



# SYSTEMATIZATION OF QUALITY ASSURANCE PRACTICES IN VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN ICELAND AND BELGIUM

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## Abstract

*Relevance.* Ensuring the quality of professional training for future specialists is the primary goal of vocational education. Improving learning outcomes will reduce the qualification gap and increase public trust. In current conditions, the experience of vocational training for young people in EU countries is of significant interest for reforming Ukraine's vocational education system. Specifically, a comparative analysis of Iceland's and Belgium's approaches to systematizing management practices, identifying commonalities and differences in their quality assurance strategies for vocational education, is of particular interest.

*Purpose:* To identify commonalities and differences in the approaches to quality assurance in vocational education in Belgium and Iceland.

*Methods:* Systematization and comparative analysis of quality assurance practices in vocational education in Iceland and Belgium.

*Results:* A comparative analysis of management approaches to quality assurance in vocational education institutions in Iceland and Belgium was conducted. This analysis was based on an examination of national frameworks, legislation, the activities of key organizations, internal/external evaluation mechanisms, and the role of national/European qualification frameworks.

*Conclusions:* Iceland utilizes the Icelandic Quality Assurance Agency for external reviews and mandates internal evaluations for institutions. In Belgian Flanders, NVAO operates for educational accreditation, alongside a system for validating acquired competencies. In the Belgian regions of Wallonia and Brussels, AEQES is responsible for evaluating the quality of educational institutions. Common features in the quality assurance practices of both countries were identified: harmonization of European traditions and national specificities; effective combination of internal self-evaluation and external evaluation; the presence of effective mechanisms for involving all stakeholders in quality assurance; an orientation towards learning outcomes; and compliance with European frameworks (EQF, EQAVET). Differences were also characterized: Iceland's management system is centralized, while Belgium's is decentralized; Belgium has a bi-national agency; Iceland uses digital journals for quality assurance, whereas Belgium uses the VAC system. At the same time, ensuring quality education in both countries is complex, particularly across the different regions of Belgium.

**Keywords:** *quality assurance, comparative analysis, Icelandic Quality Assurance Agency, vocational education in Iceland, vocational education in Belgium, legislative acts.*

**Introduction.** Quality of vocational education is a cornerstone of economic growth, social cohesion, and individual development in today's globalized world. Amidst rapid

technological changes and labor market transformations, effective quality assurance systems for vocational education become critically important, ensuring the alignment of educational

programs with the needs of learners, employers, and society as a whole, while also promoting improved learning outcomes and strengthening public trust. Iceland and Belgium, each with their unique socio-economic and educational contexts, demonstrate interesting approaches to building and operating such systems. In Iceland, vocational education primarily takes place at the upper secondary level with a significant emphasis on work-based learning (Cedefop, n.d.). In Belgium, however, there is a complex federal structure with distinct systems in Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels, necessitating separate consideration of Flanders and Wallonia/Brussels due to differences in governance and practices (Cedefop & Bruxelles Formation, 2022). The purpose of this article is to systematize and thoroughly analyze quality assurance practices in vocational education in these two countries. The emphasis is on identifying the features, advantages, and disadvantages of existing models, not to advocate for specific solutions, but to structure knowledge and foster a comprehensive understanding of the issue. A comparative analysis of their experiences can be beneficial for other countries aiming to improve their own national vocational education systems. The article will sequentially examine the theoretical foundations of quality assurance, analyze the systems of Iceland and Belgium in detail, conduct their comparison, and offer conclusions.

**Research Sources.** This study is based on an analysis of existing quality assurance practices in vocational education, reflected in recent research and publications, including materials from Cedefop, Eurydice, ENQA, NVAO, as well as legislative acts and regulatory documents from Iceland and Belgium. The issue of quality assurance in vocational education is crucial for improving learning outcomes and labor market relevance. Although Iceland and Belgium (with its federal structure and separate systems in Flanders and Wallonia/Brussels) have interesting approaches, there is a need for systematization and comparative analysis of their practices. The unresolved part of the general problem addressed in this work is precisely conducting such a comparative analysis of quality assurance practices in vocational education in Iceland and Belgium, providing specific examples of their application. The study also analyzes the impact of European quality assurance frameworks on national systems.

**Article Aim:** The aim is to systematize and comparatively analyze quality assurance practices in

vocational education in Iceland and Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia/Brussels) based on an examination of their national frameworks, legislative acts, the activities of key organizations, internal and external evaluation mechanisms, and the role of national and European qualification frameworks.

**Methods.** To achieve the stated aim—the systematization and comparative analysis of quality assurance practices in vocational education in Iceland and Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia/Brussels)—the following methods were used: systematization and comparative analysis. These methods were applied to investigate national frameworks, legislation, the activities of key organizations, internal and external evaluation mechanisms, and the role of national and European qualification frameworks in both countries. Analysis: The impact of European quality assurance frameworks on national systems was analyzed. Review: National frameworks, key organizations, the legislative basis, and specific examples of quality assurance practices, including internal and external evaluation, student feedback, stakeholder engagement, curriculum development and revision, and quality assurance for work-based learning programs, were reviewed. The application of these methods aimed to identify commonalities and differences in approaches to quality assurance in vocational education in Belgium and Iceland based on the presented research results.

**Results and Discussion.** Quality Assurance in Vocational Education in Iceland: National Framework, Organizations, and Legislative Basis. The general national quality assurance framework in Iceland's education system assigns responsibility to the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (for pre-primary, primary, and secondary education) and the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation (for higher education) as the primary responsible bodies (Eurydice, n.d.). A key role in ensuring the quality of higher education, including vocational programs at this level, is played by the Icelandic Quality Assurance Agency (IAQA), an independent organization (ENQA, n.d.). The IAQA, formerly known as the Quality Board for Icelandic Higher Education (ENQA, n.d.), is mandated to oversee the quality of higher education and operates autonomously from the government and educational institutions (ENQA, n.d.). The Directorate of Education also plays an important role in various aspects of evaluation and monitoring, especially at the pre-primary, primary, and secondary education

levels (Eurydice, n.d.). To enhance the quality of Icelandic universities, the IAQA developed the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF). The IAQA issues monitoring and internal review guidelines designed to support staff in Icelandic Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) responsible for internal monitoring and review of educational services and research (Education - Government of Iceland, 2025), which includes regular evaluations of university activities (Háskólinn í Reykjavík, n.d.). The QEF has undergone several phases: QEF1 (2010-2016), QEF2 (2017-2023), and QEF3 (2024-2029) (Háskólinn í Reykjavík, n.d.).

Quality assurance in vocational education in Iceland is based on key legislative acts, including the Higher Education Act No. 63/2006 (Education - Government of Iceland, 2025), the Upper Secondary School Act No. 92/2008 (Cedefop, n.d.), and the Icelandic National Qualifications Framework No. 80/2007 (Education - Government of Iceland, 2025). These laws define and guide quality assurance processes, including monitoring, evaluation, and accreditation. Specifically, the Higher Education Act sets requirements for the accreditation of higher education institutions and their programs (Education - Government of Iceland, 2025). Furthermore, Regulation No. 1165/2024 provides additional details on monitoring the quality of teaching and research in higher education institutions (Háskólinn í Reykjavík, n.d.). These legislative acts and regulatory documents create a solid foundation for ensuring the quality of vocational education in the country.

Higher education institutions in Iceland are obliged to conduct systematic internal reviews, including the collection of clearly defined key data on their activities (Government of Iceland, 2024). Reykjavík University (RU) is an example of an institution that implements internal evaluation at the institutional level through faculty self-evaluation and peer review of academic course content (Háskólinn í Reykjavík, n.d.). Schools at all levels must also systematically evaluate their internal operations with the active participation of staff, students, and parents, and publish information about these evaluations and improvement plans (Eurydice, n.d.). RU also publishes annual quality reports, ensuring transparency of internal quality assurance processes (Háskólinn í Reykjavík, n.d.).

The IAQA conducts external quality reviews of all higher education institutions with the aim of continuously improving their performance (ENQA, n.d.). These evaluations are regular and systematic,

carried out at least every five years (Eurydice, 2025). The Ministry of Education, Science and Culture also conducts comprehensive external evaluations at the pre-primary, primary, and secondary education levels, often in collaboration with the Directorate of Education (Eurydice, n.d.). International experts and student representatives participate in the external evaluation process of higher education (Government of Iceland, 2024). Evaluation reports are published by universities and the IAQA to ensure transparency (Eurydice, n.d.). RU collects and analyzes student data, including their satisfaction with programs, progress, and dropout rates, to inform quality assurance processes (Háskólinn í Reykjavík, n.d.). Student evaluation of course quality is a key component of faculty evaluation at RU (Háskólinn í Reykjavík, n.d.). Internal evaluations at all levels of education involve the active participation of staff, students, and parents (Eurydice, n.d.). Students also participate in external expert groups for higher education quality evaluation (Government of Iceland, 2024).

Since 2011, upper secondary schools in Iceland have adopted a decentralized approach to curriculum development, as stipulated by the Upper Secondary School Act (Cedefop, n.d.). The National Curriculum for Upper Secondary Schools provides a general framework for curriculum development (Cedefop, n.d.). RU emphasizes the alignment of course organization, teaching, and assessment with learning outcomes (Háskólinn í Reykjavík, n.d.). Companies providing work-based learning must be officially certified and enter into training agreements (Cedefop, n.d.). Digital logbooks are used in apprenticeship programs to record the learning process and acquired competencies (Cedefop, n.d.). A recent policy change involves transferring the responsibility for finding apprenticeship contracts from students to vocational education institutions to strengthen the vocational education system (Cedefop, n.d.).

Structure of Vocational Education in Belgium. Belgium has a complex vocational education structure with separate systems in Flanders and Wallonia/Brussels (Cedefop & Bruxelles Formation, 2022). Vocational education is offered at various levels: secondary, post-secondary, and tertiary (Cedefop, 2024). In Flanders, the Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) is responsible for quality assurance in higher education (NVAO, n.d.). NVAO accredits programs and evaluates the quality assurance systems of higher education institutions

(NVAO, n.d.). The Agency for Higher Education, Adult Education, Qualifications and Study Grants (AHOVOKS) plays an important role in quality assurance in these sectors and also serves as the EQAVET National Reference Point for Flanders (Cedefop & Bruxelles Formation, 2022). The Education Inspectorate conducts external reviews and ensures compliance with educational standards (Eurydice, 2023). Program accreditation and institutional review: NVAO accredits new and existing programs in higher education, using expert evaluation and ensuring public access to information (NVAO, n.d.). NVAO (the Dutch-Flemish Accreditation Organisation) initiates the organization of this dialogue, and its specific format is determined by mutual agreement between the committee and the educational program. Traditionally, a site visit to the evaluation object is an integral part of this procedure. However, considering efficiency and contextual specificities, the committee may decide to waive a physical visit if existing conclusions from previous evaluations are sufficient, or if a physical visit does not provide added value. In such cases, the dialogue can be conducted through a series of online meetings. A combined use of both formats is also possible, especially to involve stakeholders who find it difficult to travel physically.

The committee's preparation for this key stage involves preliminary consultations, ensuring its readiness to perform the assigned tasks. The organization also conducts institutional reviews to assess the overall quality assurance policies of universities and university colleges (NVAO, n.d.). Validation of Acquired Competences (VAC): In Flanders, the VAC system operates for the assessment and certification of competences acquired through work experience or non-formal learning (De Vlaamse Kwalificatiestructuur, 2020). VAC aligns with the Flemish Qualifications Framework (FQF) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) (Flanders.be, 2019). Peer review and appreciative inquiry approach: In Flanders, significant attention is paid to the peer review of educational quality, involving professionals from the vocational sphere, education experts, and students (NVAO, n.d.). NVAO employs an approach based on trust and open dialogue during evaluation. Based on the NVAO program proposal, the committee, in conjunction with the educational program, defines the substantive content of the program. The process coordinator acts as a mediator, ensuring effective communication between the

parties. After the final program is approved, the educational program submits proposals for the composition of participants. During the dialogue, the committee has the right to request additional information necessary for a reasoned conclusion, with mandatory justification for such requests. A list of all studied information is recorded in the evaluation report. In connection with the possibility of a need for additional information or the institution's initiative to provide it, free time is provided in the program. This allows the educational program to submit additional documents or schedule additional meetings.

To ensure the independence and objectivity of the evaluation, any events that might affect this principle must be immediately reported to NVAO. This applies to stakeholders, including committee members, process coordinators, secretaries, institutional staff, and students, who can use the complaint procedure available on the official website (NVAO, n.d.). Overall Quality Framework for Vocational Qualification Courses: There is a general quality framework for vocational qualification courses offered by training providers and validation bodies outside formal education (European Commission, 2023). This framework consists of five components related to objectives, design, guidance, assessment, and improvement actions (European Commission, 2023).

Organizations Involved in Quality Assurance in Wallonia. The Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (AEQES) is responsible for evaluating the quality of higher education in the French Community of Belgium, including universities and university colleges (ENQA, 2021). AEQES is an independent organization and is registered with EQAR (ENQA, 2021). The Education Inspectorate organizes regular evaluations in the field of adult education and part-time artistic education (Eurydice, 2023). FOREM (Walloon Office for Employment and Vocational Training) and Bruxelles Formation participate in ensuring the quality of vocational training for job seekers and workers (Cedefop & Bruxelles Formation, 2022). IFAPME (Walloon Institute for Alternating Training and Entrepreneurship Training) and SFPME (Service for Training for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises in Brussels) are responsible for alternating training programs and potential mechanisms for their quality assurance (Vocational education and training in Europe | Belgium - Cedefop - European Union, n.d.). External evaluation by AEQES: AEQES conducts

formative evaluations based on dialogue with stakeholders and on-site visits to assess higher education programs (ENQA, 2021). The Education Inspectorate organizes regular evaluations in the field of adult education (Eurydice, 2023). Adult education institutions are obliged to conduct systematic internal quality evaluations of their activities and publish information about their quality control and improvement plans (Eurydice, n.d.). SYNTRA Flanders uses an EFQM-based self-assessment tool in combination with an expert committee for its centers (Eurydice, 2023). Quality Assurance in Alternating Training Programs: SYNTRA-Flanders is responsible for overall quality assurance in its centers, which include alternating training programs (Eurydice, 2023). In the French Community, amendments have been made to the Cooperation Agreement on Alternating Training to improve the quality of apprenticeship programs (OIT/Cinterfor, 2020). The EQAVET National Reference Point for Wallonia-Brussels organized a peer review in 2023, focusing on how training and skills needs of the labor market are met (European Commission, 2023).

**Analysis of Quality Assurance Practices. Similarities.** Iceland and Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia/Brussels) emphasize the importance of both internal and external evaluation mechanisms. Both countries recognize the value of stakeholder engagement, including students, staff, and sometimes parents or employers, in quality assurance processes. The concept of linking education and training to learning outcomes is common in both systems, often through national qualification frameworks (Education - Government of Iceland, 2025). Both countries are influenced by European quality assurance frameworks and initiatives such as EQF and EQAVET (Cedefop, 2024). **Differences.** Iceland has a more centralized system with a national agency (IAQA) playing a dominant role in higher education quality assurance, while Belgium demonstrates a more decentralized approach with regional variations and multiple actors. Flanders has a bi-national accreditation agency (NVAO) for higher education, reflecting close ties with the Netherlands, which is not present in Iceland or Wallonia/Brussels. The emphasis on specific mechanisms may differ; for example, Flanders places significant emphasis on institutional review at the higher education level through NVAO, while the IAQA in Iceland focuses on program and institutional evaluation. Wallonia/Brussels relies more on inspections for adult education quality

assurance. The level of detail and formality in quality assurance regulations and guidelines can vary between countries and regions.

National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs) in Iceland (ISQF) and Belgium (FQF for Flanders and CFC for the French Community) play an important role in quality assurance. They define learning outcomes, qualification levels, and promote transparency and mobility (Education - Government of Iceland, 2025). These frameworks also facilitate the inclusion of vocational qualifications and the recognition of non-formal learning (De Vlaamse Kwalificatiestructuur, 2020). The European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) have influenced the development and implementation of national quality assurance practices in Iceland and Belgium (Cedefop, 2024). National EQAVET Reference Points contribute to the implementation and further development of the EQAVET framework in both countries (European Commission, n.d.).

**Reykjavík University's Quality Assurance System:** Includes self-evaluation, student feedback, peer review, and alignment with international standards (Háskólinn í Reykjavík, n.d.). Quality assurance of apprenticeship programs is achieved through the use of digital logbooks, which serve as a tool for documenting skills and competencies acquired during work-based learning (Cedefop, n.d.). The IAQA conducts regular external evaluations of higher education institutions for continuous quality improvement (ENQA, n.d.).

**In Flanders, NVAO Program Accreditation:** The NVAO program accreditation process includes peer review and the publication of evaluation reports (NVAO, n.d.). The Validation of Acquired Competences (VAC) in a sectoral context is a mechanism that ensures the official recognition and confirmation of skills acquired by individuals outside the formal education system, particularly in fields such as information technology (IT) or trade (De Vlaamse Kwalificatiestructuur, 2020). Adult education centers in Flanders have internal quality assurance systems and are subject to external oversight by the Education Inspectorate (Eurydice, 2023). The methodology for external quality evaluation of higher education, carried out by the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (AEQES) in Brussels, integrates key elements such as structured dialogue with all relevant stakeholders and conducting on-site visits to higher education

institutions (ENQA, 2021). IFAPME uses various mechanisms to ensure the quality of apprentice training in Wallonia (Cedefop, 2024). Adult education centers in Brussels conduct self-evaluation, and the Education Inspectorate performs subsequent monitoring (Eurydice, n.d.).

**Conclusions.** Therefore, quality assurance practices in Iceland and Belgium reflect both common European trends and unique national characteristics. Both countries emphasize the importance of combining internal self-evaluation and external independent evaluation to ensure the quality of vocational education. Stakeholder engagement, especially students, is a key element in both systems, contributing to increased transparency and accountability. One noticeable difference is the level of centralization of the systems. Iceland demonstrates a more centralized approach, especially in higher education, where the IAQA plays a leading role in national quality assurance. Belgium, with its federal structure, has a more decentralized system with regional variations and

various bodies responsible for quality assurance in different education sectors. The presence of a bi-national accreditation agency (NVAO) in Flanders is a unique feature, reflecting close cooperation with the Netherlands in higher education.

Among the innovative approaches, one can highlight the Icelandic system of digital logbooks for apprenticeship programs, which provides detailed tracking of acquired competencies in the workplace. In Flanders, the comprehensive system of Validation of Acquired Competences (VAC) deserves attention, as it promotes the recognition of non-formal learning and increases labor market mobility. Ensuring the quality of vocational education is a complex task, especially in the context of diverse educational environments and governance structures, which is particularly evident in Belgium. Further research could focus on evaluating the effectiveness of different quality assurance models in both countries and identifying best practices that could be applied in other contexts.

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## СИСТЕМАТИЗАЦІЯ ПРАКТИК ЗАБЕЗПЕЧЕННЯ ЯКОСТІ ПРОФЕСІЙНОЇ ОСВІТИ В ІСЛАНДІЇ ТА БЕЛЬГІЇ

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### Реферат:

*Актуальність:* забезпечення якості професійної підготовки майбутніх фахівців є найголовнішим завданням професійної освіти; покращення результатів навчання скорочуватиме кваліфікаційний розрив і підвищуватиме довіру суспільства; за сучасних умов для реформування системи професійної освіти в Україні значний інтерес становить досвід професійної підготовки молоді у країнах ЄС; зокрема, цікавим є порівняльний аналіз підходів Ісландії та Бельгії до систематизації управлінських практик, виявлення спільного та відмінного у стратегіях забезпечення якості професійної освіти в обох країнах.

*Мета:* виявлення спільних рис та відмінностей у підходах до забезпечення якості професійної освіти в Бельгії та Ісландії.

*Методи:* систематизація та порівняльний аналіз практик забезпечення якості професійної освіти в Ісландії та Бельгії.

*Результати:* проведено порівняльний аналіз управлінських підходів до забезпечення якості професійної освіти у закладах професійної освіти Ісландії та Бельгії, що базувався на дослідженні національних рамок, законодавства, діяльності ключових організацій, внутрішніх/зовнішніх механізмів оцінювання та ролі національних/європейських кваліфікаційних рамок.

*Висновки:* Ісландія використовує Ісландську агенцію із забезпечення якості (IAQA) для зовнішніх перевірок та зобов'язує заклади до внутрішнього оцінювання; у Бельгійській Фландрії діє NVAO для акредитації освіти та система валідації набутих компетентностей (VAC); у бельгійських землях Валлонії та Брюсселі за оцінювання якості закладів освіти відповідає AEQES; виявлено спільні риси у практиках забезпечення якості освіти обох країн (гармонізація європейських традицій і національних особливостей; ефективне поєднання внутрішнього самооцінювання та зовнішнього оцінювання; наявність дієвих механізмів залучення до забезпечення якості освіти усіх зацікавлені сторони; орієнтація на результати навчання; відповідність європейським рамкам EQF, EQAVET); охарактеризовано відмінності (система управління в Ісландії централізована, а в Бельгії – децентралізована; у Бельгії діє двонаціональна агенція NVAO; в Ісландії для забезпечення якості освіти використовуються цифрові журнали, а в Бельгії – система VAC; водночас забезпечення якості освіти в обох країнах є складним, особливо в різних землях Бельгії).

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**Ключові слова:** *забезпечення якості, порівняльний аналіз, Ісландська агенція забезпечення якості, професійної освіта в Ісландії, професійна освіта в Бельгії, законодавчі акти.*

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