

Peer Review and the CQAF

Peer Review as an innovative methodology for external evaluation in VET and its contribution to the further development of the „Common Quality Assurance Framework“ (CQAF)

Imprint

**Peer Review Extended
Implementing the CQAF through Peer Review – Mutual Review and Assessment of VET Providers
and Extension of the European Peer Review Network
Leonardo da Vinci Project
(EAC/32/06/13)**

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I. The European Peer Review procedure for VET providers in Europe

Within the Leonardo da Vinci project "Peer Review in initial VET" (2004-2007) (www.peer-review-education.net), a **European Peer Review Procedure** has been developed in transnational cooperation between 12 European countries as a truly European instrument for quality assurance and improvement at the VET provider level. The procedure was tested in 15 transnational Peer Reviews in eight European countries in 2006. The European Peer Review methodology developed is described in the "European Peer Review Manual" (published in June 2007).

The development of the European Peer Review procedure was prompted by initiatives in quality assurance promoted on the European level. The project sought to complement the activities of the "Technical Working Group on Quality in VET" (TWG) by taking up one part of the TWG's assignment "to promote the exchange of good practice and the use of voluntary peer review at different levels" (Mandate of the TWG on Quality in VET): While Peer Review res. Peer Learning activities were launched by the TWG on the system level, the project aimed at introducing Peer Review on the institutional level in initial VET.

Thus, "the European Peer Review procedure implements the principles of the Common Quality Assurance Framework (CQAF) and, in turn, also seeks to contribute to the further development of the CQAF model. It takes a formative, improvement-oriented approach and aims at supporting VET institutions/providers in their efforts to offer high quality education and training. The focus lies on the promotion of continuing quality improvement in an atmosphere of openness and mutual trust that contributes to enhancing transparency and comparability in Europe. Good practice is valued and mutual learning encouraged in a dynamic and motivating process, from which both the VET institution reviewed and the Peers can benefit" (European Peer Review Manual 2007).

Interest in the methodology of Peer Review has led to the follow-up project "Peer Review Extended" (2007) which continued the fine-tuning of the European Peer Review procedure through practical experimentation (four more Peer Reviews and three new countries) and the potential contribution of Peer Review to the CQAF. In November 2007, a Leonardo da Vinci innovation transfer project "Peer Review Extended II" was launched. In this project, Peer Review will be extended to another three new countries and to continuing VET. Furthermore, face-to-face Peer Training will be developed in transnational cooperation (cf. also European Peer Review Initiative – an overview).

II. Peer Review and the CQAF – an overview

The European Peer Review Procedure is based on and supports the principles of the **Common Quality Assurance Framework** by providing a new methodology for external evaluation in VET. The European Peer Review procedure enhances transparency and comparability – both regarding the evaluation methodology and the quality areas/indicators used – and fosters European cooperation through transnational evaluations at the institutional level.

The European Peer Review procedure has been developed with the explicit aim to contribute to quality policies on European and national levels. It thus fully corresponds to the central tenets and goals of the “Common Quality Assurance Framework”. Furthermore, Peer Review is expected to contribute to the CQAF in the following areas¹:

- 1) Enriching the methodological repertoire – Peer Review as external evaluation methodology in the CQAF model
- 2) Implementing the CQAF – Peer Review as a systematic procedure following the criteria of the CQAF model
- 3) Calling for external perspectives – contribution of Peer Review to external monitoring
- 4) Learning and teaching in the centre – key topics of a Peer Review
- 5) Making sense of indicators – qualitative and quantitative indicators in Peer Review
- 6) Enhancing mutual trust in Europe – transparency, understanding and mutual learning as main aims of Peer Review.

III. Enriching the methodological repertoire – Peer Review as external evaluation methodology in the CQAF model

The European Peer Review Manual describes a European standard procedure for carrying out Peer Reviews in initial vocational education and training. Peer Review is defined as a systematic evaluation of institutions (or parts of institutions) carried out by Peers, i.e. mainly colleagues from other VET providers. It is geared towards **supporting the VET providers under review in their endeavours to improve the quality of their provision**. It is thus a formative, improvement-oriented external evaluation methodology which VET providers perceive as “lighter”, “humane” and “less threatening” than other forms of external evaluation (like inspections, audits etc.).

Peer Review builds upon quality activities in place in the VET providers – especially self-evaluation and self-assessment – and takes them a step further by bringing in the external perspective and professional judgement of the Peers. **Peer Review thus adds to the methodological repertoire presented in the CQAF.**

¹ A prospect which is also buttressed by positive experiences with the European Peer Review in the pilot phase 2006 (cf. Gutknecht-Gmeiner 2007: Report on the Pilot Phase and Outlook).

Additionally, the **benefits of Peer Review** as a new and promising external evaluation methodology are manifold:

Peer Review is flexible and can be adapted to different situations and management systems (thus making it useful for VET providers all over Europe) while allowing for comparability due to a standard and transparent procedure. The scope of the Peer Review – scope and number of evaluation topics, scope of the provision under review (whole institutions or only parts of institutions) – can be tailored to the needs of the VET provider and the resources available, Peer Reviews can be “quick” and with a narrow focus or extended and broad. Especially the “quick and focused” Peer Review is ideal for VET providers who have had little or no experience with external evaluation so far. Peer Review is also an economical evaluation procedure: In addition to avoiding duplication of efforts by building upon quality measures already in place, inviting Peers is less expensive than calling in external consultants or other professional quality experts. Learning opportunities are offered not only to the VET provider reviewed but are also extended to the Peers. Thus mutual learning is facilitated and learning effects remain within the VET system.

The pilot phase of the projects "Peer Review in initial VET" and "Peer Review Extended" have also shown clearly that the European Peer Review procedure can be adopted easily by VET providers even if they do not have prior expertise in external reviews. The European Peer Review procedure can thus be implemented readily and without major adaptive efforts by various types of VET providers in different European countries.

IV. Implementing the CQAF – Peer Review as a systematic procedure following the criteria of the CQAF model

The European Peer Review procedure was developed as a **systematic procedure** following the criteria of the CQAF model. It is a very clear and transparent procedure including the following phases: Preparation (including self-evaluation) – Peer Visit – Peer Review Report – Putting plans into action (follow-up and procedures for change).

Graph: Peer Review as a systematic procedure in the CQAF model

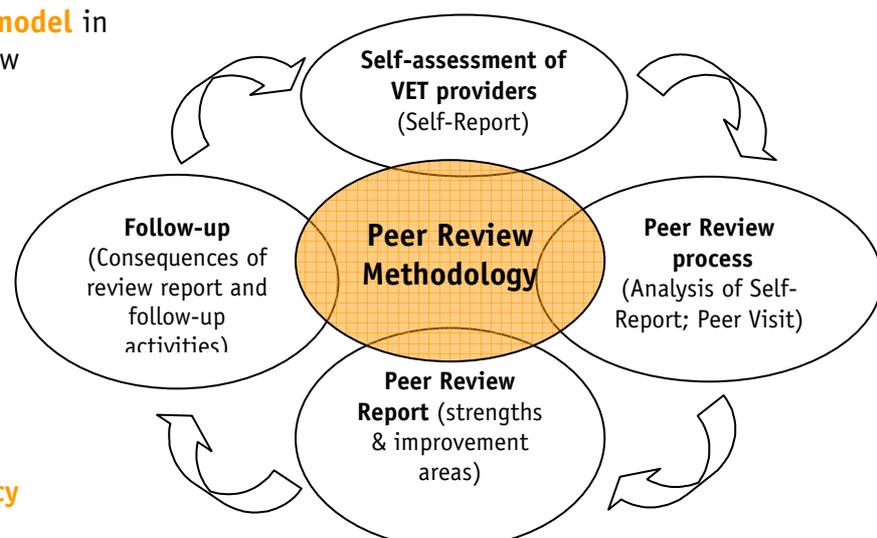
Elements of the CQAF model in the European Peer Review

Peer Review as **methodology**

Contribution to **external** monitoring

Use of **indicators**

Contribution to gains: **mutual trust, transparency**



Additionally, a set of Quality Areas has been developed in order to ensure comparability in transnational European Peer Reviews. The CQAF model has been applied in two ways: Firstly, during the Peer Review, the quality circle set out in the CQAF (planning – implementation – evaluation and assessment – review and procedures for change) should be taken into account for the assessment of the Quality Areas. Additionally, considering their main properties, the Quality Areas as such may be attributed to the elements of the CQAF model.

Table: The Quality Areas within the Quality Assurance Model of the CQAF

Element of the Quality Assurance Model	Quality Area
Planning	Quality Area 5: Social environment and accessibility
	Quality Area 6: Management and administration
	Quality Area 7: Institutional ethos and strategic planning
	Quality Area 1: Curricula
Implementation	Quality Area 2: Learning and teaching
	Quality Area 8: Infrastructure and financial resources
	Quality Area 9: Staff allocation, recruitment & development
	Quality Area 10: Working conditions of staff
	Quality Area 11: External relations and internationalisation
	Quality Area 12: Social participation & interactions
Evaluation & Assessment	Quality Area 3: Assessment
	Quality Area 4: Learning results and outcomes
Review	Quality Area 13: Gender mainstreaming
	Quality Area 14: Quality management and evaluation

V. Calling for external perspectives – contribution of Peer Review to external monitoring

As an external evaluation methodology, **Peer Review also contributes to external monitoring** by providing (recurring) external reviews of VET providers. External assessments are a logical and necessary further step in a systematic quality assurance system as proposed by the CQAF. So far, initiatives on the European level have mainly focused on self-evaluation and self-assessment.

The European Peer Review is an external evaluation methodology which can be implemented in the member states on a voluntary basis but also on a European level – in the form of transnational European Peer Reviews involving VET providers from different European countries.

Since its focus is on **quality improvement and because the evaluators and the evaluated share the same profession**, the Peer Review methodology developed does not readily lend itself as an instrument for rigorous and all-encompassing quality control by the authorities. Instead it should be perceived as a formative external evaluation methodology which complements other measures and systems (inspections, audits, certification, accreditation etc.) and promotes exchange between VET providers and mutual learning. It can also be used to further develop benchmarking through qualitative analyses and assessments.

In the long run, summative Peer Reviews, however, seem possible – also on the European level – in a quality review process governed by VET providers themselves. Certification res. issuance of a Peer Review quality seal and inclusion in a Peer Review Network of VET providers would then require successful review by Peers based on a clear set of common indicators at VET provider level – a procedure which is also common in Higher Education.

While at the VET provider level a wide range of other instruments and methodologies for external monitoring exist, **Peer Review is the only feasible and appropriate methodology** for the **system level**.

VI. Learning and teaching at the centre – key topics of a Peer Review

While Peer Review can be used for a wide range of evaluation topics (as is witnessed in the breadth of the Quality Areas developed), the European Peer Review has a **strong focus on learning and teaching as the key processes in VET**: The four Quality Areas directly related to teaching and learning have been defined as "core quality" areas, dealing with at least one of the core quality areas is mandatory in a European Peer Review.

The European Peer Review thus counteracts the danger inherent in all traditional management models used in VET to focus on management processes while neglecting **pedagogical issues**. Learning and teaching being the area of expertise of the Peers, the European Peer Review is perfectly fit to put the "core business" of VET at the centre of the evaluation procedure.

This approach is complemented by a strong **consideration of the perspectives of internal and external stakeholders** of the learning and teaching processes: Stakeholders participate in the Peer Review procedure both as interviewees, i.e. sources of information, but may also take an active role as so-called "Stakeholder Peers".

VII. Making sense of indicators – dealing with qualitative and quantitative indicators in Peer Review

For the European Peer Review procedure, a **comprehensive set of exemplary quality indicators** have been developed to illustrate the Quality Areas used to describe the quality of VET provision in a transnational dialogue. This set of quality indicators integrates quantitative and qualitative indicators to be applied on a voluntary basis on the institutional level.

Concerning quality indicators, the European Peer Review contributes to the COAF on two levels: Firstly, the set of European quality indicators on the VET provider level, which has been put to a first practical test in the pilot phase, includes **quantitative and qualitative indicators** allowing for a comprehensive assessment. The set of indicators in the Quality Areas can be considered a starting point for the further development of commonly recognised European indicators for VET provision on the institutional level.

Secondly, and perhaps more important in terms of sustainable impact, Peer Review can make a decisive contribution to the **understanding of indicators**. While the establishment of indicators and their application to data collected during evaluation and assessment procedures already represents a challenge to VET providers, the ultimate test for the use of indicators remains the **interpretation of data and indicators and the conclusions derived**. This is the phase in which VET providers often feel at a loss and where stringent analysis and open discussion are needed.

Peer Review as a methodology which centres on the interpretation of data – analysing and contextualising data, discussing the meaning of indicators, drawing conclusions from empirical findings – is expected to support the VET providers in making sense of quantitative data and indicators thus enhancing the practical impact of evaluation and review.

VIII. Enhancing mutual trust in Europe – transparency, understanding and mutual learning as main aims of Peer Review

Most importantly perhaps, the European Peer Review Procedure as a **point of reference and common framework for implementing Peer Review** will increase transparency and comparability, thus enhancing mutual learning and mutual trust.

As a methodology, Peer Review is **based on networking**, it will thus break up the isolation of the individual VET providers and **support bottom-up cooperation and innovation transfer**: The experience during the pilot phase of the project "Peer Review in initial VET" shows that Peer Review is a methodology which fosters networking and has a tendency to reach out also to institutions external to the core partnership: 21 additional institutions were included in the Peer Review Network through the Peers; all in all 35 institutions were thus activated in the pilot peer reviews.

The European Peer Review procedure can be put to use in **individual member states** but may also be organised on a **transnational level facilitating direct exchange and networking between VET providers from different European countries**. A European Peer Review Network comprising VET providers and other stakeholders from all over Europe who engage in mutual reviews should contribute to the development of a **common European Area of VET**. Peer Review is also a powerful tool for stimulating peer learning within and between VET systems. The exchange of experience and the transfer of good practice between VET providers – locally, regionally, within or across sectors, in transnational cooperation – are the main benefits of the European Peer Review procedure. In global competition, mutual trust is needed on all levels to complement competition in education and training.

Mutual trust in quality of VET provision is also a prerequisite for the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and for strengthening links between Higher Education and VET. Cooperation with Higher Education in particular can be supported through Peer Review as a shared external evaluation methodology (including e.g. Peer Reviews conducted between VET and HE) which meets central quality requirements for evaluation schemes and methodologies: Specifically, the European Peer Review procedure can be considered a "consistent evaluation method, associating self-assessment and external review" providing "feedback mechanisms and procedures for improvement". (cf. Conclusions of the Conference „Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training“, 11/12 May, University of Graz and the EQF Consultation Document – Common Principles for quality assurance).

IX. Addendum: Some notions concerning the added value of Peer Review

The crucial question is whether Peer Review as a methodology also **contributes to the actual improvement of VET provision** (cf. TWG for Quality in VET 2004, 9 f.) – the quality circle must be followed to the phase where **learning takes place** in order to justify the time and effort invested in the review process. Putting the results of the Peer Review into action is thus the critical element for the success of the Peer Review in terms of systematic, continuous and sustainable quality improvement.

In the assessment of the pilot phase, first hypotheses have been formulated as to the **potential added value** of Peer Review in this respect. The **hypotheses** will (hopefully) be investigated in a meta-evaluation of all pilot Peer Reviews in a subsequent project.

First impressions from the pilot phase point to the potential of Peer Review for stimulating learning. The special value of Peer Review in comparison to other external evaluation methodologies was highlighted especially by those VET providers who have comprehensive experience with external evaluation and auditing and are thus able to compare Peer Review to other types of evaluation:

Peer Review was seen as a "**friendly**" and "**humane**" methodology which generates **goodwill and openness** on the part of the VET provider. It was not perceived as threatening as other procedures, allowing VET providers to put up for evaluation difficult topics which would be omitted or concealed as much as possible in audits or inspections for fear of negative consequences. Peer Review thus directly contributes to the **actual improvement of those areas where VET providers themselves recognise difficulties**.

Additionally, VET providers are expected to be much more motivated to act upon the results of a Review if they themselves have initiated the Review and chosen the areas to be scrutinised. For VET providers with less experience, Peer Review is an attractive methodology for experimenting with external forms of evaluation.

X. Literature and (re)sources

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XI. Project management and contact

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XII. The European Peer Review Initiative – an overview

Project	Peer Review in initial VET	Peer Review Extended	Peer Review Extended II
Duration	October 2004 – September 2007	January 2007 – December 2007	November 2007 – October 2009
Partners	25 partners from 11 countries Austria, Germany, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Hungary, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, United Kingdom, Switzerland 15 VET providers	9 partners from 6 countries Austria, Germany, Spain, Finland Italy, Hungary 4 VET providers	14 partners from 9 countries Austria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Spain, Finland, Portugal, Turkey, Slovenia, United Kingdom 9 VET providers
Aims	Development and testing of Peer Review procedure for initial VET Build-up of Peer Review Network	Further development and testing of European Peer Review Procedure Contribution of Peer Review to CQAF Expansion of Network	Adaptation of Peer Review to → new countries → continuing VET Expansion of Network
Products	European Peer Review Manual for initial VET Peer Training Programme	European Peer Review Manual - Revised Scenarios for Peer Review Implementation Peer Review Tool-box for VET providers	European Peer Review Manual - Revised Instructional & dissemination material Face-to-face Peer Training
Pilots	15 Pilots completed (2006) Austria (2), Denmark (1), Finland (3), Italy (4), Netherlands (2), Portugal (1), Romania (1), United Kingdom (1)	4 Pilots completed (2007) Austria (1), Germany (1), Spain (1), Hungary (1)	6 Pilots planned (2008) Austria (3), Denmark (2), Portugal (1)

Source: öibf, December 2007

www.peer-review.education.net

