

Improving the quality of basic skills education for adults

A review of European best practices on quality assurance

This document reviews the existing practices on quality assurance for non-formal adult education across European countries with the aim of informing the debate in the Dutch context. Particular attention is given to accreditation and quality labels processes, evaluations and continuous self-improvement, and additional support structures, such as validation of prior learning and lifelong guidance, the professionalization of the teaching staff, and the direct involvement of social partners in quality assurance.

1 Introduction

Adults with low skills are most at risk of experiencing a deterioration in their labour market prospects and social exclusion in everyday life. Indeed, not only the demand for their skills is decreasing, as many jobs they traditionally do are automated or off-shored in advanced economies (OECD, 2019), but such low activity rates often mask discouragement and result in disengagement and social exclusion (Cedefop, 2017). Investing in adult learning and continuous education is paramount to ensure that low-skilled adults are equipped with the necessary competencies to participate in today's societies and economies. The potential benefits of adult training are numerous and include greater employability and access to better quality jobs, increased productivity, improved civic participation, and – most importantly – a greater sense of individual fulfilment and wellbeing.

Yet, in order to achieve these positive gains, education needs to be of high quality and ensure successful learning outcomes for all participants. Indeed, following the recent rise in interest and participation in adult education, the demand for accountability has also increased, and guaranteeing quality provision is becoming gradually more important in the field of education. Quality provision is also seen as a key tool to create trust in the adult training system, especially for non-formal and informal learning, as well as a marketing tool for providers to attest their prestige and credibility. Whether their funds are private or public, providers' efforts towards greater quality of education help them remaining accountable to their stakeholders and students. Overall, a culture of continuous programme improvement contributes to promoting providers' future performance and creating a virtuous circle in the whole education sector.

What is quality education and how can quality be ensured in the field of adult training? This report presents an overview of quality assurance systems designed and implemented across Europe and their success factors. The goal of the study is to concisely summarize the main actions that policy makers and a variety of stakeholders have implemented in different countries in order to inform the public debate on quality assurance in basic skills education for adults in the Netherlands. The remainder of the report is structured as follows. The next section provides some background information necessary to put the study into context, including definitions of the main concepts under scrutiny and the challenges faced by institutions in setting up quality assurance systems for adult education. Common practices used to ensure quality in adult training across European countries are then examined and carefully detailed, distinguishing between those imposing minimum quality requirements to providers (such as accreditation) and those relying on less strict requirements (e.g. self-evaluations, quality guidelines, etc.). The importance of adopting a holistic approach to quality in adult education is emphasized, with a discussion of the role played by additional support structures, such as the validation of prior learning, the professionalization of the teaching staff, and the involvement of social partners. A summary section concludes.

2 Setting the scene

Given the abstract nature of the term “quality”, definitions have been scattered throughout the education literature. To promote a common understanding, in 2011 the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) of the European Union created a glossary on the terminologies used for quality in education and training. Quality is defined as “all characteristics of an entity that bear on its ability to satisfy stated and implied needs” or “the degree to which a set of inherent characteristics fulfils requirements” (Cedefop, 2011). The safeguard of quality has been labelled quality assurance, that represents all “activities involving planning, implementation, evaluation, reporting, and quality improvement, implemented to ensure that all education and training (content of programmes, curricula, assessment and validation of learning outcomes, etc.) meet the quality requirements expected by stakeholders” (Cedefop, 2011). Although related, quality assurance and quality control do not overlap and should not be confused: quality assurance focuses on making sure that the processes to achieve certain results are of high quality, while quality control focuses on the end result itself.

Quality is typically assured in formal adult learning (Broek and Buiskool, 2013). In fact, despite being often characterized by different sector-based regimes, all formal adult education programmes generally have a quality component, be it in the form of self-evaluations, external evaluations, or the adoption of existing quality systems (such as ISO). Furthermore, the European Union and its institutions have been quite active in developing quality standards and guidelines in higher education and vocation training during the past few years. For example, in 2009 the European Parliament approved the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET (EQAVET) in order to ensure quality of VET provision, while the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area have been adopted in 2005 and recently revised in 2015.

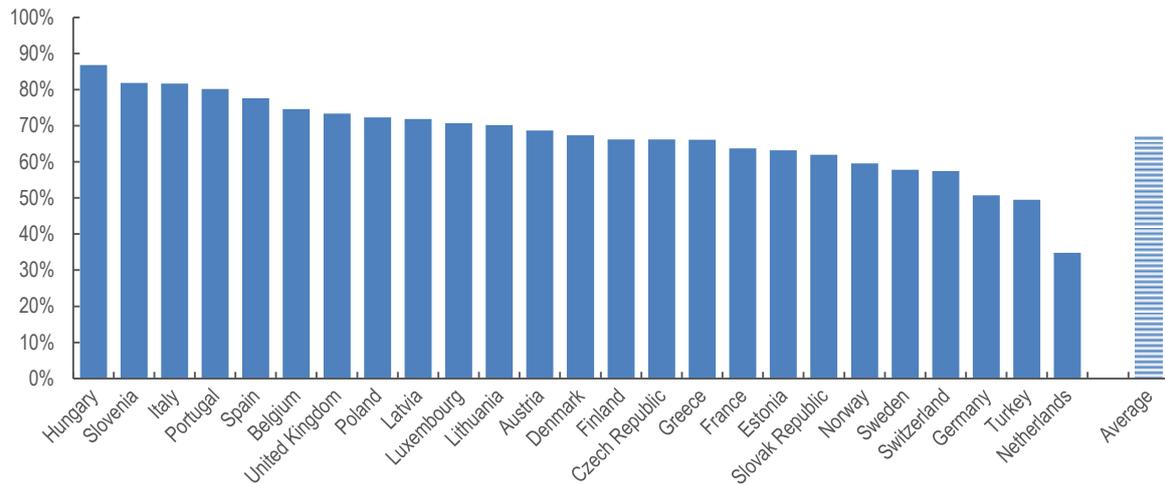
In contrast, defining in a standardized way the concept of quality in non-formal adult education has proved to be very challenging – let alone assuring quality throughout the whole sector. As a result, quality assurance mechanisms in non-formal and informal education differ from country to country, and how quality is achieved and monitored can be very different (Prisacariu, 2014). Very often, countries do not have any national-level quality framework in place for non-formal education. When they do, these quality frameworks typically emanate from bottom-up initiatives by the providers themselves.

A significant obstacle to the development of a national quality assurance framework in adult education is the fragmentation of the numerous different approaches to quality of the sector itself (European Commission, 2013). Such a diverse landscape makes it difficult to stimulate quality development, especially in countries where governance is highly decentralised. In fact, whilst in several European countries policies for adult learning are set at national level, responsibilities can be decentralised to regional and local levels, as is the case for example in Austria, France, Denmark, Sweden, Norway and the Netherlands. Other important challenges to the development of quality assurance in non-formal adult education are linked to the lack of monitoring data, an element necessary to understand the participation and learning outcomes of students, and the inadequate accessibility of validation of prior learning and lifelong guidance.

As a result of these challenges in ensuring good quality of adult education, one in three participants in non-formal training in Europe do not think that the training helped them achieve positive employment outcomes, as defined as getting a new job, higher wages, promotion in the job, new task, and better

performance in the present job (Figure 2.1). The situation is especially critical in the Netherlands, where only 35% of learners state that they have experienced positive employment outcomes following non-formal training participation. Reviewing how different countries in Europe are attempting to tackle the issue of quality in non-formal adult education assumes particular significance to draw lessons for the Dutch case.

Figure 2.1. Experience of positive employment outcomes following training (% of participants)



Note: Refers to non-formal job-related learning. Positive employment outcomes are defined as getting a (new) job, higher salary/wages, promotion in the job, new task, better performance in the present job.

Source: Eurostat AES data (2016).

3 Ensuring quality in adult training through accreditation and quality labels

Accreditation as a tool to foster a quality culture

A tool that has been extensively used throughout Europe to ensure quality of adult education is accreditation. Accreditation procedures are “the formal recognition by an appropriate authority that a body or a person is competent to carry out specific tasks” (Cedefop, 2011), and aim at certifying that relevant quality actions are conducted. Providers of adult training need to meet certain minimum quality standards in order to be accredited or certified, thereby ensuring that customers are offered effective and efficient training. In addition, other strengths of the accreditation framework include the fact that it conveys an evaluation tool to providers themselves, as well as a monitoring tool for policy makers. European countries have often made accreditation compulsory in order to receive public funding, while in some other contexts accreditation is untied from funding and has only the signalling purpose of developing a quality culture.

A well-known and relatively long-standing accreditation framework that is often necessary for accessing public funds is Switzerland’s *eduQua*. At the turn of the millennium, the adult education sector in Switzerland was highly heterogeneous, with the market for adult learning dominated by many small private providers and no nation-wide regulation (in the Swiss federal system, responsibility for education lies with the 26 cantons). As a consequence, in 2000 the Swiss Federation for Adult Learning (SVEB) – an umbrella non-governmental organisation representing both public and private institutions, associations, and personnel managers – decided to introduce the quality label *eduQua*, with the support of the State Secretary for Economic Affairs, the cantons, and the Swiss Association of Employment Departments.

The main goal of the certification is to ensure quality in adult continuing education by imposing minimum standards to providers. The certification process also includes on-site visits and yearly intermediate audits. All providers of adult education can apply to the accreditation, including those involved in the “re-education” of unemployed people. An important feature of the programme is that the *eduQua* label certifies the whole institution, and not its single courses. Seven *eduQua* agencies conduct the certification, and over 1 000 Swiss adult education providers are currently certified throughout all over the country. The certification lasts three years, after which the provider must undergo a renewal. Each canton can choose whether providers need to have the *eduQua* certification to receive public funds, and at the moment this is the case in almost half of the cantons.

With its two decades of experience, *eduQua* has proved to be very successful. Its main strengths lie in the fact that its scope is well defined, with the precise and clear objective of certifying the quality of methodology and didactics of adult training only, and that it is managed by a well-respected main actor (SVEB), which represents the interest of all stakeholders involved. The *eduQua* initiative itself is

evaluated regularly, thereby increasing its effectiveness. As a result, the label has received wide support from both policy makers, educational institutions and the private sector over the years.

The importance of quality assurance systems having the buy-in of all relevant partners can be illustrated with the case of the *Greta-Plus* label in France. The label was created in 2001 by the Ministry of Education with the aim of promoting the Greta (public structures responsible for adult learning as part of the national education system) against private sector competition. The label emphasized the pedagogical dimension of education and the need to provide adults with tailor-made training whereby the learning paths and modalities are individualized. Whilst not compulsory, the government fostered the certification as a means of quality assurance. Yet, after over a decade, only 43 of the 137 Greta had the *Greta-Plus* label by 2013 (France Strategie, 2013). Such somewhat poor implementation of the *Greta-Plus* label was partly due to a lack of clear objectives and a limited direct relevance in the labour markets. Indeed, according to Broek and Buiskool (2013), local businesses – the most important customers of Greta – saw little value in this label, thereby limiting educational providers' incentives in applying for it. Moreover, it has also been argued that some Greta preferred not to request a *Greta-Plus* label in order to avoid the involvement of the central government in their functioning.

Consequently, the *Greta-Plus* label has been discontinued and replaced by the new *Eduform* label in 2017. Still developed by the Ministry of Education, this new accreditation system promoting quality in the adult education sector can be attributed to both public and private adult training organizations. The *Eduform* label has the twofold purpose of boosting centres' attractiveness and quality by guaranteeing compliance with the AFNOR BP X50-762 standards of continuous training services. It is issued for three years after the completion of a national audit, although each year a follow-up audit is organized to confirm or not the attribution of the label. The National Council for Employment, Training and Vocational Guidance (CNEFOP) has registered *Eduform* on the list of certifications and labels eligible for the Personal Training Account (CPF), meaning that prospective learners can apply to external financing to take up courses in institutions with the *Eduform* label.

Fostering a quality culture is also the goal of the Offering Quality Education to Adults (OQEA) project in Slovenia. Developed by the Slovenian Institute of Adult Education in 1999, the OQEA initiative aims at advising educational organisations on how to self-evaluate their own quality and determine their future development. OQEA has a logo that all providers of adult education can obtain if they prove that in the past three years they have carried out self-evaluation processes systematically and produced a written action plan based on the derived in-depth self-evaluation. The purpose of such a quality logo is to reward adult training providers who care about how they do their work and are prepared to constantly learn, test new findings, systematically assess the effects of their work and implement measures to develop quality (Broek and Buiskool, 2013). Currently, approximately 40 providers can display the OEQA logo.

Similarly to the Netherlands, the adult education sector in Germany is less regulated by the state than other areas of education, with the rationale that local providers can more easily meet the needs of the diverse and rapidly changing demands of adult learning. Yet, in the past few years, there has been a drive towards the certification of non-formal and informal learning as an incentive for people to engage more fully in society that has led to the elaboration of a nationwide certification process for adult learning provision in 2012. Providers now have to be certified by specific bodies (*Fachkundige Stellen*) if they want to carry out employment promotion measures themselves or have them carried out on their behalf. The German Accreditation Body (*Deutsche Akkreditierungsstelle*) is in charge of accrediting the certification bodies to guarantee their quality. The certification can be granted for a maximum of five years.

The admission procedure is structured in three stages. The first step involves the approval of the provider, and is mandatory for all providers; the prerequisites are efficiency and reliability, personnel and technical suitability, a quality assurance system (external quality management system certifications and association certifications are taken into account during the examination) and appropriate contractual

conditions for the participants. The second step involves the approval of the measures and courses; the following criteria are used: whether the course concept is likely to lead to successful participation, whether it is expedient, economical and whether it offers appropriate conditions for participation. The third stage is only necessary for providers of continuing vocational training and includes additional requirements for them.

It is worth discussing the case of Austria more at length, as this is particularly similar to the Dutch context. The Austrian adult education landscape is characterized by few national regulations and a large variety of stakeholders. No unified quality assurance system for non-formal adult learning exists, but a range of different instruments has been put in place in the last decade to ensure quality education. Two initiatives, in particular, have drawn great attention in the international debate on quality assurance: the Initiative for Adult Education and the label *Ö-Cert*.

The Initiative for Adult Education has been established by the Federal Ministry of Education together with the nine Austrian provinces in 2012, with the goal of creating high-quality courses enabling low-skilled adults to continue – and, in many cases, finish – their education. In addition to providing free courses for all participants, an important feature of the project is the implementation of consistent quality guidelines for all courses in the country. An accreditation is necessary for providers to take part in the initiative and it is based on three quality criteria: (1) fulfilment of general requirements, (2) creation of an appropriate programme concept, and (3) fulfilment of the project guidelines concerning the qualification of the trainers and counsellors. Once the accreditation is given, the provider can apply for public funding. Typically, for an approval to be granted, not only should the quality guidelines be met, but the programme should also fit with the needs of the participants in the region where it is conducted – in other words, funds are only granted when there is a need and a target group for the accredited offer. Providers taking part in the Initiative commit themselves to continuous monitoring and evaluation. This whole accreditation process is undertaken by six selected adult education experts, and a monitoring board supervises the process and the results.

While the Adult Education Initiative provides funds to create high-quality courses when there is a need and a specific target group, *Ö-Cert* is a quality framework (“umbrella label”) for all adult education providers. Also developed in 2011 by the Federal Ministry of Education and the nine Austrian provinces in cooperation with important stakeholders of adult education – such as the Conference of Adult Education Organizations – the aim of the label *Ö-Cert* was to reduce the administrative burdens that both providers, prospective learners and public authorities used to encounter in identifying quality training. In fact, depending on the definition used, there were between 1 800 and 3 000 providers in Austria in 2007, with offers that were often difficult to compare and little transparency for customers (Gruber, Brünner and Huss, 2009). With the recent increase of attention on quality issues, providers had also gradually started to adopt a multitude of quality labels, systems and seals (e.g. ISO, EFQM, LQW, ...), making it so difficult for the government to assess their quality when applying for public funding that even provinces started to create their own quality controls. The establishment of a single quality label was thus important not only to encourage homogeneity in quality assurance, but also to better manage the sector.

At its inception, *Ö-Cert* therefore had a challenging task: ensuring quality across educational institutions without being an additional quality management system and respecting the diversity of the providers and of the quality systems that they already had in place. To address this, *Ö-Cert* not only committed to safeguard the principle of autonomy of providers, but – to not overburden all actors involved with a new quality management system – it pledged to be only a system of recognition and certification of quality without own audits. In practice, in order to be accredited with the *Ö-Cert* label, providers only need to have one of eleven *Ö-Cert*-approved Quality Management Systems or Quality Assurance Procedures. Hence, by using the concept of “umbrella label”, this top-down procedure manages to respect the autonomy of decisions and use of different quality assurance systems by providers, while at the same time being an effective, simple and cheap model of introducing a transparent tool of quality in diverse contexts of the adult learning sector (Broek and Buiskool, 2013).

Box 3.1. Quality assurance systems outside Europe: The case of Korea and Chile

Training providers in Korea wishing to deliver government-funded training programmes need to be certified. The duration for which certification is granted depends on the outcome of the quality evaluation. The Korean Skills Quality Authority (KSQA) is in charge of the evaluation of vocational training providers, training programmes and trainees. The KSQA conducts an in-depth evaluation of institutions, including on financial soundness, capability to provide training and training performance, and grants certified grades based on the evaluation outcomes. These grades are necessary to provide government-funded training, and better performing institutions receive grades that are valid for longer periods (up to five years). The KSQA also screens training programmes in terms of content, methods, teacher quality, facilities and equipment, and past training outcomes. For the evaluation of the trainees, the KSQA assesses whether the participants who completed training courses have acquired the expected skills. Courses that have positive outcomes in the trainee evaluation can receive additional financial support. The results from the trainee evaluation also feed into the training providers' evaluation.

In Chile, providers of training financed by the public employment services have to adhere to a quality norm that was set in 2015. Certification based on this quality norm is done by private entities (*Organismos certificadores de servicios*), which in turn are supervised by a public entity (*Instituto Nacional de Normas*). The aims of the norm are: to ensure that providers' management prioritise the satisfaction of the participants to the training activities; to ensure that providers' management invest in the development of trainers' skills; and to periodically generate information on providers' financial results. When the norm started to be enforced in 2017, this led to the closure of around 800 training providers. Complementary quality control mechanisms existing in Chile include ex-ante evaluations of training courses, evaluation of teaching staff (where studies, teaching and work experience of course trainers are evaluated), and on-site audit processes.

Source: OECD (2019).

Common practices in accreditation processes

Although each quality assurance system has a different functioning, some practices are common to most accreditation processes. Indeed, four steps are regularly at the basis of accreditation and quality labels systems (Broek and Buischool, 2013). Firstly, providers of adult training must prepare their application dossier, filling up various forms and submitting a request to be quality assured. Frequently through self-evaluation reports, providers must assure that they comply with the standards requested by the accreditation organism. In a second step, the responsible body – be it a public, semi-public or private agency – carries out an external evaluation to assess the fulfilment of the required quality standards. This assessment can involve both on-site visits and inspections, expert consultations, and a validation of providers' self-report. The third step is the approval of the application by the responsible body and the provision of the quality seal. Note that in many cases, the approval process by the accreditation organism is not merely “approved” or “not approved”, but it involves scales of merit or conditional approval decisions.¹ The fourth and last common step in accreditation processes is the monitoring and

¹ For example, in Switzerland the *eduQua* label can be granted unconditionally or conditionally under certain conditions that are clearly stipulated. Similarly, in France the committee in charge of assigning adult education labels has four options: a) grant the label for 3 years; b) deny the label; c) demand additional information; and d) demand another audit.

follow-up of the approved quality seal. This may involve annual reports, on-site visits and – typically – the renewal of the label if the accreditation was valid only for a limited time period.

For instance, in order to obtain the *Ö-Cert* label in Austria, candidate providers follow the steps outlined above. First, the candidate institution needs to provide evidence of its identification as a provider of adult education, thereby fulfilling basic requirements concerning its organization, offer and principles of ethics. In a second phase, one of the *Ö-Cert* agency and an accreditation group of experts control through a checklist that the application of the provider is valid. The most important selection criterion here is the existence of external audits. This step includes confirming that providers have one of the eleven valid quality management systems or quality assurance procedures, according to the *Ö-Cert* list. If the request of accreditation is accepted, the provider is registered as one of the quality providers of adult education in Austria and receives the *Ö-Cert* label (after payment of a small administration fee of €100). As the *Ö-Cert* certification is only an umbrella label, its duration is the same as the duration of the quality management system that the providers have obtained (with a 6-month tolerance limit), although the validity period is not made visible to the public.

In a similar vein, providers of adult training applying for the *eduQua* label in Switzerland have to compile an application dossier following specific guidelines, where they need to prove their fulfilment of the minimum standards set by the certifying agency. Where the process differs from the Austrian initiative is in the presence of an on-site audit, which in the Swiss case has to be conducted before the evaluation of the dossier. The *eduQua* label is only awarded after the provider successfully passes the on-site audit and the dossier evaluation.

Typical quality criteria used in accreditation processes

While, as shown above, most accreditation processes follow similar steps, identifying common quality standards used in the various accreditation systems is no easy task. In fact, detailed information about the specific criteria are often not publicly available, and – even when it is – quality standards largely vary across contexts and quality assurance systems. Some focus more on accountability of the provider in terms of efficiency of how the public funds are spent, others concentrate on the quality of the didactics, and others instead prefer to focus on the quality of the learning outcomes.

Overall, four broad categories of quality criteria can be identified in accreditation processes (Broek and Buiskool, 2013):

- First, quality standards on the organizational structure and management of the providers are almost ubiquitous in all accreditation processes across Europe. Typically, this set of criteria aims at ensuring that the provider has a well-defined and appropriate mission, its organisation is structured properly with solid management practices, the physical infrastructure of the provider is suitable for adult learning, and its finances are administered efficiently.
- Second, quality standards on the teaching staff of the providers are also frequently encompassed in most accreditation processes. Such type of standards includes setting minimum qualifications or competence levels and offering further training for the adult trainers themselves.
- The quality of didactics and the learning process are at the centre of a third set of quality criteria, although not all accreditation processes stress this aspect equally. The goal of these specific standards is to make sure the educational offer of the provider fits the needs of adult learners. This third category of quality criteria includes for example guidance and counselling for learners, complaints procedures, assessments of the quality of exams, education and training methods, etc.

- Finally, the fourth group of standards used in most accreditation processes to evaluate providers relates to their training outcomes. Relevant criteria include follow-up evaluations of training programmes, feedback from students, labour market performance of past learners, etc.

The case of the *eduQua* label in Switzerland is well apt to illustrate in practice the sort of quality standards that accreditation processes use to evaluate adult education providers. Indeed, its certification uses 22 well-defined standards grouped in six criteria to measure the quality of a provider, which are all listed in a publicly available manual (EduQua, 2012). For each of the 22 standards, the manual precisely defines what are the objectives of the standard and why it has been selected, what are the requirements to respect, what are the indicators that can be used to evaluate the standard, what are the documents that the provider needs to send to the *eduQua* agency during the certification process, and what are the documents that will be needed when the accreditation agency will perform an on-site audit at the provider's premises. The list of 6 criteria and 22 standards is presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. The quality criteria behind the *eduQua* label in Switzerland

Criterion	Standards
Training offers that satisfy the needs of the customer and society at large	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Definition of courses 2. Learning objectives 3. Learning content 4. Verification of the achieved learning success 5. Evaluation of courses
A transparent presentation of continuing education opportunities, the institution and its guidelines	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Information about the provider 7. Information about the courses
A training that allows, facilitates and promotes the success of learning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Selection of participants 9. Lesson planning 10. Teaching and learning methods 11. Teaching instruments and media 12. Transfer of learning
Qualified trainers, with high skills in methodology and didactics as well as in their specialization	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 13. Qualifications 14. Activities of continuing education and development 15. Feedback for trainers
Conventions and commitments that are reviewed and respected; continuous development of quality that is ensured	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 16. Quality assurance and quality development
A management that guarantees customer-oriented, economical, efficient and effective services	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 17. Institutional mission statement and andragogic guiding principles 18. Management instruments 19. Organisation 20. Classrooms and infrastructure 21. Customer satisfaction 22. Monitoring and further development

Source: EduQua (2012).

Box 3.2. The importance of details: Evidence from *eduQua* accreditation manual

To explain the level of granularity that the *eduQua* manual provides for each standard, let us take the example of standard 21, “Customer satisfaction”. As argued in the manual, this standard has been chosen in order to provide comprehensive and good quality customer services. Participant satisfaction should not be limited to aspects of training, but also take into account other important features of the institution. The requirements for this standard are: (1) regular surveys on the public image of the provider and its services from the clientele are made and include evaluation of the provider’s management and infrastructure (such as evaluation of the secretariat, the website, information on courses, communication, registration procedures, reception, classrooms and workrooms, etc.), course evaluations, indications on the actions taken following the evaluations (responsibilities, tools and deadlines); (2) there are appropriate tools to assess customer satisfaction; (3) there is a complaint service, and complaints are handled quickly and constructively.

The indicators used to evaluate this standard are: (I) the results of the evaluation of customer satisfaction are understandable and correspond to the directives of the planning; (II) improvement measures are identified, defined and implemented, while lessons learned from evaluations are integrated into the guidelines and tools used; (III) the positive effects of the improvement measures can be demonstrated; (IV) following this process, courses can be cancelled in order to protect customers.

The documents that the provider needs to include in its application package should contain measurement, evaluation and development of customer satisfaction of last three years, and the exact instruments and methods used. When the *eduQua* agency carries out the on-site audit, it checks not only the result of the assessment of customer satisfaction, but also the improvement measures implemented. Moreover, the manual also provides additional questions and themes that may be equally discussed during the on-site visit, such as the important additional benefits for participants (e.g. free parking near the institution, cafeteria, etc.) and how can these be taken into account in the customer satisfaction evaluation.

As shown, the level of details for each criteria used in the *eduQua* certification process is very high, and it is important to acknowledge the effort put by the decision makers behind the *eduQua* label in providing such clear and transparent evaluation guidelines.

Source: EduQua (2012).

The basic requirements for acceptance into the quality framework for adult education *Ö-Cert* in Austria are slightly less detailed yet still clearly defined. The provider has to fulfil five categories of basic requirements: general basic requirements, basic requirements concerning the organization of the provider, basic requirements concerning the offers of the provider, basic requirements concerning principles of ethics and democracy, and basic requirements with regard to quality (Table 3.2).

Table 3.2. The quality criteria behind the *Ö-Cert* label in Austria

Criterion	Standards
General basic requirements, central paradigms of the adult education provider	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic philosophy of education - Education has its own value in any stages of life: It affects political involvement, social life, professional efficiency and personal identity in a positive way. Education can be considered more than instrumental learning qualifications and further training. • Lifelong learning - Lifelong learning embraces all formal, non-formal and informal

	<p>acquisition of knowledge in various educational centres reaching from childhood up to the stage of retirement. Lifelong learning can be defined as any act of learning with a definite goal, which serves the purpose of continuous improvement of knowledge, abilities and competences. Here “learning” is viewed as a processing of information and experiences into knowledge, insight and competences. Verification of the achieved learning success</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult education/Continuing education and training - Adult education (synonymous with continuing education and training) includes all forms of formal, non-formal and informal goal-orientated learning by adults after completion of a first stage of education varying in length and irrespective of the level that has been reached during this process. Adult education/Continuing education and training involves all vocational, political and cultural teaching and learning processes or those, which offer basic education for adults and are controlled within a public, private and economic context by others or oneself. Adult education-orientated action is based on political strategies in education, social responsibility, organisational structures as well as legal and financial requirements. • Definition of providers - Any type of organisation (associations, businesses, institutes, coordinating organisations of networks and cooperation), which offers adult education/continuing education and training according to the definitions set out above, can be termed providers.
Basic requirements with regard to organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The organisation requires at least one educational offer in Austria, which is characterised by regularity, plans and systematisation and must be communicated in public; transparency of provision is prevalent. • Adult education/ Continuing education and training is the core task of the organisation. • At the time of application the organisation is required to have provided measures in adult education/continuing education and training for at least 3 economic or calendar years. • The head of the organisation or at least one employee must have undertaken thorough pedagogical education or further training and have appropriate work experience of two years. • Terms of business of the organisation need to be publicly transparent and made available to the public.
Basic requirements with regard to provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In general, the organisation's provision of education is made available publicly or if the need arises is aimed at target groups (such as women, the elderly, migrants, trainings for librarians, trade unions). • Offers of formal education at schools and universities are accepted, if they are aimed at adults with the purpose of gaining further qualifications within the framework of continuing education and training. Undergraduate courses of study at public and private universities, universities for applied science and pedagogical universities do not fall into this category. • Organisations with their offers feel under an obligation to the set out democratic values of the responsible bodies and sponsors of Ö-Cert (federal states and federal government). • The public libraries are key representatives in adult education/ continuing education and training. In accordance with Ö-Cert only organisations which provide offers (such as courses, readings) with a focus on active impartation of knowledge are acknowledged. • Organisations, which primarily offer trainings with a focus on particular products and/or events, which are primarily tailored to customers and attract new members, are excluded by Ö-Cert. Trainings in the field of users' programmes such as Microsoft Office do not fall into the category "trainings with a focus on particular products". • Organisations, which provide individual guidance and counselling in the field of education and training as an applied method within the framework of an educational process, are acknowledged in accordance with Ö-Cert. Organisations, whose offers are exclusively aimed at individuals on a one-to-one basis, are not taken into consideration.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisations, which primarily provide activities that solely encourage the individual to engage in sports and exercise and offer leisure time activities, are not taken into consideration in accordance with Ö-Cert. • Organisations, which provide cultural offers, are taken into consideration in accordance with Ö-Cert, if the events serve the purpose of imparting cultural knowledge. Performances of any kind and exhibitions are not included. • In a religious, ideological context the organisation's intent of impartation must exceed the practical application in accordance with Ö-Cert, such as events, where propagation of faith is prevalent, are not taken into consideration.
Basic requirements with regard to ethical and democratic principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The organisation acknowledges the current Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This ensures that all persons irrespective of their gender and age, their education, their social and professional status, their political and ideological beliefs and their nationality have access to education. During the educational process, freedom of speech is guaranteed and encouraged. • The organisation is under an obligation to democracy. According to this self-explanatory term no antidemocratic, racist, anti-Semitic and sexist materials and behaviours are accepted, neither are such materials and behaviours, which discriminate against other individuals. These materials, tendencies and behaviours are counteracted in the educational sessions. In addition the organisation does not provide any space for the propaganda of antidemocratic ideologies, it does not offer any possibility for other forms of propaganda, agitation or advertisement of products or the recruitment of "clientele" for political, religious and other ideological groups.
Basic requirements with regard to quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The organisation must hold an external certificate of quality, which has been approved of by Ö-Cert.

Source: Ö-Cert (2019).

Yet, not all accreditation initiatives need to have such level of details and granularity in terms of their quality requirements. For instance, in 2000 Luxembourg created a quality label ("*label de qualité*") for the non-formal adult education sector with the twofold aim of improving providers' quality, as well as supporting the monitoring of the otherwise difficult-to-regulate non-formal sector, allowing the government to gather data and information. The main requirements for this quality label are:

- a minimum of 15 learners (exceptions are possible for certain courses);
- guaranteeing general access to the courses;
- availability of a special enrolment rate (€ 5 to € 10) to disadvantaged target groups;
- publishing the courses including information on learning outcomes;
- advising the learners to find the right offer;
- providing information about accessibility for persons with special needs;
- applying a pedagogical approach based on the needs and the situation of adults;
- teachers must be accredited by the Minister (pedagogical and content-related competences achieved either through initial education, continuous education or professional experience);
- delivering a participation certificate to learners who attend 70% of the course;
- delivering on demand an individual certificate including the description of skills and knowledge obtained.

Similarly, the *Eduform* label in France is based on a high level of requirements for 13 commitments, as well as for the organization and management of the targeted structures. These commitments are:

1. quick and guided access to information on the services offered;
2. quality of the reception;
3. personalized advice on the services and their financing possibilities;
4. proposal of a wide range of services;
5. help in building a tailor-made response;
6. contractualisation with the beneficiary on the objectives, the contents and the modalities of the services;
7. support, monitoring, evaluation and readjustment of the beneficiary's journey throughout the service by a dedicated person;
8. adaptation to each service and for each beneficiary of the premises and the pedagogical means, methods, supports, tools and materials of the service;
9. assessment and recognition of prior learning and certification;
10. qualifications and competencies guaranteed and developed throughout life;
11. taking into account the satisfaction of customers and beneficiaries;
12. continuous improvement of services and trainings;
13. taking into account stakeholder expectations of corporate social responsibility and sustainable development.

Box 3.3. Quality awards and prizes

Rather than adopting accreditation or quality label systems, some European countries rely on awards and prizes to develop a quality culture in the adult learning sector. For example, in Finland, the Ministry of Education and Culture organizes a yearly quality award competition for adult education providers with the objective of encouraging learning centres to assess and continuously improve the quality of their activities. The rationale of the initiative is to identify best practices that providers across the country can emulate, and to promote the overall value, attractiveness and visibility of the adult education sector. The Quality Award recognizes the quality of services, continuous improvement and results, and exemplary work in the development of vocational training. The award of the prize is based on performance evaluation based on predefined criteria determined by an expert committee appointed by the Ministry. A maximum of four quality awards are given each year, with the possibility of honourable mentions of merit in a specific theme. Indeed, each year a specific theme is selected – for instance, in 2017 the theme was knowledge management, while in 2018 it was the well-being of students and staff. The amount of the prize is intended to be used to develop the activities of the training provider. A similar initiative exists in Sweden, where a Quality Prize has been established by the so-called School Act of 2010. All kinds of schools can participate to the competition, including municipal adult education, as long as they can document their actions towards quality improvements. The goal of the award is again motivating and inspiring schools in putting in place quality reforms.

4 Ensuring quality in adult training through evaluation

In addition to accreditation and quality labels, other methods of quality assessment are frequent throughout European countries, especially evaluations. The main difference between the two categories of methods, however, is that evaluations do not typically entail comparing training providers' performance against pre-set minimum quality standards. Although seemingly less demanding, the evaluation of the quality of training programmes and providers can be a challenging task, as evaluation exercises require information on many different aspects. Effectiveness of training is generally measured by looking at training outcomes, such as labour market entry, or satisfaction with the provided training. These outcomes can be assessed through a variety of monitoring and evaluation methods, implemented either by external quality assurance bodies or internally through self-evaluations of training providers (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1. Methods for quality assessments



The assessment of quality of training providers and programmes can be assigned to external quality bodies that assess quality through inspections. In Norway, for example, the agency for lifelong learning (*SkillsNorway*) is in charge of the inspections of adult learning provided in Study Associations² and under the publicly-funded training programme for basic working life skills (*SkillsPlus*). The aim of the *SkillsPlus* initiative is to give adults the opportunity to acquire the basic skills they need to keep up with the

² The provision of non-formal adult education in Norway is handled by the so-called Study Associations (or Adult Education Associations). Their main objective is to provide educational opportunities that are independent of curricula and exams. Their courses cover a large number of activities, from purely leisure activities to vocational courses and academic subjects. There are currently fifteen Study Associations, with group over 450 member organisations. In 2015, around 508 000 participants were registered at study association courses.

demands and changes in modern working life and civil society. Funding and participation have increased every year since the programme was established in 2006. The number of participants who have received training now exceeds 30 000. The programme concentrates on reading, writing, numeracy, and digital skills, and, since 2014, it also includes oral communication. Any enterprise in Norway, private and public, can apply for funding if they follow three criteria: (i) the learning activity should be combined with work and basic skills training should preferably be linked to other job-relevant learning; (ii) the courses should strengthen the participants' motivation to go on learning; (iii) the courses have to relate to the competence goals approved by the Ministry of Education and Research. The providers – both public and private, as well as study associations – are important stakeholders in the programme, and they often write the applications on behalf of the enterprises or in their own right. In order to ensure quality of the *SkillsPlus* programme, *SkillsNorway* frequently undertakes inspections of the training providers. A negative finding from an inspection can result in an order to make changes, but also in withdrawal of public funding and/or an obligation to pay back received public funding.

In England, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) grades training providers based on their overall effectiveness, with a focus on: i) the effectiveness of leadership and management; ii) the quality of teaching, learning and assessment; iii) personal development, behaviour and welfare; and iv) outcomes for learners. Inspection judgements are based primarily on first-hand evidence gathered during on-site inspections, but inspectors also consult a range of publicly available data on learners' and apprentices' progress and achievement, and have access to a wide range of other information (including self-assessment reports of the providers). The criteria used by inspectors are laid out in the *Further Education and Skills Inspection Handbook*. Independent training providers who are judged to be inadequate will generally no longer receive funding from the Education and Skills Funding Agency. For Further Education colleges a negative review will lead to the development of a notice to improve, which sets out the conditions that the college must meet in a time bound period in order to receive continued funding.

An alternative strategy to monitor and evaluate the performance of training providers is through self-evaluation. In Slovenia, self-evaluation is commonly used among education and training providers. A framework for offering quality education to adults was introduced for adult learning providers in 2001, and this can be used for self-evaluation of entire institutions or specific programmes. The 2018 Adult Education Act states that all adult education providers should have an internal quality system that includes ongoing monitoring and in-depth self-evaluation. Information on how providers conduct their self-evaluations has to be made publicly available. In Portugal, the *Qualifica Centres*, which provide guidance and support for recognition of prior learning, have to submit information on enrolment, referral to education and training pathways and recognition activities to the National Agency for Qualification and Vocational Education (ANQEP), which analyses the information and sends it back to the centres in an effort to encourage self-evaluation.

A more subjective way to measure quality is the satisfaction of participants with the provided training, which is generally measured through surveys during and/or after training participation. In the Brussels capital region (Belgium), the results from user satisfaction surveys are part of the quality evaluation done by *Bruxelles Formation*, the organisation in charge of adult learning for the French-speaking population in Brussels. They aim to have an average satisfaction level of at least eight out of ten. In Finland, participants' surveys are run during and right after every training programme funded by the public employment services, and this information feeds into the evaluation process.

Box 4.1. Self-evaluation in formal adult education: The case of BRUK in Sweden

The *Bedömning, Reflektion, Utveckling, Kvalitet* (Assessment, Reflection, Development, Quality) initiative (BRUK) is a general support system developed by school authorities in Sweden in 2001 for quality assurance in preschools and public schools, and adapted specifically to formal adult education in 2008. It is based on a set of self-evaluation tools and indicators, as elaborated in national steering documents. By showing strengths and weaknesses of adult training providers, the BRUK quality model aims at giving an overview of the overall quality of the institutions and areas for improvement.

Fundamentally, the system is based on a list of questions that providers of adult training ask themselves with the final goal of identifying gaps in the quality of the delivery of their services. The structure of the questions is complex, yet elaborated such that it maximise continuous improvement. Three main areas – process, goal achievement, and contextual factors – are split into a number of indicator areas, which are then divided in sub-areas and in numerous sub-indicators. For each of these indicators and sub-indicators, precise criteria are then enumerated, and providers need to assess to what extent such criteria are met by their services. The self-evaluation questionnaire also asks providers to add new indicators, which has proven critical in the past in order to motivate providers to use the tool. After providers reply to the whole questionnaire, the criteria are examined in order to obtain an overview of the current state of the quality of the institution, and a number of follow-up actions are planned to improve the situation if needed. Importantly, for each follow-up action providers need also to decide who is the responsible person in the team and the deadline.

Although with some initial difficulties in ensuring buy-in by stakeholders, nowadays BRUK is used as a quality tool by both the providers themselves and the external evaluators of educational quality in Sweden. Importantly for the whole sector, the BRUK initiative helped introduce a common language and a common framework on quality in adult learning.

How can public policies help in making sure that evaluations lead to greater quality of adult education?

Show best practices and provide guidelines

Measuring the quality of training is challenging, even for training providers themselves, as quality is multi-dimensional and often subjective. Training providers could therefore benefit from support in implementing quality measures and systems for monitoring and evaluation. This type of support is available in some countries in the form of guidelines, criteria and quality standards, or support materials for training providers, such as good practice examples and self-evaluation tools.

Guidelines, criteria and quality standards can form the basis of a framework against which to evaluate the quality of training. Providing training providers with guidelines will help them understand what is considered high-quality training provision and how it is measured. For example, training accredited by the Department for Adult Training (*Service de la Formation des Adultes*) in Luxembourg has to follow quality criteria in the areas of i) equal access, ii) transparency, and iii) trained teachers. Giving training providers access to support materials can also help them develop their quality systems. In Italy, the group involved in the Action Plan for Innovation in Adult Learning (PAIDEIA) disseminates good practices in terms of quality among training providers. In Finland, on top of carrying out evaluations, the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) is tasked with supporting education and training providers in issues related to evaluation and quality assurance. In this respect, the centre formulates evaluation methods and indicators that education providers can use in self-evaluation and peer reviews. FINEEC

also supports the development of an evaluation culture among education and training providers and promotes the spreading of good practices (FINEEC, 2016).

In Slovenia, good practices, tools and recommendations are made available on an online platform (*Mozaik Kakovosti*) with the goal of providing support for training providers who are developing an internal quality system. Providers that take part of the aforementioned Offering Quality Education to Adults (OQEA) initiative carry out planned, systematic and regular assessments and evaluations of their quality. At the beginning of each self-evaluation cycle, the organisation decides in which areas and with which indicators the self-evaluation will take place. The Slovenian Institute of Adult Education created a systematic collection of areas and indicators of quality in adult education that the organisation can use in self-evaluation. There are dozens of indicators and criteria to choose from (all available in English here: <https://kakovost.acs.si/doc/N-1077-1.pdf>).

In Denmark, a self-evaluation tool (*VisKvalitet*) is available for providers of adult labour market training to help measure participants' satisfaction and learning outcomes, as well as the satisfaction of employers whose employees have participated in training programmes. The use of the tool has been made compulsory for continuing vocational education and training providers. The questionnaire includes nine common questions for unemployed participants and ten for employed participants (e.g. "How much do you agree on the statement that the teaching was well planned?" and "Has this course meant that you can better take on new tasks in your workplace if needed?"), three background questions (e.g. "Whose idea was it for you to enrol in this course?" and "What is your education level?") and the possibility of elaborating answers at the end of the evaluation. Moreover, the tool gives flexibility to training providers to add personalized questions in addition to the mandatory ones.

An important step in having an effective quality assurance system is also to build the capacity of staff in adult training institutions to have a good understanding of what quality is and how to monitor and assess it. In Slovenia, a training programme was developed by the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education (SIAE) for individuals to become quality counsellors in adult education. Training providers who want to improve their quality management system can have one or more staff members participate in the training or hire a qualified quality counsellor.

Publicize information on quality and evaluation

For individuals, employers and institutions to be able to make informed choices about which training to invest in, they need to have access to relevant and up-to-date information on the quality of different training providers and programmes. Accreditation and quality labels can serve as signals of quality, but training providers can also share more in-depth information on evaluations, learning outcomes and user satisfaction with the general public to help them decide which training to invest in. This information should ideally be easily accessible, presented in a user-friendly format. Indeed, consumer protection is an important objective of quality assurance systems.

In some countries, quality assurance bodies make the results from evaluations publicly available. In Norway, for example, *Skills Plus* makes the results from inspections of *Skills Plus* programmes and adult training in Study Associations available on its website. In the United Kingdom, the Department for Education publishes summary tables of outcome-based success measures, including sustained employment and learning rates, by provider on its website. In France, certain public institutions that finance training have to review the quality of the training providers they work with, and make the outcomes from the review process publicly available. For training providers that do not hold a specific quality label, the review consists of an evaluation of six quality criteria, including education and training of teachers and sharing of information on training outcomes. Training providers that comply with the criteria are registered in an online database accessible to financiers of training (*DataDock*).

In some of those countries that make use of self-evaluation systems it is actually compulsory to make the results publicly available. For example, in Denmark, the results from self-evaluations through the national *VisKvalitet* tool are centralised and published online. To protect learners' data privacy, answers to the questionnaire are publicly shown only when at least 35 participants have answered. The system provides many opportunities to compare and track developments over time, both for individual labour market education and for schools.

Box 4.2. Sharing information on quality through online databases: Evidence from outside Europe

Online databases that provide details on existing training programmes can help individuals, employers and institutions make informed adult learning choices. In some cases, these databases also provide quality information, such as learning outcomes or user satisfaction. The Korean HRD-Net website provides a wealth of information for a wide range of different training programmes. In addition to basic information on the duration of the course, the costs and the average age of the participants, the website also provides information on the employment rate and average wages of the graduates from the programmes. It also shows the satisfaction of participants, on a range from zero to five stars, and their reviews. Australia's national directory of vocational education and training providers and courses (www.myskills.gov.au) allows users to search VET qualifications by industry and access information about average course fees, course duration, available subsidies and average employment outcomes. While employment outcomes are currently available by qualification, a plan exists to make them available at the provider level.

Source: OECD (2019).

5

Ensuring quality in adult training through additional support structures

Ensuring the quality of the adult education sector requires a holistic approach. Accreditation and evaluation of providers of adult learning are a necessary but not sufficient condition to ensure the highest possible quality of the sector. Validation of prior learning and lifelong guidance are central to the quality of adult education since they enable access, participation and progression, which are all intrinsic to quality in the field (European Commission, 2013). Similarly, the professionalization of the teaching staff is paramount to improve the overall quality of the adult education system, especially in the non-formal sector. Finally, involving social partners in quality assurance is key to make sure that all stakeholders are fully involved in the (re)training of adults.

Validation of prior learning and lifelong guidance

By definition, quality assurance represents all “activities involving planning, implementation, evaluation, reporting, and quality improvement, implemented to ensure that all education and training (content of programmes, curricula, assessment and validation of learning outcomes, etc.) meet the quality requirements expected by stakeholders”. As such, validation of prior learning – i.e. the process of confirmation by an authorised body that an individual has acquired learning outcomes measured against a relevant standard (European Commission, 2013) – becomes a critical element in the quality of adult education in terms of motivation, access, persistence and progression. Over the past few years, this has become more and more important given the increasingly heterogeneous nature of adult learning with its multiple and flexible upskilling pathways. Consequently, participants to the 2013 Thematic Working Group on quality in adult learning of the European Commission unanimously agreed that the availability of guidance and validation is an indispensable dimension of quality assurance of adult education and should form part of quality criteria for the accreditation of providers (European Commission, 2013).

In fact, many adults with low skills are anything but “low skilled”: they may have low literacy and numeracy levels, but at the same time, they possess a range of other valuable skills such as the ability to drive different vehicles or care for customers (OECD, 2019). Equally, adults may have low qualification levels, but may have gained skills through years of work-experience that are equivalent to those associated with formal qualifications. Recognising these skills through validation and certification can benefit individuals, employers and the economy. For the individual, it recognises their (informal) learning effort, which can increase motivation and become a stepping-stone to further (formal) learning. Employers benefit from skill recognition through higher productivity, by being able to better match employees’ skillsets and jobs. The benefits of skill validation and certification for the individual and employer, in turn, improve labour market functioning (Kis and Windisch, 2018). Overall, for these positive effects to materialise, it is important that employers and society at large value certificates that are obtained through skill recognition and see them as equivalent to those acquired through formal learning.

Although there is no unique approach to the recognition of existing skills and the methods of recognition procedures vary widely across contexts, they often share four similar phases: (1) identification of the experiences of an individual through dialogue; (2) documentation to support the individual's experiences; (3) a formal assessment of these experiences; and (4) certification of the results of the assessment which may lead to a partial or full qualification (cf. Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning, 2012/C 398/01).

There is a clear link between validation and lifelong guidance, since learners need the guidance to embark on a validation pathway. For instance, in Portugal *Qualifica Centres* are comprehensive one-stop shops for guidance on lifelong learning. The centres target adults with low qualifications, the unemployed and young people not in employment, education or training. One of the main responsibilities of the centres is the recognition of competences, which is embedded in their overall guidance offer. Any adult seeking advice at one of the 303 *Qualifica Centres* undergoes a standardised four-step process: i) information and enrolment, ii) analysis and development of a skill profile, iii) discussion and definition of appropriate education and training path, iv) referral to recognition procedures or appropriate education and training provision. To enter the recognition procedures, adults must be older than 18 years and have a minimum of 3 years professional experience. The process entails the preparation of a skill portfolio and a written, oral or practical exam. A jury awards a certificate of total or partial recognition. Partial recognition can lead to full recognition through the completion of modular training, although local provision may vary and not always be in line with the identified training needs. In 2017, 28 804 adults enrolled in recognition procedures and 10 157 received a certificate.

France has a long-standing tradition of recognising and certifying existing skills (*Validation des acquis de l'expérience* – VAE), which was strengthened by a 2002 law establishing the National Certification Register, a dedicated commission which validates the conformity of certificates awarded through VAE. Adults can now gain recognition for around 1 300 qualifications by demonstrating that they have the relevant skills through work experience. Different bodies are responsible for implementing VAE, and law, decrees and frameworks ensure consistency between procedures. Yet, the validation procedure has been described as demanding and lengthy, in particular for adults with low skills (Mathou, 2016). For example, adults must not only be able demonstrate their previous experience in their written skill portfolio, but also be able to verbalise and reflect on their experience in a jury interview. In recent years, however, access to the recognition procedure has been made more inclusive for adults with low qualification levels and employers are now obliged to inform their employees about VAE every two years in the context of their professional development. Moreover, since late 2014, adults have the right to receive support during the VAE process, including in the preparation of the portfolio and interview process. In practice, the support is provided by the responsible bodies awarding the qualification or specific counselling providers. Adults also have access to specific VAE leave.

As for Portugal, lifelong guidance is a key element of validation in France. The state pays the cost of validation for unemployed people. For employees, the cost is covered by rights accumulated throughout working life. There is a mix of funding for 'in-between' cases; otherwise, the individual pays between 600 – 2 000 Euro. Of 250 000 people undergoing validation in recent times, only 100 paid their own costs (European Commission, 2013).

Improving the quality of the teaching staff to improve the quality of the training

The professionalization of the teaching staff is one of the most challenging aspects of quality assurance in adult education. Indeed, unlike in compulsory schooling and higher education, where the need for initial and continuing training as a teacher is not questioned, in adult learning there appears to be an assumption that professional teacher training is not necessary (Broek and Buischool, 2013). Staff trained to teach at different levels are often hired to teach adults without upskilling in adult-specific teaching

methodologies. Moreover, the frequent non-formal dimension of adult learning creates a need to carefully balance the advantages of professionalization with the potential threats of over-regulation and over-burdening.

For these reasons, several countries have recently put in place projects to improve the quality of the teaching staff. For instance, since training for teaching staff in adult education is not regulated in Switzerland, instructors have frequently been working in voluntary or part-time positions without professional training. To solve this problem, following the recent rise in interest in the qualifications of adult trainers, in 1995 the Swiss Federation for Adult Learning (SVEB) introduced the programme “Train the Trainer” (AdA). AdA is a 3-level core concept of staff quality, which provide a 3-level certificate of the competences of adult education instructors.

In a similar vein, in 2007 Austria established its Academy of Continuing Education (WBA) as a validation system for the qualification and recognition of adult educators. The WBA is aimed at individuals from one of the four main professions in adult education who are actively involved in adult education in Austria, namely managerial positions, teaching and training, career guidance and counselling, and librarianship. The Academy recognizes adult educators’ qualifications according to set standards based on qualification profiles, and it acknowledges prior learning results and offers guidance and counselling as far as the acquisition of missing skills is concerned. It does not offer further education programmes itself but accredits suitable courses offered by various adult education institutions throughout Austria. It awards two degrees: a certificate, certifying basic competences in all four fields of adult education, and a diploma, based on the certificate but focusing on the specific field the educators want to specialize in.

In Slovenia, the Institute for Adult Education provides professional training for adult educators with a threefold objective: acquire new knowledge and skills in order to perform quality work, share their experience with others and evaluate their own practices under expert guidance in order to improve them, and rethink their own professional identity of adult educator by professionally connecting with others. Three types of programmes are offered: in the general basic and further training programme, participants acquire and further develop the knowledge of the discipline of adult education; in the basic training for special roles programme, participants acquire basic knowledge for performing special roles, such as mentor in study circles, counsellor in guidance centres, quality counsellor, etc.; in the further training programme, participants upgrade their knowledge and reflect on their practice. Importantly, the Slovenian Institute for Adult Education allows recognition of prior learning. An up-to-date website contains all the information on activities, programmes and events organized by the Institute (<https://izobrazevanje.acs.si/>).

In 2013, a Thematic Working Group on quality in adult learning of the European Commission developed a policy checklist in order to provide public authorities with a tool to self-assess existing policies, structures and systems for quality assurance of adult learning staff (European Commission, 2013). The checklist covers: i) legal regulations for the qualifications of adult learning staff; ii) regulatory frameworks for the professional development of staff; iii) career paths / pathways leading to the profession; iv) the employment situation of adult learning staff; v) data collection for policy development; vi) systematic and regular promotion of the nature and benefits of adult learning professions; vii) quality assurance and quality management. By gathering information under a detailed list of sub-headings on the above areas, the results of such an assessment aims at helping governments identifying gaps in their national framework for the professionalization of adult trainers. In addition to the checklist on staff quality, the Thematic Working Group also elaborated a preliminary profiling grid for adult learning staff. Using the grid, providers themselves can self-evaluate the key competences required by staff working in the various sub-domains of adult learning. Overall, the aim is to show how different competences have different degrees of importance in different sectors. Creating teacher profiles could support providers to develop training for unqualified staff and at the same time be in a position to offer validation of non-formal and informal learning to experienced staff lacking a professional qualification to teach adults.

Involving social partners in quality assurance

Social partners can be involved in quality assurance at different levels, be this through providing oversight on boards of education providers, being part of local or sectoral quality assurance bodies or having representation on national agencies responsible for the quality assurance of adult learning (OECD, 2019). Indeed, in some countries, social partners have a role in agencies that ensure the quality of (parts of) the adult learning system: Sweden's National Agency for Higher Vocational Education (*Myndigheten för yrkeshögskolan*) ensures the quality of higher vocational education programmes. Both trade unions and employers are represented on the agency's advisory council for labour market issues. The role of the advisory council includes the inspections of providers and programmes, including work-based training elements. The inspections entail observational visits, interviews with students, tutors, teachers and head coordinators. Based on the inspection, as well as an assessments of labour market needs, the council advises the National Agency about which training programmes should receive state grants and be included in the higher vocational education offer (Kuczera, 2013).

Similarly, social partners in Denmark are involved in the 11 continuing training and education committees, which monitor adult vocational training in different sectors of the labour market. One of the key inputs to the monitoring of programmes and providers is information produced through the system *VisKvalitet*. As discussed above, this system collects data from each participant about their satisfaction with the training via a questionnaire, as well as data from a sample of companies whose employees have attended training. Results are used by the committees to identify quality issues and develop remedial action.

Social partners can also be involved in the certification of adult learning providers: Flanders (Belgium) is currently introducing changes to their accreditation system to guarantee that training corresponds to labour market needs. Since September 2019, there are three accreditation streams for adult learning programmes that benefit from government incentives: i) automatic accreditation for certain (often more general or formal) training programmes, such as the ones provided through adult education centres and higher education institutions; ii) accreditation through social partners (*Paritaire Comités*) for training organised at the sector level; and iii) accreditation by the Flemish accreditation commission (*Vlaamse erkenningscommissie*) for all other training. The accreditation commission consists of social partners.

Many countries have complex multi-level quality assurance systems, which are supported by social partners. In Germany, for example, certification of training programmes in the context of active labour market policies is conducted by certifying bodies (*Zertifizierungsstelle*). One of the better-known certifying bodies, CERTQUA, is run by the leading German employer organisations. Certifying bodies, in turn, need to be accredited by the German Federal Public Employment Agency (*Bundesagentur für Arbeit*). An advisory council supports the agency in this work. Trade unions and employer organisations are part of the council.

6 Conclusions

By reviewing numerous practices across Europe, this report showed that the landscape of quality assurance systems in adult education is varied and highly heterogeneous. This is especially true in the non-formal and informal learning sectors, where there is often a lack of a national quality assurance strategy. Overall it is possible to identify two categories of quality assurance mechanisms that prevail in the European context: accreditation and quality labels, and quality approaches that do not impose minimum standards, namely (self-)evaluations. The report, however, stressed also the importance of establishing a wide and holistic quality approach, where typical measures – such as accreditation and evaluation – are complemented with additional support structures. Some of the most frequent support initiatives are reviewed: validation of prior learning and lifelong guidance, professionalization of teaching staff, involvement of social partners, but also provision of best practices and guidelines, as well as consumer protection in terms of publication of information on quality.

The available empirical evidence on the best quality assurance mechanisms in Europe is still too scarce, and more so in the context of non-formal adult learning with its mix of public and private interventions, in order to provide univocal recommendation for countries that are interested in embarking in the elaboration of a national quality assurance programme. Nevertheless, this review of the current existing practices suggests that it is paramount to initiate a discussion about the quality of adult education, and that there exist several examples of successful initiative at European level to draw inspiration from.

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