

IQ-DigitS

Interoperability of Qualifications –by building
Sustainable Digital credentials Infrastructure

Mapping of applied
methodologies in developing
existing curricula
of accredited training at
vocational education and
adult education providers

With a Benchmarking report with
recommendations for development
of common methodology

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Abstract

In a highly globalized society, the issue of education systems not being harmonized is an obstacle to both learners and education providers. Discrepancies are detected in the field of developing methodologies for vocational education and training (VET) and adult education (AE) programs. In order to resolve this issue, a new methodology adjusted to the needs and requirements of all stakeholders is needed.

The first step to the development of common methodology is mapping the existing program development methodology in four European countries, being North Macedonia, Croatia, Italy and Austria.

The research was done as a part of the Erasmus+ project IQ-DigitS (Interoperability of Qualifications – by building sustainable digital credentials infrastructure IQ-DigitS).

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The findings were made on the basis of a desktop research made by education experts on national levels after which the comparative analyses were made on a horizontal level, between the countries, and on the vertical level, between the European Union guidelines and individual countries. The results of the analyses indicate that, despite the fact that all countries follow the EU guidelines and have appropriate legislation which is aligned with the EU framework, different national contexts and perspectives cause various interpretation and application of the said framework. A more systematic and structured approach to the developing methodology based on the

labor market needs and learner competencies development is needed, especially of non-formal education programs. Also, clear standards of quality are necessary in order to improve the functioning of education providers, but also to enhance the learning experience of learners.

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Abbreviations

VET - Vocational education and training

AE - Adult education

EU – European Union

EDCI - Europass Digital Credentials Infrastructure

IQ-DigitS – Erasmus+ project: Interoperability of Qualifications – by building Sustainable Digital credentials Infrastructure

EQAVET - European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training

ISCED - International Standard Classification of Education

IVET - Initial vocational education and training

CVET - Continuing vocational education and training

EQF - European Qualifications Framework

NQF - National Qualifications Framework

ESF - European Social Fund.

ICT - Information and communications technology

CPIA - Provincial Centers for Adult Education (Italy)

QMS - Quality Management System for Schools (Austria)

HKO Register - Register of the Croatian Qualification Framework

ECA - Employment Service Agency (North Macedonia)

1. Introduction



Each education system can be perceived as a living organism which changes, evolves and communicates with its surroundings. It adapts to the context in which it exists while also shaping and influencing it at the same time. One of the main standards in examining the quality of the education system is the way in which it answers to the issues and needs of the societal, cultural and economic particularities of its area. However, with globalization, development of technology and transport, and raised awareness of the importance of interculturality, unison and international collaboration, it became insufficient for the education system to answer to the needs and events of its immediate surroundings. The national context is important, but education systems also need to be reviewed and analyzed in the international perspectives.

Further on, the quality of an education system can be measured by the quality of education programs available to the learners. Therefore, it is crucial to pay attention to the methodology of the development of education programs. Upon the start of project partnership, differences were identified in development of training, courses and the forms of accreditations, not only on international, but on the national level, as well. The lack of standardization and synchronization was identified as an

obstacle to implement the new European strategies. All previous analysis confirmed the existing gap. These issues were the basis on which the mutual project was developed.

“IQ-DigitS - Interoperability of Qualifications – by building Sustainable Digital credentials Infrastructure” is an Erasmus+ project developed with the aim of contributing to the quality assurance in vocational education and training (VET) and adult education (AE), by adaptation of private VET and AE providers to the sustainable model of certification based on micro credentials, and introduction of digital tool for issuing digital certificates, compatible with the Europass Digital Credentials Infrastructure (EDCI), with full implementation of the standards, modules and credits for qualifications and trainings they provide.

The prerequisite to the development of the above-mentioned model of certification, is to examine and compare the existing methodologies and procedures used in the development and quality control of VET and AE programs on national levels. For this reason, the first step in the project implementation process is the mapping of applied methodologies in developing existing curricula of accredited training at vocational education and adult education providers. Based on the comparative report and the recommendations, a common methodology for adaptation of existing curricula to the modular learning, based on learning outcomes and micro-credentials, will be developed and implemented. The overall objectives of the project activities include improved transparency and quality standards of VET and AE providers, improved strategic and cross-sectorial cooperation between VET and AE providers across Europe, improved internationalization of European VET and AE providers and an increased flexibility and opportunities in VET and AE.

2. Applied methods and materials

The countries included in the report are North Macedonia, Croatia, Italy and Austria. The experts involved in the preparation of the report are employees of private education providers with firsthand experience in the field of vocational and adult education. The first step in the development of the report was the desktop research made by each country. Desktop research includes analyses of qualitative data and in this case it refers to examination of official documents and legislation regarding VET and AE, guides and publications regarding the developing methodology of education programs, but also practical experiences of the education providers. Each partner has prepared a document in which they provided crucial information and an overview of the VET and AE system in their country. The research and the results were focused on four main areas:

Chapter 1. *Existing procedures for accreditation of VET and AE programs*, incorporates the Definition of VET and AE field in each country and the description of the VET and AE systems in each country, authorities responsible for program accreditation, legislation which implies to program accreditation process in VET and AE, description of the process of accreditation, types and levels of VET and AE programs in each country.

Chapter 2. *Screening and identification of applied methodologies in developing existing curricula for accredited training at AE/VET providers in national context*, is concerned with the methodologies implemented to develop curricula/programs. The aim is to determine how the methodologies differ between the partner countries and which are the common points. The questions in this chapter concern the existing models and forms for the program writing, the legislation and documents which need to be consulted when writing a new program, obligatory elements that a program needs to contain, and the level of independence that a private education provider has in the process of program/curricula development.

Chapter 3. *Methodology for developing adult education programs for the acquisition of micro qualifications* is concerned with national initiatives and systems for allowing adult learners to obtain micro qualifications and validate skills obtained through non-formal and informal learning.

Chapter 4, *Screening and identification of implementation of EQAVET Quality standards in national context*, provides information about how EQAVET quality standards implemented in each country, how the quality assurance system function in each country and which authorities are responsible for quality assurance.

Based on the research documents drafted by each country, a benchmarking report was developed based on the comparison of the provided data and additional research. The data was compared on a horizontal level, between the participating countries, and on the vertical level, between the legislation and guidelines of the European Union.

The comparison highlighted the similarities and differences, indicated elements which are a good basis for the development of a common program development methodology, but also indicated that there are discrepancies and gaps between different systems. The results were then used in order to prepare a set of recommendation for the development of common methodology to be used in this, but also other projects since the report is publicly available.

The described methods used during the development of the report was specifically designed for this purpose and mapping of applied methodologies in developing existing curricula has never been previously developed, which makes the process and its results innovative and a valuable source for future activities.

3. Results

3.1 VET and AE definition



EUROPEAN UNION

As for the definition of adult education, according to the European Commission, “Adult learning refers to a range of formal and informal learning activities, both general and vocational, undertaken by adults after leaving initial education and training”. In the scope of the Erasmus+ program, adult education pertains to “All forms of non-vocational adult education, whether of a formal, non-formal or informal nature” and adult learners are defined as “Any adult who, having completed or being no longer involved in initial education or training, returns to some forms of non-vocational continuing learning (formal, non-formal or informal)”¹. On the other hand, vocational education and training (VET) is defined in the scope of the Erasmus+ program as “Vocational education and training is to be understood as the education and training which aims to equip young people and adults with knowledge, skills and competences required in particular occupations or more broadly on the labor market”, while

¹ <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-d/glossary-adults>

3.1 VET and AE definition

vocational education and training learner is defined as “a person enrolled in an initial or continuous vocational education and training program or a person who has recently graduated or obtained a qualification from such a program”.

NORTH MACEDONIA

Vocational education and training is aimed to provide individual development and the acquisition of competencies, knowledge and skills necessary for inclusion in the labor market or continuing education. By the definition of the competent Law, Institution for vocational education and training is an institution whose predominant activity is VET and in North Macedonia, they comprise of:

- Schools for vocational education and training that implements general and vocational-theoretical education and practical training,
- Regional centers for vocational education and training, in which general and vocational theoretical education and practical training are implementing, and
- Vocational training centers in which vocational-theoretical and practical education and training is implemented.
- Vocational education and training in North Macedonia includes:
 - Secondary vocational education and training is part of the secondary education and provides initial acquisition of first, second or third level of professional qualifications and
 - Post-secondary vocational education and training is part of the education system which allows persons who have acquired secondary education to acquire the fourth level of professional qualifications.

Initial VET programmes are:

- Vocational programmes (2-year ISCED 3)
- Occupational programmes (3-year ISCED 3)
- Technical programmes (4-year ISCED 4)

3.1 VET and AE definition

Adult education is aimed to provide opportunities for acquiring an appropriate level of education for everyone and for all age groups and to enable them to acquire knowledge, skills and attitudes that will be in line with the demands of society and the labor market. Providers of adult education services in North Macedonia are:

Public and private specialized institutions for adult education: open universities, civic universities, workers universities, educational consulting companies, training centers, centers for ICT training, career guidance centers, primary schools for adult education;

- Secondary schools;
- Labor and trade unions;
- Job providers;
- Chambers and associations;
- Professional bodies and
- Universities

There are other institutions and organizations, which in addition to their main function provide certain adult education and training activities, such as: libraries, museums, publishing companies, cultural centers, etc. Larger private companies and corporations often provide for their employees contemporary training or other forms of further education and AE systems in each country.

CROATIA

VET is defined as activity which enables the development and acquisition of competences necessary for obtaining professional qualifications. The system of regular vocational education for acquiring low and intermediate level qualifications, according to educational programs, consists of:

- One-year and two-year programs of lower education
- Three-year programs for occupations in industry and crafts
- Four-year technical programs and similar orientations

Institutions that implement VET are Vocational schools, lasting from one to usually three or four years, exceptionally five, upon the completion of which the students acquire a qualification of a certain level, scope, profile and

3.1 VET and AE definition

quality which is proven by a public document whose content and form are prescribed by the ministry responsible for education.

Adult Education is defined as a unity of the adult learning processes intended for exercising the right to free personal development, employability training (acquisition of qualifications for the first profession, retraining, acquisition and deepening of professional knowledge, skills and abilities) and training for active citizenship. In Croatia, adult education includes all forms of education for persons over 15 years of age.

Adult education is carried out by institutions that have a registered activity of adult education. Adult education can be performed by an institution established exclusively for the purpose of adult education, a school institution, a university, as well as an institution that performs other activities in addition to adult education.

ITALY

The term Vocational Education and Training (in Italian - *Istruzione e Formazione Professionale IFP*) tends to designate specific pathways whose formulation falls within the specific competence of the regions and autonomous provinces.

The Italian VET system comes directly from the regional qualification courses that in the 1990s constituted the regional supply of training for young people with a high school diploma. These were courses aimed at training professional figures who could find employment in different sectors thanks to a very specific specialization (plumber, pastry chefs/chefs, electrician, beautician, etc.), strongly linked to the demands of local markets. They were courses of one and two-year duration that each Region and Autonomous Province organized and managed in total autonomy, with its own rules, methods and curricula, in which practice played a fundamental role. With the experimentation of three-year VET courses in the educational year 2003/2004, VET was included in the second cycle education, valid for the fulfillment of legal obligations.

VET is in Italy available through:

- Upper secondary school is jurisdiction of the state, it has a duration of five years and it is aimed at students aged 14 to 18 who have

3.1 VET and AE definition

completed the first cycle of education. Belonging to this pathway are the high schools, technical and vocational institutes.

- Three and four-year vocational education and training (VET) courses, of regional competence, equally aimed at learners who have completed the first cycle of education. They can be carried out by centers accredited by the regions (training institutions) and by professional institutes under subsidiarity.

The expression 'adult education' means all activities aimed at the cultural enrichment, retraining and professional mobility of adults. These activities can be organized by establishing a collaboration between schools and local communities, involving the labor market and the main social partners active in a territory, either as an extension or as a supplement to the education provided during the compulsory school age, or as a replacement for it for those who have prematurely abandoned the normal school career. This set of activities may include all those organized forms of enrichment of a person's cultural background, be they formal activities aimed at acquiring a qualification or activities undertaken to enrich one's personal cultural heritage.

After a reform in 2015/16., the term 'adult education' only considers those educational activities aimed at the acquisition of a qualification, with the aim of raising the educational level of the adult population. Furthermore, with the reform, Provincial Centers for Adult Education (CPIA) were established, which are at the core of the reform and which, together with secondary schools for 2nd level courses, replaced the existing CTP and evening courses respectively. CPIAs are autonomous educational institutions, organized in local networks. They have the same level of autonomy as schools, so they have their own premises, staff and collegiate bodies.

AUSTRIA

VET is by definition intended to prepare graduates for qualified occupational activities and to impart necessary competences (knowledge, skills and key qualifications) for this purpose. Graduates of vocational education and training shall in particular be enabled to assume

3.1 VET and AE definition

responsibility and independence in working and learning situations. The system can be broken down into two major categories:

- part-time vocational schools in the apprenticeship system
- full-time schools of intermediate VET and colleges of higher VET

Adult learning is primarily about expanding knowledge and awareness, without primarily professional reasons behind it. It encompasses all forms of formal, non-formal and informal goal-oriented learning by adults after completion of an initial stage of education. It includes all vocational, general, political and cultural teaching and learning processes for adults.

Adult learning programmes may lead to legally regulated qualifications (also called formal qualifications). They include second-chance programmes, for example: These are programmes that aim at the acquisition of qualifications by adults in the formal education sector²

- the compulsory schooling qualification
- the apprenticeship-leave certificate
- the final certificate from schools for people in employment

Institutions which provide adult education in Austria are Medium Level and Upper Level General, Technical and Vocational Secondary Schools for Adults, Add-on Courses, Post-secondary VET Courses and Academies, universities, University Colleges for Teacher Training and Universities of Applied Sciences, Private Universities.

² <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/austria/austria>

3.1 VET and AE definition

CONCLUSIONS

The first step of the benchmarking process is to clearly define the terms and definitions used throughout the report. Therefore, it is crucial to detect the meaning behind the terms vocational education and training (VET) and adult education (AE) on the level of the European Union, within the Erasmus program and on national levels of the participatory countries, North Macedonia, Austria, Italy and Croatia. The first discrepancies are already present between the EU definition and Erasmus+ definition of AE, as it is stated above. The European Commission defines adult education as both general and vocational learning activities undertaken by adults, while the Erasmus+ program definition states that AE pertains to non-vocational learning activities.

All four countries follow the European Union guides when it comes to defining the VET and AE systems and are guided by the EU understanding and definitions. Still, the interpretation of the said guidelines and definitions varies from one country to another. The most prominent difference detectable is related to the level of centralization and unification of the VET and AE systems on the national level. North Macedonia, Austria and Croatia have the unique national definitions and guidelines while the Italian system is highly decentralized and decision making and is lowered to the level of regions and autonomous provinces. This means that it is not possible to completely compare the AE and VET system on national level of all the countries included.

3.2 Legislation and strategic policy documents

EUROPEAN UNION

The importance of VET and AE is highly recognized on the European Union level and there are currently a number of initiatives aimed at supporting participation in education of EU citizens of all age groups. As part of this, adult learning was identified as a focus topic of the European Education Area for the period 2021-2030 (Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030) 2021/C 66/01³ and the right to education, training and lifelong learning was also included as Principle 1 of the European Pillar of Social Rights, stating that “Everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labor market.”⁴



VET and AE are also crucial areas in the new European Skills Agenda⁵, a five-year plan to help individuals and businesses develop more and better skills and to put them to use, especially through Action 4: Proposal for a Council Recommendation on vocational education and training (VET), and actions dedicated to support people in their lifelong learning pathways: Action 9: Initiative on individual learning accounts, Action 10: A European approach to micro-credentials, Action 11: New Europass platform.

³<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/b004d247-77d4-11eb-9ac9-01aa75ed71a1>

⁴https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en

⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223&langId=en>

3.2 Legislation and strategic policy documents

One of the key initiatives in the field of adult learning was also the Council Resolution on a new European Agenda for Adult Learning⁶ from 2021, in which the way in which adult learning should develop in Europe by 2030 in five crucial areas, and also the working group was founded Under the European Education Area strategic framework, consisting of Member State experts on adult learning for the period 2021-2025 with the purpose of supporting Member States in implementing the EU's vision for a European Education Area.

In the field of VET, the Council of the EU adopted a Recommendation on vocational education and training for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience in 2020 in which “key principles for ensuring that vocational education and training is agile in that it adapts swiftly to labor market needs and provides quality learning opportunities for young people and adults alike are defined”. In the same year, Osnabrück Declaration 2020 on vocational education and training as an enabler of recovery and just transitions to digital and green economies was endorsed and it set out new policy actions for the period of 2021-2025 to complement the Council Recommendation on vocational education and training for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience. The four main areas will be in the focus, and some of the key targets are to improve quality, inclusiveness and flexibility of VET and move towards green skills, digitalization and internationalization. Also, as part of the European Education Area strategic framework for the period 2021-2030, a Working Group on Vocational education and training was established.

The aim of all of the said initiatives was to set out a common ground for the development of national initiatives for all Member States and promote inclusion and quality of opportunities for VET and AE learnings all across the Europe. Regardless of this, there are still certain differences in the way VET and AE are defined on the national level of the participatory countries. The differences are detected on the horizontal level, between the countries, but also between the national and EU level.

⁶ how adult learning should develop in Europe by 2030

3.2 Legislation and strategic policy documents

The Council of the European Union, in Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways: New Opportunities for Adults in 2016, recommends, inter alia, that Member States, in accordance with national legislation, circumstances and available resources, work closely with the social partners and adult education providers in order to provide the access to education and training to adults with lower level of skills, knowledge and competences and according to their individual needs, e.g., persons who have left basic education or training early and/or have not completed secondary or equivalent education that would enable them to:

- a) Acquire a minimum level of literacy, numeracy and digital competence; and/or
- b) Acquire a broader set of skills, knowledge and competences relevant to the labor market and active participation in society.

NORTH MACEDONIA

The strategic framework for the education sector is the Education Strategy 2018– 2025, which is currently being implementing. The strategy is very ambitious, and it covers every education sub-sector and a number of transversal issues.

In this document at the field of adult education few priorities and respective expected outcomes are enlisted:

Priority I. Improve qualifications (knowledge, skills and competences) of adults.

Priority II. Improve Content and Quality of Adult Learning and Education Provision (ALE).

Priority III. Improve Legislation, Organization and Management of Adult Learning and Education.

As far as VET is concerned, priorities include:

Priority I. Harmonization of vocational education and training with the needs of the labor market

Priority II. Improving the learning environment and the quality of vocational education and training

Priority III. Increasing the scope of vocational education and training

Priority IV. Improving the capacity of human resources

3.2 Legislation and strategic policy documents

Consequently, Strategy for Adult Education 2019-2023, was adopted. Some of the key priorities of this strategy are:

1. Improving the attractiveness of participation in education of adults
2. Establishing a quality assurance system in the framework of adult education
3. Development of a system for validation of prior learning
4. Improvement of organization, management, and funding of adult education.
5. Establishment of a system of public education for adults by reforming public education institutions for adult education Open Citizens' Lifelong Learning Universities / Worker Universities.
6. Strengthening research, expertise and development projects in the field of adult education.
7. Professionalization of the staff in the field of adult education Development of qualification standards
8. Monitoring and evaluation of adult education.

CROATIA

The National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia until 2030, adopted by the Croatian Parliament in 2021, highlights the key priorities of adult education:

- Raising the qualification standards of teachers and principals and attracting and retaining high quality educators, with special emphasis on the deficient fields of the education system
- Increasing the quality, efficiency and relevance of the vocational education system by strengthening and promoting work-based learning, excellence and flexibility
- Further development of regional competence centers and improving the quality of vocational schools and their connection with the economy and labor market
- Development of core competencies, including competences "learn how to learn" and entrepreneurial competences
- Encouraging and rewarding innovative, creative and entrepreneurial endeavors of educators and students

3.2 Legislation and strategic policy documents

- Improving the quality and relevance of adult education programs to increase the share of adults in lifelong learning
- Strengthening information and communication infrastructure in educational institutions and digital literacy of students and educators
- Development of a comprehensive and computer system for ensuring the quality of education and increasing the level of digital maturity of schools.

ITALY

With the Law 107/2015, vocational education offered by vocational institutes was reformed. The reform was applied gradually from the 2018/2019 school year and focuses on innovating the vocational education and training offer and revising the curricula in order to avoid overlaps with technical pathways and regional vocational education and training (VET). On the basis of the reform, there was a change from six study courses in vocational schools to 11 courses. In addition, the reform provided for an increase in the percentage of time devoted to laboratory and practical teaching to 40% in the first two years and 50% in the last three years.

Further steps in bringing the education and training system closer to the labor market were the promotion of policies related to school-to-work alternation and the dual system. School-to-work alternation (Alternanza scuola-lavoro) is an educational methodology aimed at allowing students to carry out training activities in companies by alternating classroom periods with internship activities. The so-called “Good School Law” systematized this system, with the possibility of achieving a minimum amount of 400 hours for technical and professional institutes and 200 hours for high schools in the last three years.

Italy also has a National strategic plan for upskilling and reskilling adults. The plan has three strategic activity axes which aim to increase chances of bridging the skills gap for the majority of the adult population:

- Intercepting, reaching out to and guiding individuals: this aims to strengthen existing services by improving their attractiveness and effectiveness and to activate new forms of intervention capable of

3.2 Legislation and strategic policy documents

reaching the low-skilled/low-qualified adults who tend to alienate, disengage and renounce the exercise of active citizenship.

- Qualifying and upskilling human capital: it is necessary to extend the personalization of the existing learning offer (in matters such as contexts, content, timing and methods of learning assessment, teaching and IT supports), maintaining a focus on basic skills (raising and updating the literacy and qualification levels of the adult population, offering a personalization of education, training, work and socio-work inclusion services, and qualifying demand and use of skills by strengthening entrepreneurship and management competences).
- Intermediating and synchronizing skills supply and demand; this will include both actions at system level, and actions at the level of individuals, direct beneficiaries of the plan. Actions matching beneficiary learning needs better (include improving the quality of services aimed at the enhancement and portability of skills, supporting measures to strengthen and promote alliances that integrate and enhance formal learning contexts with non-formal and informal learning, and measures aimed at strengthening active ageing and reverse mentoring).⁷

AUSTRIA

Strategy for Lifelong Learning in Austria – LLL: 2020 (2011) had set out the following strategic goals:

- Adopting a national legal framework for pre-school education
- Reducing by half the number of pupils at risk of illiteracy
- Reducing elementary school dropout rates
- Increasing the proportion of apprentices who gain a university entrance qualification
- Reducing the rate of youth unemployment
- Increasing the rate of employment among elderly persons

⁷<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news/italy-national-strategic-plan-upskilling-and-reskilling-adults>

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- Increasing participation rates in non-formal continuing education in rural areas
- Enhancing participation in continuing education for low-qualified employees
- Increasing the number of higher education graduates
- Increasing general participation in continuing education
- Establishing quality standards for educational programs targeting retired persons
- Implementing the NQF and a strategy for the validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning

Another initiative is the 8-Point Plan for Digital Learning. Key measures include aligning the digital resources on the Eduthek platform – developed in the early stages of the pandemic – with the school curriculum. The government also plans to equip 5th and 6th grade students with personal devices from 2021, based on schools' digitalization plans. Schools that participate in the initiative will also receive devices for teachers. As part of the initiative, the government launched a range of online learning courses for teachers in the summer of 2020, with a particular focus on blended and distance learning.

3.2 Legislation and strategic policy documents

OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL PRIORITIES ACROSS THE COUNTRIES

EUROPEAN UNION	NORTH MACEDONIA	CROATIA	ITALY	AUSTRIA
Improving quality, equity, inclusion and success for all in education and training	+	+	+	+
Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality for all	+	+	+	+
Supporting the green and digital transitions in and through education and training		+	+	
Vocational education and training is agile in adapting to labor market changes	+	+		
Flexibility and progression opportunities are at the core of vocational education and training		+	+	
Vocational education and training is a driver for innovation and growth and prepares for the digital		+		

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and green transitions and occupations in high demand				
Vocational education and training is an attractive choice based on modern and digitalized provision of training/skills	+	+		
Vocational education and training promotes equality of opportunities	+	+	+	+
Vocational education and training is underpinned by a culture of quality assurance	+	+		
Initiative on individual learning accounts		+		
A European approach to micro-credentials		+		
New Europass platform implemented		+	+	
Governance in AE (partnerships between governments, regional and local authorities,		+	+	

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education and training providers, companies, social partners, public employment and social services)				
Strengthening the overall conditions for cooperation on adult learning needs	+	+		
Supply and take-up of lifelong learning opportunities	+	+		
Accessibility and flexibility in AE		+		
Quality, equity, inclusion and success in adult learning – <i>Professionalisation</i>		+	+	
Quality, equity, inclusion and success in adult learning – <i>Mobility</i>		+	+	
Quality, equity, inclusion and success in adult learning – <i>Inclusion</i>		+	+	
Quality, equity, inclusion and success in adult learning – <i>Quality Assurance</i>		+	+	

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CONCLUSIONS

All four countries have legislation and national strategies concerning AE and VET which are in harmonization with the EU strategic plans and documents. There are general common issues that all countries have in common such as the need to increase participation rates, prevent dropout, improve the quality of the education system, and achieve harmonization between the education system and the needs on the labor market. Each national strategy is also adapted to the specific needs and challenges of each country. Those specific challenges can be related to the social, economic, geographical, political and other influences. In some cases, some alignments to the general Europeans strategic targets still needs to be adopted.

The general conclusion is that the countries do not lack legislation and guidelines, but, especially in the field of AE, there are still present gray areas which allow variation in the interpretations of legislation and cause a lack of structure. This issue may have a negative effect on the quality of education, but also cause difficulties for the education providers and institutions which collaborate and provide their services on an international level. It also may hinder the learners who want to live and work beyond the borders of their country. There is also a rising phenomenon of individuals who, due to the development of technology and business internationalization work for foreign of international companies from their homes. Another relevant group are the migrants and refugees which have also highlighted the need for the internationalization of the education systems. Differences in the education systems allow for variety and richness, but also prove to be impractical in such cases.



3.3 Types and levels of VET and AE programs



In order to address the topic of methodology of VET and AE programs and start the comparison, it is also crucial to note the differences and similarities between the existing types and levels of programs on national levels of countries involved.

NORTH MACEDONIA

VET programmes are:

Vocational programmes (2-year ISCED 3 programmes). Vocational training lasts one to two years, a period in which the student is trained with practical knowledge and skills. The students can be enrolled with completed primary education.

- Occupational programmes (3-year ISCED 3 programmes). Occupational training lasts for three years and enrolls students with completed primary education, and students with completed appropriate vocational training can "pass". The completion is achieved by taking a final exam where the students obtain a diploma, i.e., III (third) level of qualifications.
- Technical programmes (4-year ISCED 4 programmes). Technical education lasts for four years and prepares students for the labor market and / or for continuing education. Students who have completed this type of education by taking the state graduation exam, obtain a State Matura Diploma which gives them the opportunity to continue their education at all higher education institutions.



3.3 Types and levels of VET and AE programs

Post-secondary education lasts from one to two years. Its purpose is to provide students / candidates with in-depth knowledge, skills and training to work with more complex and sophisticated technology, specialized high-quality services, work organization, top-level management functions, instruction, mentoring and the like. It enrolls students / candidates who have completed technical education or have completed vocational education for occupations and have three years of relevant work experience.

Adult education programs are divided into formal and non-formal. Formal programs include:

- primary education of adults
- secondary education for adults, vocational training, vocational education for occupation, technical education and post-secondary education for adults, as well as retraining and additional training and
- higher education for adults.

Non-formal adult education means organized learning processes aimed at training adults for work, or for social and personal development. Informal adult learning means activities in which adults accept attitudes and positive values, skills and knowledge from everyday experiences and other influences from the environment. A participant in adult education programs can be a person who has reached the age of 15 and meets the other conditions prescribed by the program. Adults can be educated and trained, specialized and supplement their knowledge, skills and competencies in accordance with special programs for acquiring knowledge and skills that are organized in verified educational institutions. Special programs eligible for adult education in North Macedonia are:

- basic literacy
- mother tongue and foreign languages
- retraining
- additional training
- entrepreneurship and management
- information and communication technologies
- creative expression and participation in cultural and artistic events
- preservation and protection of the environment
- special social skills
- active citizenship

3.3 Types and levels of VET and AE programs

- basic knowledge of science and technology and,
- Other knowledge, skills and abilities.
- The educational programs have to be adapted to the age, previously acquired education, knowledge, skills and abilities of the adult learners.

Basic programs for several key competences in Adult education are developed, but the sustainable system for delivery is not fully functional and the modes for financing for adult primary education are not specified.

CROATIA

VET system is similar, with the following programs available:

- one-year and two-year programs of lower education in 8 educational programs
- three-year programs for occupations in industry and crafts in 139 educational programs
- four-year technical programs and similar orientations in 83 educational programs

Adult education also includes formal and non-formal education programs. The importance of informal and self-directed adult learning is also recognized. According to the Adult Education Act, formal adult education refers to:

- Primary adult education
- Secondary adult education; secondary general education programs; secondary vocational education programs; lower vocational education programs, retraining, training and professional development; higher education

Most of the formal education programs are focused on vocational education and training.

General adult education is less represented and refers mostly to primary adult education and secondary general education programs.

Non-formal adult education includes programs aimed at training adults for work, various social activities and personal development.

Croatia also has Basic Skills Strengthening Programs. They include:

1. Primary adult education
2. The curriculum for the development of basic adult skills, strengthening digital, mathematical and reading literacy

3.3 Types and levels of VET and AE programs

3. The Croatian language program for asylum seekers, persons granted asylum and foreigners under subsidiary protection older than 15 years
4. The Croatian language, history and culture program for persons granted asylum and foreigners under subsidiary protection

Besides the basic skills programs, there are also:

- Programs for the Acquisition of Qualifications for Adult Learners. Those are secondary general education programs, secondary vocational education programs, lower vocational education programs and retraining programs.
- Programs facilitating the transition to the labor market.
- Non-vocational education programs for personal development and community service. The Strategy for Education, Science and Technology lists a series of non-formal programs related to cultural expression, social inclusion (volunteer, environmental, political and similar activism, adoption and application of democratic values and attitudes), creative and artistic evaluation and expression, development of basic economic, financial and media literacy. A significant part of non-formal programs
- relate to civic education, sustainable development, gender equality and respect for human rights.

ITALY

Secondary education in Italy is made up of two levels of education:

- the ‘first-level secondary school’ corresponding to the lower secondary level
- the ‘second cycle of education’, which corresponds to the upper secondary level and offers the following two options:
 - the State-run general and vocational upper secondary education, offered by upper secondary schools;
 - the vocational education and training system, organized at regional level.

The first two years of the second cycle of education and training are compulsory and can be undertaken at any of the institutions - both of the State and regional system - offering education and training within the second cycle of education. Vocational institutes offer vocational education and

3.3 Types and levels of VET and AE programs

provide students with a strong technical and vocational general background in the sectors of services, industry and handicraft, to facilitate access to the labor market.

Regional vocational education and training is organized into three and four-year courses for those who have completed the first cycle of education and wish to complete their compulsory education in the vocational training system or receive a three-year qualification by their 18th year of age.

Courses can be organized by both local training agencies and by vocational upper secondary schools in partnership with training agencies. In the latter case, schools follow regional guidelines. Courses foresee the release of intermediate certifications with the recognition of credits, which enable students to shift to other training or education pathways (e.g. school or apprenticeship).

As far as the adult education programs in Italy are concerned, the system of 'School Education for Adults' offers:

- First-level courses, organized by CPIAs, aimed at obtaining a first-cycle qualification and the certification of basic competences to be acquired at the end of compulsory education in vocational and technical education
- Second-level courses, organized by upper secondary schools, aimed at the obtainment of a technical, vocational and artistic school leaving certificate;
- Literacy and Italian language courses for foreign adults, organized by CPIAs, aimed at the acquisition of competences in the Italian language at least at the level A2 of CEFR.

AUSTRIA

The vocational training programs are provided in the dual system at VET schools (BMS) or VET colleges (BHS). Students who have finished lower secondary school or the lower level of AHS and wish to go for an apprenticeship training program within the dual system must complete nine years of mandatory education. After completing the mandatory schooling criteria, they can attend the apprenticeship training program at a one-year pre-vocational school [ISCED 3C]. Inaugural vocational training in an

3.3 Types and levels of VET and AE programs

apprenticeship profession is provided partially by a training organization and partially by a part-time vocational school for apprentices (Berufsschule). These vocational schools provide general education and specialized profession related knowledge and skills to the students.

VET Schools (BMS): After completing studies from lower secondary school or the lower cycle of academic secondary school, students may attend a VET school- BMS [ISCED 3B]. The VET schools begin after the eighth year of schooling and last for 4 years.

VET Colleges (BHS): The VET colleges- BHS [ISCED 3A/4A] begin after the 8th year of schooling.⁸

In Austria, adult education comes in the form of educational counseling, guidance and information, provision of basic education and basic skills and the opportunity to gain or catch up on educational qualifications at various levels. Free information and advice about Adult Education is available from education counseling, guidance and information centers in all federal provinces.

There are governmental regulated qualifications

- the compulsory schooling qualification,
- the apprenticeship-leave certificate,
- the final certificate from schools for people in employment
- Provision to Raise Achievement in Basic Skills and
- Provision to Achieve a Recognized Qualification during Adulthood

A number of programs, however, also lead to legally regulated qualifications which have no equivalent in the initial vocational education and training (IVET) system (such as the industrial master qualification, cf. below: Special forms of schools for intermediate vocational education).

Qualifications which are not subject to any legal regulations are in the responsibility of the AE providers themselves.

In addition to obtaining a basic education, second chance education comprises the opportunity to catch up on educational qualifications. The following qualifications can be caught up:

- Lower secondary school completion certificate
- Pre-vocational School qualification

⁸<https://www.austriaeducation.info/education-system/overview-of-austrian-education-system.html>

3.3 Types and levels of VET and AE programs

- Apprenticeship Qualification
- Higher Education Entrance examination issued by an Academic Secondary School (AHS) or College for Higher Vocational Education (BHS) taken by means of examination for external students
- Academic secondary schools for working adults or Add-on Courses
- Career Advancement Examinations for Civil Servants (the "B-Matura")
- Limited Higher Education Entrance Examination
- General Higher Education Entrance Examination for leavers of the apprenticeship training and VET schools

Though educational qualifications provide no guarantee of social security and professional advancement, they do however increase one's chances in the labor market, reduce the risk of unemployment and enhance the holder's personal development as well as access to further education. In the case of Second Chance Education, significant emphasis is placed on informing interested parties as to the types of subsidy that are available, as the participation in Continuing Education amongst adults is heavily dependent upon the financial resources and the amount of time available.⁹

⁹ <https://www.bildungssystem.at/en/second-chance-education>



3.3 Types and levels of VET and AE programs

CONCLUSION:

Upon comparing the existing programs in the field of VET and AE in all four countries, there are noticeable discrepancies in the types and levels of available programs. The most similarities are detected between the North Macedonian and Croatian systems. Once again, the Italian system is specific due to the higher level of decentralization and a larger degree of decision-making and autonomy distributed to the regional bodies. The Austrian VET and AE field is highly heterogeneous with a large quantity of various education providers of different types.

All countries have a well-regulated and structured VET systems, but when it comes to AE it is difficult to reach confirmed and exact findings and statistical information. The AE field is less structured and less information is available. All countries divide AE learning activities into formal, non-formal and informal learning. Formal learning in all countries refers to programs of primary and vocational adult education, while non-formal education programs for adults are mostly non-vocational and focused on the development and improvement of personal skills, civic competencies, cultural, artistic and other skills. This area is, as already stated, less structured and more available for various interpretations. The providers of non-formal programs are in all countries mostly NGOs, various centers, cultural institutions and private providers and trainers. It is hard to clearly distinct and qualitatively describe the types of programs in the non-formal adult education field and this area demands further research.



3.4 VET and AE formal program verification process

NORTH MACEDONIA

Education institutions are obligated to verify an education program before its implementation. The verification request needs to be submitted to the Centre for Adult Education (CAE) which is the main responsible body in the process of program verification. The required documentation includes:



- Request for verification of a special program,
- Document for registered activity adult education,
- Special educational program proposal in

the prescribed format

- Proof for paid administrative costs

Center for Adult Education decides if the request will be approved, rejected or needs to be amended. Request if filled in a prescribed format (Attached in [Annex 1](#)). And the proposal for the training program is preparing in the prescribed format as well.

Obligatory elements of the program are:

1. General information about the special adult education program
2. General information about the adult education / institution
3. Description , modules, module units, learning outcomes, program resources
4. Approval of the special program for adult education from centre for adult education

Adult education provider, for verification of institution, submits request to Ministry of Education and Science through the Adult education centre. This request contains:

- statute of the institution,
- proof of registered activity - adult education, issued by the Central Register
- elaboration of the institution
- data on the space, equipment, teaching staff, proof of ownership / rental and structure of the space

3.4 VET and AE formal program verification process

- decision for a verified program by the adult education centre
- the verified adult education program.

An institution for adult education can implement verified special programs for adult education, if there is space, equipment and staff suitable for the implementation of those programs, for which it submits a request for verification. This verification issued by the Ministry of Education and Science.

[\(Annex 2\)](#)

CROATIA

Programs for primary education, acquisition of school and professional education and retraining of institutions adopted on the basis of prescribed curricula adopted by the Ministry. Programs training and advanced training of institutions is based on the examination of educational needs, i.e. the needs of the labor market, and institutions prepare them according to the methodology.

Training and advanced training programs are provided by the institution.

After the provision of the program, the institution is obliged to obtain a positive professional opinion of the Agency for Vocational and Adult Education. The opinion on the program is delivered by mail to the address of the institution.

Upon the receipt of a positive expert opinion of the Agency, the institution submits a request for approval of the program to the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports. The request for approval delivered to the Ministry is required to include:

- a copy of the decision on the assessment of the conformity of the founding act with the law
- a copy of the excerpt from the court register
- adult education program
- a copy of the opinion of the agency responsible for adult education on the program (in accordance with Article 21 of the said Ordinance)
- list of teachers who will participate in the implementation of the program

3.4 VET and AE formal program verification process

- appointment of a person to perform the duties of a professional head of education (or a copy of the Statute if the duties of the expert manager are performed by the director)
- document (statement) on the readiness of teachers to cooperate in the implementation of the program
- Copies of diplomas of teachers and professional leaders of education
- data on the space in which the teaching will be performed and the equipment, teaching aids and other material conditions necessary for the implementation of the program
- Copies of proof of ownership or lease agreement
- copies of software licenses (if provided by the program)
- document (contract) on secured practical classes (if provided by the program)
- a copy of the decision on meeting the minimum technical and hygienic requirements of the space
- proof of payment of the prescribed administrative fee

The program proposal is submitted in a prescribed form (Attached in [Annex 3](#)).

The required elements are:

- Name of the program
- Name and degree of complexity of jobs according to the National Classification of Occupations (code)
- Knowledge, skills and abilities acquired at the end of the program
- Conditions for enrolling students
- Curriculum (duration in teaching hours by teaching content), method of program implementation, outline program by teaching content and duration of the entire program
- How to check knowledge and skills, progression and completion of the program
- Material and spatial conditions depending on educational content
- Personnel conditions according to teaching contents

ITALY

The process of the accreditation of the program falls under the jurisdiction of regions. The central government in Italy has always limited itself to

3.4 VET and AE formal program verification process

determining the general principles, in order to guarantee minimum quality standards and homogeneity of services at a national level. The result is a heterogeneous framework, in which the individual regions are given the task of defining their own territorial accreditation systems through the provision of specific criteria and procedures for the provision of training and employment services and for access to the resources allocated by the public notices financing these activities.

In the region of Umbria, which is included in the report, training courses and programs need to have certain characteristics, to conform to minimum standards of content and duration and, most importantly, need to be carried out by accredited subjects and provided with appropriate final certification of the learning accrued by the participants. Before being published in an Online Catalogue, the training proposals are subject to evaluation by the Region and the Provinces, which also monitor and control their implementation. Offer conditions - such as price (in the case of open-market courses), schedules and minimum number of participants - are defined exclusively by the proposing party and, as such, are not subject to public regulation.

AUSTRIA

When it comes to formal VET and AE programs in Austria through which learners acquire governmentally regulated qualifications, the institution is required to use the curriculum developed by ordinance of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research.

Framework curricula for apprenticeships are structured as follows:

- Timetable
- Remarks concerning the timetable
- General provisions, general educational objectives, general didactical principles and teaching principles
- Specific didactical principles for each subject

Since the curricula of the 203 apprenticeship occupations (as of 2019) differ in terms of optional subjects and exercises, a summary is given of those subjects which are found in all curricula:

- Compulsory subjects:
 - religious instruction

3.4 VET and AE formal program verification process

- German and communication
- an occupation-specific foreign language
- citizenship education
- business studies
- theoretical and practical subjects required for the respective apprenticeship.
- Optional subjects:
 - religious instruction
 - foreign language
 - German and
 - applied mathematics
- Optional exercises:
 - physical education and sport, applied computer science.

As far as the compulsory elements are concerned, they include:

- Timetable: specifying the overall teaching hours for each subject
- Remarks concerning the timetable: contains information about possible modifications of the subjects
- General provisions, general educational objectives, general didactical principles and teaching principles including information about definition and process of the curriculum, educational mandate and educational objectives, didactical provisions, lesson planning, preparation of teaching subject, teaching methods, promotion of competences (digital, business thinking, intercultural education, etc.)
- Specific didactical principles for each subject: contains specific information for each subject (objectives, teaching methods, etc.)



3.4 VET and AE formal program verification process

CONCLUSION

As it is clear from the review of formal VET and AE programs, all countries have a prescribed system of formal program accreditation. There are specific public bodies on a national or regional level which are responsible for the prescription of program methodology and there are requirements set out which need to be fulfilled by the education provider in order to verify and implement education programs. There are also ready-made formats and obligatory elements that programs need to contain. The rules and procedures are set out in laws and regulations are based on the legislation of each country. On the other hand, the methodology of the development of non-formal programs is a less structured area. On the other field, the non-formal education area is vaguer.



3.5 Methodology for development of non-formal VET and AE programs

NORTH MACEDONIA



Non-formal education is governed by a number of sub-legal acts regulating the procedures for verification of the programs. All programs verified and approved by the national authorities are standardized with the minimum number of classes, compliance with existing standards for occupations, space means and other preconditions for delivery.

But the programs that are not verified by the Centre for adult education, lacks of regulation. Each provider can develop, design and deliver non-formal unverified educational program. Mechanisms for quality assurance and integration of such types of education are not developed.

One of the main issues is the absence of a system for validation of non-formal and informal learning. The learners are currently not able to validate competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning. Also, the term vocational non-formal education is used and non-formal education programs also go through the verification process.

CROATIA

In Croatia, non-formal programs are not verified by the state or any other public body. There is currently no prescribed format for non-formal education programs. Each education provider can develop the program in any suitable form and decide on the number of hours, requirements, objectives and skills that the learners will develop throughout the program. Non-formal programs do not need to be sent for an approval or opinion to any of the agencies, centers and institutions responsible for education in the country. Currently, a system of formal recognition and validation of non-formal education is not implemented. Education providers can issue certificates which prove learner's participation in a program and list the objectives and skills that the program

3.5 Methodology for development of non-formal VET and AE programs

offers, those certificates bear the official stamp and signature of the institution and the institution's legal representative but they are not officially recognized by the labor market. Still, there are currently efforts and new legislation which is intended to improve the situation regarding the non-formal education program. The new Adult Education Act from 2022, therefore, states: "education of adults for the acquisition of competencies necessary for work in the sense of this Act includes the implementation of informal education programs that are financed through vouchers from European structural and investment funds and mechanisms for recovery and resilience aligned with the occupational standard or set of competencies and the qualification standard or set of learning outcomes from Register of the Croatian Qualification Framework (hereinafter: HKO Register)" The new Act also includes the "Validation of previously acquired knowledge" which pertains to the formal recognition of skills which were previously acquired by the learner through non-formal and informal learning activities. The learners will, in line with this, have to prove that they possess skills and knowledge related to a certain set of learning outcomes.

Another change is that Non-formal education programs for the acquisition of competencies required for work that are financed through vouchers from the European Structural and Investment Funds and the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism, as evidence that they are based on a link with an occupational standard or a set of competencies and a qualification standard or a set of learning outcomes from the Croatian Qualification Framework Register, must have the consent of the ministry responsible for work. The ministry responsible for work will issue the consent from paragraph 8 of this article on the basis of the opinion on the relevance of the service provider that it will obtain from the ministry responsible for the activity within which the competencies necessary for work are acquired through the non-formal education program.

Still, due to the fact that the new Act has been brought in 2022, its provisions are still not fully in action and a period of adjustments to the new elements is expected in the future. The articles regarding non-formal educations are, therefore, still put into practice and their quality and practicality are yet to be presented.

3.5 Methodology for development of non-formal VET and AE programs

ITALY

Since 2012, Italy has been committed to defining its own National Framework. At regional level, regional qualification and certification systems allow the recognition of training credits for the skills acquired outside the formal education and training system.

The Law 92/2012 of 28 June 2012 on the labor market reform initiates a concrete systemic and regulatory path by providing a set of provisions for lifelong learning (including the definition of a national system of certification of competences and validation of non-formal and informal learning). The text of the Law considers the validation of non-formal and informal learning and the national system of certification of competences as two fundamental elements to ensure and implement lifelong learning based on the maintenance of the citizens' conditions for employability.

Such path leads to several implementation packages and, among these, great priority is given to the Decree Law no. 13 of January 16, 2013 on the National system of certification of competences and validation of non-formal and informal learning ("Definition of general rules and essential performance levels for identifying and validating non-formal and informal learning and minimum performance standards of the national system of certification of competences, in accordance with Article 4, paragraph 58 and 68 of Law no. 92 of June 28, 2012").

The Decree Law 13/13 is fundamental for the designation of a set of rules, shared by all relevant Italian institutions, to guarantee its citizens the exercise of the right to social and institutional recognition of all the competences acquired, with no exception.

Moreover, the Decree no. 13, Chapter III establishes the "National Directory of education and training titles and professional qualifications" which is the Reference Framework to certify skills and competences.

Once again, the format is not prescribed and the methodology of non-formal program developments depends on the education provider.

3.5 Methodology for development of non-formal VET and AE programs

AUSTRIA

As far as non-formal VET and AE in Austria is concerned, the respective AE provider is responsible for the curriculum development and the final exams which makes the process very diverse. Since the AE providers are responsible for themselves, there is no relevant law, regulation or strategy in terms of curricula development methodology in Austria. There are also no specific elements/sections in the programs. As far as the recognition of non-formal learning is concerned, Impetus for the development of a national strategy is existing since 2011 (national LLL-strategy), first draft published in 2015, validated in 2017 by the Ministry of Education, Science and Research:

- Catalog of quality criteria
- Online portal for all validation and accompanying offers
- Qualification profile for validation experts
- Examples:
 - exceptional admission to the apprenticeship-leave exam
 - waiving of parts of the practical apprenticeship-leave exam
 - credits for the acquisition of certificates in second-chance education

Recognition of relevant competences to shorten the training period (such as upon entering a postsecondary VET course or a school for people in employment).

Also, the aforementioned Ö-Cert system can also be applied to the non-formal education programs.



3.5 Methodology for development of non-formal VET and AE programs

CONCLUSION:

Formal education, especially in the VET field, is very well structured in all countries included in the report. The first step in all countries is acquiring an approval and an accreditation needed in order to be able to implement a certain education program. All countries have legislation which prescribes the necessary steps of this process. There are also formats and obligatory elements that each program needs to contain. Each country also has established bodies which give opinions and verify the programs. Clear lists of documentation and annexes to be provided with the program also exists in all countries. The difference is present in the amount of documentation and the complexity of the administrative process between the countries.

On the other hand, non-formal education is still a field which is not clearly defined when it comes to program development methodology. Elements such as contents, outcomes, specifications regarding the length and scope of the program, material resources necessary for the implementation of the program, human resources needed for the implementation and other depend on the education provider. This allows for diversity and variety in the education offer, but also causes difficulties in evaluation of the quality of educational programs.

Initiatives aimed at the standardization and new ways of formal validation of non-formal learning are also present in the countries, but have not yet been fully exercised and put into practice.



3.6 Micro-qualification approach to program development methodology

EUROPEAN UNION



Micro-qualification is a sub-unit of a qualification. While generally micro-qualifications are not mapped to EQF, some countries allow for this possibility (e.g. Malta) and non-EU countries copy the practice too (e.g. Singapore) while micro-credential denotes a Sub-

unit of a credential or credentials (could be micro, meso, mini, etc.) that could accumulate into a larger credentials or be part of a portfolio. Micro-credentials certify the learning outcomes of short-term learning experiences, for example a short course or training. They offer a flexible, targeted way to help people develop the knowledge, skills and competences they need for their personal and professional development.

Shorter forms of learning opportunities than traditional qualifications, such as micro-credentials, are being developed rapidly across Europe and around the world. These opportunities are made available by a wide variety of public and private providers in response to the demand for more flexible, learner-centered forms of education and training. They also have the potential to offer education and training opportunities to a wider range of learners, including disadvantaged and vulnerable groups.

However, without common standards ensuring their quality, transparency, cross-border comparability, recognition and portability, micro-credentials cannot reach their full potential. In 2022 a Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability was adopted. This Recommendation urges Member States to follow a common approach to micro-credentials and in particular to apply a common EU definition, EU standards and key principles for the design and issuance of micro-credentials.¹⁰

¹⁰ <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/micro-credentials>

3.6 Micro-qualification approach to program development methodology

NORTH MACEDONIA

The concept of micro-credentials is not introduced in North Macedonia, yet. There are no strategic or legal documents regulating the implementation of the micro-credentials on the national level.

CROATIA

In accordance with the legal obligation to develop a methodology from Article 12, paragraph 10 of the Adult Education Act (Official Gazette 144/21), and the imminent funding of formal education programs through vouchers according to the National Repair Plan, the Agency for Vocational Education and Adult Education has developed a Methodology for adult education programs for the acquisition of micro-qualifications, partial qualifications and complete qualifications financed through vouchers and other sources of financing.

The methodology for creating adult education programs is in accordance with the Adult Education Act (Article 17, paragraph 6), according to which formal adult education programs for acquiring the competencies necessary for work, financed through vouchers from the European structural funds and the mechanism for recovery and resilience, based on the link with the occupational standard (or set of competencies) and the qualification standard (or set of learning outcomes) from the HKO Register.

Currently, the first micro-qualification programs are being implemented and adult education providers are in the process of development of new programs, following the prescribed methodology for micro-qualifications ([Annex 4](#))

ITALY

Italy does not yet have specific regulations on micro-credentials, but higher education institutions in their autonomy can offer them under certain conditions. These micro-credentials offer very specific useful competences for learners already employed (or wanting to be employed) in industry, in higher education institutions and public administration, and/or engaged in research.

3.6 Micro-qualification approach to program development methodology

AUSTRIA

The system of vouchers designed to reimburse parts of the course or examination costs, occasionally mobility costs is being implemented. There is a working group in charge of the micro-credentials with the goal of implementing them on a national level.



3.7 Implementation of Quality Standards

EUROPEAN UNION

EQAVET



The *European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training* (EQAVET)

is based on a quality assurance and improvement cycle (planning,

implementation, evaluation/ assessment, and review/revision) and a selection of descriptors and indicators applicable to quality management at both VET system and VET provider levels. EQAVET does not prescribe a particular quality assurance system or approach, but provides a framework of common principles, indicative descriptors and indicators that may help in assessing and improving the quality of VET systems and VET provision. EQAVET can therefore be regarded as a 'toolbox' from which the various users may choose those descriptors and indicators that they consider most relevant to the requirements of their quality assurance system.

The EQAVET Framework can be used by VET providers and in VET systems to support the quality assurance of:

- learning environments (e.g., school-based provision, work-based learning, apprenticeships, formal, informal and non-formal provision),
- all types of learning contexts (e.g., digital, face-to-face and blended),
- public and private sector VET providers,
- VET awards and qualifications at all levels of the European Qualifications Framework,

EQF

The EQF is an 8-level, learning outcomes-based framework for all types of qualifications that serves as a translation tool between different national

3.7 Implementation of Quality Standards

qualifications frameworks. This framework helps improve transparency, comparability and portability of people's qualifications and makes it possible to compare qualifications from different countries and institutions.

The EQF covers all types and all levels of qualifications and the use of learning outcomes makes it clear what a person knows, understands and is able to do. The level increases according to the level of proficiency, level 1 is the lowest and 8 the highest level. Most importantly the EQF is closely linked to national qualifications frameworks, this way it can provide a comprehensive map of all types and levels of qualifications in Europe, which are increasingly accessible through qualification databases.

The EQF was set up in 2008 and later revised in 2017. Its revision has kept the core objectives of creating transparency and mutual trust in the landscape of qualifications in Europe. Member States committed themselves to further develop the EQF and make it more effective in facilitating the understanding of national, international and third-country qualifications by employers, workers and learners. In addition to the EU Member States, another 11 countries work towards implementing the EQF, namely Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway (European Economic Area countries), Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey (candidate countries), Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo** (potential candidates) and Switzerland. Based on the EQF, national quality frameworks (NQF) are developed and implemented. All the countries included in the report are currently working towards implementing the EQF.

NORTH MACEDONIA

In North Macedonia, a comprehensive quality assurance system for VET, yet needs to be developed. A national approach to quality assurance has been devised for IVET and CVET independently. Currently, a feasibility study on implementation of the EQAVET indicators including identification of processes, along with a roadmap for implementation of the framework by the VET providers, is being prepared.

Certain competences of the existing system are already designed to improve quality assurance in the sector. For example, the VET Centre is responsible for: accrediting staff training services; proposing measures to improve the quality of teaching; instructing / mentoring teachers and assessing them. Employment

3.7 Implementation of Quality Standards

Service Agency (ECA) carries out regular research on employers' needs and vacancy monitoring. Within the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, a number of analyses were developed, such as Occupational Outlooks, and the long-term project model was tested. ESA employers' survey collects information about short-term recruitment over six to twelve months as well as data on skills and occupational shortages. The Ministry of Education and Science prioritizes the development of its education management information system. A Skills Observatory was established as a department within the Ministry to collect, interpret and disseminate key data on elements such as education offers in higher education, information on curricula and skills development, information on job placement of graduates, cost of studies, links to information on job demand and economic development, and forecasting of labor demand.

Prescribed procedure for the design and adoption of VET qualifications is already designed and implementing in practice.

In non-formal education, occupational standards and a special adult education program have to be created. All new and reformed qualifications are based on learning outcomes. The responsibility for VET curriculum development in formal/non-formal education is centralized (within the VET Centre and the Centre for Adult Education).

The NQF law establishes principles, objectives, quality assurance procedures for qualifications (such as qualification standards, development and acquisition of qualifications, levels and qualifications submission, accreditation of providers, verification of programs/modules, certification), assessment processes, competent authorities, institutions, bodies and commissions.

However, the systematic approach for implementing measures established to verify that processes and procedures are in place, which, when effective, ensure the quality and quality improvement of VET, are still in the very early stage of implementation. Additional problem is that the stakeholders are not well informed about the existence of EQAVET framework.

Policies for good VET systems have to be supported by: effective leadership and a vision of quality VET; evidence-based planning; adequate resources; interconnected strategies; multi-level governance and multi-stakeholder engagement; competent personnel and responsible institutions.

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CROATIA

QAVET.HR is the Croatian National Reference Point (NRP) for quality assurance (QA) in vocational education and training (VET) founded in 2014 within the Agency for VET and Adult Education. NRPs for QA in VET are established in accordance with the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET). NRPs connect all interested stakeholders on national and regional level to ensure the implementation of EQAVET network's relevant initiatives. Main functions of NRPs for QA in VET are:

- informing a wide array of stakeholders of EQAVET network activities
- providing active support to the implementation of EQAVET network programs
- taking concrete steps towards promoting and continuously developing EQAVET within national context
- supporting self-assurance as an efficient tool for QA which enables the measurement of success and identification of areas for improvements in relation with the EQAVET network work program

Self-assessment of adult education institutions is one of the two key elements (along with external evaluation) of ensuring the quality of the adult education system. Although the self-assessment of adult education institutions at the systematic level is still developing in many institutions (e.g. secondary vocational schools), since they implement vocational education programs for adult students, they are included in the self-assessment process as part of self-assessment of vocational education institutions. Like other vocational education institutions, adult education institutions assess the quality of their work through this process with the aim of systematic improvement. These institutions also use the online tool for self-assessment, e-Quality and Self-assessment Manual with guidelines for self-assessment.

Further development of self-assessment of adult education institutions, where all institutions will be included in a systematic way, will be implemented through the ESF project Development of QA System in Adult Education.

Currently in Croatia there is no firmly structured system that would systematically monitor the quality of work of adult education institutions and

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introduce the necessary development measures and improvements based existing and required competencies of the working population. The Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education is responsible for professional supervision in adult education institutions, which primarily refers to the insight into the work of institutions. Although professional and advisory assistance to institutions, as well as previous experiences in self-assessment, are the basis for building a quality system in adult education, a comprehensive quality assurance system is not set by existing regulations, nor is it implemented in practice. The VET system development program (2016-2020) envisages the development of a unique quality assurance system for vocational education and training and adult education in accordance with the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET (EQAVET). The draft proposal of the new Law on Adult Education provides framework guidelines for the development of a comprehensive quality assurance system that would evaluate learners, adult education institutions and educational processes through self-assessment and external evaluation of adult education institutions, evaluation of educational programs through accreditation and re-accreditation, external evaluation learning outcomes of participants, inspection and professional supervision and monitoring the work of adult education institutions. At the same time, the development of indicators, standards, procedures and tools for self-assessment of institutions is foreseen.

ITALY

With regard to the possession of quality certification for those who apply for accreditation, a complexity of behavior on the part of the regional administrations can be noted: some regions provide for the obligation of a quality certification; other regions establish facilities for those with a quality certification. From this point of view, it is interesting to observe how the accreditation systems themselves are moving towards an increasingly specific definition of indicators and tools for verifying the supply, evaluation and planning processes.

It is not possible to precisely identify specific quality models implemented by local institutions: the various regional systems, in fact, although they

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implement the guidelines and guidelines drawn up centrally and shared in the State-Regions conference, maintain a series of specificities that make it difficult to build unambiguous and organic reference models even within the regional territory.

With regard to the topic of evaluation, the peer review experience of the Umbria region is particularly interesting, which to date continues to represent a unicum in the Italian panorama: the Praline Project (Peer Review in Adult Learning to Improve Formal End Non-formal Education).

Peer review is a type of formative evaluation, of a voluntary nature, developed between networks of educational and training structures that promotes the implementation of internal and external evaluation procedures, aimed at promoting and constantly improving the set of elements that make up the quality cycle of training. External evaluation activities are carried out by Peers, i.e. a group of external experts, who are called upon to express a judgment on the quality of various quality areas/areas of the structure evaluated; the evaluation areas may concern individual quality areas or the entire organization. The Umbria region began to implement and structure this methodology at the regional level as early as 2008 and experimented between 2011 and 2013. Subsequently, the Praline project set as its objective the promotion of 'sustainable strategies, methods and tools to develop the quality of adult learning, supporting in particular those providers of non-formal learning for adults who are approaching quality assurance devices for the first time'.

To summarize, the Umbria region's experimental use of the peer review methodology can be considered substantially in line with the main objectives of the first National Plan implementing the European EQAVET Framework: to strengthen the qualitative aspect of accreditation; to reinforce the national and regional use of indicators for monitoring the system and benchmarking the structures; to evaluate the outcomes of the system in terms of learning, professional insertion, learner satisfaction and companies; to promote self-evaluation and external evaluation.

The National Reference Points for Quality in Vocational Education and Training (Reference Points), set up in the various member countries within the European Quality Network - EQAVET, represent the point of contact between the European and national levels, to ensure the spill-over of European

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initiatives on the national territory and an efficient dissemination of information on the theme of quality in training. The Italian Reference Point, set up in 2006 is located at Inapp.

Several initiatives have been undertaken in our country which can be traced back to the model presented in the European Recommendation on Quality, which contributes to composing an Italian model of quality assurance of vocational training.

AUSTRIA

QMS (Quality Management System for Schools) is a national strategy to implement quality management in the Austrian VET system (for all full and part-time VET schools). QMS is based on a specific quality framework and has the following instruments: pedagogical guiding principles, the school development plan, the Q-handbook and a balance and target agreement meeting. The former quality management system ARQA-VET was referencing to the goals of EQAVET. It was transformed into the QMS system in 2021.

QMS is introduced by the Federal ministry of education, science and research and the main actors are the education directorate on federal state level and school management, teacher teams and teachers on school level. There is also an international platform for evaluation and school development to support the implementation of QMS. It provides feedback concerning the quality of lessons and concerning learning competences and impact; provided by school students and among teacher colleagues.

There are also annual school evaluations by trained school evaluators concerning quality management and quality of lessons Austria also has its Quality framework for adult education in Austria, called Ö-Cert.

Ö-Cert is aimed at adult education institutions that perform high-quality work from an adult educational point of view and can demonstrate this using the Ö-Cert criteria. Ö-Cert is awarded by the federal and state governments on the basis of a legal basis (15a agreement on Ö-Cert, Federal Law Gazette II No. 269/2012) and is considered a European showcase project.

In order to acquire an Ö-Cert, an education provider needs to:

- Register on the website and fill out the application form
- Send the application documents to the office by post

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- The office carries out the completeness check of the documents
- The accreditation group checks the application based on the Ö-Cert basic requirements
- After receiving Ö-Cert, an educational institution will appear in the directory of Ö-Cert quality providers

The objectives of this system is to allow Austria-wide recognition for the institutions, include them into the directory of Ö-Cert quality providers, allow a higher degree of transparency for customers, reduce administration and improve the functioning and transparency of the funding system. In the long run, the main objective is to enhance the quality of education.

4. Conclusions and recommendations for the development of the common methodology

1. Education programs should be developed in accordance with the labor market demands. Non-formal programs need to be developed on the basis of the 21st century competencies and needs of the labor market, but also needs of the individual in the contemporary society (it is recommended to use analyses with experts and field workers, but also analysis tools such as the SWAT model, GROW model and other).
2. Formal programs are less flexible and therefore non-formal education is a field which may help bridge the gap between the education system and the market. The flexibility of non-formal education allows the non-formal education programs to be a quick and efficient answer for the continually changing and evolving market and society.
3. The mentioned flexibility of the non-formal programs, on the other hand may cause distrust of the qualifications acquired this way and even a lack of quality of such programs. Therefore, clear quality standards are needed.
4. A standardized format with obligatory sections should be proscribed. It is recommended for the programs to include objectives, learning materials, activities, evaluation, and the follow-up. The content of the program should be based on learning objectives and focused on the skills on
5. Competencies to be developed by the learners. Also, the mentioned follow-up means that programs need to be evaluated and improved depending on the issues detected.
6. The used methodology should be based on a modular learning, micro competences system based on sets of learning outcomes in order to be in accordance with EU policies and strategies. Programs also need to be developed on the basis of contemporary pedagogy and andragogy in order to suit the needs of the learners involved in the program and facilitate a high-quality learning process.
7. The qualification attained through non-formal education programs should also contain obligatory elements. Each certification should clearly state the competencies acquired by the learners.
8. Methodology should be adjusted to use on the international level. The programs should correspond to the Europass documents.

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