EQAVET peer review on 'CoVE leadership and innovation' - Flash Report

EQAVET Peer Review in Bulgaria

The fourth EQAVET system level peer review of the 2024-26 cycle took place on 24-25 October 2024 online, hosted by the VET Directorate of the Ministry of Education and Science (MES) which is where the Bulgarian National Reference Point is located. Eight EQAVET Network members from Croatia, Czechia, Greece, Hungary and Italy acted as peers. The Peer Review focused on the ongoing VET reform in Bulgaria and the development of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) which will act as hubs for development of quality assurance (QA) in the VET system. The feedback from peers should help to refine the functions of the CoVEs, their role in the QA process as well strengthen their capacity to act as leaders and innovators at regional level.

VET reform and the role of CoVEs

Strategical priorities and ongoing reforms in the Bulgarian VET system

The MES presented the VET reforms undertaken by Bulgaria which have the following objectives: modernise VET content, ensure that VET responds to the labour market needs, optimise the validation of prior learning and skills and competences gained through non formal and informal learning, as well as optimise work-based learning. As part of the reforms, the MES organised consultation with stakeholders, social partners, employers and VET institutions to amend the VET Act, and the revised version was adopted by the parliament in March 2024.

The key legislative changes include:

- New list of professions for VET: the number of professions was reduced to 193, with 40 in the digital and green sectors, to facilitate career guidance for learners and workload for institutions who deliver the programmes;

- New framework programmes;

- New structure of State educational standards;

- New instruments to obtain certifications related to single units of learning outcomes, which was previously not available;

- Green skills in all programmes and ICT skills in specific programmes.

New instruments will also be available to support the VET reforms:

- Sectoral Skills Councils covering 20 different economic sectors were established under the ESF+ project 'VET Modernisation' to work on the new VET qualifications. They cooperated with the MES to develop the new list of professions and key profiles which will be the basis for the new State educational standards;

- VET teacher and student trainings will be offered to improve transversal competences, businesses will be invited to be further involved in VET education, work-based learning will be further promoted, school informational campaigns will promote VET benefits and sectoral and national meetings will be organised to support the VET reform. All these initiatives are funded under the 'VET Modernisation' ESF+ project.

- VET competitions will take place every year in different economic sectors;

- CoVEs will benefit from initiatives to support their implementation and capacity building.

The CoVEs

Training for capacity building

Bulgaria does not have a formal QA framework, but different incentives can support the VET reform and QA within VET organisations, including CoVEs. Capacity building needs in Bulgaria include:

- Structured data for labour market trends and needs;
- Standards for collecting and using data on knowledge, skills and competences needed for curricula development;
- A systematic approach to assess and forecast skills needs;
- Monitoring of the career pathways of VET graduates;
- Monitoring and assessment of the use of skills in the workplace; and
- VET- and skills- specific cooperation between stakeholders.

The MES developed a series of projects funded by Erasmus+, VIREO, to address these needs: VIREO 1 on indicators for QA in VET aligned with EQAVET, VIREO 2 to develop a VET graduate tracking model, VIREO 3 on a model for collecting and using skills-related labour market information and VIREO 4 on CoVE capacity building.

The main objectives of VIREO 4 are to:

- **Use graduate tracking for QA and planning of VET programmes and curricula**: CoVE leaders, VET experts from Regional Education Directorates, VET school leaders and VET management and development specialists are trained to develop, implement and use graduate tracking effectively to improve VET quality.
- **Develop capacity building for skills anticipation in the labour market**: CoVE leaders are trained to understand and use labour market skills anticipation data, transform anticipation insights in actionable strategies and make evidence-based decisions for VET development. Key focus areas are foundations and systems of skills anticipation, data and resources available to CoVEs, and pilot models in three sectors (ICT, construction and transport and logistics). The expected impacts are to enhance VET quality, increase labour market relevance and enable the strategic development of VET.

Selection method and role in VET QA

The concept of CoVE was introduced in Bulgaria in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan. The MES developed in August 2022 a comprehensive methodology for selecting VET schools to obtain the status of CoVE. The selection methodology focused on four categories: school capacity; schools' available building fund (e.g. laboratories, but also premises with opportunities to develop); partnerships and network school capacity; and regional and economic needs in terms of added value of the CoVEs. Schools were selected especially based on their potential for development. In a first phase, schools self-assessed themselves, then the regional level carried out a second screening, before the MES made its final selection.

28 VET schools (among the 420) were appointed as CoVEs in November 2022 and benefited from modernisation of their infrastructures and equipment through grants from the Recovery Resilience Facility starting from April 2023 (EUR 50 million). CoVE contracts were signed in November-December 2023. There is one CoVE per region, some with one specific sectoral

profile while others cover several fields. Additional EUR 35 million have been allocated for soft measures, to support CoVEs in developing their capacity to provide high quality, modern and innovative VET to students while meeting the dynamically changing requirements of the labour market. The support can be categorised in three:

- **Learning**: develop school curricula and programmes, apply innovative teaching and learning methods, increase qualifications of teachers in partnerships with businesses and higher education institutions (HEIs) and implement a quality indicator framework and surveys from the graduate tracking mechanism;

- **Mobilities**: initiate international mobilities and exchanges of teachers and trainers between CoVEs, vocational high school and businesses;

- **Collaboration and partnerships**: develop long-term partnerships with HEIs, scientific and research organisations and businesses, support sector-based and regional cooperation, mobilise economic and social partners and educational institutions to create local skills ecosystems, develop international cooperation with other CoVEs to improve quality of teaching and learning practices and raise VET attractiveness by information and communication activities, professional competitions and organise the professional skills week.

Examples of activities

CoVEs will serve as regional hubs and leaders for students of other VET schools to have extra-curricular activities, use the equipment and for teachers to acquire qualifications. Teachers in CoVEs will have a knowledge transfer role and be in charge of organising trainings for the schools of their cluster (regional or sectoral). Two CoVEs were represented during the Peer Review and gave a brief overview of their school and development as part of the VET reforms:

- The **vocational school for computer programming and innovations in Burgas** offers training for graphic design, computer networks, programming, artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics. The CoVE is supported by a school board with representatives of IT developer and HEIs, which organises sponsor activities and help to develop VET programmes. The RRF funding was used notably to build a high technology centre for computer sciences, with laboratories dedicated to robotics, AI, design and gaming, in collaboration with the MES and the city of Burgas. The CoVE is also associated with Sofia university and will work in partnership with various IT stakeholders in the region. The school includes sports in curricula, which is appreciated by employers who rate high the personal skills of students.

- The **vocational high school of woodworking and construction 'Tsar Ivan Asen II' in Haskovo** will offer training in computer science, construction, production technologies (wood, paper, plastic and glass) and forestry. The CoVE has partnerships with similar schools and HEIs (e.g. Association of Schools of Civil Engineering in Bulgaria, Association of Schools of Agriculture, Forestry and Furniture, Sofia University of Forestry) as well as businesses (e.g. Chamber of Woodworking and Furniture Industry, Construction Chamber). The CoVE is working on the development of its institutional capacity with international partnerships and educational networks. With the RRF, the CoVE is also benefiting from the construction of a new building with high-tech equipment, including a laboratory of embedded control systems, a design studio, a laboratory to test building material and a geodesk laboratory.

Peer Discussions

The peers discussed the role of CoVEs in QA assurance processes and approaches for strengthening CoVE capacity to act as leaders and innovators at regional level. At the end of the meeting, the peer reviewers shared their initial feedback.

Peers stressed that the number of functions of the CoVEs was already sufficient, and prior to defining, their functions it might be worthwhile to define their intended impact and target groups, based on their capacities and development needs. Development plans were mentioned as a potential instrument to support CoVEs in that regard.

Peers also believed that the role of partnerships should be strengthen in the future activities of the CoVEs to ensure their leadership position. CoVEs would benefit from training when it comes to management. Peers suggested that CoVEs could take the responsibility for rather transversal topics, such as graduate tracking or career guidance, which have similar methodology between schools.

When it comes to the role of CoVES in QA, peers suggested that the QA system could be strengthened at national level first, with the use of the EQAVET framework to complement the QA cycle. At CoVE level, self-assessment and peer reviews could be introduced.

Next steps

A comprehensive feedback report will be drafted and shared with the Bulgarian hosts.

The EQAVET system level peer review initiative

The 2020 Council Recommendation on VET called upon the EQAVET Network to develop a specific methodology for EQAVET peer reviews, with the objective to support the improvement and transparency of quality assurance arrangements at system level in the Member States. Over the course of 2021, with the support of DG EMPL and the EQAVET Secretariat, the EQAVET Network agreed on a joint methodology and prepared a Peer Review Manual. A first cycle took place in 2022-2023 with Quality Assurance National Reference Points (EQAVET NRPs) from 21 Member States taking part in the EQAVET Network's peer review initiative. A second cycle is planned for 2024-26 with 20 participating NRPs. The Bulgarian peer review was the fourth out of five peer reviews that are scheduled to take place in 2024. Nine further peer reviews are planned to take place in 2025 and six in 2026.