

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 National context

North Macedonia is located on the Balkan Peninsula. It covers an area of 25 713 square kilometres, with 2 022 547 inhabitants according to the last population census conducted in 2002. It is organised in 80 municipalities and divided into 8 statistical regions where only 34 out of 1 762 settlements are cities. More than 30% of the total population lives in the capital Skopje. It is a multi-ethnic country with 64.17% of Macedonians, 25.17% of Albanians, 3.85% of Turks, 2.66% of Roma, 0.47% of Vlachs, 1.77% of Serbs and 0.84% of Bosniaks. In 2017, young people accounted for only 16% of the working age population, which is part of a continuing downward trend.

European Union (EU) membership is the main pathway motivating reforms towards achieving the country's strategic goals. North Macedonia concluded its Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2001 and was awarded EU candidate status in 2005. In 2006, it introduced a National Programme for the Adoption of the Acquis, which is revised and updated every year based on annual progress reports of the European Commission, as well as with priorities derived from the Accession Partnership Agreement adopted in 2008. Following the Agreement on Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation with Bulgaria and the Prespa¹ Agreement with Greece, the European Commission has acknowledged the country's efforts to build good-neighbourly relations and has decided, in 2020, to start negotiations, whereby the date for opening of the negotiating chapters will be further determined.

According to the State Statistical Office's estimated data, the GDP growth rate for the fourth quarter of 2019 was 3.4%. The highest growth was recorded in the following sectors: wholesale and retail trade, repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles, transport and storage, accommodation facilities and food service activities (8.1%); construction (6.7%); and information and communications (5.7%). The consumption of households increased by 3.5% in nominal terms, and her involvement in the GDP structure is 62.9%.

A number of initiatives have been launched in recent years to change the education legislation, decentralise education, reform and introduce new qualifications, strengthen the administrative and professional capacity of state institutions and so on. The state's efforts aim to find optimal solutions that will enable the creation of a functional education system.

1.2 Statistics

TABLE 1. POPULATION

	Size of population	Size of youth population (15–24, %)
2010	2 052 722	20.0
2014	2 065 769	18.1
2018	2 075 301	15.9

Source: Eurostat

¹ The Prespa agreement is an agreement reached on 12 June 2018 between Greece and the Republic of Macedonia, under the United Nations' auspices, resolving a long-standing dispute over the latter's name.

TABLE 2. EMPLOYMENT

	Employment rate (15+, %)	Employment rate of young people (15–24, %)
2010	37.9	15.4
2014	40.2	15.2
2018	43.7	17.4

Source: Eurostat

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

	Low	Medium	High
2010	27.6	53.8	18.7
2015	23.1	54.2	22.7
2018	18.9	56.1	25.0

Note: Low – International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 0–2; Medium – ISCED 3–4; High – ISCED 5–8

Source: Eurostat

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

	Upper secondary (ISCED 3) VET
2010	59.6
2012	59.3
2017	59.6

Source: State Statistical Office (Makstat), Primary, lower secondary and upper secondary schools at the beginning of the school year

TABLE 5. SPENDING ON GENERAL EDUCATION AND VET

	Spending on ISCED 3–4 all education (including VET) as % of GDP
2010	4.5
2014	4.3
2016	4.0

Source: Ministry of Education and Science

1.3 The VET system

Governance and management

The VET system is managed mainly by the Ministry of Education and Science. The Council for Vocational Education and the Council for Adult Education have advisory roles and ensure stakeholders' involvement/consultation. The following institutions are in charge of development, implementation, monitoring and provision of advice in the field of education: the Vocational Education

and Training Centre (VET Centre), the Centre for Adult Education, the State Examination Centre, the Bureau for the Development of Education and the State Education Inspectorate.

Financing

The Ministry of Education and Science covers most of the financing costs in vocational education, based on work programmes and annual budget approved by the government. As vocational schools operate under the responsibility of municipalities, the latter get grants from the government to cover running costs. The main criteria for allocating funds to municipalities is the number of students. Corrective formulas are applied for VET students and students with special needs.

Apart from funds from the state budget, vocational schools can obtain additional funds through projects (mostly implemented by international donors) and special funds from various ministries. Some schools generate income through delivering training for external users, various profitable services and sale of products.

Regulatory frameworks

The VET system is mainly regulated by the Law on Vocational Education and Training approved in 2006 and amended in 2015. Other legal acts such as the Law for Adult Education (2008) and the Law on Secondary Education (2016), which makes secondary education compulsory for all citizens, contribute to setting up the legal basis for the whole education and training system.

The government has recently adopted the Comprehensive Strategy for Education 2018–2025 that defines a vision of comprehensive, inclusive and integrated education focused on the learner, based on modern programmes for equipping future generations with knowledge, skills and competences in accordance with the needs of a democratic multicultural society, requirements of the labour market, and the new challenges in the global scientific-technological environment.

The strategy covers six pillars of the education system: (1) pre-school education, (2) primary education, (3) general secondary education, (4) vocational education and training, (5) higher education, research and innovation, and (6) learning and adult education. The seventh pillar covers general topics. Each pillar includes an overview of the situation and activities so far, identifies challenges, and defines priorities and expected outcomes.

In view of the reforms planned in the new strategy, in 2019 the government started to review the whole education legislative framework. This review – that should be completed in 2020 – concerns all major education laws, including the above-mentioned ones.

Main provider institution types

VET provision in the country is predominantly state-led. The main provider institutions in formal education are vocational schools, while in non-formal education these are training centres, companies, non-governmental organisations, various associations, etc.

Main provision/programme types

Work-based learning mainly takes place during formal upper secondary VET, in four-year programmes, which account for approximately 93% of all VET students, and three-year programmes. Most three-year programmes have recently been revised or newly developed. These programmes are based on occupational standards and learning outcomes and the share of practical training is 40%, one-third of which

is expected to be conducted at the workplace. The practical training in traditional (not reformed) four-year programmes varies between 6% and 22% and work-based learning is not compulsory. A reformed work-based learning model has been developed in the framework of the new four-year modular VET programmes (based on occupational standards and learning outcomes). These have been piloted in three reformed qualification programmes in six schools as of 2017 and started implementation at system level in 2019/20. In the new model, in-company training is mandatory for all students starting from year three.

The Law on Vocational Education and Training regulates work-based learning of VET students in companies. Companies are permitted to conduct practical training if they meet specific requirements related to training space, equipment and staff. The standards are established by the VET Centre and approved by the respective chambers. A formal apprenticeship system is not in place.

Main qualifications according to ISCED levels

There are 87 vocational schools, comprising both vocational schools and schools which provide VET programmes. Three types of VET qualifications – two-, three- and four-year programmes – are offered.

The two-year qualification programmes start at age 14/15 and equate to ISCED level 2. These programmes lead to a Diploma for completion of upper secondary education for vocational training. The graduates can either enter the labour market or continue education at a higher level (ISCED 3).

The three-year qualification programmes start at the age of 14/15 (2 922 students in 2017) and are ISCED level 3 vocational educational programmes. Graduates of these programmes have access to the four-year qualifications (after taking five exams) or to post-secondary education programmes at ISCED level 5B if certain preconditions are met.

The four-year qualification programmes also start at the age of 14/15 (39 674 students in 2017) and are ISCED level 4 vocational educational programmes. Graduates of these programmes have to pass a final exam to obtain a Diploma for Completing Vocational Education with a four-year duration or may pass the State Matura which provides access to ISCED tertiary levels. Alternatively, they can access post-secondary programmes (ISCED 5) or enter the labour market.

2. QUALITY ASSURANCE IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

2.1 Overview

The Strategy for Vocational Education and Training in the Context of Lifelong Learning 2013–2020 with associated Action Plan – Better Skills for a Better Tomorrow – aims to improve VET quality assurance, including alignment with the European Quality Assurance in VET (EQAVET) Reference Framework. The Comprehensive Strategy for Education (2018–25) supports the national qualifications framework (NQF) implementation, qualifications design, and initial and continuing VET (IVET/CVET) certification and related quality assurance measures.

Regulatory mechanisms for quality assurance in VET include:

- a national approach to quality assurance of IVET and CVET compatible with the EQAVET quality cycle;

- statutory registration of VET and CVET providers as a condition of accreditation by, inter alia, the Ministry of Education and Science, the Bureau for the Development of Education and the VET Centre;
- a prescribed procedure for the preparation and adoption of qualifications in vocational education;
- Ministry of Education and Science verification of curricula/programmes for formal VET, and Centre for Adult Education verification of curricula/programmes for non-formal learning;
- assessment of the achievement of competences in IVET carried out internally through continuous monitoring of students' progress throughout the entire education process, with learning outcomes being evaluated formatively and summatively;
- students in VET completing their education by passing the State Matura or final vocational exam;
- evaluation of learning outcomes in non-formal education by a heterogeneous commission with representatives from the provider institution, employers and education.

2.2 General information on quality assurance at VET system level

A national approach to quality assurance has been devised for IVET and CVET, independently of EQAVET, but compatible with the EQAVET quality circle. However, a comprehensive quality assurance system for VET needs to be developed.

2.3 Quality assurance related to key VET areas

Evidence – statistics, and research and development

Several institutions such as the Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Employment Service Agency (ESA) and the State Statistical Office are involved in skills intelligence.

ESA carries out regular research on employers' needs and vacancy monitoring. Within the Ministry of Labour 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 purpose of this survey is to detect short-term occupational shortages (deficient skills or occupations) which are used to structure ESA training programmes. However, the usefulness of the survey for anticipating future skills needs is limited for several reasons, including that it is limited to short-term skills needs and it is not relevant for higher education policy making.

The Ministry of Education and Science prioritises 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 labour demand. The Observatory carried out the first tracer study for 2014/15 graduates of VET and higher education institutions. The Observatory has also undertaken activities to develop a system of skills forecasting. The first report of the future skills' needs was prepared based on a simple forecasting model coupled with the Delphi method.

For the moment, there is no detailed and integrated analysis of the labour force survey data, job vacancy data, surveys on adult learning, or education supply (graduation and completion rates).

A well-functioning system for collecting data on labour demand as well as for forecasting future skills needs is still in the development phase.

Quality assurance and the qualifications cycle

There is a prescribed procedure for the design and adoption of VET qualifications.

To create a new qualification in formal education, different working groups comprising employers, teaching staff and university professors from relevant fields, and an advisor from the VET Centre have to be set up. These groups prepare the following documents: stakeholder initiative with justification, occupational standards, qualification standards, teaching plan, modules/programmes and an exam programme.

In non-formal education, occupational standards and a special adult education programme 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 centralised (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 programmes/modules, certification), assessment processes, competent authorities, institutions, bodies and commissions.

Quality assurance and VET provision/provider institutions

All vocational schools must undergo a self-assessment that covers the following seven: curricula and syllabi; students' achievement; learning and teaching; student support; school environment; resources; and management and administration. This self-assessment is complemented by an external assessment conducted by the State Examination Centre.

Quality assurance and VET teacher/trainer qualifications standards and continuing professional development

Teachers in VET should have a higher education qualification and should have passed a professional exam. A person with a non-pedagogic higher education qualification must have undergone pedagogic, psychological and methodological preparation in an accredited institution in order to become a teacher. For practical classes, the teacher may have a specialist secondary education with pedagogic, psychological and methodological preparation and must have passed the professional exam.

Teachers have a legal obligation to engage in at least 60 hours of internal and/or external continuing professional development every three academic years, while upgrading their portfolio.

On the basis of the Law on Secondary Education, the Ministry of Education and Science, in cooperation with the Bureau for the Development of Education, the VET Centre and the State Examination Centre, adopts the Annual Professional Programme for the improvement and advancement of teachers. Schools have an obligation to prepare professional development plans, arising from the self-evaluation of the school, as part of the school's development plan.

The quality of VET teachers and trainers has been outlined in the Comprehensive Strategy for Education for 2018–2025, which points out the need to improve teachers' knowledge of modern technologies related to the subjects taught and managerial capacity of vocational school principals.

The Chamber of Commerce and Crafts organises and the VET Centre implements training for company mentors in accordance with the standard and the training programme adopted by the Ministry of Education and Science.

3. STRENGTHS, DEVELOPMENTS, NEEDS

Interesting developments have taken place that will boost the quality of VET, namely: a VET legislation, a strategic commitment towards the development of VET, the involvement of employers in the process of education and training, the establishment of the NQF, the reform of some existing qualifications and the introduction of new ones based on labour market needs, the introduction of modular programmes based on learning outcomes, and the promotion of work-based learning.

However, the system is still facing some challenges in relation to improving VET quality assurance, which include the need to:

- optimise the network of vocational schools;
- progress with the development of an integrated labour market information system and management information system;
- continue to develop qualifications in accordance with NQF principles and quality assurance requirements;
- improve the monitoring and evaluation of VET teachers' professional development and the competences of vocational schools' management;
- establish a comprehensive system of professional orientation and counselling for students in VET;
- ensure that internal and external evaluation are related to vocational schools' quality improvement processes;
- ensure that processes exist at VET system level to analyse external evaluation reports to inform identification of priority areas for policy interventions;
- increase the attractiveness of VET and strengthen its function to prevent social exclusion;
- improve the material, technical and financial conditions of vocational schools.

4. GOOD PRACTICE EXAMPLE: A NATIONAL APPROACH TO THE EVALUATION OF VOCATIONAL SCHOOLS

A national approach to the evaluation of vocational schools is in place.

A wide range of state and non-state actors were involved in developing the statutory national approach to the evaluation of VET providers that is in line with the EQAVET Recommendation.

Quality assessment and quality improvement are based on the Law on General Education, while forms/methods are governed by relevant rules on the content, forms and methods of the quality assessment of education institutions. The framework for quality assurance in VET comprises two processes: external and internal evaluation, thus providing a systematic approach to quality.

External integral evaluation of vocational schools is carried out by the State Education Inspectorate, which performs supervision/quality control in VET, based on the quality indicators developed for schools. In line with the Law on the Bureau for the Development of Education, the Bureau's counsellors provide monitoring of planning and implementation of teaching units of general education subjects in secondary vocational schools, student assessment and a stimulating environment for teachers.

In addition, counselors from the VET Centre hold advisory-consultative annual meetings with vocational schools to help improving the quality of the educational process.

In the internal evaluation/self-evaluation process, the schools apply procedures for monitoring the quality of teaching. Each school has to prepare a three-year professional development plan based on the outcomes of the self-evaluation.

The methodology for internal evaluation includes questionnaires classified by key areas, and indicators relating to teaching, learning and student achievement. The evaluation is carried out by school principals and specially formed teams. The evaluation results can be either not achieved, partially achieved or fully achieved.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

CVET	Continuing vocational education and training
EQAVET	European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training
ESA	Employment Service Agency
ETF	European Training Foundation
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross domestic product
ISCED	International Standard Classification of Education
IVET	Initial vocational education and training
NQF	National qualifications framework
VET	Vocational education and training

Where to find out more

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