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Article

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PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT OF THE TRAINING SERVICE PROVIDERS IN ROMANIA RELATED TO THE CRITERIA OF THE COMMON QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

The paper presents the results of a questionnaire based survey, conducted at the level of training service providers in Romania, which are more and more interested to implement internationally recognized management system models. The objective of the research was to assess the degree of fulfilment by these organizations of the criteria defined by the Common Quality Assurance Framework CQAF, which was developed by the European Forum for Education and Training Quality. Taking into consideration the obtained results, the authors have established there is a correlation between the degree of fulfilment of the criteria regarding planning (leadership, objectives and values, strategies and planning, partnership and resources) and the degree of fulfilment of the criteria regarding the results obtained by these organizations in relation with the client and stakeholder needs fulfilment, personnel requirements fulfilment and the ones related to the profitability of the organization.

Keywords: quality assurance, training services, performance, quality management system, training

JEL Classification: M10, M13

Introduction

Recently, there has been an increased interest to promote quality in the vocational education and training (VET) systems and a lot of attention has been given to its role in increasing competitiveness and social inclusion¹. It is appreciated that the improvement of vocational education and training represents a key element in the transition to a knowledge

based society and economy (Farschou, K., 2002, Pupius, M., 2003, Olaru, M. and Cherciu, O., 2006).

Due to these reasons, numerous legal initiatives have been promoted in the development of the European Union policy in the field of vocational education and training quality. Out of these initiatives the most important one is the definition of a Common Quality Assurance Framework (CQAF)² for training services. This framework proposes a set of criteria to facilitate the evaluation and performance improvement process of the training service providers (Olaru, M. et al., 2006, Cherciu, O., 2006).

On the other side, in the EU countries, Romania included, the training service providers are more and more interested in implementing internationally recognized quality management systems, amongst which is the International standard ISO 9001 and the EFQM model for Excellence (Zuniga, F., 2004, Olaru, M. et al, 2007, Stoleriu, G. et al, 2008).

Under these circumstances, the authors had as objective to determine in what measure the training service providers in Romania fulfil the criteria of CQAF and if there is a correlation between the degree of fulfilment of the criteria regarding planning (leadership, objectives and values, strategies and planning, partnership and resources) and the degree of fulfilment of the criteria regarding the results obtained by these organizations in relation with the client and stakeholder needs fulfilment, personnel requirements fulfilment and the ones related to the profitability of the organization.

1. Criteria defined by the Common Quality Assurance Framework for vocational education and training

CQAF has been developed by the European Forum for vocational education and training with the purpose to increase transparency and to harmonize approaches in this field with other actions and European policy initiatives to assure quality, nevertheless respecting the European Union member states responsibility as well as the training service providers' responsibility to develop their own quality assurance systems.

This model³ is based on two of the quality management systems that are currently applied at an international level, that is the international standard ISO 9001 and the EFQM Excellence model (Olaru, M. și Cherciu, O., 2007, Olaru, M. et al., 2008).

CQAF defines a reduced number of common European criteria regarding quality assurance in vocational education and training. It can be used both at the level of national training quality assurance as well as at the level of training service providers.

CQAF includes: *a model* that defines the basic criteria to assess quality assurance systems of the training service providers; *a methodology* to assess and analyze the quality assurance system that highlights evaluation and external monitoring; *a monitoring system*, at a national level; *measurement instruments* that represent a reference set of indicators to evaluate quality assurance systems at a national level.

The basic criteria defined by CQAF to evaluate quality assurance systems of the training service providers refer to the activities of planning, implementation, assessments and results analysis (figure 1).



Figure 1 Basic criteria of the quality assurance model defined by CQAF

Source: *An European Guide on Self-assessment for VET providers*, CEDEFOP, Oct. 2003, pg. 9

2. Research methodology

In order to reach the research objectives a questionnaire based research was done on the training service providers between 2005 and 2007.

The following formula was used to determine the minimum sample size:

$$n = \frac{t^2 \cdot p \cdot (1 - p)}{\Delta^2_{\omega}} \quad (1)$$

where:

n = the size of the minimum sample;

t = confidence level representing the probability that guarantees the results (from statistical tables of the Student distribution);

p = proportion of sample size that has the research characteristic (when p is not known it is considered to be 0.5 – corresponding to the maximum dispersion);

$\Delta\omega$ = limit accepted error.

Taking into consideration the relative size of the training service providers in Romania which are accredited by the National Training Council – CNFPA (735 organizations) in the formula, the acceptable error limit was chosen to be 9.5%.

To determine the minimum sample size the coefficients from the above mentioned formula have the following values:

$t = 2$ (corresponding to a probability of 0.95)

$p = 0.5$ (corresponding to a maximum value of the dispersion)

$\Delta\omega = 0.095$ (error limit).

By introducing the values for t , p and $\Delta\omega$ in formula (1) the minimum sample size was obtained:

$$n = \frac{2^2 \cdot 0.5 \cdot (1 - 0.5)}{0.095^2} = 111 \text{ companies}$$

We have distributed 385 questionnaires to training service providers that are accredited or have an ISO certified quality management system. Out of these questionnaires, 197 were filled and returned.

In table 1, the distribution of the received questionnaires is presented, grouped on the type of organization and personnel number respectively.

The distribution of questionnaires on types of questioned organizations

Table 1

Item	Type of organization/ Number of employees	Number of filled questionnaires	Weight (%)
1	Microcompanies 1-5 employees	27	13,7
2	Small sized companies 6-20 employees	61	31,0
3	Small sized companies 21-49 employees	41	20,8
4	Middle sized companies 50-249 employees	54	27,4
5	Large companies Over 250 employees	14	7,1
	<i>Total questioned companies</i>	197	100%

The questionnaire was structured on the following sections:

- General information about the organization: company identification (name, activity field, number of employees); types of training programs delivered; implementing and certification of the quality management system (types of implemented standards and quality management models, the accreditation of the bodies that have ensured the certification; the accreditation of the training programs; interests related to training services quality assurance);
- The degree of fulfilment of the criteria of the CQAF model related to planning: leadership, objectives and values, strategy and planning;

- The degree of fulfilment of the criteria of the CQAF model related to implementation: management of the trainers and other types of personnel, process management;
- The degree of fulfilment of the criteria of the CQAF model related to assessment and monitoring: training results, employee related results, society and work market related results, financial results;
- The degree of fulfilment of the criteria of the CQAF model related to analysis (feedback and change mechanism): planning and implementation of improvement actions, external assessment.

In order to evaluate the answers a five level scale of appreciation (from 0 to 5) was used and the following coding qualifications were given: ≤ 0.75 – not at all, $0.75 \div 1.75$ – insufficient; $1.75 \div 3$ – in a small degree; $3 \div 4.25$ – in a large degree, ≥ 4.25 – totally. The data processing from the questionnaire was done using the software Excel 2000.

3 Research results

We present in this paper the results of data processing related to the fulfilment of the criteria of the CQAF model in relation with planning and results assessment and monitoring obtained for the questioned organizations.

3.1 The degree of fulfilment of criteria related to planning

Through the research we have observed the fulfilment degree of the following criteria defined by the CQAF related to planning: leadership, objectives and values, strategy and planning;

a) Leadership

The requirements related to “leadership” allow the evaluation of the degree in which, through its behaviour and actions, the management succeeds to take part in all the activities of the company, by developing mutually advantageous partnerships with clients and other stakeholders (Olaru, M. and Stoleriu, G., 2008).

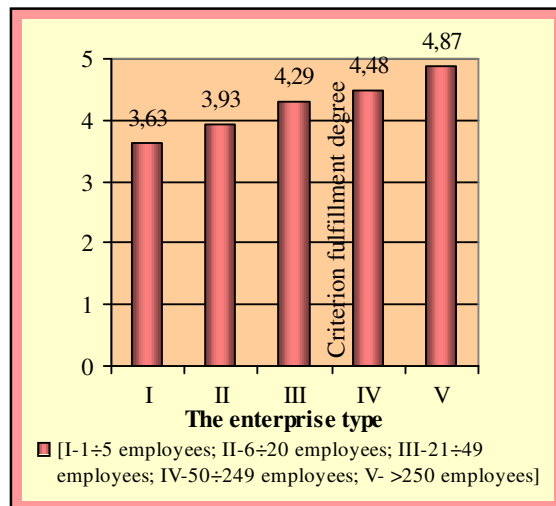


Figure 2 The degree of fulfilment of the “leadership” criterion by the questioned training service providers

According to the research, micro-companies appreciate that the degree of fulfilment of the criteria related to leadership is low, compared to medium and large sized companies, which consider that they fulfil these requirements “totally” (the indicator 3.63 has the lowest value, as it results from figure 2).

Related to this criterion, the questioned organizations have mentioned the following strong points: the availability of management for change, innovation, institutional modernization, flexible

management style, capable employee promotion. In their opinion, the leadership improvement can be done through reorganization, empowerment, and involvement of all the employees in problem solving.

b) Objectives and values

The unfolding of the activities in the training service provider companies should follow the accomplishment of quantifiable objectives, with a highlight on the knowledge and skills acquired by the trainees as a result of their participation to the training sessions. In order to establish the objectives, the values of the organization should be taken into consideration, such as leadership through example, flexibility and openness to change (Cherciu, O., 2006).

This criterion is “totally” fulfilled by the large and medium sized organizations (figure 3).

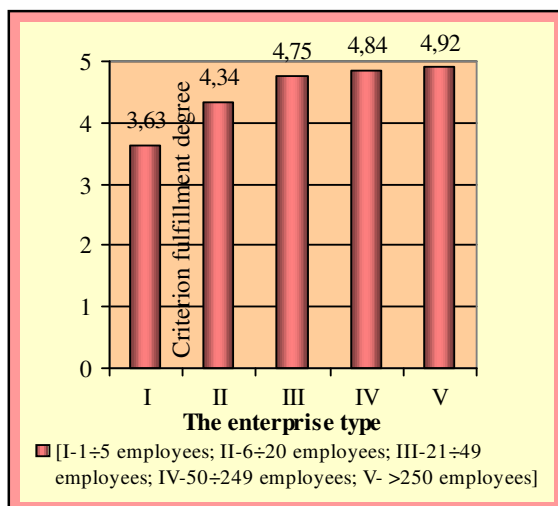


Figure 3. The degree of fulfilment of the “objectives and values” criterion by the questioned training service providers

In the case of the small sized organizations, the criterion is fulfilled in a small degree. Although in the case of these companies, the managers are the ones that promote the values in the organization, they do not set objectives and they do not systematically follow their accomplishment.

In order to improve the degree of fulfilment of this criterion, the main suggestion of the questioned organizations refers to the implementation of quality management system that could ensure the traceability in results accomplishment related to the established objectives.

c) Strategy and planning

In the case of this criterion we have observed the way in which the organization obtains information related to clients, stakeholders, competition, employees, work market and uses them to draft strategic plans, in the training programs, as well as in activities related to the training process (establishing the participation requirements, definition of the curriculum).

Regarding the evaluation of the degree of fulfilment of this criterion, we can observe that for all the categories of questioned organizations, this indicator is close to the degree of fulfilment of the criteria for “leadership” and “objectives and values” (figure 4).

The questioned organizations have mentioned the following strong points related to this criterion: draft of the annual plans based on the national training plan, the fulfilment of the legislation framework related to the training programs, orientation towards work force employment. Among the mentioned improvement suggestions the following were included:

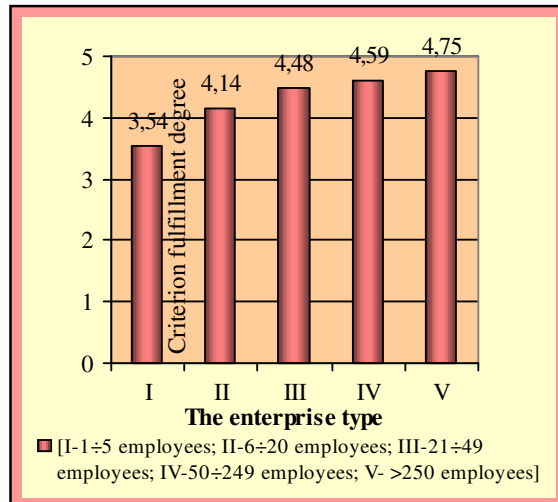


Figure 4 The degree of fulfilment of the “strategy and planning” criterion by the questioned training service providers

organizations fulfil it “in a large degree” (figure 5).

As a result of the research we can state that companies

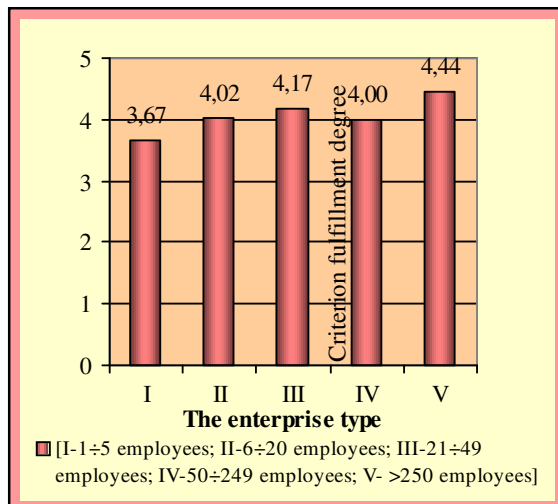


Figure 5 The degree of fulfilment of the “partnerships” criterion by the questioned training service providers

systematic assessment of the needs and expectations of the clients, knowledge of the business environment, continuous improvement of own personnel, increase of the accreditation field for jobs that are demanded on the work market.

d) Partnerships

This criterion refers to the way in which the organization manages strategic partnerships, based on the requirements of the stakeholders and on the risk analysis based on the weak points of the organization.

The large sized questioned organizations fulfil the criterion totally (the value of the indicator determined was higher than 4.25), and the other categories of

have developed partnerships with the local public administration, with mass-media and other local factors, and with the companies that are consistently interested to improve the skills of their personnel. The adequate communication strategy with the aforementioned partners was mentioned as a key success factor. The improvement suggestions of the questioned organizations relate to: identification and establishment of partnership for continuous promotion of the training activities, the improved access to national training programs and the development of a national wide infrastructure, which would facilitate the cooperation between the training service providers.

e) Financial and other type of resources

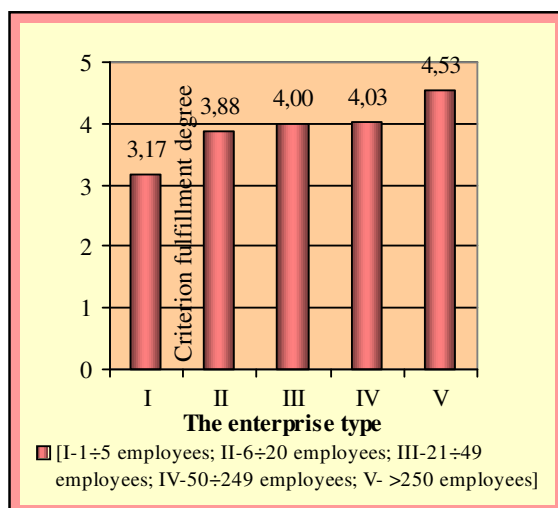


Figure 6 The degree of fulfilment of the “financial resources and other resources” criterion by the questioned training service providers

In the case of this criterion we have analyzed the management of resources (financial, material, informational and knowledge related, necessary resources to introduce new technologies etc). In figure 6 the degree of fulfilment of this criterion by the questioned organization is presented.

It is ascertained that micro-companies fulfil this criterion in a small degree (3.17), compared to small and large sized companies, that fulfil it in a “large degree”, while the large organizations fulfil the criterion “totally” (the value of the determined indicator being the largest – 4.53).

The small sized questioned companies are preoccupied to improve their infrastructure in order to carry on activities specific to training and to obtain financing from European funds.

3.2 The degree of fulfilment of the criteria related to results assessment and monitoring

According to the CQAF model, the results assessment and monitoring of the training service providers is done taking into consideration the following criteria: results related to the quality of the training programs, results related to the employees of the company, results related to society and to the work market, financial results of the company.

a) Results related to the quality of the training programs

In the case of this criterion the indicators related to the degree of satisfaction of the trainees are taken into consideration and the degree of fulfilment of the requirements of the trainees, the skills acquired compared to the initially established objectives are analyzed.

According to the research, the large sized questioned organizations fulfil this criterion “totally”, the other organizations fulfil it “in a large degree”, with the determined indicator being between 3 and 4.25 (figure 7).

The questioned organizations have stated as strong points related to the held trainings: the improvement of the satisfaction of the trainees, the increase of the number of trainees, the improvement of the results obtained at the final assessment of the trainees, the development of new specialization programs. Among the suggestions for improvement we mention: the diversification of the continuous training programs offers, the need to accredit the training activities for adults, the improvement of the train the trainer system.

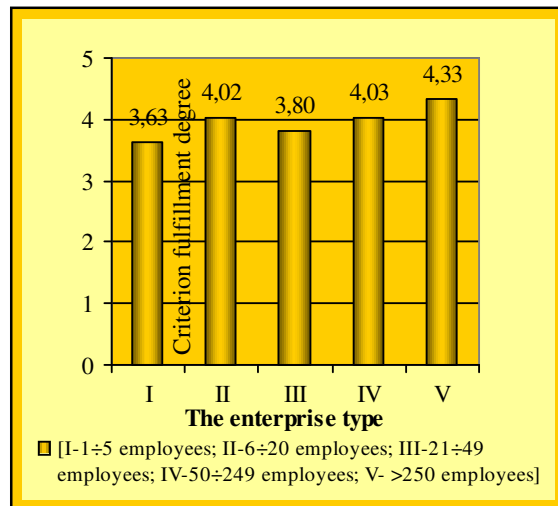


Figure 7 The degree of fulfilment of the “training results” criterion by the questioned training service providers

and small companies have appreciated that they fulfil the requirements related to this criterion “in a large degree” (fig.8), while the small and large sized consider that they fulfil it “totally” (the value of the determined indicator being 4.75 and 4.33 respectively).

Related to this criterion, the questioned organizations have stated the following strong points: personnel results monitoring, continuous train of trainers, and systematic assessment of personnel performance. In the same time these organizations consider that improvements should be made in what regards: customer relationship management and skill diversification of the trainers.

c) Results related to society and work market

The external environment plays a determinant role in the establishment of objectives and strategies of training service

b) Results related to the personnel of the training service providers

The assessment of the fulfilment degree of this criterion was done taking into consideration the perception of employees related to: work environment, career development possibilities, communication, activity evaluation, decision making involvement, continuous training programs etc. Also, the following indicators related to personnel were determined, the rate of success of the training programs and objectives accomplishment, the rapport between the necessary skills and the real skills of the personnel.

The questioned micro-companies

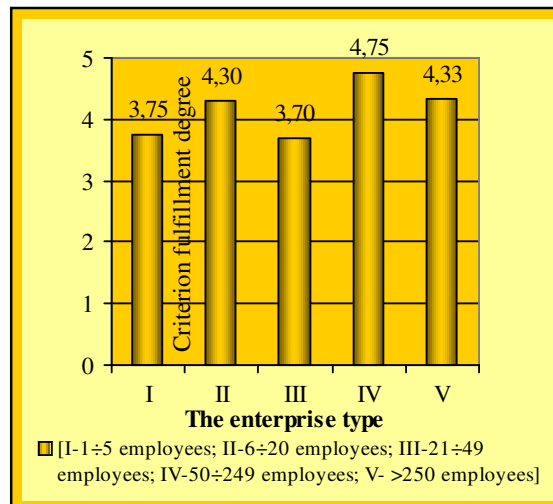


Figure 8 The degree of fulfilment of the “personnel related results” criterion by the questioned training service providers

providers related to their offering of continuous education programs, client segment definition, and partnership establishment. Among the criteria formulated by the European

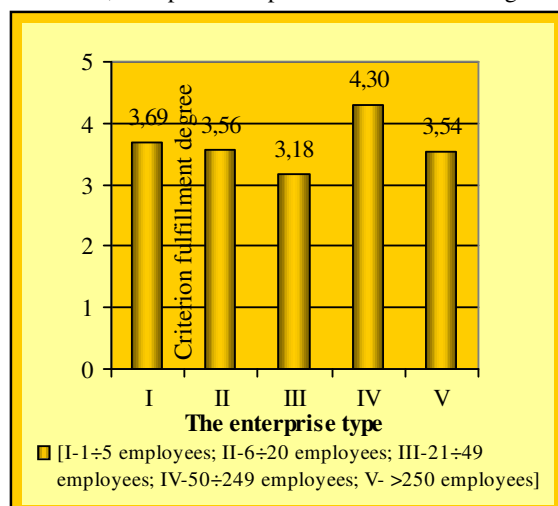


Figure 9 The degree of fulfilment of the “Results related to society and work market” criterion by the questioned training service providers

model CQAF related to this criterion we can mention: the correlation of the training offering with the work market demand, contribution to work force employing, active involvement of the organization in the life of the community, concerns related to environment protection.

The small and large sized companies’ fulfil in a “large degree” this criterion, the determined indicator is situated between 3.00 and 4.25 (figure 9) and the middle sized organizations consider that they “totally” fulfil this criterion (the determined indicator is 4.3).

The questioned organizations have indicated the following strong points related to this criterion: good results related to

the valorisation of the skills acquired on the work market, the decrease in the unemployment rate at a local level as a result of the training programs for the unemployed, the cooperation with the local authorities regarding work force employment. On the other side, these organizations have indicated the following areas that need improvement: the improvement of the communication with socially underprivileged persons, the correlation of the training programs with the employment possibilities on the work market of the persons targeted by these programs.

d) Financial results

In order to assess the degree of fulfilment of this criterion, according to the European model CQAF the following are considered: the capacity of the

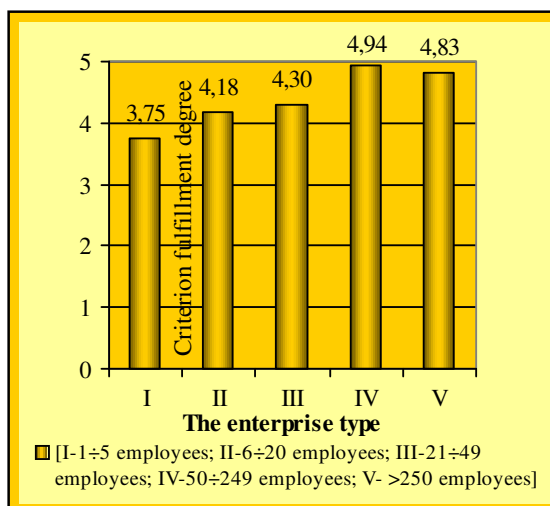


Figure 10 The degree of fulfilment of the “financial results” criterion by the questioned training service providers

organization to satisfy and equilibrate the financial interests of the stakeholders, the fulfilment of the established financial objectives as well as the economic-financial indicators of the company (turnover, profit etc), income generated from the main activity and the ones obtained from other sources.

According to the results of the research, the questioned organizations fulfil “totally” the requirements related to this criterion, the determined indicator having values higher than 4.25, except for micro-companies that state that they fulfil it “in a large measure” (figure 10).

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the results of the questionnaire based survey, at the level of the training service providers in Romania, for the evaluation of the degree of fulfilment of the model CQAF criteria; we can state that there are differences between the categories of questioned organizations (micro-companies, small, medium and large sized companies).

Therefore, the weakest results regarding the degree of fulfilment of the aforementioned criteria have been found in the case of the micro-companies. On the contrary, the medium and large size training service providers consider that they fulfil “totally” or “in a large degree” the mentioned criteria.

In the case of the criteria related to the results assessment and monitoring (related to satisfying the needs of the clients, of the personnel, of the work market, of the financial results respectively), the micro companies and small companies fulfil the criteria in a “small degree”.

As a result, we have confirmed the fact that there is a correlation between the degree of fulfilment by the training service providers in Romania of the criteria regarding the obtained results and the degree of fulfilment of the criteria related to planning, defined by the European model CQAF.

A series of improvements of the degree of fulfilment of the considered criteria have been identified, among which we can mention: the involvement of the whole personnel in problem solving, the implementation of a quality management system to develop the capacity to ensure the traceability in results evaluation related to the established objectives; monitoring and systematic assessment of the clients’ needs and expectation, the knowledge of the business environment, the continuous improvement of their own personnel, the expansion of the accreditation area for the jobs required on the work market, the development of the capacity to have access to the European funds to finance training.

In order to accomplish these improvements it is necessary to develop an organizational culture oriented towards quality, having as purpose to obtain long term advantages, for the clients, for the personnel of these organizations and for the whole society, according to the requirements of the criteria of the European model CQAF.

¹Europe Council Resolution 2000/C 8/04, *Into the new millennium: developing new working procedures for European cooperation in the field of education and training*, Brussels, 1999

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