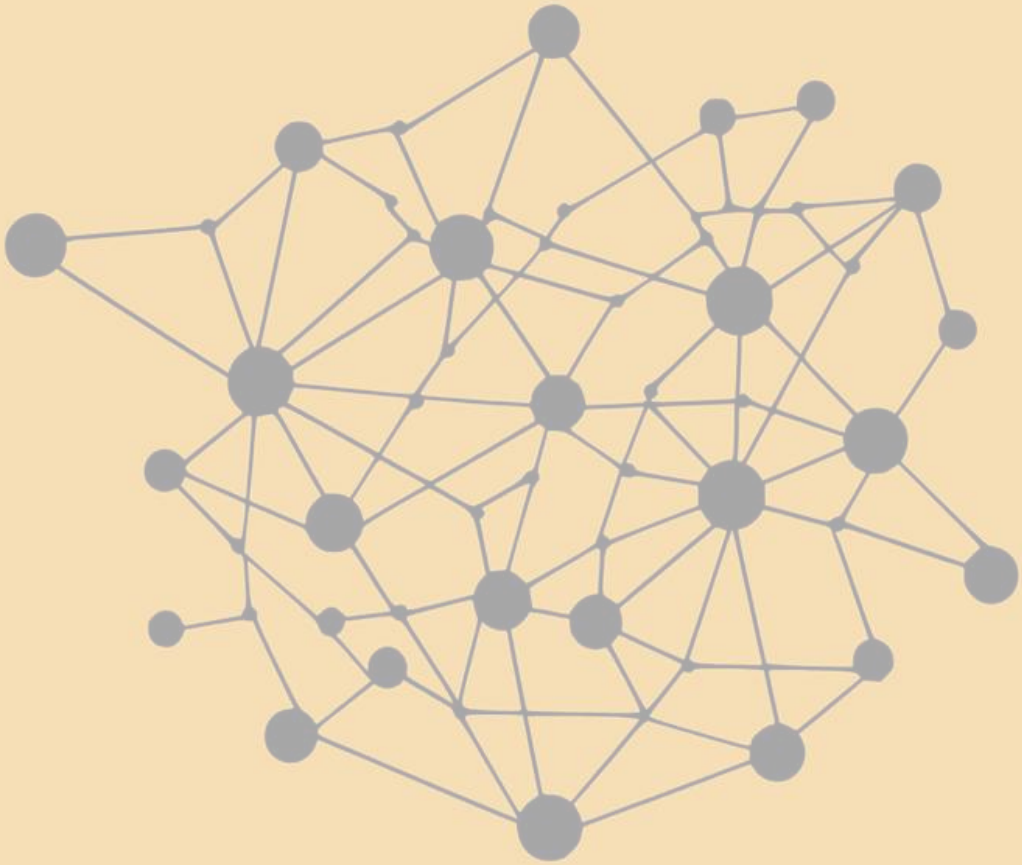
Position Paper

Towards a European VET Ranking Framework



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Enhancing Transparency, Excellence, and Recognition in Vocational Education and Training

Executive Summary

Vocational Education and Training stands at a critical juncture in Europe. While higher education benefits from well-established international ranking systems that drive quality improvement, enhance institutional visibility, and empower student choice, VET remains without an equivalent benchmarking framework. This structural gap perpetuates outdated perceptions of vocational pathways as secondary options, hinders cross-border recognition, and prevents VET institutions from demonstrating their excellence on a European stage.

The European Association of Institutes for Vocational Training (EVBB) believes the time has come to address this gap through a carefully designed, VET-specific ranking framework. Such a system must respect the diversity of European VET traditions while providing meaningful, transparent, and fair indicators of institutional quality. Drawing on our network of over 750 member organisations and extensive experience in EU-funded initiatives, EVBB advocates for a ranking approach that complements existing quality assurance mechanisms, enhances the attractiveness of VET, and supports the European Union's ambitions for a skilled, mobile, and competitive workforce.
This position paper outlines the rationale for VET ranking, identifies key principles and safeguards, and presents concrete recommendations for EU institutions, Member States, and the broader VET community.

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Context and Policy Background

The European VET Landscape: Progress and Persistent Challenges

European policymakers have long recognised vocational education's vital contribution to economic competitiveness, social cohesion, and individual opportunity. The Osnabrück Declaration (2020), the Council Recommendation on VET for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience (2020), and the European Skills Agenda have set ambitious targets for modernising VET systems. The expansion of Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs) under Erasmus+ reflects the EU's commitment to positioning VET as a first-choice pathway.

Yet significant challenges remain. VET participation rates vary dramatically across Member States, and perceptions of vocational pathways continue to lag behind those of academic education. The fragmentation of national VET systems, each with distinct curricula, accreditation processes, and quality standards limits cross-border mobility and complicates employers' ability to assess qualifications. While frameworks such as EQAVET and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) have improved transparency, they focus primarily on process quality and qualification levels rather than comparative institutional performance.

In higher education, ranking systems such as the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, QS World University Rankings, and U-Multirank have become influential tools for institutional benchmarking, student decision-making, and policy development. No equivalent exists for VET institutions a gap that limits their visibility, inhibits healthy competition, and deprives learners of the comparative information available to their university-bound peers.

The Case for VET Ranking

EVBB contends that a well-designed ranking system for VET institutions would serve multiple strategic objectives aligned with EU policy priorities:

- **Enhanced Transparency and Recognition:** A standardised evaluation framework would make VET institutional quality more visible and comparable across borders, supporting the mutual recognition objectives embedded in the European Education Area.
- **Empowered Learner Choice:** Prospective students currently lack access to comparative data on VET providers. A ranking system would enable informed decision-making, placing VET learners on equal footing with those considering higher education pathways.
- **Continuous Quality Improvement:** Benchmarking encourages institutions to identify strengths and weaknesses, adopt best practices, and pursue excellence. Self-assessment tools integrated within a ranking framework can drive institutional development.
- **Elevated VET Attractiveness:** By showcasing high-performing institutions, a ranking system would challenge outdated stereotypes and position VET as a prestigious, competitive pathway to skilled employment.

- **Strengthened Employer Engagement:** Employers seeking skilled graduates would gain reliable insights into institutional quality, facilitating apprenticeship partnerships and work-based learning collaborations.

Alignment with EU Policy Frameworks

A European VET ranking framework would directly support multiple EU policy objectives:

- **European Education Area:** By enhancing transparency and comparability, VET ranking supports the EEA goal of seamless learning and working across borders.
- **European Skills Agenda:** The agenda's emphasis on skills intelligence and quality improvement aligns with ranking's capacity to generate comparable performance data and drive institutional development.
- **Osnabrück Declaration:** The declaration's call for VET excellence, innovation, and attractiveness is reinforced by a system that identifies and showcases high-performing institutions.
- **Centres of Vocational Excellence:** CoVEs represent the EU's commitment to excellence in VET. Ranking provides a complementary mechanism for identifying excellence beyond the CoVE initiative.
- **Micro-credentials and Permeability:** Transparent institutional quality information supports learners navigating flexible pathways between VET and higher education, and employers assessing the value of modular credentials.

EVBB's Position: Principles for a VET-Appropriate Ranking Framework

EVBB supports the development of a European VET ranking framework, provided it adheres to principles that respect the sector's distinctive characteristics. We caution against the uncritical transposition of higher education ranking methodologies, which often emphasise research output and global reputation metrics poorly suited to VET's practical, employment-oriented mission.

Principle 1: Complementarity with Existing Frameworks

A VET ranking system must complement not replace established quality assurance mechanisms. EQAVET provides a robust foundation for process-oriented quality assurance, while the EQF ensures comparability of qualification levels. Ranking adds a comparative, outcomes-focused dimension that existing frameworks do not provide. The indicators selected for VET ranking should align with EQAVET principles and EQF descriptors, ensuring coherence across the European quality landscape.

Principle 2: VET-Specific Indicators

The indicators underpinning VET ranking must reflect vocational education's unique mission and stakeholders. Rather than research citations or academic reputation, a VET ranking framework should prioritise:

- **Employability outcomes:** Graduate employment rates, time to employment, and alignment between training and employment sector.
- **Industry collaboration:** Extent and quality of partnerships with employers, including apprenticeship provision and work-based learning opportunities.
- **Student and staff satisfaction:** Learner experience, support services, and educator working conditions.
- **Curriculum relevance:** Responsiveness to labour market needs, integration of green and digital skills, and engagement with emerging sectors.
- **Inclusivity and accessibility:** Support for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, accessibility provisions, and gender balance.
- **Internationalisation:** Participation in mobility programmes, international partnerships, and language provision.

Principle 3: Equity and Contextual Sensitivity

VET institutions operate in vastly different contexts rural and urban, well-resourced and under-funded, serving diverse learner populations. A credible ranking system must incorporate contextual adjustments that prevent systematic disadvantage for institutions facing structural constraints. Indicators should be designed to assess institutional effort and added value, not merely absolute outcomes that reflect pre-existing advantages. Rural schools serving remote communities and institutions supporting vulnerable populations must not be penalised for circumstances beyond their control.

Principle 4: Transparency and Methodological Rigour

The ranking methodology must be fully transparent, with clear documentation of indicator definitions, data sources, weighting decisions, and calculation procedures. Stakeholders should understand exactly how rankings are produced and what they represent. The methodology should undergo expert validation involving VET providers, policymakers, employers, and learners from across Europe. Regular review and refinement based on stakeholder feedback and emerging evidence should be institutionalised.

Principle 5: Developmental Orientation

Ranking should serve institutional improvement rather than mere classification. A well-designed framework will include self-assessment tools enabling institutions to evaluate their own performance, identify development priorities, and track progress over time. Recommendations reports and best practice guidance should accompany ranking results, providing actionable pathways for quality enhancement. The ultimate goal is not to create winners and losers but to foster a culture of continuous improvement across the European VET sector.

Principle 6: Voluntary Participation and Gradual Implementation

EVBB recommends that VET ranking be implemented on a voluntary basis, at least initially. Institutions should be encouraged not compelled to participate, allowing the system to demonstrate its value and build trust before broader adoption. Pilot testing with diverse institutions across multiple Member States should precede full rollout, ensuring the methodology works fairly across different national contexts.

Recommandations

The absence of a ranking system for VET institutions represents a structural gap in the European education landscape. While ranking is not a panacea, a carefully designed, VET-specific framework can enhance transparency, empower learner choice, drive quality improvement, and elevate the attractiveness of vocational pathways.

EVBB is actively advancing the VET ranking agenda through the VET Rank project, developed in partnership with leading VET providers, research institutions, and European networks from six EU Member States. This initiative aims to create the first comprehensive, evidence-based ranking system for VET institutions at EQF levels 3-6. The initiative will develop validated key performance indicators aligned with EQAVET and EQF, a transparent weighted scoring methodology accommodating institutional diversity, a digital self-assessment platform for benchmarking and continuous improvement, and policy recommendations for institutional and systemic quality enhancement. Extensive pilot testing with over fifty diverse VET institutions across Europe will ensure the methodology functions fairly across different national contexts, institutional sizes, and sectoral specialisations.

EVBB is committed to advancing this agenda in partnership with EU institutions, Member States, and the broader VET community. We call on all stakeholders to engage constructively with ranking development, ensuring that the resulting framework serves the interests of VET learners, institutions, employers, and European society.

The European VET sector deserves the same tools for demonstrating excellence that higher education has long enjoyed. Through collaborative effort and careful design, we can create a ranking system that respects VET's distinctive character while advancing its recognition as a prestigious, high-quality educational pathway.