

A European Approach to Quality in Vocational Education and Training

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Approach to the Evaluation of the Quality of Italian Vocational Training System

ISFOL

National ESF Evaluation Unit

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1. Introduction: the Origins of the Project

The aim of this project is to define an evaluation model for the quality of training systems on a regional level.

In Italy the VET system follow two different channels: 1) the educational one, with a 3 to 5 years programmes managed in the upper secondary level of education (classifying Isced 3C for 3-years programme and Isced 3A for 5-years programme)¹; 2) the vocational one, with flexible and targeted programmes of various duration (up to 3 years) managed by the 21 regional authorities and by local authorities (classifying Isced 3C and 4C)². The Italian, regional vocational training system, which is considered in this paper, is strongly aimed at employability goals.

The project has two basic starting points: the guidelines defined on a European level and the need to build a model that can measure and compare performances with a quality approach among the Italian regional authorities.

This model has been built for the Ministry of Welfare and the regional authorities in the frame of the European Social Fund programming. It as already been discussed and shared with the above mentioned actors and will be implemented now in the programmes mid-term evaluation.

Since this is a complex topic with a vast range of heterogeneous literature, we should first of all define the main analysis dimensions and thus the most suitable reading keys for describing and interpreting composite systems and closely interrelated phenomena.

An analytic path is thus proposed with the following steps:

- 1) an in-depth examination of the different approaches to the quality of training;
- 2) an outline of the regulatory and institutional context;
- 3) the identification of the areas of the evaluative analysis;
- 4) the specification of policy objectives³

Formattati: Elenchi puntati e numerati

2. The Definition of the Quality of Training: a Historical *Excursus*

Over the last decade, the approaches to training have greatly changed, and the following is a brief overview of some of their essential features.

At the beginning of the 90s, there was an attempt by a group of French researchers (Le Bortorf, Barzucchetti and Vincent, 1992) to apply the Total Quality Management

¹ OECD, *Classifying Educational Programmes. Manual for ISCED-97, Implementation in OECD Countries*, 1999 Edition.

² Ibidem

³ therefore we are not focusing on a project of specific policy level. This implies defining a set of indicators able to describe the different regional training systems and render them comparable.

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(TQM) theory to training processes. The key points of this approach are: i) customer oriented; ii) quality of the service; iii) control/management of process in terms of quality; iv) adoption of a multi-actor approach; and v) systematic use of measuring tools.

Echoes of this approach can be found in the Community debate on the quality of training, launched in the mid 90s. On 5 December 1994, a resolution of the Council of Europe raised the issue of the quality of vocational education and training. In 1996, CEDEFOP provided an abstract of seven brief national reports on quality from Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain, with various points of view on the concept of quality, and specifically:

- quality as an absolute value (excellence);
- quality aimed at the product;
- quality defined as client satisfaction;
- quality aimed at the process (conforming to specifications);
- quality aimed at optimising the quality/price ratio.

The debate was then broadened by Seyfried (1998) in terms of the evaluation of quality, which essentially corresponds to the evaluation of policies and programmes. According to Seyfried, there are three evaluation methodologies for training programmes: one is based on *consistency between objectives/results*, where a high degree of implementation of objectives is a synonym of quality; another, is based on the *process*, understood as certified procedures, within which quality corresponds to the achievement of a standard; finally, a third is based on the *context*.

The analysis of the evaluation reports for vocational training programmes of five European countries (CEDEFOP 1998b), demonstrates that no approaches consider contemporaneously the context, processes and results. However, independently of the type of approach and indicators chosen, the link between the quality of training and the rate of employment of the trained is considered a core issue. Albeit some schools of thought affirm that a high rate of job placement of the trained already constitutes an indicator of quality in itself⁴, we consider that the logical relationships between employment and training should also be examined. These do not necessarily figure as causal links on an individual level, but represent complex relations within a structured system of many variables.

In the present Community policy agenda, and in particular in the document launching the “*European Forum on the Quality of Vocational Training*” (May 2001), the concept of quality is associated with the effectiveness of training programmes. This implies the

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⁴ G. Brunello, S. Comi, C. Lucifora (1999), “Returns to Education in Italy: a Review of the Applied Literature”, in R. Asplund and P. Telhado Pereira (eds.), *Returns to Human Capital in Europe. A Literature Review*, ETLA, Helsinki.

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achievement of the following objectives, defined on a Community level and incorporated in Member States' programmes:

- employability of people (in particular those who have followed vocational training);
- a better match between training supply and demand;
- better access to training, in particular for the most vulnerable groups on the labour market⁵.

The European Council of Nice (2000) addressed the topic of the quality of labour and considered it to be the necessary link between competitiveness and cohesion. Skills and competence, whether basic or high, are fundamental for determining the quality of employment and the growth of productivity. There is a close relationship between the weakness or absence of qualifications and employment prospects, on one hand, and low wages and poverty on the other. Taken as a whole, the quality of training, the quality of employment, the quality of industrial relations and the quality of social policies constitute the essential factors for achieving the objective of full employment and competitiveness.

During these years, the topic of quality was also tackled in Europe in terms of standards (of quality) and certification of training bodies. The quality certification and training body accreditation systems adapted the model developed within the ISO 9000 framework (CEDEFOP 1997a) to the training system. According to W. Van den Bergh (1999), the ISO 9000 certification meets the following needs:

- general requirements of a quality system (responsibility of management, quality and procedures manual, appointment of a quality manager, availability of appropriate resources);
- need to preserve the documentation of procedures concerning key processes of the organisation;
- need to have specific quality control mechanisms.

In Italy, the regulations on the accreditation of training bodies (Ministerial decree n. 166 of 25 May 2001) are currently being implemented.

The quality of training has recently been extensively discussed within the framework of public services (E. Gori, G. Vittadini, 1999). In this context, the evaluation of quality basically coincides with the evaluation of result and impact. The quality of a relational good, such as a public service (for example, health), can only be evaluated ex-post with reference to medium-long term outcomes. However, quality in services also means conforming to a standard. It is applicable to one-off actions, to outputs (e.g. building a road), to production processes (e.g. the postal service) or to products (e.g. the taste of water). These standards have to be defined without losing sight of the results for users,

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⁵ *Employability, Matching and Access*, according to the Forum's approach, are spelt out in indicators of context, inputs, outputs and outcomes for specific user targets involving specific political goals.

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otherwise there is the risk – as happens in bureaucracy – of favouring formal controls to the detriment of substantial results (A. Bulgarelli, E. Gori, 2001).

Figure 1 summarises the different approaches to the evaluation developed in literature, associating each of them with most appropriate definition of quality and areas of application.

Figure 1 – Definitions of Quality by Typology of Approach to Training and Areas of Application

<i>Approach to training</i>	<i>Definition of quality</i>	<i>Areas of Application</i>
Training as a didactic activity	Quality means the optimisation of the teaching-learning process	Process and results achieved
Training as a service to the customer	Quality is measured in terms of client satisfaction	Product
Training as a public service	Quality is a function conforming to a standard	Process
Training as a corporate function	Quality signifies TQM	Product and process
Training as an economic activity	Control and enhancement both of results and structure/system	Product and process
Training as a policy	Quality is given by the degree to which the goals are met in relation to the resources assigned	Input, output, outcomes and impacts

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Private firms in the sector tend to favour an approach to the quality of training as a corporate function and thus apply TQM techniques. On the other hand, training providers are inclined to interpret quality as certification/accreditation, also because of recent regulations in this direction. Tools for controlling the degree of user satisfaction still seem only sporadically applied in Italy.

Within the European Community, training is starting to be viewed mostly as a policy and quality is understood in terms of the degree of achievement of the objectives, analysing the product, process and context. However, there is still no structured tool box nor significant experience for this methodology.

After a survey of the different approaches available, it was decided to use “active labour policy” as the key for interpreting the quality of training system. Pawson and Tilley (1998) provide interesting contributions to this methodology, studying the mechanisms through which, with a given input in a given context, a determinate result is obtained. For example, they claim that it is not enough to link the result to the inputs to judge a programme, one also has to study the mechanism through which outputs are obtained in that particular context. The two authors also offer a series of evaluative indications (diagrams) linked to specific contexts, attempting to pinpoint the mechanisms that have

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really “functioned” in determining that particular result. Seyfried (1998), following Pawson and Tilley’s logic, claims that the best way to evaluate the quality of training is to consider the outcomes (understood as corresponding to the expected objectives/results) together with the processes (understood as the modes in which the actors achieve their macro-objectives) and the context inside which these products and processes are implemented. Only in this way does the information produced by the specific indicators become significant because information acquires a positive or negative connotation according to the context in which it is produced.

This approach prevents those errors that can so easily be incurred when attempting to check the quality of the training. For example, the presence of agreements, among different partners at national and local level as well, define the existence of a strong partnership that can be considered an indicator of institutional quality (degree of local activation/enactment). But, there can also be contexts where, albeit there are no formal agreements, there is an equally strong network of relations among actors (training providers, administration, firms, etc.) involved for various reasons in the different phases of the training interventions (planning, implementation and evaluation).

3. The Regulatory and Institutional Context and the Evaluative Approach

To evaluate the quality of the training system one has to take into account the profound changes that have occurred in the regulatory and institutional frame of reference for vocational training in Italy. In particular:

- the identification of training as an active labour policy in national legislation;
- the strong innovative impulse of the new European Social Fund programming;
- the decentralization process that has gradually shifted the decision-making process to an increasingly structured local level;
- the increase in the “responsiveness” of regional and provincial administrations to the programming choices.

These transformations have prompted the working group to make choices that are an integral part of the evaluative approach undertaken and which will outline the methodological path:

- viewing vocational training as an active labour policy rather than a service, corporate function or teaching-learning process;
- adopting the approach defined by the *European Forum on the Quality of Vocational Training* (May 2001) where the quality of the system is understood as the capacity to produce effective results (outputs and outcomes) with regards to specific objectives and inputs. In other words, the tools through which the system operates in relation to the users’ needs. In this context the quality of the training supply also depends on the quality of the programming and implementation processes;

Formattati: Elenchi puntati e numerati

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- accepting Seyfried's thesis (1998, 2001), in line with the latest contributions in literature, of considering results, processes and contexts in a single evaluative pattern;
- choosing an analysis level that prefers systemic and summative aspects to individual analytical studies.

Hence:

- the evaluation of the quality of vocational training systems considers as *evaluand* those aspects and variables arising from an overall evaluation of efficiency, effectiveness and impact of policies;
- quality does not represent a specific object of the evaluation, but an analysis criteria and the result of an evaluative judgement⁶;
- this evaluative approach intends to compare the different regional situations to discover the different qualitative levels of the performances, in relation to contexts and structured policy strategies;
- given the systemic nature of this evaluative research, elements crucial for quality, such as the accreditation of training bodies and users' satisfaction, will be considered in the approach, using indicators of the dissemination and quality of this type of practice.

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4. The Areas of the Evaluative Analysis

The vocational training system is essentially underpinned by two sub-systems. The first, the supply system, is that of the programming and financing bodies (public administration on a central and peripheral level, regional authorities) and training providers (firms, non-profit associations, social and economic partners joint bodies, public bodies, training providers, etc.). The second, the demand system, is made up of users (potential, intercepted, reached) and the economic system, with particular reference to businesses and public administration.

If we approach vocational training as a policy then we have to look at the two sub-systems in a different way. The supply, understood in terms of training providers and types of action, represents a key point in the analysis. The demand system will be examined indirectly, not only in terms of the context in which the policies are defined and implemented but also in terms of the impact of the actions undertaken.

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With reference to Pawson and Tilley's *Realistic Evaluation* approach, applied to regional vocational training systems, and to Seyfried's contributions we have summarised in Figure 2 all the areas connected to the evaluation of the quality of training. These areas correspond to the dimensions of the quality that has to be evaluated.

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⁶ ISFOL - Struttura nazionale di valutazione FSE (2001c).

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The first column contains the main actors of the system: the regional authorities and the training provider. In this approach, the beneficiaries of the interventions are not analysed, albeit active players (just think of the increasing importance given to “customer satisfaction” when measuring the quality of social care services). In this direction they are considered as elements of the context inside which the processes are implemented and as part of the products achieved in terms of outputs (e.g. number of people trained) and outcomes (e.g. gross rate of job placement). The national and international institutional actors are also part of the process, as responsible for the inputs in the system when defining policy lines, although in this approach they are considered as external to our area of analysis.

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The second column visualises the different phases of the policy definition process. Starting with the inputs defined on a European and national level, the managing authority defines its own programming tools and reinterprets the guidelines in the light of the context. This strategic programming is followed by operational planning that translates the guidelines into term of reference. During the implementation, regional authority and training providers interact to define the profile of the training supply. Finally, the evaluation spells out the output, results and impact of the actions undertaken, as well as the user satisfaction. The reading of this pathway is shown in area [A] of the figure and leads to the *Process Evaluation*.

The last column shows the main “phase products” obtained from the policy process described in the previous column. European and national objectives are indicated in italics since they represent an external, albeit crucial element, to the system under examination. The product of the strategic programming phase is represented by the different documents defined on a regional level whereas the term of reference and directives are the outcome of the plans. The implementation of the training plans, their breakdown into types of actions and beneficiaries, as well as the distribution of the training supply over the local area, should represent the concrete interpretation of the objectives indicated by the European and national (and later regional) institutional bodies. The outcomes of these actions will then be expressed in terms of results and impacts. The reading of the different “phase products” represents the second evaluation level, indicated in the figure under [B]: the *Evaluation of the “Phase Products”*.

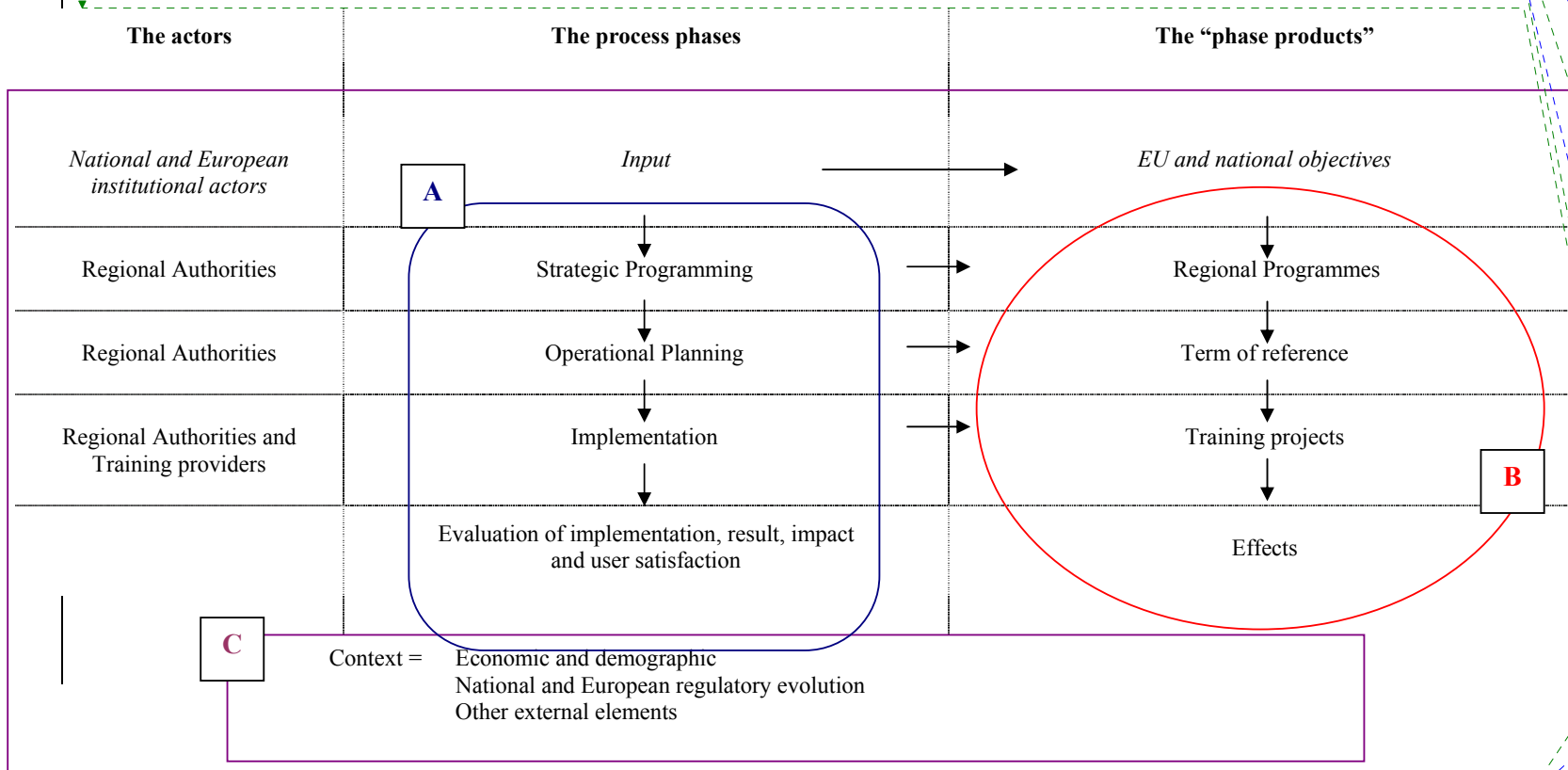
The third analysis area indicated in the figure under [C] concerns the *Identification of the Context*. This is the definition of the elements characterising the reference context, understood not only in terms of local economic-demographic variables, but also in terms of evolution of national and European regulations (e.g. the Italian debate underway on the reform of schools and the implementation of university reform). Any other external elements that could in some way influence the definition and implementation of the policy can be listed under these context elements.

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Figure 2 – Italian Regional Vocational Training System and the Areas of Evaluation



A = Process Evaluation

B = “Product” Evaluation

C = Context Identification

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5. The Objectives of Vocational Training Policies

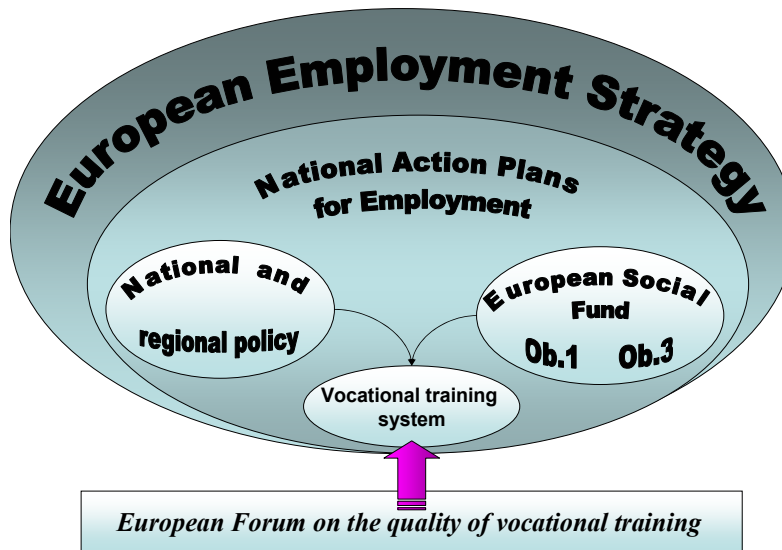
5.1 Policy Levels

The aims and strategies of vocational training (as an active labour policy) are defined by bodies that operate on several levels: European, national and local. Each of them pursues specific goals that do not necessarily coincide. Partnerships have fostered a convergence towards common objectives, with good results in the integration of policies and the definition of common intervention priorities. The definition of objectives is naturally prompted by social needs and demands (such as youth unemployment, or the development of equal opportunities or continuing training). However it is also based on specific political choices which might have general aims in common but have different ways of achieving them. In addition, there is the “box” inside which vocational training is financed (structural fund, national fund, etc.) which, in turn, follows its own logic of programming, implementation and evaluation.

It is not easy to describe the vocational training system in Italy since it is not really “a system” but a series of regional-specific programmes and interventions. Nonetheless, for the reasons given above, this work needs specific choices to outline the field of observation on which to design an evaluation model. Two observations must be made here: firstly, the links (direct and indirect) between vocational training as an active policy tool and reference policies (see Figure 3) must be defined and, secondly, the global objectives that each of these latter pursues have to be listed.

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Figure 3 – Italian Regional Vocational Training System and Active Labour Policies: the Different Policy Levels



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5.2 The Structure of European and National Strategies

The decision of the European Council of Amsterdam in June 1997 to make the provisions on employment immediately operative and the subsequent Luxembourg Summit in 20-21 November 1997 launched the European Employment Strategy (see [box 1](#)). In the same year (15 December 1997), the European Union adopted the first guidelines for employment.

The strategy marked a central move in the process for converging national policies, initiating a close coordination between Member States on the subject of employment. This coordination was underpinned by common guidelines - the “employment guidelines” - directly based on the experience acquired with the evaluation of economic policies. It implied, for both employment and economic policies (respecting the differences between the two sectors and between the situations of Member States), the will to converge towards common objectives that could be periodically checked and updated. This constituted the new element of a global strategy that involved:

- firstly, developing a coordinated macroeconomic policy, based on a competitive European market, to create the foundations for lasting growth, a new dynamism and a climate of confidence for relaunching employment;
- secondly, the mobilisation (now more systematic and determined) of all the European Community policies for employment. All these policies, including the training ones, have to be implemented in conformity with the principles of the Treaty and have to help free the potential of dynamism and initiatives in the European economy.

Formattati: Elenchi puntati e numerati

Box 1 – European Employment Strategy

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The strategy consists of defining, on an EU level, "**employment guidelines**" based on a common analysis of the situation and on the agreement to foster common policy priorities to increase employment. The guidelines fix concrete targets, whose achievement is constantly monitored by a common procedure for evaluating the results. The implementation of the guidelines can vary in function of their nature and their effects on the Member States and recipients. They have to respect the principle of subsidiarity and be compatible with general economic policy lines. Once adopted by the Council, the guidelines are developed in **National Action Plans for Employment** (NAP) by Member States in a multi-annual perspective. Thus the guidelines are implemented under the form of quantified national objectives, to be translated into national measures. The different situations in the Member States on the issues covered by the guidelines will mean country-specific solutions. The Member States fix the terms within which to achieve the desired results.

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The European Employment Strategy for 1998 outlines a common structure for the National Action Plans (NAP) for employment⁷, based on four pillars:

- employability (pillar I);
- entrepreneurship (pillar II);
- adaptability (pillar III);
- equal opportunities (pillar IV).

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In accordance with the principle of coordination ratified by the European Employment Strategy, all the employment and economic policies, and thus also the co-financed ones, follow the same guidelines. The European Social Fund, in particular, supports and completes the Member States' activities in the context of the National Action Plans for Employment. For the aims of our work, the following seemed to be particularly important: the commitment towards an active employment policy; the acknowledged need to have a more accentuated local dimension for labour strategies; the need to develop, modernise and adapt public employment services; the importance given to training and the enhancement of competences; the invitation for a greater involvement of social partners.

Vocational training is a central tool for pursuing all the guidelines of the European Employment Strategies. In this context it is increasingly structured forms and contents, integrating with other active labour policy tools and triggering innovative pathways.

5.3 The Establishment of the European Forum on the Quality of Vocational Training

The improvement of training is a key topic in the European framework. Proof of this is the Forum on the Quality of Vocational Training, launched in May 2001 by CEDEFOP and the European Commission. In line with the European Employment Strategy, the Forum has further specified the objectives that the vocational training system (initial and continuing) pursues and it is currently engaged in setting up indicators for the evaluation of the quality of training with a working subgroup.

As mention above, the Forum has identified as elements of the quality of vocational training:

- *employability of people* (in particular those who have followed vocational training);
- *a better match between training supply and demand*;
- *better access to training*.

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⁷The structure and contents of the NAPs have gradually changed over the years, as does any long-running process, in the light of the experience gained and alterations to the labour market in the individual EU countries. These changes are highlighted in the conclusions of the European Council summits of Helsinki (10-11 December 1999), Lisbon (20-24 March 2000) and Santa Maria da Feira (19-20 June 2000).

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The vocational training component is also emphasised here, understood as active employment policy.

Therefore, on the basis of the strategic objectives identified by the European Forum of the QVT and of the national aims established on the various institutional levels (community, national and local), the policy goals on which to base a model for evaluating the quality are the following:

- equality
- employability
- adaptability/competitiveness.

Formattati: Elenchi puntati e numerati

The *equality* objective includes actions addressed to weaker groups (disabled, socially excluded, immigrants, long-term unemployed, uneducated, etc.) and those aimed at equal opportunities. Life long learning falls within this objective⁸.

The *employability* objective is pursued by all those training interventions addressed to young people seeking their first job and to the unemployed young and adults according to a preventative or curative strategy.

The continuing training actions addressed to the employed and, indirectly, to firms pursue the objective of *adaptability* and/or *competitiveness*. They are aimed at improving vocational skills and competences or adapting them in the wake of the rapid rate of organisational and technological obsolescence.

6. The Methodological Design and the Next Steps

The evaluative design proposed is strongly conditioned by the considerations made in the first part of this paper.

The first step of the methodological approach is the breakdown of the evaluation areas and then to map out the dimensions and indicators determining the quality of a regional training system.

Figure 4 provides a graphic representation of the main dimensions of quality within the framework of the methodological path described. The diagram in the figure pinpoints three macro-areas:

- **The policy process:** from the strategic programming phase to operational planning; from implementation to evaluation. We consider it appropriate to extend the analysis of the process up to the evaluation activity since we believe that this activity and its feed-back on the policy process is a key element of the quality of a

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⁸ OECD (2001a).

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training system. The analysis of the strategic programming and operational planning will take into account the respective “phase products”: the programming documents, terms of references issued by the regional authorities.

- **The training supply**, understood both in terms of actors (regional authorities and training providers) and in terms on training projects.
- Finally, for analysing the quality of a training system, a crucial role is played by the **outputs, results and impacts**.

In Figure 5 we show an initial hypothesis for the breakdown of the quality dimensions. The case is of that an operational planning split first into sub-dimensions and then into single factors. In this example we have pinpointed three sub-dimensions of the quality in turn broken down into more detailed factors:

- Concertation process (among different stakeholders);
- synergies between European co-funded and national/regional policies;
- the integration between vocational training, labour and educational system.

Once the analysis areas have been pinpointed and broken down into subsets and quality factors, the actual indicators are defined. Indicators will be based on quantitative and qualitative variables. It is the intention of the working group to favour as much as possible indicators extracted from administrative information sources in particular those related to ESF monitoring data-base.

Indicators are not enough. A weighting system is needed to take into account the different strategic importance of these indicators. Moreover, to be able to compare data from different regions, it will be necessary to study further the context elements that influence the definition of the policies and their implementation and functioning of the different regional training systems, as highlighted in [C] of Figure 2.

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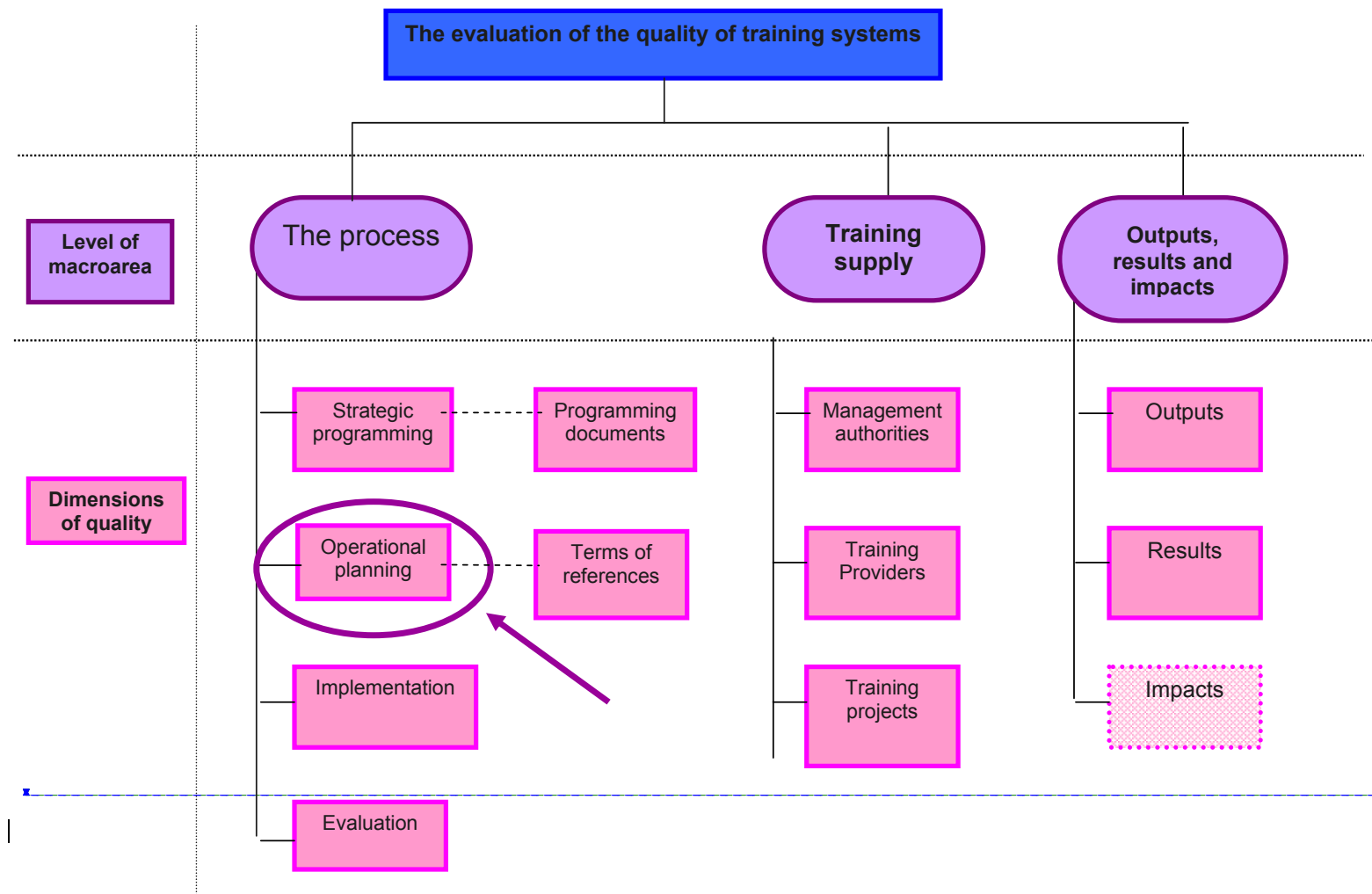
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Figure 4 – The Dimensions of Quality

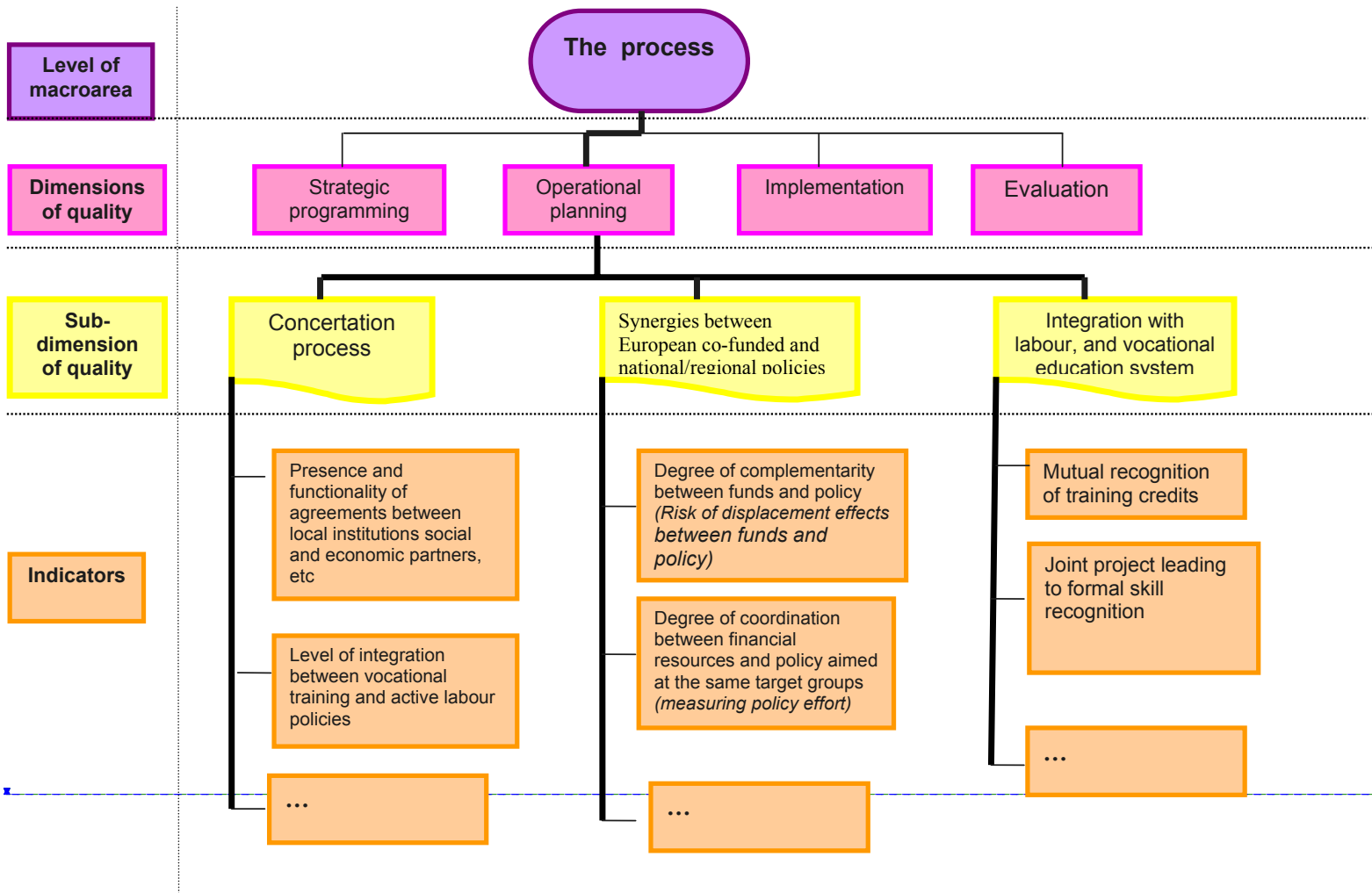


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Figure 5 – Indicators of Quality with Reference to Operational Planning



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Prospetto 3 - Macro-obiettivi delle politiche formative e tipologie di azione

	Equità	Occupabilità		
		In cerca di 1 [^] occupazione	In cerca di nuova occupazione	Occupati
Work experience		X		
Apprendistato		X		
Formazione all'interno dell'obbligo scolastico	X			
Formazione all'interno dell'obbligo formativo	X	X		
Formazione superiore		X		
IFTS		X		
Formazione rivolta ai disoccupati	X		X	
Contratti di formazione-lavoro		X		
Alta formazione nei cicli universitari e post universitario		X		
Formazione continua PA				X
Formazione continua aziende				X
Formazione continua imprenditori				X
Formazione formatori				X
Formazione rivolta alle fasce deboli	X	X	X	
Formazione rivolta agli adulti	X			X

nell'ambito della formazione permanente				
Formazione per la creazione d'impresa e il lavoro autonomo		X	X	
Vaucher formativo	X	X		X