ENQA-VET

European Network for Quality Assurance
in Vocational Education and Training

POLICY BRIEF

ENQA-VET Peer Learning Activities

SUMMARY

Peer learning activities (PLAs) are an important tool in promoting quality assurance in vocational education and training (VET), supporting mutual learning between Member States and play an important role in the implementation of the ENQA-VET work programme. PLAs should be viewed in the context of the open method of coordination (OMC) which is based on promoting mutual trust by disseminating best practices, respecting subsidiarity in the education field and achieving greater convergence among Member States towards European goals.

ENQA-VET enables countries, using the OMC methodology, to focus on the quality of VET, its attractiveness, the development of common tools and instruments as well as identifying ways in which Member States can be best supported in implementing the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF).

POLICY CONTEXT	*In Lisbon, the Council of the European Union agreed on a new strategic goal for the Union in order to strengthen employment, economic reform and social cohesion as part of a knowledge-based economy: the Lisbon Strategy; which will be achieved by:* a. *Improving the quality and effectiveness of education and training systems in the European Union.* b. *Introducing a new open method of coordination (OMC) at all levels to ensure more coherent strategic direction* [1] *(European Council 2000).* *In 2002, the Lisbon Strategy was further developed in the Copenhagen Declaration, which prioritises the promotion of cooperation in quality assurance (QA) with particular focus on exchange of models and methods, as well as common criteria and principles for quality in vocational education and training (VET).* *The European Network for Quality Assurance in VET (ENQA-VET) plays a crucial role in this process as it promotes a culture of QA for VET and supports cooperation in Europe which ensures the successful implementation of the Education and Training 2010 work programme.*

WHAT IS PEER LEARNING?
 	
PEER LEARNING, a policy building process
Learning policy effectiveness and policy development
	The European Commission defines peer learning as "*a process of cooperation at European level, whereby 'reform agents' from one country learn, through direct contact and practical cooperation, from the experience of their counterparts elsewhere in Europe in implementing reforms of shared interests and concern*" (Education and Training 2010 work programme).
	
	Peer learning is a policy learning strategy that includes knowledge sharing and utilises local experience on a relevant policy topic. Peer learning therefore:
	• Is a policy learning tool rather than a policy analysis tool.
	• Replaces the traditional indirect approach of policy decision in which policy advisers, through the preparation of reports and recommendations, inform policy decision makers.
	• Is based on modern constructivist learning principles:
	  a) where "*learners actively develop new knowledge by giving sense to what they observe*", discuss and share with others[2]
	  b) the roles of experts and learners are interchangeable -learners are experts and experts are learners-; and
	  c) a review of participants' policy context self-representation occurs as a result of the dialogue with other/s-communities and/or cultural/political paradigms.
	• The expected impact of a peer learning experience is the modification of participants' knowledge by offering new perspectives, understanding and increasing awareness of critical policy issues.
	• Peer learning as an instrument or approach to facilitate policy learning is based on three principles:
	  1) It is a voluntary process, that
	  2) It simulates a learning situation which requires policymakers to engage with and explore new policies.
	  3) It is a comparative approach with a common topic framed within a national policy context.
	• Policymakers value this learning process because it shows the operational or flexibility of a measure. "*The experience of seeing a programme successfully implemented elsewhere demonstrates that it can be realised in at least one place*". Indeed, public officials have little interest in discussing measures that have been never put in place[3].
	• Policymakers learn valuable lessons on what has worked and what has not; this saves time and costly experimenting in crafting effective national policies.
	• Once learners reflect on policy relevance topics and the policy learning takes place, the learning may lead to political action and/or produce policy change in the respective national context[4].

[1] The Lisbon Conclusions defined the open method of coordination as a means of "spreading best practice and achieving greater convergence towards the main EU' goals and indicated that it would be a fully decentralized approach using variable forms of partnerships and designed to help Member States to develop their own policies progressively" (European Council 2002).

[2] Grootings, ETF, 2006

[3] Grootings, ETF, 2006

[4] Policy learning is a instrument for policy change which should be measure in terms of either:
a) Policy learning does not occur unless there is some kind of policy change which results for learning process; or
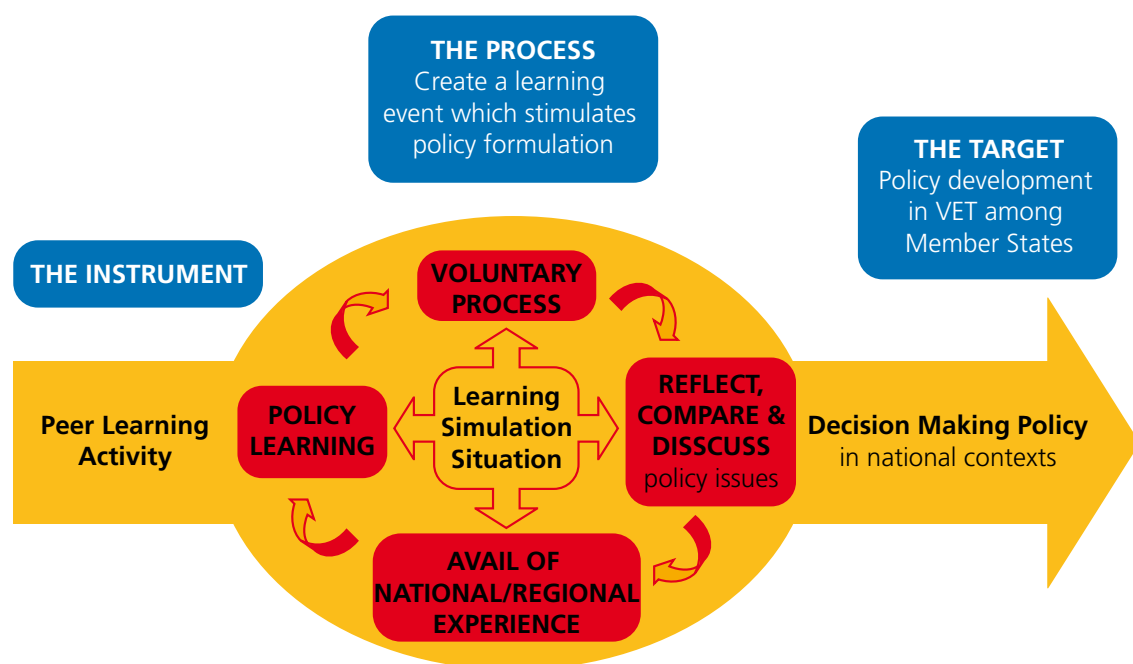b) Policy learning is better measure is terms of outcomes of resulting policy inferring that successful learning has taken place if these policies produce good results; or
c) Policy learning has an impact not only on the policies themselves but also on the way they are designed; or
d) Policy learning failure occurs when both policy borrowing from abroad and the desire of policymakers to find fast solution to urgent problems (Chakroun, ETF, 2008).

Figure 1 below illustrates the capacity building or process initiated by a peer learning activity: the policy learning process generated by simulating a learning situation is based on a *knowledge-based development* approach rather than the traditional methodology based on transfer of knowledge approach.

THE PROCESS
Create a learning event which stimulates policy formulation

THE TARGET
Policy development in VET among Member States

THE INSTRUMENT

VOLUNTARY PROCESS

POLICY LEARNING

Learning Simulation Situation

REFLECT, COMPARE & DISSCUSS policy issues

Peer Learning Activity

AVAIL OF NATIONAL/REGIONAL EXPERIENCE

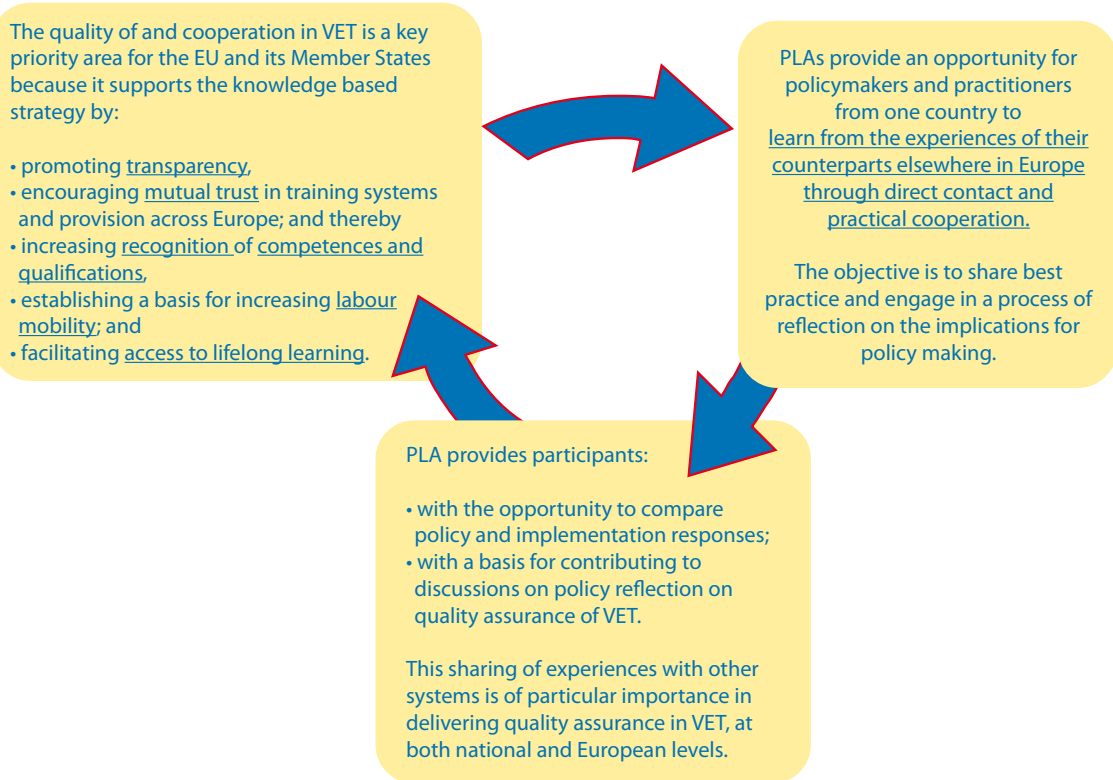**Decision Making Policy** in national contexts

WHY IS IT EFFECTIVE?

Peer learning is a process of collaboration that provides an opportunity for policymakers and practitioners from one country to learn from the experiences of a policy measure elsewhere in Europe.

- The objective is to share best practice and engage in a process of reflection with policy making implications.
- The sharing of experiences with other systems is of particular importance in delivering quality assurance in VET (OECD, 2002).
- Peer learning is expected to impact on European cooperation and on the delivery of an overview of both best practice and errors made in VET;
- Creates greater synergies and convergence among Member States towards European goals.
- The objective is to support and facilitate reflection and upgrading the basis for decision making in Member States.
- The results will both support the Copenhagen process in increasing the quality of VET and in strengthening European cooperation in the area of quality assurance in VET.

Figure 2 **The Copenhagen Process and the Rationale for ENQA-VET PLAs**	Figure 2 below shows the dynamic European process to which PLA's contribution to further realisations of European goals:

The quality of and cooperation in VET is a key priority area for the EU and its Member States because it supports the knowledge based strategy by:

• promoting transparency,
• encouraging mutual trust in training systems and provision across Europe; and thereby
• increasing recognition of competences and qualifications,
• establishing a basis for increasing labour mobility; and
• facilitating access to lifelong learning.

PLAs provide an opportunity for policymakers and practitioners from one country to learn from the experiences of their counterparts elsewhere in Europe through direct contact and practical cooperation.

The objective is to share best practice and engage in a process of reflection on the implications for policy making.

PLA provides participants:

• with the opportunity to compare policy and implementation responses;
• with a basis for contributing to discussions on policy reflection on quality assurance of VET.

This sharing of experiences with other systems is of particular importance in delivering quality assurance in VET, at both national and European levels.

HOW IT WORKS?

Networking is the pre-requisite or pre-condition for peer learning to become a policy learning tool. ENQA-VET provides the development learning platform necessary to satisfy the principles of peer learning as a policy learning instrument.

The role of ENQA-VET
Aims of peer learning

When the networking platform exists, the aims of peer learning, according to the European Commission, are fulfilled by:

1) *"developing a common understanding of success factors for the improvement of policy-making and the implementation of reform;*

2) *identifying and disseminating key conclusions which can be fed into policy-making and implementation at the national and European level"* (European Commission, 2006).

Broader policy strategy fundament

Networking also provides a more comprehensive policy learning strategy including:

a) Following-up of what participants are doing in their own systems as result of a PLA;
b) Broader dissemination tools;
c) Complementary knowledge sharing; and
d) Other policy learning activities (see ENQA-VET Work Programme 2008-2009).

ENQA-VET's PLA methodology
Key principles in relation to PLAs

Policy learning is facilitated by peer learning activities (PLAs). PLAs are small scale working sessions of two to three days with ideally two representatives from each Member State nominated, who have responsibilities at national policy level and/or who are capable of addressing critical factors for implementation in the national context. PLAs create an *exchange-of-views environment* where:

• Relevant policy issues are discussed through presentation of policy examples from the host country and other countries participating.
• The focus is on quality assurance aspect of the policy issue or topic.
• Visits to relevant locations give an insight into the policy theme and illustrate aspects of its implementation in a given policy context.
• Presentations and visits represent the starting point of discussion and reflection.

- Opportunities for reflexion and discussion are built into each stage of the PLA programme. This distinguishes a PLA from a peer review[5].
- Participants reflect on their own national experiences by providing opportunities to develop in-depth insights in policies and discussion on the countries visited.
- Involvement of VET providers and other relevant stakeholders (primary social partners) in PLAs is very important because it broadens:
    a) Stakeholders' perspective and knowledge;
    b) Ownership of the policy learned; therefore
    c) Effectiveness of the policy learning process toward VET reforms;
    d) Impact of the policy learning process into the whole national system.

WHO PARTICIPATES?
PLA actors
HOST

The appropriate balance between the key actors involved in PLAs and their roles ensures successful strategic results at each stage of the collaborative process:

The host offers an example of good practice for Member States in a relevant policy issue or aspect of quality assurance in VET provision/legislation; but also
- PLAs provide an opportunity for evaluation and reflexion on host country policy.
- The host country must be seen as an anchor in the promotion of cooperation.
- The host country must incorporate participant's feedback and reflection into the policy process.

PARTICIPANTS

The choice of participants is a key success factor and they should be highly motivated. Participants should:
- Be engaged with the topic in their home country and have real interest in participating;
- Have the ability to learn;
- Have a certain level of preparation in advance of the PLA in order to be able to relate the newly observed to experience at national level;
- Challenge specific policy recommendations and feedback into the VET policy process in the host country;
- Be capable of reflecting on the impact of the policies considered within their own system;
- Participants have a key multiplier function in their national context as a result of their participation in a PLA.

EXPERT

An external expert, familiar with the PLA topic, facilitates the mutual learning. The expert should:
- Play the role of a mediator to facilitate the approximation of both the host and the participant's policy context in order to create a learning situation.
- Know and understand both contexts and design a learning situation to bridge both worlds.
- Ensure general discussion, evaluation and reflexion. Therefore, opportunities for reflection on should be built into each stage of the activity.
- Be capable of carrying out VET reform policy analysis and presenting observations in a succinct manner.
- Generalise the results of individual PLAs in order to generate material accessible, transferable, useable and relevant to any policy context.
- Identify common principles arising from the reflection on particular context-related experiences.
- Draw clear policy messages for ministers (in the form of policy briefs) ; and
- Produce a report which summarises the lessons learned and which can be used for wider dissemination and policy consultation.

---

[5] Peer review is an external quality assessment based on a traditional learning approach of expert knowledge transfer, where peers assess and make policy recommendations. The transfer of policies from one specific national policy environment to another policy context of a country is very often superfluous or with limited results as the cultural and political frame of a country determines the final impact of a policy implementation. On the other hand, peer learning simulates a learning situation to stimulate policy learning among national policy-makers who know about their own cultural and political system and can adapted the police experience learned.

PLA questionnaires	• According to Education and Training 2010 Coordination Group, "fact-finding and information gathering is a crucial condition for effective interaction and dialogue" within a policy learning approach. In order to satisfy this condition, ENQA-VET has designed two questionnaires to be completed by participants before and after a PLA takes place. • The questionnaires are instruments to support and facilitate the discussion and cooperation processes.
Pre-activity questionnaire	All ENQA-VET PLAs are preceded by a questionnaire for participants to be completed. The pre-activity questionnaire: • Ensures that the PLA content and structure responds to participant needs. • Has a common ENQA-VET structure and a specific content related part. • Uses the CQAF/EQARF quality cycle. According to the European Commission, the quality cycle is the reference point in the exchange of experiences and debates, the instrument to capture good practices as well as weak points of different VET and quality systems. ENQA-VET uses the CQAF/EQARF quality cycle because the Common Framework serves as a "common European language", as a mean to understand the different national systems. • Gives coherence to diversity. • Helps the Expert to gather relevant information in order to bridge the host and participants policy context necessary to create a cooperative learning situation. • Facilitates the production of quality outcomes from all PLAs in the form of Expert's report which can be used for wider dissemination and policy consultation.
Post-activity	All PLAs are followed by a post-activity questionnaire for participants completed which: • Evaluates the value of a PLA within the context of the OMC and summarises the lessons learned. • Reviews the role of participants in their national context. • Encourages policy formulation among participants.

For further reading

ENQA-VET (2007) Work Programme 2008-2009. Dublin.

www.enqavet.eu/documents/ENQAVET_Work_Programme_2008-09_final.pdf

European Commission (2007) Education and Training 2010 programme, Cluster 'Teacher and Trainers', main policy conclusion. Brussels.

European Commission (2008) Education and training 2010 work programme, Cluster Key Competences – Curriculum Reform Synthesis Report on Peer Learning Activities in 2007. Brussels.

European Council (2000) Lisbon Strategy. Lisbon.

European Council (2002) Detailed work programme - Education and Training 2010. Brussels.

European Council (2009) Council conclusion on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET 2020). Brussels.

Chakroun B. and Sahlberg P., (2008) ETF Yearbook 2008 – Policy Learning in Action. Italy.

Grooting P., Nielsen, S., Nikolovska, M. and Vos, A. (2006) ETF Yearbook 2006 – Skills development for Poverty Reduction. Italy.

OECD (2002) Peer review: a tool for co-operation and change; An Analysis of an OECD Working Method. Paris.