laid. Schools often start out with self-assessment questionnaires or different perception surveys for students and teachers. Another challenge is the readiness of teachers to take part. This is perceived as a new responsibility, and, in the early days, both teachers and leaders faced a number of questions that needed answering.

It is essential that a common understanding is created among all the actors regarding self-assessment: from the start there needs to be clarity about the expectations and the process should be integrated into the school development plan. There are a number of issues to be considered, such as: How to start and when? Is it an exercise for the whole school or only for a specially appointed team? How much time will it take? What resources are needed? ■

TOWARDS VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS AS LEARNING ORGANISATIONS

For VET policymakers, one of the key priorities is to create the right conditions for the development of quality in vocational schools. International literature suggests that one of the most important factors for success is finding the right balance between bottom-up school improvement and top-down policy steering. In a top-down approach the main drivers are government-level ministries and institutions, as well as legislation and decrees. The bottom-up approach regards vocational schools as the focal point for policy implementation. Beyond achieving quality in individual schools, for policymakers the biggest challenge is ensuring that schools in general achieve quality in their operations.

During three years of mutual learning in the ETF community of practice, emphasis was placed on self-assessment to support quality, with the aim of eventually turning schools into learning organisations. Furthermore, through self-assessment, vocational schools are seeking ways of involving their various stakeholders, not only in planning and implementation, but also in the review process.

Potentially, this approach leads to schools that could offer diversified and multi-learning services to students and

communities as a result of the assessment. Results are verifiable: improved student achievements, better school leadership, improved accountability and greater satisfaction among employers. However, 'neither external nor internal strategies will impact upon the progress of students, unless the strategy itself impacts at the same time on the internal conditions or change capacity of the school. [...] If continual improvement is to be taken seriously, then the focus [...] needs to be on the school's capacity for development. "Real" school improvement strategies therefore need to be context-specific, both in terms of the learning needs of students and the organisational conditions of the school' (Hopkins, 2001, p. 160, emphasis in original).

From the point of view of usefulness in VET policy making, self-assessment can help to ensure comparability between schools and can provide important information for identifying weaknesses and assessing which schools are benefiting from specific policy actions. A common approach to school quality means that it is easier to identify, understand and find ways of addressing differences.

Self-assessment in itself is not sufficient, and some kind of external monitoring of schools' performance is necessary. A policy framework for quality in schools combining self-assessment and external evaluation with review and improvement processes,

supported by quantitative and qualitative analyses, can reinforce the benefits for individual schools. Potentially, this can provide a good balance between top-down steering and bottom-up implementation.

In recent years the idea of the school as a 'learning organisation' has been on the agendas of various EU school development projects. This concept appears to promote principles that will be in demand in the future. It aims to develop organisations that continuously change and develop and are able to systematise and evaluate their experience, making learning an ongoing process. In a team-based organisation there is a direct connection between the 'learning team' and the 'learning organisation'. A team can assemble, elaborate on and assess pedagogical experience in a more subtle and complex way than is possible for the individual teacher (Nielsen, 2011). Vocational school self-assessment could be helpful in this respect ■



photo: Fotolia

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