

## Social utility of vocational education and training – selected aspects

Spółeczna użyteczność kształcenia i szkolenia zawodowego – wybrane aspekty

**Słowa kluczowe:** kształcenie i szkolenia zawodowe, model społecznej użyteczności, jakość kształcenia, zarządzanie jakością, społeczna użyteczność.

**Streszczenie:** Pojęcie „jakości” nie jest statyczne, nie jest absolutne. Ewoluuje ono wraz z dostosowywaniem się do zmieniającego się rynku edukacyjno-szkoleniowego i potrzeb jego uczestników. Wdrażanie systemów akredytacji w jednostkach świadczących usługi szkoleniowe to często stosowane podejście mające na celu zagwarantowanie wstępnej kontroli i zapewnienie standardów jakości w zakresie świadczenia usług szkoleniowych w kształceniu i szkoleniach zawodowych (VET). W wielu państwach członkowskich UE akredytacja jest wykorzystywana jako narzędzie zarządzania w celu zapewnienia jakości kompetencji instytucji szkoleniowych i oferowanych przez nie programów szkolenia. Aby udowodnić jej rzeczywistą skuteczność, należy rozpatrywać jakość oferty VET także pod kątem użyteczności społecznej. Artykuł prezentuje wyniki międzynarodowej analizy ilościowo-jakościowej, mającej na celu ocenę społecznego wpływu w 5 obszarach podmiotów świadczących usługi kształcenia i szkoleń zawodowych: 1) kształcenie i szkolenie zawodowe i powrót do zatrudnienia; 2) kształcenie i szkolenie zawodowe a uczenie się przez całe życie i rozwój osobisty; 3) kształcenie i szkolenie zawodowe oraz integracja społeczna; 4) kształcenie i szkolenie zawodowe oraz rozwój terytorialny; 5) praktyki wewnętrzne: osobiste zaangażowanie w promowanie i wdrażanie dobrej polityki kadrowej (HR). Autorki zaprezentowały możliwy do zastosowania w różnych krajach model oceny użyteczności społecznej VET oparty na określonej puli wskaźników jakościowych i ilościowych. Pomimo różnic charakteryzujących systemy krajowe i sposób, w jaki kraje rozwijają i zapewniają edukację zawodową, kształcenie i szkolenia zawodowe przynoszą niekwestionowane korzyści gospodarcze i społeczne, materialne i niematerialne wspólne dla wszystkich krajów europejskich – dla jednostek, przedsiębiorstw, gospodarki i społeczeństwa.

**Key words:** vocational education and training, social utility model, quality of education, quality management, social utility.

**Introduction:** The concept of “quality” is not static, is not absolute. It evolves along adapting to changing market and customers’ needs. The training providers’ accreditation systems are the most common approaches aimed to guarantee a pre-emptive check of minimum standards of

quality in the delivery of training services. In many Member States and more and more frequently, accreditation is used as a governance tool to ensure the quality of training institutions and training programmes. Nevertheless, the impression is that often the adoption of such standards fall in a routine of bureaucracy and administrative procedures aimed to overtake the constrains of the certification/accreditation periodical checks. When this happens, "quality" is perceived by VET teachers and operators just as an overload of paperwork overlaid to current activities.

In order to prove its real effectiveness, the quality of the VET provision should be analysed towards its social usefulness. The Social Utility of vocational education and training (VET) is the subject of qualitative and quantitative evaluations in many European countries. However, it is difficult to clearly estimate what lies behind this concept.

### **Tools and approaches towards the quality assurance in educational practice**

According to the Pedagogical Encyclopaedia of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Pilch, 2003) the concept of quality derives from the theory of management and should be considered in relation to the most modern and globally accepted concept of Total Quality Management (TQM), which was created and applied to the economy. The creator of this concept, E. Deming, defined quality as something which satisfies (or even delights) the customer. In theory and practice, there are many different approaches to the concept of quality. Quality can be treated as excellence; described in terms of learning outcomes; described on the basis of the results of an audit-review (inspection, visit); analysed in terms of mission; described as culture; described as transformation (Krajewska 2004). From the point of view of the philosophy of education, the question arises: *how to pursue the values that most fully reflect the essence, challenges, tasks and functions of education?*. And thus how to strive for quality understood as perfection. This is one of the still unresolved problems of educational practice.

In 1963, UNESCO in cooperation with the World Bank, established The International Institute for Educational Planning, which in the early 1970s attempting to answer the question: *How is the quality of education assessed?* began to introduce the concept of education system indicators - a set of complex questions relating to various dimensions of education quality, i.e. *What is happening within the system itself? What are the relationships between the education system and the environment surrounding it? And thus identifying their impact on the effectiveness of the educational system* (see: Lawn, Grek, 2002). This was a start to improving the functioning of education systems by making changes that will make them more responsive to the needs of their clients, more efficient with available resources, and a more effective force for individual and social development.

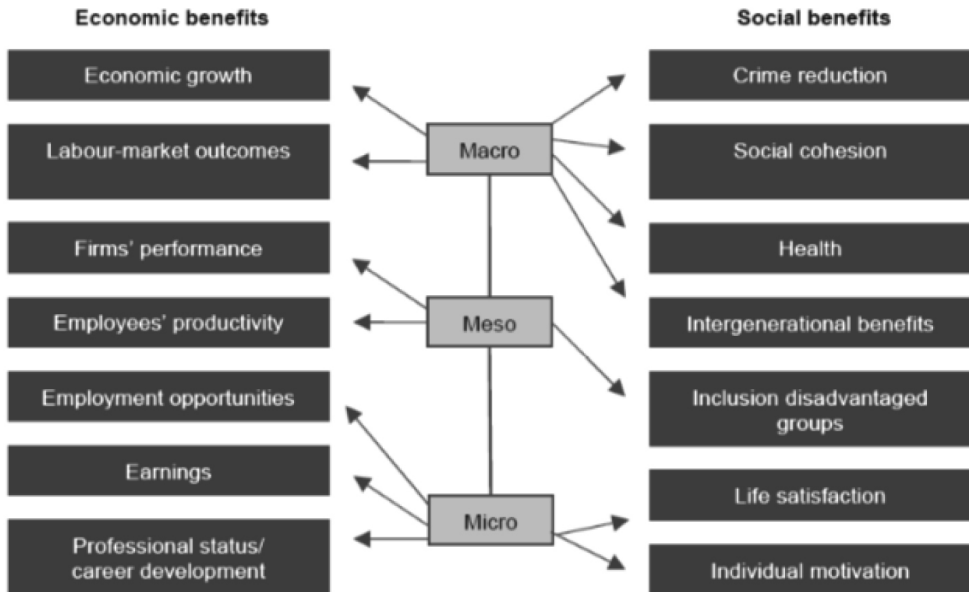
In accordance with the principle of the open method of coordination, the European Union supports the Member States in activities aimed at international cooperation, exchange of information and experience in order to improve the quality of vocational training by creating the so-called European added value. As confirmed by the literature studies, the objectives of the European Union educational programs in

which international cooperation is possible in this area are related to the strategies and recommendations addressed to the Member States. The issue of the quality of education in the European Union refers among others to *the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2001 on European cooperation in quality evaluation in school education* (2001/166/EC). In this recommendation we read, inter alia, that: 1) there is a need to promote the European dimension in education, since it is an essential objective in building a citizens' Europe; 2) the quality of education is one of the main objectives of primary and secondary education, including vocational training, for all Member States in the context of the learning society; 3) the quality of school education must be ensured at all levels and in all areas of education, regardless of differences in educational objectives, methods and needs, regardless of school performance rankings where they exist; 4) European cooperation and cross-border exchanges of experience will contribute to the identification and dissemination of effective and generally accepted quality assessment methods (See: 2001/166/EC).

To ensure the quality of learning outcomes achieved in different countries, the European Commission prepared a reference document for member states and finally approved it in 2009: *European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQARF)* (2009/C/155/01). This tool is intended to help EU member state authorities to promote and monitor the improvement of vocational education and training systems. Quality assurance can serve as a systemic approach to modernizing school systems, especially by improving the effectiveness of training. As such, it should form the basis of any policy initiative on VET. Member states are encouraged to develop and use this tool on a voluntary basis. The main users of the framework are national and regional authorities, as well as public and private institutions responsible for ensuring and improving the quality of vocational education and training. The EQARF acts as a reference point, providing methodological suggestions that help Member States to assess (based on quality criteria and indicators) whether the necessary measures to improve the quality of their national VET systems have been implemented and whether these measures need to be reviewed.

### **The social utility model: how to assess the quality and impact of vocational education and training**

Despite the differences characterizing national systems and the ways countries develop and deliver vocational education, VET demonstrates to generate unquestionable economic and social, tangible and intangible benefits – which are common across European countries – to individuals, enterprises, the economy and society. Education and training contribute to improve professional status of individuals, increase employability opportunities and boost general economic growth. At the same time, it contributes to the achievement of social goals such as reducing crime, protecting the environment, promoting democracy, equal opportunities and social justice and combating racism and xenophobia.



**Figure 1. The benefits of vocational education and training**

Source: CEDEFOP 2011.

The evaluation of social utility is a major challenge for training organisations. However, the need to prove that VET is “socially useful” is felt as more and more pressing by VET centres in order both to show that VET can be, and often is, a first choice in the educational path of a person (youth or adult) and to show to public funding authorities that the funding they are investing in VET are worthwhile to be spent from a societal and economic point of view.

The initiative behind the development of the project “SOLITY – Vet Social Utility Monitor” is born from the idea of linking the assessment of VET performance to the assessment of its impact on the overall society. It aims indeed to confirm that the social utility of VET can be measured, confirming the assumption that the performance of training organisations should not be evaluated solely based on standard economic criteria, but also in terms of their interactions with their environment, particularly the labour market, their ability to meet the needs of companies and individuals and the social and societal changes they are capable of bringing about. In terms of innovation and added values, the project develops not only on the concept that assessing VET performance based on collecting a set of data to make specific micro-economical evaluations can highlight the positive impact of VET on society and prove that the funding invested on VET by public or private bodies are well spent. It is also a way to educate society to see the individual and social value of Vocational and Educational Training, promoting VET as a first choice.

## Social utility: a shared European definition for vocational education and training

Building an approach for evaluating social utility which could be suitable for all VET centres in Europe requires a shared definition of the concept of social utility of vocational training. The joint works were undertaken within the Erasmus+ programme (Key Action 3 - Sub-Action: Forward Looking Cooperation Projects, under the EACEA-41-2016 call: Support for Policy Reform). The difficulty of identifying a widely accepted definition of social utility in Europe, especially if we look at vocational education and training, forced the organisations involved in the implementation of the activities of the SOLITY initiative to focus on researches and exchanges to compare and discuss examples of projects developed in all partner's countries. The good practices illustrate the positive short, medium and long-term impacts proving that vocational education and training have a social utility. The social utility was defined as follows: *a "social utility" actor or activity is any organization or action that participates in the economic dynamics of a territory and contributes sustainably to the social integration and development of people by developing their ability to act and interact with their environment. It takes into account vulnerable groups, contributes to social cohesion by combating exclusion and inequality and strengthens people's autonomy.* As it is, Social Utility takes into account vulnerable groups, contributes to social cohesion by fighting exclusion and inequality, and strengthens people's autonomy.

The SOLITY model is the result of the collaboration between vocational training providers and umbrella associations from different European countries (Italy, Germany, France and Belgium), faced with the challenge of measuring their performances in terms of social utility, i.e. their positive impact on society.

SOLITY stems from the vision of the following 6 partners:

ENAIIP NET IMPRESA SOCIALE SOCIETA' CONSORTILE SRL (Italy): ENAIIP NET, the project leader, works as a network agreement among some of the regional EnAIP bodies: EnAIP Lombardia (lead partner), EnAIP Piemonte, EnAIP Veneto, EnAIP Friuli Venezia Giulia, EnAIP Nazionale. Its members gathered in 2015 with the goal to widen their field of action and to increase collaborations on European and international opportunities for the final benefit of their target groups (namely, students, adults and ENAIIP's staff).

AFPA - AGENCE NATIONALE POUR LA FORMATION PROFESSIONNELLE DES ADULTES (France) : National Agency for Adults' Vocational Training is the number one training body in France providing professional certifications, and whose main characteristics are being geared toward a social, united economy; providing qualifications to working-age people, job-seekers and employees, and to help business improve their competitiveness; helping people change careers.

IB - Internationaler Bund Berlin-Brandenburg gGmbH (Germany): one of the biggest service providers in the field of youth and social work as well as education

in Germany. Its 14,000 employees in 700 facilities at 300 places in Germany help about 350,000 children, youth, adults and seniors every year in their personal and professional life planning.

LE FOREM – SERVICE PUBLIC WALLON DE L'EMPLOI ET DE LA FORMATION PROFESSIONNELLE (Belgium): Wallonia's Public Service for Employment and Training. It offers information, training and personalized guidance to employers and job seekers in order to promote integration into the labour market and meet the recruitment needs.

EVTA – EUROPEAN VOCATIONAL TRAINING ASSOCIATION : a network of European organisations in the field of human capital development (AISBL under the Belgian law). During its 25 years, EVTA has developed into one of the largest European networks or communities in vocational education and training. Through EVTA its members influence and stay updated on EU-policies and participate in European development projects.

EVBB - EUROPAISCHER VERBAND BERUFLICHER BILDUNGSTRAGER / The European Association of Institutes for Vocational Training (EVBB): a European umbrella association whose members are state associations, associations, coordinating institutes of education and educational providers at a national, regional and local level.

## Methods and procedures

The article presents the results of a quantitative and qualitative analysis on various aspects of the social impact of VET providers.

The main goal was to set up a solid, bottom-up and transferable model to assess VET social utility, based on a specific pool of qualitative and quantitative indicators. Therefore, the partnership aimed at providing all European VET providers with a common tool to assess their impact, quality and performances at many levels. The social utility, as defined, revolves around 5 axes that the partners identified as the most relevant ones when tackling the measurement of the social impact of vet providers (Figure 2).

### *Axis 1 – VET and return to employment*

This first axis of social utility aims at the measurement of the contribution of vocational training in favour of the fight against unemployment. Dimensions, volume and centering of the action towards the population of the job-seekers are thus measured as such in order to ensure the positioning and the heart of the mission of vocational training. The concept of return to employment is also central and measured ("social performance") as such and is associated with additional dimensions contributing to a better inclusion in the labour market, namely long-term employment and the relation between skills acquired/real job.

| VET and return to employment  | VET and lifelong learning personal development   | VET and social inclusion  | VET and territorial development  | Internal Practices  |
|---|--|---|--|---|
| <p>Fight against mass unemployment, assistance for return to employment</p> <p>-&gt; Jobseekers- &gt;families<br/>-&gt; Policy makers<br/>-&gt; Enterprises</p> <p>1) Access to employment rate after 6 m.<br/>2) Long term employment contract<br/>3) Training related to skills shortage<br/>4) Job guidance (coaching, career orientation...)<br/>5) Volume of incoming trainees<br/>6) Number of internships<br/>7) Number of partner companies</p> | <p>Contribution to LLPD, productivity growth, maintenance of economically strategic job-skills in individual and collective terms, capabilities</p> <p>-&gt; Employed people<br/>-&gt; Enterprises<br/>-&gt; Job seekers</p> <p>1) Certification<br/>2) Recognition of competences<br/>3) Number of trainees with soft skills<br/>4) Number of trainees with technical skills (refresh courses, skills adaptation courses, technical evolution and licences)<br/>5) Mobility<br/>6) &lt;Future or emerging Job&gt;<br/>7) Digital competences<br/>8) Success rate in professional certification<br/>9) Employability</p> | <p>Fight against exclusion and social inequalities, living better together, integration, social cohesion, social inclusion, equity</p> <p>-&gt; People disabled, disadvantaged<br/>-&gt; Policy makers<br/>-&gt; Enterprises -&gt; families</p> <p>1) Proportion of unskilled youth admitted to training<br/>2) NEET<br/>3) Dropout rate (negative)<br/>4) Migrants<br/>5) Integration of people disabled and disadvantaged people<br/>6) Integration into working life and civic life: civic education, citizenship, social rules<br/>7) Social link partnership<br/>8) Cultural diversity<br/>9) Specifying training target groups<br/>10) Social innovation models</p> | <p>Maintaining social proximity with the community, sustainability</p> <p>-&gt; Policy makers<br/>-&gt; Civil society<br/>-&gt; Enterprises</p> <p>1) Urban or rural regeneration: redevelopment of the old industrial area, ...<br/>2) Cross border or inter regional cooperation<br/>3) Compliant with regional development strategy<br/>4) Compliant with environmental sustainability<br/>5) Active dialogue with local policy makers<br/>6) Transfer of innovation to the policy makers<br/>7) Contrasts to brain drain</p> | <p>Social and environmental responsibility</p> <p>-&gt; Internal employees<br/>-&gt; Policy makers<br/>-&gt; Trainees / trainers</p> <p>1) % women in management relative to women working in company<br/>2) Hierarchical wage gap<br/>3) Gender wage gap<br/>4) Absenteeism rate<br/>5) % of employees with disabilities<br/>6) Accident frequency index<br/>7) Job-insecurity<br/>8) Access to training<br/>9) Internal mobility<br/>10) Environmental practices<br/>11) Pedagogical innovation<br/>12) Quality management: satisfaction, claims measurement...</p> |
| <p>INNOVATION R&amp;D, start-up collaboration, platform, cluster...</p>   |  |   |  |   |

Figure 2. Social Utility definition: 5 axis

Source: SOLITY project documentation.

### *Axis 2 – VET and lifelong learning personal development*

This second axis aims to measure the contribution of the vocational training to human development both individually and collectively. The focus is on four dimensions: the fight against illiteracy, the improvement of employability, social promotion, and the connection with the national skills upskilling/reskilling policy.

### *Axis 3 – VET and social inclusion*

The third axis opts for the measure of social utility towards the categories of specific public with the aim of fighting the exclusion of individuals and inequalities. The concept of the public furthest away from employment is therefore discussed. The quality of the support and measurement of access for all to national training, the measurement indicators in favour of specific categories of the population, particularly those subject to discrimination, the recognition of professional experience are thus highlighted.

### *Axis 4 – VET and territorial development*

The fourth axis focuses on the contribution of the vocational training to territorial and regional development. Measures of the participation of the vocational training in territorial balance (presence in a regeneration area, town and country planning tool) and in boosting social proximity are the key points of a VET provider social utility. Openness to other actors in the territories is appreciated in a logic of integration and coherence with regional strategies. Finally, the role of the vocational training in economic change is measured in a context of need for social utility “anticipating” economic changes.

### *Axis 5 – Internal Practices*

The fifth axis details the application of social utility ratios in training organizations to measure their personal involvement in promoting and implementing good HR policies and set good examples in favouring their staff personal and professional development.

The Social Utility framework as illustrated above has been translated into observable and measurable criteria using a limited number of indicators taking into account the complexity of the implementation of a such a model on a European scale. In order to offer a model to be used by the widest audience possible, this framework has been submitted to a panel of European experts in the field of VET to collect feedback and adjust it in a way that the differences between VET systems in Europe do not represent an obstacle for the completion of the benchmarking tool.

The identified indicators provide with the necessary and sufficient amount of data to draw representative and valuable pictures of the scenario undergoing analysis and meet certain characteristics. Each indicator is:

- Simple and understood in the same way by all data collectors;
- Accessible: data must be collected without difficulty;



- Accurate: conforms to the correct value (a part-time return to work rate on fixed-term contracts is different to a full-time return to work rate on permanent contracts);
- Reliable: must comply with databases of at least one of the following three levels of reliability:
  - LOW: internal data;
  - AVERAGE: some data is based on an internal source and some data on a ratio of external official data;
  - HIGH: official external data or internal data based on official data transferred to regional/national bodies.

### Benefits for VET providers and final conclusions

Applying the concept of Social Utility to vocational education and training empowers training providers and gives them the opportunity to influencing policy and establish connections and partnerships with decision-makers to implement initiatives at a local, regional and national level. The model presents an attractive evaluation approach based on experience. It gives the opportunity to VET institutions to undertake a self-assessment of their strengths and weaknesses. Recognizing that not all VET organizations have the same issues, the same needs and the same opportunities to work on the evaluation of their level of social utility, the model proposes a comprehensive evaluation approach through a practical tool.

By completing the SOLITY benchmarking tool, VET providers are able to analyse their social impact gathering tangible evidence on the results of their activities in order to strengthen their dialogue with policy makers, and promote the quality of their services to the general public and relevant stakeholders.

To conclude, the message conveyed by SOLITY in terms of quality and excellence relies on the fact that social inclusion must take place in contexts of self-reflection. The idea of SOLITY was raised from this assumption and from some concrete needs that professionals in the VET sector expressed as fundamental. First, the future of Vocational Education and Training requires a shared, common assessment-based approach to analyse in quantitative terms the impact of VET providers on the development of the European society and its future citizens. Second, the future of Vocational Education and Training requires a European vision, therefore the importance of ensuring the transferability and flexibility / adaptability of the Social Utility model, while taking into consideration the specificities of the different national systems and capitalizing on existing good practices.

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