European Peer Review Manual for initial VET
Imprint

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European Peer Review Manual for initial VET

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Peer Review as an Instrument for Quality Assurance and Improvement in initial VET
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In the past decade, quality assurance and quality improvement have become increasingly important for institutions providing vocational education and training, and for education authorities throughout Europe. Different procedures have been introduced for evaluating quality at the level of VET institutions/providers. They include quality management schemes adapted from the business sector (such as ISO, EFQM, BSC, etc.), inspections and audits by government agencies, and self-evaluation.

One particularly promising instrument of quality assurance and development is Peer Review – the external evaluation of VET institutions/providers by Peers. Peer Review is prevalent in higher education but the use of Peer Review has so far been marginal in vocational education and training. Peer Review can build on quality activities already in place at a VET institution/provider, it is cost-effective and it fosters networking and exchange between VET providers.

The European Peer Review Manual describes a European standard procedure for carrying out Peer Reviews in initial vocational education and training. It was developed in the course of the Leonardo da Vinci Project "Peer Review in initial VET" by a team of experts from eight institutions in seven European countries. In 2006, 15 transnational pilot Peer Reviews were carried out in eight European countries. Recommendations based on the experiences of the pilot phase have been taken into account in the revision of the European Peer Review procedure. The European Peer Review Manual thus presents a procedure which has passed the test of practical implementation and capitalises on the experiences gleaned from the pilot Peer Reviews.

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, development-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.

The European Peer Review Manual was developed for use by VET professionals across Europe. Its focus is on a practical approach: it offers directly implementable guidelines for VET providers who want to introduce Peer Reviews in their quality assessment and development procedures. The Manual is complemented by a practical Tool-box available from the project website www.peer-review-education.net, providing forms, checklists, additional information and recommendations in electronic format. The Tool-box is also available on CD-Rom from the project coordinator.

We hope that the European Peer Review will live up to our expectations and become a useful and attractive instrument for VET institutions/providers all over Europe. Since we are dedicated to the further improvement of the European Peer Review procedure, feedback on this Manual will be very much appreciated!

For the team of the project "Peer Review in initial VET"

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I. Introduction

I.1 What is Peer Review?

Peer Review is a form of external evaluation with the aim of supporting the reviewed educational institution in its quality assurance and quality development efforts.

An external group of experts, called Peers, is invited to assess the quality of different fields of the institution, such as the quality of education and training provision of individual departments or of the entire organisation. During the evaluation process, the Peers visit the reviewed institution.

Peers are external but work in a similar environment and have specific professional expertise and knowledge of the evaluated subject. They are independent and "persons of equal standing" with the persons whose performance is being reviewed.

I.2 Why Peer Review? Advantages and benefits of Peer Review as an instrument of quality assurance and development

European providers of VET can expect to benefit from a Peer Review, as proposed in this Manual, by
• obtaining critical yet sympathetic feedback on the quality of their VET provision from colleagues in the field,
• becoming acquainted with an external perspective,
• ascertaining the quality of their provision,
• presenting their strengths and showcasing good practice,
• enhancing accountability towards stakeholders,
• detecting blind spots and weaknesses,
• receiving advice and discovering the good practice of Peers,
• engaging in mutual learning with Peers,
• establishing networks and cooperation with other VET providers, and
• obtaining an external evaluation report on the quality of their training and education at a comparably economic cost.

I.3 What are the aims and principles of the European Peer Review procedure?

I.3.1 Generals aims and principles

The general aims of the European Peer Review procedure are
• to promote quality assurance and development,
• to enhance transparency and comparability of quality in VET in Europe through a common European standard, and
• to support equal opportunities.

Important specific requirements and characteristics of the procedure are
• a focus on the people involved and their interests and needs,
• objectivity and impartiality of the Peers,
• transparency of all elements of the procedure to all persons involved,
• rules on confidentiality and on the use of results, to be set up in advance and adhered to by all persons involved,
• avoidance of conflicts of interest and direct competition between Peers (and the institution they come from) and the reviewed institution,
• promotion of openness, integrity and sincerity as a prerequisite for mutual learning,
• awareness of cultural influences both on vocational education and training provision and on evaluation, especially in transnational Peer Reviews,
• promotion of an enquiring and critical attitude both in the Peers and the reviewed institution, and
• the design and implementation of Peer Review not as a technical and bureaucratic procedure but as a dynamic and motivating process, from which both the reviewed institution and the Peers can benefit.
I.3.2 The European Peer Review as a voluntary and formative evaluation procedure

The European Peer Review procedure has been developed for voluntary use by VET providers/institutions. It has a formative, development-oriented function and puts particular emphasis on the promotion of continuing quality improvement.

The European Peer Review assists the VET provider/institution in determining the status quo in terms of high-quality provision as well as providing valuable suggestions and recommendations for improvement. Thus, the primary addressees of the European Peer Review procedure are the reviewed VET providers themselves. The main focus of the procedure described in this Manual is the stimulation of continuous quality development.

Graph 1: Continuous Quality Improvement with Peer Review
I.4 European Peer Review and the Common Quality Assurance Framework


Within the framework, Peer Review can be implemented as a new methodology for ensuring and improving quality. It can be used for an extended internal assessment as well as for external monitoring of the quality of VET provision. Additionally, quality criteria and indicators have been proposed for relevant Quality Areas.

The Quality Assurance Model formulated by the TWG is adhered to within the Peer Review methodology. Its elements comprise the quality management circle prevalent in state-of-the-art quality management schemes. The European Peer Review as a systematic procedure can be depicted as follows:

Graph 2: The Quality Assurance Model of the CQAF and Peer Review
I.5 European Peer Review and gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming is a guiding principle of the European Peer Review procedure.

The Peer Review process should contribute towards the elimination of existing inequalities and promote equality between women and men in participation rates, in the distribution of resources, benefits, tasks and responsibilities in vocational education and training, and also in private and public life (in compliance with Articles 2 and 3 of the Treaty of Amsterdam 1999). An analysis of the value and attention accorded to "typically" male and female needs, roles, behaviour and interests should serve as a starting point for the investigation of how gender stereotypes and gender inequalities are socially constructed and reinforced through formal and informal structures and practices. All measures and activities must be scrutinised with regard to their potential for enhancing critical reflection and change. Thus, self-reflection on gender issues by everyone involved in the Peer Review is a prerequisite for implementing gender mainstreaming in the European Peer Review.

The following gender criteria and quality standards must be observed in the European Peer Review procedure:

- Gender mainstreaming should be integrated at all stages and levels within the Peer Review procedures.
- Gender-sensitive language must be used in all reports and during the Peer Reviews.
- Data collected are disaggregated by sex in order to represent women and men (female and male students; female and male staff).
- A gender analysis of the Quality Areas should be undertaken in the Self-Report and in the Peer Review process.
- A Peer with gender expertise (as an additional competence) should be included in the Peer Review team. The composition of the team should reflect an appropriate representation of women and men. Training needs in relation to gender and gender mainstreaming must be identified and met before the Peer Review.
- During the Peer Review, gender must be considered in the composition of groups of interviewees, in the preparation and conduct of interviews and observations (gender-sensitive formulation of questions and criteria for interviews/observations, gender-sensitive language and behaviour during interviews and observations) and in the analysis (avoidance of gender stereotypes in assessment, etc.).
- If budgets are scrutinised, a gender analysis of the school's budget and the budget for education should be carried out.

Before any Peer Review is undertaken, a gender analysis should be carried out on

- the VET institution – the rights, resources, participation, values and norms related to gender (sex-disaggregated quantitative data, qualitative assessment as well, if possible),
- the review panel – composition, training needs in relation to gender and gender mainstreaming,

If measures are planned to counteract gender inequalities then a gender impact assessment should be carried out. Gender impact assessment means using gender-relevant criteria to compare and assess the current situation and trend with the expected development resulting from the introduction of the proposed policy. A gender impact assessment should be carried out at an early stage once it has been established that the review process has implications for gender relations. Criteria for gender impact assessment are the differences between women and men with respect to participation, resources, norms and values, and rights.

Gender mainstreaming can also be chosen as a Quality Area for the European Peer Review.

A Gender mainstreaming checklist for policy indicators can be found in the Tool-box.
I.6 Who can use the European Peer Review procedure?

The primary target group for the European Peer Review procedure is providers of initial VET in Europe with experience in quality assurance and development. The minimum experience recommended as a basic prerequisite for conducting a Peer Review is that a VET provider has previously undergone a self-evaluation process at least once.

What is meant by the terms "institutions and/or providers of initial vocational education and training (VET)?"

In the Peer Review Manual, the terms "VET institution" and "VET provider" are used synonymously. They encompass the institutions responsible for quality assurance and development primarily at the school/college level but also at the level of the maintaining institution if this is where quality assurance and development takes place or is coordinated.

I.7 Role of stakeholders in the European Peer Review procedure

The involvement of various relevant stakeholder groups in the whole review process is highly recommended. Stakeholders in VET are all the people working and learning within a provider of VET: teachers, learners, administrative staff; cooperation partners of the VET provider; parents; graduates; schools whose graduates are admitted to initial VET as well as institutions of further education; potential employers and the labour market; educational authorities and social partners, and society at large.

It should be pointed out that particular consideration should be given to enterprises as cooperation partners in VET (apprenticeship scheme, internships etc.) and future employers.

Stakeholders can be interview partners both during the self-evaluation and the Peer Review. They may also serve as Peers if their special experience and know-how contribute to the process. Additionally, (groups of) stakeholders may also be interested in the outcomes of the Peer Review (e.g. the Peer Review Report).

I.8 Documentation of the European Peer Review

I.8.1 European Peer Review Portfolio

All relevant documents of the European Peer Review should be collected by the VET provider in a European Peer Review Portfolio. The European Peer Review Portfolio contains the Initial Information Sheet, the Self-Report, the Peer Review Report, and other important documents gathered during the Peer Review process. In the Leonardo Project "Peer Review in initial VET", a certificate completed the portfolio.

I.8.2 European Peer Review Certificate

The coordinator of the Leonardo da Vinci project "Peer Review in initial VET," in cooperation with the project steering group, has issued a European Peer Review Certificate to VET providers who have successfully carried out a Peer Review according to the requirements set out in this Manual.