



Navigating quality assurance in non-formal adult learning

A comparative analysis of European approaches



CONSORTIUM

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- Stowarzyszenie Trenerskie Organizacji Pozarządowych – sTOP (NGO Trainers Association) – Poland
- European Association for the Education of Adults - EAEA – Belgium
- Opintokeskukset ry (Finnish Study Centres' Association) – Finland
- Pučko otvoreno učilište Varaždin (People's Open University Varazdin) – Croatia



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Navigating quality assurance in non-formal adult learning:

A comparative analysis of European approaches

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Summary

This report, "Navigating Quality Assurance in Non-Formal Adult Learning," presents a comparative analysis of quality assurance (QA) practices across diverse European contexts within the non-formal adult learning and education (ALE) sector. As an output of the Erasmus+ Q-ALE project, it examines approaches from Poland, Croatia, Finland and draws upon broader international examples collected by the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA). The study aims to identify shared principles, structural differences, and guiding insights to inform the development of a common European quality framework – the Q-ALE system.

The methodology employed a qualitative comparative review of materials, including curriculum documents, QA tools, feedback forms, and ethical codes. This approach allowed for contextual sensitivity and an exploration of implicit values. Key findings reveal that while QA models operate at different levels (practitioner, institutional, policy), several common denominators emerge. These include a strong emphasis on learner-centredness, reflective and developmental purposes for QA, the need for flexible tools, defined yet adaptable quality dimensions, evidence-based yet humane approaches, and a core grounding in ethical and inclusive values.

The analysis highlights the Finnish model's strength in ethical language and learner voice, the Polish focus on trainer professionalism, the Croatian adherence to formal QA logic, and the EAEA's synthesis of diverse European tools like RARPA and QUALTRACK. The report synthesises these findings into a proposed set of "Final common framework components" for quality assurance in non-formal ALE, emphasising aspects like developmental purpose, learner-centricity, mixed-methods evidence, and values such as equity and ethics.

Finally, the report offers specific recommendations for the design and implementation of the future Q-ALE system. These include positioning QA as a learning tool, embedding multi-level logic, using modular and adaptive tools, prioritising ethics and learner involvement, promoting dialogue over control, creating a value-based label focused on improvement, ensuring inclusive access, and emphasising a cycle of piloting and iteration. This comparative analysis provides a robust foundation for constructing a flexible, relevant, and effective QA system tailored to the unique landscape of European non-formal adult learning.

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1. Introduction

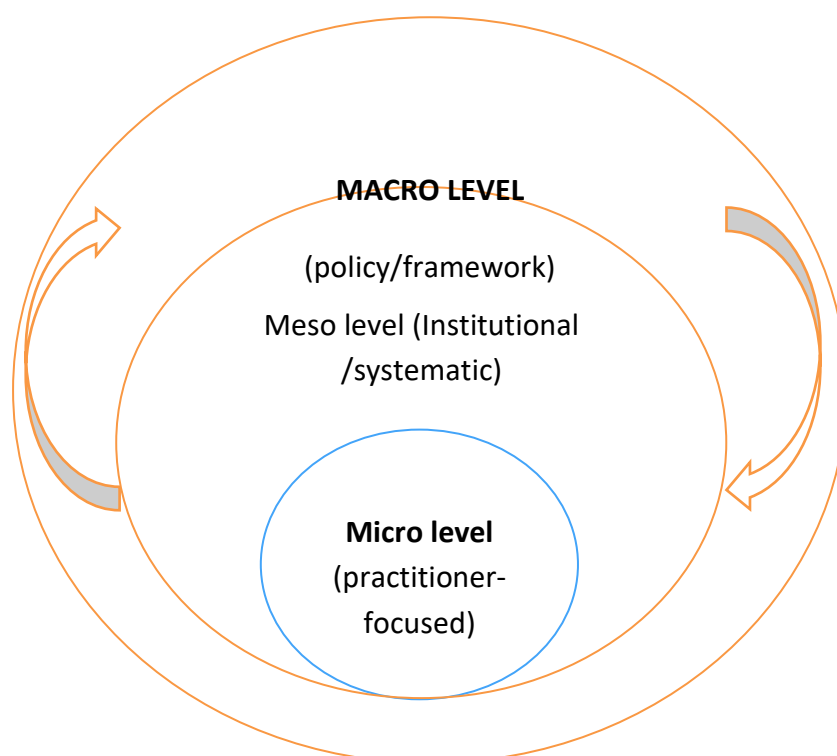
The landscape of non-formal adult learning and education (ALE) is dynamic and diverse, yet fragmented and often under-recognised. Ensuring quality across such varied contexts requires approaches that are context-sensitive, ethically grounded, and flexible enough to support providers of all sizes. This report is the result of a joint effort between partners from Poland, Croatia, Finland, and the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA). It provides a comparative analysis of quality assurance (QA) practices in non-formal ALE, identifying shared principles, structural differences, and guiding insights. Crucially, this analysis serves as foundational research for the development of a common European quality framework, the Q-ALE system, which aims to support and enhance quality in this vital sector.

Methodology

The analysis drew on materials submitted by project partners, selected for their distinct and representative approaches to QA in non-formal ALE within their national contexts. These included curriculum documents, quality assurance tools, feedback and evaluation forms, ethical codes, and reflective instruments.

The study employed a structured comparative review approach. Given the diversity of ALE systems and the often non-standardised nature of their QA tools, a qualitative method was selected to allow for contextual sensitivity and an exploration of implicit values and practices. Each partner's materials were examined individually to identify key QA characteristics — purpose, scope, target audience, and underlying values — and findings were then synthesised across partners to map differences and commonalities.

The comparative framework was built inductively from the materials themselves rather than applied as a pre-existing schema, though the three-level structure served as an organising lens throughout. Attention was paid to both the functional structure of QA models and their



normative underpinnings, particularly values around ethics, inclusivity, and learner agency. The Finnish contributions were especially influential in shaping the ethical and learner-centred scope of the analysis. The comparative table in Annex 2 provides a structured overview of key features across partners, offering a partially systematised complement to the narrative analysis.

Each partner's materials were first analysed independently, followed by comparative synthesis to determine convergences and divergences at the practitioner (**micro**), institutional (**meso**), and policy (**macro**) levels.

2. Analysis per partner

Poland (sTOP)

The Polish model, as represented by sTOP, focuses on the quality of the individual adult educator, particularly trainers and supervisors.

Key elements:

- Competence frameworks: Detailed breakdowns of knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for educators.
- Structured training curriculum: Emphasising communication, facilitation, neurodidactics, and anti-discrimination.
- Certification and supervision: QA mechanisms include formal certification processes for trainers and peer-based supervision for ongoing professional development.
- Evaluation tools: Includes instruments for trainer self-reflection and the evaluation of training effectiveness.
- Ethical grounding: Adherence to a professional code of ethics is a cornerstone.

Scope: Quality assurance is primarily located at the **practitioner level**, ensuring individual competence and ethical delivery of non-formal ALE.

Croatia (POU Varaždin)

Croatia, exemplified by POU Varaždin, employs a systemic and institutional model, grounded in national VET-inspired QA standards, adapted for the non-formal ALE context.

Key elements:

- Institutional self-evaluation: Structured around the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle for continuous improvement.
- Quality standards: Comprehensive standards covering governance, programme delivery, learner care, resources, and ethics within the institution.
- Stakeholder engagement: Mechanisms ensure learners, staff, and external stakeholders actively participate in QA processes.
- Transparency and strategic planning: QA is aligned with the institution's overall organisational strategy and transparently communicated.

Scope: QA is embedded within the **institutional level**, integrating internal review processes and often preparing for or responding to external review requirements.

Finland (FSC Study Centres)

The Finnish model, showcased by the Finnish Study Centres (FSC), represents a value-driven, learner-centred approach operating at both course and organisational levels.

Key elements:

- Safer space principles: An ethical baseline promoting respectful, inclusive, and psychologically safe learning environments.
- Course-level feedback: Forms are designed to capture learner perspectives on atmosphere, relevance, well-being, and empowerment, rather than solely administrative aspects.
- Curriculum frameworks: Designed to support formal credit recognition where applicable, while maintaining pedagogical flexibility inherent in non-formal ALE.
- Societal impact classification: Learning outcomes are tracked for their civic and personal relevance, emphasising the broader impact of ALE.

- Organisational tools: Study centres utilise dashboards, accessibility checks, and reflective templates to manage and report on QA internally.

Scope: QA is **blended across learner experience and institutional reporting**, with a strong focus on ethics, critical reflection, and robust feedback mechanisms.

EAEA and international examples

The EAEA contributes a meta-perspective, synthesising a range of existing tools, policies, and established QA frameworks from across Europe to inform the Q-ALE project. This is not a single EAEA "model" but an aggregation of diverse, recognised approaches.

Key elements:

- Advocacy for core principles: Emphasises ethics, inclusion, and learner-centredness as fundamental to quality in non-formal ALE.
- Bundled and flexible indicators: Promotes the use of flexible, layered indicators over rigid, purely quantitative metrics.
- Highlighting established tools: Key examples reviewed and leveraged include the European Peer Review Manual (like the ONE project's), QUALTRACK (as a rating system), and RARPA (for recognising non-accredited learning).
- Incorporating diverse European examples: The synthesis includes national approaches such as the Slovenian Quality Indicators model and the UK's RARPA framework, alongside tools developed in other EU projects.

Scope: QA from this perspective is **strategic and policy-oriented**, aiming to inform the development of adaptable frameworks and promote good practice across national borders.

3. Towards a shared framework: Patterns and pathways

Revisiting core scopes and levels:

Each model studied operates at a distinct, though sometimes overlapping, level of the ALE ecosystem, providing a multi-faceted view of QA:

- **Micro-level (Practitioner-focused):**
 - *Poland (sTOP):* Focused on the competences, ethics, and reflective development of individual trainers and supervisors.
- **Meso-level (Institutional/systemic):**
 - *Croatia (POU Varaždin):* Concentrates on the institutional QA system through structured self-evaluation, strategic planning, and defined quality domains.
 - *Finland (FSC):* Study centres manage QA through organisational tools, data dashboards, and internal processes informed by strong ethical and learner-centred values.
- **Macro-level and meso-level (Policy/framework and also institutional level):**
 - *EAEA and International models:* Focused on meta-level strategy and the synthesis of established frameworks (such as RARPA, QUALTRACK, Peer Review, and Slovenian indicators) that influence the wider policy environment and provide models for good practice across Europe, including the institutional level (meso).

This layered approach confirms that quality assurance in non-formal ALE is not a singular process but a composite structure of interconnected dimensions, each requiring tailored yet compatible approaches.

Cross-cutting QA themes:

Despite varied levels and forms, several core themes emerge consistently across the analysed models:

- **Quality of the learning experience:** Whether in curriculum structure, facilitation style, or classroom atmosphere, all models aim to support meaningful, engaging, and effective learning.
- **Educator competence and development:** A universally acknowledged pillar—central in sTOP's certification, explicitly present in Croatia's HR domains, and strongly encouraged by EAEA's advocacy for professionalization.
- **Evaluation and improvement cycles:** All examples incorporate mechanisms for review and iterative enhancement—from peer supervision (sTOP) and self-evaluation

cycles (POU Varaždin) to reflective practices (FSC) and structured review processes (RARPA, Peer review).

- **Learner-centredness:** This is the most consistent and pervasive theme. It is particularly strong in FSC's safer space commitments and emphasis on learner empowerment, RARPA's focus on individual learner progress tracking, and EAEA's championing of learner voice.

This synthesis supports the notion that a shared European framework for non-formal ALE should preserve this diversity of levels and approaches while connecting them through common, foundational values.

4. Common denominators across all models

Building on the cross-cutting themes, a deeper analysis reveals several common denominators that form the bedrock of effective QA in non-formal ALE:

Ethical grounding
Self-evaluation
Policy-level coherence
Strategic planning
Flexible tools
Mixed-method evaluation
Transparency
Narrative evidence
Learner-centred
Reflective and developmental
Inclusive QA practices
Contextual sensitivity
Peer review

4.1 Key denominators

1. Learner-centred approach:

- This is paramount and present across micro, meso, and macro levels. It manifests in tailoring content, considering learner needs and experiences, and promoting learner agency.
- Finnish Study Centres (FSC) and the UK's RARPA (highlighted by EAEA) explicitly embed learner voice in their tools and pedagogy, through inclusive feedback forms and progress tracking focused on individual goals.

2. Reflective and developmental purpose:

- QA is predominantly viewed not as a punitive measure but as a tool to support the growth - of individuals (educators, learners), institutions, and the wider ALE system.

- Examples include sTOP's supervision for trainers, Croatia's institutional self-evaluation cycle for strategic improvement, and the formative nature of processes like Peer Review and RARPA.

3. Flexible tools for diverse providers:

- The non-formal ALE sector is characterised by a wide variety of providers, from small NGOs to larger institutions. Effective QA tools must be adaptable to this diversity.
- The Finnish (FSC) approach and EAEA's synthesised examples (e.g., modular aspects of Peer Review) prioritise simplicity, adaptability, and modularity to cater to different provider sizes and contexts.

4. Defined yet adaptable quality dimensions:

- While specific criteria vary, common dimensions of quality consistently appear across models. These often include:
 - *Teaching and learning:* Curriculum, andragogy, learning environment.
 - *Ethics:* Professional conduct, integrity, learner well-being (very prominent in FSC and sTOP).
 - *Accessibility:* Ensuring learning opportunities are available and accessible to diverse learners.
 - *Information & Communication:* Clear information for learners and stakeholders.

5. Evidence-based yet humane approaches:

- There's a common desire to base QA on evidence, but with a recognition that non-formal ALE requires more than just quantitative data.
- Models often combine measurable indicators (where appropriate) with rich narrative reflection (e.g., qualitative feedback forms in Finland, learner stories, reflective logs in RARPA, self-assessment narratives in Peer Review).

6. Ethical grounding and inclusive values:

- A commitment to ethical practice and inclusivity is a core thread.
- This is strongest and most explicit in the Finnish (FSC) model with its "safer space" principles, in Poland's (sTOP) adherence to a code of ethics for trainers, and in EAEA's policy advocacy for inclusive ALE.

4.2 Comparative analysis: Feedback and QA questionnaires

To illustrate how these common denominators are operationalised in practice, the following **comparative table provides an analysis of specific feedback and questionnaire tools** utilised across the four core Q-ALE partners: Poland (sTOP), Croatia (POU), Finland (FSC), and within the EAEA examples. This detailed comparison reveals both the diversity of instrumentation and the shared underlying principles guiding their application.

Feature / Partner	Poland (sTOP)	Croatia (POU Varazdin)	Finland (FSC)	International (EAEA)
Primary target	Trainers / Supervisors (practitioner QA)	Institutions / Management / Teachers	Learners, with an indirect focus on trainers and learning spaces	Learners and providers (depending on the tool)
Type of tool	Trainer self-evaluation forms, peer supervision notes	Self-evaluation instruments, structured QA forms, external eval tools	Short student feedback forms; inclusive, reflective, anonymous	RARPA: 6-step learner progress model
Level of use	Individual (certification process)	Institutional (internal and external QA)	Learner-level and aggregated for organisational QA	Depends – both provider and system-level
Content themes	Competence, training goals, self-assessed development	Strategic goals, programme quality, HR, management, ethics	Learning outcomes, safe space, trainer style, practical conditions, accessibility	Learner needs, achievement, planning, review
Feedback method	Reflective forms + supervision discussions	Surveys + narrative self-assessment	Likert scale + open questions (1-page, friendly, anonymous)	Structured reflection (RARPA); multi-area self-assessment
Learner-centredness	Moderate (via trainer's view of learner needs)	Moderate–High (learner care tracked, but more system-driven)	Very high – learners define what was learned, what worked, what to improve	High – especially in RARPA (progress-based tracking)
Inclusivity / ethical anchoring	Code of ethics for trainers	Ethics included as one QA domain	Embedded throughout (e.g. safer space)	Yes – EAEA promotes ethical, humanistic QA approaches

			questions, access, tone)	
Use of results for QA	Certification, supervision, and professional growth	Institutional improvement, compliance	Feedback loops within study centres, informal staff development	Reflective improvement, no formal accreditation tied
Formality/bureaucracy	Medium – tied to certification	High – linked to AVETAE formal standards	Low – forms are short, user-friendly, and gently phrased	Varies – RARPA is structured but flexible
Do tools promote reflective learning?	Yes, for trainers	For institutions	Strongly – learners encouraged to reflect on outcomes and relevance	Yes, especially in RARPA

Shared themes in feedback tools:

- All models, despite their structural differences, incorporate elements of **reflection** and aim to gather **formative feedback** to drive improvement.
- The Finnish (FSC) tools and EAEA-highlighted examples like RARPA strongly prioritise **learner voice**, designing instruments that capture the learner's direct experience and perspective.
- **Inclusivity** in feedback mechanisms is best modelled in the Finnish (FSC) tools (e.g., anonymous, short, gently phrased forms focused on safety and empowerment) and through the principles advocated by EAEA.
- The **nature of the tools** varies significantly, from highly **structured evaluation grids** (characteristic of the Croatian POU model, aligning with formal VET standards) to **open prompts and narratives** (central to the Finnish FSC approach, encouraging personal meaning-making).

4.3 Key comparative insights from partner models

1. **FSC (Finland)** stands out for:
 - Explicit **ethical language** directly within its feedback forms (e.g., questions about feeling safe and respected).

- Prioritising **learner voice** and experience over purely administrative QA data points.
- Encouraging **personal meaning-making** and reflection as part of the learning and feedback process.

2. **sTOP (Poland)** focuses on:

- **Trainer professionalism** and competence, viewed from both internal (self-reflection, self-assessment) and external (supervision, certification) perspectives.
- Utilising feedback primarily as an integral part of **competence development** for educators.

3. **POU (Croatia)** aligns with:

- **Formal education QA logic**, employing comprehensive institutional self-evaluation across multiple quality domains, often linked to national VET standards (AVETAE).
- Learner voice is represented and considered, but typically as **one dimension among many** within a structured institutional framework.

4. **EAEA examples** are diverse and demonstrate adaptability:

- **RARPA** is a structured process but is deeply **learner-centric** in its focus on recognising and recording individual learner progress, especially in non-accredited contexts.

4.4 Summary by QA philosophy

Model	Focus	QA Style	Feedback Culture
sTOP (Poland)	Trainer competence	Developmental / Certified	Reflective and formative for trainers
POU (Croatia)	Institutional system quality	Formal / Structured	Strategic, management-led

FSC (Finland)	Learner experience and values	Ethical / Participatory	Empowering, inclusive, micro–macro loop
EAEA models	Policy & cross- model guidance	Meta-framework / Adaptive	Depends on the tool (e.g., RARPA = high learner focus)

5. Final common framework components

Based on the comparative analysis, the following interconnected components are proposed as foundational for a shared European QA framework in non-formal ALE. These components aim to be adaptable while upholding core quality principles:

Dimension	Shared characteristic
Purpose	Developmental, not controlling; improvement-focused
Perspective	Learner-centred, prioritising learner needs and experience
Scope	Applicable across micro (practitioner), meso (institutional), and macro (policy/system) levels
Tools & Processes	Emphasising self-assessment, peer review/collaboration, and supportive supervision/mentoring where appropriate. Learners' feedback is a core process and tool.
Evidence	Mixed methods: valuing qualitative insights (narratives, reflections) alongside relevant quantitative indicators
Values	Equity, ethics, inclusivity, transparency, learner well-being, and empowerment

Flexibility	Adaptable to provider size, type, context, and specific learner groups
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6. Recommendations for the Q-ALE system

The following recommendations are proposed for the design and implementation of the Q-ALE system, drawing from the comparative analysis:

1. **Position QA as a learning tool:** The Q-ALE system should primarily emphasise formative, reflective, and developmental aspects, encouraging continuous improvement rather than being perceived as a purely summative or compliance-driven exercise.
2. **Embed multi-level logic:** Recognise and cater to the distinct yet interconnected QA needs at the micro (practitioner), meso (institutional), and macro (policy/framework) levels within the system.
3. **Use modular and adaptive tools:** Allow providers to navigate the QA system at their own pace and depth, selecting modules or components most relevant to their context and developmental stage.
4. **Prioritise ethics and learner involvement:** Integrate principles of inclusive design, learner well-being (drawing from Finnish insights), and genuine learner agency throughout the QA processes and tools. The concept of learners as co-designers and co-evaluators of learning programmes.
5. **Promote dialogue, not control:** Encourage peer-to-peer learning formats (like aspects of peer review), storytelling, and the use of flexible, qualitative evidence alongside quantitative data.
6. **Create a value-based label (if applicable):** If a Q-ALE label or recognition is developed, it should celebrate a provider's commitment to ongoing improvement and ethical, learner-centred practices, rather than solely adherence to a rigid set of compliance criteria. This aligns with the flexible, developmental, and non-punitive ethos suitable for the diverse non-formal ALE sector.
7. **Ensure inclusive access:** The Q-ALE system and its tools must be designed to address equity, accessibility (for learners and providers with diverse needs), and relevance for all learners in non-formal ALE.

8. **Pilot and Iterate:** Co-develop the Q-ALE tools and processes with a diverse range of providers (differing in size, type, and national context), test them thoroughly in various settings, and refine the system based on robust feedback before wider implementation.

Glossary of acronyms and key terms

- **ALE** – Adult Learning and Education – Learning activities undertaken by adults after initial education, including formal, non-formal, and informal formats.
- **QA / Q-ALE** – Quality Assurance / Quality Assurance in Adult Learning and Education – Processes to ensure, evaluate, and improve quality in non-formal adult learning.
- **PDCA** – Plan–Do–Check–Act – A cycle for continuous improvement involving planning actions, implementing them, evaluating impact, and adjusting.
- **RARPA** – Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement – A UK model tracking individual learner progress in non-accredited learning.
- **QUALTRACK** – A European framework and methodology designed to evaluate and promote excellence in adult education, leading to a quality rating/certification.
- **FSC** – Finnish Study Centres – A network of Finnish institutions offering liberal adult education through learner-centred and reflective approaches.
- **EAEA** – European Association for the Education of Adults – Europe’s largest NGO for ALE, advocating for inclusive policy and providing/synthesizing quality tools.
- **sTOP** – Stowarzyszenie Trenerów Organizacji Pozarządowych – Polish Association of trainers for NGOs; provides certification, supervision, and ethical standards for adult educators.
- **POU** – Pučko otvoreno učilište Varaždin– (People's Open University Varazdin in Croatia), offering VET and adult education programmes, embedded in national QA frameworks.
- **AVETAE** – Agency for Vocational Education and Training and Adult Education – Croatian national agency overseeing quality standards in ALE.

Annex 2

Source validation annex

Partner	Document Name	Type/Description	QA Level
POU	Evaluation Questionnaire	Evaluation tool (pilot)	Meso
POU	Toolkit for Facilitator's Training Program	Curriculum for facilitators	Meso
POU	Form for Observing the Teaching Process	Teaching observation template	Meso
POU	Manual for Internal Quality Assurance in Adult Education	Institutional QA manual	Meso
POU	ANNEX 2 Self-evaluation Report Form	Self-evaluation template	Meso
FSC	Curriculum Framework for Official Credits (eRequirements)	Course QA/curriculum standard	Micro/Meso
FSC	Principles of a Safer Space – Citizens' Forum	Ethical learning environment principles	Micro
FSC	Student Feedback Form – Citizens' Forum	Learner feedback form	Micro
FSC	Feedback on Training – TJS Opintokeskus	Learner feedback form	Micro
FSC	Participant Feedback Form A – Sivistystyökeskus	Learner feedback form	Micro
FSC	Participant Feedback Form B – Sivistystyökeskus	Learner feedback form	Micro
FSC	Guidance Materials for Course Quality – Citizens' Forum (Pedanet)	Reporting platform guide	Meso
FSC	Course Reporting Questions – Citizens' Forum	Provider reporting template	Meso
FSC	Accessibility Field – Sivistystyökeskus	Accessibility evaluation checklist	Meso

Partner	Document Name	Type/Description	QA Level
FSC	KSL Study Centre: Sustainable Development and Topic Classifications	Civic impact typology	Macro
FSC	Societal Impact Classification of Study Centre Courses	Outcome classification model	Macro
FSC	Short Description of Quality Assurance Systems in Study Centres in Finland	Institutional QA framework	Meso/Macro
FSC	Statistics Finland Reporting Data for Study Centres	Sector statistics summary	Macro
FSC	Diving into Bildung Pedagogy: Pedagogical Studies for Adult Educators	Pedagogical quality guide	Macro
sTOP	Supervisory Certificate: List of Competences	Supervisor certification example	Micro
sTOP	Trainer Certificate: List of Competences	Trainer certification example	Micro
sTOP	Evaluation Survey – Kolb and Neurodidactics Workshop	Trainer evaluation tool	Micro
sTOP	Evaluation of the 25th sTOP School for Trainers	Training evaluation report	Micro
sTOP	Feedback Form for Pilot Training Program – Healthy Communities Project	Participant assessment tool	Micro
sTOP	School for Trainers – sTOP	ToT curriculum overview	Micro
EAEA	Sector-Specific QA Guidelines for Private and Independent Providers (QQI, Ireland)	QA guidelines for independent providers, QQI, Ireland	Macro
EAEA	Quality Indicators in Adult Education (Slovenian Ministry of Education)	Slovenian quality indicator model	Macro
EAEA	European Peer Review Manual – AL_ONE	Peer Review manual	Macro

Partner	Document Name	Type/Description	QA Level
EAEA	Quality in Adult Learning and Education: Policy Paper 2022	Policy paper on ALE quality	Macro
EAEA	Quality-Assuring Non-Regulated Provision: The Expanding Role of RARPA	UK RARPA framework	Macro
EAEA	Quality Matters: OECD Analysis of Adult Learning Quality (2023)	OECD ALE quality analysis	Macro
EAEA	QUALTRACK Quality Framework	QUALTRACK framework dimensions	Macro
EAEA	Implementation of National Registries for ALE – RALEx/ILA Report	ALE implementation report	Macro
EAEA	RARPA Guidance (Natspec/ETF, 2025)	RARPA guidance document	Macro

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