



# **EQAVET peer review on the role of VET school leaders in developing a quality culture**

**3 and 4 April 2025 in Belgrade, Serbia**

**Feedback report**

**28 April 2025**

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## Introduction to the peer review

This peer review took place on 3 and 4 April 2025 in Belgrade. It was hosted by the Ministry of Education which manages the work of the EQAVET National Reference Point in the Republic of Serbia. EQAVET Network members from Greece, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and Slovakia acted as peer reviewers.

The peer review focused on the quality assurance of the national system for training VET school principals. In particular, the peer review considered the competences expected of VET school principals, the national training and licensing process, and the development of a quality culture in VET schools. The Ministry of Education, which has overall responsibility for developing and implementing education policy, is assisted by:

- the Institute for the Evaluation of the Quality of Education which evaluates education provision and provides recommendations on the quality of the education system; and
- the Institute for the Improvement of Education which supports the development of the education system and provides advisory, services, research and other expertise.

The work of the VET principals is governed by the 2017 legislation which defines 22 specific tasks that have been assigned to VET principals. These tasks are divided into six areas of responsibility:

1. managing the educational processes in the school;
2. planning, organising and controlling the work of the institution;
3. monitoring and improving the work of employees;
4. developing cooperation with parents/guardians, the governing body, the representative union and the wider community;
5. financial and administrative management of the work of the institution;
6. ensuring the legality of the work of the institution.

Based on these areas of responsibility, a set of 24 standards for the competence of principals of all educational institutions (including VET schools) has been adopted. For each standard, there are indicators which more precisely define what is expected. The standards form the basis for the mandatory training and assessment programme for both experienced VET school principals and those who aspire to take on the role of principal. This programme awards a Licence to principals so they can work in the Serbian education system.

This report briefly describes what is expected from VET principals, the organisation of the training and assessment for the licensing process and the requirements of the internal and external evaluation systems as presented by the Serbian hosts. This report also includes a summary of the extensive discussions of the peer reviewers. The report concludes with suggestions where the peer reviewers feel further reflection could enhance the culture of quality assurance in VET schools.

## Introduction to the leadership training programme

The national training programme awards a Licence to principals so they can work in the Serbian education system. This is a mandatory programme which is provided to both experienced principals and those who are not yet principals and aspire to take on the role. The training for:

- **principals of successful schools** (schools with the highest grades based on the external evaluation and principals with at least six years of experience) comprises two days of face-to-face training;
- **principals of less successful schools** (schools with lower grades from the external evaluation, principals with less than six years of experience, and candidates who are not yet principals and aspire to obtain a Licence) comprises two days of face-to-face and eleven days of individual online training;
- **principals with a master, specialist, or doctoral degree in the field of education policy, education management, or education leadership** comprises two days of face-to-face training and up to eleven days of individual online training.

Following the completion of the training programme, candidates prepare a portfolio of their competences and a report on relevant research they have undertaken in their institution. The evidence presented by each candidate has to be sufficient to enable the assessors to judge whether each of the indicators which describe the 24 standards has been met. This assessment occurs when the candidate presents their portfolio and research report to a commission appointed by the Minister. This commission consists of representatives from the Ministry of Education (or Provincial Secretariat of Vojvodina), the Institute for the Improvement of Education and the Institute for the Evaluation of the Quality of Education. Those who are successful are awarded a Principal's Licence - approximately 10-20% of candidates are unsuccessful, mostly because of an unsatisfactory research report. However, approximately 1-2% of candidates are unsuccessful because of an unsatisfactory portfolio.

## Introduction to self-assessment and the external quality review

Serbia has mandatory internal and external quality assurance processes based on the EQAVET framework. These were introduced in 2018 and are based on the following six quality areas:

- programming, planning and reporting;
- teaching and learning;
- students' educational achievements;
- student support;
- school ethos;
- school organisation, human and material resource management.

Within each quality area, there are standards which are described in more detail by indicators. There are 24 standards in total and 124 indicators. During the external evaluation, the independent team assigns a grade to each of these indicators. This evaluation team uses a scale of 1 to 4, where 4 shows that the indicator has been fully met, 3 that the indicator has been met to a greater extent, 2 that the indicator has been met to a lesser extent and 1 shows that the indicator has not been met. These grades are used to determine the overall quality of

the institution's work and the institution's work is rated as 1, 2, 3 or 4, with 4 being the highest grade. The VET school principal is responsible for managing the institution's engagement with the external evaluation team.

The internal self-evaluation process is managed by the professional bodies in the school. These include the parents' council, the students' parliament, students, teachers and other educators, professional associates, the school secretary, the principal and the management body of the institution. An individual area of an institution's provision is evaluated every year and all aspects of provision are evaluated every fourth or fifth year.

### Observations on the development of a leadership culture

The peer reviewers discussed the following issues relating to VET leadership and quality assurance:

- expectations and motivation

VET school principals have been assigned a large number of responsibilities, and the expectations placed on them are significant. With 24 standards used to measure the competence of VET principals and 124 indicators used to assess their performance during the mandatory external evaluation, they face a significant amount of scrutiny. In these circumstances, the peer reviewers reflected on the principals' motivation to take on, and remain, in such a demanding role;
- distributive leadership and the development of middle managers

In an environment where so much is expected from the VET school principals, it is important for the school to be led by a team of staff. The opportunity to distribute leadership and management responsibility to senior staff is an important aspect of creating a culture of quality within a VET school. This, the peer reviewers noted, requires assistant or deputy principals, and middle managers with sufficient authority to lead areas of provision;
- the autonomy of VET principals

The peer reviewers were uncertain how much autonomy was assigned to VET school principals. The Serbian system is centralised and expectations are set at the national level. The balance between system and local level decisions is something to be considered, as individual VET school principals are often best placed to make the decisions that meet the needs of their learners and schools;
- greater customisation of national systems to meet the needs of the VET sector

Many of the systems considered by the peer reviewers have been designed for all principals - those in primary, secondary and VET schools. While there are advantages in establishing and using a generic set of expectations, there are circumstances where the needs of the VET sector are significantly different from those of other schools. The peer reviewers were informed of some of the ways in which these generic expectations are adjusted to meet the needs of VET schools - however, they wondered whether more bespoke arrangements would be helpful;
- the use of data for monitoring and evaluation

The development of high-quality VET provision depends on the availability and use of valid, reliable and accurate data. In this context, the peer reviewers noted that

information on some of the EQAVET indicators (e.g. indicators 4, 5 and 6)<sup>1</sup> were difficult to collect.

- providing support to leaders

The peer reviewers noted that there was a significant amount of potential support available to VET school principals. However, accessing this support seemed to depend heavily on individual VET school principals asking for assistance. If there is a culture of openness this approach can be successful. However, if there is a reluctance to own-up to challenges and ask for help, it may be worthwhile considering whether a more formalised system of support could assist with the development of high-quality provision.

### Questions considered by the peer reviewers

As part of their review of the leadership culture in VET schools, the peer reviewers were asked to consider the following four questions:

1. What do you think of the current approach for selecting and electing VET school principals in Serbia?
2. How to organise the principals' training and the licensing process?
3. What are the essential characteristics and behavioural styles of a VET school principal who manages the development of a culture of continuous improvement?
4. How do you think EQAVET could lead to the improvement of the indicator with the lowest level of achievement?

#### Question 1 - What do you think of the current approach for selecting and electing VET school principals in Serbia?

This question specifically asked the peer reviewers to consider:

- whether they had any suggestions to improve the approach?
- what should be the most important criterion for choosing a VET principal from several possible candidates - should it be previous achievements, a vision for the school's development, some special talent or something else?

In an environment where there is an emerging shortage of VET teachers, and the salary differences between VET principals and teachers is small, the peer reviewers reflected on what would motivate candidates to apply for the position of principal. Without sufficient incentives, it will become increasingly difficult to encourage and motivate staff to apply for this leadership role.

In relation to the selection approach, those who are not yet principals and aspire to this role are required to gain a Licence and then be selected by a VET school through an application and interview process. The use of electronic portfolios is helping to reduce the bureaucracy in the licensing process. However, candidates are required to show evidence for a large number of standards and indicators. It is not clear whether each of these standards is equally important and whether there are particular priority areas. The peer reviewers wondered whether a much

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<sup>1</sup> Indicator 4 - Students' completion rate in VET programmes. Indicator 5 - Placement rate in VET programmes. Indicator 6 - The utilisation of acquired skills at the workplace.

smaller number of 'core' or 'priority' standards and indicators could be identified. These 'core' or 'priority' areas could be assessed more thoroughly during the commission's interview of candidates.

The interview panel which selects a VET school principal would typically need to include a representative from an employers' organisation (e.g. sector council, chamber of commerce, local employers' group etc.) as well as a representative of the school's governance board. The peer reviewers commented on the importance of candidates' pedagogic expertise within a VET context as well as the need for all principals to be effective communicators who are able to motivate the school's staff. However, in addition, it is important for each applicant to:

- be able to demonstrate a vision and strategy for improving the quality of teaching and learning in the school;
- demonstrate leadership skills;
- provide evidence of a track record of achievement in an educational context.

### Question 2 - How to organise the principals' training and the licensing process?

This question specifically asked the peer reviewers to consider:

- what is your assessment of the training process and assessment for VET principals?
- in which area should the training be focused for experienced principals: financial; organisational; managerial; or pedagogical leadership and why?
- should the length of the Licence awarded to principals be limited and what would be the right period of time?
- what are the good and bad sides of both an open-ended Licence or one that is time-limited?

The decision to have three separate pathways for different candidates was welcomed, and seemed to be both a pragmatic and reasonable response in an environment where there are many experienced VET leaders who are required to gain a Licence. While principals have a managerial role, their main focus is on leadership and enabling members of the school staff and learners to succeed. This emphasis on pedagogic leadership, based on a vision which can be supported by staff, requires principals to be flexible, able to respond to staff who may have a wide range of views, and be able to manage liaison with employers, learners and other stakeholders. Financial and managerial competences matter, but, in many situations other members of the VET school team can take leadership responsibility for these aspects of provision. The principals need the confidence to delegate to trusted members of the school management team and support their training in order for them to successfully take on these responsibilities. The peer reviewers also emphasised the importance of providing training which supports principals' ability to manage change e.g.:

- to prepare for the greater digitalisation of VET learning;
- to support learners' development of soft skills;
- the use of data to inform decision-making; and
- the ability to promote and support innovation in a VET context.

It is these characteristics of leadership the peer reviewers felt that should be the focus on the

training and assessment processes.

Establishing a licensing process has been a significant achievement. Adding a new process which removed a principal's licence would need a lot of thought. There are risks associated with removing a Licence as taking something away from individuals will lead to appeals or complaints. In systems which have introduced professional accreditation or licensing, there are challenges relating to the removal of a Licence or re-accreditation. In addition, there could be legal challenges from those who lose their licence, de-motivated VET school leaders and expenses in establishing a new process. Another approach could be to award an open-ended Licence but limit the length of the appointment of a principal in any VET school. A fixed-term contract (e.g. for five years with one opportunity for renewal) could be one way to introduce new ideas and fresh perspectives to VET schools.

The peer reviewers noted that the focus of their discussions had been on the initial training and selection of principals. It is also important to reflect on principals' continuing training and the value of mentoring and coaching programmes which support experienced staff.

**Question 3 - What are the essential characteristics and behavioural styles of a VET school principal who manages the development of a culture of continuous improvement?**

This question specifically asked the peer reviewers to consider:

- can the essential characteristics and behaviours be identified in advance, measured and developed?
- would you add anything to the framework of standards expected from VET school principals?

Central to pedagogic leadership is the need for principals to demonstrate the behaviours and values they expect from staff. This can include tolerance, flexibility, openness, a commitment to personal professional development, managing a reasonable work-life balance, and regular communications. These behaviours, or leadership competences, encourage staff to be more motivated and accept the VET school's vision for learners. The process to select a principal has to balance the need to recognise previous achievement with an assessment of an individual's potential for leadership. While previous success is one measure of potential, it is not the only one to consider. In a rapidly changing VET environment, the ability to use data; the understanding of digitalising learning; the ability to innovate and the ability to build and maintain new networks with employers are all important. These abilities can be assessed through interviews which involve local stakeholders and VET school boards.

Principals are expected to manage and lead a large number of activities - the peer reviewers reflected on whether this was manageable. Success is often achieved through effective delegation and the training of a school management team who can lead individual areas of responsibility such as liaison with employers, innovation in teaching and learning, support programmes for learners, behaviour management etc. While avoiding the risk of being seen as aloof or remote from staff and learners, principals need to have a manageable workload. Deciding on how best to develop their school management team is one area where principals need autonomy. Supported by the school's governance group, the principals are best placed to allocate roles and responsibilities, and develop their senior team's competences.



Question 4 - How do you think EQAVET could lead to the improvement of the indicator with the lowest level of achievement?

This question specifically asked the peer reviewers to consider:

- how do you see the role of VET school principals in implementing the EQAVET framework?
- what could be the role of the EQAVET NRP?

Data from the external evaluations of 92 schools in 2022 and 2023 has shown that schools find it more difficult to achieve high scores in relation to some standards and indicators. Across the six quality areas, the average level of achievement ranged from 56% for quality area 1 (Programming, planning and reporting) to 75% for quality area 6 (School organisation, human and material resource management). There are similar variations in the schools' achievement of individual indicators, and there are situations within each quality area where the average achievement was between 57-63%.

Supporting schools to improve in those areas where previous external evaluations have shown a weakness is reliant on:

- schools having data which is reliable, collected regularly and produced in a manner which can then be used to change practice;
- schools being willing to ask for support;
- the availability of independent support which meets the needs of individual VET schools and principals e.g. through a bespoke mentoring programme.

The peer reviewers noted that EQAVET is a quality assurance framework which can be adjusted to meet the needs of individual countries or regions. EQAVET is being widely used to create and implement a national quality assurance system, and each country has its own priorities. The EQAVET indicators can be an effective way of encouraging individual VET schools to collect relevant data, and use it to improve the quality of provision. Some indicators, such as EQAVET indicators 4, 5, 6 and 7 can provide VET school principals with useful information. However, schools will need support to ensure there are common definitions of terms and data is gathered in a comparable way as this enables the national authorities to amalgamate data from all the VET schools. The peer reviewers felt that the EQAVET NRP could play an important role:

- in identifying the most important indicators and agreeing, in partnership with the VET schools, on common definitions and ways to collect data. This activity could include the development of a centralised depository of data based on the agreed indicators for all the VET centres. In this context, is it possible to develop key performance indicators (or targets) for each VET centre;
- in helping VET schools to align their curricula with the needs of the labour market;
- in providing continuing training for principals to support their use of data;
- in advising policy makers on how to strengthen the quality assurance systems



## Conclusions and next steps

The peer reviewers identified a **number of strengths** associated with the leadership culture. These included:

1. the national VET system is attractive to a very large percentage of learners and their parents;
2. the national system has established a clear vision for quality assurance which guides VET school principals;
3. the alignment between the internal self-assessment process and the external quality assurance system strongly supports the work of VET school principals;
4. the revision of the internal and external evaluation system shows a willingness to use evidence to improve practice;
5. the self-assessment process is based on partnerships with opportunities for stakeholders, employers, parents and learners to contribute;
6. for VET school leaders, the creation and use of national standards and indicators sets clear expectations in relation to the leadership training programme;
7. there is a national system to evaluate the effectiveness and performance of individual VET principals;
8. the national authorities have a very good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the VET system;
9. the flexibility of the mandatory VET school leadership training.

The peer reviewers suggested there were some **areas where further reflection** could enhance the development of a quality culture in VET schools:

- the national system places high expectations on school principals including the establishment of a clear vision to support learners. In relation to quality assurance, the self-assessment and external evaluations require a significant commitment from VET school leaders. In addition there is a requirement to demonstrate achievement of 24 standards and 124 indicators during the principals' mandatory training and assessment process. The peer reviewers wondered whether it was possible to set priorities and simplify the expectations associated with the VET school principals' training;
- with a significant number of responsibilities and high expectation it is important that principals are sufficiently motivated and rewarded in order to encourage individuals to take on, and remain in the role;
- within the national system, the VET school principals have a limited amount of autonomy e.g. it was not clear why a new team leader had to be appointed each year for the internal quality assurance process. The peer reviewers felt this type of decision could be made locally and be based on the needs of individual VET schools. The peer reviewers wondered whether there were opportunities to strengthen VET school autonomy in a quality assurance process which is based on the EQAVET framework;

- the national approach to self-assessment and external evaluation is similar for primary, secondary and VET schools. The peer reviewers wondered if there were opportunities to emphasise the particular needs of VET schools in these processes;
- the importance of accurate, valid and reliable data in order that the VET system and individual VET schools can make the best use of information collected during the self-assessment and external evaluation processes;
- the strengthening of the 'distributed leadership' model would be one way to manage the expectations and responsibilities which have been placed on individual VET school principals;
- the support offered to VET schools, and principals when they are not particularly successful during the external evaluation process. The peer reviewers wondered whether a more systematic approach could be considered rather than relying on individual VET schools asking for help;
- increasing the number of learners and employers in the dual VET system.

The peer reviewers and the EQAVET Secretariat thanked the Serbian organisers and the presenters for all their work and the clarity of their explanations.

#### Context

The [2020 Council Recommendation on VET](#) called upon the EQAVET Network to develop a specific methodology for EQAVET peer reviews, with the objective to support the improvement and transparency of quality assurance arrangements at system level in Member States. Over the course of 2021, with the support of DG EMPL and the EQAVET Secretariat, the EQAVET Network agreed on a joint methodology and prepared a Peer Review Manual. A first cycle of peer reviews took place in 2022-2023. Quality Assurance National Reference Points (EQAVET NRPs) from 21 countries took part in this EQAVET Network's peer review initiative.

Following a review of the Peer Review Manual, a second cycle of peer reviews has been planned for 2024-26 with 20 participating NRPs. The peer review in Serbia was one of nine peer reviews taking place in 2025. A further six peer reviews are planned to take in 2026.