Towards an operational manual for VocTest Centres

Report of the Seminar in Antalya

On 6/7 March 2012

This report summarises the findings of the seminar "Towards an Operational Manual for VocTest Centres" that took place in Antalya on 6-7 March 2012. The seminar was organised by the European Training Foundation, in consultation with the Vocational Qualifications Authority, the EU Delegation and the EU project for the Strengthening Vocational Qualifications Authority and National Qualifications System in Turkey (UYEP). The seminar was attended by the existing VocTest Centres grant beneficiaries, representatives from universities, the Council of Higher Education, the Ministry of Education (LLL Department), VQA staff, staff from the European project on Strengthening VQA, staff from the CFCU, from the EU Delegation, and the ETF, including an expert sharing her experience with similar centres in Romania. Unfortunately Türkak (Turkish Accreditation Agency) was unable to attend.

The seminar focused on how to kick-start the development and implementation of VocTest Centres and brought together the first VocTest Centres to exchange experience on how they are preparing for the assessment and certification of candidates and plan to implement and sustain the operations of a VocTest centre, sharing experience between existing VocTest Centres, and with other stakeholders.

The objectives of the seminar were:
√   Map jointly the processes of VocTest Centres and authorised certification bodies
√   Develop a detailed outline and skeleton for an operational manual
√   Facilitate mutual learning and ensure structures for continued systematic information exchange between VocTest Centres
√   Agree actions for follow up

Outcomes of the seminar

These objectives were met by the end of the seminar. Participants worked together to map the processes of the authorised certification bodies and develop a roadmap for completing an operational manual. The VocTest centre functions were compared to those of the sectoral assessment centres in Romania. During the seminar there was a lot of room for discussion between the Turkish colleagues to exchange information and experiences and for mutual learning

The need for additional operational guidelines that have a more practical perspective focusing on the activities and capacities of VocTest centres was recognised. During the seminar participants have been working jointly towards an outline for an operational manual for authorised certification bodies, building on the experience gained by the VocTest Centres as well as support provided by Vocational Qualifications Authority and the EU project for Strengthening VQA and the National Qualifications System in Turkey.

Three processes were looked at in detail. The development process of national vocational qualifications, the assessment-evaluation and certification processes and the institutional development processes. An outline for the operational manual mentioning these processes can be found in Annex 1.

The EU project "Strengthening the Vocational Qualifications Authority and National Qualifications System in Turkey (UYEP)" has committed itself to complete the manual in consultation with the Vocational Qualifications Authority and existing VocTest centres. The project is also considering training sessions on competency based assessment and QA for VocTest centres, to address the needs of VocTest centres in these areas.

One conclusion of the seminar is that establishing a VocTest Centre requires considerable time. VocTest grant beneficiaries who are expecting that they need more time to complete their planned activities may therefore request prolongation of the VocTest contracts from the CFCU.

The exchange of information between VocTest centres needs to be continuous. VocTest centres are exploring between themselves and with VQA how they can facilitate an informal exchange of information on the internet.

Clarifying the current position and role of VocTest Centres

VocTest Centres or more correctly Authorised Certification Bodies are a new type of institution in the Turkish qualifications landscape, and an essential element in the qualifications 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. Voc Test 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 in the quality assurance, certification and upgrading of the 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.

As with all new endeavours, experience shows that it is not easy to establish a VocTest centre. Only INTES has been able to obtain authorisation following accreditation so far and has started to qualify staff in the construction sector, which is a legal requirement for the construction sector, creating a steady demand for services. INTES has been preparing for this role long before the grant scheme started.

A number of other VocTest Centres is also quite advanced, as they have been involved before the grant scheme in the development process of occupational standards and qualifications.

Other VocTest Centres have only started their activities with the grant scheme, sometimes lacking a full overview of what it implies to establish a functional VocTest Centre.

The seminar has helped everybody to understand what is expected from the VocTest Centres in the National Vocational Qualifications System. Advanced VocTest Centres have made considerable efforts to get to where they are and as a consequence VocTest Centres are at very different stages of development. This has created a situation in which mutual trust for cooperation is still low which does not favour an active exchange of information and experience between VocTest Centres. Only one of the VocTest Centres openly volunteered during the seminar to facilitate the information exchange between each other.

It is clear that all VocTest Centres can gain from cooperation. Most VocTest centres are reinventing the wheel. In particular in the area of developing item banks there are obvious reasons for cooperation as VQA is planning to establish a national item bank to support the National Vocational Qualifications System as a whole, and all the intense efforts made in this area might therefore only have a temporary use. Moreover, there are likely to be other developmental and implementation issues

where the private interests of VocTest Centres differ from those of VQA as the public regulator of the system, where the position of the VocTest Centres would be considerably strengthened if they operated together. One possible area that one could think of are bolstering the requirements for VocTest Centres to proof their sectoral linkages, which might protect the development costs invested by advanced VocTest Centres against parvenus without sectoral affiliation. There is a clear need to have some kind of a social network to exchange information informally between VocTest centres.

In the end everybody seems to be looking at VQA as facilitator. VQA is also the regulator and these roles can conflict at times. As the warden of the system VQA is looking for system solutions that are standardised in order to guarantee a level playing field, while VocTest Centres may prefer solutions that are more tailored to their sector. VQA can not advise VocTest Centres on how to organise themselves and than evaluate whether they are organised appropriately.

There is a need for more practical guidance, exchange of experiences and training of VocTest Centre staff on content related issues, such as competency based assessment methods and quality assurance. Although different regulatory documents exist that determine the legal requirements for operating an authorised certification body, they do not provide practical guidance for establishing and developing VocTest centres.

The legal basis for the activities of the authorised certification bodies are determined by Law 5544 on the Vocational Qualifications Authority, that was published in the Official Gazette on 7 Oct 2006 and revised 2 November 2011, and the Regulation on Vocational qualification, Testing and Certification (Official Gazette 27096/30 Dec 2008). These documents set the general legal provisions for the operations in the National Vocational Qualifications System and the role of the certification bodies is described in different parts of the regulation concerning accreditation, and authorisation of the certification bodies and on the legal obligations vis-à-vis VQA and stipulations on assessment-evaluation materials, applications for certification, record keeping, the scope of testing, the selection of questions for assessment-evaluation, notification on the testing schedule, results of the testing, decisions on certification, the issuing of certificates and the maintenance of records. All these issues are approached from a regulatory rather than from a practical perspective.

Sharing experience with existing VocTest Centres

In spite of the lack of an agreed solution on how to share experience, a good start was made to share experience between VocTest centres in the seminar. Two presentations were made by existing VocTest Centres with attention to capacity and institution building, and standard development, assessment and certification processes which formed the first and important step towards more information exchange between VocTest Centres. The text below is a write up of notes made during the presentations and is meant to reflect the issues that emerged in the development process, rather than a prescription on how to establish a VocTest Centre.

□ **Textile sector**

The textile sector (presented by Bora Kocaman) has been working with VQA since 2009 when they signed a protocol. The focus is on middle-sized and big companies. The textile sector has developed 25 national occupational standards and visited hundreds of workshops in the sector. All relevant NGO's, Chambers of Commerce, and companies were contacted to ask opinions about the new standards. The

response rate was only 10%. There is a need to think about different policies here to ensure a better response that could be useful for all the 26 VocTest Centres.

A new vocational tree has been developed for textile skills. The textile sector is working closely with textile training centres in Istanbul, Adana and Kayseri. Jointly, they are working towards 5 different national qualifications that focus on textile treatment and the production of threads and fabrics.

Software applications for item banks have been developed, including psycho-technical tests, building on methods that are being used in the enterprises, with a special focus on the eye finger coordination. One issue that is now important is how to systematise the practical tests. Accreditation to Türkak is in preparation.

Five people are working for the textile sector and two each in Adana and Kayseri. They have received support of academics, in particular sociologists and ICT experts who have been brought to the practical areas. Companies were all using their own approaches for performance and competence assessment. Both employees and employers are involved in the textile sector. Theoretical and practical tests are developed, using an IT infrastructure via a website, which will allow people with password to enter the web site from these Testing Centres and do (part of the) exams from these centres.

It is now important to provide opportunities to the employers for the assessment. There is a huge gap between theory and practice, and competence assessment can provide more transparent procedures. The public needs to have access to the information on the possibilities of certification via a portal. Official information only covers part of the realities in the industry. Officially there are 200.000 textile workers in Turkey, but in reality there are as much as 800.000 workers working in the sector. There is a need to have the statistical information from the regions, based on objective criteria that are accessible to everyone.

There is a three level administration system in the VocTest Centre. All of the colleagues are looking at the standards. Theoretical examinations will be available via an electronic platform with 350 questions. Producing questions is very hard. But making the assessment based on the questions is also very hard. 2000 questions have been collected in the textile item banks so far and 450 of these questions have been deemed appropriate for use in testing. For each trade we need to prepare about 300 questions.

Theoretical exam candidates need to pass a threshold of a 50% success rate. It seems that after 20/30 questions people get bored. They are not used to reading. The practical examinations threshold is higher, integrating skills, knowledge and competence. The exam is expected to take approximately four to five hours. There are psycho-technical tests too. In the textile sector there are many urgent orders from abroad and this means that the industry must be able to produce quickly. Textile workers need to be prepared for rotating jobs, just like in Migros supermarket where many staff is performing cashier functions in peak hours while performing their specific functions when there are less clients around.

There are still many problems to address even when VocTest Centres are up and running. How can the autonomy of the VocTest Centre be ensured? It is not easy to define how many years a certificate should be valid? For Türkak this seems to be only two years and then people will need to requalify. Formal requirements for qualifications, which are used in the VET schools of the Ministry of National Education and in MYO's (colleges), clash with the needs of industry. The management of the branches needs to be convinced about the needs for change and use the sector committees. The biggest challenge is the lack of experience.

□ **INTES Construction sector**

INTES (presented by Asli Karatekin) has been measuring competences since 1994. INTES has been working with VQA since 2008 and has established a VocTest Centre that is now fully functional and sustainable and has the staff to support the process. The construction sector has expanded its activities far beyond the borders of Turkey and this has increased the need to certify the work force, which has been reinforced by regulatory requirements in the sector. In the past INTES focused almost exclusively on providing training in construction sector. INTES reoriented technicians, and engineers who lacked practical experience. The training covered 5100 people. INTES has worked with VQA since the very beginning of its operations. It started with nine occupational standards and 9 qualifications.

INTES has applied to Türkak in 90 days' time after receiving preliminary authorization of VQA and has been accredited against ISO standard 17024. INTES had to prepare first all the requested documents required on the Türkak website. After examination of the documents, a team of auditors came to visit INTES during two days. There was an audit of all the documentation; INTES had to show 6 procedures as well as its quality manual. All the documentation was checked in detail for three occupations against the national qualifications. Türkak hires academicians to do that. The VQA authorisation looked at the compliance with the national authorisation requirements and not at the specific issues for each qualification as these had already been checked in detail by Türkak.

The backbone of INTES work is the item bank. In the construction sector there are many unskilled workers. Gazi university construction technology department has given support in developing the assessment. The examinations have both a theoretical and practical part. For each question there were developers and INTES accepted, rejected or corrected the questions, developed by them. The accepted questions are integrated in the soft ware. Only 50% of the questions proved to be acceptable in the end. In order to test the validity of the questions field test are carried out. There are 2004 training centres in construction in Turkey. They are linked to the technical universities where the construction sector tries to create examination requirements. 450 candidates could be accepted for the competence assessment tests. INTES has already received many requests from Turkish construction companies that work internationally to certify their staff. For the assessment all the health and safety measures are taken into account to create an appropriate environment.

What to do with the people who are not (yet) competent? INTES is receiving support from many universities to develop training modules in order to train unsuccessful candidates for specific units of competence. 95% of the candidates need some training.


The Romanian experience

Romania implemented a competence based assessment and certification system and a network of assessment centres that has been operating for more than ten years now. Like Turkey Romania began to develop occupational standards in the mid nineties and soon the request came from industries to use these standards to certify their staff as well as for the recognition of the vocational competencies acquired by the labour force through non-formal learning. Elisabeta Mitroi, who was involved from the early stages at the national level and has been personally accredited as assessor and verifier, shared her experience during the seminar.

As an output-control system, assessment of competences allows the recognition and certification of competences regardless of where and how they have been achieved. The result of assessment is either "competent" when the candidate gets the recognition of the learning achievements and is ready for employment, or "not yet competent" when the candidate gets a report of the missing competence and a recommendation for further learning meant to fill the gaps.

After the stage of additional learning the candidate may ask for a new assessment and will go through a new assessment process which, again, can lead to one of the two types of assessment decision explained above.

Feed-back loop

Vocational Education
•Formal
•Non-formal, informal

Assessment and Certification

Competent → **Employment**

Not yet competent
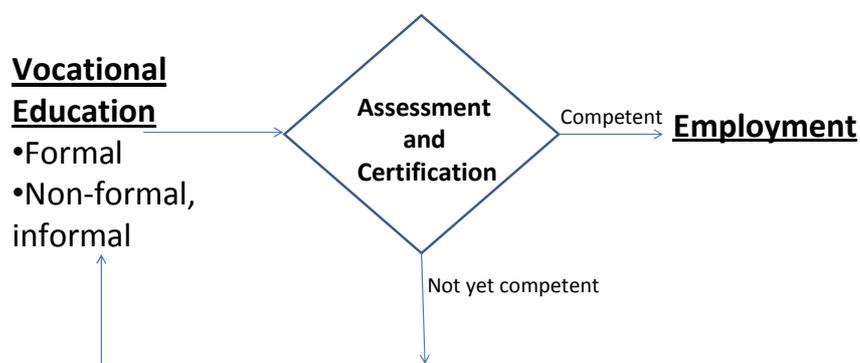
The assessment of competences is the process of collecting evidence of knowledge, skills and work results produced by a candidate, and judging them against the specifications of occupational standards. With other words, the certification is granted only if the candidate provides evidence of competence of knowledge, skills and work results, as described in the performance criteria and assessment requirements for each occupational standard. It means that it is not enough if the candidate has the necessary knowledge and skills, but she/he must demonstrate the ability to use the knowledge and skills in work context and to obtain the expected results.

As the assessment of competence is a matter of trust, the process needs to be led by qualified **assessors** in institutions authorised by the National Authority for Qualifications (NAQ) as **assessment centres**.
The main features of assessment of competence are:
- The result of assessment is either the candidate is **competent** or **not yet competent**. The characteristics of the criteria based assessment is that the candidate's performance is compared with the specifications of the occupational standard, as opposed to norm based assessment where the results of a candidate are compared with the average results of other candidates.
- The process is run by a **qualified assessor** within an authorised institution = **assessment centre**. The assessor must be a professional in the occupations he assesses, with recent experience either as practitioner or as a supervisor of practitioners in respective occupations. In addition, the assessor should have appropriate competences for performing assessments, i.e. planning and

organising assessments, judging evidence and making decision on candidate's competence, developing assessment items, keeping records of assessment process.

The <u>assessment centre</u> is an institution with appropriate facilities, competent personnel for assessment. In addition the institution must demonstrate it has in place a quality assurance system in line with ISO 17024 (the organisation is not necessarily accredited against ISO 17024).
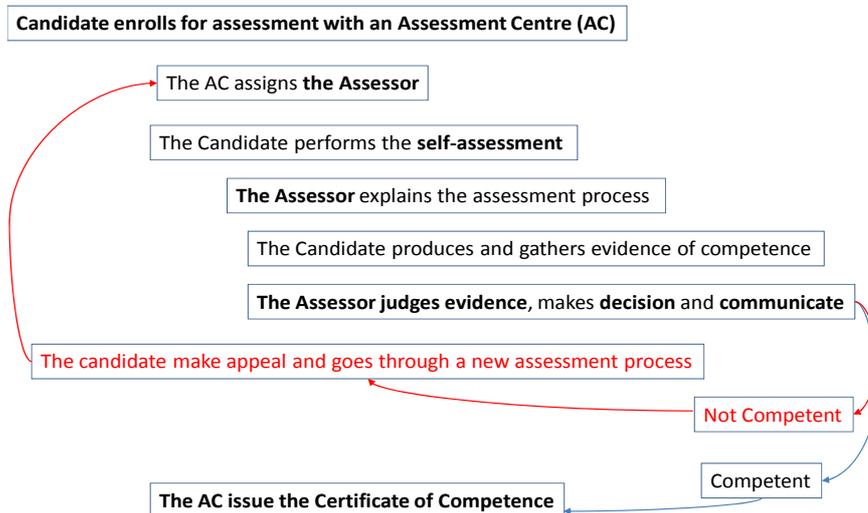
In order to be authorised as Assessment Centre the organisation needs to comply with the following eight criteria:

- It proves to have adequate human and physical resources which means, on one hand that the assessors are certified to perform assessments of competence and in the same time they have the required professional experience in respective occupations. On the other hand it means that organisation has the necessary facilities, equipment, tools and materials that allow the candidates to make the test of knowledge and the practical demonstration of their skills for the full range of conditions stated in the occupational standard. The lack of one type of equipment will affect the validity of the assessment process and, consequently the assessment decision.
- It demonstrates relevant knowledge and experience in the occupational domain for which it will conduct assessments. The staff of the organisation has significant work experience in respective field.
- It has documentation and written materials – the assessment centre must have its own assessment items which are pre-tested before the mass use, and the appropriate number of tests for each assessment method which is used, so that reliable evaluations of the candidates are secured. The organisation also gives access to the candidates to occupational standards and to learning materials related to the occupations which are assessed.
- Assessment processes are conducted in required conditions – which means in accordance with requirements stated in the occupational standards and with the approved methodology. It is compulsory to include in the assessment process the self-assessment, tests of knowledge, evaluation of skills and of capacity to comply with workplace conditions for obtaining expected work results. In the same time the organisation needs to prove that occupational

health and safety rules are in place for the practical tests so that candidates and assessors are not exposed to any occupational risk.

- The organisation has an operational communication plan and promotes the assessment services so that any individual can access without limitations the assessment services.
- It ensures equal opportunities for all candidates – the institution need to prove adopted in-place policies for non-discriminatory access and practices for all candidates seeking recognition of competences.
- The assessment centre must have a clear and transparent appeal procedure which is communicated to candidates before the assessment process starts.
- The assessment centre must keep the records of a full range of data occurring along the assessment processes, and required by NQA. The correctness and accuracy of the record system is subject of verification for initial authorisation as well as for re-authorisation.

The assessment centre is verified and monitored against the principles of quality assurance (quality circle) for each of all eight criteria. Each criterion is scrutinised for every stage of quality assurance cycle: planning, implementing, verification and improvement and gets a mark between 0 and 3. The lowest mark for any of the eight criteria, will give the mark for the performance of the centre and accordingly the centre can be authorised for 1, 2 or 3 years. In case the mark for at least one criterion is 0, the centre is not authorised.

Prior to verification performed by the external verifiers assigned by NQA, the assessment centre makes an internal verification with its own internal verifiers who have the role to ensure a continuum of the quality assurance process within the organisation. The internal verifiers ensure the internal monitoring of the work of assessors.

Quality Assurance in Assessment Process		
NAQ	External verification	External verifiers
Assessment Centres	Internal verification	Internal verifiers
Assessment Centres	Assessment	Assessor
Candidate's performance		

NAQ in Romania has wide competences in the domain of continuing vocational training and in assessment and certification of vocational competencies acquired through non-formal and informal learning.

In the field of continuing vocational training, NAQ develops and implements the methodology for authorising training centres.

NAQ main responsibilities related to assessment and certification system are the following:
- endorses the occupational standards validated by the sectoral committees
- authorises assessment centres and monitors through external verifiers the activity of assessment centres
- certifies assessors, internal and external verifiers

Apart from these, and in order to support the good implementation of assessment and certification system NAQ assists the professional development of assessors and verifiers, and cooperates with the Sectoral Committees in the development of occupational standards, qualifications. For this purpose NAQ developed and published on its web page guidelines for all above mentioned activities, and a handbook for assessors meant to support the activity of assessors and of the managers and administrators of assessment centres.

To what extent the Romanian and Turkish experiences differ

The Romanian experience is very useful for the VocTest Centres, though the contexts are different. In the Turkish context the ISO-17024 standard is formally applied, while in the Romanian case the principles from ISO-17024 have been used for as far as they were useful. This has created more flexibility in developing the system and tailoring it to the realities of Romania. The Türkak Accreditation and VQA authorisation procedures require resources, time and bureaucracy that are less demanding in Romania, where the National Qualifications Authority has its own accreditation process. Apart from ISO accreditation, all the other features of the assessment system implemented in Romania – from the organisation of the process, to the role and responsibilities of assessors, assessment centres and NQA – might provide an example of good practice in competence based assessment for VocTest Centres and VQA.

In Romania sectors are perhaps less developed and organised than in Turkey, but there are also important differences between sectors as in Turkey and the construction sector is also ahead of the rest in terms of sectoral organisation in the area of training and qualifications. There are now many assessment centres operational, many of them were established on the basis of training providers that had the experience and the staff for training and assessment in the sectors. For the Romanian centres the assessment centre function is therefore normally only one of their activities. The economic side of the assessment centre activity can be therefore be considered within those of the organisation as a whole, while there must also be arrangements in place to ensure the autonomy of the assessment functions.

For economic reasons Romania didn't choose to develop a national item bank that is planned to be developed by VQA. The lack of a standardised approach has disadvantages in terms of the transparency of a coordinated system but gives more responsibility to assessment centres for implementing competence based assessment where tests of knowledge are combined with tests of performance and with portfolio assessment in order to get valid and reliable decisions regarding the competence as a whole. Clearly there are many advantages of the automatic elaboration of computer-based assessment results but the main concern should be the combination of methods in a comprehensive assessment strategies leading to evidence of knowledge and performance.

In the Romanian approach candidates are really at the centre as the assessment starts with a self-assessment as an important stage of preparation by the candidates for the assessment. While the Turkish system seems to be inclined to assure a very high level of reliability of the testing, the Romanian system may be more inclined to ensuring the validity through a combination of different assessment methods.

The Romanian approach gives a very important role to the assessor who plans, designs and conducts the assessment process. Assessors are first of all experienced professionals from the occupation for which the candidate is tested. They have extensive and current professional experience in that field, and therefore academics or managers (apart from direct supervisors) are not considered competent for the assessment. This is quite different than the assessment approach by committee that is used in the Turkish system. In Romania all assessors must proof their competence for assessment against an assessor standard. In order to be certificated assessors they are assessed themselves by staff of the national qualifications authority or by other certificated verifiers.

Internal verification

Verifiers in Romania are focusing on the coherence of assessment procedures and consistency in decision making process. Every centres needs to involve competent assessors and verifiers. The internal verification is a key element of the quality assurance practices of VocTest centres. Quality assurance is often based on the principle that institutions write down what they do, and do what they have written down to do. How VocTest Centres quality assure their different processes will need to be described in their quality assurance manuals. The quality assurance manual of each VocTest Centre will be scrutinised by both Türkak and VQA in the accreditation and authorisation processes.

External Verification in Turkey

All personnel certification bodies need to be accredited against ISO 17024. Personnel certification bodies must apply to TÜRKAK in 90 days' time after receiving preliminary authorization of VQA. The process of accreditation by TÜRKAK may last up to 1 year from the date of application. Türkak verifies the institutional capacities, as well as the specific requirements for the assessment against specific national vocational qualifications. This means that for every assessment process against an additional national vocational qualification, additional Türkak accreditation is required.

The authorisation by VQA starts from the principle that the VocTest Centre will have been accredited. Authorisation by VQA is complementary and not meant to duplicate the accreditation. There are also guidelines on the steps to follow for the assessment and certification which follow a more regular procedure for all VocTest centres. The authorization is within 30 days. Both VQA and Türkak monitor the activities of the VocTest Centres.

Below we give a short introduction into the VQA accreditation procedure following a presentation by Donald Paterson from the Strengthening VQA and NQS in Turkey (UYEP) project.

Authorisation is the process used by VQA to ensure that Centres applying to assess NVQs have the necessary systems and resources in place to do so effectively. The authorisation process looks at two criteria:
(i)   Authorisation to become a Testing and Certification Centre

(ii)   Authorisation to assess specific NVQ(s)

For assessing the capacity for the first criterion, VQA will assess the following:
- A1   Overall Quality System
- A2   Management of information
- A3   Internal Verification
- A4   Arrangements to support External Verification
- A5   Management of Resources
- A6   Management of Staff
- A7   Management of Candidates
- A8   Appeals procedure

While in order to verify the capacity for to assess specific NVQs, VQA will assess whether resources meet the requirements of the
- qualification(s)
- method(s) of assessment
- number and needs of candidates
- mode(s) of delivery

Conclusions

The seminar focused on the functions of the VocTest Centres as a new entity in the qualifications systems in Turkey. VocTest Centres are not easy to establish. They need to be well embedded within economic sectors to ensure that they can perform in accordance with the needs of each sector. They need facilities, resources and appropriate staff. They need to have clear procedures established for the assessment and certification processes and for quality assuring these processes.

The existing VocTest Centres are still in an early phase of their operations. They still need to develop their capacities to perform competence based assessment processes, they need to develop their quality assurance processes, and they need to communicate their activities to potential costumers.

We hope that this seminar has been useful in kick-starting these developments, but we are aware that much remains to be done before there will be a sustainable network of VocTest Centres.

Turin, Wednesday, 11 April 2012

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For the European Training Foundation

ANNEX 1

BRIEF OUTLINE FOR THE OPERATIONAL MANUAL FOR VOCTEST CENTRES

Target group:

Sectors that consider establishing a VocTest Centre

Introduction
- What are VocTest Centres
- What is the National Vocational Qualifications System
- The international context
- Advantages

What is the VocTest Centre for? Qualifying adults using national vocational qualifications
What are national vocational qualifications?
How to use national vocational qualifications for assessment?

Assessment and Certification

- How to plan assessment?
- How to design assessment processes?
- How to conduct assessment processes?
- How to record the assessment?
- How to quality assure the process?
- What are the requirements for assessors and validators?

Institutional issues
- Exploring the market for the VocTest centres
- Networking with stakeholders
- Costumer services
- Funding and sustainability
    - a scenario of the fixed and variable expenses of a VOC test centre and the expected demands for certification and related revenues.

Cooperation with VQA and Türkak

Sharing experience with other VocTest Centres