

Scoping of the European Certifying Organisation for the Active Leisure Sector

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1. Introduction

The Blueprint for Skills Cooperation and Employment in Active Leisure project focuses on developing new skills for current and future workers, for improving employability of young people, and supporting entrepreneurship and growth across the sector.

This paper provides an overview of the context and development of the BLUEPRINT *Intellectual Output 4 – Scoping of the European Certifying Organisation*. It should be read in conjunction with the other BLUEPRINT Intellectual Output reports to provide further background. In particular there is a direct relationship with *IO 5 - New and updated qualification for fitness (personal trainer) and outdoors (animator) for pan-European use* and *IO9 – Testing, trialling and refining development of new qualifications, awarding organisation and recognition of prior learning*.

IO4 was developed to support the mobility of skilled workers in the Active Leisure sector across member states. It was perceived as an integral part of the project to ensure that an individual who had trained in one Member State could easily move to another one, and transition into new employment with as few barriers as possible. International, or sectoral, qualifications are one way of supporting that by allowing recognition of single qualifications in multiple member states. This aspiration is very much in line with the European Union principle of free movement of labour and services and was especially expressed as a priority in the last Commission through the New Skills Agenda.

IO4 recognises that the mutual recognition of qualifications can only be effectively applied if those training institutions providing the ‘international qualifications’ are subject to a rigorous external or third-party quality assurance process. In this context, it is recognised that a common assessment practice is particularly important and has become a key focus of IO4.

During the project it was especially realised that for the fitness sector the work in this area could result in the formation of a Europe-wide Certifying Organisation to quality assure training provision across the fitness sector. Building on existing EuropeActive programmes it could help ensure the optimal implementation of the European educational standards as represented by the Fitness Sectoral Qualifications Framework (SQF). Awarding Organisations (AO) are experts in developing high quality qualifications that meet the needs of employers and learners. AOs approve/accredit centres and work with them to ensure high quality delivery of qualifications and they carry out activity designed to assure the quality of the qualifications awarded. They also develop innovative products and services to support their centres and learners.

As the BLUEPRINT project developed it was realised that the understanding of the term of an AO was explicit and that a better ‘fit’ was to use the term of a Certifying Organisation (CO).

2. Why is a Certifying Organisation necessary?

The necessity for such a Certifying Organisation in the European Fitness Sector was attributable to the need for several aspects, outlined below.

2.1. A clear separation of responsibilities

EuropeActive has been both the developer of standards and the accreditor of training providers against those standards. There is a fundamental conflict of interest here which would be resolved by a separate CO with clearly defined and distinct responsibilities. National Qualification Frameworks and systems demand a high level of impartiality between standards-setting, training delivery and examination and assessment of students. This separation of responsibilities is common in most education systems across Europe from schools upwards.

2.2. Bring clarity and credibility to a confused marketplace

Providing vocational training and certification of organisations and people in Europe is an open market and there already many commercially orientated bodies who carry-out these functions including US certification bodies and, UK awarding organisations. The establishing of a European Certifying Organisation with robust and transparent legal and governance structures was necessary to provide organisations and individuals with a 'one stop shop' for the quality assurance of qualifications.

2.3. Control in an expanding market

As the reputation of EuropeActive grows as a quality assurance agency there was a wider demand for professional and transparent accreditation services.

2.4. Need to strengthen quality assurance approach

The current EuropeActive accreditation system for training providers is not fully developed increasing the chances of abuse. There was a need to increase the robustness of accreditation systems. National Qualification Frameworks and systems demand a high level of impartiality between standards-setting, training delivery and examination and assessment of students.

2.5. Need to show external scrutiny

There is currently no external scrutiny of the EuropeActive accreditation processes. It was felt that the CO would need to be independent, accountable, and compliant to international standards of quality assurance in the scheme it operates to deliver qualifications. The CO needed to have the resources to operate against the certification and inspection requirements of ISO 17024:2012 to show its impartiality.

2.6. Protecting and benefiting from assets

The EuropeActive occupational standards are potentially a valuable asset to EuropeActive and so their use by any organisation – including the CO - should be restricted or licensed so that they can accrue a revenue to help with future development. Additionally, if the CO is not using the standards correctly or there is a breach of licencing terms then EuropeActive could revoke their use. Conversely the CO will expect EuropeActive to keep the occupational standards up to date and in line with employer and sector requirements and expectations. The European Register of Exercise Professionals (EREPS) remains in the ownership and control of EuropeActive but the CO will reasonably expect it to be run to protect the main intention of it being an independent and credible public register for exercise professionals.

This effectively means that EuropeActive should protect these key assets and to benefit financially from their use which can be re-invested to further improve and develop future standards and to enforce graduate registration with EREPS to boost numbers and income.

2.7. In-line with current EU thinking in relation to the EQF

The EQF Advisory Board has indicated that sectoral/international qualification frameworks should not be directly related to the EQF (see BLUEPRINT IO 10). Instead, this referencing should be through national qualification frameworks and the CO provides the best mechanism for this. As mentioned previously national qualification systems will require a high level of quality assurance of training delivery and the impartiality and role of the CO can fulfil these expectations.

2.8. Currently no European-wide quality assurance and certification body for the Fitness Sector exists

While there are many examples of certification bodies as witnessed with the examples of the US certification bodies and UK awarding organisations active in the European fitness market (and internationally), there is no one credible Europe-wide certification body to facilitate transferability of qualifications and the promotion of employment mobility.

3. A proposed definition of a Certifying Organisation

An accepted definition of a Certifying Organisation can be: An organisation that designs, develops, supports the delivery of and awards qualifications. Attaining these qualifications involves the achievement of learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and/or competences) by an individual following an assessment and quality assurance process that is valued by employers, learners or stakeholders.

These definitions will also help to understand the context and role of the CO:

Certification

‘The provision by an independent body of written assurance (a certificate) that the product, service or system in question meets specific requirements. Certification can be a useful tool to add credibility, by demonstrating that your product or service meets the expectations of your customers. For some industries, certification is a legal or contractual requirement.’¹

Accreditation

‘The formal recognition by an independent body, generally known as an accreditation body, that a certification body operates according to international standards.’²

An awarding body

‘An organisation that designs, develops, supports the delivery of and awards qualifications. Attaining these qualifications involves the achievement of learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and/or competences) by an individual following an assessment and quality assurance process that is valued by employers, learners or stakeholders.’³

Certification institution/body

The role of a certifying institution or awarding organisation is to issue ‘qualifications (certificates, diplomas or titles) formally recognising the learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and/or competences) of an individual, following an assessment procedure.’⁴

‘An organisation independent of the manufacturer that has demonstrated adequate competence, authority, and credibility to perform independent and objective audits of another organization in order to provide verification of the adequate qualification/competency of the audited organization’s personnel and evidence that the audited organization’s products satisfy applicable requirements.’⁵

¹ <https://www.iso.org/certification.html>

², <https://www.iso.org/certification.html>

³ <https://awarding.org.uk/>

⁴ Adapted from: <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/fr/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory/european-inventory-glossary#C>

⁵ <https://www.apisubscriptions.org/publications/preview.cgi?b51d0c4d-415e-4f66-91aa-0c9f0d8b895c>

‘A legal entity or an individual entrepreneur accredited in accordance with the established procedure to perform work in the sphere of certification.’⁶

‘Third-party conformity assessment body operating certification schemes for persons. A certification body can be non-governmental or governmental, with or without regulatory authority.’⁷

Certification schemes

‘...The set of requirements put in place by industry, regulators or other entities, are the driving documents for all certifications. Without a Certification Scheme, there is no information about the criteria with which the certified product, process, or service complies. The end user of the certified “thing” does not know if the ‘thing’ is safe, or if it will provide a desired output...the requirements the product, process, or service must meet.’⁸

‘The role of an awarding organisation (AO) is to issue ‘qualifications (certificates, diplomas or titles) formally recognising the learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and/or competences) of an individual, following an assessment procedure’ (CEDEFOP, 2014). This must be done in a manner that maintains impartiality (ISO 17024: 2012), meets the requirements of the Sector and National Qualification Frameworks (SQF and NQFs), and ensures that the student is the ‘ultimate beneficiary of the education and training.’⁹

4. Working characteristics of a Certifying Organisation

Taking an overview of the above definitions, a body that provides or awards certification will need to have some common and accepted characteristics:

To provide written assurances that a product or service meets the requirements and expectations of the users of that product or service,

To give credibility and transparency for consumers of the end product or service,

To observe listed criteria with which the certified product, process, or service complies to determine whether these criteria have been met,

Should be independent of the product design or service delivery (i.e., educational training) in order to provide independent, third party scrutiny of the involved practices and procedures,

It should be a legally established entity, but can operate with or without regulatory authority,

⁶ https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/acc_e/rus_e/WTACCRUS48A5_LEG_17.pdf

⁷ <https://www.iso.org/obp/ui/#iso:std:iso-iec:ts:17027:ed-1:v1:en>

⁸ <https://www.iso.org/obp/ui/#iso:std:iso-iec:17065:ed-1:v1:en>

⁹ <https://www.eqavet.eu/>

The certifying organisation itself should meet the requirements of an independent accrediting body for certifying organisations.¹⁰

5. EuropeActive's Certifying Organisation

5.1. Mission, vision and values

In considering all the above points the mission, vision and values of the proposed Certifying Organisation for EuropeActive were identified as:

- **Vision:** To be the leading body in developing, supporting, quality assuring and certifying qualifications of professionals of the European fitness and physical activity and to champion the very highest standards of education provision.
- **Mission:** To develop qualifications, assessment, resources and services for the occupations of the European fitness and physical activity industry, providing the credibility and recognition of this sector by ensuring high, comparable and standardised levels of education resulting in high customer satisfaction in order to support EuropeActive in getting More People, More Active, More Often.
- **Values:** robust, process-driven, accessible, professional, supportive.

5.2. Proposed governance for the Certifying Organisation

A key aspect of setting up a Certifying Organisation is to establish a workable and appropriate governance structure. The governance arrangements will need to provide solid foundations and keep the organisation, its staff, and its service users safe and secure. These arrangements will also provide visibility and transparency so the wider sectoral community and others who may look critically at its credentials can transparently see the basis on which it operates.

Governance processes will need to have strategic leadership, accountability, organisational structures and processes together with its oversight of educational and financial performance.

Strategic leadership of the CO will observe:

- establishing a clear and explicit vision for the future set by a Board of formally appointed representatives. This vision along with clear values should be communicated across the organisation,

¹⁰ More information can be found here:

<https://crossfieldsinstitute.com/english-awarding-organisation/>
<https://www.fitnessmentors.com/best-personal-trainer-certification/>
<https://www.ptpioneer.com/ncca-accredited-certifications/>

- setting of medium to long-term strategic goals,
- setting up processes to monitor and review progress against strategic goals and to update company vision periodically,
- implementing risk management processes at every level of governance,
- exercising due diligence in reviewing the effectiveness of governance structures and processes in line with the changing needs of the organisation and its customers.

Accountability of the CO will include:

- a transparent system for performance management of organisational leaders linked strategic priorities,
- performance management of all other employees and structures for their pay and conditions of service,
- regular meetings and suitable processes to support business and financial planning,
- effective systems for managing within available resources and ensuring value for money.

Structures and processes that reinforce clearly defined roles and responsibilities of the CO will include:

- appropriate governance structures to ensure oversight of action plans,
- published details of governance arrangements including the structure and remit of the people who provide its governance and any operational groups.

5.3. General role and functions for the Certifying Organisation

Its principal role is to be the organisation that designs, develops, supports the delivery of and awards qualifications for the European fitness and physical activity sector. In this regard it has four key functions:

1. Qualification development: translating EuropeActive standards into usable qualifications. To develop a qualification based on learning outcomes which will include an assessment strategy (e.g., how are the learners assessed in theory and practice). These qualifications should be based on commonly accepted educational standards that have been developed in consultation with key industry stakeholders including employers, training providers (higher education institutes and vocational providers).

2. Common assessments: providing common assessments to be implemented by recognised training providers and taken by all individuals wishing to gain certification through the CO. In this way, the CO creates a “first-person” relationship with the enrolled students through the approved training academies leading to final examination and assessment of the students (viz. not undertaken by the training providers).

3. Quality assurance: externally quality assuring the delivery and assessment of accredited courses. To approve training centres in terms of their competency to deliver and assess training which meets learning outcomes stipulated in awarded qualifications.

4. Certification: end certification of the successful students who meet the learning outcomes of the qualification (both theoretical and practical). This is sometimes referred to as a “common training test” approach as envisaged in Article 49 of Directive 2013/55 EU.¹¹

5.4. Qualification development

A central role of a Certifying Organisation is the development of qualifications against which training providers can deliver and individuals (students) can be assessed. Achievement against these qualifications becomes a measure of competency and the ability to perform a particular job role as well as facilitating the comparability and mutual recognition of these qualifications.

A qualification gives a reliable indication of an individual learner’s knowledge, skills or understanding and are only awarded to a learner who has demonstrated that they have a specified level of attainment through a reliable assessment method. A certificate naming the qualification is awarded to a successful learner.

Qualifications have been described as:

‘...A formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent authority determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards.’¹²

The value of qualifications in supporting mobility of employment and learning is well established:

‘As sectoral actors identify a need or a desire to establish internationally valid systems of skill and competence recognition, they turn again to qualifications as the central instrument of trusted communication, backed by a strong institutional framework... It also seems that for additional, independent systems set up by private actors, qualifications are seen as an instrument of choice for allowing cross-national and cross-institutional coordination of professional content, despite the absence of licensing or mandatory training.’¹³

‘International qualification means a qualification awarded by a legally established international body (association, organisation, sector or company) or by a national body acting on behalf of an international body that is used in more than one country and that includes learning outcomes assessed with reference to standards established by an international body.’¹⁴

¹¹ See Intellectual Outputs 2 and 11 for more information.

¹² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32017H0615%2801%29>

¹³ https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/6120_en.pdf

¹⁴ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32017H0615%2801%29>

A qualification sets out what an individual needs to know or be able to do in order to be given (awarded) that qualification. Most vocational qualifications are made up of a number of units of learning, each one covering a specific area or topic. In some qualifications, particularly the smaller ones, a learner may have to do all the units to get the qualification. In most vocational qualifications some of these units will be required units (mandatory) and there will be number of other units to choose from (optional).

Each unit has a number of statements that set out what the learner needs to know or be able to do. These are called the learning outcomes and they are checked (assessed) in a number of different ways. It might involve an on-line test, an observation of what the learner is doing, a written assignment, project work, an exam or compiling a portfolio of evidence demonstrating what the learning knows or can do.

To effectively fulfil its remit, the CO, must develop qualifications that are fit for purpose, containing units of learning outcomes, assessment criteria and assessment methods that are valuable to all stakeholders (e.g., employers, professional organisations, students).

The CO will need to do this in a transparent manner, and which synergises of the requirements of all European Lifelong Learning instruments of the EQF, ECVET, ECTS, and EQAVET. The CO will also need to take into account stakeholder feedback on a periodic basis, as well as any expected or additional relevant national qualification framework requirements. This collaborative consistency will help facilitate the development of which should be appreciated and recognised as transportable qualifications. Qualifications must therefore be developed following strict, transparent procedures which incorporate stakeholder feedback – and which ultimately will need to be given an approval of use through intellectual property rights/copyright of the occupational standards. Once a qualification has been launched, the CO will need to monitor, document, and respond to all feedback to ensure the ongoing validity of the learning outcomes, assessment criteria, and assessment methods in the current occupational sect.

5.5. Recommended stages for international qualification development

In order to develop an international qualification that facilitates recognition in as many member states as possible it is essential to complete initial investigations of the legislations, professional standards, requirements, current delivery models and assessment strategies in each nation. Evaluation of these must begin to highlight similarities and differences that would limit/enhance its recognition and transferability.

The main intended outcome of any international qualification must be that the learner can seek employment in country(ies) of their choice, therefore the initial investigation must identify any factors which may result in limitation of achievement of the main outcome. Evaluation of whether these factors can be addressed, or risks mitigated should take place to ensure integration of solutions into the specific development.

Stakeholder feedback from employers, professional standards and recognition bodies, national communication points, technical experts is an essential component of any development. The development process must therefore incorporate collation, evaluation, and usage of this feedback to amend and adapt the development accordingly. Often feedback is gathered using working groups and consultations and findings evaluated by developers to identify the appropriate amendment.

Once a draft qualification/assessment has been developed it is important to test and trial to ensure that they are fit for purpose and facilitate demonstration of competence in the required knowledge or skill. Relevant stakeholders contribute to evaluations, tests and trials as required. Testing and trialling must be relevant to the development and diverse needs of stakeholders (including learners). It may also be necessary for some developments to perform tests, trials, and evaluations in different member states. These must be identified early in the process and incorporated into plans for development and implementation.

Recognition of qualifications is an essential factor in achieving the overall outcome of a qualification. It is highly recommended that the qualification is presented to as many relevant national representatives as possible to encourage inclusion and ‘buy-in’. If this stage is delayed until after qualification launch, there is a risk that some key considerations have not been addressed and amendment of the qualification is no longer possible. This may limit recognition and therefore achievement of the overall outcome.

6. Establishing a common assessment strategy

In the context of a CO assessment is:

‘The process of appraising knowledge, know-how, skills and/or competences of an individual against predefined criteria (learning expectations, measurement of learning outcomes). Assessment is typically followed by validation and certification.’¹⁵

A common assessment strategy is a tool that can be used to facilitate a standardised approach to an assessment process. A Certifying Organisation should implement a common assessment strategy for the qualification that is synergised with the requirements of the occupational standards. Quality assurance can then evaluate the implementation of the common strategy to ensure standardisation and comparability between training providers across a range of nations.

The initial stakeholder feedback to the development of the PT qualification demonstrated that the key outcome was that the learner could demonstrate that they were competent against all of the standards. Assessments would therefore need to be holistic in nature and to include criteria from all of the units as this was complimented in the typical delivery model for training providers in this sector.

¹⁵ https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4064_en.pdf

6.1. Choosing the right assessments

When designing or choosing assessment tasks it is important to remember that as well as promoting student learning, they should also provide opportunities for students to demonstrate how well they have achieved, or are progressing towards achieving the intended learning outcomes of the unit/s.

Vocational assessment is important because when a candidate successfully completes a vocational qualification, they effectively become licensed to practice. It is essential therefore, that qualification assessments are fit for purpose to ensure that – whether these qualifications are knowledge, competence or skills focused - they are assessed in ways that are valid, reliable, fair, and manageable.

Assessment can provide a CO with important data on the breadth and depth of student learning. Assessment is not just a grading exercise it is about measuring the progress of student learning and, inputs into both the process of learning and learner motivation. The type of assessment used will heavily influence how learners approach their learning and the study behaviours employed.

Considering the importance of assessment for learning, it was vital to determine the best measure of the desired learning contained within each unit. By choosing an appropriate assessment it provides the CO with valuable information about what students learned, how well they learned it, and where they struggled. Such information will provide a great deal of useful information to the CO in supporting training providers to identify any barriers to learning and to help improve their approaches to teaching.

6.2. Quality assurance

It will be an important function of the CO to accredit European training providers to deliver training against the CO qualification requirements for the fitness sector. As part of this quality assurance function the CO will support training providers in implementing effective internal verification (IV) processes and provide an element of on-going external verification (EV). All qualifications which have an informal referencing to an EQF level should be quality-assured to enhance trust in both their quality and level.

‘A process of quality assurance through which accredited status is granted to a programme of education or training, showing it has been approved by the relevant legislative or professional authorities by having met predetermined standards.’¹⁶

The CO will need to implement a coherent, comprehensive quality assurance process to ensure that a student is:

- Given the opportunity to learn the required content in a manner which suits their individual learning needs;

¹⁶ https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4064_en.pdf

- Prepared for assessment in a fair and equitable manner (meaning their learning has included all the relevant content, delivered in a manner that suits their individual learning needs, without being given an unfair advantage);
- Assessed against the criteria in a comparable, standardised manner (each assessment centre interprets the criteria in the same way and makes similar judgements).

Quality student outcomes will be achieved by working with a range of training providers/assessment centres who will be responsible for delivering learning and performing assessments. The CO will quality assure each centre's internal policies, procedures and practices as well as learner output (assessments) to ensure that appropriate standards are met and maintained at all times. Effective and sufficient sampling and quality assurance activities will be used to facilitate standardisation and comparability across a range of centres, in a range of countries.

7. Implementing the Certifying Organisation and the accreditation of training providers

Over the last 2009 years and before the conception of the Blueprint Project EuropeActive, using its educational standards as its basis, has developed a system of independent quality assurance.¹⁷ This system has successfully accredited over 150 training providers (including both vocational training providers and higher education institutes) across Europe and has been subject to considerable scrutiny and updating as a result of the work of BLUEPRINT. The previous system was been described as 'light touch' in its approach to the quality assurance of both the delivery and assessment of training courses aligned to the EuropeActive standards. However, as a direct result of BLUEPRINT a more comprehensive and robust system of quality assurance for European training providers is now in place which will provide the foundation for the quality assurances processes of the Certifying Organisation.

The current training provider accreditation process is undertaken by specially selected independent third-party verifiers on behalf of EuropeActive to prevent any influence on the decision-making process for political or commercial motives. The accreditation period of training providers lasts for 2 years, and then it is necessary to go through a process of re-accreditation. During this tenure, training providers may be subjected to an on-site external verification visit.

Under the Accreditation system 3 main areas of evidence are gathered:

- EQAVET evidence
- Discipline specific evidence
- Supporting evidence

¹⁷ www.europeactive-standards.eu

7.1. EQAVET evidence

EQAVET is a programme of the European Commission but not all Member States have applied the EQAVET principles.¹⁸

If the training provider has EQAVET approval they must provide the contact details of the government organisation that has issued the EQAVET approval. If the training provider does not have EQAVET status for any reason, they will be required to provide the following evidence documents:

- A copy of an organogram or organisation chart that clearly shows the training department staff in detail and the person(s) with responsibility for maintaining quality assurance,
- Copies of the Curricula Vitae or resumes for all teaching, assessing and quality assurance staff,
- A copy of the company quality assurance policy/procedures that details how teaching and assessing standards are monitored and continuous improvement measures implemented, this should be including observations of the teaching and assessment process,
- A copy of minutes from a recent tutor/assessor standardisation meeting,
- A minimum of three suitable independent references for the training provider (except for higher education institutions).

The below two criteria are additional requirements to any EQAVET held by the Training Provider:

- Statement of confirmation required from training provider with details if the training provider seeking accreditation ever had accreditation/ approval/ membership declined, cancelled or sanctions/special terms imposed upon them,
- A link to the training providers website (and online platform if applicable) – this website should support all evidence in the application i.e., course price, content (syllabus), duration, delivery methods, teacher biographies, nature of final certification/qualification issued, and any online student support offered.

7.2. Discipline-specific evidence

Training providers are advised to complete a thorough referencing exercise against the relevant EuropeActive standards to ensure that a course covers all the knowledge and skills listed in the respective document for the discipline(s) being considered for application.

The Verifier will work with the training provider to gather the following evidence in preparation for review by the EuropeActive Accreditation Panel (see below).

- The type of application – new application, re-accreditation, additional discipline, satellite, affiliate. The full title of the qualification/certification,

¹⁸ www.eqavet.eu/gns/home.aspx

- A short description of the qualification/certification - where applicable it must show evidence of student pre-requisite qualifications (e.g., fitness gym instructor being the pre-requisite for personal trainer),
- A course outline detailing the structure of the qualification and course delivery methods. This can be a prospectus, syllabus, course timetable, course overview or other document but must enable the verifier to identify the overall structure of the qualification in terms of the number of hours of independent study required, the number of days of face-to-face and 'live' study training, the amount of time in classroom or practical settings and the overall duration of the course,
- Qualification delivery – this must detail the delivery methods and show how much time is dedicated to each subject within the course structure,
- Method of assessment – it is expected that there will be more than one method of assessment for most courses. The practical skill-based requirements of the standards will need to be assessed using a practical assessment.

7.3. Supporting evidence

- A video of the practical observation assessment in which the assessor, the student and their client can be seen and heard clearly. A detailed description of what this assessment must cover is given to training providers,
- The completed assessment checklist/paperwork from the assessment in the video along with all feedback should also be submitted,
- Examples of completed student feedback questionnaires or course evaluation forms (from the last 6 months),
- A picture of the certificate issued on achievement of the qualification,
- Examples of teaching and learning resources used to deliver the qualification e.g., student manuals, lists of course texts, example presentations, lesson plans, assessment materials, handouts, or other materials.

7.4. Review by EuropeActive Accreditation Panel

As a final stage in the accreditation process, once the verifier has been able to collate all the required evidence and signed documentation, they will notify the EuropeActive Accreditation Panel of the application. The Panel will review the application and will either:

- Approve Accreditation,
- Seek further information and evidence,
- Decline Accreditation.

The above processes indicate that many of the quality assurance processes intended for a CO are already in place and became fully operational during the BLUEPRINT project. These processes have been further strengthened with the addition of:

- a more demanding re-accreditation processes which now involves the re-submission of much of the evidence listed above rather than a simple confirmation that nothing has changed in the delivery and assessment of training courses,
- a set of minimum requirements for learning hours for accredited training providers. It should be emphasised these do not depart from the modern learning concept, where the most important consideration is the learning output (learning outcomes), not the education process itself. Instead, the aim was to make the accreditation process for training providers more transparent and the educational and vocational programmes more comparable. By using European Credit System for Vocational and Education Training (ECVET) and European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) in these learning hour requirements (please refer to IO6: Application of ECVET and ECTS to new qualifications), the intention was also to facilitate the transferability of qualifications or individual learning units between vocational education and training (VET) and higher education (HE) systems.

In reviewing the above, it should be seen that perhaps the last piece in the jigsaw puzzle of quality assurance is the specific issue of a direct relationship of the CO with learners (students). At present training providers set their own assessments, administer those assessments and certificate their learners. This means that the current accreditation team are somewhat distant from those learners and have no direct relationship with them in the certification process. This would, however, be addressed by the instigation of a common assessment protocol implemented by a European CO and, the certification of those learners who successfully complete this process by the CO. Common assessments and the implementation of those assessments are further discussed in IO 5 and IO 9.

8. Certification

The certification of learning outcomes can be described as:

“The process of issuing a certificate, diploma or title formally attesting that a set of learning outcomes (knowledge, knowhow, skills and/or competences) acquired by an individual have been assessed and validated by a competent body against a predefined standard.”¹⁹

A Certificate/ diploma / title can be described as:

“An official document, issued by an awarding body, which records the achievements of an individual following an assessment and validation against a predefined standard.”²⁰

It is currently the case that training providers accredited with EuropeActive both assess and certificate their own learners. Achieving this certification with an accredited provider is then accepted as

¹⁹ https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4064_en.pdf

²⁰ https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/4064_en.pdf

sufficient evidence for entry on to the European Register of Exercise Professionals (EREPS). The intention of establishing a Certifying Organisation is to take the responsibility of both assessment and certification away from the training provider and place it in the hands of an independent third party. In this way, potential conflicts of interest for training providers would be removed and learners would be subject to transparent and accountable processes administered by an independent body.

The Certifying Organisation must have a formal procedure by which it, as the accredited or authorised agency certifies (attests in writing by issuing a certificate), that the learner has attained the necessary qualification standards and learning outcomes, that is, they have successfully completed all relevant assessments. This third-party certification can be described as professional certification, trade certification, or professional designation and is earned by a person to assure qualification to perform a job or task, that is to show competence to practice.²¹

Some certifications are time-limited, while others can be renewed if certain stipulations are met. Such renewal generally involves some form of continued education or commitment to a programme of lifelong learning in order to ensure currency of knowledge, skills and competences.

Certifications provided by a competent body in the form of an independent Certifying Organisation are portable, since they do not depend on one company or sectoral definitions of a particular job, and thereby provide potential employers with an impartial, third-party endorsement of an individual's professional capabilities.

While certification programmes are often affiliated with, or endorsed by, professional associations or trade organisations focussed on raising industry standards, it is important that they remain independent of them.

8.1. Certification requirements and operational procedures

The CO must maintain sole responsibility for certification and at no point delegate this responsibility to another organisation. It could provide the initial certification for entry to the sector but also require re-certification after an identified period. This re-certification could form part of a continuing education or lifelong learning programme.

The scope of certification and the criteria for initial certification and re-certification should be clearly stated within the certification process of the CO. Similarly, the suspension or withdrawal of certification would be within the remit of the CO and the criteria for suspension or withdrawal of certification clearly stipulated. The CO must, upon application be able to provide an overview of the certification process (including certification requirements and scope, the assessments involved, applicants' rights, the duties of the certified person and any fees) and ensure that the certification scheme is regularly reviewed and validated.

²¹ See Intellectual Output 11 for more information.

The CO must be committed to impartiality in its management of those submitting for certification and not be influenced by commercial or other pressures that might threaten this impartiality. In this regard, the CO should not offer any training or education services that might better facilitate certification as this would conflict with the need for impartiality. Commitment to impartiality should be demonstrated in the CO's structure, policies, and procedures. The CO should incorporate processes that identify and document any threats to impartiality and how it has worked to reduce or eliminate these threats.

The CO should have sufficient personnel available to manage all necessary certification processes. These personnel should have the qualifications, training and experience required to perform their various duties and responsibilities in relation to the certification process. All the personnel should be fully aware of the need for confidentiality, impartiality and the absence of any conflicts of interest. The CO must manage the performance of any personnel involved in the assessment of learners and the reliability of their performance in making assessment decisions and judgements. Any issues with such decision-making must be identified, corrected and the actions taken to be fully documented.

The CO should maintain records on all certified persons in order to be able to on request confirm at any time the status and scope of their certification. These records will need to be kept for an appropriate period of time in relation to the certification cycle, i.e., the length of certification and the requirement for re-certification. The CO should have in place an enforceable requirement where any certified person must inform the CO immediately of any matters that would impact on their ability to meet the requirements of certification.

The CO must have established security policies and procedures in place to ensure the security of any examination materials. These policies and procedures should include how assessment materials are delivered, stored, or transported and any issues arising from the repeated use of these materials. The CO must have procedures in place to ensure consistent examination administration and manage any potentially fraudulent examination practices (e.g., requiring invigilation of assessments, candidates signing non-disclosure agreements regarding assessment materials, measures to confirm the identity of candidates and checking assessment papers and results for any indications of cheating). If any technical equipment (e.g., an online platform delivering an online assessment) is used in the examination process the quality and functioning of this equipment must be ensured.

On application any candidate would need to receive an overview of the certification process and their responsibilities and rights within this process. They would need to provide a signed application for certification and within this provide all the necessary information to identify the applicant, a statement of the certification they are applying for, whether they hold any necessary pre-requisites, agreement to complying with any certification requirements and the identification of any special needs.

The CO has sole responsibility for the decision to certify and should not outsource this decision-making function. The information gained during the assessment process should be sufficient for the certification body to make an informed decision on certification. It will be necessary to retain and have

reference to this information in the event of an appeal or complaint. It is vital that those making the certification decision have sufficient knowledge and experience of the certification process to determine if the requirements of certification have been met. Those making the final certification decision should not have been involved in either the training or assessment of the candidate.

Certificates issued to the successful learners will contain the following information:

- Name of the CO,
- Name of the certified person,
- A unique identification number,
- Date the certification was issued and the date of expiry,
- The qualification achieved (viz. European Personal Trainer Qualification),
- The qualification EQF level as informally referenced.

Any certified person will need to have signed an agreement that states that they will comply with any requirements of certification and will not make any misleading claims with regard to their certification and the scope of that certification. If any misleading claims or misuse of the certification is identified the CO will need to take the necessary corrective action.

8.2. Appeals and complaint procedures

The CO will need to have documented processes in place to receive, evaluate and make final decisions on any appeals or complaints with regards to the assessment processes or outcomes or complaints against a certified person. These processes must be fair, confidential, and impartial and the individual making the appeal should be kept in touch with the stage of that appeal. This would include notification of the receipt of the appeal or complaint and timely notification of the outcome of that appeal.

8.3. Management systems

The CO should have in place management systems sufficient to ensure the consistent delivery of all the above requirements and enable the regular review and updating of these systems. This system should allow the production, approval, maintenance and review of all necessary certification documentation.

9. Conclusion

As identified above, a Certifying Organisation has many potential functions including qualification development, assessment, quality assurance and certification. It is in these various functions that a Certifying Organisation can be seen as a 'must have' for a developing and maturing fitness sector. Ultimately, it is only when these functions are managed and controlled by an independent external body that the quality of training provision for various occupational roles can be assured across Europe. This underlines that the mutual recognition of qualifications will only be effectively achieved if the training providers delivering 'international qualifications' are subject to a comprehensive external or third-party quality assurance process.

In putting together the scoping of a Certifying Organisation many insights have been gained and lessons learned which have directly impacted on the existing qualification development and training provider accreditation processes of EuropeActive. These processes will continue to develop, but perhaps central to this development will be a move toward some form of common assessment as the basis for a CO certification. The BLUEPRINT IO 9 sets out some of the feedback received on such an assessment process during trials and testing. This will not be an easy conclusion as different countries across Europe will be at different stages of sectoral development and will have various existing regulations and systems. It will, therefore, be vital that a level of flexibility is maintained in the application of these assessment processes if they are ultimately to be accessible, accepted and implemented.

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