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Quality Matters: A Comparative Analysis of Quality Assurance Mechanisms in Adult Education and Training in OECD Countries

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Abstract

In recent years, provision of relevant up-skilling and re-skilling opportunities for adults has become a necessity due to global megatrends affecting labour markets. As a result, countries are looking to strengthen these opportunities throughout the life course.

The successful deployment of these initiatives requires a coherent set of policies, with quality assurance being critically important.

This paper provides an overview of quality assurance mechanisms from the perspective of the 38 OECD member countries. It proposes a framework to characterise and compare the governance, processes and outcomes of these mechanisms.

The paper's contribution is to facilitate understanding of quality assurance across OECD countries, presenting a visual cross-country mapping that classifies existing mechanisms.

Résumé

Ces dernières années, l'offre de perfectionnement pour les adultes est devenue essentielle face aux mégatendances mondiales affectant les marchés du travail. Les pays cherchent donc à soutenir une formation continue tout au long de la vie.

Le succès de ces programmes nécessite des politiques cohérentes. L'assurance qualité est particulièrement cruciale pour garantir l'efficacité de ces efforts.

Ce document offre une vue d'ensemble des modèles d'assurance qualité dans les pays de l'OCDE. Il propose un cadre pour caractériser ces modèles dans l'éducation des adultes et classe les modèles existants.

La contribution de ce document est de clarifier les systèmes d'assurance qualité au sein de l'OCDE, en présentant une cartographie qui classe ces modèles, permettant une meilleure compréhension internationale.

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1 Introduction

1. Quality assurance is a critical aspect of adult education and training (AET). It encompasses processes and procedures that are put in place to evaluate and improve the quality of AET providers and programmes. Quality assurance involves the use of quality standards and assessment instruments to evaluate different aspects of the provisions of AET with the objective of ensuring that learners receive high-quality AET, have a positive learning experience and receive the necessary knowledge to advance in the professional or personal development goals.

2. Despite the progress made by countries in establishing mechanisms to ensure the quality of the provision of AET, many challenges remain and comparative international experience in this field is scarce. This paper fills this gap and provides a comprehensive cross-country overview of quality assurance models across OECD countries. This paper primarily focuses on the provision of non-formal AET (hereinafter simply referred as adult education and training or AET). It develops an analytical framework to characterise the variety of quality assurance mechanisms in AET, and develops indicators to synthesise, classify and compare these mechanisms along key dimensions.

Box 1.1. Formal versus non-formal adult education and training (AET)

Formal adult education and training:

Education that is institutionalised, intentional and planned through public organisations and recognised private bodies that leads to a formal qualification. Formal education programmes are thus recognised as such by the relevant national education or equivalent authorities.

Non-formal adult education and training:

Any institutionalised, intentional and planned educational programmes and processes alternative and/or complementary to formal education. Non-formal AET mostly leads to qualifications that are not recognised as formal or equivalent to formal qualifications by the relevant national or sub-national education authorities or to no qualifications at all. Typically, the delivery of non-formal AET is more flexible than formal AET in terms of when and where learners engage with the programmes and may take in variety of places including community centres, workplaces, or in the providers' premises.

Non-formal AET includes courses, programmes, up- and re-skilling opportunities, such as:

- Job-related training that is expected to impact individuals' performance and productivity at work; and
- Learning activities undertaken for the pursuit of personal growth (e.g. life skills, social and cultural development).

Note: Authors' own definition based on the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 2011.

The changing landscape of skills needs

3. The needs for skills in both labour markets and society are constantly changing due to various factors such as new technologies, globalisation, and significant trends like an aging population and climate change. The introduction of artificial intelligence (AI) and technological advancements are accelerating the automation of jobs, leading to the displacement of tasks previously performed by humans (Lassébie and Quintini, 2022^[1]). This situation requires displaced workers to seek new jobs that align with their skills or undergo up-skilling and re-skilling to remain competitive in the job market. Simultaneously, emerging technologies offer considerable opportunities for humans in areas where machines and algorithms cannot easily replace human workers. Consequently, there is a growing demand for skills such as creativity, problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. Employers consistently report difficulties in filling positions that require these skills across OECD countries.

4. Globalisation also impacts the landscape of skills needed in the workforce. As economies and cultures become more integrated, there is an increasing demand for language and communication skills. Likewise, companies operating on a global scale require stronger cross-functional and managerial skills due to the complexity of their operations. Globalisation creates new prospects for workers while reshaping their perspective on careers and the skills necessary for success in the global economy.

5. Furthermore, the transition to low-carbon economies driven by climate change amplifies the demand for skills in sectors like renewable energy, energy efficiency, and sustainable agriculture. Population aging, resulting from declining fertility rates and increased life expectancy, significantly affects skill requirements. The healthcare sector is experiencing increased demand for specific skills as the older population requires more medical and support services, including elder care services. However, as societies age, the working-age population decreases, necessitating higher average labour productivity to maintain economic growth levels.

6. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these trends. The health crisis and associated lockdowns have particularly hindered skills development among adults (Fana, Tolan and Torrejón, 2020^[2]). Moreover, the pandemic's impact has been unevenly distributed, with the rapid shift to online learning further exacerbating existing social and digital divides. This situation makes it more challenging for vulnerable groups to access continued education, putting them at risk of falling further behind (OECD, 2020^[3]).

Government and individual reactions to emerging skill requirements

7. The increasing demand for new skills throughout one's life is leading to changes both at the individual level and governmental level. People are recognising the value of continuous learning and are taking active measures to update their skills and knowledge throughout their lives. This understanding has led to an increase in the demand for education and training opportunities that extend beyond basic education. Demand has risen not just for traditional educational routes such as master's degrees or graduate programmes, but also for flexible and readily available professional development opportunities, like online courses and micro-credentials (OECD, 2023^[4]; OECD, 2023^[5]; Kato, Galán-Muros and Weko, 2020^[6]).

8. Meanwhile, governments are responding by investing more in strengthening AET systems across OECD countries. They are promoting the importance of lifelong learning, implementing training programmes to help individuals acquire new skills, retraining displaced workers, and making AET more accessible and affordable. Particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments are considering new funding mechanisms to support both up-skilling and re-skilling throughout one's life. Initiatives under consideration include vouchers, subsidies, and individual learning schemes, such as Individual Learning Accounts (ILAs) (European Commission, 2021^[7]).

Quality assurance is a key supporting policy of adult education and training

9. However, financing alone is not enough to ensure that skills policies achieve their intended goals. To make these investments truly effective in the long term, a robust AET system needs also to be supported by well-functioning complementary policies. For instance, career guidance plays a critical role in helping individuals make informed training decisions and understand the implications of different career choices (OECD, 2021^[8]) (OECD, 2023^[5]). This enables individuals to align their skills and interests with learning opportunities and identify possibilities in the job market.

10. Strong engagement mechanisms with stakeholders are crucial for the effective and efficient design and implementation of AET (OECD, 2020^[9]). Stakeholders can provide valuable information about labour market trends, contribute to the design of training curricula, and support the financing of training policies.

11. A system for recognising prior learning (RPL) can also be beneficial as it allows individuals to gain formal recognition of their past education and work experiences. The opportunity to have skills recognised can stimulate participation in AET, saving adults time and money by allowing them to bypass aspects of a training programme they are already proficient in (OECD, 2022^[10]).

12. Qualification frameworks are a vital part of AET systems as they provide a structure and common reference for comparing qualifications. This makes it easier to choose between training opportunities and allows learners to understand how different training options relate to each other within the overall qualifications system.

13. Funding mechanisms on their own can effectively boost participation rates in AET. Governments can increase spending in AET swiftly through direct or indirect subsidies to learners and institutions, which would result in increased participation in the short term. However, to ensure that these investments yield dividends, it is crucial to ensure that the provision meets minimum quality standards. Additionally, it is vital to design programmes in a way that incentivises learners not just to participate, but to actively engage and benefit from the training. Without robust quality assurance, there is a risk that increased spending might lead, for example, to proliferation of low-quality programmes. These not only potentially waste resources but also fail to equip learners with the relevant skills, impacting their well-being and professional development.

14. But quality assurance in AET is not just about maintaining or ensuring minimum standards. It is pivotal for designing impactful skills strategies that are in sync with market and societal needs. As such, it should be central to any forward-thinking skills strategy, making quality assurance arguably one of AET's most important components.

Strengthening quality assurance remains an important challenge

15. Quality assurance in AET is a vital yet challenging area of policy interest for many countries. The primary hurdle faced is the significant investment required in terms of both financial and human resources. An efficient quality assurance system necessitates specialised staff and robust physical and digital infrastructures. These resources are crucial to implement effective quality assurance measures. Given that the benefits of such an investment are typically observed in the medium term, there might be hesitation in investing in quality assurance, especially during periods of financial strain or when there are other urgent spending pressures.

16. Furthermore, attempts to refine or modify quality assurance protocols may meet with substantial resistance within countries. This resistance may stem from an inherent preference for existing systems, mistrust, and apprehension towards potential changes in the system introduced by a new one. It is worth noting that this reluctance is not unique to shifts in quality assurance but is typical of reactions to many policy changes. Institutions and individuals often fear policy changes due to potential disruptions and

changes to familiar workflows and protocols. Concerns can increase if the benefits of the change are not clearly communicated or if stakeholders feel left out of consultations. Consequently, the evolution of quality assurance systems is often a slow and gradual process.

17. Complicating matters further is the intricate nature of the AET system. Unlike other educational domains, AET caters to an extensive array of learners, each with unique goals and expectations. Factors such as learner age, initial skill levels, teaching methods, and learning environments vary widely. AET also occurs in numerous settings like online platforms, physical classrooms, or workplaces and can differ greatly between economic sectors. Additionally, the dynamism of the AET system, wherein the supply of skills adapts faster than other educational levels in response to demand changes, adds another layer of complexity. This vast array of variables makes it challenging to standardise practices and establish common quality frameworks and standards.

18. As a result, in some countries quality assurance mechanisms tend to emerge from grassroots initiatives, which are devised and executed on a case-by-case basis. This leads to AET quality assurance mechanisms being typically fragmented and governed in a highly decentralised manner. Responsibility is allocated to various entities, including ministries, agencies, regional and local bodies, contributing to this decentralised structure (OECD, 2021_[11]).

Quality assurance of AET remains comparatively understudied

19. Despite growing agreement among experts and policymakers that quality assurance plays a critical role in AET, this area still attracts less research attention, especially when compared with studies on quality assurance in sectors like higher education or vocational education and training (VET). This lack of attention may, in part, be due to the inherently more complex and heterogeneous nature of AET. In these latter sectors, quality assurance systems are well entrenched, and international standards, such as those from the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET), have been established.

20. Building up on previous OECD work (OECD, 2021_[11]; OECD, 2021_[12]), this paper seeks to address this gap in the literature. Specifically, this paper develops an analytical framework to characterise the variety of quality assurance mechanisms in AET, and develops indicators to synthesise, classify and compare these mechanisms along key dimensions. Furthermore, it provides a comprehensive cross-country overview of quality assurance models across OECD countries.

21. The contribution of this paper is to facilitate the understanding of quality assurance systems and practices across OECD countries. To this end, the paper presents a visual cross-country mapping that classifies the existing quality assurance models. These results allow to gain a better understanding of how countries' quality assurance systems compare with others internationally.

22. This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 describes the analytical framework, methodology and sample. Section 3 presents the main findings and finally Section 4 concludes.

2 Background and methodology

What is quality assurance?

23. Quality assurance refers to the systematic process of evaluating and improving the quality of a product or service to meet customer requirements and standards. Quality assurance includes establishing quality criteria, developing, and implementing processes to meet those criteria, and conducting evaluations to ensure the ongoing improvement of quality of the product or service. The concept of quality assurance originated in the manufacturing industry. Historically, quality assurance mechanisms were put in place to prevent mistakes and defects in the development and production of manufactured products. Nowadays, quality assurance is extensively used in a variety of industries and sectors, including healthcare, transportation, and education.

24. Within the educational sector, quality assurance denotes the processes that evaluate and elevate the quality of educational institutions and programmes. It sets up standards and criteria for educational quality and assesses performance against these benchmarks. Moreover, it aids in identifying successful practices and areas for further improvement.

25. Quality assurance mechanisms theoretically serve multiple functions. For example, they could be employed for public accountability, where quality assessment protocols are instituted by a local or national authority. This approach enhances external scrutiny and regulation of educational providers and helps guide educational choices for students and their families. Quality assurance can also be employed for quality enhancement, identifying challenges and offering tools for perpetual advancement. This form of quality assurance centres more on prospective performance rather than retrospective evaluation (Kis, 2005^[13]).

26. Establishing consensus on quality standards and assessment methods is a practical challenge, given the complex, multidimensional, and relative nature of quality. Quality holds different meanings for different stakeholders. For instance, students and their families may have differing perceptions of quality compared to teachers or educational administrators. Likewise, employers often measure the quality of education against practical skills students gain and their applicability in the workplace. Conversely, policymakers and educators may evaluate education quality using a more comprehensive approach, focusing on broader benefits to individuals and society.

27. Definitions of quality, as well as assessment tools and methods, can vary across educational levels. For instance, in early childhood education and care (ECEC), quality assurance prioritises the provision of a safe and healthy development environment. In primary and secondary education, it focuses on preparing students for tertiary education. The literature identifies two concepts at these levels - 'structural quality' and 'process quality'. Structural quality pertains to aspects such as infrastructure, student characteristics, curriculum, and staff qualifications. Process quality relates to the interaction between students, educators, and the environment during the learning process, for example, pedagogical practices.

28. In upper levels of education (e.g. tertiary education, adult education and training, vocational education and training), the emphasis is on ensuring students receive an education of high quality and that is well-aligned with labour market needs, preparing them for the job market. Consequently, quality

assurance involves evaluating institutional policies and structures, staff qualifications, and student outcomes.

29. In the context of AET, quality assurance refers to the processes and standards that ensure the learning experience of adults is effective, relevant, and of high quality. It encompasses processes of setting standards, conducting evaluations and improvement of adult learning programmes in terms of their ability to provide learners with necessary skills and knowledge that are applicable to the job market and broader societal context.

Methodology

30. This section describes the methodology employed to construct the analytical framework and to derive the results. The methodology comprises three stages: i) desk research, ii) expert consultations and iii) data collection and analysis.

Desk research

31. The project initiated with an exhaustive desk research phase, during which the OECD collected data and information on the present state of quality assurance in AET across OECD countries. This research encompassed a review of relevant literature, policy documents, and proven practices in the field.

32. Leveraging previous OECD research on this subject (OECD, 2021^[11]; OECD, 2021^[12]), the OECD formulated a preliminary analytical framework. This framework, which aims to provide a thorough and systematic approach to studying quality assurance in AET, informed the development of a draft questionnaire. The questionnaire was then used to gather data from a sample of countries. This questionnaire sought information on the structure and functionality of quality assurance systems in AET, including details on the types of quality assurance mechanisms employed, the governance model, and the results of the process.

33. Initially, the OECD collected data from a sample of 12 OECD countries to verify the validity of the framework and questionnaire. This collected data was scrutinised and used to refine the analytical framework.

Expert consultations

34. The initial analytical framework and questionnaire underwent improvements based on significant input from quality assurance experts. During this phase, the OECD held consultations with these experts from the field of AET from Austria, Portugal, Slovenia, Switzerland and the United Kingdom (England).

35. The expert consultations encompassed a virtual workshop conducted in March 2022, along with numerous exchanges to provide feedback on the framework and questionnaire. The workshop aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the varied models of quality assurance in AET across these countries. It also sought to validate the findings from the desk research phase and solicit feedback.

36. The outcomes of these expert consultations were analysed and incorporated to refine the analytical framework for the study further and to guide the project's subsequent phase.

Data collection and analysis

37. The final framework, along with its associated questionnaire, was applied across all OECD member countries. The data was collected by the OECD from public sources.

38. Multiple information sources were employed during the data collection phase. These included government and institutional websites, legislation, reports, documents from relevant national organisations and agencies, and academic articles. This data was analysed, consolidated into a database, and individual country profiles highlighting each country's distinct features and characteristics were created (available upon request).

Sample

39. The study encompassed all 38 OECD member countries. The specific unit of observation is one particular quality assurance mechanism. Here, a mechanism is defined as a distinct process, system or procedure established to evaluate the quality of AET providers. A quality assurance mechanism has a clearly identified set of criteria, standards, methods, and instruments to systematically undertake the quality assessment. It is worth noting that the scope of assessment may encompass evaluating the overall quality of AET providers, examining the quality of specific educational and training programmes, or a combination of both aspects (see the analytical framework below).

40. It is important to note that multiple mechanisms for quality assurance may exist within a given country, often instituted by diverse entities, both public and private. These entities can range from individual ministries or agencies to multiple public bodies, each with a distinct, though potentially overlapping, focus or scope in the realm of AET quality assurance. Moreover, within federated nations, such as Canada and the United States, each province or state operates under its own quality assurance system.

41. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this study, we have elected to focus on a single quality assurance mechanism within each OECD country. This decision was driven by several key factors: the availability of public data, the extent to which the quality assurance mechanism provides broad representation and coverage within the AET system, and a preference for those mechanisms that put a predominant focus on non-formal AET. This approach is not to discount the existence or importance of multiple mechanisms within some countries, but rather a methodological choice to streamline our analysis and provide more focused insights.

42. Table 2.1 below outlines the specific quality assurance mechanisms selected for analysis from each OECD country.

Table 2.1. Selected quality assurance mechanisms by country

#	Country	Quality assurance mechanisms
1	Australia	Registration by the Australian Skills Quality Authority, ASQA
2	Austria	Ö-Cert
3	Belgium (Flanders)	Inspectorate of education
4	Canada (British Columbia)	Education Quality Assurance (EQA)
5	Chile	Register of Technical Training Bodies (Organismos Técnicos de Capacitación), OTEC
6	Colombia	Sistema de calidad de formación para el trabajo (SCAFT)
7	Costa Rica	Acreditación del Instituto Nacional de Aprendizaje (INA)
8	Czechia	Register of Schools and Educational Establishments
9	Denmark	Quality assurance and measurement with Viskvalitet.dk
10	Estonia	Notice of economic activities for the provision of continuing education
11	Finland	Vocational education and training quality awards
12	France	QUALIOPI
13	Germany	Accreditation and Certification in Employment Promotion Ordinance (Akkreditierungs-und Zulassungsverordnung Arbeitsförderung, AZAV)
14	Greece	Certification of the teaching qualification of Trainers for Adults of non-formal education by EOPPEP

#	Country	Quality assurance mechanisms
15	Hungary	Licensing procedure for adult education providers
16	Iceland	EQM/EQM+ quality certification
17	Ireland	QQI Award provider
18	Israel	Teacher approval in supervised courses
19	Italy	Self-assessment for provincial centres for adult education
20	Japan	Quality certification by the Japan Association for Management of Training and Education (JAMOTE)
21	Korea	Accreditation by the Korean Skills Quality Authority (KSQA)
22	Latvia (Riga)	Licensing of non-formal adult education programmes
23	Lithuania	Law on Non-formal Adult Education and Lifelong Learning of the Republic of Lithuania
24	Luxembourg	Ministerial quality label
25	Mexico	National Registry of Training Courses Based on Competency Standards (RENAC)
26	Netherlands	NRTO Quality Mark
27	New Zealand	NZQA' External Evaluation and Review (EER) for tertiary education organisations
28	Norway	Kompetanse Norge (Skills Norway)
29	Poland	Accreditation of lifelong learning in out-of-school forms
30	Portugal	Certification by Direção-Geral do Emprego e das Relações de Trabalho, DGERT
31	Slovak Republic	Accreditation of further education programmes under Act No. 568/2009 Coll. on Lifelong Learning
32	Slovenia	Offering Quality Education to Adults (OQEA)
33	Spain	Questionnaire for the evaluation of the quality of training actions for the employment system
34	Sweden	The Bedömning, Reflektion, Utveckling, Kvalitet (Assessment, Reflection, Development, Quality) initiative (BRUK)
35	Switzerland	eduQua
36	Türkiye	External evaluation by the Board of Education Inspectors
37	United Kingdom	Inspections of further education and skills providers
38	United States (Florida)	Quality Assurance and Compliance (QAC) System

3 Analytical framework

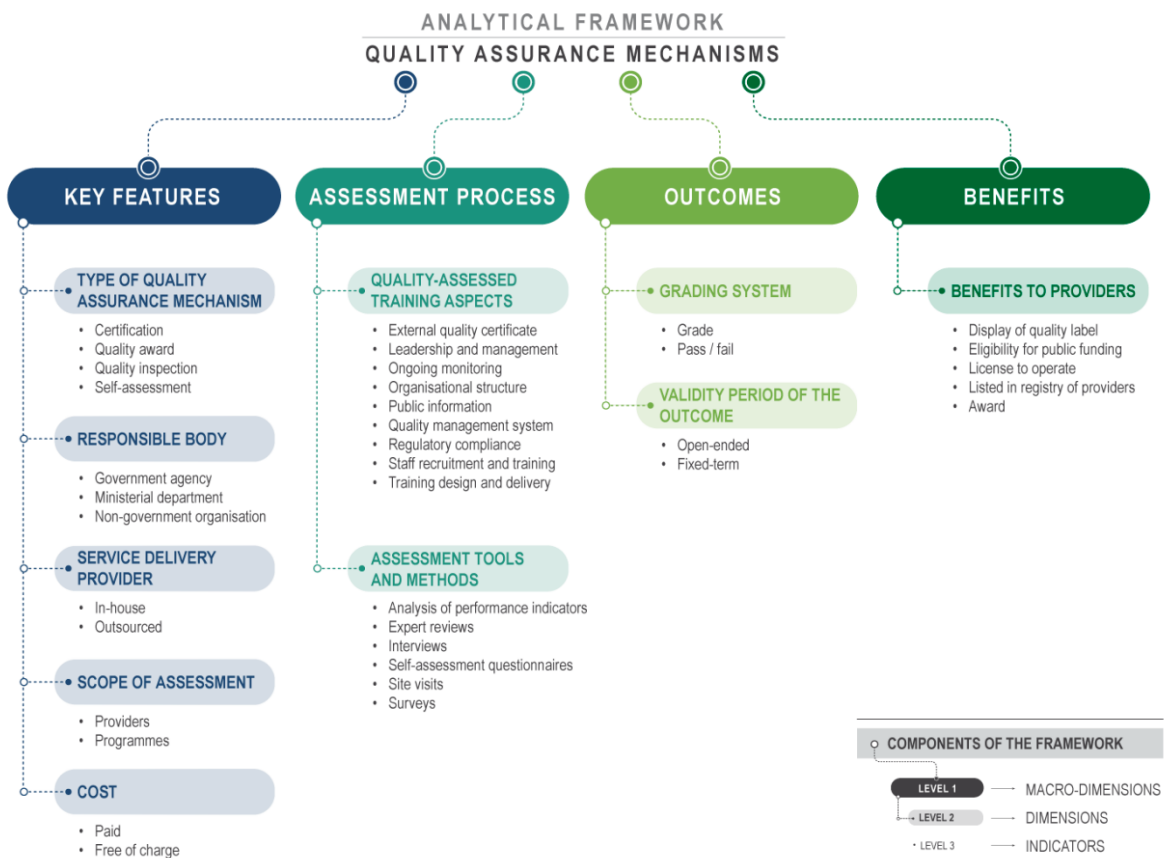
43. This section presents the analytical framework developed to characterise and compare quality assurance mechanisms across countries, by identifying the key components that define the governance, processes, and outcomes of these quality assurance mechanisms.

44. The framework is structured into three hierarchical tiers:

- **Macro-dimensions:** the framework is built around four *macro-dimensions*, namely: i) key features, ii) assessment processes, iii) outcomes, and iv) benefits to providers.
- **Dimensions:** each macro-dimension is subdivided into more detailed *dimensions*.
- **Indicators:** qualitative and quantitative *indicators* are used to operationalise each dimension and serve as specific measures that enable a comprehensive examination of each dimension.

45. Figure 3.1 offers an overview of the analytical framework and the macro-dimensions, dimensions, and indicators it encompasses. Subsequent sections delve into each component of the framework, thoroughly examining their nature and scope.

Figure 3.1. Analytical framework: macro-dimensions, dimensions, and indicators



Key features

46. The first macro-dimension in the framework focuses on the **key features** of a quality assurance mechanism, which represent the most significant characteristics of a mechanism. These features consist of system-level attributes that enable differentiation between different quality assurance mechanisms.

47. This macro-dimension is defined by five dimensions: i) *type of quality assurance mechanism*, ii) *responsible body*, iii) *service delivery provider*, iv) *scope of assessment*, and v) *cost*. These five dimensions provide a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms, covering their nature, governance, scope of assessment, and fundamental operating features.

Type of quality assurance mechanism

48. The **type of quality assurance mechanism** refers to how these mechanisms are categorised based on their inherent objectives, methods, and outcomes. OECD countries utilise a range of mechanisms, serving different purposes and employing distinct approaches. It is important to note that countries may employ multiple mechanisms rather than exclusively relying on a single one. After a thorough examination, these quality assurance mechanisms were classified into four types: i) *certification*, ii) *quality award*, iii) *quality inspection*, and iv) *self-assessment*, as described in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. Definition and key features: Types of quality assurance mechanism

Certification				
Definition	Certification is a formal recognition that an AET provider meets specific quality standards. Certifications are conducted by a third-party (i.e. separate from the entity seeking certification), whether governmental or non-governmental organisations. A common outcome of certifications is the acquisition of a quality label, which may take the form of a logo, emblem, or symbol that the provider is either able or, in some cases, obliged to showcase in reports and certificates. The attainment of quality certifications could involve on-site and off-site assessment procedures, such as audits and interviews.			
Features	Objective	Who conducts the assessment?	Common assessment procedures	Possible Outcomes
	Certify that the services and operations of AET providers or programmes meet specific quality standards.	Third-party	Site visits Audit Interviews	Written report Quality label Certificate
Quality award				
Definition	A quality award is a recognition granted to an Adult Education and Training (AET) provider or programme as part of a competition organised by an external entity, whether governmental or non-governmental organization. In these competitions, various AET providers or programmes submit applications or are nominated to be considered for the award. These applications or nominations are then evaluated based on predefined criteria that measure the quality of their services. After the evaluation, the winners are selected, and the award results are announced. The winning AET providers or programmes are acknowledged for their outstanding performance and quality of service. This quality assurance mechanism can assess different aspects of the quality of AET providers or programmes, including continuous improvement, and exemplary work in the development of AET. Quality awards are typically performed through expert reviews, whether on-site or off-premises, and normally result in a prize, distinction, or other type of award.			
Features	Objective	Who conducts the assessment?	Common assessment procedures	Possible Outcomes
	Recognise the quality of AET providers or programmes	Third-party	Expert review	Prizes Distinctions Other type of awards

Quality inspection				
Definition	Quality inspection is a systematic evaluation of various aspects of the AET provider's operations, curriculum, teaching methodologies, facilities, and overall performance, conducted by a third-party. The purpose of quality inspection is to determine conformity with predetermined requirements and standards and identify areas for improvement. Inspections typically involve site visits, review of performance indicators, and interviews with trainers, administrators and other relevant stakeholders.			
Features	Objective	Who conducts the assessment?	Common assessment procedures	Possible Outcomes
	Determine conformity with the standards and requirements set by the relevant authority and identify areas for improvement.	Third-party	Site visits Analysis of performance indicators Interviews	Written report
Self-assessment				
Definition	Self-assessment is the process in which an AET provider internally evaluates the quality and performance of its own services and operations against established standards and criteria. Self-assessment is normally carried out through self-evaluations and analysis of performance indicators. The purpose of self-assessment is to promote self-reflection, continuous improvement, and accountability within the AET provider. A common outcome of self-assessments is a written report, which serves as a formal record and guides the AET provider in identifying areas for improvement and developing action plans.			
Features	Objective	Who conducts the assessment?	Common assessment procedures	Possible Outcomes
	Promote continuous improvement and accountability within an AET provider through self-evaluation.	Internal	Self-evaluations Analysis of performance indicators	Written report

Responsible body

49. The second dimension refers to the entity or organisation that is responsible for overseeing and managing the quality assurance mechanism. The *responsible body* is typically a technical entity that is also responsible for setting standards and conducting the evaluations and assessment of providers. However, its specific responsibilities and functions may vary from country to country.

50. The responsible body are categorised into three main types: *i) government agencies, ii) ministerial departments, and iii) non-governmental organisations (NGOs)*, defined in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2. Type of responsible bodies

Government agency
Government agency is a technical entity that is established by a government to perform specific functions. These agencies are part of the national, state, or local government, but are not directly controlled by a ministry or department. Agencies normally have a significant degree of autonomy when compared with ministries or ministerial departments, although their level of autonomy can vary significantly across countries. To enhance comparability in this study, any governmental entity that operates independently from a ministry or department, even if it is not formally designated as an agency, is categorised as a government agency.
Ministerial department
Ministerial department is a specialised department or unit established to perform specific functions, usually under the leadership and oversight of one or more cabinet ministers.
Non-governmental organisation (NGO)
Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are organisations that operate independent from governments. NGOs typically are non-profit entities and have a specific mission (e.g. social, education).

Service delivery provider

51. The dimension *service delivery provider* describes how the responsible body delivers its services. Specifically, it refers to whether the responsible body delegates certain tasks and assessment responsibilities to third parties (i.e. outsourcing) or if the assessment is primarily conducted in-house by the responsible body's own staff and resources. Therefore, this dimension indicates whether the services are provided: *i) in-house or ii) outsourced*.

52. The outsourcing model is common in the accreditation of higher education institutions. In several countries, the accreditation of universities or programmes is carried out by private agencies (i.e. accreditation bodies) authorised by the national or local authority. Thus, the responsible body plays a co-ordination role and set the rules and regulations under which the agencies assess the quality of institutions. In contrast, when a service delivery is "in-house", it indicates that the organisation (e.g. the responsible ministry or agency) maintains control over the assessment processes instead of outsourcing them to external providers.

Scope of assessment

53. The dimension *scope* refers to the breadth or coverage of the quality assurance mechanism. The scope of assessment may encompass evaluating the overall quality of AET providers, examining the quality of specific educational and training programmes, or a combination of both aspects.

54. When assessing the overall quality of AET providers, the scope of assessment of the quality assurance mechanism extends to the evaluation of the provider as a whole and the mechanism will examine the institutional-level elements influencing the quality of the programmes offered by the provider (e.g. infrastructure, leadership, quality management systems in place). Alternatively, the scope of assessment may be narrower, focusing on specific educational programmes within AET providers. In this case, the quality assurance mechanism will typically place greater emphasis on evaluating aspects such as specific course content, instructors' qualifications, teaching resources, and learning outcomes, and overall effectiveness of those programmes.

Cost

55. This dimension reflects the immediate financial cost borne by providers to partake in the quality assurance process. The charges are typically settled in advance, paid at the commencement of the process to the responsible entity overseeing the procedure. To facilitate comparison, fees have been converted from local currencies to euros based on the 2023 exchange rate.

🕒 Assessment process

56. The second macro-dimension refers to how the quality assessment is carried out in practice. Specifically, it covers two important dimensions of the assessment process: the *aspects of the training* that are assessed, and the *assessment tools and methods* that are used to assess the quality.

Quality-assessed training aspects

57. This dimension refers to the specific domains or aspects that are evaluated and assessed during the quality assurance process. These training aspects encompass important components of the provision that contribute to the overall learning experience and ultimately to the quality of the programmes.

58. It is important to note that the quality assurance mechanisms cover a large number of aspects. However, these aspects were synthesised and aggregated into nine broader categories to simplify the analysis and facilitate comparison between mechanisms. This framework identifies the following quality areas: *i) external quality certificate, ii) leadership and management, iii) ongoing monitoring, iv) organisational structure, v) public information, vi) quality management system, vii) regulatory compliance, viii) staff training, ix) training design and delivery.* Each of these aspects of quality are defined in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3. Definition: Quality-assessed training aspects

External quality certificate	AET providers hold a quality certificate issued by an accredited external entity, which can be a governmental or non-governmental organisation. Examples of such certificates include ISO29990 or ISO9001.
Leadership and management	AET providers ensure that leadership enables effective management and operation of the services. Well-documented policies and procedures, well-maintained records, shared values and clear direction are in place to enable a customer-oriented and efficient service.
On-going monitoring	AET providers monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set out for them and respond to the needs of learners and society. AET providers ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for monitoring purposes of their programmes and other activities. This information should lead to continuous improvement of the AET provider and programmes.
Organisational structure	AET providers ensure that the internal structure and organisation of the provider (human resources, facilities and equipment) is appropriate for the operation of the service. Staffing arrangements support learners' continuing education and training. Outdoor and indoor spaces, buildings and fixtures are suitable for their purpose. Premises, furniture and equipment are safe and well maintained.
Public information	AET providers publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible.
Quality management system	AET providers have a quality management system (QMS) in place means that a provider has implemented a systematic approach to ensure consistent quality in its educational programmes and training services. The QMS involves documented processes, procedures, and policies tailored to the specific needs of adult learners.
Regulatory compliance	AET providers adhere to laws and regulations relevant to their operations, set forth by local, regional, or national governments. The specific requirements can vary, depending largely on the type of providers and programmes delivered. This quality area also includes adherence to ethical principles.
Staff recruitment and training	AET providers ensure the quality of the methodological-didactical competences of their teachers and trainers. AET providers apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and professional development of the staff.
Training design and delivery	AET providers ensure that the training design and delivery is stimulating and engaging and enhances learners' continuing education and training. The development process of training programmes (planning, design, organisation, development, and training assessment) is appropriate for the operation of the service. AET providers ensure that programmes meet students' educational needs, and that student support and academic assistance is provided.

Assessment tools and methods

59. This dimension refers to the set of instruments and tools employed to gather the information and data to conduct the quality assessment. Six assessment tools and methods were identified: *i) analysis of performance indicators, ii) experts reviews, iii) interviews, iv) self-assessment questionnaires, v) site visits, and vi) surveys*, which are defined in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4. Types of assessment tools and methods

Analysis of performance indicators	Refers to the process of evaluation or measuring the effectiveness of the service delivery. Common performance indicators include enrolment, graduation rates, satisfaction of learners, and learning outcomes (e.g. grades).
Expert reviews	Another means to collect and analyse information is through expert reviews. For example, the responsible body can rely on experts (e.g. academics, experienced practitioners, employer representatives, peers), to conduct a quality assessment that is used as an input for the overall process.
Interviews	Interviews can be used to collect qualitative information and first-hand information and insights from key stakeholders such as trainers, learners, administrators, amongst others. Depending on the type of information to be collected, interviews can be structured or semi-structured.
Self-assessment questionnaire	As part of some quality assurance processes, providers are requested by the body conducting the assessment to complete a self-assessment questionnaire. Self-assessment questionnaires allow AET providers to assess their own quality by critically thinking about its performance. Most commonly, the main objective of this instrument to identify strengths and weaknesses in order to develop a plan for continuous improvement.
Site visits	Site visits are physical inspections of an AET provider that aim to gather first-hand information about the operations and the quality of the educational services delivery. Site visits are typically performed by an assessment team from an independent third party (e.g. staff from the responsible body). During a site visit, the assessment team observes the functioning and operations of the provider, collect data and relevant information and typically conduct interviews and surveys to trainers, trainees and relevant stakeholders.
Surveys	Surveys to key stakeholders such as, trainers, learners or administrators, can be an important tool to gather information about specific aspects of the quality of AET providers. The advantage of surveys over interviews is that the former can reach a greater number of individuals.

60. It is important to highlight that the instruments described in Table 3.4 are not mutually exclusive, which means the use of one does not preclude the use of others. In fact, most quality assurance mechanisms employ a blend of these instruments simultaneously. For instance, expert reviews or site visits can be coupled with interviews and surveys. In a similar vein, the scrutiny of performance indicators can form a key element of both self-evaluation and expert review processes.

🕒 Outcomes

61. This macro-dimension refers to the *outcomes* of the quality assurance mechanism, which encompasses the format of presenting results after completion of a quality assurance process (for example a grade or pass/fail), the duration of their validity and the benefits that providers gain by participating in this process.

Grading system

62. This dimension refers to the grading system used to report the results of quality assurance processes. Two categories were identified: *i) multi-category grading system, and ii) pass-fail grading system.*

63. A multi-category grading system typically assigns multiple categories (e.g. a score or letter grade) based on the performance of the AET providers or programmes in the process. In contrast, a pass-fail grading system is a binary system that assigns a *pass* or *fail* based on its performance.

64. It is worth noting that one advantage of using a grade system is that it provides a more nuanced and detailed evaluation of the provider's overall performance. Alternatively, a pass-fail system focuses on whether the provider meets the established criteria and standards or not. It simplifies the evaluation process, categorizing providers as either meeting the requirements (pass) or falling short (fail).

Validity period of the outcome

65. This dimension of the framework refers to the duration, measured in years during which the outcome of the quality assurance mechanism is considered valid or relevant. The validity period of the outcome is set by the responsible body or by external regulations, and it may vary depending on the type of quality assurance mechanism and the context in which it is used. The possible outcomes for this indicator are: *i) fixed-term, and ii) open-ended.*

◎ Benefits to providers

66. The last macro-dimension of the framework refers to the advantages that AET institutions or providers can experience as a result of participating in a quality assurance process. It is important to note that these potential benefits are not mutually exclusive. The potential benefits to providers are classified into five categories: *i) display of quality label, ii) eligibility for public funding, iii) license to operate, iv) listed in registry of providers, and v) award*, which are defined as follows in Table 3.5.

Table 3.5. Benefits to providers

Display of quality label	Quality labels indicate that a AET provider has attained specific quality standards. These labels can be an important tool to increase the credibility and reputation of the provider. Labels serve as a tangible demonstration of the provider's commitment to quality, instilling confidence and satisfaction in learners and trust in the institution. Labels can (and in some cases must) be displayed publicly, for example on the institution's website, brochures, and marketing products. Even though the process through which quality labels and quality awards are obtained differ substantially, quality awards are similar to quality labels with respect to the implications on the AET provider credibility, visibility and reputation.
Eligibility for public funding	Undergoing and passing a quality assurance process may also be a requirement for accessing public funding. For example, successful AET providers may be eligible to receive direct subsidies (i.e. supply-side subsidies). Alternatively, learners enrolled in a AET that passes a quality assurance process may be eligible for state financial support (i.e. demand-side subsidies), such as scholarships or state-backed loans.
License to operate	The quality assurance process can also grant AET provider the legal permit to carry out its operations according to specified conditions and regulations. The license to operate is usually subject to regular monitoring to ensure that the standards are maintained over time.

Listed in registry of providers

A positive outcome in a quality assurance can also grant the AET institution to be in the database of institutions authorized to offer AET services. Registries typically list basic information about the providers and provides a central repository of information about education providers, which makes it easier for prospective student to find and compare AET providers

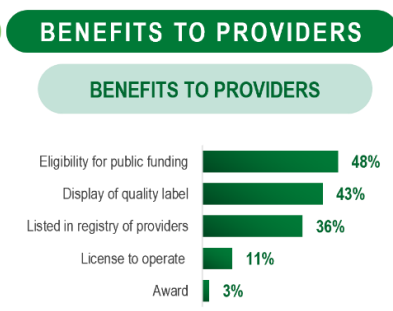
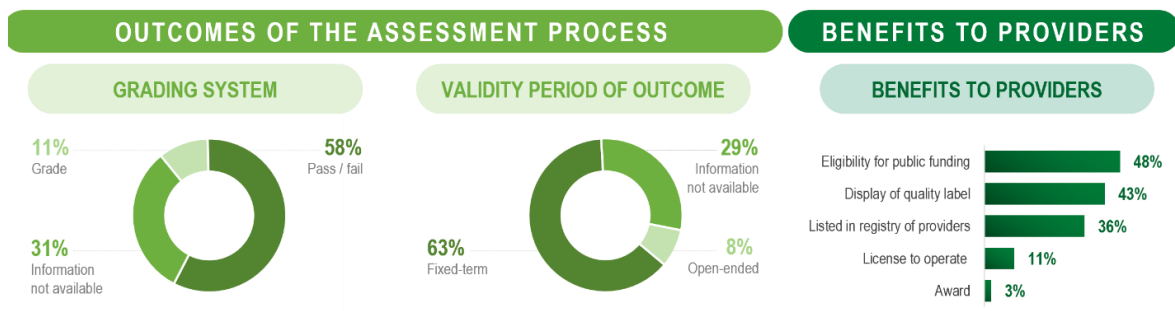
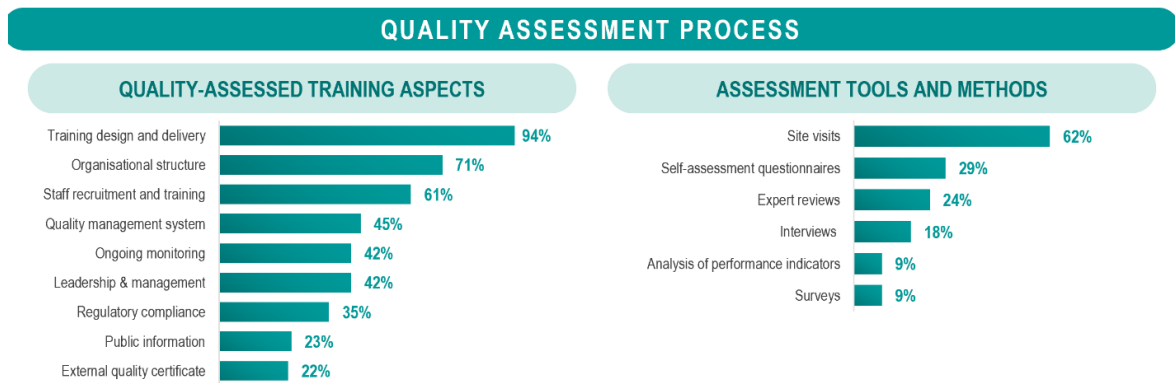
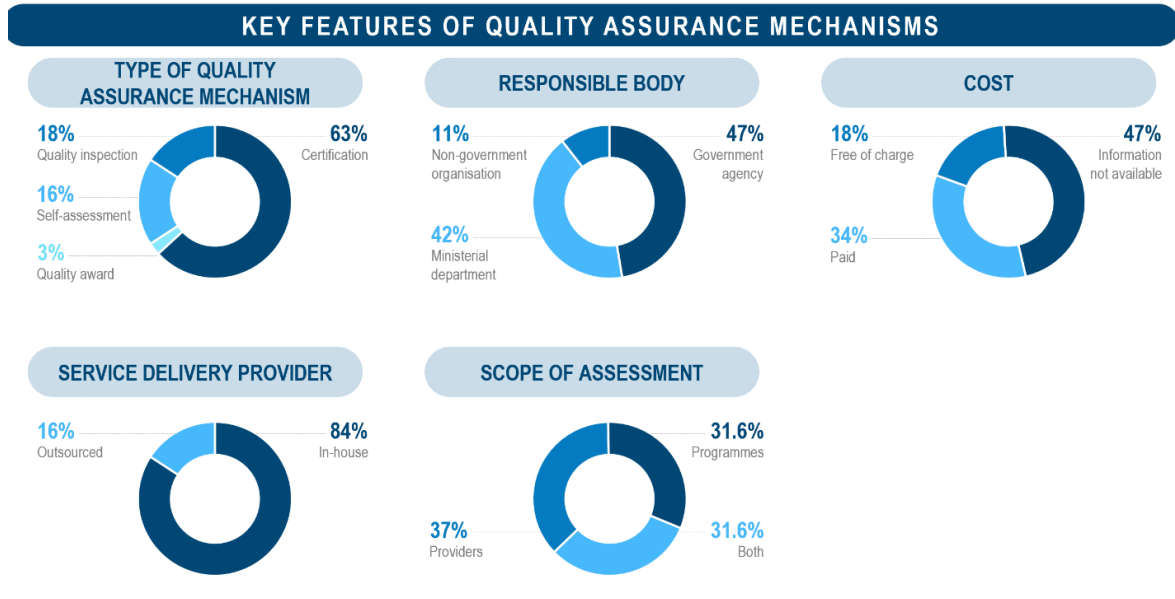
Award

It corresponds to the prizes, distinctions, or other awards that are granted from participating in certain quality assurance mechanism.

4 Findings

Figure 4.1. Overview of the results of the analytical framework components

% of mechanisms in the sample



67. Figure 4.1 offers an overview of the findings, which are derived from applying the analytical framework to examine the features of the selected QA mechanisms in OECD countries. The figure shows the proportion of mechanisms within each category, or the proportion of mechanisms where a specific indicator is observed. By examining one quality assurance mechanism from each OECD member country and employing a systematic approach to analyse the collected data, these findings offer valuable insights into the variety of quality assurance systems across OECD countries.

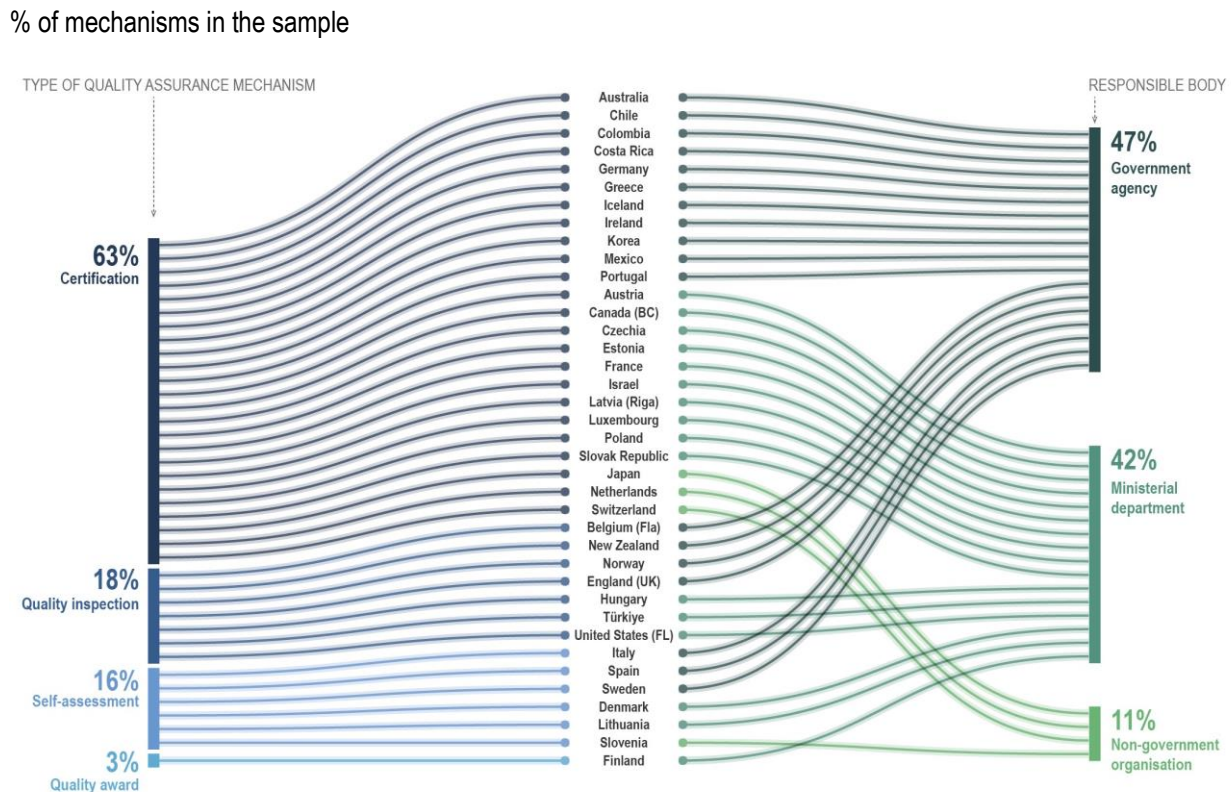
Certifications are the most common type of quality assurance mechanisms

68. The majority of mechanisms (24 out of 38, approximately 63%) employ *certification* as their quality assurance mechanism type for AET, including those examined in countries such as Australia, Colombia, Estonia, Israel, Japan, Korea, and Luxembourg (see Figure 4.2).

69. *Quality Inspection* is the second most common quality assurance mechanism, observed in seven mechanisms (around 18%), such as Belgium (Flanders), Norway and the United Kingdom (England). *Self-assessment* is adopted by six mechanisms (around 16%), including those examined in Italy, Lithuania, and Slovenia.

70. In our sample, *quality award mechanisms* are only used by Finland. The Ministry of Education and Culture organises an annual quality award competition, designed to incentivise providers to assess and enhance the quality of their activities. This recognition allows awarded training providers to showcase their commitment to excellence by displaying the ministry's quality award badge in their communications. Additionally, the prize amount received serves as a means to further develop and enhance the activities of the training provider.

Figure 4.2. Mapping the relationship between type of quality assurance mechanisms and responsible body across selected mechanisms in OECD countries



71. Figure 4.2 provides a visual representation of the type of quality assurance mechanism used by each country - *certification, quality awards, quality inspection or self-assessment*, as well as the type of body responsible for its implementation – *governmental agency, ministerial department, or non-governmental organisation*.

72. Similarly, as shown in Figure 4.1, the scope of the assessments varies considerably. While 37% of mechanisms (17 in total) focus solely on assessing *institutions*, as in Lithuania and the Netherlands, 32% of mechanisms (12 in total) restrict their assessments to specific *programmes* (as is the case of Latvia and Portugal). The same percentage (32%, or 12 mechanisms) use quality assurance mechanisms that evaluate both *institutions* and specific *programmes* (as is the case of Denmark, Germany, and Korea).

73. *Certification* are more likely to focus on *programme-level* assessments, with 14 out of 24 mechanisms (around 58%) adopting this approach. In several cases, *self-assessment* and *quality inspection* tend to cover *both institutional* and *programme-level* assessments, with 50% and 42% of the respective countries incorporating both scopes.

74. When it comes to costs, there is less information readily available compared to other components of the framework. 18 mechanisms (around 47%) do not publicly provide data on fees, seven mechanisms (around 18%) offer *free* quality assurance mechanisms, and the remaining 13 mechanisms (around 34%) have *paid* quality assurance processes. For instance, among the mechanisms examined, those in countries like Chile, Hungary, and New Zealand offer free quality assurance mechanisms, while others such as Australia, France, and the Slovak Republic have fee-based quality assurance mechanisms.

75. The data collected on fees charged for quality assurance across the sample reveals significant variation in pricing structures and information availability. Some mechanisms have specified fees, such as Austria with a fixed fee of EUR 100. In other mechanisms as in the case of Iceland, Australia and Japan, the price varies depending on the type of assessment (e.g. Iceland), or on the chosen entity to conduct the assessment (e.g. Germany). Notably, Ireland stands out with a fee of EUR 5 000.

Governments play a key role in ensuring quality of AET

76. Governments play a key role in ensuring quality standards of AET in our sample of mechanisms, as evidenced by their involvement in a large number of the quality assurance mechanisms examined. As shown in Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.2, roughly 50% of the mechanisms, have a *government agency* as the responsible body for overseeing quality assurance mechanisms, including those cases in Australia, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Korea, and Mexico. *Ministerial departments* are responsible in 42% of the mechanisms (16), such as those cases in Canada (British Columbia), the Czech Republic (hereafter 'Czechia'), Denmark, Estonia, Israel, and Latvia (Riga).

77. *Non-government organisations (NGOs)* oversee quality assurance in four mechanisms (10%), namely those examined in Japan, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Switzerland. These organisations, which serve as central coordinating bodies. For example, in Slovenia, the Slovenian Institute of Adult Education (SIAE) fulfils this role, while in the Netherlands, the Dutch Council for Training and Education (NRTO) is the co-ordinating association for all private training and education providers and is the responsible institution for issuing the quality marks. Similarly, the Swiss Federation for Adult Learning (SVEB) is a non-governmental umbrella organisation representing both public and private institutions, associations, and personnel managers, and is responsible for managing the quality label eduQua.

78. Most mechanisms (32 mechanisms or 84%) adopt an *in-house* service delivery, where the responsible body conducts assessments in-house. Examples of mechanisms with an in-house approach include those examined in Belgium (Flanders), Costa Rica, Estonia, Finland, Greece, and Israel. Six mechanisms (16%) utilise an *outsourced* service delivery, where tasks and assessment responsibilities are delegated to third parties, including the cases of Austria, Chile, Colombia, France, Germany, and Japan.

The coverage of quality-assessed training aspects varies across mechanisms

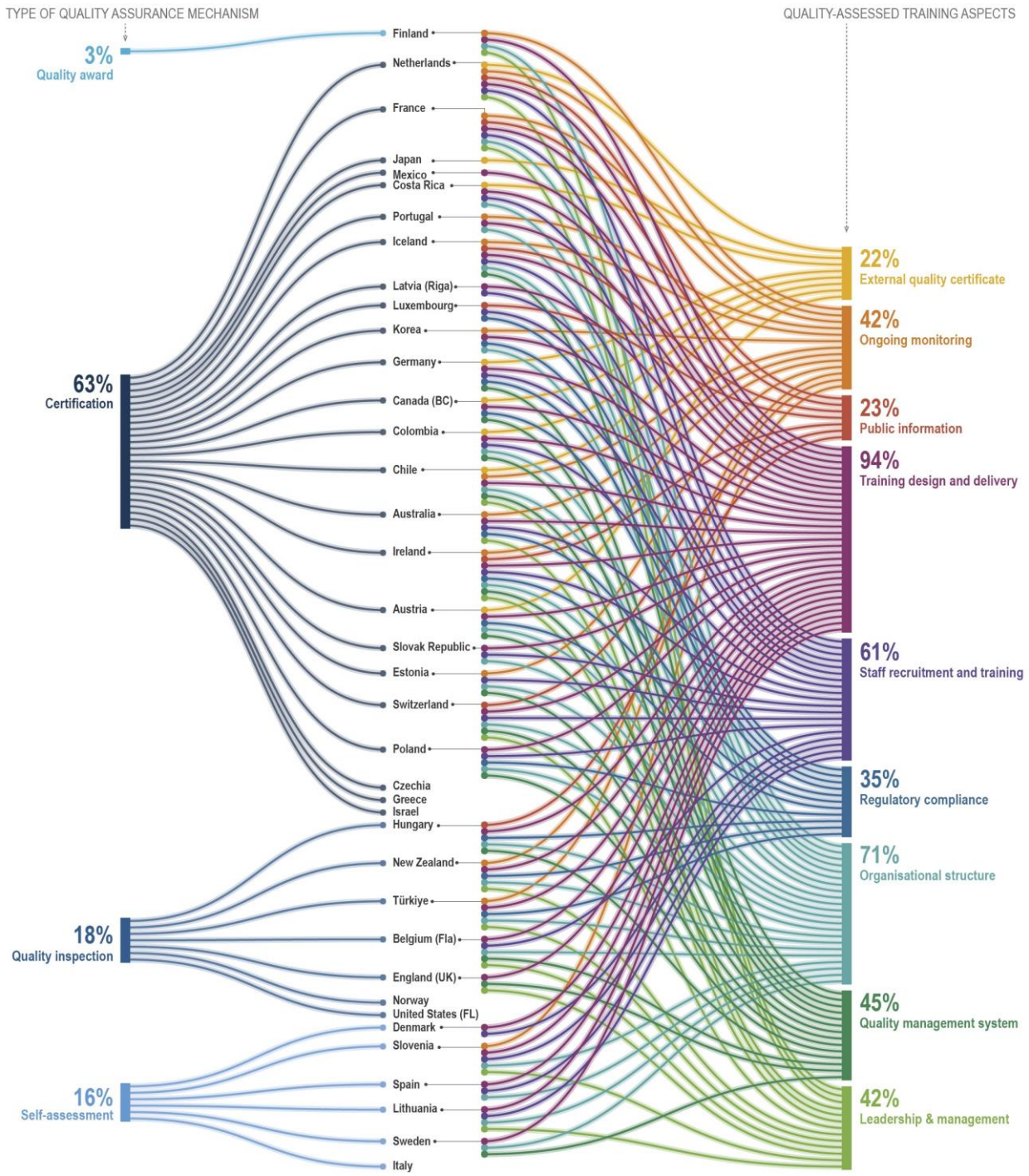
79. The previous section revealed a diverse array of quality assurance mechanisms in adult education and training. This section focuses on the training aspects (see Table 3.3) assessed by these mechanisms. This analysis, summarised in Table 4.1 and Figure 4.3, reveals a varied landscape, with mechanisms assessing different combinations of training aspects. It is worth noting that information was not available for all mechanisms. As a result, the percentages presented in this section and the following ones are based solely on the mechanisms for which information is available.

Table 4.1. Quality-assessed training aspects in selected mechanisms in OECD countries

OECD countries	QUALITY ASPECTS COVERED BY DIFFERENT QUALITY ASSURANCE MECHANISMS								
	External quality certificate	Leadership and management	Ongoing monitoring	Organisational structure	Public information	Quality management system	Regulatory compliance	Staff recruitment and training	Training design and delivery
Australia	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Austria	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Belgium (Flanders)	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Canada (British Columbia)	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Chile	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Colombia	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Costa Rica	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Czechia	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Denmark	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
England (UK)	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Estonia	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Finland	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
France	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Germany	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Greece	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Hungary	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Iceland	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Ireland	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Israel	●	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Italy	●	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Japan	●	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Korea	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Latvia (Riga)	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Lithuania	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Luxembourg	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Mexico	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Netherlands	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
New Zealand	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Norway	●	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Poland	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Portugal	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Slovak Republic	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Slovenia	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Spain	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Sweden	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Switzerland	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Türkiye	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
United States (Florida)	●	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Note: Shaded cells indicate the quality aspects that are covered in the particular mechanism.

Figure 4.3. Mapping the relationship between type of quality assurance mechanism and quality-assessed training aspects across mechanisms



80. The “external quality certificate” is one such aspect. As mentioned in Section 3, some mechanisms require AET providers to hold an external certificate of quality issued by an accredited body, be it a government or non-government organisation (e.g. such as ISO29990 or ISO9001) (see Table 4.2 for a sample of external quality certificates accepted in a sample of countries). This requirement is present in roughly 22% of mechanisms in our study, including those in Austria, Canada (British Columbia), Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Germany, Japan, and the Netherlands.

Table 4.2. External quality certificates

External quality certificates accepted in selected mechanisms

Country	List of accepted quality certificates
Austria	ÖNORM EN ISO 9001:2008, ISO 29990 and ISO 21001; EFQM, European Foundation for Quality Management; LQW, Learner-Oriented Quality Certification for Further Education Organisations by Art-Set Trademark QVB; EduQua; UZB; OÖ-EBQ; VET CERT-NÖ; S-QS; Wien-cert;
Chile	The Chilean Quality Standard for Technical Training Organisations, NCh2728.
Germany	ISO 9001; DAkkS Deutsche Akkreditierungsstelle GmbH
Japan	ISO 29990; ISO 29991
Netherlands	ISO 9001; CRKBO; CROHO

81. Another quality aspect of interest is “leadership and management.” In this dimension, AET providers are expected to foster an environment where leadership enables the effective management and operation of services. This includes well-documented policies and procedures, well-maintained records, shared values, and a clear direction to enable a customer-oriented and efficient service. This quality assurance measure is adopted by around 42% of mechanisms, with examples including Australia, Belgium (Flanders), Chile, Ireland, Finland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, New Zealand, the Republic of Türkiye (here after ‘Türkiye’) Slovenia, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom (England).

82. “Ongoing monitoring” encompasses the continuous tracking and periodic review of programmes by AET providers to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and meet the needs of learners and society. Here, AET providers collect, analyse, and use relevant information for the monitoring of their programmes and other activities, leading to continuous improvement. This quality area is observed in approximately 42% of mechanisms, including for example in Australia, Chile, Estonia, Finland, France, Iceland, Ireland, Korea, New Zealand, Portugal, Slovenia and Türkiye.

83. In terms of the “organisational structure”, AET providers are expected to ensure that their internal structure, including human resources, facilities, and equipment, is suitable for service operation. Furthermore, staffing arrangements should support learners' continuing education and training, with spaces, buildings, and fixtures being safe and well maintained. This quality area is part of the assurance process in around 71% of mechanisms, including those observed in Belgium (Flanders), Colombia, Estonia, Hungary, Ireland, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland.

84. The “public Information” quality area requires AET providers to publish clear, accurate, objective, and up-to-date information about their activities, including programmes. This measure is included in the quality assurance systems of just 23% of mechanisms, including those observed in Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Switzerland.

85. As mentioned above, some quality assurance mechanisms request the AET provider to have a quality management system (QMS) in place to ensure consistent quality in its educational programmes and training services. This requirement is adopted by roughly 45% of mechanisms, such as the cases of Belgium (Flanders), Canada (British Columbia), Chile, Colombia, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Poland and Sweden.

86. “Regulatory compliance” pertains to the adherence of AET providers to laws and regulations relevant to their operations, set forth by local, regional, or national governments. The specific requirements can vary, often depending on the type of providers and programmes delivered and can include ensuring that AET providers comply with relevant education laws and regulations, employment and labour laws, anti-discrimination laws, privacy and data protection laws. This quality area is part of the quality assurance process in approximately 36% of mechanisms, including those examined Australia, Austria, Canada (British Columbia), Germany, Korea, Luxembourg, Poland, Türkiye and the United Kingdom (England).

87. With respect to “teaching staff”, AET providers are expected to ensure the quality of the methodological-didactical competences of their teachers and trainers. This includes applying fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and professional development of the staff. This quality area is covered by 61% of the mechanisms under study, including the cases of Australia, Belgium (Flanders), Colombia, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia (Riga), Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, and Switzerland.

88. Finally, with regards to the “training design and delivery” AET providers are generally required to ensure that there exists appropriate process for the development of training programs, including planning, design, organisation, development, and training assessment. Providers must ensure that programmes are relevant and meet students’ educational needs and that student support and academic assistance is provided. This area is an important aspect of the quality assurance process in around 94% of mechanisms, making it the most widely adopted quality area. This includes mechanisms observed in countries such as Australia, Belgium (Flanders), Canada (British Columbia), Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Austria, Finland, Germany, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland.

89. It is observed that on average, mechanisms cover approximately four out of the nine potential quality areas. This average, however, masks substantial variation across mechanisms, suggesting a diverse approach to quality assurance in adult education and training globally. For example, Ireland stands out as the most comprehensive, covering eight observable quality aspects. France closely follows, covering seven of the quality aspects. And mechanisms in countries such as Chile, Iceland, the Netherlands and Switzerland cover six. On the other end of the spectrum, mechanisms in certain countries such as Denmark, Latvia and Mexico, only cover one or two areas.

Diverse assessment tools and methods in AET quality assurance

90. In the context of quality assurance in Adult Education and Training (AET), a range of assessment tools and methods are adopted across OECD countries (see Figure 4.4). This section of the paper explores these practices and their prevalence, providing a comprehensive understanding of the current practices in quality assurance. Six distinct practices have been identified, namely, analysis of performance indicators, expert reviews, interviews, self-assessment questionnaires, site visits, and surveys.

91. A prevalent practice observed is the use of site visits, employed by 21 out of the 34 mechanisms with available data (61.8%). Site visits involving direct inspection of AET providers, is adopted by a diverse range of mechanisms, including Australia, Belgium (Flanders), and Denmark, suggesting its universal appeal.

92. Self-assessment questionnaires, allowing AET providers to conduct an introspective evaluation of their performance, are utilised by seven mechanisms (30 % of the mechanisms with available data). Notably, a combination of site visits and self-assessment questionnaires is a common practice, as seen in the mechanisms examined the Netherlands and New Zealand, among others.

93. Interviews, used for gathering qualitative insights from stakeholders, are employed in four mechanisms (18 %), as seen in Australia, Belgium (Flanders), Israel, and the United States (Florida).

The same mechanisms, barring the example of Australia and Belgium (Flanders), also utilise expert reviews, which rely on the analysis provided by external experts for assessing quality.

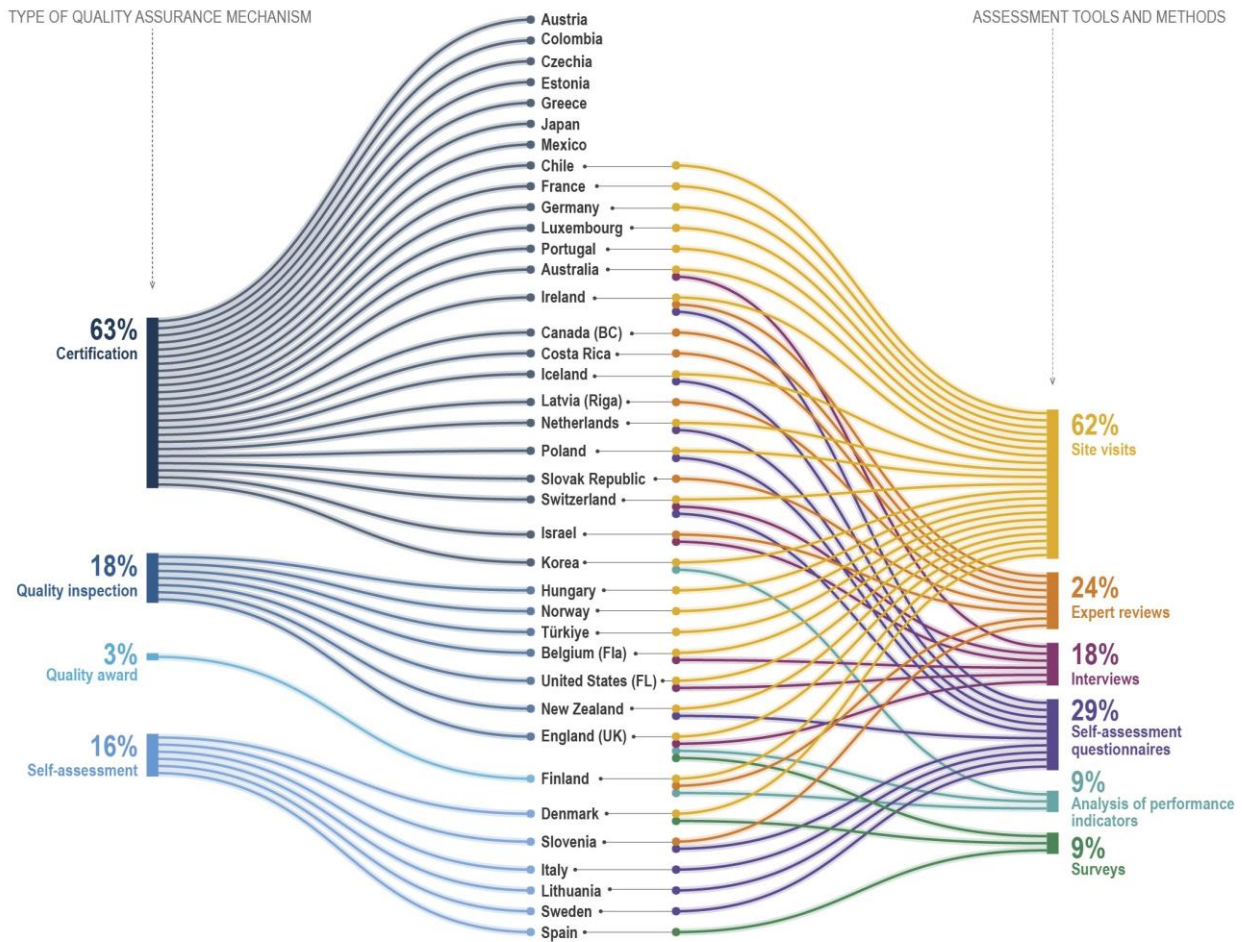
94. The analysis of performance indicators, a method measuring quantitative parameters such as enrolment and graduation rates, learner satisfaction, and learning outcomes, is the least commonly used assessment tool, found only in the cases examined in Finland, Korea and the United Kingdom (England).

95. Surveys, despite their ability to reach a wider audience than interviews, are used by only three countries: Denmark, Spain and the United Kingdom (England).

96. Mechanisms in our sample use approximately one to two assessment tools and methods (1.34 on average across the sample), with several mechanisms having a more integrative approach that combines multiple mechanisms. Ireland, for instance, employs a combination of expert reviews, self-assessment questionnaires, and site visits, while the United Kingdom (England) integrates analysis of performance indicators, interviews, site visits, and surveys.

97. In terms of correlation with the type of quality assurance mechanism, *site visits* are highly prevalent in *certifications*, seen in the cases of countries such as Australia, Canada (British Columbia), and Chile. Not surprisingly, self-assessment questionnaires, on the other hand, are often associated with self-assessment type mechanisms, as observed in Italy and Lithuania but these questionnaires are also required under some *certification* and Inspection processes. Finally, *expert reviews* are used across diverse types of mechanisms, suggesting their versatile nature.

Figure 4.4. Mapping assessment tools and methods by country



Note: Countries with no connections indicate that there is no available data for the quality assurance mechanism in those particular countries.

Pass/Fail outcomes and fixed-term validity prevail

98. In terms of outcome types, the “pass-fail” grading system emerges as the most common, being used in 22 out of the 26 mechanisms where data is available (approximately 84%). This includes countries such as Australia, Canada (British Columbia), and France, among others. A less frequent outcome type is the ‘Grade’ category (15% of the mechanisms), found in the cases observed in Finland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom (England) and the United States (Florida).

99. In terms of the validity period of the outcome, a fixed-term validity is the most common practice among the 22 mechanisms providing data (around 73%). The length of the validity period, however, varies considerably. To better understand this, we computed an average validity duration, considering only those mechanisms where specific years were provided, and multiple periods were averaged. The average validity period is approximately 3.3 years. The Irish case (5), for example is in the higher range, while mechanisms in countries like Canada (British Columbia) and Latvia (Riga) have shorter validity periods of 1 and 2 years, respectively.

100. The type of quality assurance mechanism seems to have a correlation with the grading system and its validity. Certifications, for instance, predominantly employ a “pass/fail” outcome and have a fixed-term validity, seen in countries like Australia, Chile, and France. On the other hand, quality inspections, as

seen the cases examined in the United Kingdom (England), and the United States (Florida), often result in a 'grade' outcome.

Public funding and registry listings: Dominant incentives for quality assurance participation

101. The analysis of the collected data presents a comprehensive overview of the benefits that AET providers can accrue by participating in quality assurance across OECD countries. The benefits are categorised into five distinct factors: eligibility for public funding, display of quality label, being listed in the registry of providers, license to operate, and in the case of quality awards, receiving an award.

102. The most prevalent benefit among the mechanisms with available data is *eligibility for public funding* almost 50% of the mechanisms, as observed in Colombia, Estonia, France, Greece, Japan, Luxembourg, and Portugal, offering this benefit to AET providers. The second most common benefit is *display of quality label* is offered in 43% of the mechanisms, including those cases observed in Canada (British Columbia), Colombia, Finland, France, Iceland, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg, Netherlands, and Portugal.

103. The benefit of being *listed in the registry of providers* with 35% of the mechanisms with available information, including Colombia, Estonia, France, Japan, Luxembourg, and Portugal, offering this benefit to AET providers. Finally, the Finish care is the only one with a quality award system and consequently the only that offers the 'quality award' benefit. Finally, the *license to operate* is the least common benefit, only provided by the cases examined in Czechia, Hungary, and Latvia, representing just 11% of the mechanisms.

104. There is a notable correlation between the type of quality assurance mechanism and the benefits provided. For example, *certifications*, employed by countries such as Australia, Canada (British Columbia), Chile are most commonly associated with the benefit of being *listed in the registry of providers*.

105. The data suggests that AET providers can derive significant benefits from participating in quality assurance processes. However, these benefits vary widely across mechanisms and are influenced by the specific type of quality assurance mechanism in place. Policymakers should consider these findings when designing or refining quality assurance systems, ensuring that they provide substantial incentives for AET providers to participate and thereby improve the quality of adult education and training.

5 Discussion and conclusions

106. This paper introduces an analytical framework to characterise the variety of quality assurance mechanisms in AET in OECD countries. This novel study aims to compile, categorise, and compare these systems on key dimensions with the purpose of better understanding the variety of quality assurance systems and practices across OECD countries.

107. The framework is composed of four overarching macro-dimensions: *i) key features, ii) assessment processes, iii) outcomes*, and benefits to providers. Each macro-dimension is broken down into more disaggregated dimensions, which refer to specific and fundamental aspects of the quality assurance mechanism, including type, responsible body, quality aspects, assessment tools and methods, benefits for providers, among other. Each dimension is operationalised through a series of qualitative and quantitative indicators, which are specific measures that allow for an in-depth examination of the dimension and provide a basis for international comparison.

108. It is worth acknowledging that countries may have multiple quality assurance mechanisms in place, but for the purposes of this study, only one mechanism per country was considered and analysed. It is also important to note that for some countries, the available public information was not as comprehensive as needed for the analysis. These gaps in information unfortunately restrict the depth and scope of the analysis.

109. Drawing upon the sample of quality assurance mechanisms examined in this study, this paper finds that certification is the predominant quality assurance mechanism, with its implementation spanning approximately 63% of these countries. Quality Inspection trails as the second most prevalent quality assurance mechanism, used by an estimated 18% of countries. In terms of supervisory authorities, government agencies constitute the majority, overseeing quality assurance mechanisms in 47% of countries. Close behind are ministerial departments, which hold responsibility in 42% of countries. Conversely, non-government organisations are the minority, managing quality assurance in only 11% of countries.

110. With respect to assessment tools and methods, site visits are the most common mechanism, used by 14 out of the 32 surveyed countries. Self-assessment questionnaires are utilised by a total of seven countries, whereas interviews are practiced in only four countries. Expert reviews, analysis of performance indicators, and surveys remain comparatively underused tools.

111. Concerning the variety of quality aspects examined, countries blend different quality aspects in unique configurations. For example, “Training design and delivery” is widely considered, with approximately 63% assessing this area for quality. Additional aspects of quality that are of great interest to countries include “Leadership and Management,” “Ongoing Monitoring,” and “Training Staff.”

112. Eligibility for public funding and the opportunity to be included in registry listings are the primary benefits to AET providers to engage in quality assurance processes.

113. This study is a useful resource for countries planning to review and/or introduce changes to their quality assurance systems. By showcasing what other countries are doing in this field, it highlights international practices that could inspire local reforms. Hence, the findings offer a starting point for understanding and adopting successful strategies, thus supporting peer-learning opportunities among OECD countries.

Building robust quality assurance systems to support lifelong learning initiatives

114. The landscape of AET is experiencing a remarkable shift. Megatrends such technological change, the green transition, and events like the Covid-19 pandemic have highlighted the importance of lifelong learning. In response to these trends, countries across OECD have increased their support for individual to undertake further training and to engage in learning activities.

115. Among the various support measures, one has captured the attention of policy makers across OECD and European countries: Individual learning schemes (ILS). These schemes, such and individual learning accounts (ILAs) or vouchers are designed to promote lifelong learning by making education and training more accessible and affordable for individuals. For example, ILAs provide financial resources, often through government funding or employer contributions, that individuals can use to pay for learning activities such as training courses or education programmes. ILAs place the purchasing power directly in the hands of the learners. By doing so, ILAs provide individuals with the autonomy to choose the learning and training options that best suit their needs and aspirations.

116. Individual learning accounts (ILAs) can foster an increase in the supply and diversification of training. Firstly, by providing individuals with financial resources, ILSs enhance accessibility and affordability, expanding the pool of potential learners. This, in turn, encourages a greater number of training providers to participate, promoting market competition and driving providers to improve the quality and relevance of their offerings. ILSs also stimulate the entry of new providers, fostering innovation and introducing diverse perspectives and approaches to training. Additionally, ILSs can be targeted towards underrepresented groups, addressing equity concerns, and further diversifying the range of training options available. Therefore, ILSs serve as a catalyst for expanding the supply and diversification of training, enabling individuals to access a broader array of learning opportunities.

117. In this context, it is essential to ensure that the financial investment in supporting lifelong learning yields high returns by maintaining high-quality training standards that effectively support individual learning and career goals. This prompts an essential question: What are the most effective quality assurance mechanisms to establish an efficient, scalable, and robust quality assurance system capable of effectively handling the scale of training programmes and providers? Though this question is posed rhetorically, it emphasises the need for new research to navigate towards evidence-based answers and policy recommendations.

Adapting quality assurance mechanisms for an increasing number of providers

118. When faced with a significant rise in the number of providers and programmes, it is crucial to ensure that the quality assurance mechanism in place can effectively handle the potentially large volume. It is important to underscore that no single quality assurance mechanism will function well for all quality assurance needs. Each has its unique strengths and can be more or less suited to different contexts. These mechanisms are tools in a policy maker's toolbox, best used in combination depending on the particular circumstances of a country or provider.

Ensuring a consistent and efficient approach to certification

119. Certification is an important mechanism for ensuring quality of numerous ILA providers. The main advantage is that by establishing explicit quality standards, providers can undergo certification by a third-party organisation. This approach ensures consistency and enables streamlined evaluation processes. Standardised criteria and efficient procedures help manage a larger volume of providers seeking certification while upholding minimum quality standards. However, certification processes can be time-consuming, costly, and administratively burdensome, especially when dealing with a large number of

providers. Managing a high volume of certification applications and assessments can strain resources and potentially lead to delays in the certification process.

Empowering providers through self-assessment

120. Self-assessments may be useful when there is a significant number of providers. Through self-evaluation, providers assess their services and operations using predetermined quality indicators or benchmarks. Empowering providers to take responsibility for their own quality improvement efforts reduces the burden on external evaluators. Scalability and efficient management of a larger number of providers could be achieved through online platforms or automated systems, facilitating streamlined self-assessment procedures. However, relying solely on self-assessment may raise concerns about objectivity and consistency in evaluating the quality of training. With a large number of providers, ensuring uniform adherence to quality standards through self-assessment alone can be challenging. The lack of external validation may also impact the credibility and assurance of the self-assessment process.

Managing cost through a sampling approach to quality inspections

121. Conducting comprehensive quality inspections for every provider becomes challenging with a large volume. Hence, a sampling approach may be more cost-effective. Quality inspections can be performed on a representative sample of providers chosen through statistically valid sampling methods. This method ensures reasonable assessment of overall quality without inspecting each provider individually. However, selecting an appropriate sample that truly represents the overall quality of all providers can be challenging. There is a risk of overlooking potential quality issues in providers not included in the sample, potentially compromising the effectiveness of quality assurance.

Balancing benefits and costs of quality awards

122. Finally, quality awards have the ability to raise awareness about quality standards within the AET sector. By acknowledging and rewarding those who excel in maintaining high standards, quality awards encourages a culture of quality and continuous improvement among all providers. It stimulates competition and motivates providers to strive for better performance. Quality awards can also serve as an effective marketing tool, enhancing the reputation of the awarded providers and increasing their appeal to potential learners. However, managing quality awards can be challenging, especially with a growing number of providers. The process of organising contests and competitions, and conducting thorough expert reviews, can be time-consuming and resource-intensive. Additionally, while they acknowledge top performers, quality awards may not provide a comprehensive view of the quality standards across all providers, as not every provider would be assessed or awarded. Hence, the use of quality awards as a sole quality assurance mechanism could potentially lead to gaps in monitoring and ensuring overall quality consistency.

123. As we consider the various quality assurance mechanisms, it is evident that each has its strengths and limitations, especially with the expansion of providers. A combined approach may offer a more comprehensive solution. This discussion underscores the need for deeper research in this area, including in-depth case studies, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play. The upcoming section will elaborate in these knowledge gaps.

Future research

124. The rapidly changing landscape of AET poses several emerging challenges that are yet to be thoroughly explored. Future research in these areas is vital to the continuous adaptation of systems and practices, ensuring they are best equipped to respond to the dynamic needs of adult learners.

125. In conclusion, this paper provides an analytical framework to examine quality assurance mechanisms in AET across OECD countries. The findings highlight the diversity of existing practices. The study offers insights into the variety of quality assurance mechanisms used for ensuring quality, the types of supervisory authorities employed, the data utilised for making assessments and methodologies for collecting that data, and the range of quality aspects that are assessed, among others. This research contributes substantially to international peer learning on the topic of quality assurance of AET, serving as a resource for policymakers considering reforms in their quality assurance systems. Ultimately, this study marks the first attempt to provide an international view of quality assurance systems.

126. This paper is part of a series of papers focused on the quality assurance of AET, which will feature in an upcoming OECD report on the topic. As a part of this series, three upcoming papers will elaborate in-depth on topics that are currently of high salience in the field. These topics have been identified as areas where further research and policy interventions are needed to address emerging challenges and opportunities.

127. The first area is ensuring quality of digital adult education and training. With the rise of online learning, we must consider how to maintain the same high standards as traditional learning methods. Adapting existing quality assurance mechanisms for digital AET is crucial. This entails examining the specific features of digital education, like accessibility and learner engagement, and adapting the standards accordingly. This research could inform policies aimed at safeguarding the quality of digital AET.

128. The second paper will explore how to support adults in making informed education and training choices is critical. With a multitude of training options available, adults often find it difficult to make decisions that best serve their needs. To aid this process, research will focus on creating user-friendly platforms and standardised frameworks to provide clear information about the quality of education and training programmes (OECD, 2023^[14]; EUR-Lex, 2022^[15]). These strategies would help individuals navigate the complex landscape of AET, making more informed choices.

129. The final paper of the series focuses on tracking outcomes of adults in AET. This involves measuring the effectiveness of AET programmes by monitoring learner outcomes. Such data is invaluable for making informed decisions about programme design and delivery, and for optimising resource allocation. As shown in the findings section, currently, less than 10% of countries include the analysis of performance indicators, which highlights the urgent need to incorporate more quantitative evidence into the quality assurance processes (OECD, 2021^[12]; OECD, 2023^[14]). In particular, the quality of the providers and programmes should incorporate the performance of their graduates in the labour market to determine quality. This chapter will evaluate existing tracking methods, identify the most relevant outcomes, and propose more effective ways of collecting this data.

130. By focusing on these specific areas, the series aims to provide in-depth insights and practical recommendations that can guide policymakers and stakeholders in tackling key, emerging issues related to the quality assurance of AET.

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