

Sustaining the VocTest Centres

Antalya, 29 – 30 April 2013

Report of the Seminar



BACKGROUND

Authorised Certification Bodies / VocTest Centres are an essential element in the qualifications systems reforms in Turkey. The main function of the VocTest centre is to assess candidates against national vocational qualifications in order to certify them. Authorised Certification Bodies / VocTest Centres are therefore central to the success of the National Vocational Qualifications System.

VocTest Centres are private entities, representing the voice of practice and are linked in with economic sectors. They need to be representative for their sector and closely linked with companies. They need to have a clear purpose for the sector quality assuring, certificating and upgrading of staff. They can only operate when they have standards for assessment, when they have procedures for their operations, when they have competent staff and meet formal requirements for accreditation and authorisation. In line with Law 5544 of 2006 and the decree law 665 of 2011, VocTest Centres need to be accredited by Trkak and authorised by VQA. Last year the first VocTest Centre started operating, and we now can start to exchange experiences among VocTest Centres.

This seminar coincided with the last months of the grant scheme. Building on the results of last year's seminar and the experience of the VocTest Centres, we wanted to use this workshop in order to discuss how we can sustain the first VocTest Centres, how we can more effectively support the

development of additional VocTest centres, and how we can establish a network of VocTest Centres that is able to provide effective mutual support.

The following objectives had been formulated before the event

- to discuss the progress related to the operational manual
- to review the experience so far, to share good practices, identify and address bottlenecks
- to review the experience with accreditation and authorization procedures
- to learn from VocTest centres operational issues and discuss possible sustainable business models
- to explore opportunities for mutual support among VocTest centres
- to support and grow the VocTest centres network

Due to budgetary constraints we were unable to invite all VocTest Centres to the seminar, and focused on those who were most advanced in their operations. In hindsight this has been a mistake, as all VocTest Centres should have been represented, especially since 25 out of the 26 centres asked for accreditation. This is a very high success rate of the grant scheme, beyond our expectations.

Overview of the main outcomes of the seminar

A productive seminar...towards a VocTest Centre Association

The seminar proved to be very useful as it helped to share experience and bring out the concerns of all the stakeholders from the VocTest Centres, from VQA, from Trkak, from the Ministry of Education, the Council of Higher Education, from the EU coordination department of the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, the EU delegation and ETF.

The event had some very positive and concrete outcomes:

1. VQA and the UYEP project presented the Operational Manual that they had developed after last year's event. A copy of the manual is published on the ETF website together with all the presentations made during the event. VQA and UYEP invite the VocTest Centres to analyse the Operational Manual and provide comments, so that the Operational Manual can be further improved.
2. VQA and Trkak promised to sit together and to discuss jointly how they can streamline their external quality assurance processes in order to minimise overlapping issues and reduce the reporting burden of the VocTest Centres.
3. By far the most promising outcome was the joint initiative of the VocTest Centres present to establish an association of VocTest Centres. A working group was formed during the seminar that would meet on the 31 May 2013 in Ankara. The Association of VocTest Centres shall involve all VocTest Centres that want to join, including those not present at the meeting. The association could represent the interests, concerns and the common voice of the VocTest Centres. An electronic platform would need to be put in place as soon as possible to share information among the VocTest Centres.
4. The EU is committed to continue its support to VocTest Centres, after this grant scheme is completed. The network of VocTest Centres needs to expand and existing VocTest Centres need to be sustained. The EU Coordination Department of the Ministry of Labour and Social

Security that is coordinating the programming of EU support confirmed that there are already immediate opportunities to support an Association of VocTest centres through the grant scheme of the LLL project.

Overview of the discussions

Introductions

Opportunities, expectations ...but also challenges for VocTest Centers

Mustafa Balci and Virve Vimpari (EU Delegation) opened the seminar and explained the objectives to identify targets for the future, as well as challenges that need to be addressed jointly. The main aim was to understand how we can improve the performance of the National Vocational Qualifications System, so that more adults will be able to obtain VQA certificates and to strengthen relations among the VocTest Centres, and discuss how the cooperation of VQA, Türkak and the VocTest Centres can be improved. The work of the VOC Test Centres is bound-breaking and is highly appreciated. The EU has provided 12M€ in the development of the VocTest Centres. We are happy to learn that most grant holders are establishing a formal accredited and authorized certification body within the national Vocational Qualifications System. Out of the 26 VocTest Centres financed, 8 are already accredited by Türkak and authorized by VQA and most have applied for accreditation. The success of the National Vocational Qualifications System aiming to qualify professionals in Turkish industries, depends on the full commitment of the private sector. This is very important and recognized and supported by the EU. Without active private sector involvement there can be no progress.

Rosita Van Meel stressed that lifelong learning is a key for Turkey's future and social development. Recognition of informal and non-formal learning is needed in this regard, and for this we need to have standard procedures for certification. If Turkey continues on this road, it can become a leading country in recognition of informal learning. Still, there are challenges with the implementation.

Professor Durmus Gunay from the Council of Higher Education shared the experience of the TQF for higher education and the lack of visible progress for individuals and the need to work on raising awareness about the consequences of the TQF for LLL. Looking at the skills people are using when they are working, 30% are on average acquired through formal training, while 70% are obtained informally. The VocTest Centres should be part of a robust system that must be in place to measure and recognise people's skills, but so far the VQA system had not made a real impact on the workforce and the added value to individuals needs to be become clearer, otherwise it would only be an experimental theoretical system.

Meeting formal requirements

The first part of the seminar started with presentations about the Türkak accreditation process and the Operational Manual for VocTest Centres that had been prepared by VQA and the UYEP project.

Türkak Accreditation procedures

Doğan Yildiz presented the Türkak experience with the ISO-17024 accreditation process. Accreditation is the official confirmation by the national accreditation body that an assessment body

operates in accordance with the national and international accepted technical criteria. Türkak has about twenty years of accreditation experience and deals with laboratories, certification bodies and inspection bodies. Türkak is part of an international association of national accreditation bodies. There is only one accreditation body in each country that is accredited to issue the ISO certification. In Turkey this is Türkak. In order to strengthen the independence of Türkak, the organisation is no longer affiliated to the Ministry of Industry, but is now reporting to the Ministry of European Integration. This was the outcome of an audit of Türkak by the European Accreditation Body, as Türkak is subject to similar procedures as it applies to the VocTest Centres. In line with EU regulations, Turkish organisations can also apply to other national accreditation bodies for accreditation. Each accreditation process is composed of application, inspection, decision, and monitoring. The ISO 17024 standard is an international standard that has been defined by ISO, and it is not flexible. Türkak cannot make its own adapted version of the accreditation requirements; it is a package that has to be adopted as a whole to get international accreditation. The clauses of ISO 17024 are followed by Türkak in detail in the accreditation process. The Certification Body is responsible for the decision. The accreditation process builds on the internal quality assurance procedures that are in place in each VocTest Centre.

During the application process VocTest Centres supply information and a pre-interview takes place before the formal application is submitted. All the information is uploaded in the Türkak system and all documents are available to everybody involved in the process of application.

A chief auditor and inspectors with relevant technical expertise form the inspection committee in charge of the field inspection. The field visit starts with a kickoff meeting. All the clauses of the ISO 17024 standard are checked meticulously. Interviews with the personnel of the VocTest Centre take place. During the inspection on site the Quality System and the Technical Content are inspected. During a final meeting the inspection is evaluated jointly and the findings are shared. The team grades all the criteria for inspection, and grades below 2 require action. The non-conformities are signed mutually between the Inspection Committee and the VocTest Centre. The VocTest applicant has three months to correct the non-conformities identified. Common problems that appear are often related to the questions in the item bank. Often Türkak notices that these questions have not been screened by the programme committee of the VocTest Centre. Some questions are also not at the right level.

Accreditation is granted for four years. Every year an inspection takes place. This is followed by a recertification procedure in the fourth year. During the annual inspection visits the actual testing is checked against the standards for which the testing is taken place. The experience during the year is evaluated and the number of candidates is monitored. Unusual high success rates are challenged.

At the end of the seminar Türkak announced that 25 out of 26 VocTest centres applied for accreditation. To speed up accreditation some organisations did not get a pre-authorisation report from VQA, before starting the accreditation procedures. As of 1 May 2013 a new revised version of the ISO 17024 standard is in force with 10 additional articles.

Presentation of the Operational Manual

Following the ETF workshop in March 2012, the idea of having an Operational Manual for the VocTest Centres took shape. Donald Paterson, from the UYEP project introduced the manual. The manual has been produced to support VocTest Centres in their day to day operation as National Vocational Qualification assessment centres. It explains the core business functions of VocTest

Centres to assess vocational qualifications effectively and the requirements for working with VQA to provide successful candidates a NVQ certificate.

A glossary is included in the Manual, and is the product of joint work with other European projects. The glossary will ensure a common understanding of many new concepts associated with the new National Vocational Qualifications System. The manual also contains current versions of all VQA guidance documents supporting the assessment, quality assurance and certification of national vocational qualifications.

The manual has 11 sections.

The first section describes the role, structure and functions of VocTest Centres, on how they are expected to cooperate with Trkak and VQA, including in the Trkak accreditation process.

The second section is dedicated to quality assurance principles and includes the validation process, the VQA Authorisation Process, internal verification by the VocTest Centres, external verification, audits and monitoring by VQA. It also explains what kind of support and visits can be expected from VQA and what kind of policies VocTest Centres should have in place. For many of these policies there are examples included in the manual, including on quality assurance, assessment, staff development and what skills need to be further developed; to mention a few.

Current versions of VQA guidance are included in the sections 4-10 which provide a Guide to Validation, Authorisation Criteria, the Guide to Assessment, Assessment Appeals Guide, Guide to Internal Verification, a Guide to External Verification and the Guide to Certification. The Guide to Certification is not completely ready yet.

An important issue for many centres is how VocTest Centres operate with unsuccessful applicants, and how they ensure competent people in the appeal committee.

The planned last section of the manual is on the quality audit process, is still under discussion.

Electronic copies of the operational manual are available on the ETF and VQA websites. It is recommended that hard copies are kept in binders in loose-leaf format, in order to include updates as soon as they are available. An electronic copy on USB key was distributed to all participants during the seminar.

Since the manual is still work in progress, comments are very welcome on the content and structure of the Manual. Please present your comments to VQA

DISCUSSIONS

The discussion after the presentations focused on the use of the ISO-17024 standard in other countries. It was explained that this standard is particularly used for the assessment of regulated professions, but not for regular assessment and certification processes as is the case in Turkey. The Turkish requirement that all certification bodies are accredited against this standard is therefore heavier than in the European Union.

The standard makes clear statements about the limitations to sub-contracting for a certification body, which seemed to be in conflict with the practice in Turkey that the VocTest Centres are

responsible for the assessment but sub-contract the certification to VQA. On the other hand, the existence of a unique VQA certificate, rather than having a huge range of certifying bodies issuing their own certificates strengthens the recognisability and value of the certificates for individuals as they now receive national qualifications. The VQA system has been put in place to coordinate and regulate the system of standards, ensuring coherence and quality across the country.

Many VocTest Centres complained that the existing set-up of having two separate QA processes with Trkak and VQA is increasing their workload, and in particular their reporting obligations. With the Ministry of Education opening validation procedures via lifelong learning centres, some VocTest Centres feared that individuals would simply pick the simplest procedure to obtain certification.

The fact that VocTest Centres have to be a private / profit-making body rather than a NGO is a Turkish requirement. By law, in Turkey they have to be commercial entities – it is not rule that has been developed by Trkak neither a requirement from the ISO 17024 standard. As the EU is unable to give grants to commercial organisations, this rule has implications for further EU support to sustain the VocTest Centres.

TWO PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

From the formal requirements we moved to the early experience of existing VocTest Centres. Two new examples were chosen of organisations that have managed to obtain Trkak accreditation and VQA authorisation.

- *IZODER*

Hseyin Onbaođlu from **Izoder** presented the BECTIS project for Qualification Based Certification in the Insulation Sector. In Insulation there is already experience with accreditation procedures for insulation products and processes and this has made it easier to introduce conformity assessment as a necessary next step. According to Hseyin quality insulation depends on three factors: certificated materials, certificated personnel and market monitoring inspection. The aim of Izoder is to promote the certification of insulation professionals for a quality insulation procedure.

The project went through different stages before the VocTest Centre for the Insulation Sector became operational. Below is a time table:

1. Preparation of vocational qualifications based on vocational standards related to four branches of insulation and approval by the Vocational Qualifications Agency. (30 May 2012)
2. Preparation of test and assessment tools based on the qualifications; development of question bank. (March 2012)
3. Development of the central data processing system and the software that permits the theoretical tests to be conducted via computer on the network. (August 2012)
4. Tender for the production of the test modules which will be used in the Practical Test Centre. (August 2012 – November 2012)
5. Pre application for the VQA authorization. (12 November 2012)
6. Signing protocol with the VQA. (04 December 2012)

7. Application to Türkak for the ISO-17024 quality management system based accreditation. (07 December 2012)
8. Türkak accreditation. (14 January 2013)
9. Application to VQA for the authorization. (16 January 20123)
10. VQA Authorization (March 2013)

Hüseyin explained that It is not easy to run a VocTest project as there are clear contradictions between European and Turkish requirements. The main challenges encountered in the implementation of the projects were the organisation of tender procedures, obtaining approval for the amendments of project activities which took very long, and the production of two-month monitoring reports that is a rather time consuming task, although these reports are quite superficial in contents.

Projects like this really require support and concerted action from the whole organisation, beyond the project team. It is important to develop a detailed action plan in addition to the timetable in the project proposal. Cooperation between the organisations that are focused on the same target can bring more success. In the near future Izoder will further promote the centre in the insulation sector. The Izoder members and other expert implementers will be encouraged to obtain a vocational qualification certificate. An insulation master qualification certificate will be included in the Insulation Credit System.



Lessons learned and recommendations

There are many issues that VocTest Centres can address more effectively together than on their own, and the colleagues from Izoder therefore suggested that a VocTest Centres' Association is founded to represent the interest of VocTest centres and to support information exchange and exchange of experiences. According to Hüseyin VocTest Centres are like boats in the sea, some will sink, others will float, but they are lost to the elements if they do not establish a good communication system between them. The current regulatory requirements are very complex and

could be reviewed together with VQA in order to strengthen the sustainability of VocTest Centres. In order to stimulate organisations to establish VocTest Centres, grant holders could receive some legal privileges. There needs to be a study on vocational responsibility and liability insurance, which seems to be a very unusual issue.

- *HAK-IŞ*

The second example was presented by Sahin Serim, from HAK-IŞ. HAK-IŞ decided to establish a VocTest Centre to support lifelong learning and in particular the development of the labour force.

The VocTest Centre is dealing with the following qualifications in the metal industry: Refractory worker (Level 3-4), Milling cutter operator (Level 3-4), Hydraulic and pneumatic technician (Level 4-5), Steel welder (Level 3) and Machine operator (Level 3-4). Most of these are occupations with considerable health and safety issues, and they are therefore often regulated occupations in other countries. The ISO requirements therefore seem to be justified for this particular set of occupations.

In order to establish the foundation of the Test and Certification Centre the HAK-IŞ Confederation the General Assembly and board adopted a special resolution and the regulation was modified accordingly. A commercial enterprise was established (HAK-IŞ MEYEB) to meet the accreditation requirements. Working Procedures and Principles were prepared; and registration in the Ankara Chamber of Commerce was completed

The time table for the Accreditation and Authorization Processes is similar to the timetable of Izoder described above: A National Qualification Preparation Protocol with the VQA was signed on 18.01.2012. Pre-application to the VQA authorization for the occupations in scope took place on 28.12.2012. The pre-application was accepted on 04.01.2013.

In the meantime the application for Türkak Accreditation was made on 21.11.2012. Türkak Inspection took place during three days: 9-10-11.01.2013 Corrective and preventive actions to eliminate nonconformities were addressed immediately on 01.02.2013. Türkak Accreditation was obtained on 25.02.2013.

The application for VQA authorization followed on 28.02.2013. VQA Authorization Inspection took place on 12-13.04.2013. Corrective and preventive actions to eliminate nonconformities were completed by 25.04.2013

For the item banks that were prepared for the occupations mentioned 1590 theoretical and performance based questions were prepared in total.



Lessons learned and recommendations

Practical experience shows that there are problems with some qualifications. They should be amended immediately once such problems are identified. There is ample scope for a better coordination of the Türkak and VQA roles. Türkak and VQA Inspection could be combined. Türkak should authorise VQA on personnel certification, to ensure the whole system is linked up. At the moment candidates receive two certificates with Türkak and VQA logos, but in the future these should be combined. The VocTest Centres that operate in common areas should cooperate and a common question banks should be developed under VQA. In order to strengthen the sustainability of VocTest Centres there is a need for new support mechanisms. Alternatives to VocTest Centres should not be developed within the scope of the accreditation activities of the training institutions.

DISCUSSIONS

After the presentations there was a lively discussion on whether the existing set up with its elaborate accreditation and authorisation processes, monitoring and reporting procedures was actually working. Many VocTest Centres wanted to see a closer cooperation between Türkak and VQA on the external quality assurance of the system. The relationship between Türkak and VQA should also be established to bring the accreditation and authorisation processes in one coherent process. There were many concerns whether VocTest Centres could be sustainable, let alone profitable, as there is currently still limited interest from the public for certification. The existing VocTest Centres were created by NGOs that wanted to increase the number of qualified people in their sector. However, the government also had an interest in promoting that in view of the 2023 agenda. Industry should gain something from the certifications to ensure employers were interested. Most VocTest Centres were not against others joining the market for certification, but that had to be done on a level playing field. If national certificates could be obtained in cheaper and easier ways elsewhere, e.g. in lifelong learning centres that did not need to undergo Türkak

accreditation and VQA authorisation, this would undermine the sustainability of the VocTest Centres.

WORKING GROUPS

After the presentations and the plenary discussions working groups sessions took place to discuss how VocTest Centres could become stronger, looking on one hand at their internal QA processes (– rapporteur Abdullah Ozdemir, VQA) and on the other hand the business processes that could facilitate the expansion of VocTest Centres (rapporteur Nesli Urhan, Ministry of Labour and Social Security)

Sharing experience with Internal Quality Assurance Processes

The working group looked at the internal verification processes that should be put in place to provide a second eye in order to audit the assessment and certification procedures within the VocTest Centre. It is important that a quality culture is developed within the VocTest Centres that allows them to spot and address problems effectively. Internal verification can therefore be addressed as a collective reflective process. Not every VocTest Centres needs to have an in-house internal verifier. VQA staff will visit VocTest Centres to provide feedback on the internal processes.

Appeal procedures are an essential part of the certification processes, but VocTest centres are not expected to involve a lawyer in dealing with appeals. It is important to make judgements about which appeals would warrant the advice of a lawyer, and which can be dealt with by competent staff in the VocTest centres.

VQA is requesting that VocTest Centres record the examination on CCTV for audit purposes, but some VocTest Centres challenged VQA that such filmed materials could actually be used to define whether someone was successful or not in the test, while ETF pointed out that filming candidates during examination could influence their performance negatively, and could possibly be challenged based on European privacy and data protection regulations.

VQA confirmed that there is no need to record screen shots from examinations, as assessors are ultimately responsible for supervising candidates during examination.

Each VocTest Centre should develop its own strategy for assessment, but there are guidelines from VQA to promote coherence. The limit of tolerance to decide whether a person is competent or not, needs a clear agreement within each VocTest Centre.

The role of item banks with their bias towards knowledge assessment was also discussed. VQA is looking into the development of software to ease the job for VocTest Centres.

How to expand VocTest Centres?

The second group looked into a series of factors that could help VocTest Centres to grow their business. More cooperation between VocTest Centres is definitely a very important factor, and establishing an association of VocTest Centres is seen as a priority. An EU grant to develop the organisation can thus be requested. All VocTest Centres that are authorized by VQA should come together to discuss a joint portal and a common association to share expertise, represent the common interest of the VocTest Centres and channel support to the VocTest Centres.

Currently the demand for the validation of non-formal and informal learning is low. Extending the pilot phase of development for VocTest Centres with additional subsidies and support measures to build capacities is important in order to give the system more time to develop. Legislation is planned by the Ministry of National Education to facilitate recognition of informal learning. The approaches to validation that the Ministry of National Education and the on Ministry of Labour and Social Security are developing should be harmonised with EU policies (Recommendation on Validation 2012, Common Principles 2004).

There should be a public promotion campaign about the VocTest Centres to reach a wider public. This could include spots on TV, or role models of people undergoing validation in popular TVE series. A date could be set once a year to organise nationwide examinations at all VocTest centres. Good practices can be published. New industries should be targeted to establish VocTest Centres.

A factor that is affecting the balance sheet of existing centres negatively is the obligation to provide unsuccessful candidates access to a second exam for free. This should be reviewed.

FROM RECOMMENDATIONS TO ACTIONS

From these discussions that generated many ideas, the work moved from recommendations to actions during the last two working groups followed by a plenary discussion. Since these overlapped each other we have summarised them here in one common set of finding, conclusions and actions. The main ideas that came out of the discussion was to establish an association of VocTest Centres, to establish a virtual platform for information sharing, and investigate how to obtain further EU support for the VocTest Centres.

- *Establishing a Foundation of VocTest Centres*

The VocTest Centres discussed whether they could join an existing association dealing for accredited organisations, but in the end decided that they would need a specific association given their specific duties. An NGO structure would be the best form for an alliance among VocTest Centres. This would also be good to fight the unfair competition. Many legal issues need to be considered before establishing a new NGO. A working group with representatives from five VocTest centres would lead the way. They would meet at 31 May in Ankara in the ASO premises to discuss the roles and responsibilities of the foundation and practical issues, including the Secretariat, administration etc. The working group would elaborate proposals. Decisions should be taken later on by the respective managers, at the stage of the set-up of the association. Membership would be first of all open to all VocTest Centres that had applied for accreditation. The association would be open to any new VocTest Centre. VocTest Centres that were not present in the seminar not here today should be informed asap of the discussions taking place here regarding the alliance – VQA confirmed that all accredited VocTest Centres will be proposed to be part of the association, automatically. Relevant ministries, VQA, Türkak, EU could become observers in the foundation. Involvement of influential organisations representing the private industry that can have a word in the market should be consulted as well before setting up a new entity.

It may be useful to look at different examples of similar organisations such as COLO, sector skills council alliance, FAB,...

Establish a virtual platform for information sharing

An electronic platform should be put into place to share information among VocTest Centres as soon as possible. This could facilitate discussions on formal and informal issues, in order to find solutions

to current problems of VocTest Centres, and to look for efficiency gains. These could include cooperation on software development. Existing software for testing should be shared, to avoid duplication. It could be discussed what software – what can VocTest Centres develop in common? The electronic platform would be the main tool for daily communication and information sharing.

- *How to obtain further EU support?*

The EU cannot give grants to for profit organisations, but EU support can in principle be channelled through the VocTest Association. Funding can already be allocated through existing grant schemes. There is: no need to wait for specific EU funds (2015) to set-up this alliance. There is a practical guide which gives directions for getting EU funds. The to-be-established NGO will have to apply within a calls for grants, i.e. in the framework of the grant scheme for LLL. The EU Del will need to have info on the composition of the new NGO, since it will not be a temporary entity. ETF is also available to continue to work with the VocTest Centres

FINAL DISCUSSION ON FOLLOW-UP and CONCLUSIONS

Chairs and rapporteurs of today's working groups will call for a meeting of a working group on 31 May and shall involve ALL VocTest Centres, also those who are not here today. The ETF findings from this event will follow and will be shared with ALL (incl. not present VocTest Centres) later on. Turkey is really ahead with its system: it is a very good example of commitment and private sector involvement in the field of qualifications. Not often in EU you see so much private sector represented, it is mainly the public sector. Both VocTest Centres and VQA have learned a lot. It is crucial to share info also with newcomers. There are opportunities in improving efficiency and not to reinvent the wheel with similar software etc. – knowledge and cost sharing is important, as well as increasing mutual trust, focusing on content of the work – cumulative process to be followed. Efficiency, cooperation and streamlining will help to reduce cost

VQA (Ismail Ozdogan) Insights have been given in these two days on standards and processes run by the VQA. After this VQA will start to work on remove duplications. Feedback will be awaited by the participants from the VocTest Centres on possible improvements to the Operational Manual

Türkak (Dogan Yildiz and Ahmet Gozukucuk) Accreditation means audit, if standards are not met recommendations are put forward. Türkak is available to sit with VQA and discuss how to quickly sort overlapping issues. Türkak is expanding its capacities to new domains once the TQF for lifelong learning will be in place.