



FINNISH NATIONAL  
BOARD OF EDUCATION

## STRENGTH FROM INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Strategic Planning for International Cooperation  
in Vocational Education and Training



Publications 2014:5

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## Foreword

Finnish society relies on people with international skills. Mobility of workers and students is increasing due to globalisation of business and industry and the widening of the European integration. Our cultures are becoming more diverse at the same time as competition for skilled workers is increasing.

In today's world students with vocational qualifications are expected to have international competences. For this reason, there is now more and more emphasis on such competences as language and social skills, knowledge of other cultures and of working conditions in other countries in vocational training. It benefits the whole society if our future professionals possess the competences needed in the increasingly international world of business and the increasingly diverse societies. This changing operating environment poses, however, great challenges for teachers and guidance counsellors in VET.

Training providers in VET are tackling these international challenges by extending their international and domestic networks and by increasing their international cooperation and projects. International projects create opportunities for on-the-job learning or studying abroad, for exchange of experiences among teachers and other staff, for development and quality assurance work, for example. Participation in international skills competitions improves the quality and appeal of training.

When training providers plan their international activities, they have to take national and European policy objectives into consideration. The development plan of the Finnish government for education and research sets out the international objectives for Finland. By developing vocational training we will improve the competitiveness of the Finnish labour market and of education and training in the increasingly international operating environment.

At European level, international objectives of vocational education and training were clarified in the Bruges communiqué, the aim of which is 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, 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 Leonardo da Vinci projects.

The Finnish National Board of Education also sets out international objectives in its qualification requirements. International competences are included, for example, in the core skills of lifelong learning in the new requirements. The aim is to make students better equipped to work in international environments both at home and abroad.

When international cooperation is managed and implemented strategically and transparently, it will result in more motivated teachers and students, better training and it will raise the profile of vocational training.

The results will lead to a magnified impact: competences of newly qualified students will meet the needs of employers and benefit our business and industry. The increasingly international operating environment is both an opportunity and a challenge to Finland, to which vocational education and training must answer.

## The aim and purpose of this guidebook

The aim of this guidebook is to assist in the strategic planning of international cooperation and to define its role in development of vocational education and training. The guide is based on a study<sup>1</sup> about the state of internationalisation in vocational education and training in Finland, conducted in 2008 in cooperation of the Finnish National Board of Education, the Centre for International Mobility CIMO and the Professional Teacher Education Unit of the HAMK University of Applied Sciences. According to the study, all elements of international strategies have not always transferred into practice within the training institutions. There is a great variety of international activities going on in the everyday life, but there is a lot of variation in the strategic approaches or in how the work is planned and managed. In addition, the structures and contents of the strategies of different training providers were found to be very different.

Strategic planning of international cooperation will help staff and students see how international activities relate to the core activities and development of their institutions. Strategic planning will give direction to international cooperation and make it more systematic, which will help in managing the activities 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 the goals and activities of international cooperation.

In their role as supporters of international cooperation the Finnish National Board of Education and CIMO require Finnish training providers to invest in improving the quality of international cooperation. The aim of this guidebook is to provide practical help for this development work. It offers tools and advice for the planning of international cooperation to training providers who are at different stages of internationalisation. It is meant for managers or any others involved in international cooperation.

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1 Increasing the quality and effectiveness of the management of internationalisation, Publication by the Finnish National Board of Education, HAMK and CIMO 2008

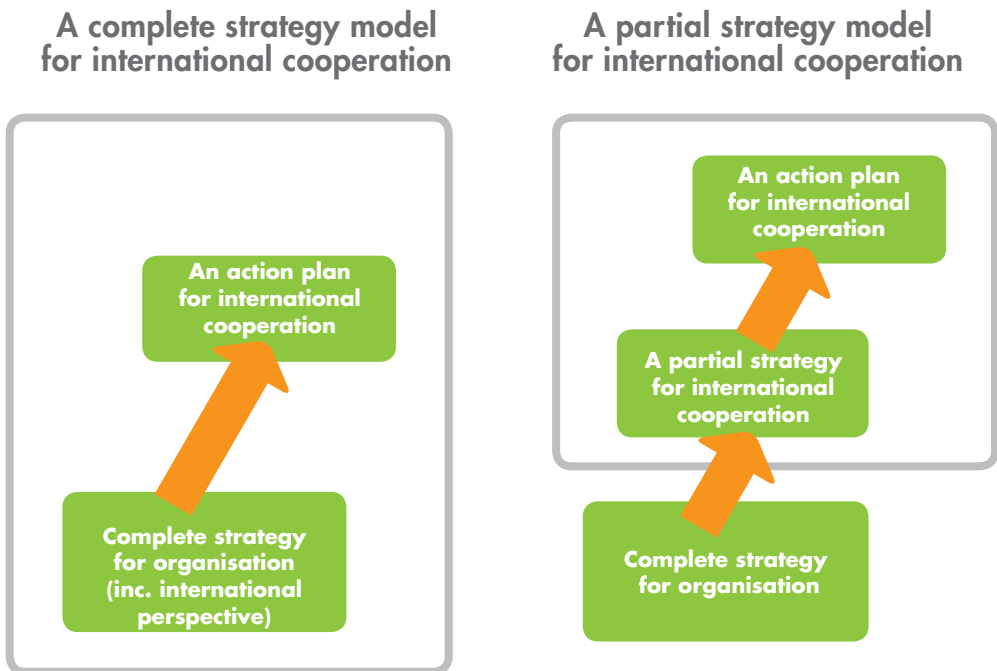
The guide is accompanied by a website at [www.cimo.fi](http://www.cimo.fi) | Oppilaitoksille | Ammatillisille oppilaitoksille (This service is only available in Finnish.). There are practical examples, advice and tools for strategic planning of international activities on the website. It was launched at the beginning of 2011. It is maintained by the Finnish National Board of Education and CIMO in cooperation with training providers and other actors in the field.

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



# 1 Strategic planning of international cooperation

The goal of a strategy is to give direction to the work of training providers and vocational training institutions. Based on the strategy, an action plan is then written, detailing the actions to be taken in order to achieve the strategic goals. 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. This will ensure that the international perspective will be taken into account at all stages of strategic planning. This means that people should consider and analyse how internationalisation is included, for example, in the organisation’s visions for the future or its values.



*Graph 1 Strategy models for international cooperation*

The complete strategy model will help make the whole organisation commit to the strategic goals and ensure that there are sufficient resources for the work. At organisation level, it also helps people to better see how international cooperation fits in with the overall development of the organisation and professional development of staff. It will also help people remember international issues better when they do their annual planning.

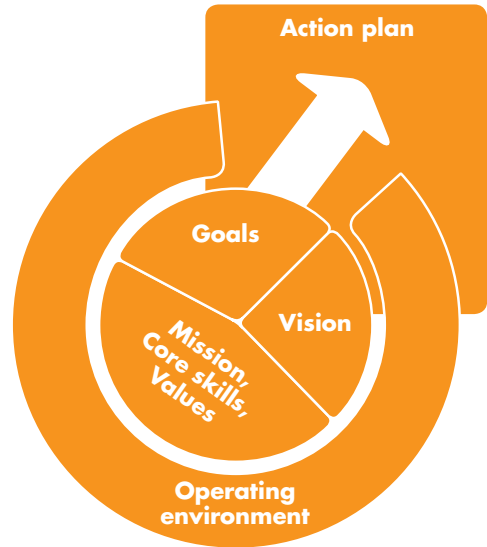
The complete strategy for an organisation can also be done in parts. In this scenario, the international strategy is written after the overall strategy for the organisation, which results in a “partial strategy model” for international cooperation. In this case, it is particularly important to make sure that the international strategy is based on the overall strategy and that it is in line with the goals of the overall strategy.

An action plan for international cooperation will follow from the strategic goals.

## 2 How to write a strategy for international cooperation?

The purpose of an international strategy is to make international cooperation known as widely as possible within an organisation and to make it an everyday part of its activities. For this reason, it is recommended that all staff members are involved in the strategic planning, preferably including also students and e.g. board members and external cooperation partners.

Graph 2 presents a simplified model for strategic planning to describe incorporation of the international perspective in strategies.



*Graph 2 Elements of strategic planning*

The operations strategy of an organisation is based on

- analysis of the operating environment and trends in it
- its mission
- its core skills
- its values.

On the basis of the above, an organisation will decide on

1. its vision for the future
2. its strategic goals, which aim at fulfilling the vision
3. the practical steps that need to be taken in order to achieve the goals
  - on the long term
  - on an annual basis.

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

## 2.1 The operating environment

The operating environment refers to 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 and changes affecting it. It is affected by, for example, education and training policies, demographic changes, immigration, labour market and changes in it as well as changes within the organisation.



**Think how changes in the operating environment will affect the international cooperation of the training provider and training institution:**

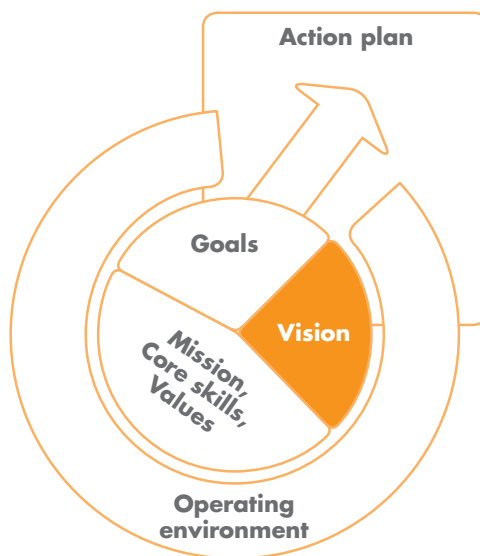
- What changes foreseen in the operating environment should be taken into account?
- How will the international dimension affect jobs and skills requirements in the future?
- What kinds of jobs will new graduates have in the future and where?
- What is the state of internationalisation in different fields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

**It is advisable to take the following points into consideration in strategic planning:**

- ✓ One's professional skills should include an ability to operate in a multicultural environment.
- ✓ English is often the internal working language of multinational companies, but the need to know other languages is also increasing.
- ✓ It is necessary to be able to work in a multicultural environment and to provide services to customers from different cultures in more and more jobs.
- ✓ To work in international business requires not only language skills, but also an ability to operate in different working cultures.
- ✓ The customers in the public sector are becoming more and more multicultural.

## 2.2 Vision

The vision describes where an organisation wants to be in the future, based on its purpose and values<sup>2</sup>. In the vision lies the future power of a strategy. It shows people what the goals of their organisation are and where their efforts will be directed in the future. A good vision inspires and guides.



**Think how the international dimension should manifest itself in the vision:**

- How can the training institution become more competitive in the future?
- What does this mean for students and staff in practice?
- What kind of national and international networks should be created to fulfil the vision?

**The international dimension in the vision can mean, for example, the following:**

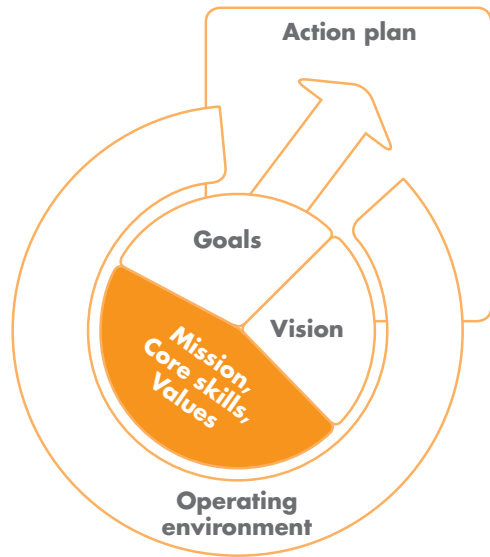
- ✓ Establishing strategic geographical priority areas for building networks.
- ✓ Expanding international cooperation to new regions.
- ✓ Multiculturalism is an area of development that permeates all operations.
- ✓ Students will be employed in international businesses.

2 Quality Management Recommendation for Vocational Education and Training. Finnish National Board of Education 2008.

## 2.3 Mission, core skills and values

**The mission** answers the question: "Why are we here?". It justifies the existence of an organisation and it has an important role in steering its operations.

**Core skills** refer to knowledge and competences that nobody else has, the expertise of an organisation. The core skills of an organisation are a unique combination of knowledge, skills and technologies that are hard to copy or replace. Core skills help the organisation to achieve a competitive edge and add special value to customers.



### Think,

- how is international dimension included in the mission
- what are the core skills in the international activities of your organisation.

### The mission can include for example these ideas:

- ✓ your staff is international
- ✓ you will specialise in training international experts in certain fields
- ✓ you will specialise in the training of immigrants
- ✓ the aim of your training provision is to get your students employed in international businesses.

**Values** express what is important in an organisation and what its operations are based on<sup>3</sup>. Values steer the way people and organisations operate. Values in vocational training may include, for example, employer-orientation, tolerance, equality and student-orientation.

**Think how the values of your organisation manifest themselves**

- in the processes of international cooperation in practice
- in the day-to-day work of staff who work with international affairs.

**Values manifest themselves, for example, in**

- ✓ listening to students' wishes when selecting countries for international networks (student-orientation)
- ✓ trying to develop forms of international cooperation that are accessible also to underage students (equality)
- ✓ giving different nationalities the opportunity to express their cultures (tolerance, equality)

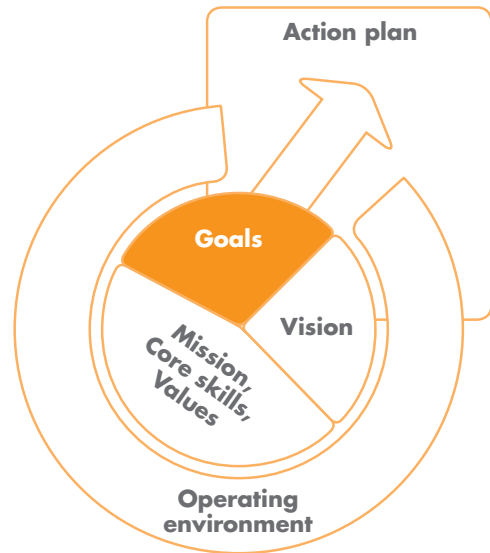
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3 Quality Management Recommendation for Vocational Education and Training. Finnish National Board of Education 2008.

## 2.4 Goals

Actions that follow the organisations mission should have set goals.

Strategic goals are set so that the organisation will develop towards the desired state (vision).



### Think

- how the international dimension manifests itself in the strategic goals of your organisation
- what goals should be set in order to fulfil the vision of your organisation in the area of international operations.

### For example:

- ✓ The strategic goal of "developing the quality of training to meet the needs of globalising business and industry" includes goals, such as language skills, ability to operate in multicultural work environments and knowledge of different cultures.
- ✓ The strategic goal of "building an international network" will require extending your current network to more countries or strengthening cooperation with current partner countries.



## 2.5 Action plan

An action plan is a document written to implement the strategy of an organisation and to improve quality. It covers performance targets, procedures, schedules and resources for set actions.<sup>4</sup>

The action plan sets out measures that need to be taken in order to achieve the set goals. An action plan is written annually, including a schedule for activities and taking available financial and human resources into account. The implementation of action plans is evaluated annually, and the plans are modified accordingly. A longer-term action plan is written every 3–5 years.



### Think

- what measures should be taken to achieve your short term and long term internationalisation goals
- which of these measures can be taken in the coming year
- are there alternative measures that could be taken to achieve the same goal
- how to provide funding and resources for all international cooperation.

### Examples of goals in an action plan:

- ✓ We will begin cooperation with Norway next year and will later extend cooperation to all Nordic countries.
- ✓ We will reserve specialist expertise resources
- ✓ for the implementation of development projects.
- ✓ In order to meet the targets set for language skills, we will arrange language training and student and teacher exchanges to countries where relevant languages are spoken.
- ✓ We will join the Japan network.

<sup>4</sup> Quality Management Recommendation for Vocational Education and Training. Finnish National Board of Education 2008.

## 3 International cooperation and its development

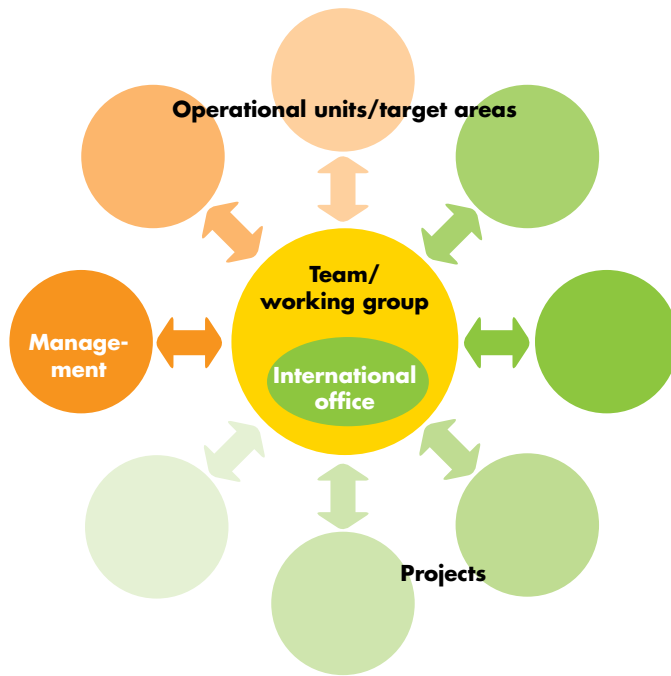
After a strategy for international cooperation has been completed, it is time to consider how to put it into practice. In this chapter, we discuss organisation and implementation of activities, monitoring and quality management.

### 3.1 Organisation

When organising international activities, it is important to take into consideration the guidelines given by the management and also to ensure the commitment of the management. Most training institutions have appointed a person who is responsible for coordinating and managing the international activities of different units.

The manager of international affairs is usually supported by a team of international coordinators or other representatives from different subject or target areas in the institution and those responsible for international projects. It is important to include all relevant expertise from all international operations, such as international vocational skills competitions and trainee placement enterprises.

Larger training institutions have a separate international office, which includes people responsible for international student services and project administration, in addition to the manager of international affairs.



**Graph 3** *Organisation of international activities*

Because international cooperation cannot be financially viable as an independent activity, it is particularly important to secure the commitment and support of the management. This can be ensured by either including a member of the management group in the international team or by having the international manager to attend management meetings.

It is essential to establish a link between international activities and teaching and guidance, because in this way it is possible to reach the most important target group, the students.

## 3.2 Human resources in international cooperation

International cooperation requires multiple skills: you need to have an extensive knowledge of the operations of the whole organisation, understand the present state of your operating environment and foresee changes in it. Staff responsible for international cooperation can include a manager/head/coordinators of international affairs, project coordinators, assistants, teachers etc.

### **International cooperation includes the following tasks<sup>5</sup>**

- participation in the strategic planning of the organisation
- composing international project proposals, administration of projects and reporting
- participation in the planning of training that produces international competences
- writing the action plan for international cooperation
- participation in international projects
- organisation of international seminars
- preparation of students and staff for international exchanges
- welcoming and guidance of international students
- organisation of accommodation and programmes for incoming staff and students
- establishing links with organisations abroad
- negotiating student and staff exchange agreements with partners
- negotiations and international meetings
- presentations in international events
- representing the organisation to visitors from abroad
- internal information events
- providing information to students and staff.

The size of the organisation and the strategies chosen determine how many people are needed to carry out these tasks. However, international dimension should belong to everybody's responsibilities.

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5 Adapted from International Operation Agent (IOA) <http://www.ioagent.net/>

### 3.3 Networks of training providers

Cooperation with training institutions and other organisations both at home and abroad is a key part of international cooperation. The partners in the networks of training institutions will often also collaborate with each other. The unifying factor among partners in a network can be, for example, a subject of study, Nordic cooperation, common language or similar development goals.

Networking is cost-efficient because the fixed costs of the activities are shared between the partners. People can also learn about application procedures for funding from each other in the networks. Furthermore, new tools to promote internationalisation in training institutions are being created and accumulated. Networks also promote certification of mobility, which makes longer-term funding and development possible.<sup>6</sup>

Training providers make written agreements for cooperation with their partners. Agreements set out the principles for the implementation of student and staff exchanges and trainee placements. Long-standing networks can for example establish effective routines, which provide more security in organisation of student exchanges. With domestic partners institutions can for example agree on curriculum collaboration or joint student and staff exchanges to a certain region.

Networks should be developed according to the established international strategies. The networks should be extended by acquiring new partners from regions or subject areas deemed strategically necessary. Partner affiliations that are not strategically relevant will become abandoned naturally 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.

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6 A study on networks in international cooperation by Siru Korkkala. 2010.

### 3.4 Internationalisation and implementation of qualification requirements

A central task of vocational education and training is to train skilled workers for the increasingly international labour market. Training providers must make strategic plans and choices: how to meet these challenges by providing qualifications and parts of qualifications, by teaching arrangements and skilled staff.

Skills requirements of vocational qualifications and study programmes/specialisations include skills needed in an increasingly international labour market, such as vocational competences and language and cultural competences. On the basis of the set qualification requirements, training providers will have to decide how they will ensure that international competences are achieved at school or during work-based learning. This information then needs to be incorporated in their curricula and plans for preparatory training and arrangements of competence-based qualifications. Furthermore, they need to decide how to evaluate these competences in vocational skills demonstrations and other assessments and examinations.

Vocational qualifications include compulsory and optional study modules, which both can be taken into account when gaining international competences. In initial vocational training, training providers can also offer special, so-called local training modules, which have been developed in cooperation with employers to meet the needs of the more and more international labour market. In addition, initial vocational qualifications can be individually expanded so that students can specialise in international tasks. Decisions need to be taken on how on-the-job learning and skills demonstrations can be carried out in international work places in Finland and abroad, on how competences acquired in international learning environments can be validated and recognised and on the procedures for transfer of credits. It would be sensible to link international skills competitions, practice enterprise trade fairs and sectoral and other seminars strategically to qualifications and training.

Students' individual study plans and skills demonstration plans will also have personalised learning paths for acquiring competences needed in the international labour market. International dimension should be included in the study programmes of all students and learners in some form. Similarly, assessment of students' international competences should be a part of their assessment plans.

To be able to bring the international dimension into qualifications and teaching, teachers and other staff must have international competences. International

and multicultural dimensions can be incorporated into teaching regardless of the subject of study. It is also a good idea to take advantage of the cultural knowledge and language skills of students and teachers from different cultural backgrounds.

Since 2012, it has been a requirement that qualification certificates indicate the level of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and how it relates to the levels in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). Certificates must include study credits transferred through the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) and the credits that are part of the qualification or partial qualifications. These together will help compare qualifications and their elements in international contexts. It is now a national requirement that the study levels and credits must be taken into account in training providers' curricula, plans for preparatory training, arrangements of competence-based training and all personal study plans.

### 3.5 Evaluation and improvement of activities

Like any other activities, international activities must also be evaluated to get information about achievement of goals, quality of work and development needs. The most important thing is to evaluate how the targets set for international cooperation have been achieved both from the perspective of the organisation and the individuals. Activities can be assessed, e.g. by using indicators to measure sub-processes (e.g. mobility statistics) and by collecting feedback from participants and partners. Feedback from students can give information, such as their satisfaction with international services, their wishes for optional course provision and for target countries of student exchanges.



**Graph 4** *The Deming Quality Circle*

A peer assessment among partner organisations can be used as a form of external evaluation.

Evaluation of activities is a part of the overall quality management of an organisation. It is best to select indicators that allow data to be collected, at least partly, at the same time as data collected in the framework of the general quality system of the organisation, for example by including questions in student and staff feedback. Those responsible for international affairs should ensure that work is systematically developed on the basis of information received through evaluations.

Both qualitative and quantitative indicators should be set for the sub-processes of international cooperation. We will list the most common sub-processes in international cooperation below and provide an example of a quantitative indicator of success related to each sub-process.

### **Student mobility**

The stages of this sub-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 the most important sub-processes of international cooperation so it makes sense to describe them in detail to ensure a smooth running of activities both as a sending and as a host organisation. It is particularly important to remember the use of the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET) that covers, for example, recognition of studies completed and the use of the Europass.

- The volume of mobility can be used as the indicator, for example: the number of students who have been on an exchange of over two weeks as a percentage of the total number of students enrolled in the institution in the year in question.

### **Staff mobility, outgoing and incoming**

The mobility of managers and other staff members also contributes to the achievement of strategic goals of international cooperation, because their attitudes, language skills and commitment to international cooperation 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 which is difficult to measure.

- The indicator can be, for example, the number of exchanges of 5 days as a percentage of the total number of students enrolled in the institution in the year in question.



## International competences of staff

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

- The indicator can be, for example, the number of short exchanges and trips as a percentage of the total number of full-time staff members.

## International competitions and training for them

Participation in international competitions allows training institutions to compare the quality and practices of their training to those of other countries and improve 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. This gives them an international perspective into training and teaching at the highest level. Teachers and students can be encouraged to take part in competitions for example by giving presentations about previous competitions and through exchanges abroad. Young people who have participated in competitions may benefit from their international networks later at work.

- The indicator can be, for example, the number of students who received training for international skills competitions as a percentage of the number of students graduated.

## International development projects

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

- The indicator can be, for example, the amount of external funding as a percentage of the amount of unit price funding received by the training provider.

## Internationalisation at home

Internationalisation at home refers to, for example, integration of students with immigrant background to the Finnish culture, provision of training in foreign languages and students' participation in these activities.

- The indicator can be, for example, the number of incoming international students as a percentage of students enrolled in the institution in the year in question.

### 3.6 Statistics on international activities

CIMO collects statistics on international mobility of students and staff in educational institutions in Finland every year. These statistics provide good indicators for measuring sub-processes of international cooperation. The statistics cover all Finnish training organisations that offer training leading to vocational qualifications. Statistics are collected both on outgoing and incoming mobility.

CIMO requires that even organisations that do not have any international mobility during a particular year when data is collected will have to register to the data collection system. This is to ensure that the statistics are as complete as possible. A report is produced every year on the basis of the data collected and published online. The report includes mobility numbers by training institution and training provider. It lists all organisations regardless of whether they have had any international mobility or not and whether they submitted any data. The statistics allow comparisons between organisations as long as you remember to take their size into account. The numbers of students and those enrolled in any particular year can be found on the Finnish National Board of Education's website on funding <http://vos.uta.fi/rap/> and from the Wera reporting service.

## Final Words

The review of the future of the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture emphasises that we need active and tolerant citizens in the increasingly global operating environment of education and training, research and information production. New social networks, transparent societies and cultural changes pose new challenges to vocational education and training in Finland. The improvement of international competitiveness requires also the internationalisation of vocational education and training. This means that students should be better prepared to work in more international work places both at home or abroad. The Finnish vocational education and training system is of high quality and, we have started to export, for example, our skills demonstrations practices.

We hope that this guide will support vocational training providers in their strategic planning for international cooperation and help them meet the above challenges.

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The aim of this guidebook is to help training providers in their strategic planning of international cooperation and to define its role in development of vocational training. The book offers tools and advice for planning of international activities to training institutions at different stages of internationalisation.

Strategic planning of international cooperation will help training institutions make it clear to students and staff how international cooperation is linked to the core activities and development of the institution. Strategic planning will steer international cooperation and make it more systematic, which will help management of the activities and the day-to-day work of staff.

In cooperation:



Finnish National Board of Education [www.oph.fi/english](http://www.oph.fi/english)  
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