

Guidelines for the Peer Review Process

The Peer Review procedure comprises 4 phases.

1. The Peer Review starts with a preparatory phase. In this first phase, the Peer Review is organised and a Self-Report is written by the VET provider. Peers must be recruited and trained. A timetable for the Review is drawn up and arrangements are made for the Peer Visit.
2. In the second phase, the Peer Visit, which is the core activity of the Peer Review procedure, takes place: Peers come to visit the VET provider and carry out an evaluation. This evaluation includes a tour of the premises and interviews with different groups of stakeholders. The Peers give initial oral feedback at the end of the Peer Visit.
3. After the Peer Visit, a draft report is drawn up by the Peers. This report is commented on by the VET provider and the final Peer Review Report is issued.
4. The fourth phase is crucial for the improvement of VET provision and organisational development: results and recommendations from the Peer Review are transferred into concrete actions for improvement, which are planned and implemented.

Decision to undertake a Peer Review

Starting a Peer Review involves

- the decision to carry out a European Peer Review with high commitment by the management and other important stakeholders,
- the decision on whether the Peer Review should cover the whole institution or only parts of it,
- the decision on the aims and purposes of the Peer Review,
- the decision on time and resources allocated to the Peer Review.
-

Decision on Quality Areas

The next step is to decide which Quality Areas should be dealt with in the Peer Review. **The decision on the Quality Areas should be made by the management in agreement with staff and other important stakeholders, if possible.** VET providers/institutions should only choose **Quality Areas over which they have an influence.** For an overview of the Quality Areas, please go to Chapter VII.

Issues that may be considered in the choice of Quality Areas are:

- Are there Quality Areas that are essential due to national/regional/local, etc. quality requirements and standards?
- Are there Quality Areas that show examples of best practice and excellence?
- Are there Quality Areas that urgently need to be reviewed, i.e. because problems have been detected?
- Are there Quality Areas that are particularly important, i.e. because new developments are to be initiated?
- Are there Quality Areas where innovation has taken place, which calls for an evaluation?
- Are there Quality Areas that are of particular interest to important groups of stakeholders?

Additionally, special evaluation questions can be formulated for the Peers: in addition to the Quality Areas, VET providers can give "assignments" to the Peers to pay special attention to specific issues and questions that are of particular importance to the VET provider. This will enhance the usefulness of the results of the Peer Review.

Selecting and inviting the Peer Team

Once the decision on conducting the Peer Review and a selection of Quality Areas has been made, the VET provider and/or the coordinating body become active in recruiting Peers. Preliminary information on the Peer Review procedure and the tasks of the Peers may be sent out to prospective Peers.

The Peers may come from other VET providers or stakeholder institutions. The VET providers may suggest suitable Peers. Alternatively, Peers can also submit applications of their own accord. If a coordinating body does not exist or is only marginally involved, the VET providers may also select and invite the Peers themselves. The use of a standard application form for Peers is recommended.

Apart from the competences and experience of the Peers, availability is an important factor in setting up Peer Teams. Thus, the areas of expertise of the Peers must fit in with the Quality Areas to be reviewed while, at the same time, the time schedules of Peers and VET providers need to be compatible. The Peer Coordinator should be selected with great care: S/he will be the key person in the Peer Team with overall responsibility for the Peer Review process: communication and coordination in the Peer Team; time management; relations with the VET provider, etc. If an Evaluation Expert is to guide the Peer Review process, s/he must also be recruited.

Preparing the Peer Visit

Tasks of the VET provider

After fixing the date for the Peer Visit and recruiting and inviting the Peers, the Peer Review Facilitator must make sure that the Peers receive the Self-Report and all necessary documentation no later than one month before the Visit.

Recommended: Meeting between the VET provider and the Peer Team

It is highly recommended, that a meeting be organised between the VET provider and the Peer Team in order to clarify questions from the Peers and discuss the agenda of the Peer

Visit. This may comprise fine-tuning the evaluation questions for the Peers, making decisions on the evaluation methods and on the groups of stakeholders to be interviewed.

Further information can be given to the Peers upon request. The outcome of the meeting is a detailed Peer Visit agenda.

Drawing-up an agenda for the Peer Visit

A detailed and realistic agenda for the Peer Visit should be drawn up by the Peer Review Facilitator. For this task, the Peer Review Facilitator should be aided by the Evaluation Expert and/or the Peers since the agenda will reflect the kind of evaluation methods that will be used and what stakeholder groups will be involved in the Peer Visit. Plan the agenda carefully to ensure a successful Peer Visit.

Local organisation of the Peer Visit

The local organisation of the Peer Visit is undertaken by the Peer Review Facilitator, who is responsible for the smooth running of the Visit. The local organisation entails:

- selecting interviewees,
- reserving rooms and equipment,
- making a plan of the school premises and putting up signs giving directions (optional),
- inviting interviewees,
- informing and inviting other involved stakeholders,
- preparing.

Rooms have to be suitable and free from disturbance. One room should be reserved for the Peer Team throughout the whole day for interim sessions by the Peers. One spacious room should be reserved for briefing and for the final meeting between the representatives of the VET institution and the Peer Team.

Tasks of the Peers

To prepare for the Review, the Peers need

- to attend a pre-review meeting with the VET provider (recommended),
- to agree on evaluation topics for the Peer Review,
- to draw up an agenda for the Peer Visit together with the Peer Review Facilitator,
- to attend a pre-review Peer Team meeting (the day/evening before the Visit),
- to prepare interview questions and criteria for observation.

What happens during the Peer Visit?

During the Visit, the Peers conduct a brief and condensed evaluation, which focuses on the Quality Areas chosen by the VET provider. The basis for the evaluation is an analysis of the previously collected information. During the Visit, the Peers check the accuracy of the findings documents and conduct their own investigation. All of this usually entails gathering additional data.

Different evaluation methods can be used. Apart from the analysis of the available documentation (which can be extended to encompass further written sources of information during the Visit), the most common methods are interviews and (focus) group discussions, as well as observations. The data collected must then be analysed and discussed by the Peers. Initial feedback is given to the VET provider at the end of the Visit. Depending on the aims of the Peer Review, the Peer Visit can also be used for a more extensive exchange between Peers and representatives of the VET provider, comprising elements of Peer consulting.

Collecting data

The most common methods used for collecting data are:

Group and single interviews

Interviews are most often used in Peer Reviews. The aim is to collect as much information as possible from different stakeholders. Interviews may be conducted with single persons or with groups of persons (usually five to six, up to a maximum of about ten). Groups will be fairly homogeneous most of the time (focus groups), but groups with different stakeholder representatives are also possible. For important stakeholder groups, like students and teachers, two independent interview groups can be organised to gather comprehensive feedback.

Tour of the premises

On an accompanied, on-site visit, the whole Peer Team or a Peer Tandem (the Peer Coordinator, who also writes the Peer Review Report, should ideally be included) assesses the infrastructure and equipment. In addition, informal information can be collected during this tour of the premises.

Peer observations (in classrooms, laboratories, workshops, etc.)

During a Peer Visit, observations can also be carried out. Classroom observations are most common but observations can also be conducted during practical training, i.e. in laboratories, workshops, etc., and in other social situations (breaks, etc.).

If observations are to be carried out, they must be prepared well. The aim(s) and the subject of the observation must be defined in advance (together with the persons reviewed, if possible) and a systematic procedure for note-taking must be drawn up. In the assessment, the evaluations of the individual situations must be aggregated so that conclusions will focus on the VET provider as a whole and not on individual teachers .

Observations of specific teaching and learning activities can be linked to the tour of the premises, which will then take more time. Apart from the individual classroom visit, which usually focuses on a certain topic, whole classes may be shadowed throughout a day or all classes may be visited for a short time.

Analysing data

A preliminary analysis and assessment based on the documents provided must be made by the Peers before the Visit. During the Visit, it is advisable to sort through and discuss the findings of the individual sessions and activities immediately afterwards. Peers should not jump to conclusions but carefully weigh the evidence found and seek to gather additional information if findings are inconclusive. A communicative validation of findings – especially with learners, as the ultimate beneficiaries, or with the responsible management – can also help to challenge earlier judgements and to obtain a more comprehensive impression. In order to distil, analyse, and discuss the collected information, sufficient time must be reserved for repeated exchange in the Peer Tandems as well as for the final analysis of the findings in the whole Peer Team.

Assessment and feedback

The central element of a Peer Review is the assessment, i.e. the professional judgement by the Peers. It is necessary to reserve ample time for the challenging task of organising and distilling findings, judging their reliability and relevance, discussing different perspectives and opinions in the Peer Team and arriving at common conclusions.

A final meeting of the Peers should be held before the feedback session with the VET provider. In this meeting, the collected data are reviewed and matched for relevance and representativity. Important issues may be selected and visualised on flip charts so that they can be presented to the VET provider in the feedback session. During the discussion meetings of the Peers, the different perspectives of the individual Peer Team members should be taken into account. It is recommended that the Peers come to consensual conclusions; statements of differing opinions should only be given if no agreement can be reached. All assessments must be substantiated.

Oral feedback

A very useful element is the feedback session at the end of the Peer Review, in which the Peers communicate their findings (and perhaps also their recommendations) to the reviewed institution. This also allows for a communicative validation - direct comments from the institution, including the clarification of misunderstandings or irrelevant conclusions – and an exchange between the Peers and the reviewed institution.

Feedback can be fairly descriptive - merely describing the findings of the Peer Visit - or it can involve reporting an assessment, identifying strengths and areas for improvement. Giving and receiving feedback is, of course, a delicate task. On the one hand, Peers must be fully aware of their responsibility to provide useful and critical feedback to the VET provider in a friendly and professional manner. When assessments are presented during the oral feedback session at the end of the Peer Visit, they must be prepared and formulated with great care so as not to offend the representatives of the VET provider and cause conflicts.

Representatives of the VET provider, on the other hand, should neither start defending themselves nor arguing their case against the findings, but accept the feedback as valuable

information in their quest for development and growth. Coming to a full understanding of the feedback should therefore be the focus of this oral exchange.

Thus, both the Peers and the VET provider must collaborate in the constructive handling of feedback. It is helpful if the staff of the VET provider reviewed assumes a self-confident stance which also accepts criticism. The Peers need to refrain from any kind of sweeping statements or statements focusing on specific persons. An inoffensive form of language should be used by all involved, descriptions should be as clear as possible rather than abstract; Peers should concentrate on behaviour and not on assumed personal characteristics; positive aspects should be mentioned alongside the negative, and judgements and conclusions must be based on facts and observations.

Final assessment

The final assessment should only be made by the Peers after the feedback session (including the communicative validation) so that comments and feedback from the VET provider can be taken into account. The assessments and conclusions will be included in the Peer Review Report.

Recommendations

Recommendations are usually part of evaluation procedures. In a European Peer Review, the Peers will formulate areas for improvement in the Peer Review Report as an indication to the VET providers that action should be taken in these areas.

Recommendations beyond this indicative assessment should only be given by the Peers if the VET provider asks for them. If the VET provider does not seek recommendations from the Peers during the Peer Review this should be clarified before the Peer Review - when the assignment for the Peers is defined - or at least in due time before the feedback session.

If recommendations are desired, they can be presented and discussed during the Peer Visit in an open exchange between the Peers and the representatives of the VET provider. Such a discussion should then focus on mutual exchange and learning from good practice.

Time management

Good time management is pivotal for the success of a Peer Review. A realistic Peer Review agenda is a must since activities usually tend to take more time than planned: if the agenda is too tight, any slight delay may cause grave problems in the process (interview time is reduced, observations do not start on time, time delays add up, activities have to be postponed at short notice, etc.). Agendas should therefore also include some time (such as extended breaks) to buffer delays.

During the Peer Visit, time-keeping is essential. It is the Peer Review Facilitator who is responsible for local organisation – availability of interviewees and classes during the data collection period, organisation of final meeting, provision of catering and transport (if necessary) throughout the Peer Visit.

Last but not least, a high level of time-keeping discipline is required from the Peers. The Peer Coordinator (who may be aided by the Evaluation Expert) assumes central responsibility for time management in the Peer Team. S/he must make sure that the time-frame of the agenda is respected, that the Peers are punctual, that discussion sessions in the Peer Team are not overextended, and that decisions are made, if problems arise, on how to best use the limited time available.

Duration of the Peer Visit

The duration of the Peer Visit depends on the size of the VET provider, the scope of the Quality Areas and the time available. It is advisable to plan fairly short Visits since

- 1) a Peer Visit will to some extent disrupt the routine processes at the VET provider and
- 2) Peers will not be able to take leave for an extended period of time.

Peer Visits of 1 to 2 days at the most are recommended.

Peer Review Report (Phase 3)

The Peer Review Report is the final document. All Peers should contribute to the report. The writing, however, can be done by one or two persons with the other Peers commenting. It is recommended that the Peer Coordinator, together with the Evaluation Expert, be responsible for producing the Report. Usually, Peers should come to common conclusions and recommendations through discussion and argumentation; if this is not possible, dissenting opinions can also be presented.

A draft report is issued, on which the reviewed VET provider should have the opportunity to give feedback. The final report should take these comments into consideration.

Structure of Peer Review Report

The Peer Review Report contains:

1. Title
2. Table of contents (glossary and abbreviations, if necessary)
3. Data sheet
4. Short portrait of the VET provider (about 1 page)
5. Peer Review procedure
6. Assessment of Quality Areas
7. Overall assessment
8. Annex: e.g. agenda for the Peer Visit, interview guidelines, observation guidelines