

Executive summary

A) Brief overview of the study

The results of this study should support the European Commission by **contributing to a knowledge base**, which will inform a number of future activities to be undertaken in the framework of European Cooperation on Adult Learning Policy. According to the terms of reference, the specific objective of this study is to “map and to analyse the scope, content and implementation of quality approaches, standards and other relevant recent developments such as the development and implementation of accreditation systems and institutions, in the adult learning sector”.

The study should mainly focus on **mapping interesting practices throughout Europe** and secondly on providing ingredients for the development of a **framework for quality assurance in adult learning**, in which quality assurance systems in other education sectors need to be taken into account. Recommendations on how to proceed in developing the framework (in terms of time lines, consultations, additional studies etc.) should be provided within the study.

In order to achieve the above-mentioned research objectives, the following **research methods** were implemented: 1) Conducting desk research on EU documents, EU projects, and academic literature addressing quality approaches in adult learning. 2) Drawing up 32 country fact sheets based on desk research and interviews on the national level. 3) Conducting 15 case studies on interesting quality systems and approaches. 4) Organising a testing seminar with external stakeholders for discussing and validating the outcomes of the study. 5) Organising meetings with the Thematic Working Group on Quality in Adult Learning to discuss the progress of the study and receive feedback on the research.

This Executive summary subsequently presents: B) Key findings of the study; C) Conclusions; D) Specific recommendations for European countries improving their quality systems; and E) Recommendations on the development of a European level quality framework.

B) Key findings of the study

The study resulted in the following key findings:

1 In reviewing the **quality assurance systems in place**, this study identified three groups of countries:

- (1) countries that have elaborated quality systems in place on macro level for adult learning, formal as well non-formal learning often determined in a specific strand (such as AT, BE, CH, DK, EE, FI, HU, IE, LU, LV, NO, SE). Most of these countries are also the better performing countries in terms of participation in adult learning and have higher educational attainment levels (with the exception of BE, HU, and IE).
- (2) countries that have fragmented quality systems on macro level for non-formal adult learning, while having quality systems in place for formal adult learning (such as DE, EL, ES, CZ, IS, MT, NL, PL, PT, SI, UK);
- (3) countries with no or limited quality systems in place on macro level for non-formal learning, while having quality systems in place for formal adult learning

(such as BG, CY, FR, HR, IT, LT, RO, SK, TK). Overall these countries are generally lacking quality systems for the non-formal part of adult learning and, at the same time, show a relatively low performance on the ET2020 benchmarks.

- 2 **Overarching quality systems intersecting different sub-sectors are rarely seen.** Some concrete examples are the Ö-Cert (Austria) and EduQua (Switzerland) labels that can be used in all sub-domains of adult learning. In Greece a strategic framework was developed for quality in the whole lifelong learning sector but has not yet been implemented.
- 3 Type and intensity of quality systems in place **differ between formal and non-formal adult learning.** With regard to system level quality assurance, the differences between higher education (HE), vocational education and training (VET) and non-vocational adult learning are less related to the fact that the provision is intended for adults, but more to the fact that the HE and VET provide state-regulated qualifications, falling under the National Qualifications Frameworks (NQF). This often demands that all awards included in the NQF are quality assured, and a key objective of these frameworks is to promote and maintain standards. The non-formal sectors are less regulated through the government and more often grass-root, bottom-up approaches are applied to work on quality assurance (such as codes of conducts and development of sectoral quality labels).
- 4 Given the fact that the formal sectors are more regulated than the non-formal sector, also **monitoring of the sector differs.** The formal sectors are generally more uniform in their objectives, type of organisation, target groups, and societal results, where the HE sector is even more uniformly organised than the VET sector. The content of the quality assurance systems in place, especially those in relation to organisational requirements, however, do not differ in a great extent between the HE, VET and non-formal adult learning sector. Generally no specific reference is made to specific characters of adult learning within the quality systems in place for formal HE and VET.
- 5 In most countries there is a consensus that **quality assurance systems should be developed** for the adult learning sector, and especially the non-formal sector. Most countries are currently developing or revising their legislative framework for adult learning, putting more focus on quality assurance mechanisms. In the last few years, most countries produced white papers, communications, policy proposals and lifelong learning strategies in which they emphasise the importance of quality assurance. Nevertheless, the main challenge is to implement these strategies. Experience shows that it takes a long time to build consensus on the idea and content of quality systems.
- 6 Quality assurance systems have **multiple objectives.** The quality assurance systems studied are developed for different purposes. The objectives the quality assurance systems mostly focus on are setting minimum requirements, transparency, and accountability.
- 7 Quality assurance systems in non-formal adult learning include a **sequence of procedural steps** for providers being quality assured. The quality assurance systems studied, generally follow the same procedural steps including: application by the provider, including endorsement of adult learning principles; assessment by the responsible body, validation by the responsible body, and finally monitoring, follow-up activities

both by the provider and the responsible body. Most quality assurance systems include self-evaluation procedures at provider level. The emphasis is on the application by the provider.

- 8 There is a **diversity of responsible bodies**. Most responsible bodies are public bodies (either involved solely in quality assurance or with additional responsibilities). For some sectoral initiatives, the responsible bodies are private organisations, also involved in other activities.
- 9 The quality assurance systems studied have **common descriptors**. Four broad categories of quality descriptors can be identified: organisational issues; quality of the didactics and the learning process; quality of staff; and quality of measuring results. Only two of the quality assurance systems studied, do not include all four categories.
- 10 System, or sector level **monitoring systems** including an adult learning-tailored set of indicators are scarce (acknowledging the specific goals of adult learning, the wide diversity of providers, learning environments, and socio economic actors involved, but also endorsing some basic principles on adult learning as identified in the literature, such as that adult learning should be tailor made, learner centred, and attuned to specific learning needs of the adult learner, and should be offered in a flexible manner).
- 11 This study identified **challenges for improving the quality in adult learning**. The main challenges concern the lack of overarching quality assurance systems in the adult learning sector, and especially for the non-formal part of adult learning. These challenges were subsequently linked to relevant examples of practices over Europe that could be seen as solutions or at least models of inspirations for policy makers.
- 12 **Success factors of quality assurance systems' implementation can be identified**. Success factors are factors that were identified as being a condition under which a well functioning quality assurance system was/is implemented. The following generic factors of success of quality assurance systems' implementation are identified: 1) The focus of the quality assurance system is on the learner/consumer; 2) The quality assurance system is transparent for all stakeholders; 3) The quality assurance system is organisationally strongly backed (the responsible authorising body possesses authority in the sector); 4) the quality assurance system has commitment of management and the employees within the provider; 5) The quality assurance system should be affordable in relation to the volume of adult learning provision and the context it takes place; 6) The quality assurance system should be relevant for the given context (no one-size fits all) or sufficiently broad to embed different form of adult learning provision; 7) The development/ acceptance of quality assurance systems takes a certain period of time.
- 13 The **European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET (EQAVET) and Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)** quality reference frameworks are applicable to the situation of the adult learning sector, acknowledging that the adult learning sector is less uniform in terms of objectives, organisation, target groups, and societal results (especially for the non-formal part of adult learning). Most cases studied are based on the same philosophy (quality cycle) and similar descriptors are in place.

C) Conclusions

Based on the key findings, the following conclusions are drawn:

- 1 In most countries, **quality assurance systems, especially for the non-formal adult learning sector can be improved**. On the other hand, the study identified a high number of interesting practices which can serve as inspiration for improving and setting of quality assurance systems.
- 2 There is a strong **need for more (comparable) information on adult learning provision**, especially for the non-formal part of adult learning. It is important to provide relevant statistics in order to prove the results of adult learning in social and economic terms based on cost-benefit models.
- 3 The results of the study provide arguments for **the development of a reference framework for quality in adult learning at the European level** to serve as reference that Member States could use to develop standards for the whole sector. This reference framework could be used by national, regional, sectoral and institutional organisations in developing quality policies. It is important to differentiate in the framework between the different adult learning domains (e.g. higher education, vocational education, second chance and liberal education) and types of provision (formal and non-formal).
- 4 Furthermore, there is a plea for an **integrated approach for quality in lifelong learning**. There are some strong arguments to link up with the quality framework already developed for the VET sector (EQAVET), and make this adult learning proof instead of developing a separate framework. The following arguments can be summed up: Firstly, this study provides strong evidence that EQAVET (such as the quality model, building blocks and indicative descriptors set) is applicable to adult learning provision. EQAVET needs slight modification to adopt it to the adult learning sector. Secondly, having different quality frameworks in place could lead to confusion amongst stakeholders (“again another framework”), especially in case a provider provides services in the vocational as well as the non vocational domain at the same time. Finally, aligning with EQAVET leads to economies of scale making use of the existing platforms of national reference points, EQAVET network, the products and tools that has been developed, and the experience of the European Commission guiding this process. This will finally lead to a future quality assurance framework for lifelong learning, being an inspirational model for all actors involved in lifelong learning, including adult learning.
- 5 Due to the similarities we propose therefore to **take the quality model of EQAVET as reference point for adult learning** and add adult learning specific characteristics to it. Broadening the scope of EQAVET to adult learning could at the same time be a first step finally leading to a **future quality assurance framework for lifelong learning**, being an inspirational model for all educational sectors (also including HE and general education).

D) Specific recommendations for European countries improving their quality systems

Based on the key findings and conclusions, the following recommendations can be mentioned that will help to improve the quality in adult learning in the countries. These recommendations are related to the system challenges which are identified:

- 1 For countries facing a lack of an overarching framework for adult learning, it is recommended **to develop an overarching system which sets minimum requirements for providers to get validated** (applies mostly to NL, BG, CZ, CY, HR, PL, BE (Flanders), BE (Walloon), LU, MT, TK). As inspiration, the following systems can be further examined: meta-frameworks such as Ö-Cert (AT) or overarching frameworks such as EduQua (CH) and the FETAC framework (IE).
- 2 For countries facing a lack of a system / framework / regulation for assuring quality in the non-formal part of adult learning, there are **three potential responses**, dependent on what countries feel best suitable for them (applies mostly to DK, EE, NL, NO, ES, IS, BG, CZ, CY, BE (Walloon), FR, IT, MT):
 - Develop a quality assurance system for non-formal adult learning, with setting minimum quality requirements. Inspirational models for this concern firstly, systems organised by public bodies, such as EduQua (CH) Greta-plus (FR); Quality label (LU); and secondly, they concern systems organised by private bodies, such as the Hamburg model (DE); the quality seal for folk universities (NL) and the code of conduct for Dutch private providers (NL).
 - Stimulating quality developments without setting minimum quality requirements. As inspiration one could have a look at existing quality prizes in Germany, Sweden and Finland.
 - Providing additional support structures. The Quality guidelines/manual developed in Sweden (BRUK); the staff development programmes developed in Norway and Malta; the Slovenian initiative 'Offering Quality Education to Adults' and the Czech 'Concept' project, could serve as inspiration.
- 3 For countries facing a lack of attention for adult learning specific elements in quality systems / regulation for formal education, it is recommended **to increase attention to adult learning elements in formal education** (applies mostly to NL, BG, CZ, CY, HR, HU, PL, RO, LU). This includes changing policy and legal frameworks related to the educational sectors in question and engaging the stakeholders to change the regulations as they are, in order to increase the attention to adult learning specific elements in the quality assurance systems. Inspiring examples in this respect related to VET can be found in UK (Wales), namely the ESTYN inspectorate, in Ireland, the FETAC framework; and in France, the Greta-plus quality label. Related to general education, the system which is particularly interesting to look at is the quality assurance structures in basic skills in Malta.
- 4 For countries facing a lack of (specific) legal requirements for adult learning staff or lacking initial training and continuing professional development, it is recommended **to set staff requirements at national level and develop opportunities for initial and further training of teachers in adult learning** (applies to most countries). Actions in this field should take into account the recommendations related to the study on key competences of adult learning professionals. Inspiring examples of frameworks where

explicit attention is given to requirements set for adult learning staff can be found in Malta, namely in the quality assurance structures in basic skills.

- 5 For countries facing a lack of system / regulation for assuring quality of APL provision and guidance, there are two potential responses, dependent on what countries would like to focus on (in relation to APL, this applies mostly to DK, EE, UK, ES, BG, CY, PL, BE (Walloon), EL, LU, MT, TK; in relation to guidance, this applies mostly to EE, UK, ES, DE, PL, BE (Walloon), EL, MT). Firstly, **set minimum quality requirements for APL providers**. Inspiring examples can be found in the Netherlands, Quality Code APL; and Portugal, quality charter New Opportunity Centres; secondly, **set minimum quality requirements for guidance providers**. An inspiring example can be found in Denmark: quality in guidance.
- 6 For countries facing a lack of monitoring data in the AL sector (provision of AL and effects), it is recommended **to establish sector-level indicators for monitoring the sector** (applies mostly to DK, EE, NL, NO, ES, IS, BG, CY, DE, HR, HU, LT, LV, RO, EL, IE, MT, PT, TK). These indicators should be tailored to the specific objectives of the adult learning system in the country. Although not yet implemented, the Greek "Quality - Always - Everywhere framework" provides an inspiring example to develop indicator sets to monitor the sector.

E) Recommendations on the development of a European level quality framework

Based on the key findings and the conclusions, the following recommendations are provided related to the development of a European level quality framework:

- 1 This study recommends **broadening the EQAVET framework to the field of adult learning**. This framework could improve the availability of comparable information on adult learning in particular, as countries are asked to take the framework as reference for setting up/ further develop their quality systems.
- 2 It is recommended that new framework **is flexible and respect principles of adult learning**. A cross-national quality framework should be flexible, open and transparent to all stakeholders in the adult learning sector; it should comprise both a technical and political approach while developing it; and it should take into account the particularities of the adult learning sector (serving different goals, provided by a wide diversity of providers, taking place in different learning environments, and the involvement of wide variety of social and economic actors); and endorse the basic principles related to quality adult learning (that adult learning provision should be tailor-made, learner-centred and attuned to the specific learning needs of the adult learner, and should be offered in a flexible manner in terms of duration, time, and place). Most importantly, however, for working towards a European level framework, it is essential that it is developed on the basis of, or in accordance with national quality frameworks for adult learning and existing practices in place. Finally, the development of a European level framework should respect the principle of subsidiarity.
- 3 With regard the adjustment of the EQAVET recommendation, it is recommended that the **list of indicators is extended with more adult learning relevant indicators**, i.e.: the Adult education survey, the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies

(PIAAC), and the Eurostat social inclusion statistics (Living conditions and social protection). In addition, newly compiled indicators could be used at country level such as developed in the Greek $\pi 3$ framework. Furthermore, with regard system level indicative descriptors, the more procedural system level indicative descriptors can be applied in adult learning as well. Finally, the quality assurance systems studied to a large extent fit the indicative descriptors at providers level; however, there could be more focus on the learning environment of adults, including the quality of didactics and the infrastructure (according to the principles mentioned here before).

- 4 It is recommended that the implementation strategy takes into account the following steps:
 - **Step 1)** In order to expand the scope of the EQAVET recommendation of 2009, a **legal document should preferably be drawn up** as a basis for renewing this recommendation (this would create the foundation to jointly work on renewing the recommendation). This legal document should not immediately propose what the renewed framework will look like, but will set the agenda and a time-plan for arriving at a renewed framework to be accepted by the European Council and the European Parliament.
 - **Step 2)** When a legal basis is created, all relevant stakeholders can start working on **shaping the quality framework** on the basis of EQAVET. However, this has to be coordinated by the European Commission. Furthermore, at EU level, but more importantly, at national level, consultations should start to get stakeholders involved in the process of renewing the EQAVET framework.
 - **Step 3)** The consultation provides insights with regards to what is socially and politically feasible at country level to include in a quality framework for lifelong learning. This should however, be technically backed up with **pilot studies, cross-country comparisons, sectoral studies** on whether the framework leads to results.
 - **Step 4)** In addition, there should also be a **balance between the national and European developments**: there should be a constructive interchange of experiences between the national and the European levels.
 - **Step 5)** The legal document on which the whole process should include an **agenda and a time plan for the process**. The final product should also have a clear profile. It should be clear for all stakeholders: What is the aim of the framework? Why is it needed? How should it be used? To whom does it apply? Who is responsible?
- 5 Concerning the **time plan to unroll the strategy** to develop and implement a renewed EQAVET framework, broadened to lifelong learning, it is expected that when there is a legal document to work on the revision (step 1), implementing the subsequent steps (2-5), will take approximately 2 years. For the further development and implementation at provider level, given experiences with other frameworks, another 5-7 years might be required.
- 6 The broadening of the EQAVET framework also calls for the need to **change the name** of the framework. This name should be better adapted to the new users and audience, without losing the brand that has been carefully developed over the last years.