Quality assurance in vocational education and training

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Executive summary

The State Audit Office (SAO) conducted an audit in the second half of 2004, with the aim to analyse the bottlenecks in the quality of vocational education and training, by evaluating the quality assurance activities of the Ministry of Education and Research as well as the concrete action taken in 12 vocational schools. As the output and outcome of vocational education are targeted to the labour market, the quality assessment focused on the satisfaction and involvement of entrepreneurs.

The last time when the SAO audited the provision of vocational education was in 2002. In the meantime a number of positive developments have taken place in vocational education: for instance, a lot of schools participate in the project on quality prize, the Ministry continues to systematize the schools network. On the basis of the audit outcome we can conclude that the processes taking place in vocational education are multifaceted and the Ministry as the coordinating body has a lot to accomplish in order to harmonize the quality of vocational education and make it less dependent on the region, particular school and the area of specialisation.

Vocational education needs a more integrated and cohesive approach to quality assurance. The Ministry of Education and Research has taken multiple measures in order to assure the quality of vocational education. The scope of government supervision has increased from year to year, private schools must periodically renew their educational licences, the evaluation of government-maintained vocational schools carried out under agreed quality criteria was completed only recently. However, there is still no integrated quality assurance system in place in vocational education and training. The accreditation system is yet to be developed. Data about the overall performance of vocational education in terms of withdrawals and employability are collected sporadically by the Ministry. Information about the expectations and satisfaction of entrepreneurs is not systematic. The boards of vocational schools do not always observe the law and contribute to the development of schools to a different extent.

Instruction in vocational schools should be based on national curricula, however, curriculum development has failed during the last ten years. In intermediate years, additional mechanisms have been designed in order to ensure the relevance and up-to-date nature of curricula: the vocational education standard and the professional standards. However, the completion of national curricula has been postponed for another three years and another EEK 5 million has been foreseen for curriculum development.

The SAO has made recommendations to the Minister of Education and Research as follows:

- Develop an integrated quality assurance system in vocational education, in order to ensure quality control by the state of all vocational education institutions and their curricula. In building a quality system, the optimal number and combination of existing resources should be considered so as to make the quality assurance properly function and to avoid duplications and overlapping. The following solutions might be applied:
    - Introduce the accreditation of vocational education institutions or their curricula.
    - Consider the need for national curricula. If the latter are decided to be developed, they should be of such volume as to enable their speedy updating (e.g. amendment in line with the changes to professional standards).
    - Legislate periodic inspections by the National Examination and Qualification Centre so as to ensure the compliance of all curricula used by vocational schools with the vocational education standard, the professional standards (and the national curricula). Provide for a fixed-interval control mode in order to ensure uniform quality and equal conditions for schools, irrespective of their form of ownership.
- Specify the role and responsibility of school boards in the management of vocational education institutions.
- Improve the quality of data collection so as to better plan for government-commissioned education and measures to reduce the number of students discontinuing their studies and to set up a regular feedback system for the monitoring of the employability of graduates and the evaluations and expectations of entrepreneurs.

Government-commissioned education does not always meet entrepreneurs' expectations. The state is not able to produce sufficient numbers of graduates in the "commissioned" specialties. One of the reasons is large numbers of students - about a fifth in recent years - withdrawing from studies. Another reason is the low enrolment levels: students are not willing to enrol in all areas of specialisation which professionals the government has chosen to produce by designing the training order in cooperation with entrepreneurs. Since any school is interested in capitation fees, it seeks to solve this controversy. A non-attractive subject area is advertised under a more attractive name or students are admitted to a related area, the specialists of which are not in great demand in the labour market but which the students are willing to study. The SAO has recommended the following:

- Discontinue the practice of advertising fields of study under misleading names; clarify the need for government-commissioned education or invite enrolments in broader subject fields so that schools could not produce professionals not needed in the labour market.

Entrepreneurs know better what the students should be capable of doing after graduation. In addition to soliciting the opinion of entrepreneurs upon assessing the need for government-commissioned education, the schools are required to seek the opinion of entrepreneurs about each curriculum. Further, vocational schools put on professional qualifications examinations which offer comparable and uniformly understood information about the skills of graduates. The SAO has recommended the following:

- Review and revise the system of "prior approval" of curricula by entrepreneurs and professional associations: specify which institutions must endorse a curriculum and how the costs associated with the endorsement are reimbursed for entrepreneurs and professional associations.
- Continue the integration of professional qualifications examinations in vocational education and training, by combining the final examination of a vocational school to the professional qualifications examination if applicable; analyse the reasons for failing in professional qualifications examinations.

The proportion of practical training to studies, the technical equipment available in training facilities and the contribution of entrepreneurs is rather uneven. The proportion of practical training and the equipment in training facilities differ by schools. Despite the different levels of equipment availability, the cross-usage of practical training facilities is implemented to a little extent. Company internship places are mainly obtained by students themselves. The supervision of company internship by schools and the feedback from host companies regarding the trainee's progress are poor, as a rule. An entrepreneur is expected to make a social contribution without any reward for pedagogical efforts. The SAO has recommended the following:

- Make provision in the vocational education standard for an approximate length of a company training and a school training.
- Set requirements for the material basis of vocational schools by vocational areas and determine the purpose of practical training in school and in an enterprise, or to what extent the schools' training bases are to be developed.
- Take a stance on the funding of company internship, so as to make unambiguously clear whether the expenses associated with practical training in a company must be reimbursed for the company and by whom.
- Consider transition to such mode of company training which would be more coordinated by schools so as to familiarize vocational students with the enterprises with different profiles operating in the chosen filed of study.

One cannot rely on the qualifications and up-to-date practical skills of instructors. As it is difficult to recruit and hire teachers in general education, so it is difficult to recruit and retain quality teaching staff in vocational education: there are teachers in vocational schools who do not meet the qualification requirements. Further field training of teachers in businesses is not properly managed. The SAO has recommended the following:

- Continue to make the qualification system for teachers in vocational education more flexible, by considering extra opportunities for giving credit for the skills of specialists who have passed the professional qualifications examination, for teaching demonstration classes, etc. Given that vocational schools perceive the requirement for further training in professional pedagogy as excessive and bureaucratic, analyse the contents of such extensive further training and the opportunity for its reorganisation.

- Specify in detail the further training of vocational teachers: what are the proportions of theoretical further training, observation, practice in enterprises.

The Minister of Education and Research has concurred with the proposals of the SAO, conceding that the quality of vocational education and training requires systematic improvement. No implementation scheme was submitted, for it should be contained in several instruments subject to approval: the vocational education standard, Act on Amendments to the Vocational Education Institutions Act, The development plan for vocational education system for 2005-2008. Deficiencies in data collection are expected to be corrected through the Estonian education information system to be launched, without a definite reference to deadlines; complex quality assurance, incl. principles of accreditation, is expected to be in place by 2007.

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