Methodological proposal for the EQAVET Network's approach to system level Peer Reviews

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1.1 Introduction

This paper presents the methodological proposal for the EQAVET Network's approach to system level Peer Reviews. It outlines the main considerations in developing the peer reviews, proposes an EQAVET-specific approach and lists the next steps for further development and validation of a practical manual or 'toolbox' that can assist the EQAVET Network members in preparing and implementing peer reviews.

The paper is based on the following information:

■ Review of discussions with DG EMPL in the kick-off meeting,
■ Review of discussions with the EQAVET Network at the EQAVET Annual Network Meeting in December 2020 and in Steering Group meetings in February and March 2021;
■ Review of key documentation relating to existing concepts and approaches to peer review at the system and provider level (ETF peer review concept, provider level peer review concept, concepts developed upon the initiative of Member States (e.g. Slovenia), etc.).

1.2 Main methodological elements

The 2020 VET Recommendation[1] calls for the introduction of EU level peer reviews of quality assurance in VET at system level. It is stipulated that one of the tasks of the Quality Assurance National Reference Points is to '*engage in EU level peer reviews of quality assurance to enhance the transparency and consistency of quality assurance arrangements, and to reinforce trust between the Member States*'.[2]

In the Recommendation, a peer review is defined as '*a type of voluntary mutual learning activity with the objective to support the improvement and transparency of quality assurance arrangements at system level not leading to accreditation procedures, based on a specific methodology to be developed by the European Network for quality assurance in vocational education and training*'.[3]

The methodology outlined in the following sections is based on these definitions and assumptions, and will, in its final version, constitute the EQAVET Network's joint methodology for system level peer reviews.

1.2.1 Aims and benefits of the peer review process

The main aim of the peer review process is to support the country hosting the peer review (=the host country) to reflect on its practice of quality assuring the national VET system. Peers from other countries will act as critical friends and provide external feedback, based on specific

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[1] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32020H1202(01)&from=EN

[2] Cf. Article 18

[3] Cf. footnote No 36

'evaluation questions' developed by the host country. To prepare the process, the host country will reflect critically on (aspects of) their own VET quality assurance system by writing a self-assessment report that reflects on the strengths and weaknesses of QA systems at national level, against the 'evaluation questions', using the EQAVET framework. This report is shared with a selected group of peers and experts, who are invited to give feedback. The peers will read the host country self-assessment report, visit the host country institution, and give feedback on the selected quality assurance measures during the Peer Review meeting. Jointly, the peer reviewers and the host country will identify areas for learning and further improvement to meet the current and future challenges. This can reinforce mutual trust between the EU countries, and promote further collaboration and networking between the EQAVET members.

Peer reviews will take place in a member country of the EQAVET network. **National Reference Points (NRPs) representing their country are the direct target group of EQAVET peer reviews and they will take on the role of the host, on behalf of their institution, or act as a peer.** This ensures that VET quality assurance expertise is shared between EQAVET Network members: peer reviews are a chance to support the process of taking stock of "what is there" in the Member States, identifying the main strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement in the national QA systems. This may allow to draw conclusions for EQAVET implementation at European level.

There are a number of important benefits to be realised from the participation in the peer review both for the hosts and peer reviewers.

The National Reference Point that takes the role of host gets opportunities to (and thus benefits from):

■   analytically self-assess the selected quality assurance measure by writing a self-assessment report, together with an external expert;
■   reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of their quality assurance system by collecting feedback from peers and engaging in a mutual learning process with the peers;
■   become acquainted with an external perspective (through the feedback from peers), and gain experience in receiving and actioning feedback;
■   receive advice and discover good practices to further develop the quality assurance system.

National Reference Points taking part in peer reviews, acting as peer reviewers, will get opportunities to:

■   learn about the national quality assurance approach and selected quality assurance measure(s) presented by the host country;
■   receive advice and discover good practices to further develop quality assurance approaches and measures in their own countries;
■   practise giving critical, but supportive and constructive feedback;
■   engage in mutual learning with peers and representatives from the host country.

To ensure the focus of the peer review process, a maximum of 8-10 participants should take part in the peer review.

1.2.2   Scope of the peer reviews: focused approach

As stated above, the 2020 VET Recommendation calls for peer reviews that focus on quality assurance arrangements at system level.

For the EQAVET network, 'a whole system approach' would cover the entire national VET quality system and the whole EQAVET framework (four stages of the quality cycle, indicative descriptors at the VET system level and performance against common indicators). Depending on the country and the VET system, such arrangements could be very complex, which raises the question of how the scope of the peer review should be defined.

For instance, a whole system approach would ensure a comprehensive coverage of all aspects across the EQAVET framework, yet such a wholesale appraisal is likely to generate more resistance to a complete scrutiny. A focused approach is likely to be more feasible to implement but would lead to less comprehensive scrutiny of the whole system.

In contrast, the focused approach could cover specific aspects of QA system that the host country would like to review and possibly reform, which are not working as well or where open questions on their effectiveness remain, using external assessment as inspiration /check for their further development.

Given the diversity of situations in the EU countries with respect to their QA systems, the peer reviews will take a focused approach, with certain aspects of QA system being subject to the peer review. The decision which aspects of QA system to peer review will be for the host country to propose as the host country will determine the scope of the peer review.

The host country will be asked to formulate specific questions in relation to the focus topic that they would like to discuss with their peers. To ensure that the peer reviews are based on clear 'evaluation questions' that are jointly understood, the EQAVET Secretariat will develop a template to support the host country in formulating these 'evaluation questions'.

1.2.3   Nature of participation: voluntary and closed doors

As set out in the 2020 VET Recommendation, participation in the EQAVET peer reviews is voluntary and it is up to the concerned EU country to manifest interest.

Existing peer review concepts apply either an 'open-door' or a 'closed-door' approach. In open-door approaches, besides peers, external stakeholders and/or independent experts are also invited to the process and peer review results are usually made public. This ensures fresh perspectives from externals, which can challenge the shared wisdom of peers. In closed-door approaches, only institutional peers participate and outcomes remain confidential. This might generate the feeling of safe space, which in turn may lead to more openness and willingness to discuss less positive aspects of the focus topic. The risk, however, is to create closed feedback loops without any external challenge and would lead to a limitation of the benefits for the wider circle of peers.

For the EQAVET peer reviews, most host countries are expected to adopt the closed-door approach: peers will be representatives of other NRPs and the details of the results will remain confidential to the participants. The outcomes of the peer review will be shared with the members of EQAVET network in a form of a summary report by the host country capturing the main points from the peer review. This will enable the learning from the peer review to be shared within the EQAVET network as well as provide a basis for follow up of peer review outcomes.

However, some host countries may decide to publish the results of the peer review. Furthermore, the host country can also decide to invite the external stakeholders, such as social partners, to the peer review process, if this would add value to the peer review

(depending on the national context). In addition, observers can be nominated (for example, the representative of European Commission).

The exact way to go about will hence vary. We suggest preparing a template for a 'Memorandum of Understanding' that specifies the basic (confidentiality) agreements for every peer review (incl. questions of data privacy etc.). This MoU will be completed and signed by all participating parties ahead of the peer review.

1.2.4   Self-assessment of the host country situation

The quality and depth of analysis of the specific host QA system aspect(s) will determine the success of the peer review. Self-assessment is useful to support the change process, but it can be time-consuming. In contrast, external assessment by an independent expert is less time-consuming for the host, but if the experts' assessment is controversial, it could be challenged and derail the peer review process.

We propose that an external expert works with the host country to support their own self-assessment of the QA system prior to the peer review. Such external expert would be nominated by the host country, or the EQAVET Secretariat can assist the host country in identifying the appropriate expert. The expert should have the knowledge of the host QA system, be based in the country and have familiarity with the peer review process. The expert should also be familiar with the EQAVET framework, as – depending on the focus topic – the indicators and descriptors of the EQAVET framework will be used to guide and structure the assessment.

The expert will also support the organisation and facilitation of the peer review meeting and aid the host country in identifying the key action points and recommendations from the process and how are they followed up.

The EQAVET Secretariat will support the process of identifying the expert, and will brief and support the experts in their assessment work, where necessary.

1.2.5   Training of the peer reviewers

To support the implementation of successful peer reviews, **the EQAVET Secretariat will support the training of NRPs to act as hosts and peer reviewers.**

Ahead of the peer reviews, regular training sessions will be offered in the form of webinars, to explain the process of peer review, roles and expectations from the hosts and peer reviewers, the work to be undertaken, outcomes and follow up to be expected and the deadlines and process.

1.2.6   Phases and steps of peer reviews

The existing peer review concepts differ between a relatively short process centered around the actual peer review visit and a more extensive and longer process of preparatory analysis, actual visit, follow up and implementation. Longer peer review processes tend to secure a more in-depth review but are time-consuming for hosts and peer reviewers. A more limited one-off exercise can be powerful to initiate a change in one area, however, a cyclical approach ensures systematic follow up and implementation.

Given that the peer reviews in the context of EQAVET Network will target strategic aspects of QA systems, **we propose to avoid a one-off exercise and adopt a longer approach,**

consisting of four steps: preparatory analysis (incl. initial discussions with peers), actual peer review meeting, peer feedback and a follow up phase.

Bringing the above suggestions together, we suggest a four -phase process for a peer review process that is based on the following steps, as shown in the diagram below.
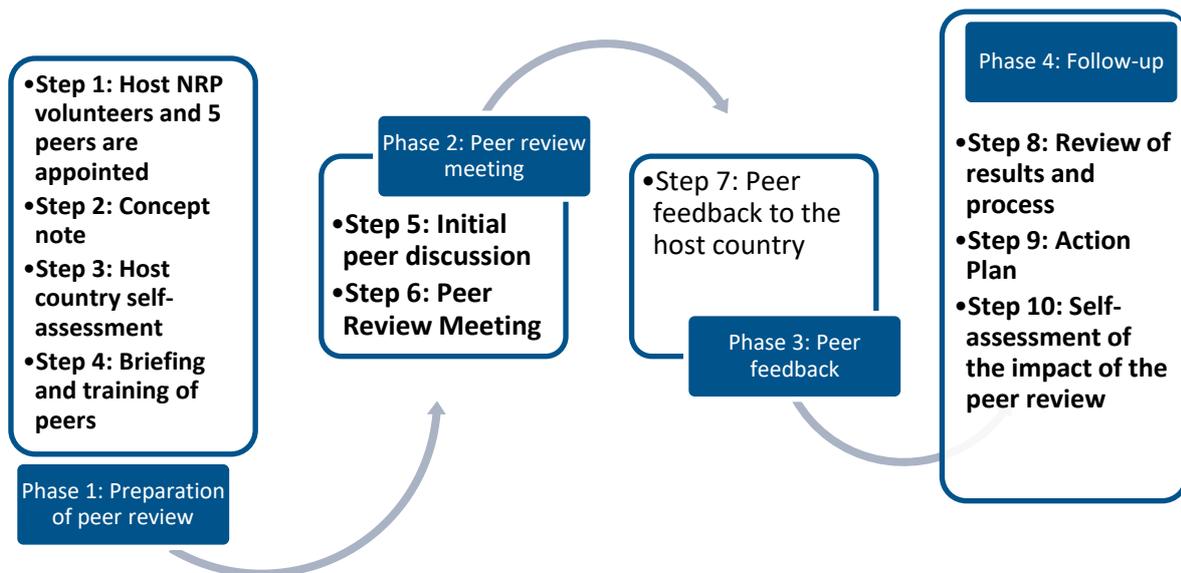
- ■ **Phase 1: Preparation of the peer review (2-3 months).** There are four steps related to the preparation phase.

  - – **Step 1: NRP volunteers for a peer review and selects peers.** Host NRPs that volunteer for a peer review would come forward with a concrete idea of which aspect(s) of their QA system they would like to subject to a peer review (such as open questions requiring improvement)[4] and which peer countries (other NRPs) they would like to invite as peers (it is proposed around 5 peers are identified and recruited to participate in the peer review). Peers would be identified from the current network of NRPs. A good selection of "equal standing" peers is key to the success, so their selection criteria will reflect a balance between the required expertise on the QA system topic reviewed and the EQAVET Framework, geographic balance and proximity to the host country QA system. The EQAVET Secretariat can assist the host country with this thought process, also ensuring the coordination of peer reviewer selection across multiple peer reviewers and appropriate application of selection criteria for peers. The initial ideas for the QA system aspects to be reviewed and selection of peers are also discussed with the European Commission.

    Once peers and the topics are confirmed, the participating parties are asked to complete and sign a 'Memorandum of Understanding' that

  - – **Step 2: Host develops the peer review concept note.** The initial thinking by host country is captured in the concept note for a particular peer review, which serves as a

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[4] As the EAFA benchlearning exercise already covers the aspects of quality assurance in work-based learning and apprenticeships, the scope for avoiding potential duplication needs to be considered in selecting the focus for EQAVET peer reviews

reference document for the peer review process. The concept note will also include a draft agenda for the peer review meeting to ensure the appropriate focus of the peer review meeting. The EQAVET Secretariat will develop a standard format for the note, capturing the main aspects to take account during the process of defining the peer review, in particular guidance on how to formulate good evaluation (assessment) questions (indicative length 2-3 pages, including specific headings and instructions for completing, reflecting the relevant EQAVET framework and indicators).

– **Step 3: Host prepares the host country self-assessment.** An external expert with extensive country and topic experience is identified by the EQAVET Secretariat (or suggested by the host country) and agreed with the host country. Wherever possible, the expert should be a native speaker in the language of the host country as well as be experienced with the organization and carrying out of peer reviews. The expert supports the self-assessment of the host country, using the EQAVET framework. A standard template is developed for this assessment (indicative length 20-30 pages, including specific headings and instructions for completing, reflecting the relevant EQAVET framework and indicators).

– **Step 4: Briefing and training of peer countries:** Peer reviewers from the network of EQAVET NRPs are appointed and briefed initially on their role and expected inputs for the particular peer review. Furthermore, more in-depth training could be offered for the peer reviewers depending on the training needs. In this way, a pool of experienced peer reviewers (e.g. from NRP's that have already implemented Peer Reviews) could be trained up to work with the methodology to be developed the NRPs would build up an expert pool that can help with this.

The EQAVET Secretariat will also prepare information for the peer reviewers on the specifics of the host countries' VET and QA system in advance of the review. In this respect, the Cedefop 'VET in Europe' database[5] is a good initial source and its information will be presented in a manner targeted to the topic in question. This information would also allow the peer reviewers to become aware of any cultural and institutional differences influencing the process and the feedback.

▪ **Phase 2: Peer review meeting (2 days)**. This phase includes the implementation of the peer review, during which the peer assessment will be carried out. There are two steps related to this phase:

– **Step 5: Initial peer discussion** takes place on the main points raised in the host self-assessment (indicative duration 1 day). This could also take place online, as it serves to prepare the actual peer review meeting, introduces the peers to the host country situation and gives them food for thought. Otherwise, we risk that peers come unprepared for the actual visit and time is not optimally used to get to know the host situation, etc. The EQAVET Secretariat will prepare a standard agenda to be followed in this preparatory discussion. If host country and peers are convinced they have a sufficient level of common knowledge and shared understanding of the situation assessed in the peer review, this preparatory discussion step could be skipped.

– **Step 6: Peer Review Meeting.** The peer review meeting takes place in the host country, with 5 peers and external expert (suggested duration 1.5 days). A standard

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[5] https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/vet-europe#:~:text=VET%20in%20Europe%20is%20the,common%20template%20designed%20by%20Cedefop.

approach is developed to ensure that common criteria, principles and standards for the peer assessment are followed. This is likely to be a global approach which needs to be tailored thematically, including specific headings and instructions for covering the discussion, reflecting the relevant EQAVET framework and indicators. Meeting participants complete Peer Review process evaluation forms, where they reflect on the success and lessons learnt from the process of undergoing a peer review, informing the approach and methodologies of next peer reviews.

- **Phase 3: Step 7: Peer feedback (2-3 hours).** After the meeting, a session is organized with peers (without a host country) facilitated by the external expert to gather their feedback and organize the process of giving feedback to the host country. Peers then give feedback to the host country during a moderated final feedback session. In this final feedback session, the peers deliver their feedback on and ideas for the improvement of the quality assurance measures to the host country. It is preferred that peers give feedback as a group of peers, in a coordinated way, so that the feedback provided across the group of peers is consistent and integrated. The host country documents the Peer Review Meeting outcomes including the peers' feedback.

- **Phase 4: Follow-up (duration depending on the national context):** This phase includes immediate follow-up to the peer review as well as a self-assessment of the impact at a later stage. Consequently there are two steps related to this last phase:

  - **Step 8** (Review of peer review results and process), in this step, the host country goes through a process of reviewing the feedback received and deciding on its response and way forward. Peers are expected to reflect on the results of the Peer review meeting and think about opportunities to work with the results in their own national contexts. In addition, the host country reflects with the help of the external expert on the process of carrying out the peer review, its approach and methodology. This enables the host to reflect on the success and lessons learnt from the process of undergoing a peer review, informing the approach and methodologies of next peer reviews. Evaluation forms from the peers are also used in this reflection, which is summarized in the form of a process report.

  - **Step 9: Developing an Action Plan, implementation of change process:** Concrete action points and recommendations are worked out together with the participants into an action plan for the host country. A standard template for the action plan is developed in advance (indicative length 2-3 pages). This could envisage further support from peers or other mutual learning services available through our support. The action plan is not strictly mandatory or binding, it contains a list of concrete measures to follow up, with clear roles and responsibilities and timelines indicated. Once the action plan is agreed, the host country starts to implement the agreed changes.

  - **Step 10: Self-assessment of the impact of the peer review:** The host country will be invited to report back to the progress made against its action plan to the Network at an agreed point in time (in 6, 12 and 18 months after the peer review), to the peer reviewers and the broader Network. This serves as a check on the impact of the peer review and action plan developed. The peers will also be expected to reflect on their experience in participating in the peer review, and report on whether and how they used the opportunities to work with the results in their own national contexts.

1.3   Next steps in the development of the peer review concept

In a next step, a Draft Peer Review Manual will be prepared. The Manual is designed to be a practical guide assisting countries in preparing and implementing peer reviews. As outlined above, it will contain several templates, guidance documents and other practical tools.

The draft manual will be discussed with the EQAVET Network during the 2021 Annual EQAVET Network meeting in June 2021. Any feedback received will be used to prepare a version that is ready to be piloted.

The Peer Review concept will be piloted with voluntary NRPs in the 2nd half of 2021. Up to five pilot peer reviews are foreseen. Feedback on the process and the tools provided in the manual will be collected and analysed. Experiences during the piloting will be reflected back in the revised final methodology, including in the templates and practical tools.

The final, road-tested EQAVET Peer Review Manual is expected to be ready for publication in summer 2022.