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GO INTERNATIONAL

A practical guide on strategic internationalisation in Vocational Education and Training

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Foreword

As outlined by the European Commission[1], globalisation has helped lift hundreds of millions of people out of poverty and enabled poorer countries around the world to catch up. For the EU, global trade has greatly boosted EU economic growth and cheaper imports have benefitted both industry and citizens.

But, while the European Union and its Member States have greatly benefitted from international cooperation and globalisation, these benefits are not automatic, nor are they evenly distributed. Globalisation can be beneficial when properly harnessed, and when the outlook and skill sets of our societies, working life and citizens are in line with the developments globally.

In their role as supporters of European and global cooperation, the European Commission and the Erasmus+ National Agencies want to support training providers within the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector to invest in improving the quality of their international activities and the skill sets of both teachers, trainers and students in VET.

This guide will provide practical guidance and advice for the strategic planning of international cooperation to VET training providers. It caters to both small and large institutions, to countries and to VET systems at different stages of internationalisation. It builds first and foremost on EU cooperation, but also takes global aspects into account.

This European version of the guide is based on a previous version from 2010, produced by the Finnish National Board of Education and the Centre for International Mobility (CIMO)[2]. It has been re-worked, with the permission of the publishers, for the purposes of European cooperation and the Erasmus+ programme, including the Erasmus+ VET Mobility Charter. The work has been carried out by the Finnish Erasmus+ National Agency[3] and supported by a team comprised of representatives from the Danish, Dutch, Hungarian and German Erasmus+ National Agencies in VET. The Erasmus+ National Agency VET Mobility Working Group, established by the European Commission, and European Commission officials have also given their input in the process.

[1] *Reflection paper on harnessing globalisation*, May 2017.
[2] *Strength from International Cooperation*, 2014.
[3] *Under the coordination of Mika Saarinen.*

1. The aim and purpose of this guide

The aim of this guide is to assist in the strategic planning of international activities in VET and to help in defining the role internationalisation plays in the development of vocational education and training, VET qualifications and VET systems. It is meant for principals and managers as well as teachers and trainers of VET providers and institutions, and any other parties involved in European and international cooperation in the VET sector.

Many of the VET providers in Europe are aware of the importance of internationalisation and have developed approaches to incorporate international activities into their training and organisations. However, executing European and international projects is not enough to fully capitalise on the entire potential of international activities. Having a clear and well anchored strategy on internationalisation will support and give direction to international activities, and ultimately have impact on and added value for the whole organisation, its students, the employees, the surrounding region and the world of work.

> *"The impact and benefits of international cooperation in education [are] clearly higher if you have a strategy for the activities. However it definitely requires support from the senior management and a sense of ownership within the organisation."* – Danish VET provider

But in practice, developing such a strategy has, for many institutions, still turned out to be a challenge. And to fully embed internationalisation into the institutional policy and practice on all levels is a greater challenge still.

> *"We decided to organise a strategy-writing workshop and, as we were advised, we wanted to involve as many people as possible. Our school has had to face a lot of challenges in the past decades, our colleagues have had to adapt to a great number of changes but we were still astonished by the huge interest they showed, filling up the whole room. The colleagues fully understood that writing our own institutional strategy is a great opportunity for us in the ever-changing circumstances. They came up with a lot of ideas, new approaches, and we were so happy to see how democratic the process turned [out] to be."* – Hungarian VET provider

In this sense, the purpose of the guide is to create a common approach and language, and to make the work on internationalisation strategies easier within and between VET institutions in different countries throughout the EU. It supports the promoters of Erasmus+ projects both when planning mobility projects, VET Mobility Charters and strategic partnerships, and also when drawing up the European Development Plan, as a part of the applications, which in itself is a small version of a strategy.

WITH THE HELP OF THIS GUIDE, THE READER:

- achieves an understanding of the **general value of strategic planning**, strategy structures and the issues and processes involved;
- gains knowledge of **what strategic planning and approaches can bring to the field of internationalisation** and mobility, and the ability to link that with the development of an institution;
- realises what role the strategy process plays in **making a strategy a shared, embedded vision and coming alive in an institution**;
- is able to set up the next steps needed in their own institution to **go on a 'strategy journey'** that works for their institution and fits their own context;
- gets acquainted, on a basic level, with the concept of **quality assurance and indicators** to measure processes and results.

SOME OF THE KEY PRINCIPLES SUPPORTING THE WORK ON THIS GUIDE INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- Every institution has some previous experience and/or staff with skills and interest in international cooperation, and the strategic planning of internationalisation should take this into account: **you need to get to know your starting point and build on that.**
- Every solid strategy must at the same time – be anchored in the past, consider the reality of the present, and look to the future: **you need to establish a realistic, but also sufficiently ambitious vision for the future.**
- Strategy and organisational culture needs to go hand-in-hand, so when you create new strategies you also **need to involve and empower students, staff and all stakeholders to take part.**
- The global setting, the European Union and our educational systems are all undergoing constant changes in these dynamic and demanding times. Any strategy must also take into account that the operating conditions can and will most likely change, even within a fairly short amount of time: **you need to stay flexible with your strategy and be ready to adapt to changes if you want to achieve your goals in changing environments.**

2. The European Union and the global setting

The European Union and its Member States rely more and more on people with international skills from all walks of life and throughout society. The mobility of workers and students is increasing due to the globalisation of business and industry and widening European integration. Our cultures are becoming more diverse. At the same time, competition for skilled workers is increasing.

Students with vocational qualifications are nowadays expected to have at least some international competences when entering the labour market. For this reason, more and more qualifications also emphasise language and social skills, knowledge of other cultures and of working conditions in other countries. These demands add to the existing vocational skill sets. Furthermore, most employers today also highly value competences such as curiosity, productivity and resilience. As shown by recent studies[4], these competences can also have a strong link to international experiences.

Internationalisation is, however, not only a labour market value, but also a value in itself. It benefits the whole society if our future citizens (including professionals) possess the competences needed in the increasingly international world of business, and our progressively diverse European and global societies more generally. This changing operating environment poses great challenges for teachers, trainers and guidance counsellors.

Training providers are tackling these international challenges by extending their international and domestic networks, and by increasing their international cooperation and projects. For example, international contacts, projects and cooperation create opportunities for on-the-job learning or studying abroad, for exchange of experiences among teachers and other staff, for benchmarking and for development, as well as quality improvement and quality assurance cooperation.

When training providers plan their international activities, they take national and European policy objectives into consideration. But global trends and the rapid evolvement of working life, as well as the digitalisation of both industry and training, will also affect the way we look at the future of VET. By developing vocational education and training, we will improve the competitiveness of the European labour market – and of education and training more broadly – in an increasingly global operating environment.

[4] *Hidden Competences*, 2014.

At European level, international objectives of vocational education and training were clarified in several policy papers from the year 2000 onwards and most recently in the Skills Agenda, all of which aim to support the Europe 2020 strategy. The strategy for European cooperation in education and training, spanning until 2020, has four priorities:

- lifelong learning and mobility;
- quality and efficiency;
- equality, social cohesion and active citizenship; and
- creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship.

Work on recognition and compatibility of qualifications through the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), the credit transfer system ECVET and the exchange of information that has taken place in this context have helped build a solid foundation for development. These common European tools are being developed both nationally and at European level, for example in Erasmus+ projects.

Many of the European VET systems also set out international objectives in their national policies and qualification requirements. However, there are also vast differences in how the EU Member States are approaching issues related to globalisation in VET. International competences can be included, for example, in the core skills of lifelong learning or in the vocational competences in a sector. The aim is often to make students better equipped to work in international environments, both at home and abroad. But, in some cases, international competences are also seen as life skills with little or no direct connection to professions.

When international activities are managed, coordinated and implemented strategically and transparently, they will result in more motivated teachers and students, better training and competences, and a higher overall profile of vocational training. The results will lead to a magnified impact: the competences of newly qualified students will better meet the needs of employers and benefit our business and industry. The increasingly global operating environment is both an opportunity and a challenge to the whole of Europe, to which vocational education and training must also answer.

3. Strategic planning of international activities

The main aim of all strategic work is to express the meaning and purpose of, and then give direction to, what an organisation does. This applies to the strategic planning of internationalisation as well: the aim is to express the purpose and future developments of the international activities of a training provider or vocational training institution.

- Strategic planning of international activities will help staff and students see how international cooperation relates to the core activities and development of their institutions.
- Strategic planning will give direction to international activities and make them more systematic, which will help in managing them and help staff in their practical work.
- Planning will ensure that there are enough resources to carry out the international activities in practice, that international cooperation is in line with the overall strategies of the organisation, and that all staff members are aware of these international goals and activities.

We have named the model presented in this publication as a 'complete strategy model', in which the international goals are included in the overall strategy of an organisation, thus ensuring that the international perspective will be considered at all stages of strategic planning. This means that staff and students should consider and analyse how internationalisation is included, for example, in the organisation's visions for the future or its values, and of course the future developments of the organisation.

> *"The most significant step forward was getting different departments and actors involved in preparation of an international strategy, including staff and students and also local businesses that were sent a questionnaire about their international activities. The management was interviewed to provide their views about the organisation's international needs… An action plan secures continuity in international work, documenting division of responsibilities, roles and tasks, which has helped different departments achieve their goals. This is necessary because of the physically fragmented nature of the organisation, with long distances between different institutions, which makes the work challenging."* – Finnish VET provider

FIGURE 1: STRATEGY MODELS FOR INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES

A COMPLETE STRATEGY MODEL FOR INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES

A PARTIAL STRATEGY MODEL FOR INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES

The complete strategy model helps the organisation to commit to the strategic goals and ensure that there are sufficient resources for the work. At the organisational level, it also supports the staff and students in seeing how international activities fit into the overall development of the organisation and the professional development of staff. It will also support staff when they do their annual planning and include international activities.

> *"Seven years ago, we started organising work placements abroad with no overall plan and only two teachers involved. By now – thanks to the development of a long-term strategy of internationalisation, the introduction of a professional EU team consisting of six highly ambitious colleagues who regularly meet and the establishment of [our] own 'Europe classroom' – we could widen the network of participants, include many German training companies and considerably increase the number of partners abroad."* – German VET provider

In the partial strategy model scenario, the international strategy is written after the overall strategy for the organisation, which results in a partial strategy for international activities. In this situation, it is particularly important to make sure that the partial international strategy is clearly based on, and in fact derived from, the overall strategy, so that it is in line with the goals of the overall strategy. The existence and content of this separate internationalisation strategy as part of the whole strategy context must also be clearly communicated.

In both scenarios, an action plan is normally written each year (based on the strategic decisions) which details and schedules the responsibilities and actions to be taken in order to achieve the strategic goals.

In general, strategies today are made for a period of 3 to 5 years, as developments in the environments of education, business and society are changing rapidly. After this period a strategy normally needs to be fully revised, but it is also important to consider the need for regular checks so that the strategy stays flexible and dynamic enough to remain up to date with current developments in the operating environment.

> *"The strategy helps us to take stock of our international work. Every two years our strategy is renewed and we reflect and assess whether the goals were met in practice. A strategy is not a fixed road map – sometimes things develop differently than we expected. Reflections provide important learning."* – It should also be noted that when applying for the Erasmus+ VET Mobility Charter, it is wise to align the strategy period with the Charter, even if this makes it over 3-5 years long. At the same time, one should also be open for any developments and changes in the strategy that might be necessary during that period.

4. The basic elements of an international strategy

The purpose of an international strategy is to develop and improve vocational education and training through international cooperation. At the same time, this type of strategy brings an international element to students and staff in colleges and to working life outside of school.

This is best done if the strategy is known as widely as possible within an organisation and made an everyday part of the activities. It is also recommended that all stakeholders are involved in the strategic planning, preferably including all staff, students, social partners and decision-makers.

Figure 2 shows a simplified model of strategic planning with an international perspective incorporated into the different strategies.

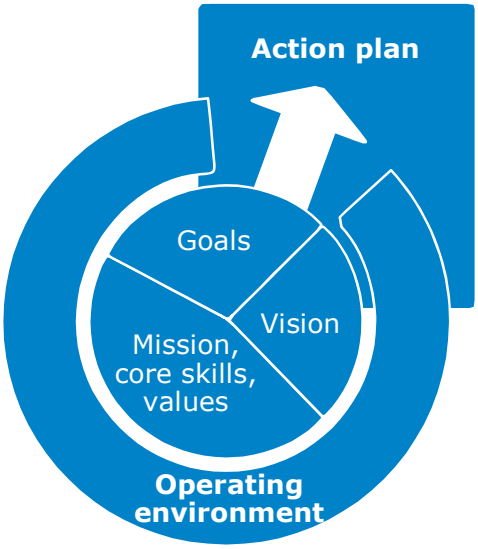


FIGURE 2: ELEMENTS OF STRATEGIC PLANNING

THE GENERAL STRATEGY OF AN ORGANISATION IS USUALLY BASED ON THE FOLLOWING:

- an analysis of the operating environment and its development trends
- its mission (why it exists)
- its core skills
- its values.

THEN AN ORGANISATION WILL DECIDE ON:

1. its vision for the future (what difference it wants to make in the world)
2. its strategic goals, (i.e. how to fulfil the vision)
3. what practical steps need to be taken to achieve the goals (i.e. action plan):
    - in the long term
    - on an annual basis.

However, it should be noted that, for example, a more radical definition of the vision for the future of the organisations might also have an impact on the organisation's views on its values or cores skills and even its mission. Therefore, the relationships between the strategy's elements above are not directly causal, but rather circular, as depicted in Figure 2.

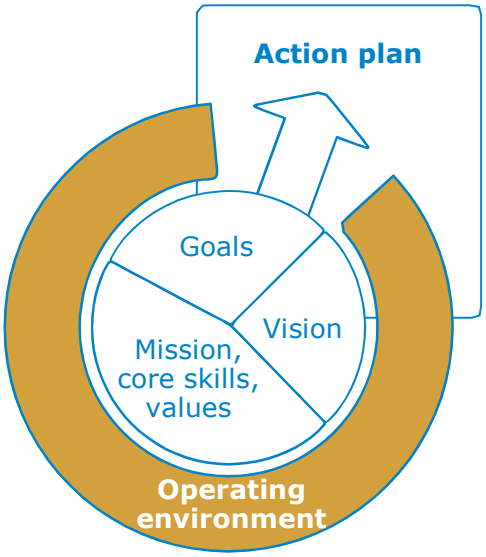
In a regular strategy process, each item is re-visited and re-drafted many times before taking its final shape, including the mission statement and values. If, as time goes by, a change is experienced, for example in the operating environment, the strategy can be re-visited in the middle of the strategy period.

> *"It was quite tricky in the beginning, some kind of 'learning by doing' process. Although we had been warned not to overcharge our strategy, we were enthusiastic and reluctant to let so many great and relevant ideas just go. We had to learn step-by-step how we can keep our strategy focused and, considering our limited resources, make the implementation more manageable and realistic."* – Hungarian VET provider

In the following section, we will present a step-by-step model on how to include the international perspective into strategic planning.

4.1 The operating environment

By **operating environment**, we mean everything that affects the operations of an organisation, internally and externally. The starting point for development work in an organisation is to analyse the operating environment: the constants and the changes influencing it. An operating environment is affected by, for example, education and training policies, demographic changes, immigration, the labour market and changes within the organisation, as well as global developments and major trends in our societies.



A major part of analysing the operating environment *vis-à-vis* international activities is also to have a look at what has been done so far in internationalisation. What is the status quo? What projects have been carried out? Which partnerships are in place? What is there to build on?

Strategic planning is particularly important during challenging times and in difficult conditions. It helps to give focus to the activities so that you are able to do more of what matters most. But it is equally important when conditions are favourable, so that the organisation can keep ahead of trends and not become complacent.

CONSIDER HOW CHANGES IN THE OPERATING ENVIRONMENT WILL AFFECT THE INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES OF THE TRAINING PROVIDER AND TRAINING INSTITUTION:

- What changes foreseen in the operating environment should you consider?
- How will the international dimension affect jobs and skills requirements in the future?
- What kinds of jobs will new graduates have in the future and where?
- What is the state of internationalisation in different fields of vocational education and training?
- How do you take national and EU objectives for internationalisation into account?

TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE FOLLOWING POINTS ON STRATEGIC PLANNING:

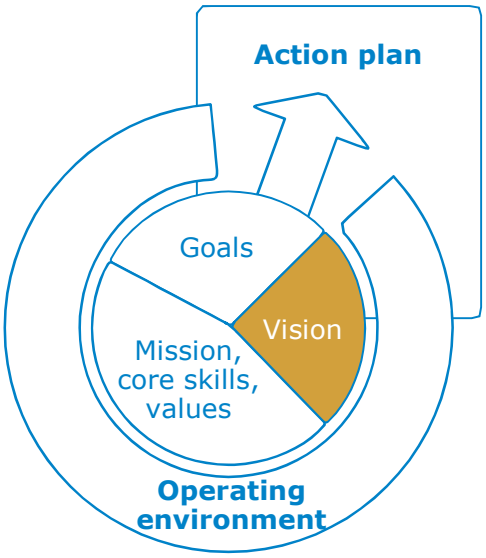
- Key topics for an internationalising VET institution are networking, cooperation with workplaces and industry, core staff skills, project planning and execution, and an ability to operate strategically, both internally and externally.
- Different sectors need different internationalisation approaches at different stages: strategic partnerships, staff mobility, student mobility or other cooperation & development projects.
- Professional skills, both for students and staff, should also include the ability to operate in multicultural environments.
- English is often the internal working language of multinational companies, but the need to know other languages is also increasing.
- Skills such as curiosity, productivity and resilience, which are also linked to international skills, are increasingly needed in working life.
- It is necessary to be able to provide services to customers or clients from different cultures in more and more jobs. Also, the target groups in the public sector are becoming more and more multicultural.
- To work in global business requires not only language skills, but also an ability to operate in different working cultures.

4.2 Vision

The **vision** describes where an organisation wants to be in the future, based on its purpose (mission) and values, and contains the so-called future power of a strategy.

A solid vision shows staff and students what the goals of the organisation are in both the shorter but maybe more importantly the longer run, and where their efforts should be directed in the future.

A good vision both inspires and guides, but at the same time is rooted in reality and looking well beyond what is currently in existence.



A more radical definition of the vision might impact on the organisation's values, its approach to core skills or even its mission in the long run.

CONSIDER HOW THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION SHOULD MANIFEST ITSELF IN THE VISION:

- How can the training institution become more modern and attractive in the future?
- What does this mean for students and staff in practice?
- What kind of national and international networks should you be able to create to fulfil such a vision?

TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THAT THE INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION IN THE VISION CAN MEAN, FOR EXAMPLE, THE FOLLOWING:

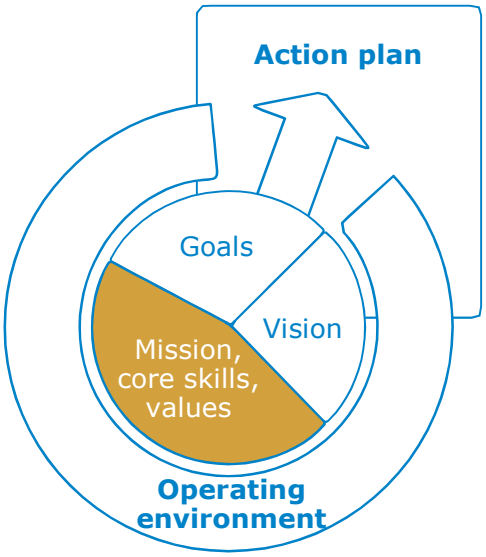
- Covering the globe: Establishing strategic geographical priority areas across the world for building global networks for both cooperation & mobility projects.
- Accounting for a diversifying society: Multiculturalism is an area of development that permeates all operations.
- Providing multinational companies with the skills needed: Establishing strategic partnerships based on certain sectors/ qualifications with companies that have factories or units in several European countries.
- Giving students and staff more international opportunities: Expanding international activities to new regions.
- Providing the international skills of the future: Many students will be employed in international businesses or multi-cultural workplaces.

4.3 Mission, core skills and values

The **mission** answers the question: Why are we here? It justifies the existence of an organisation and has an important role in guiding its operations.[5]

By **core skills** we mean the knowledge and competences that distinguish the organisation from others – the true expertise of an organisation.

The core skills of an organisation are a unique combination of knowledge, skills, competences and technologies that are hard to copy or replace. Core skills help to achieve an advantage or even the 'competitive edge' of an organisation, at least locally or regionally, and add special value to students, employers and other stakeholders.



CONSIDER

- How is the international dimension included in your mission?
- What are the internationally focu-sed core skills of your organisation?

TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THAT THE MISSION CAN INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING ELEMENTS:

- Your organisation is specialising in training international experts in certain key topics.
- The sectors you are serving have a need to develop their qualifications in multinational contexts.
- You are training immigrants and refugees.
- Your staff is multicultural.
- The aim of your training provision is to get your students employed in international companies, export businesses or qualified for multicul-tural workplaces.

Values express what is important in an organisation and what viewpoints or ethical standpoints its operations are based on[6]. Values steer the way students, staff and organisations operate as a whole. Values in the field of vocational training may include, for example, such topics as equality, tolerance, cooperation, openness, employer orientation and student orientation.

[5] *Quality Management Recommendation for Vocational Education and Training,* Finnish National Board of Education, 2008.
[6] *Quality Management Recommendation for Vocational Education and Training,* Finnish National Board of Education, 2008.

CONSIDER HOW THE VALUES OF YOUR ORGANISATION MANIFEST THEMSELVES:

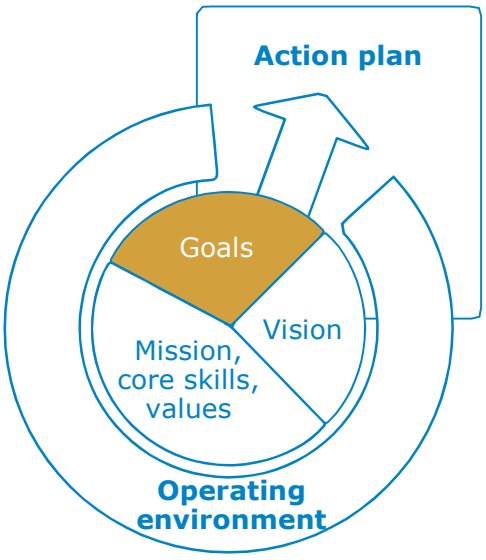
- in the processes of international activities in practice?
- in the day-to-day work of staff who work with international affairs, and when you last experienced this?

TAKE INTO ACCOUNT WHAT VALUES MEAN WHEN, FOR EXAMPLE:

- The requirements of different sectors need to be balanced.
- You listen to students' wishes when you select countries for your international networks (student orientation).
- You involve different stake-holders in the strategy process.
- You give different nationalities the opportunity to express their cultures (tolerance, equality).
- You try to develop forms of international cooperation that are accessible to weaker students, underage students or students with socio-economic issues, etc.

4.4 Goals

Goals link the mission with the vision of the organisation, and are formulated so that the organisation will develop towards the desired, future state (vision).



GOALS ARE THE CORE ELEMENT OF THE INTERNATIONALISATION STRATEGY. THEY SHOULD:

- be based on a realistic picture of the past, present and future; and at the same time.
- challenge the status quo, so that the organisation is pushed to develop further.

ASKING THE QUESTION 'WHY', AND NO LONGER GETTING ANOTHER GOAL AS AN ANSWER CAN IDENTIFY A TRUE, STRATEGICALLY FOCUSED GOAL. AN EXAMPLE OF THIS IS:

First goal: Our aim is to internationalise our institution.

WHY?

Answer: The businesses in our area needs a workforce with skills to work internationally.

Re-formulated goal: Our aim is to provide every student with international skills, either through mobility or the regular curricula, so that we can cater to the skills needs in our area.

It is important to know from this example that there are no right or wrong answers, but the answers must be based on the real situation, mission and vision of each VET provider.

Usually every goal is also linked to an expected output, outcome or impact that is traced with a quantitative or qualitative indicator (see chapter 5.5).

An organisation should not establish too many strategic goals for a specific period as the vision might become blurred. It is advisable to keep the goals to between five and six, and certainly no more than eight.

> *"A pitfall in strategy work is to make too soft and rather fluid declarations of intent. As we have become more professional, our strategy and actions plans have become more concrete over the years."* – Danish VET provider

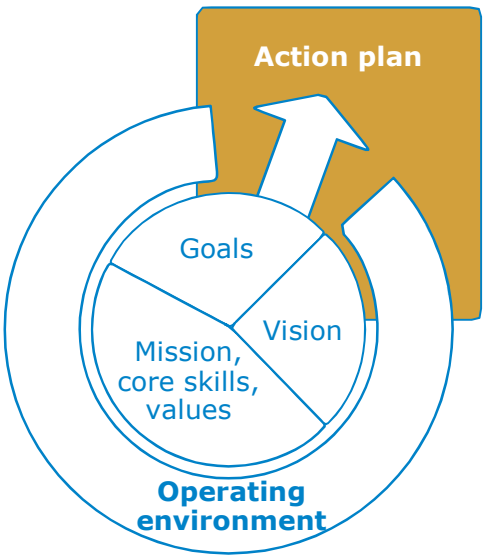
CONSIDER

- How the international dimension manifests itself in the general strategy goals of your organisation, even if the topic is perhaps not directly mentioned?
- What specific goals should be set to fulfil the vision of your organisation in international operations?
- How do we make sure that goals are both realistic and visionary enough?

TAKE INTO ACCOUNT

- The perspectives of students, staff and management.
- The business and working life perspective.
- Internationalisation. This doesn't only cover mobility. The development of qualifications, curricula, content & methods is central to a well-diversified internationalisation.
- The key issues: language skills, the ability to operate in multicultural work environments and knowledge of different cultures all need to be covered.
- Internationalisation is not only about international business, language learning and intercultural skills. It is also about giving students and staff lifelong learning skills, future-proof transversal skills and equipping them for globalisation.
- Goals can also be related to the operations: improving the quality and efficiency of the cooperation with current partner countries, extending your current network, making more efficient mobility procedures or better preparations for mobility, increasing the number of sectors / departments / teachers involved, etc.

4.5 Action plan



The **action plan** is drawn up to outline how an organisation's strategy will be implemented. Its purpose is to turn the strategic goals into operational targets and related actions, and to improve the quality of the work and the outputs.

The action plan usually covers such issues as operational targets/actions, procedures and resources for the agreed actions, as well as the related indicators.[7]

An action plan is generally drawn up, or at least revised, annually. The procedures describe how an agreed action point is carried out, who is responsible or 'the owner' of that process, the schedule for when it takes place and for how long, and which financial and human means (resources) are available for the purpose.

An important aspect is also to establish clear indicators or performance targets to know if the action has been successful or not. Ideally, the implementation of an action plan is evaluated annually as part of normal quality management (described in more detail in chapter 5.5).

[7] *Quality Management Recommendation for Vocational Education and Training*, National Board of Education, 2008.

CONSIDER

- What measures should you take to achieve your internationalisation goals?
- What measures can already be taken in the coming year? What measures need to be covered over several years?
- Are there alternative measures that can be taken to achieve the same goal?
- Which national and international partners are needed to carry out this work?
- Where will the funding and human resources come from for the planned international work?

TAKE INTO ACCOUNT

WHAT TYPICAL ACTIONS POINTS MAY LOOK LIKE:

- To meet the targets set for language skills development in the next year, we need to arrange language training for 20 teachers and for 20 student and teacher exchanges with countries where the relevant languages are spoken.
- We will implement a strategic partnership with a higher education institution to increase cross-sectoral international cooperation.
- We will start working together with Norway next year and will later extend cooperation to all Nordic countries.
- We will reserve specialist expertise resources in all departments in order to implement at least 2 new strategic partnerships and/or other international development projects.
- We will prepare and submit our Erasmus+ VET Mobility Charter application at the next Call.
- We will improve the preparation materials and dedicated coursework for our students going on a mobility abroad.
- We will join the Japan Network.

5. Embedding and continuous improvement

Part of drawing up an international strategy is considering how to put it into practice. This is not just a matter of making an action plan, which was discussed in the previous chapter. It also encompasses other aspects; most importantly how to embed the internationalisation activities and planned actions into the everyday work of your organisation.

If the mission, values, vision and goals of your internationalisation strategy are not clearly linked to the basic activities of your organisation, they easily fall out of focus when central decisions are taken on, for example, organisation, resources, pedagogical programmes, partnerships and networks, curricula or quality assurance. Linking and embedding strategic goals concerning internationalisation with other strategic decisions taken in other areas is key to overcoming this problem.

Another very important aspect is 'continuous improvement'. Ideally, the strategy and especially the implementation of the action plan are evaluated annually as part of the quality management, based on agreed indicators. At the same time, future plans are modified accordingly and thus the aim of continuous improvement is achieved.

In this chapter we discuss the organisation and implementation of international activities, & the follow-up, monitoring & quality management of those activities.

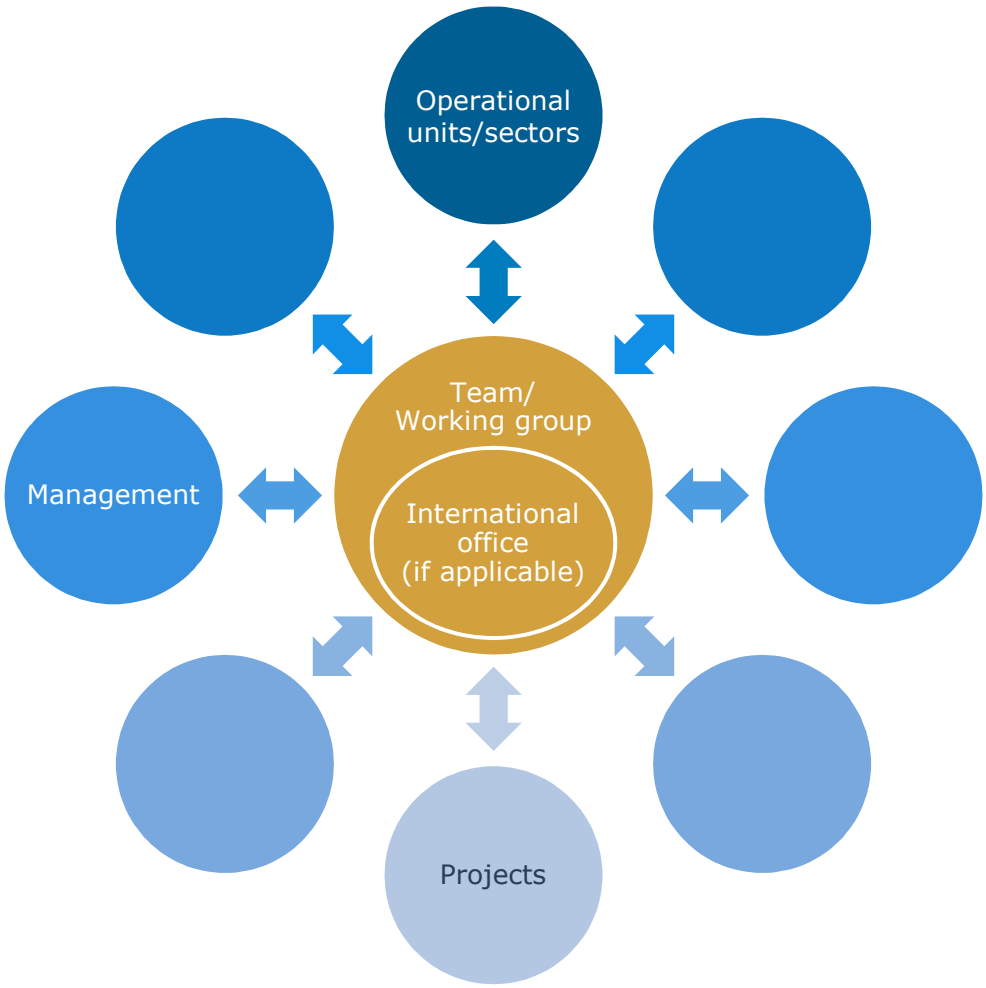
5.1 Organisation

How you organise and structure your international activities is a very important part of the strategic outlook. The question is to what degree you can embed internationalisation into the everyday activities of the organisation, and to what degree you also need a separate coordinating body.

Most internationally active VET institutions have appointed a person or a small team to be responsible for coordinating and managing the international activities for the whole organisation. Larger training institutions might even have a separate international office and an international manager. Such an office often includes staff responsible for international student services and project administration on a central level. Smaller institutions would, again, work more in an integrated fashion, with certain teachers or trainers having these tasks as part of their other duties. In both cases, it is important to maintain open cooperation and a good flow of information between the different international actors, and to and from management.

Since internationalisation is not an isolated item, this person or team is often, at least in larger institutions, supported by a group of international contacts, teachers or other staff involved in the different operational units or on a sector level. They form the extended internationalisation team. If this is the case, it is important to make sure that all the relevant expertise from each of the international operations is included, such as those responsible for separate international projects, those working with international vocational skills competitions, people in charge of trainee placements in enterprises and language teachers. Of increasing importance is also internationalisation at home, i.e. the teaching of international content, virtual cooperation across borders and creating international connections through a company working globally. This also means that the teachers working on these topics need to be involved in the extended internationalisation team.

FIGURE 7: POSSIBLE ORGANISATION OF INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES

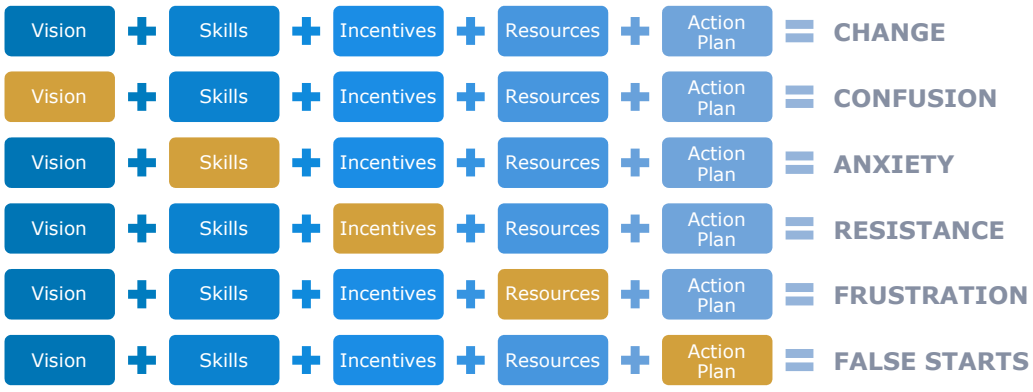


International activities cannot be financially viable as an independent activity so it is particularly important to secure the commitment and support of management. This can be ensured by either including a member of the management group in the international team or by having the international manager attend management meetings. When organising international activities, it is also important to know of any specific guidelines provided by the management in one's institution and to ensure that management is committed to the plans.

> *"We have been thinking strategically in our school for a long time now. As a head of a school I cannot possibly know everything that happens in our school and I suppose I do not even need to. When I walk along the corridors, our students and my colleagues never fail to surprise me. And never in an unpleasant way… What I need to know is that my colleagues are competent, our organisational values are shared and our strategic goals are well known and respected. As far as this [is concerned], I have nothing to be worried about. Anything that happens in our school just brings us closer to our common vision. It feels very good to experience even in the smallest, unknown detail that we are on the right track, our school is a good place and it's getting better day by day."* – Hungarian VET provider

By putting in place an internationalisation strategy and carrying out the strategic vision, the strategic goals and action points can be compared to managing a process of complex change, which is summarised in the following figure:

FIGURE 8: MANAGING COMPLEX CHANGE



As can be seen from Figure 8, it is necessary to have a good mix of vision, skills, incentives, resources and an action plan to be able to make change happen. It is equally important to have structure and regular, clear communication within the team focused on international issues. Clearly defined roles and responsibilities within the team are also necessary.

It is essential to establish a link between international activities and teaching and guidance, because in this way you can reach the most important target group: the students. If the international team consists, for example, of only administrative staff and temporary project personnel, it hinders the long-term institutional impact of the international activities on the development of curricula, qualifications, pedagogical programmes and teaching practices.

Furthermore, the international team must establish a visibility within the organisation for its activities, and, therefore, to not only clearly communicate within the team, but also to the remainder of the organisation.

5.2 Human resources in international activities

International activities require multiple skills: you need to have a quite detailed overall knowledge of the operations of your organisation; at the same time you need to understand the current state of your operating environment and foresee changes in it, as well as detailed and sometimes very technical knowledge and skills related to networking, project work and, perhaps, EU financing.

Staff responsible for international work can include teachers, managers/ heads of the institution, managers/coordinators of international affairs, project coordinators, assistants, guidance personnel, etc.

INTERNATIONAL ACTIVITIES MAY INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING TYPES OF TASKS[8]:

- Participating in strategic planning for the organisation;
- Writing international project proposals, administration of projects & reporting;
- Participating in planning training needs related to international competences;
- Writing the action plan for international activities;
- Participating in and being responsible for international projects;
- Evaluating results and outcomes of international projects;
- Organising international seminars;
- Preparing students and staff for international exchanges;
- Welcoming and guiding international students;
- Organising accommodation and programmes for incoming staff and students;
- Establishing links with organisations abroad;
- Negotiating student and staff exchanges: learning content and outcomes, agreements with partners;
- Managing/evaluating learning outcomes;
- Negotiations and international meetings;
- Presentations at international events;

[8] Adapted from International Operation Agent (IOA). http://www.ioagent.net

- Representing the organisation to visitors from abroad;
- International information events;
- Providing information to students and staff.

The decision on how many people are needed to carry out these tasks depends on the size of the organisation and its strategies. However, everybody's responsibilities should ideally include an international dimension.

5.3 Partnerships, consortia and networks

Cooperation with training institutions, workplaces, businesses and other organisations both at home and abroad is a key part of international activities. The unifying factor among partners can be, for example, a sector or subject of study, a regional focus, interest in a certain foreign country or training system, a common language or similar development goals. It is important to recognise that international cooperation is often dependent on two kinds of partnerships, both equally important:

- domestic partnerships or even consortia;
- partners or networks of organisations abroad.

The key issue, from the point of view of an internationalisation strategy, is that both domestic cooperation and links to partners abroad are planned and executed in line with the set goals.

Not all partners can be so-called strategic partners. Hence, partnerships, consortia or networks should be extended by acquiring new partners from regions or subject areas deemed strategically necessary. And partner affiliations that are not strategically relevant will become naturally abandoned over time. To maintain a network efficiently, it is necessary to keep track of the current and historic contact information so that they are easily available.

Sometimes the partnerships are formed around common projects, which discontinue when the project is over. But sometimes more permanent consortia or networks are formed, which is often the case when a VET provider is trying to formulate a more strategic outlook on its aspirations of internationalisation. Such networking, both domestically and abroad, is cost-efficient because the fixed costs of the activities are shared between the partners and different operational years and projects. Long-term cooperation is often also beneficial for quality and efficiency in, for example, student and staff mobility. Staff can also learn about application procedures for funding from each other within the networks. Furthermore, new tools to promote internationalisation in training institutions are being created and accumulated. It is also possible to promote networks or consortia of providers within the Erasmus+ programme and even the VET Mobility Charters, which makes longer-term funding and development possible.[9]

[9] *A study on networks in international cooperation*, Siru Korkala, 2010.

In general, training providers make written agreements for cooperation with their partners for both short-term and long-term cooperation. Agreements set out the principles for implementing not only student and staff exchanges and trainee placements, but also development projects. Long-standing networks can establish effective routines, which provide more security for the organisation of student exchanges, for example.

5.4 Internationalisation and implementation of curricula and qualification requirements

The purpose of vocational education and training is to train skilled workers with an ability to also develop themselves and their workplaces for the future. This also applies to an increasingly international and global labour market.

However, the qualification standards or requirements vary greatly from country to country in Europe and there are no common standards for how globalisation or international cooperation are covered in the curricula or qualifications. In many cases these topics are only dealt with indirectly.

Nonetheless, when drawing up international strategies it is important to analyse the qualifications and curricula to see what possibilities and openings there are for including the international element through the qualification requirements.

> *"In a so-called European class, the students carry out certain parts of their education, both study at school and internship in a company, in another country. The basic idea is simple: different countries can provide different skills and complementarity to the Swedish system. This is a small step in internationalisation but the institution has included [this] in the curricula, so there are strategic elements to it. We lack certified teachers in welding in Sweden. But thanks to our cooperation with Finland, our students can go there and be certified. In return, we are good at entrepreneurial learning, so the Finnish students get their entrepreneurial knowledge when going to Sweden. And the teachers become more aware of what our education needs to improve, and what we have that we can offer to others."* – Swedish VET provider

To be able to bring the international dimension into qualifications and teaching, teachers, trainers and other staff must have international competences themselves. An international and multicultural dimension can be incorporated into teaching regardless of the subject of study or vocational field. It is also a good idea to take advantage of the cultural knowledge and language skills of students and teachers from different cultural backgrounds. This is sometimes referred to as 'internationalisation at home'.

Based on the national curricula or qualification requirements, training providers must decide how they will ensure that international competences are achieved in the workplace, at school/college or during work-based learning, and then incorporate this information into their plans or curricula. To be able to do this in the long run, training providers must make strategic plans and choices:

- How do we meet the challenges of an ever-changing working life and economy, now and in the future?
- What teaching and training arrangements will be needed in the future?
- How can we keep the skilled staff needed for those future situations?
- What sort of cooperation with workplaces could support our goals in this area?
- How will the qualifications or curricula need to develop?

This is also especially important for the planning of the mobility periods, as described in the ECVET recommendation[10] and ECVET Toolkit[11], where it is stated that each unit of learning outcomes carried out in mobility should be designed so that it is:

- **clearly understood** by involved actors – such as learners, teachers and trainers (in the home and host institutions) and competent institutions with responsibility for validating and recognising learning outcomes achieved during a period of geographical mobility;
- **achieved during mobility** – for example, considering the existing knowledge, skills and competence of learners, the duration of the planned mobility and the learning opportunities able to be accessed in the host institution and country;
- **assessed abroad** – some learning outcomes may be easier to assess abroad than others; it is also important to consider the language skills of individual learners;
- **recognised** when the learner returns to the home institution.

Such a learning outcome approach is very useful, especially in the case of mobility, since it helps in transgressing the different VET systems and qualification structures, and relates more directly to the situations in a workplace. Learning outcomes are defined in the context of knowledge, skills, attitude and autonomy/responsibility, and indicate what the individual knows, understands and is capable of doing.[12] Even if one's own VET system is not fully based on learning outcomes, they can still be used with success in the context of transnational mobility.

[10] *European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)*, Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council, 2008.
[11] http://www.ecvet-toolkit.eu/ecvet-toolkit/identify-units-learning-outcomes
[12] *European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF)*, Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council, 2008 and renewed version 2017.

5.5 Evaluation & continuous improvement of activities

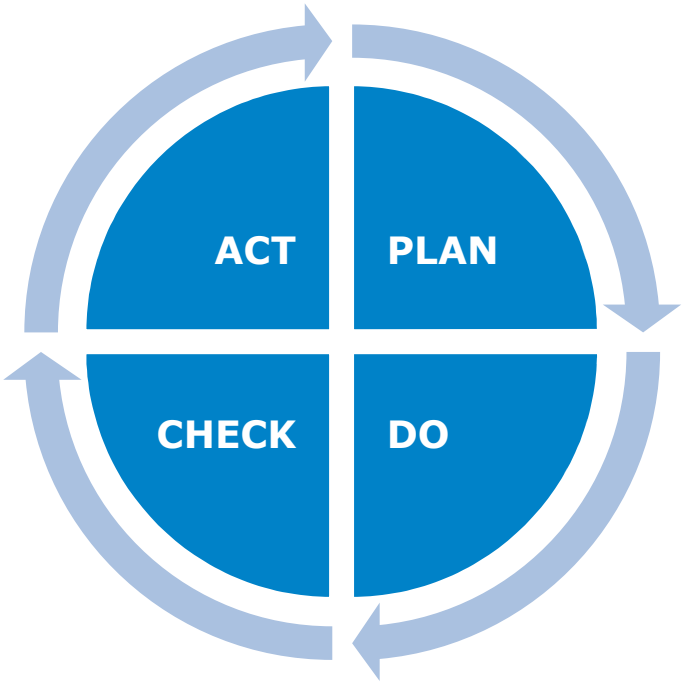
Like any other activities within an organisation, international activities must also be evaluated on a regular basis to gain information about the achievement of goals, the quality of work and future development needs. The most central thing is to evaluate how the strategic goals and yearly actions set in place for international work have been achieved from the perspective of both the individuals and the organisation.

A common way to approach evaluation or quality assurance, as it can also be called, is through the Deming Quality Circle, which describes four basic steps: Plan – Do – Check – Act.

The steps Plan (strategy and action plan) and Do (carry out the activities) have been dealt with in chapter 2. From the point of view of quality assurance, the steps Check (evaluation) and Act (corrective actions and plans) are the most crucial.

Quality assurance is never a one-off activity but constantly repeated, for example every 6 months or yearly. Continuous improvement is at the heart of the Deming Quality Circle.

FIGURE 9: THE DEMING QUALITY CIRCLE



Activities can be assessed in several ways as regards their output, outcomes or impact. The direct products or results of action (outputs) are one way of seeing what the result of that action is. However, we are often looking for the effects, benefits or values to the individual or institution (outcomes), or even the fundamental changes (impact).

> *"We monitor regularly the progress of the implementation. There are some delays of course but the strategy helps us to be disciplined and focus our attention. It is like a good recipe for us, it makes sure that nothing is left out and hopefully the final result will be favourable and convincing to everybody."* – Hungarian VET provider

In order to be able to follow-up on the activities, it is important to set quantitative and/or qualitative indicators, e.g. mobility statistics, amounts of funding, number of projects, number of foreign partners, the qualitative reports of projects and mobility periods or feedback from participants and partners, how the students or staff feel about the values, etc. Feedback from students or staff can give information on, for example, their satisfaction with international services, their wish for optional course provisions and for target countries of student exchanges. Feedback from working life concerning the arrangements of a mobility period is equally crucial. A peer assessment among partner organisations can also be used as a form of external evaluation.

An evaluation of activities should ideally be a part of the overall quality assurance of an organisation. If possible it would be best to select indicators that would allow data to be collected at the same time as data collected within the framework of the general quality system of the organisation or other processes, for example by including questions in student and staff feedback or using information from the Erasmus+ questionnaires and reports. Those responsible for international affairs should ensure that the work is also systematically developed based on information received via the evaluations.

Qualitative and/or quantitative indicators should be set for all the different strategy goals of the international activities. It should be noted that areas that might or might not be strategy goals in themselves might still need following up on through the quality assurance system due to their importance, such as student and staff satisfaction or the funding of international activities. You will find a list of the most common processes of international work below, with an illustrative example of a quantitative and/or qualitative indicator of success provided for each.

> *"Having a long-term strategy of internationalisation offers a good basis for tackling problems that might occur – constant monitoring and analysis of the achievements of the European activities are of utmost importance for guaranteeing best results for all participants involved. At the same time, this strategy should also include a future vision to enhance [the] motivation and creativity of all members of staff."* – German VET provider

STUDENT MOBILITY, OUTGOING AND INCOMING

The stages of this process are agreement, preparation and arrangements before the exchange, guidance and support during the exchange, and reporting and recognition of skills after the exchange. These are perhaps the most central steps of international activities so it makes sense to describe them in detail to ensure a smooth running of activities, both for the home and the host organisations. It is also important to remember that it is not only the number of mobile students but also the acquired skills that are important, i.e. recognising the learning outcomes could be an equally potent indicator in this regard.

> The volume of mobility and its growth can be used as the indicator. For example, the number of students who have been on an exchange of over 2 weeks as a percentage of the total number of students enrolled in the institution in the year in question.
>
> * If the strategic goal for student mobility is of a more qualitative nature the indicator could also be related to the number of development projects and actions taken which have improved the mobility arrangements.

STAFF MOBILITY, OUTGOING AND INCOMING

The mobility of managers and other staff members also contribute to the achievement of strategic goals of international work, because their attitudes, language skills and commitment to international work play a crucial role in this respect. When a programme for incoming visitors and groups is managed well, it has a great impact on stakeholder relations within the organisation, not to mention a wider, overall impact that is difficult to measure.

> Here, the indicator could be the number of exchanges of 5 days or more as a percentage of the total number of new students enrolled in the institution in the year in question.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

Development projects carried out in international partnerships aim to improve the quality and appeal of vocational training, for example. Participation in projects will also improve the international competences of staff and allow organisations to learn from the good practices of others. This also has a positive impact on the attitudes of participants.

> The indicator could be the amount of external project funding received as a percentage of the training provider's total budget.

INTERNATIONAL COMPETENCES OF STAFF

International competences, such as a knowledge of languages and different cultures or networking and projects skills, form a part of staff members' professional skills. Improving them forms part of their professional development. It is recommended to group the training needs by theme/ subject area and organise training for several people at the same time, possibly together with other training providers.

> The indicator could be the number of applied for and approved international development projects and/or the number of staff exchanges and trips as a percentage of the total number of full-time staff members.

INTERNATIONAL SKILLS COMPETITIONS AND PREPARING FOR THEM

Participation in international competitions allows training institutions to compare the quality and practices of their training to those of other countries, and to improve the skills and international competences of students and teachers. Preparation for international skills competitions for each skill sector takes place in training units composed of several vocational institutions. Vocational teachers also provide expertise in international competitions. They will design the tasks for the competitions and assess the performance of contestants together with experts from other countries, thus giving them an international perspective into training and teaching at the highest level. Teachers and students can be encouraged to take part in competitions by giving presentations about previous competitions and through exchanges abroad, for example. Young people who have participated in competitions may benefit from their international networks later in the workplace.

> The indicator could be the number of students who received training for international skills competitions as a percentage of the number of students graduated.

INTERNATIONALISATION IN THE HOME COUNTRY

Internationalisation in the home country refers to, for example, the provision of training in a foreign language, virtual mobility or cooperation across borders using social media, the integration of students with an immigrant background and their culture into the teaching programmes, cooperating with mainly global or internationally focused companies in the home country, and/or introducing internationally sourced or focused materials into the teaching in the home country.

> The indicator could be how many programmes and courses in which there are some forms of internationalisation-at-home activities (teaching in a foreign language, virtual mobility, global company contacts, international materials, etc.).

6. The 'strategy journey'

Based on several years of work with internationalisation strategies among the Erasmus+ National Agencies involved in the production of this guide and some recent research[13], we can clearly see that there are some key areas that are essential for a successful implementation of an internationalisation strategy for a VET provider:

- **Strategy process:** The kind of strategy process one builds very much determines the success and results of that process. A process built around knowing your own mission and operating environment, with a good balance of being realistic and visionary, and involving everyone in co-creation and ownership of the process seems to produce the best results.
- **Cooperation with the world of work:** The strategy process and internationalisation at large often lacks direct input from the world of work. Even if views are considered in other more indirect ways, it would be beneficial in VET institutions if the views of the world of work and business were to directly influence the strategy and actions taken.
- **Qualifications, curricula and pedagogics:** These are the key access points to larger impacts and a deeper implementation within the VET system. The qualifications and/or curricula direct a great number of the processes taking place within VET institutions, thus creating a crucial link between them and internationalisation. It also reminds each teacher of the role that internationalisation plays.
- **Role of management:** The management must lead the strategy process and at the same time involve teachers and staff at large for a strategy to be successful. The international team should also include a representative from management.
- **Practical implementation:** Finally, any strategy comes down to the action plans drawn up and how they are carried out. It cannot be stressed enough how important it is to involve the whole staff in this process in order for internationalisation to really become an everyday part of each institution.

[13] *International dimension in the strategies and daily life of vocational schools*, 2016.

TO HELP THE READERS OF THIS GUIDE, WE HAVE SUMMARISED THE ACTIONS NEEDED TO GO ON 'THE STRATEGY JOURNEY' INTO EIGHT SIMPLE STEPS:

1. **Map your existing internationalisation activities,** projects and possible strategic documents to date.
    - Draw a timeline of the developments achieved so far, together with the major milestones.
2. **Analyse the operational environment** and broader strategies.
    - Make a table of institutional, regional, national, sectoral and European strategies and documents guiding your work.
3. **Understand the core skills** present in your organisation.
    - Carry out a small survey of the staff and their international experience and skills.
4. **Examine the mission and values** in your organisation from the viewpoint of internationalisation.
5. **Formulate the vision** for your internationalisation strategy with all actors and stakeholders, considering the existing activities, the operational environment, the mission and values, and the core skills.
    - Arrange a small workshop with colleagues in order to discuss about where you are right now, and where you would like to be in 5 or 10 years with your internationalisation.
6. **Set the strategic goals** in support of your vision for the international activities in such a way that students, staff and the working environment can relate to them.
7. **Decide on an action plan** for at least the first year, including deciding on roles, dividing tasks, budgeting and setting indicators for the key strategic goals.
    - Do this in regular meetings with your colleagues. Not all the tasks have to be ready straightaway.
8. **Communicate both the strategy process and the strategic decisions to all actors and stakeholders** throughout the process for maximum commitment.

7. Tools for your 'strategy journey'

There is a multitude of strategy tools and guides available online and in bookstores. Many of them can be useful when working on your own strategies, and can be utilised with success in one or many parts of the process.

For the specific purpose of drawing up strategies on how to internationalise VET institutions, the Erasmus+ National Agencies have, over the years, worked on materials and tools that could assist with this work. The present guide is published on http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/calls/2017-eac-a06-vet-mobility-charter_en

THERE ARE TOOLS AVAILABLE TO ASSIST YOU WITH MOST OF THE STEPS ON YOUR STRATEGY JOURNEY:

- Analyse your own organisation and the operational environment, as well as your core skills;
- Map your existing internationalisation activities;
- Analyse your mission and values, as well as working on your vision;
- Setting strategic goals and drawing up an action plan;
- Deciding on indicators;
- Help with peer evaluations of your activities;
- Refresh your strategy.

The tools are all available in digital format and free for you to use and re-draft, according to your own purposes.

Final Words

We hope that this guide will genuinely inspire and support vocational training providers in the strategic planning for international cooperation and thus help to meet the challenges of the future.

We also hope that this guide will assist all the applicants for Erasmus+ projects and especially those planning strategic partnerships, as well as those either preparing for a VET Mobility Charter application or who already have a Charter but still see that they would need to strengthen their strategic approach.

The following quotes from VET Mobility Charter holders perhaps describe some of the sentiments of the group of National Agencies and the VET Mobility Working Group that have worked on this guide.

> *"Our ambition is to participate in a wide range of European partnerships and cooperation activities in education, and the strategy is a tool that makes our international work easier (…). With almost 3 000 students, 300 staff members and many VET programmes with different traditions for international engagement spread out at different locations within the region we have great diversity at the college. The international strategy helps us tackle this diversity and ensures that we are pulling in the same direction. (…) At the same time, the strategy also helps us to be selective in our international cooperation. We have been in the game for many years and are regularly being approached by new potential partners. The strategy makes it easier to prioritise between different partnerships and cooperation activities."* – Danish VET provider

> *"It takes the entire staff to implement the internationalisation strategy, but only those can have a leading role [who] have [ ] the right attitude – not just the knowledge. What I really mean is that if you can address new challenges and enjoy working on the strategy, and if you are enthusiastic and confident that the results can be beneficial to all parties, you will attract people, [and] they will be on board with you."* – Hungarian VET provider

> *"We wholeheartedly recommend the use of this guide to anyone interested in strategic internationalisation. Our organisation got very practical and sound tips on how to set up our follow-up and quality assurance measures based on our existing strategy. We used the structure and approach of the strategy model to request both qualitative and quantitative data on our central strategic goals. This helps us in making our strategy 'come alive' in every sector, in every qualification and in every teacher's work and not just on an institutional level."* – VET provider in Finland

In addition, we would like to highlight the support and help you can receive from your Erasmus+ National Agency in your own country. Please consult them with any questions or concerns you might have. The contact details can be found at: http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/contact_en#tab-1-0

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The production team of the original Finnish guidebook from 2010 (Finnish version) included: Head of Unit Mika Saarinen and Programme Manager Katriina Lammi-Rajapuro from CIMO; Manager Ritva Saastamoinen and Project Manager Päivi Riihelä from Helsinki Business College; Senior Advisor Annikki Häkkilä, Senior Advisor Hanna Autere and Senior Education Advisor Tuula Sumkin from the National Board of Education; Head of International Relations Seija Heikkinen from Omnia and Project Manager Leena-Maija Talikka from Skills Finland.

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The aim of this guidebook is to help VET institutions in the strategic planning of international activities. The guide offers advice and support to training institutions of different types, sizes and at different stages of internationalisation. It builds first and foremost on EU cooperation and the Erasmus+ programme, but also takes global aspects into account.

The strategic planning of international activities helps training institutions make it clear to students, staff and working life what role internationalisation plays in the core activities and the development of vocational education and training, VET qualifications and VET systems.

Strategic planning helps to steer international activities over the long term and make it more systematic. This in turn helps the management of the activities and the day-to-day work of everybody involved in international activities.

BASED ON:

The guide *Strength from International Cooperation*, 2010/2014, produced by the Finnish National Board of Education and the Centre for International Mobility (CIMO) in Finland.

PRODUCED BY:

The Erasmus+ National Agencies in Finland supported by a team from the Erasmus+ National Agencies in VET from Denmark, Germany, Hungary and the Netherlands. The Erasmus+ National Agency VET Mobility Working Group, established by the European Commission, and European Commission officials have also giving their input to the process.

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