

Study on Peer Review and the work of the EQAVET Network

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Executive Summary

Peer review in the education and training sector means the evaluation of an institution, activity or product by one or more peers i.e. by someone who does the same or a similar job to those being assessed.

Peer reviews may be conducted on systems (on parts or all of national/regional policies), institutions (providers of education and training e.g. universities, VET schools, quality assurance agencies, etc.) and/or on individual products (academic articles, etc.).

Peer review may be used as an alternative to formal external evaluation.

The analysis presented in this study is based on two sources: desk research into the definition and the implementation of peer review at VET provider and system levels, and documentation provided by the EQAVET national reference points (NRPs), which are funded under Erasmus+ KA3 programmes¹.

Main findings

The EQAVET NRPs from Austria, Croatia, Finland, Italy, Slovenia and Slovakia organised peer reviews of VET providers between 2017–2019. The findings of those reviews were:

- Peer review is an appropriate methodology for improving quality assurance at school level
- Peer review should be used regularly to strengthen the quality of the educational offering
- Peer review of VET providers is an opportunity for transnational cooperation where NRPs agree a common approach to the review process and peers come from different countries.

EQAVET NRPs have also organised numerous peer learning activities and study visits as part of the Erasmus+ projects, which are regarded as useful ways of transferring knowledge among peers.

At system level, peer review has been used regularly by international institutions such as the OECD and the EU Commission:

- Since its foundation, the OECD has used peer review more often than any other review methodology. The OECD definition of peer review is *the systematic examination and assessment of the performance of a State by other States, with the ultimate goal of helping the reviewed State improve its policy making, adopt best practices, and comply with established standards and principles* (see chapter 1).
- The EU Commission uses peer review in the Mutual Learning Programme (MLP) which is part of the European Employment Strategy. The MLP also includes peer learning events and public conferences. Here, a peer review is a learning event hosted by a European country wishing to present examples of good practice or an emerging policy or practice to a group of peer countries (up to 10 guest countries). The goal of this type of peer review is to discuss a specific topic in order to identify good practice which peers could adopt to support the implementation of emerging policies or practices.
- DG EAC has developed the methodology of peer counselling, which is an instrument which brings together professional peers from a small number of national administrations to provide external advice to a country in the process of a policy development. It is intended to go beyond information-sharing and provide a participatory workshop where possible solutions to national challenges can be discussed.
- Another area of interest is the use of peer review by the Directorate-General for

¹ The Erasmus+ programme addressed to National Reference Points has been developed so far through two calls: the first edition covered (approximately) one year from 2016 to 2017; the second edition covered two years from 2017 to 2019 (See Erasmus+ KA3 — Support to the activities of the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and training (EQAVET) National Reference Points (NRP) Compendium 2017. A third called was launched at the end of 2018.

Research and Innovation, EU Commission, to examine national research and innovation systems, under the "Horizon 2020 Policy Support Facility".

Peer reviews are also carried out by Eurostat, UNEG (the United Nations Evaluations Group), ENQA and other international organisations. The ETF Forum for Quality Assurance in VET has developed a manual (currently a working paper) which provides guidance and a training concept for the implementation of Peer Visits.

Chapter 3 presents a SWOT analysis on peer review. It shows that peer review is a "soft" mechanism that improves quality assurance at both system and provider levels. Peer review advances trust, transparency and understanding between countries and institutions, since the assessment is managed by peers and not by external inspectors. For this reason, peer review is easily accepted by the institution under scrutiny as a friendly approach that facilitates the emergence of important issues that might otherwise remain hidden.

In conclusion, peer review promotes mutual reflection on quality assurance in VET, fostering European integration and awareness of other systems.

Possible developments

The positive results achieved by EQAVET NRPs through peer reviews of VET providers indicate that this methodology could be also be used to improve the quality assurance of national VET systems or elements of them.

According to the EQAVET Secretariat survey, quality management in national VET systems in EU-28 is stronger in the planning and implementation stages than in the evaluation and review stages². Therefore, national VET systems may need further support in the evaluation and review stages, in particular in relation to review processes.

Peer review at system level can have the following benefits:

- **Policy dialogue:** during peer reviews, countries systematically exchange information and opinions on policies and their application. This dialogue can be the basis for further cooperation.
- **Transparency:** the reviewed country has the opportunity, during a peer review, to present and clarify national rules, practices and procedures and explain their rationale.
- **Capacity building:** peer review is a mutual learning process in which best practices are exchanged. The process can therefore help to build capacity – not only in the country under review, but also in countries participating in the process as peers/examiners, or simply as members of the network.
- **Compliance:** an important function of peer review is to ensure that countries comply with internationally agreed policies, standards, and principles. In many contexts, the soft nature of peer review is more successful at obtaining compliance than traditional enforcement mechanisms³.

Peer review at system level could prove mutually beneficial as follows:

- Countries which invite peers to comment on an innovation or a system reform in order to implement or improve it can expect to receive constructive suggestions from peers.
- Countries which provide experts to contribute to a peer review of an innovation or a system reform in another country can expect to increase their knowledge of the issue.

The EQAVET Network and peer review

On foot of these benefits, one could argue that peer review fits well with the work of the EQAVET Network.

² Supporting the implementation of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework - Draft Results of EQAVET Secretariat Survey 2016 – 2017, p.115 OECD 2003

³ Peer Review, an OECD Tool for Co-operation and Change, OECD 2003

However, peer review at system level has certain requirements:

- Careful preparation
- A clearly defined policy context, clear objectives, and the participation of key actors at system level
- Trustworthy peers who have expertise on the EU process and the Eqavet Framework.

The study contains some reflections on this issue, mainly about:

- **Scope:** How wide and deep should be the peer review be? Should it encompass the entire QA national system, or just parts of it? Should it focus on good, controversial or innovative practice? Should it request a deep analysis before, during and/or after the visit? And who should do the analysis?
- **Timeline:** How much time should be devoted to the peer review by the host country, by the peers and by the EU Secretariat managing the work of the Network? How long should the Peer Visit last?
- **Peers:** Who should be the peers? The NRPs or other experts/institutions? What actors and organisations should be also be involved?
- **Process:** What needs to be done to implement and conclude a wide system peer review?

Chapter 1. Peer review: one useful instrument for several purposes

1.1. General definition

Peer review is the evaluation of an institution, activity or product by one or more people (called peers) who do the same or a similar job to those being assessed.

In peer review of VET, a group of peers (an external group of experts) is invited to review the quality of various aspects of the education and training provision of a department or an entire organisation.

Peers are “persons of equal standing”, who usually come from a similar environment and have specific knowledge and expertise. This makes it easier to accept the findings of the evaluation in comparison to other external forms of review. Peer review may be conducted on systems (on parts or all of national/regional policies), institutions (universities, schools, VET providers, etc.) and/or individual products (academic articles, etc.).

For institutions, peer review may be used as an alternative to formal external evaluation carried out by inspectors.

1.2 Peer review at system level

Peer review may be used to evaluate policies implemented at system level. Significant peer reviews at system level are carried out by international institutions like OECD, the European Commission, Eurostat, UN, ENQA, WTO, etc.

1.2.1 Peer Reviews carried out by the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC)

The OECD has used peer review in most policy areas since it was set up more than 50 years ago. Peer review has evolved over time to take account of new developments, including the involvement of civil society, business and labour. The main aim of peer review is to help the State under review improve its policymaking, adopt best practices and comply with established standards and principles. The system relies heavily on mutual trust among the States involved, as well as their shared confidence in the process. OECD staff experts also play an important role in supporting and stimulating the process.

The peer review is a discussion among equals, rather than the acceptance of judgement or criticism from ‘a superior body’. In peer review, a State is more willing to accept criticism, and its neighbours to give it. Both parties know there is no obligation to accept recommendations.

The OECD concept of peer review at system level

According to OECD, *peer review can be described as the systematic examination and assessment of the performance of a State by other States, with the ultimate goal of helping the reviewed State improve its policy making, adopt best practices, and comply with established standards and principles.*

The examination is conducted on a non-adversarial basis, and it relies heavily on mutual trust among the States involved in the review, as well as shared confidence in the process. When peer review is undertaken in an international organisation, as is usually the case, the secretariat of the organisation also plays an important role in supporting and managing the process. With these elements in place, peer review tends to create, through this reciprocal evaluation process, a system of mutual accountability.

An individual country peer review could relate to economics, governance, education, health, environment, energy or other policies and practices. Within one or more of those subject areas, a State may be examined against a wide range of standards and criteria, such as conformity with policy guidelines, or implementation of legally binding principles. Peer review can also be carried out thematically, where several countries are examined at the same time with respect to a particular thing. Peer review with regard to an individual State, or theme, is typically carried out on a regular basis with each review exercise resulting in a report that assesses accomplishments, spells out shortfalls and makes recommendations⁴.

How does OECD use peer review?

A country seeking to reduce unemployment can learn valuable lessons from its peers on what has worked and what has not. This can save time, and costly experimenting, in drafting effective national policies. The recommendations resulting from such a review can also help governments win support at home for difficult measures.

In OECD countries, peer review has been carried out in key policy areas. There is no standardised peer review mechanism. However, all peer reviews contain the following structural elements:

- An agreed roadmap;
- An agreed set of principles, standards and criteria against which the country performance is to be reviewed;
- Designated actors to carry out the peer review; and
- A set of procedures leading to the final result of the peer review; which are usually policy recommendations and guidelines.

Currently, peer reviews are carried out by the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC), which is mandated to promote co-operation in sustainable development, economic growth, poverty reduction and improvement of living standards. The peer review is prepared by a team consisting of representatives of the Secretariat working with officials from two DAC members who are designated as examiners. An explicit and transparent analytical framework is used to review the performance of DAC members as follows:

⁴ OECD: Peer Review: an OECD tool for co-operation and change, 2003

DAC peer review reference guide

Components of analysis

Dimension	Components of analysis
<p>1. Global efforts for sustainable development The member has a broad, strategic approach to global sustainable development, encompassing global challenges, policy coherence for sustainable development and awareness raising at home</p>	<p>1.1. Efforts to support global sustainable development 1.2. Policy coherence for sustainable development 1.3. Global awareness</p>
<p>2. Policy vision and framework Clear political directives, policies and strategies shape the member's development co-operation and are in line with international commitments, including the 2030 Agenda.</p>	<p>2.1. Framework 2.2. Principles and guidance 2.3. Basis for decision-making</p>
<p>3. Financing for development The member's international and national commitments drive its ODA volume and allocations and its other financing efforts to support the 2030 Agenda.</p>	<p>3.1. Overall ODA volume 3.2. Bilateral ODA allocations 3.3. Multilateral ODA allocations 3.4. Financing for sustainable development</p>
<p>4. Structure and systems Organisational structures and management systems for development co-operation are fit for purpose, with appropriate capabilities.</p>	<p>4.1. Authority, mandate and co-ordination 4.2. Systems 4.3. Capabilities throughout the system</p>
<p>5. Delivery modalities and partnerships The member's approach to delivering in partner countries and through partnerships is in line with the principles for effective development co-operation.</p>	<p>5.1. Effective partnerships 5.2. Country level engagement</p>
<p>6. Results management, evaluation and learning The member plans and manages for results, in line with the SDGs, building evidence of what works and using evidence to learn and adapt.</p>	<p>6.1. Management for development results 6.2. Evaluation system 6.3. Institutional learning</p>
<p>7. Fragility, crises and humanitarian assistance The member contributes to reducing the risk of crises and conflict, minimising the impact of shocks and conflicts, managing forced displacement flows and supporting affected populations, and increasing resilience to shocks and stresses, including through prevention. (Section A) The member contributes to minimising the humanitarian impact of shocks and crises; and saves lives, alleviates suffering, and maintains human dignity in crisis and disaster settings. (Section B)</p>	<p>A 7.1 Strategic framework 7.2 Effective programme design and instruments 7.3 Effective delivery and partnerships B 7.4 Humanitarian assistance strategic framework 7.5 Effective humanitarian programming 7.6 Effective delivery, partnership and instruments of humanitarian assistance 7.7 Organisation fit for purpose 7.8 Communication</p>

Source OECD, Development Co-Operation Directorate, DAC Peer Review Reference Guide, 2019–20, DCD/DAC (2019)3/FINAL

Indicators are included for each element.

The purpose of the reference guide is to:

- Clarify the preparation of the memorandum for the review.
- Prepare both the examining team and the reviewed member for discussions at headquarters and in the field.
- Provide a consistent approach to the drafting of the assessment report.
- Enable lessons to be learnt after reviews, which may include thematic recommendations following a series of reviews.

While the reference guide provides benchmarks and conditions that define good and effective development cooperation, there is no “one size fits all” model. Each peer review has its own context, which is presented at the beginning of the peer review report. This ensures that the reference guide is applied in a flexible manner and that recommendations are adjusted in order to support the efforts of the reviewed member to build quality development cooperation. Balance between accountability and flexibility is essential.

The country under review provides a memorandum setting out developments in its policies and programmes. At this point, the secretary and examiners visit the country's capital to interview officials, parliamentarians, as well as members of civil society and non-governmental organisations. Field visits are organised to assess how members are implementing the major DAC policies, and to hear concerns. Based on these visits, the Secretariat prepares a draft report which forms the basis for a DAC review meeting at the OECD. At this meeting, senior officials from the country under review respond to questions formulated by the committee in association with the examiners⁵. The policies and programmes of each DAC member are critically examined approximately every five years. DAC peer reviews assess the performance of a given country, not just the development co-operation agency, and examine both policy and implementation.

OECD uses peer reviews also to:

- Examine economic trends and policies in OECD and Key Partner countries.
- Review systematically how OECD countries meet domestic policy objectives and international commitments.
- Help governments identify best practice and set priorities for regulatory reform across a broad range of policy areas.

1.2.2 Peer reviews carried out under The EU Mutual Learning Programme

The European Union has been using peer review in the Mutual Learning Programme (MLP)⁶ under the European Employment Strategy (EES), which aims to:

- Support, coordinate and encourage mutual learning between EU Member States in order to progress towards the goals of the European Employment Strategy.
- Encourage mutual learning opportunities resulting in policy transfer at EU and national levels.
- Disseminate the results of the MLP and their contribution to the European Employment Strategy.

The MLP includes peer learning events and public conferences, which provide forums for European government representatives and other stakeholders (such as social partners, non-governmental and international organisations) to exchange information and experiences on topics relating to the European Employment Strategy and the European Pillar of Social Rights.

⁵ OECD *Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: European Union 2018*, in series: OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews. Published on December 10, 2018

⁶ The Mutual Learning Programme is a tool for the open method of coordination in the field of EU employment policy

One of the most common types of peer learning events is the peer review. A peer review is a learning event hosted by a European country wishing to present a good practice example or an emerging policy or practice to a group of peer countries (up to 10 guest countries) and EU organisations.

How does MLP use peer review?

The peer review is attended by experts from the European Commission, peer countries and relevant stakeholders who provide feedback. These usually meet over two days and include visits to local sites where the policy can be seen in operation. The exercise consists of a two-way exchange guided by the question 'What works and what does not work and why'.

Before the meeting, an expert report is produced, on which participating "peer countries" submit comments. The results are published on the web. The goal is to discuss a specific topic, in order to identify transferable aspects and learning from good practice and/ or support the implementation of emerging policies or practices.

Peer reviews are a useful tool to assess whether the practice discussed:

- Is effective;
- Contributes to EU objectives;
- Could be effectively transferred to other countries.

The host country can also hold a peer review meeting to gather expert advice from other countries before preparing a major policy reform (or new programme or institutional arrangement) in the field of social protection and social inclusion.

The events target national officials, and involve independent experts who contribute with their knowledge and support by preparing background papers in advance of the meetings.

Peer review carried out under the Mutual Learning Programme

In October 2018 a peer review was held in Paris on "Measuring labour market tightness to improve employment policies and reduce skills mismatches". The aim of the peer review was to share experiences on ways to improve flexibility in the labour market.

Ensuring a good match between labour supply and demand is a complex challenge for all countries. In this context, France used to publish labour market tightness indices (ratio of the number of job vacancies posted by Public Employment Services (PES) per registered unemployed). However, in May 2017 this publication was suspended due to data issues (including insufficient coverage of job vacancies data, relying only on PES job vacancies and therefore missing a large proportion of non-PES job vacancies, as well as the hidden labour market).

Subsequently, the Statistical Office for Research and Statistics (DARES) launched a review on labour market tightness based on:

- *an inventory of relevant indicators from administrative data and existing surveys,*
- *an analysis of all these indicators at sectoral and occupational levels, and*
- *a principal component analysis (PCA) to make sense of these various indicators.*

This peer review provided an opportunity for all participating countries to share their experiences, including data issues, good practice and solutions.

It was also an opportunity to explore how labour market actors (government, PES, unions, companies, etc.) can make use of labour market indicators to inform employment related policies. The peer review was hosted by the French Statistical Office for Labour and Employment.

In addition to peer reviews, the MLP organises other events to help European countries address specific policy challenges and issues. These are learning exchanges which bring together a smaller group of countries to examine a specific policy or measure in greater depth or to deal with specific policy challenges, such as Country-Specific Recommendations.

The learning generated through MLP activities is shared with a wider audience through the MLP website, public conferences and thematic events bringing together key stakeholders, to address:

- Critical policy issues or thematic priorities of the European Employment Strategy and the European Pillar of Social Rights;
- How EU and national employment policy can address these issues and priorities;
- Networking and ways of identifying further opportunities for mutual learning and collaboration;
- How to disseminate the results of the MLP and how they can be used to inform EU and national employment policy.

1.2.3 A similar instrument: Peer Counselling

The 2015 Joint Report of the Council and the Commission on the implementation of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (ET2020)⁷ stated that ET 2020 peer learning activities, usually conducted within Working Groups, would be strengthened and enable Member States sharing similar policy challenges to work in clusters. Peer reviews, organised in implementation of the 2012 Joint Report on a voluntary basis and focusing on country-specific challenges, have proved useful in the context of the informal DG meetings but require more preparation and interactive dialogue.

Tailored peer counselling can also be used to support a particular national reform agenda. Peer counselling is an instrument which brings together, on a voluntary and transparent basis, professional peers from a small number of national administrations to provide external advice to a country in the process of a significant policy development. It is intended to go beyond information-sharing and provide a forum for finding solutions to national challenges in a participatory workshop.

The distinctive features of peer counselling are:

- Peer counselling is tailored to the policy needs of a country as it takes the specific policy challenges of one particular Member State as the starting point for discussions
- The instrument is highly responsive to the needs of a country as it can only be launched at the request of a Member State. It has to be closely linked to an ongoing policy development in the Member State.
- It features an EU knowledge-sharing element by bringing together members of national administrations with direct experience from working on similar projects.

Peers are policy makers from other national administrations and, optionally, independent academic experts, who provide policy advice and expertise. The involved policymakers and experts have typically already had experience in dealing with comparable policy challenges.

Peer counselling differs from country-focused workshops in that it is entirely tailored to the needs of one particular Member State. Not only does the host Member State set the agenda and define the discussion points, but the event takes place in the host country, which makes attendance of a broader number of national policy makers and stakeholders possible.

According to the information note developed by the DG EAC⁸, peer counselling may be implemented in two versions: light and full version.

The Light Version of Peer Counselling

The light version of Peer Counselling, 3-6 months in length, takes the form of a seminar targeted at the needs of the hosting country and involves experienced colleagues from other Member States. It is especially flexible and adaptable to the needs of the hosting Member State, in particular the need for technical advice from other Member States within a short timeframe.

- *Preparatory phase*

⁷ (2015/C 417/04)

⁸European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture *Peer counselling A new element in the ET2020 toolbox*

- (1) Request by an interested Member State to the Commission (DG EAC), providing a description of the rationale behind the request
- (2) Feasibility check by the Commission in cooperation with that country on the topics for the peer counselling and accordingly, the available expertise at EU and Member State level;
- (3) Formal request endorsed by the national director-general of the relevant policy field
- (4) Definition of a roadmap between the country concerned, the Commission, and, if applicable, independent experts.
- (5) Selection of suitable peers and, if applicable, experts; and
- (6) A self-assessment of the hosting country and its policy challenges (based on an agreed structure and methodology), possible solutions and detailed policy questions for peers. At this stage, the hosts also prepare an agenda for the event.

- *Counselling*

The role of the peers is to then:

- (7) Study the country's self-assessment of policy challenges and fully understand the background of the thematic area chosen by the host country. To that end, there is a possibility of a presentation of the current system by the host country via a webinar hosted by the Commission.
- (8) Prepare information about actions undertaken in their respective Member States on similar challenges and participate in the actual event in the hosting country to discuss the hosting country's challenges and offer insight into successful and/or less successful policy solutions that they have experience of.

- *Reporting*

- (9) The Commission (if necessary, supported by an expert) draws up a final report summarising the discussions during the event. It contains the hosting country's description of its policy challenges and questions, a description of related experiences and policy solutions put in place in other Member States, and finally a list of conclusions for the hosting country drawing on the contributions of the peers from the seminar. The peers may comment on the final report, but effort will be made not to overburden peers. The relevant ET2020 Working Group and the Education Committee are informed of the main results.

European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture Peer counselling A new element in the ET2020 toolbox

Czechia and Slovakia have implemented this instrument in recent years.

1.2.4 Peer reviews carried out under The EU Horizon 2020 Policy Support Facility

Another interesting instance of peer review organised by the EU Commission comes from the Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, which promoted the "Horizon 2020 Policy Support Facility". This is a new instrument that enables Member States to design, implement and evaluate reforms to enhance the quality of their research and innovation investments, policies and systems. One of the activities developed through this instrument is the peer review of national R&I systems.

How does The EU Horizon 2020 Policy Support Facility use peer review?

These reviews are carried out by a panel of experts and policy peers, leading to operational recommendations to the national authorities on the reforms necessary to strengthen their R&I systems. Here, peer reviews can take the shape of a general assessment of the country's strengths and weaknesses in R&I; or be focused on a number of specific elements of the R&I systems (e.g. reform of universities, knowledge-transfer systems, etc.). The scope is agreed beforehand with the country under review.

The peer review is preceded by a 'pre-peer review' (a preparatory step to identify focus areas) and followed by a 'post-peer review' (a follow-up step to advise on how to adjust and strengthen the implementation of peer review recommendations).

In 2017 a peer review was hosted by the Polish Science and Higher Education System, with the object of obtaining recommendations on how to develop Poland's science and higher education policy to support innovation. The specific focus areas of the peer review were:

- Structural changes in the higher education and science sector.
- Links between that sector and other relevant sectors.
- The internationalisation of the sector – trends, key areas for improvement.

The Peer Review of the Polish Science and Higher Education System

The Peer Review of the Polish Science and Higher Education System took place between 30 January 2017 and 13 September 2017. The panel of assessors comprised three peers from Belgium, Austria and Sweden and five independent experts.

The Polish Peer Review requested one kick-off meeting and two Country Visits and was organised as follows:

1) Design and Preparation: The first step was for the host country (Poland) to express interest in a peer review and confirm its commitment to it, and to define the scope of the review (which is afterwards confirmed/specified during the self-assessment phase). The panel of independent and peer experts was selected, relevant information collected, and key actors (in Poland) contacted. The kick-off meeting of the peer review panel, the relevant Polish authorities and the Commission took place in Brussels, to agree a roadmap for the peer review and country visits (timing, meetings, main issues/questions). The background information produced by the contractor and the country's self-assessment (in the form of a structured PPT presentation) were presented to the experts at this meeting.

2) In-depth analysis and peer review sessions: The second step was to analyse the information collected during the first step on the focus areas of the R&I system and in face-to-face interactions in Poland through two peer review missions. The peer review missions included interviews with officers and stakeholders from Poland (intermediary organisations, public administration bodies, private sector representatives). Debrief meetings were organised for the panel and representatives of the Commission at the end of each day.

3) Reporting phase: The third step was the elaboration and communication of the findings of the peer review. The draft peer review report, prepared before the second visit, was discussed with the Polish authorities. After almost nine months of analytical work and visits to Poland, the peer review panel's report and recommendations on the modernisation of the national science and higher education system were discussed at a special meeting hosted by the Polish Ministry for Science and Higher Education. A press conference and related communication activities were organised to disseminate the report to stakeholders and to raise awareness of the main R&I policy challenges in Poland.

Peer reviews of Maltese, Estonian and Danish research & innovation systems following this approach were launched in 2018 and are ongoing.

1.2.5 The Peer Learning Visits developed by ETF

The European Training Foundation (ETF) established a Forum for Quality Assurance in VET in 2017. This Forum is a transnational collaboration initiative between national institutions with VET quality assurance mandates in sixteen ETF partner countries. Within this program ETF has developed the *Peer Visit Guidance and Training Manual*⁹. The Manual, currently a Working Paper, provides guidance and a training concept for the implementation of Peer Visits that aim to support self- and peer-assessment of VET quality assurance measures. Peer learning in the context of the Forum encompasses a number of different mechanisms that support learning from and with peers. In peer learning activities, peers simultaneously learn from other peers and contribute to their learning by sharing knowledge, ideas and experiences.

⁹ Etf Forum for quality assurance in vocational education and training *Peer visit guidance and training manual* summary version, 2018

The ETF Peer Learning Visits

A Peer Visit is a form of external feedback from peers, with the aim of supporting a Forum member acting as host in its quality assurance development efforts. An external group of peers is invited to give feedback on the quality assurance measures selected by the host institution.

Principles of ETF Forum Peer Visits

There are some principles to be taken into account when it comes to the implementation of Forum Peer Visits:

- Participation as a host or a peer is voluntary.
- The interests and needs of the institutions involved are central.
- They take account of cultural differences influencing the process and the feedback.
- The focus is on both the strengths and the weaknesses of the selected quality assurance approach/measure.
- The host Forum member institution is expected to reflect on and work with the results of the peer feedback.

Peer Visits are not intended to be controlling, technical or bureaucratic procedures and should not be misused to glorify or promote organisations, persons, concepts or approaches.

Roles and responsibilities

Careful preparation is essential for a successful Peer Visit. One of the first things to do is to determine the roles and responsibilities of all actors in the procedure.

- Forum host institutions: Host institutions are those who get feedback from Forum peers on the quality assurance measures reviewed during the Peer Visit. The host institution must invest personnel and financial resources. The host institution is also responsible for taking action on the results of the peer feedback.
- Forum peers: Their role is to give critical but constructive and supportive feedback. Peers are persons who are equal to or on equal standing with the persons receiving feedback. They work in a similar environment and have a similar expertise. Peers are not expected to act in a judging or controlling way or manner. They should be willing to engage in a reflective process and to consider the transferability of what they have heard and seen to their own national context.
- Observers (optional): Observers can be nominated. The role of an observer is to reflect on the whole procedure. The main tasks are to observe whether the process is implemented effectively and efficiently and to give advice on areas for improvement.

A funding and/or a content specialist body may support the host institution in the management and coordination of the Peer Visit and/or the identification of external experts as relevant and appropriate.

The four phases of a Peer Visit

- Phase 1. Preparation for the Peer Visit
- Phase 2. Peer Visit in the country of the host Forum member institution
- Phase 3. Peer feedback to the host Forum member institution
- Phase 4. Follow-up: consideration of improvements based on the feedback

In contrast to Study Visits, Peer Visits place a strong emphasis on professional feedback by a group of peers through a clearly structured procedure. The core intention of the procedure is that this feedback be valuable and helpful for the host Forum member institution and serve as a basis for improving the quality assurance in VET measures under review.

ETF Forum for quality assurance in vocational education and training Peer visit guidance and training manual summary version, 2018

1.2.6 Peer reviews carried out by Eurostat¹⁰

Eurostat also carries out peer reviews. The objective is to evaluate the extent to which National Statistical Institutes (NSIs) and the European Statistical System (ESS) comply with the European Statistics Code of Practice (CoP). All EU Member States and EFTA/EEA countries and Eurostat are subject to peer review.

The first peer reviews took place between 2006–2008 and explored what progress NSIs and Eurostat were making in implementing the CoP in relation to institutions and disseminating statistics. The reviews from the period 2013–2015 focus mainly on issues where full compliance with the CoP was not found or further improvements were recommended by the peer review team.

(2

How does Eurostat use peer review?

Each peer review in Member States and EFTA/EEA countries is conducted by three reviewers and consists of four phases:

1. Completion of a self-assessment questionnaire by a country;
2. Assessment of the questionnaire by peer reviewers;
3. A peer review visit; and
4. The preparation of reports on the outcomes.

Prior to each in-country visit, the review team will analyse the self-assessment questionnaires, the core documents provided by the National Statistical Institute, other documentation (such as previous peer review reports and a summary of progress with improvement actions and any online information etc.) and the websites of the NSI. This is followed by the identification of the areas on which it intends to focus, on the basis of a risk assessment. Based on a country's circumstances, the team will refine a standard list of questions, prepared as an initial guide for peer reviewers.

This procedure ensures a balance between comparability and diversity in countries' frameworks. This balance is achieved by a two-step approach:

1. The self-assessment questionnaires cover the whole CoP – i.e. comparability is ensured.
2. The country visits focus on issues identified by the review teams in the preparatory phase. The review team might also identify important innovative practices which are not included in the CoP but which are currently in effect in other countries.

The duration of the visits will partly depend on the team's assessment of the issues raised in its pre-visit analysis of the documentation. The default assumption is that in-country visits will last five days. Covering all requirements in five days can be a challenge, but careful preparation by the small team of reviewers (through comprehensive self-assessment and documentation) will ensure that visits are both efficient and effective.

The visit starts with a peer review team discussion, followed by a meeting with the NSI coordinator to discuss practical aspects of the visit informally and for members to be introduced. The final half day of the visit includes a discussion on how much confidence senior management in the host country places in the findings of the review team.

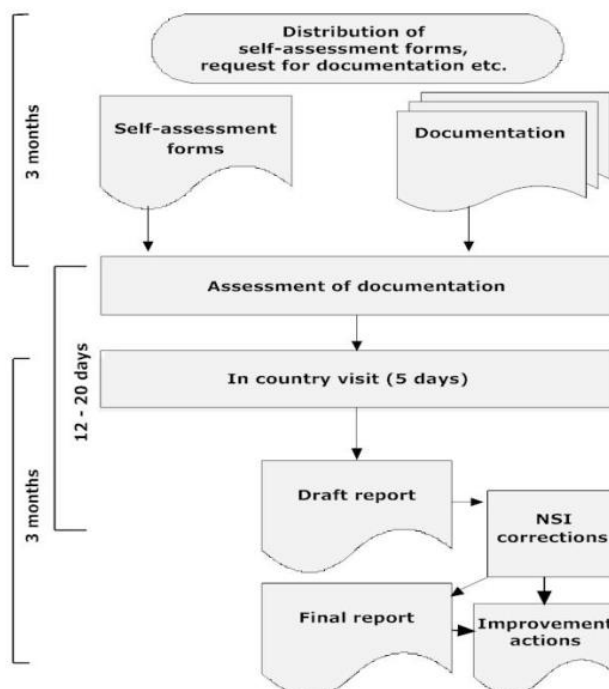
The purpose of the Eurostat programme of reviews is not to rank countries/statistical institutes, but to focus on strengths (including the identification of innovative practices) and weaknesses (including recommendations for improvements). The conclusions of each review are formulated qualitatively and published in a report.

The process peer review is illustrated by figure 1 below:

¹⁰ The information provided in this paragraph is taken from *European Statistical System Peer Reviews-Guide for Peer Reviewers*

Figure 1:

Main phases of the Eurostat peer review for one country



Source: *European Statistical System Peer Reviews – Guide for Peer Reviewers*

1.2.7 How other international organisations use peer review

Many other intergovernmental organisations use peer review. Among United Nations (UN) bodies and specialised agencies, countries use peer review to monitor and assess national policies in various sectors, covering a wider range of issues, such as environment and investment.

Since 2005, the UN Evaluation Group (UNEG) has adopted and played an increasingly important role as the touchstone for peer reviews. In 2011 the UNEG Framework for Professional Peer Reviews of the Evaluation Function of UN organisations was approved, largely based on OECD DAC methodology (see par. 1.2.1). The Framework sets out both specific recommendations and options for the “Approach and Methodology” of professional peer reviews. This provides an explanation of the nature, strengths and limits of a peer review to be undertaken.

The definition of peer review according to UNEG

1) Peer review can be described as the systematic examination and assessment of the performance of an organisation by its peers. The goal is to help the reviewed organisation improve its policy making, adopt best practices, and comply with established standards and principles. The examination relies heavily on mutual trust among the organisations involved in the review, as well as their shared confidence in the process.

2) Peer review is not intended as a basis for resolving differences or for imposing sanctions. Generally, the review process seeks to assess performance based not just on facts/quantitative information but on dialogue and interaction between peers and the institutions under review. Moreover, peer review does not produce legally binding measures or other enforcement mechanisms. Instead, it is a form of peer persuasion which can become an important driving force to encourage organisations to change, achieve goals and meet standards.

3) *These are the elements included in the professional peer review framework, which outlines recommendations and options for the review process:*

- *A basis for proceeding: including the necessary agreement for cooperation, and a clear question for assessment;*
- *A normative framework: an agreed set of principles, standards and criteria against which performance is to be reviewed;*
- *Designated actors and roles in carrying out the peer review; and*
- *A set of procedures for working with evidence and findings (planning, collating and testing), leading to the final result of the peer review. Final results are based on discussions and are drawn primarily from the professional experience and judgment of the panel of peers.*

Source: *UNEG Framework for Professional Peer Reviews of the Evaluation Function of UN organizations. UNEG/REF(2011)1*

The UNEG peer review process includes three phases:

- Phase 1: the preparatory phase in which the ToR for the peer review (and the panel) are formulated. In this phase, the normative framework is developed and the functions within the self-assessment process are identified and agreed.
- Phase 2: the “fact-finding phase”, which consists of 1. the document that contains the factual information needed for the peer review; 2. a first visit of the peer panel to validate this information, seek clarification where needed and help panel members to understand how the evaluation function works. It involves conducting structured interviews with stakeholders in the organisation (evaluation department, other staff and senior management) in order to solicit their views on the evaluation function. If field visits are needed, they will be undertaken during this phase. The results of the “fact-finding phase” will be incorporated into a draft peer review report. The report will be finalised once agreed by all parties.
- Final Phase: a second visit to discuss practices and potential improvements based on the report. This second visit leads to deliberations that result in a final report to be presented to the “evaluation unit” consisting of senior management and/or the governing body of the organisation under review. This ensures that issues identified are accepted by the reviewed organisation.

The World Trade Organisation (WTO) under the Trade Policy Review Mechanism also uses peer review to monitor trade policy and practice in the Member States. A designated WTO body meets to review the policy statements presented by the Member State under review and a report prepared by the WTO Secretariat. This examination is led by two reviewing countries. The procedure concludes with the Final Remarks of the Chair, which are published together with the policy statement of the country under review, the report of the Secretariat and the minutes of the meeting.

1.3 The ENQA Reviews

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) also reviews national quality assurance agencies in EU countries by peer review. These reviews could be more properly classified as “external” reviews than as “peer” reviews¹¹.

Like EQAVET, ENQA is a European Network, supported by the EU Commission, with the purpose of improving quality assurance in European education and training.

ENQA reviews are designed to accredit national quality assurance agencies as ENQA members, provided they meet the expectations of the ENQA Board and formally demonstrate compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). The ESG serves as the reference tool for ENQA Agency Reviews.

¹¹ The next paragraph is dedicated to discussing this distinction.

The aim of the review process is to foster trust in quality assurance and the quality of higher education internationally and to support the legitimacy of the agency at national level.

A review panel of four members comprises two quality assurance professionals (university professors and/or members of national quality assurance agencies), one university professor and one university student. The review panel does not make any judgements on granting membership, since this decision is for the Board of ENQA, based on the evaluation and recommendations made in the final external review report.

ENQA Agency Review: Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (SQAA)

In June 2018, the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (SQAA) undertook an external review coordinated by ENQA. SQAA has been a member of ENQA since March 2015, and wanted to renew its ENQA membership and to continue to be listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). It has been an EQAR member since 2013.

A review panel appointed by ENQA evaluated the way in which and to what extent SQAA fulfils the ESG. The panel for this review was appointed by ENQA.

The review process began with the submission of a self-assessment report (SAR), which, at ENQA's request, was revised in line with ENQA Guidelines. In April 2018, the panel received the final version of the SAR by e-mail. The SAR was commented by the panel which formulated questions and agreed upon the programme for the site visit.

ENQA organised a preparatory video conference briefing for the panel (7 May 2018) providing additional information on the procedure. Prior to the site visit, the review secretary had regular contact with the SQAA's liaison officer and the ENQA coordinator.

During a four-day site visit in Ljubljana (10–13 June 2018), the panel met with management, staff, students, HEIs, the Minister of Education and other stakeholders. The interviews were organised in 15 sessions offering opportunities to discuss and verify the findings in the SAR, and to gather more specific evidence. The panel appreciated the open discussions and the readiness to provide additional documents. At the end of the visit, the panel discussed and approved compliance with each ESG. The scores used by ENQA are: fully, substantially, partially compliant or non-compliant. A final de-briefing meeting with SQAA completed the site visit. At this meeting, the chair gave the panel's overall impressions of the review.

ENQA reviews may have serious consequences for agencies, not only in terms of granting access to membership of ENQA and inclusion in EQAR, but also in terms of how an agency's credibility and quality is perceived by its peers. Therefore, the process of ENQA reviews is formal, with agency accreditation as its final purpose, and ENQA seeks to support all individuals and entities involved in the review process, particularly the agency under review and the external reviewers. The review process seeks to be transparent and focuses on improving quality assurance in the higher education sector.

1.4 Peer learning and peer review

These terms are used interchangeably as both methodologies are based on the predominantly qualitative examination of a policy, institution or specific activity by a group of "fellow" experts (peers).

There are some differences between the two peer processes: in peer learning, peers working in the same field are asked to identify transferable practice in their own institution. In peer review, peers not only have operational knowledge but also possess policy expertise which enables them to carry out a critical analysis of the presented policy.

Documentation

In peer review, documentation submitted by the reviewee is more detailed than in peer learning, and highlights critical aspects of the practice or policy under review. The peer learning visit aims to highlight aspects of innovation in the practice or policy which are likely to transfer well to other national contexts. The peer review visit aims to highlight all aspects, both positive and

problematic, of the practice or policy, in order to allow a more informed and thorough critical judgment. Therefore, peer review visits are usually longer than peer learning visits and are dedicated to critical discussions, with follow-up. This is not the case for peer learning. There is also an expectation that peer review will result in a change and implementation process, which is not the case in peer learning.

However, there is a fine line between the two methodologies and they share certain features. Well-organised peer learning activities include time for reflection and discussion where not only good practice but also challenges are presented and suggestions are made on how challenges may be resolved, based on the experience and expertise of participants.

The main objective of peer learning is the transfer of knowledge of a successful policy or good practice from host to visitor countries. In peer review, the main objective is the improvement of the system, policy or practice assessed by peers; i.e. the transfer of knowledge is in one direction: to the hosting country, which receives critical feedback from peers.

In addition, peer review methodology is generally more structured, leading to a formalised assessment and not only to a "simple" knowledge transfer.

However, it should be said that peer review can become a learning process for peers, who gain knowledge from the host and can transfer it to their home institution, as occurs in peer learning.

Peer review vs external review

Peers are people who work in the same field of practice or politics, and are experts on the subject. Peers are highly regarded by the group or network utilising the peer review methodology.

Good reputation is not always a feature of the external review process. Another difference between the two is that the main objective of peer review is to help the reviewed institution to improve whereas the main objective of the external review is to verify the possession of certain requirements by the institution reviewed, sometimes in order to issue an accreditation.

However, there is no clear distinction between the two kinds of peer activity and both share the following features:

- An initial self-assessment report, drafted by the institution visited
- A site visit, conducted by the peer group, in which further opinions and evidence are collected to investigate and verify the self-assessment report
- A final report, which may be commented by the reviewed institution.

1.5 The adaptation of peer review to VET providers

Since the beginning of the previous decade the peer review methodology has been applied to VET providers and tested through pilot projects in the Leonardo programme. The aim of these projects was to test the suitability of peer review for VET. These projects have proven that this methodology is fit for purpose.

The definition and development of a peer review procedure for VET followed and was defined as a voluntary external evaluation which supports European VET providers in their efforts to improve the quality of their provision.

The main characteristics of the peer review approach for VET are¹²:

- It is an external friendly assessment
- It is voluntary
- It can complement traditional external evaluation

¹² The following paragraph is taken from Maria Gutknecht-Gmeiner (ed.), *European Peer Review Manual for VET*, Vienna, September 2009

- Its aim is formative, that is, to improve the quality of VET providers
- It is based on a quantitative/qualitative assessment: the qualitative approach depends on information available
- It is focused on the institution and on the interests of people involved, who have chosen the areas to be evaluated
- The external assessors are peers, i.e., people who have similar roles or competences to the people examined.

There are four phases to the process:

Phase 1

The peer review starts with an organising phase:

- The institution agrees upon the “quality areas”, the criteria and the indicators to be reviewed and may additionally formulate specific evaluation questions for the peer team
- The peers are recruited and trained
- The provider carries out a self-evaluation (if this does not exist) to prepare a “self-report” (it should be available one month before the peer review visit in order to allow peers to be prepared for the visit)
- A timetable for the review is drawn up and arrangements are made for the Peer Visit
- The Peer Visit is organised

Phase 2

The Peer Visit, which is the core activity, is conducted in this phase. Peers visit the VET provider and carry out an evaluation. The following are the main activities performed by the peers:

- Collection of supplementary documentation and data
- Tour of the premises
- Interviews with different groups of stakeholders and observations
- Analysis and discussion of the findings in the peer team
- Professional assessment and definition of common conclusions
- Oral feedback to the institution at the end of the Peer Visit
- Meta-evaluation by the Review Team

Phase 3

After the Peer Visit, a draft report is prepared by the peers, and is commented on by the VET provider before the final “peer review report” is issued

Phase 4

Results and recommendations from the peer review are expressed in concrete actions for improvement.

- A plan containing improvement measures is drawn up
- Improvement measures are implemented
- The next peer review is planned and carried out

Phase 4 is of key importance.

1.5.1 The Quality Areas

Peer review is about evaluating institutions (or parts of institutions) – not individual teachers or trainers. Furthermore, the peer review does not provide a full evaluation of the institution (this would take too much time). Rather, it focuses on the aspects of most interest to the provider, whether seeking to improve or to critically analyse its current practice. The methodology contains 14 quality areas, of which the provider chooses two or three areas on which it would like to be evaluated.

1.5.2 The peers

The peers are considered to be “critical friends”. They are external to the institution reviewed, but work in a similar environment and have specific professional expertise and knowledge. They are “persons of equal standing”.

The peers must have a good knowledge of the process of peer review, some competences in quality management and evaluation and possess some social research techniques (ideally data and statistics, conducting quantitative and qualitative analysis, interviewing individuals and groups, etc.).

Peers should also have teaching experience, knowledge of the quality areas reviewed, and a general knowledge of the education and training system of the reviewee. Experience in group dynamics and basic computer skills are also important prerequisites. Training for peers is required prior to the visit. The peer team is made of four people. A transnational peer may be included in the peer team.

1.5.3 Peer review adapted to VET providers

The first three projects carried out between 2003 and 2009¹³ allowed promoters of the project to define a methodology and a manual¹⁴, which would apply to initial as well as continuing VET. As a consequence, many other initiatives have been developed at national and international level and the manual has been adapted to different educational contexts, as the Educational and Vocational Guidance for Adults, developed by the EuropePeerGuid project¹⁵; the European Peer Review and the manual were also adapted to complement and enhance the usual quality assurance systems in Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL)¹⁶.

Many countries (including Austria, Finland, Italy Slovenia, Hungary, Portugal etc.) have implemented peer review at national or international level. These initiatives were developed between networks of schools and training centres and received a positive response from the participating actors. Finland and Slovenia adapted the “quality areas” of the original manual to their context. In Austria, peer review has been introduced as a quality methodology in the national strategy of the Section for General Education and Vocational Training of the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research.

The international aspect of the transnational peer review has also led to increased European cooperation and prompted some projects in other areas (student mobility and exchanges, for instance).

In 2013, based on the results obtained by the projects carried out from 2004 to 2009, the European Peer Review Association was founded to disseminate, support and further develop peer review as an evaluation process by colleagues in education and training institutions in the EU¹⁷.

1.5.4 The impact of peer review

In 2010 the project Peer Review Impact¹⁸ made a thorough investigation and analysis of 14 transnational European peer reviews carried out in eight European countries between 2006 and 2009. The aim was to determine the conditions under which feedback from peer reviews was used (as a starting point for a VET provider’s operational improvement) and to discover the critical success factors from these findings.

¹³ “Peer Review in initial VET” , “Peer Review Extended” & “Peer Review Extended II”

¹⁴ Maria Gutknecht-Gmeiner (ed.), *European Peer Review Manual for VET*, Vienna, September 2009

¹⁵ LdV TOI Project “EuroPeerGuid” “European Peer Review in Guidance and Counselling in Adult Vocational Education and Training”, 2010–2012 (CECOA, Portugal)

¹⁶ <http://www.peer-review-network.eu/pages/peer-review-vnfil-extended/project-description.php>

¹⁷ <http://www.peer-review-network.eu/pages/about-us.php>

¹⁸ LEONARDO Project ‘Peer Review Impact – Ensuring the impact of Peer Review to improve provision of VET in Europe, 2009–2011’ Progetto number – 2009-1-F11-LEO05-01584 The project involved Finland, Austria, Italy, Hungary, Netherlands

This analysis indicated that peer review is considered a good tool for improving quality and that in most cases management was committed, staff and other stakeholders were sufficiently involved, the quality areas chosen were relevant, peers had sufficient expertise and acted professionally, the “friendly” atmosphere was appreciated and oral and written feedback was clear, credible and acceptable¹⁹.

The following table summarises the critical success factors and “killers”:

Critical success factors	“Killers”
Observation of the requirements of the Peer Review procedure in order to ensure a high quality evaluation	Hidden conflicts in the institution of relevance to the topics of the Peer Review
Openness of management to evaluation findings and commitment to use results	Lack of commitment of management to follow-up of results which are not convenient or are critical of management or of previous actions
External evaluation as opportunity to stimulate change	External evaluation as mere marketing event
Realistic expectations	
Clarity of intended users and competence of intended users to act upon Peer Review results	
Appropriate evaluation questions	
Shared understanding between VET Provider and Peers of the topics to be evaluated	
Involvement of relevant (mainly internal in most cases) stakeholders in all phases of the Peer Review (esp. staff)	

Source: Gutknecht-Gmeiner

A number of participating institutions reported that they were still using peer review “voluntary” recognition rather than “formal” recognition. Moreover, many still sent peers to other institutions to conduct peer reviews. In only one of the institutions have peer review activities been discontinued.

The Peer Review Impact Project developed Peer Review Impact Guidelines to help VET providers, institutions and training centres set up and carry out peer reviews and promote change²⁰.

¹⁹ M. Gutknecht-Gmeiner, *Peer Review Impact Analysis Report- Analysis of 14 transnational European Peer Reviews carried out in eight European countries 2006–2009 Final report*, Vienna, Nov. 2010

²⁰ Leena Koski (ed.), *Peer Review Impact Guidelines*, The Leonardo Project “Peer Review Impact”, cit.

General guidelines for maximising the impact of peer reviews in vocational education and training (VET) in Europe

These guidelines are important preconditions in order to ensure the success of peer review:

- *Use the European Peer Review Manual for VET and supporting tools and procedures (see <http://www.peer-review-education.net>).*
- *ensure that there are some systematic procedures for quality assurance and evaluation in place in your organisation.*
- *For example, this means that use of the peer review will be greatly enhanced if you have already established such procedures in your organisation. If not, it is recommended that you introduce systematic procedures for quality assurance, which include procedures for the analysis, dissemination and follow-up of evaluation results.*
 - *Ensure that the peer review is or will be integrated with the VET provider's quality assurance and evaluation procedures. For more information, see Chapter 3.2 (Peer Review as part of a VET provider's overall quality management and evaluation system).*
 - *Ensure that the intended users of peer review results (such as management, teachers and students) are clear about the procedure.*
 - *Ensure that all relevant parties are involved and that their commitment is promoted at all stages of the peer review process. These are the intended users of the peer review results (see Phase 4), but others may also be involved in change processes, such as instructors in on-the-job learning places.*
 - *In order to increase the likelihood of a successful peer review, ensure that parties with experience in evaluation, quality assurance and self-assessment are involved in the peer review process.*
 - *A positive attitude of staff towards evaluation in general increases the likelihood of a successful peer review.*
 - *Ensure that the organisation planning to carry out a peer review is prepared and has realistic expectations.*
 - *Management should be aware of the fact that a peer review will point to strengths as well as improvement areas in the VET provider's operations. An external evaluation such as a peer review is an opportunity to improve performance and stimulate change, not just a marketing event.*
 - *On the other hand, a peer review will not provide overwhelmingly novel insights, since this would mean that all previous evaluations had been completely off-track. Expect the peer review to reinforce previous evaluation findings as well as offer some new insights.*
 - *Ensure that issues such as existing internal conflicts will not detract from the peer review.*

1.5.5 Peer Review and EQAVET network

To exploit further the results of the three Leonardo da Vinci projects and to maximise the benefit from national efforts to implement the European Peer Review, in 2008–2009 a Thematic Group on Peer Review was set up in ENQA-VET to develop a structure and process for future transnational European peer reviews.

The Thematic Group outlined three models:

- A “grassroots model”: grassroots activities by VET providers with no European coordination and support (scenario 1);
- A “decentralised coordination model”: a coordinating body at European level would provide technical and administrative support primarily (scenario 2);
- A “transnational cooperative model”: more active and exacting cooperation between the different actors is involved, with a coordination body that also provides expert support for both the national lead bodies (coordination, dissemination, cooperative support of transnational peer reviews) and the VET providers involved (training, peer database, matching) (scenario 3).

The Thematic Group recommended the implementation of the “transnational cooperative model”²¹.

²¹ Enqa-Vet, *Proposal for a structure and process for transnational European peer reviews Results of the work undertaken by the thematic group on Peer review*, Fetac 2009.

Chapter 2. The implementation of peer review under Erasmus+ KA3 projects carried out by National Reference Points (NRPs)

2.1 Countries involved in peer reviewing

This section of the study analyses the experiences of countries involved in peer reviews funded under Erasmus+ 2016–2018, to investigate how peer review has been defined and used in projects and in participating countries.²²

Eight NRPs mentioned peer review in their application forms:

- Austria
- Croatia
- Finland
- Italy
- Malta
- Slovakia
- Slovenia
- UK (NI)

Only **Italy, Austria, Finland, Slovenia, Slovakia, Croatia** have organised peer reviews of VET providers²³.

2.2 Description of activities

Austria

In Austria, a feasibility study on the implementation of peer review within the national quality framework QIBB (Qualitäts Initiative Berufsbildung) was carried out in 2008/2009. At the same time, the procedure was adapted and tested in a first national pilot. Since 2009, peer review has been established as the external evaluation component at institutional level within QIBB. Peer review is an evaluation tool that gives the school a peer-to-peer view of school quality. Peer review fits into the QIBB quality control loop; within the framework of peer review in QIBB, however, completely new quality areas can be chosen on which the school would like to have feedback. As in Finland, organisational structure and support measures like training and mentoring have been introduced.

The number of Austrian schools involved in peer review decreased between 2010 and 2016, for lack of time to participate, mainly, as a result of significant changes in recent years, e.g. Zentralmatura (centralised Matura), which have absorbed resources from VET schools and colleges which might have been devoted to other activities. In order to allow VET schools and colleges to focus their resources on implementing national educational reforms, peer review was not actively promoted in the schools.

Among other activities, the Austrian NRP organised a transnational peer review/joint activity with FI, HR and SI, to enhance cooperation in the EQAVET network and to support the

²² See Erasmus+ KA3 — Support to the activities of the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and training (EQAVET) National Reference Points (NRP) Compendium 2017.

A third call was launched at the end of 2018

²³ **Malta** organised under the first call a 3-day training seminar for peers and students reviewers who were preparing to conduct QA audits. Under the second call Malta implemented a Mock Audit conducted by a peer-review panel made up of three members to determine whether NCFHE (National Commission for Further and Higher Education) meets the standards expected of a QA agency in the EHEA (European higher education area) and make recommendations. The **UK** Department for the Economy (NI) implemented four training events across Northern Ireland in various college locations to facilitate the development of peer review and self-reflective skills and relevant attitudes on the importance of peer review.

We shall also include in the list those countries which organised or took part in peer learning activities and study visits, because they display an interest in these methodologies which are related to System Peer Review.

implementation of the EQAVET work programme. The peer review was coordinated by the EDUFI - FI (see the relevant box).

Croatia

In its first call (2016), the Croatian NRP focused on cooperation among NRPs through a series of peer learning activities on the issues of VET QA and EQAVET. In addition, the Croatian NRP organised a two-day peer learning event on QA of WBL and self-assessment of VET schools.

In the second call (2017) the Croatian project aimed to support the implementation of the EQAVET Strategic Plan 2016–2017 in the national context. The main activities of the project have focused on networking with other NRPs through study visits, PLAs and peer review activities.

The main activities have focused on inclusion of VET schools in the project, through joint peer reviews with three other NRPs (see the relevant box).

Two PLAs were planned: one on feedback loops in VET and monitoring students after graduation from secondary VET education, the other on promoting a culture of quality and the establishment of national quality indicators, especially those which promote the relevance of VET and its coordination with the labour market.

Finland

In Finland, the use of peer review was included in the Quality Management Recommendations for Vocational Education and Training in 2008. The Recommendations are the main instrument used to implement EQAVET; they support and encourage VET providers to pursue excellence. Peer review will not replace existing quality assurance/quality development tools used by VET providers, but will complement them.

Pilot peer reviews were conducted on a national level in initial VET and a structure for the support of peer reviews was developed – including peer review training. Peer review has since spread to many different types of vocational education and training activities.

The Finnish National Agency for Education has updated the peer review criteria for VET to meet the new legislation and EQAVET+ (EQAVET network paper on complementing European Quality Assurance Reference Framework) as part of the EQAVET NRP project of 2017. Previously, there were separate criteria for initial VET, competence-based qualifications, preparatory education for vocational education and apprenticeship training. The project has developed uniform peer review criteria for all vocational training based on reformed policies. The peer review criteria have been worked out in co-operation with representatives of vocational training providers in working seminars and distance meetings.

In addition, peer review training was organised, after which peer review criteria were piloted by twelve education providers during spring 2018. Based on the feedback and comments from the piloting, the peer review criteria were further amended in June and guidance contained in the previously published European Peer Review Manual for VET has been also implemented.

With the Erasmus+ KA3 funding 2017 the Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) plans the following developments of peer review:

- 1) Updating the criteria for peer reviews for Finnish VET
- 2) Joint activity with Austria, Croatia and Slovenia: transnational peer reviews and update of the criteria;
- 3) Peer reviews of initial VET.

Finland, Austria, Croatia, and Slovenia organised a joint activity to develop peer review methodology, in particular in the field of work-based learning.

The joint activity on peer review carried out by Austria, Croatia, Finland and Slovenia

How peer review has been developed

In Austria, Finland and Slovenia there is a tradition of peer review; it was introduced as a quality assurance methodology more than 10 years ago. In these countries peer review has officially become a component of the national approach to VET quality assurance.

The aim of peer review activity was to update and modify the quality criteria in accordance with EQAVET+, in order to stimulate the use of peer review as a way of promoting mutual learning.

Key factors contributing to the development of the methodology

Work-based learning came into focus at the beginning of the project because it needed further elaboration. Therefore, the core Quality Areas from the original European Peer Review Manual were updated:

- 1) Curricula (now Pedagogical Framework and Planning the Pedagogical Processes),*
- 2) Learning and teaching (now Teaching and Learning (including support))*
- 3) Assessment (now Assessment and Certification)*
- 4) Learning results and outcomes (now Learning Results and Outcomes),*
- 5) And a new area was added: Work-based Learning (WBL) outside the School*

These five quality areas (four modified and one new) are, in fact, core areas; they may be used alone or they may be used by peers and providers together with the other (non-modified) existing quality areas from the original manual. However, the project recognised the need to update the other 10 quality areas as well – which could be the scope of the next EQAVET NRP project.

Each NRP has piloted the new quality areas inside a school (VET provider) which means that in one school for every country involved a full peer review has been conducted.

Actors involved

Four NRPs

Four VET Providers, one for each country involved

The VET Provider staff

Germany

The German NRP carried out, under the first call, a study which shows how quality assurance and development of work-based learning in the German VET system works. In January 2017 a three-day study visit was organised in Germany with 19 participants from 11 countries (including Germany).

The study visit managed by the German NRP

The study visit had the following objectives:

- To increase the transfer potential of the study results at national and European level and to support the EQAVET work programme.*
- Exchanges between the NRPs about organising the quality assurance of VET with a focus on dual forms in other member states*
- To support critical dispute in the various quality assurance systems in Europe and their presentation*
- To compare various national forms of quality assurance in work-based learning in order to prepare common quality criteria, which could be useful for VET.*

The study visit included:

- An introduction to the German dual system*
- Group discussions*
- A company visit*
- A visit to an intercompany training centre,*
- A round table discussion with social partners.*

The material developed was reported in a brochure, on the DEQA-VET website and in presentation slides, in English and German.

During the study visit and round table discussion/conference mutual understanding among the NRPs was strengthened. Among the matters discussed were commonalities and differences between quality assurance systems, use of quality criteria, and the conditions necessary for work-based learning including forms of social partnership. Although quality assurance in the German dual system was the main topic (especially the role of chambers and the involvement of enterprises), the discussion covered the strengths and weaknesses of all VET systems. A detailed report on the study visit contained the findings of the pre-meeting questionnaire and of the three conference days (study visit and round table discussion).

The study visit was evaluated by feedback questionnaires filled in by the participants. On a scale from 1 (very good) to 5 (very bad), the mean of the assessment of all questions was very good (1.4). The general feedback was that everybody would willingly participate again and similar visits were recommended. The participants in the study visit from the NRPs acquired a comprehensive knowledge of the German VET system and of the conditions which make this system work.

Italy

The Italian NRP has taken part in the development of peer review for VET providers since the beginning of this activity in 2003. The Italian NRP has promoted a number of peer reviews, both at national and international level (i.e. implemented with the participation of some international peers) to improve the quality of training provision. One interesting feature of peer reviews organised by the Italian NRP is the dialogue which has been promoted between upper secondary vocational and technical schools (managed by the Italian Ministry of Education) and vocational education and training centres managed by private organisations (often religious) and funded by regional government.

The peer reviews organised by the Italian NRP ensured the presence of peers from schools when VET centres were reviewed, and vice versa, when schools were reviewed. This exchange of peers guaranteed impartial evaluation and a cross-fertilisation of teaching approaches between schools and VET centres, affording an opportunity to present and discuss different teaching approaches leading to mutual learning.

It should be also noted that every year Italian schools write or update a “Rapporto di Autovalutazione” (RAV), a mandatory self-evaluation report. The evaluation is followed by a Plan of Improvement (PDM) which underlines the priorities, goals and objectives of the school in the medium and long term. The self-evaluation should be followed by an external evaluation of the school, managed by external inspectors, but so far this follow-up activity has not been implemented systematically.

Two transnational peer reviews were planned and carried out by the Italian NRP under the first Erasmus+ call and two more peer reviews have been planned and carried out by the Italian NRP under the second call. Moreover, under the second call the Italian NRP organised study visits together with Romania, Finland and Greece, one of them dedicated to peer review.

The Peer Reviews managed by the Italian NRP

How peer review has been developed

Every year Italian schools write or update a “Rapporto di Autovalutazione” (RAV), a mandatory self-evaluation report. The evaluation is followed by a Plan of Improvement (PDM) which underlines the priorities, the goals and the objectives of the school in the medium and long term.

The VET providers involved in the project decided to undergo a peer review to avoid the danger of being self-referential, since there is no external evaluation process in place yet, and to promote continuous improvement. The international dimension of the peer review, assured by the presence of one or two peers from abroad, was another reason for schools and training centres to take part in this exercise.

In particular:

Reasons of VP A²⁴: It is hoped that this peer review visit will allow for critical comparison of various organisational and management issues, especially those routine aspects where critical implications may be overlooked.

Reasons of VP B: The institute considers peer review a useful instrument to promote the quality of the educational offering and to promote continuous innovation and evaluation. The institute is also keen to examine the European dimension, so participation in a transnational peer review is regarded as a useful opportunity.

Reasons of VP C: The school needs to have efficient evaluation techniques particularly for the job internship program.

Reasons of VP D: The institute considers peer review to be a tool for continuous improvement.

Four VET providers implemented the peer review: three upper secondary technical and vocational schools and one VET centre.

In all three peer reviews one or two peers from other European countries were included. All reviews focused on two Quality Areas. The quality assurance of teaching and learning was the one most frequently chosen (three VET providers) while evaluation and quality management was chosen by two VET providers. Visits lasted two and a half days.

Key factors contributing to the development of the methodology

All VET providers involved followed the usual methodology introduced by the manual on peer review. One school asked for an external evaluation focused on school-work alternance (ASL), which in the last two years has passed from an experimental phase involving only a few classes to mandatory implementation throughout the three-year school period; this innovation has highlighted difficulties in the implementation of activities and in the assessment of training and learning outcomes. The peer review visit, by analysing the procedures and practices adopted by the school for the design, implementation and evaluation of school pathways, tried to find out if and how the school-work alternance has become an integral part of the curriculum of the institute.

Actors concerned

Four VET Providers

Four NRPs

The VET Provider staff

Use of results

The results of the peer reviews were discussed with the other three NRPs during a study visit on "Peer review as a tool for quality assurance" organised by the Italian NRP. The study visit in May 2018 focused on the peer review methodology adopted by the Italian NRP. The main purpose of the study visit was to examine how peer review methodology, practices and tools are organised in Italy, since it is expected that peer review methodology will play an increasingly important role in the Italian VET system as well as in other educational and training sectors.

Accordingly, more emphasis was placed on the methodology proposed by the EQAVET Network and other procedures that would be necessary in order to use peer review in diverse sectors and areas at national, regional and local levels. The experience of Italy was intended as a template for this. Other quality assurance issues were also discussed during the study visit in Rome.

The focus was on what had been achieved already and on future challenges. Relevant discussions took place about NRP activities and initiatives to adapt and implement the EQAVET Recommendation at national level. There is a need to experiment with EQAVET indicators in different areas. Experience of peer review methodologies at different levels were shared and exchanged.

The following points need to be explored:

- 1) The impact of the methodology at different levels: on providers and on the system.*
- 2) The financial requirements of the methodology for both providers and final users.*

²⁴ For privacy reasons, in this study the names of the providers taking part in the peer review will not be given.

Romania

The Romanian NRP organised a peer learning activity in Bucharest, under the first call, to promote visibility and raise awareness of VET. Both system and provider developments were addressed in the PLA referred to. This PLA was attended by members from eight countries (Austria, Croatia, Finland, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Romania, and Slovenia) who were invited to present their own initiatives and to discover new ideas from other participants. The 12 international participants and 16 Romanian participants exchanged experiences and explored how they might increase the visibility and attractiveness of VET. The national staff involved in the project presented Romanian developments, both at system and provider level, aimed at promoting visibility and raising awareness of VET. At the end of the peer learning, a policy briefing on promoting visibility and raising awareness of VET was issued, comprising key messages for system and provider developments.

Furthermore, the application for the 2017/2019 grant period included organising a set of study visits in a network constituted by the NRPs from Romania, Italy, Finland and Greece. Each of the NRPs had to organise a study visit for colleagues on topics of general interest, such as quality assurance of work-based learning, peer review of VET providers, collection and use of information on VET graduate satisfaction and the use of information on VET graduate tracking at VET provider level and at system level to improve VET provision and qualifications (feedback).

Slovakia

The Slovakian project built on cooperation between the EQAVET NRP in Slovakia and organisations from other Member States which have been implementing the European Peer Review Methodology. With regard to this last point, the goal of the project was to introduce the concept of the European Peer Review in Slovakia and create tools for its implementation. The main outcomes of the project were:

- Peer review methodology was adopted
- A plan for its implementation was proposed.

The peer review managed by the Slovakian NRP

How peer review has been developed

In Slovakia, the peer review approach was unknown before the implementation of the EQAVET NRP project in 2017. The first contact with peer review was during the seminar on the culture of quality organised by the Dutch NRP in September 2016.

At that event, the Slovakian NRP began cooperation with an Italian organisation, Forma.Azione, which has long-term expertise in peer review. Following these initial contacts and information, the Slovakian NRP organised a seminar for VET policymakers and providers in Slovakia with the Italian experts and included peer review development in the plan of activities. Within the EQAVET NRP project, peer review was discussed at length with principal stakeholders at national level and also in study visits abroad organised by NRP SK.

To support its implementation, the EQAVET project was complemented by an ERASMUS+ KA1 mobility project, which aimed at training trainers on peer review and as future peers. NRP SK organised the first international peer review ever in Slovakia in February 2018, involving the Secondary Technical School of Mechanical Engineering.

Following the NRP Slovakian information campaign on peer review, Trenčín Higher Territorial Unit (one of the self-governing regions of Slovakia, which are in charge of secondary VET schools) recently introduced peer review as a quality assurance tool in all VET schools under their administration.

As part of the EQAVET NRP project, the NRP has translated the Peer Review Methodology²⁵ (handbook) and Toolbox into the Slovak language and has established a dedicated website on quality in education. The goal is to introduce peer review as a tool at system level.

²⁵ <http://www.peer-review-network.eu/pages/manual/manual-vnfil.php>

Key factors contributing to the development of the methodology

- *European cooperation – in all aspects (information, peer learning, partnerships, projects, materials and documents, financial support)*
- *Good partnership at national level – we experienced openness to the new methods relating to quality assurance from significant parties: The Association of Secondary VET schools in Slovakia, Trenčín Higher Territorial Unit and Secondary Technical School of Mechanical Engineering in Bratislava, which have become supporters and pioneers in peer review implementation.*

Actors concerned

- *Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport SR*
- *State Vocational Education Institute (project team implementing the ESF national project on introducing dual education)*
- *State School Inspectorate*
- *National Institute for Education*
- *Association of Secondary VET Schools in Slovakia*
- *Association of Adult Learning Institutions in Slovakia*
- *Association of Lecturers and Career Counsellors*
- *VET providers*
- *Other educational institutions (general education - very recently)*

All these institutions have participated in the NRP information events, and in events and PLAs organised by the EQAVET Secretariat or by other NRPs.

Use of results in evaluation and review phases of the quality cycle.

Peer review is still young in Slovakia. The NRP has been taking steps to introduce peer review as a system tool acknowledged by the ministry of education; they have also been planning the introduction of a central register of peers. Last year the NRP developed two accredited training courses for teachers – one on quality and EQAVET in general (including basic information on peer review) and the other for staff who will be involved in peer review in schools.

Slovenia

In 2010 Slovenia developed Quality Areas of the Peer Review methodology, and piloted them in a national peer review. In particular the Slovenian NRP developed indicators for the process of QA with self-evaluation and for teaching and learning. Both areas were developed in accordance with the goals of VET reform and VET legislation in Slovenia at that time.

In upper secondary VET and short-cycle higher VET (EQF levels 3, 4 and 5), Slovenia offered peer review as a voluntary method to the schools three times at national level (in 2009, 2010 and 2011). Twenty-six schools (out of 115 public VET schools in Slovenia) were included in the peer review on one area at least (self-evaluation or teaching and learning), some on both. The project was supported by ESF funding.

NRP in Slovenia together with Austria, Croatia and Finland organised a joint activity to develop peer review methodology in order to inform and exchange expertise, in particular in the field of work-based learning (see the relevant box).

Chapter 3. Final analysis and proposals

This study shows that peer review is a methodology with many applications: it may be used to assure (or improve) the quality of systems, products, university departments, national agencies, schools or VET providers.

The basic principle of peer review affirms that quality may be assessed by peers, i.e. persons which are of the same standing as those under scrutiny. The main goal of peer review is improvement.

Peer reviews at system level have not formed part of EQAVET NRPs projects of Erasmus+ call 2017–2019. Instead most NRPs have organised European peer learning activities.

The boundary between a “soft” peer review carried out at system level and peer learning is subtle. Peer learning activities developed by EQAVET NRPs *were designed to provide information to external visitors, i.e. representatives of other Member States and/or NRPs, about a certain national or regional practice.* The aim was to present successful approaches which, if implemented, could be useful also in other contexts. Peer review activities also provide information about certain national or regional practices to external visitors (the Peers), but with the aim of promoting a critical analysis of those policies.

A strong transnational dimension was added to peer review of VET providers, with funding from Erasmus+ call 2017–2019.

3.1 SWOT analysis

The table below summarises the strengths and risks of using peer review based on the findings of the study:

SWOT analysis of peer review activities

Strengths

- Peer review is a “soft” mechanism that improves QA and advances common trust, transparency and understanding between countries.
- When the assessment is managed by peers and not by external inspectors, the review process is easily accepted by the institution under scrutiny and becomes part of a system or of a provider approach. This friendly approach facilitates the emergence of critical areas that could remain hidden in more formal assessments.
- Peer review encourages a critical and self-critical attitude among both peers and the institutions evaluated.
- Peer review is not as rigid as other quality assurance methodologies but allows the actors involved to agree on issues through dialogue.
- The practice of using direct testimonies from those working on the ground is a useful way of transferring knowledge and is very difficult to achieve through written description/documents. The opportunity to examine practice and policy in cooperation with colleagues from other countries facilitates the identification of strengths and weaknesses in the practice or policy examined.
- Peer review may be adapted to national contexts; and the proposed indicators adapted to national requirements/circumstances.
- The methodology of peer review is coherent with EQAVET as it is based on a four-step cycle:
 - Decision to undergo a peer review (Planning)
 - Peer visit (Implementation)
 - Peer review report (Evaluation)
 - Follow-up: Putting plans into action (Review)

Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding required for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ General organisation expenses ○ Peer fees ○ Travel and accommodation expenses • Planning and timelines necessary for successful organisation • Need to oversee the impact of the peer review • The necessity to plan and organise peers training before the peer review takes place. This training could be done on line.
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It provides possibilities for international cooperation which can trigger cultural exchange. • It promotes networking and the exchange of knowledge between professionals from different institutions, leading to the transfer of good practice. • Peer review promotes and encourages evaluation aimed at improvement. • Transnational peer reviews provide a basis for mutual reflection on quality assurance in VET, fostering European integration and awareness of other systems.
Threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selection of peers: if there is insufficient commitment in peers' own countries, the transfer of good practice or policies may not occur. • One or two visits may not be enough to make an accurate assessment. • The peer review process may not shed sufficient light on the practice or policy reviewed. • Peer review builds on a country's interest in improving their quality assurance system. It requires openness and honesty throughout; without this, the review process is doomed.

The SWOT analysis indicates that:

- Peer review as a “soft” mechanism can improve quality assurance and promote trust, transparency and understanding between countries and institutions.
- Since the assessment is managed by peers and not by external inspectors, peer review is more easily accepted by those under scrutiny and embedded in systems or providers.
- The friendly approach facilitates the emergence of critical areas that could remain hidden during formal assessment, and provides a basis for increasing mutual reflection on quality assurance in VET.
- Transnational peer reviews foster European integration and awareness of other systems.

It should not be forgotten that peer review is a demanding activity and requires time and funding.

3.2 From peer review at provider level to peer review at system level

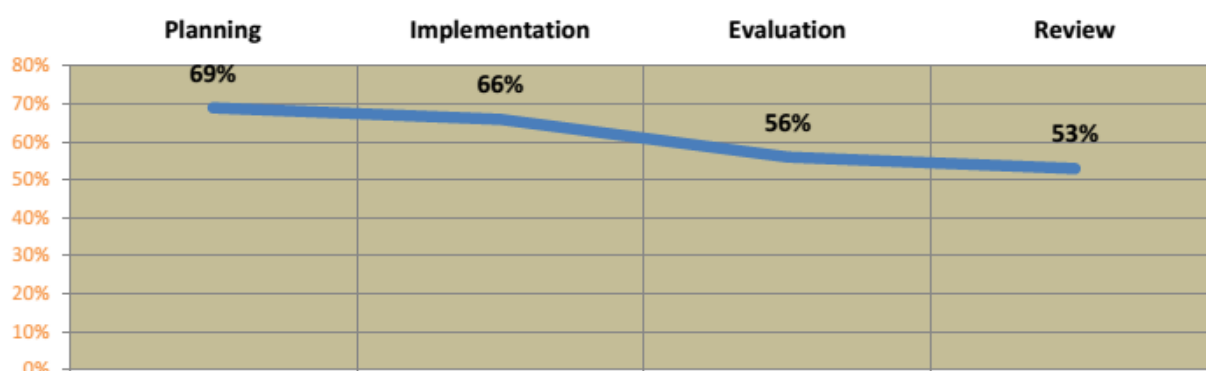
The outcomes of the peer reviews at VET provider level organised by NRPs as part of the Erasmus+ calls have shown that peer review is a friendly quality assurance approach, aimed at supporting improvement and is well accepted by schools and those involved. Moreover, these peer learning activities have been a useful tool for the transfer of knowledge, as an NRP indicates, *“one important added value of peer review was showing that it is possible to influence culture, to change the routine ways of thinking and performing and decision-making, especially when experts from abroad are present. It showed that thinking and performing can be more fluid, more flexible. It brought new dynamics and new approaches to the same things, and the form of presenting results was a complete novelty”* .

These findings could be considered as a basis for applying peer review at system level – in terms of insights, concepts such as confidence in peers, and its importance in a broader quality assurance cycle.

The adoption of peer review at system level in the work of the EQAVET Network could assist in further developing the evaluation and feedback phases, as indicated by the results of the EQAVET Secretariat Survey 2016 – 2017²⁶.

The Secretariat Survey report shows that ‘on average national VET systems in EU-28 Countries ‘always use’ and implement the EQAVET indicative descriptors more often in the planning and implementing phases than in the evaluation and review phases of their IVET national systems. This may suggest that, on average, national VET systems in EU-28 have established more developed quality management systems in the planning and implementation stages than in the evaluation and review stages. It indicates that national VET systems may need further support in these two phases of the quality assurance cycle, in particular in relation to review processes’.

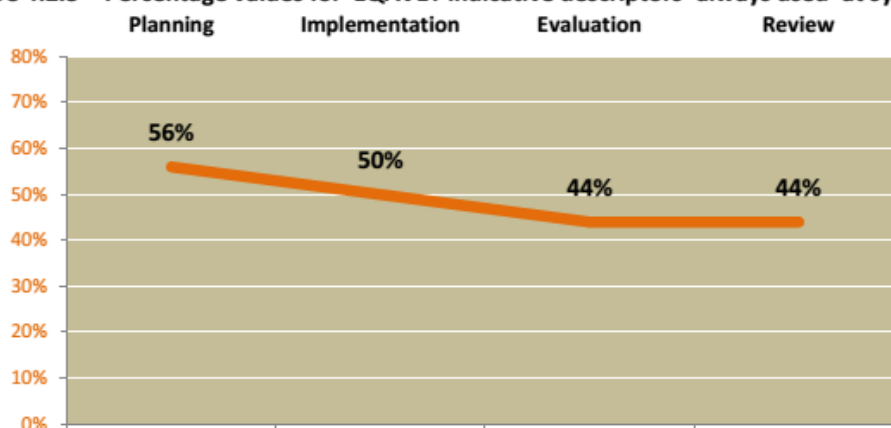
Figure 4.1.5 – Percentage values for EQAVET indicative descriptors ‘always used’ at system level for IVET in 2016



Source: EQAVET Secretariat, Supporting the implementation of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework, 2017

This is also the case for the CVET sector at system level.

Figure 4.2.5 – Percentage values for EQAVET indicative descriptors ‘always used’ at system level for CVET in 2016



Source: EQAVET Secretariat, Supporting the implementation of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework, 2017

Moreover, the Secretariat survey shows that only 14 national VET systems in EU-28 Countries (or 44 per cent) reported that they had put in place arrangements to review the national approach to quality assurance. The link between having a centralised system to collect data and informing the community involved in this data collection is not always straightforward.

²⁶ Eqavet Secretariat, Supporting the implementation of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework, 2017

Peer review carried out at system level, directly or indirectly, can serve the following purposes:

- Policy dialogue: during the peer review process, countries systematically exchange information, attitudes and views on policy decisions and their application. This dialogue can be the basis for further cooperation;
- Transparency: the reviewed country has the chance, in the course of a peer review, to present and clarify national rules, practices and procedures and explain their rationale.
- Capacity building: peer review is a mutual learning process in which best practice is exchanged. The process can therefore serve as an important capacity building instrument – not only for the country under review, but also for countries participating in the process as examiners, or simply as members of the network.
- Compliance: an important function of peer review is to monitor and enhance compliance by countries with internationally agreed policies, standards, and principles. However, unlike a traditional legal enforcement mechanism, peer review works as a sort of “soft enforcement” system, resulting in non-coercive final reports and recommendations rather than binding coercive measures, such as sanctions. In many contexts, the soft law nature of peer review can prove better suited to encouraging and enhancing compliance than a traditional enforcement mechanism.

3.2.1 What model of peer review could be adopted at system level?

Different models of peer review have been developed at system level as shown in chapter 1. Basically, two types of approaches can be identified:

- A "hard" approach, aimed at verifying whether the system under investigation possesses certain requisites (a necessary condition to access some benefits, monetary or status). This approach is more characteristic of external reviews than of peer review.
- A "soft" or "light" approach, aimed at supporting the improvement of the system under review by focusing on positive aspects. This is the approach favoured by the Mutual Learning Programme and by the "Peer counselling" approach developed by DG EAC.

The organisational implications of each model are different:

- The “hard approach” requires:
 - The preliminary collection and analysis of in-depth documentation
 - Longer periods of times for data analysis and visit; sometimes the visit is repeated
 - Stronger commitment from peers
 - Final prescriptive indications by peers
- The “soft approach” requires
 - Less organisational commitment from the host country and peers,²⁷
 - The final recommendations should be couched as friendly advice.

3.2.2 What kind of procedure is there for implementing peer review at system level?

Peer review at system level needs to be prepared for and requires a clearly defined policy context, clear objectives and the engagement of key actors and peers. Peers must be trusted by the system involved and the EQAVET community provides a well-developed community of practice offering the necessary elements.

Certain questions need to be discussed:

- Scope: Should the peer review encompass the entire national quality assurance system, or just parts of it (a good or a controversial practice, or an innovative activity)? Should it request a deep analysis before, during and after the visit? And by whom?

²⁷ E.g. the model adopted by the Commission's Directorate-General for Research and Innovation.

- How much time should be devoted to the implementation of peer review by the host country, by the peers and the secretariat? How long should the visit or visits be?
- Who should be the peers? EQAVET NRPs, other experts, or somebody else? What actors and organisations should be also be involved?
- What methodology should be followed to prepare, implement and conclude the peer review process?

Let's examine the 13 different points:

1) The choice of the field or topic to be reviewed.

The subject of the peer review could be a national / regional policy or a good innovative practice. It should be emphasised that the goal is not only to "show off" the good practice, but to receive critical peer analysis from other Member States, from whom inputs are received in order to improve. Therefore, the peer review will not focus on positive aspects only. For that reason any of the following could be chosen:

- A critical area, which presents problems, and requires inputs and suggestions to change or improve; or
- An innovative practice, which has been recently introduced in the quality assurance system, and requires inputs and suggestions for its implementation; or
- A successful practice, which is reviewed in order to improve it further and share its strengths with other countries.

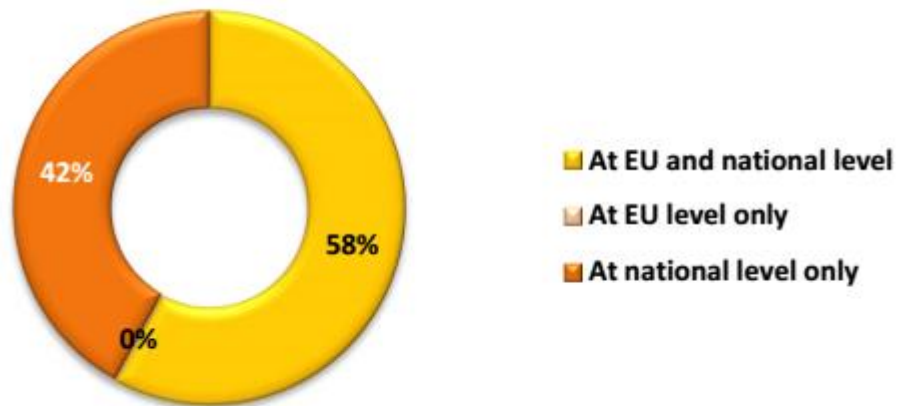
For example, the review could concern the approach to self-assessment, or the methodology of VET graduate tracking, or how one or more indicators are collected and used. The Secretariat Survey indicates that the majority of EU-28 countries (24 or three quarters (75 per cent)) would find it useful to increase EU cooperation with a view to working towards benchmarking conditions in relation to the EQAVET indicators.

Table 5.3.1 – Working with EQAVET indicators and benchmarking

WORKING with EQAVET INDICATORS and BENCHMARKING	Response count	Response percentages
Yes	24	75%
No	6	19%
No response	2	6%

Source: EQAVET Secretariat, *Supporting the implementation of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework, 2017*

Figure 5.3.2 – Level of cooperation and benchmarking



Source: EQAVET Secretariat, *Supporting the implementation of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework, 2017*

2) The scope of the review:

- The entire quality assurance system of a country; or
- one component of the quality assurance system (e.g. one of the topics presented above).

If the latter, more time and funding will be needed.

3) Who decide the topic/s?:

The choice of review topic could be left to the host country and its national authorities. In the case of a “hard” peer review, the topics to be submitted for review are those defined by the common rules of the Network.

4) The involvement of national (or regional) stakeholders

This is a very important point to consider, since national stakeholders can bring the perspective of users to the discussions and should implement the advice received from peers.

5) Principles, criteria and standards to follow when assessing the performance of the reviewed institution:

These can differ widely in character and scope, but basically they should include:

- A set of criteria against which the practice is examined. The criteria should be applied in a flexible manner, since each peer review has its own context.
- The consistency and coherence of certain practices and activities with respect to the country’s own policies.

A reference guide should be drafted, containing the basic principles and standards to follow, as well as instructions for the management of all the review phases (Preparation-Documentation and Self-Assessment-Visit-Report-Follow up).

6) The choice of peers and their training:

The peer could be a colleague working in another NRP or a stakeholder, i.e. a person who occupies a key position in her / his own organisation / system, and therefore is able to disseminate information and promote its application. The tasks of the peers should be:

- To read the documentation sent before the visit
- To participate in the peer review visit
- To express their opinion of the practice or policy submitted for review
- To interact with the peer coordinator for the preparation of the visit report
- To disseminate knowledge of the practice examined within their organisation and system, and promote its application, if considered worthy

- To complete the follow-up questionnaire sent by the peer coordinator

The countries participating in the programme should identify the candidate peers among experts in quality assurance; it is however desirable that peers receive, directly, remotely or by ad hoc documentation, adequate training for the task. It would therefore be necessary to prepare methodological material addressed to peers on how to carry out a peer review. The team of peers could also be supported by experts.

7) The number of peers:

An even number (2, 4 or 6) of peers should be appointed so as to allow the carrying out of specific activities in tandem (for example, interviews with privileged witnesses). Each peer will focus on themes and questions based on his/her area of expertise. With a greater number of peers, the scope of observation can be widened and deepened and it should be possible to collect a greater amount of information; coordination becomes important, however.

8) The choice of the peer coordinator.

One peer should act as “peer coordinator” and assume overall responsibility for the entire peer review process. The tasks of the peer coordinator are:

- To read the documentation sent prior to the visit, evaluate its completeness and compliance with the objectives of the peer review, and request additional information from the host country if needed.
- To check the initial visit programme prepared by the country, ensuring its correspondence to the objectives of the peer review
- To participate in the peer review visit, ensuring its compliance with the objectives of the visit and promoting and supporting the final discussion on the practice or policy presented
- To prepare a report on the practice or policy presented, sharing it with the peers involved
- To verify the follow-up one year after the peer review process, and to prepare a final report.

9) The preparation of the documentation:

The country subject to scrutiny should compile the documentation regarding the practice or policy and send it to the peer coordinator. The report will contain a general presentation of the practice or policy (max. 10-15 pages), appropriately framed in the context of the national system, with annexes for further information. The documentation should present both the positive and problematic features. In particular the documentation should contain:

- A general description of the educational system of the country, in order to contextualise the activity chosen for peer review; in order to understand the context, it is advisable to include data and indicators, such as trends in enrolment, attendance rate, drop-out rate, employment rate after graduation, etc. Comparisons between data of previous years should be also carried out, to identify basic issues.
- A description of the national quality assurance system will be needed in order to contextualise the practice to be examined.
- A more in-depth description of the practice should be submitted to the peer group, and both positive and problematic aspects should be highlighted.

The preliminary documentation should not exceed 15 pages, but it should be possible to attach documents and include links to websites²⁸.

The peer coordinator verifies the visit programme and the documentation received and assesses its completeness and compliance with the objectives of the peer review. After peer coordinator approval, the programme and documentation are sent to the peer. An online

²⁸ The preliminary documentation could be deeper in case of a “hard” Peer review.

questionnaire could also be set up to gather opinions, comments and facts from the researcher community/ relevant stakeholders and to mobilise their involvement in the process.

10) The management of the visit.

- The length of the visit: obviously a longer visit allows for a deeper review, but time and resources are usually limited. In the case of a "light" review, the minimum duration of the visit should be 3–4 days, but longer visits may be organised, or additional visits paid²⁹.
- The visit should include:
 - An introductory meeting between the peers, to finalise the methods of investigation and the division of tasks among the peers.
 - An initial presentation by the country, subject to scrutiny, of the practice or policy, with time for questions.
 - Direct observation of the practice or policy subjected to peer review in different sites that also show critical aspects (with time for questions). The peers might also be divided into teams to visit different sites.
 - Meetings with stakeholders who have different roles (policy makers, officials, heads of VET providers, teachers, students, families, other stakeholders) who express their point of view on the practice or policy which is subject to peer review. The peers could be divided into two or more teams and interview different categories of stakeholders. This approach would allow peers to gather more information in the given period.
 - One discussion session among the peers (coordinated by the peer coordinator) to discuss the visit and set questions and observations for the final session.
 - A final (provisional) feedback session, where peers express their first critical judgment. The debate is facilitated and supported by the NRP organiser and technical support is provided by the Network.

It is very important that observations, information gathering, analysis of the institution and the final report be supported by evidence. Peer review, even if it is a qualitative assessment, should not be based solely on the impressions or opinions of peers, but on verifiable facts.

11) The conclusion of the peer review.

The review should be concluded by a report submitted to the host by the peer coordinator (previously agreed by the peers) on the practice or policy presented. This last task could be performed also with the technical support of the Network in agreement with the peers. The report should identify strengths and weaknesses of the practice / policy presented and could contain suggestions aimed at improving the presented practice / policy. The host country responds to the report, indicating which suggestions can be accepted and how they might be implemented.

12) Checking the impact of the review.

One year later, the peer coordinator (or the technical support team of the Network) sends a questionnaire to the host country and to the other peers to find out what improvements / innovations have been introduced into national / regional policies or practices arising from the visit and report.

13) Summarising the results:

Based on the answers provided to the questionnaire, the peer coordinator could write a final report to describe the results of the peer review activity and provide suggestions for the continuation of this activity. The report should be sent to the host country and to the technical support section of the Network.

²⁹ Especially in the hypothesis of a "hard" implementation, the visit should be longer and could be repeated if necessary.

3.2.3 Impact and benefits of this activity

The impact of peer review relies on a number of factors:

- An adequate level of commitment from the participating countries;
- The quality of the report, which is particularly effective if based on facts and if it makes concrete suggestions based on real experiences. It should be not too demanding, rather it should be easy to implement;
- The engagement demonstrated by key actors (policymakers and other stakeholders), both in the host country and in countries being reviewed;

The development of peer review at system level could benefit:

- Those countries which have introduced an innovation or system reform and need an external perspective or set of inputs to support its implementation or improvement. These countries could expect to receive constructive suggestions from peers;
- Other countries who can provide experts to contribute to a peer review. By participating in an in-depth peer review of another country's quality assurance approach to VET, they may increase their knowledge of other quality assurance systems.

The material that results from the review (the initial documentation, the peer report) could also enable other countries to increase their knowledge of quality assurance systems.