



# National Strategy Paper Austria

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Project "Transnational Peer Review for quality assurance in Validation of Non Formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL) Extended" (Project no. 2015-1-NL01-KA204-009004)

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## 1. Lessons learned / experiences from the project on the institutional and national level

The main lesson learned from the project is that Peer Review works very well for Austrian VNFIL providers. It is a valuable tool for learning and improving VNFIL provision for the institutions involved. It is an important addition to traditional quality assurance schemes (e.g. in adult education Ö-CERT) that focus more on compliance. Peer Review, by contrast, is a tailored procedure that allows providers to decide upon the areas reviewed and the Peers to be invited. This leads to a motivated learning process and an open way of dealing with successes and difficulties.

All involved providers have benefitted considerably from the project – most notably through the pilot phase, but also through the Peer Training and the transnational meetings and events held by the project. The learnings stem from the pilot Peer Reviews carried out, but also in general from the exchange with other VNFIL providers in the project – especially VNFIL providers from other countries which afforded the Austrian partners the opportunity to profit from other (more advanced) countries.

In the project a very broad range of types of validation providers was represented – from formative VNFIL in adult education (Frauenstiftung Steyr) through formal VET qualification provision (Du kannst was, AK Salzburg) to specialised summative offers on higher qualification levels (Weiterbildungsakademie) to the university sector (Universität für Bodenkultur). The project has shown that Peer Review works for all of these types of VNFIL, sectors and levels and that an exchange on VNFIL provision between different institutions and sectors is fruitful, breaking up the traditional fragmentation of VNFIL into adult education and VET on one side and the higher education sector on the other res. between formative and summative VNFIL practices.

On the national level, the project established a network of Austrian validation providers that will continue after the project end. Through the stakeholder committee meeting (March 2016) and the large final conference (May 3, 2018) the project has joined forces with the current implementation of the national validation strategy and has attained high visibility with policy decision-makers and the VNFIL provider community. The European perspective of the project – seeing how VNFIL is done in other countries – has provided additional arguments for promoting VNFIL in Austria.

Finally, the new Austrian quality criteria catalogue for validation is in line with the European Quality Areas of the ERAMUS+ project “Peer Review VNFIL Extended” and has the potential to boost further developments in Austrian VNFIL. Its piloting could be linked to national implementation of Peer Review, i.e. using Peer Review to test the Austrian quality catalogue.

## 2. Added-value of Peer Review for Austrian VNFIL providers

For Austrian VNFIL Providers the project has been a valuable learning experience. Learning took place through

- the development of professional skills in evaluation in the Peer Training
- self-exploration during the preparation of the Peer Review which uncovered areas of strength and areas of improvement that had not been focused on before
- the feedback from the Peers – national and in particular also international Peers, this allowed VNFIL providers to tap into (international and national) best practice, and
- through experiencing other VNFIL practices and systems first-hand as Peers.

The learning effects revolved mainly around the VNFIL offer itself (VNFIL processes and methods) but also on the recruitment of candidates and the information and guidance provided before and during VNFIL. The Peer Review also offered an external view on the institution and impulses for organisational learning. Peer Review generally boosted motivation to engage in quality assurance and improvement and led to new cooperation between providers.

The added-value of Peer Review from the point of view of Austrian VNFIL providers can be described thus:

Peer Review in itself is a quality-assured procedure, it creates trust in the processes and outcomes of validation.

Peer Review and VNFIL fit very well since Peer Review itself is similar to validation. It shares the same goals and procedures and therefore meets with high acceptance in VNFIL.

Peer Review is a focused procedure, it is tailored to the needs of the provider. It is therefore also very efficient since the institution can tackle relevant areas instead of having to work through long catalogues of quality dimensions and criteria.

Peer Review is cost-effective and easy-to use. Implementation requires only some basic structures and support. It is also the method prevalent in higher education and its use for quality improvement of validation should meet with high acceptance there.

Peer Review seeks to enhance learning and further development of VNFIL. This creates an atmosphere of openness and trust and motivates to improve VNFIL provision and to engage in quality assurance and evaluation.

“Peer Review identifies strengths, creates motivation and makes participating persons eager to improve. Therefor Peer Review opens minds for quality development. While other methods of quality assurance often are combined with control and fear, Peer Review enhances a real and deep interest in getting work done better.”

Peer Review offers ample opportunity for mutual learning and transfer of innovative practices. Transnational Peer Reviews afford the possibility of learning from other countries and systems and are therefore particularly beneficial.

Peer Review offers a chance for organisational learning.

Peer Review supports and enhances cooperation and networking between validation providers.

Peer Review can help to develop the VNFIL sector in Austria. It can be used to share good practices and to build up new validation offers.

### 3. Potential and challenges for implementing Peer Review as a formative external evaluation for VNFIL into the QA system for VNFIL in Austria

#### Potential

Quality assurance has been an important issue and field of development for the Austrian education system for many years. This holds good for all sectors represented in the project: initial VET, adult education, and the university sector. External assessment has so far concentrated on ascertaining certain standards. The formative European Peer Review is the first procedure that aims to support quality improvement. That such an approach has high relevance for Austria is also highlighted by the fact that the Frauenstiftung Steyr was awarded the Austrian National Award for Adult Education for its participation in the Peer Review project in 2017.

With the Austrian National Validation Strategy published and implementation activities going on since spring 2017, the current situation seems conducive for further use of Peer Review: Quality assurance of validation is one of the main strands of the implementation scheme and is expected by decision-makers to be instrumental in further developing and expanding VNFIL in Austria. In the past year, a Quality Criteria Catalogue was developed by a working group headed by the Austrian ministry. It was presented and discussed during the joint Conference on Quality of Validation held on May 3, 2018 as a joint event of the Austrian partners of the project Peer Review VNFIL Extended, the Austrian Ministry of Education, Research and Science, and the Chamber of Labour. The catalogue has met with high acclaim from the validation community and piloting of the quality criteria is planned for autumn 2018.

The use of the Quality Catalogue is voluntary and fits in very well with Peer Review while Peer Review could also be a very well-suited instrument for testing and implementing the quality criteria. Peer Review as a learning tool could help validation providers to meet the quality criteria – or work towards fulfilling them together with others.

The faster VNFIL providers operating the criteria will succeed in expanding their offer and in acquiring participants the more the criteria will be seen as indispensable. This might also lead to a need for an instrument like Peer Review that helps build up the validation sector through mutual learning while also providing external quality assurance.

Peer Reviews could be the basis for a validation network that focuses on developing the quality of validation in Austria. If different types and sectors of validation (as in the project Peer Review VNFIL Extended) are included, Peer Review could also be used to overcome fragmentation of VNFIL provision.

In the next months, a roll-out for “Du kannst was” to other Austrian provinces is planned. For that roll-out, the quality criteria will play an important role. “Du kannst was” will be the first testing ground for the new Quality Catalogue for VNFIL. If Peer Review can take over the role of quality assurance in “Du kannst was”, the method will become a fixed part of the VNFIL system in Austria.

For validation in the university sector (for a start in particular: validation for continuing professional training provided by universities), Peer Review could lead to more transparency and higher relevance of validation which in turn could help to attract participants with “atypical” non-formal educational careers.

## Challenges

Further implementation of Peer Review depends on whether VNFIL providers actually want to try out Peer Review and whether some minimal structure of coordination and support is available.

→ Reaching VNFIL providers will require more dissemination and offers of networking. Communication will need to clarify the characteristics and added-value of Peer Review (and how it differs from other quality assurance methods available). Some concrete offers will need to be made (e.g. workshops, training, network meetings etc.) to get things going.

→ Some kind of coordination and support will be necessary. Institutions that already play a role in quality assurance in the Austrian education system or in VNFIL could assume these tasks and responsibilities. Alternatively, the European Peer Review Association (as a body situated in Austria) could assume this role. EPRA can be of assistance in any case – be it as main coordinator or as support for another coordinating institution.

All of this ties in with the availability of resources. Even though Peer Review is a relatively low-cost procedure (for the conduct of Peer Review only travel costs will need to be covered if Peers are exchanged between institutions), but it will require some funding for training, support and network activities (which are central to Peer Review). So far it is not clear where this funding could come from (European funding, ESF, national/regional funds?) and who would have the resources to make an application.

The situation is exacerbated by the fact that most validation procedures in Austria are not market-driven, but require public funding and the financing of existing validation procedures (in adult education and VET) varies a lot in Austria. There is no standard and in some cases there is no public financing at all.

In the university sector, Peer Review is most likely to be used in a transnational manner in order to avoid competition and also to comply with standards of quality assurance in higher education which foresee the inclusion of international Peers. As with any transnational project, some additional funding will be necessary from the European level.

## 4. Plans for further use of Peer Review for VNFIL in Austria

As mentioned above the roll-out of “Du kannst was” could be a good chance for the further use of Peer Review in Austria. And since two provinces (Salzburg and Upper Austria – the “homeland” of Du kannst was) were partners in the project “Peer Review VNFIL Extended” there is a likelihood that Peer Review will be part of an Austrian-wide “Du kannst was”-system –also to ensure some coherence between regional variations and support a joint development. Peer Review would be ideally fit for this task.

All partners would like to continue the networking. Further Peer Reviews are not planned but could be carried out between network partners in the next 2-3 years – but rather on the national level due to funding restrictions. There are no concrete projects planned yet.

## 5. Potential and challenges of building up a Peer Review Network in VNFIL on the European level.

### Potential

The Austrian partners see the existing Peer Review Network as a good starting point.

They also perceive important benefits of Peer Review on a European level: transnational Peers as “non competing experts from outside are the best reviewers you can imagine”. Transnational Peer Review has greatly contributed to the transfer of practices that took place in the project “Peer Review VNFIL Extended”. This is why a sustainable network for Peer Review in VNFIL on the European level is something the Austrian partners would welcome – it would ensure continued exchange and learning in VNFIL across Europe.

There are also some ideas for continuing European cooperation through future Erasmus+ projects: i.e. in the area of health (around the validation of competences of health professionals) and in higher education. The latter could further investigate the needs and conditions for further development of VNFIL in the European Higher Education Area und explore the potential of Peer Review for contributing to coherent quality standards in VNFIL across institutions and countries.

### Challenges

The main challenge is, again, funding.

Funding would be required for the extra costs (travel, but also extra time/staff resources) needed for transnational Peer Reviews. In addition, a stable coordinating body (e.g. EPRA) would be needed which also requires some elementary funding for its tasks.

If future Erasmus+ projects are successful (see above), some funding would be available for future transnational Peer Reviews. However, partners underline that some stable European funding would be very important for Peer Review to continue on this level. A piecemeal approach – providers and Peers applying for KA1 mobility funding for every single Peer Review – seems to complicated, time-consuming and fraught with uncertainty.

## 6. Further dissemination of Peer Review in the country

### Partners' contributions

The Austrian partners come from different sectors with different target groups and stakeholders. Dissemination has been very wide so far and will continue to target a wide variety of actors.

The Frauenstiftung Steyr as award winner of the Austrian National Adult-Education Award has created a lot of interest in and visibility for Peer Review. They disseminate mainly to adult education and labour market institutions, in particular also the Austrian Employment Service as a key player in validation in Austria. They have engaged in external mentoring with another institution providing training for the labour market. They are planning to continue with presentations, PR and media work.

As chamber of labour, AK Salzburg has access to different players in validation and will continue dissemination through different channels. Most notably, AK Salzburg with its leading role in the roll-out of „Du kannst was“ will strive to continue to use Peer Review within the Chamber of Labour networks.

Weiterbildungsakademie (wba) have reported regularly on the progress of the project (on their website, in their blog, in published articles and online media. In their 10-year Conference, a workshop on Peer Review (carried out together with EPRA) was included.

wba also published a blog on the large national validation conference organised by the project on May 3, 2018 and a report was published on erwachsenenbildung.at, the main information platform for adult education in Austria (see below). <https://wba.or.at/de/aktuelles/blog/126-ein-grosser-schritt-fuer-die-validierung-in-oesterreich-bericht-zur-tagung-qualitaetsentwicklung-in-der-validierung-am-3-mai-2018-in-wien.php>

For the next edition of the Magazin Erwachsenenbildung 2019 on “Validation and recognition of competences” wba plans to submit an article on Peer Review and wba’s experiences with Peer Review. [https://erwachsenenbildung.at/magazin/redaktion/meb19-36\\_callforpapers.pdf?m=1521537370&](https://erwachsenenbildung.at/magazin/redaktion/meb19-36_callforpapers.pdf?m=1521537370&)

Universität für Bodenkultur has repeatedly informed about Peer Review and the project “Peer Review VNFIL Extended” in the AUCEN network (Austrian University Continuing Education and Staff Development Network <https://www.aucen.ac.at/>) and continue to do so. If Peer Review is tested by additional universities in the network, exchange on experiences will lead to continuous development of know-how on Peer Review. At the conference on Quality in Validation, the University of natural resources and life sciences organised a workshop on “Peer Review for quality development of validation in universities: Experiences of the Universität für Bodenkultur with international and trans-disciplinary Peer Teams”. There was response form different higher education sectors. Among universities of applied sciences (Fachhochschulen) there seems to be an interest to use Peer Review for further development of VNFIL-processes. In this sector, the discussion on validation of prior learning/ qualifications is further developed than at universities.

European Peer Review Association (EPRA) has over the past 2.5 years spent a lot of time and energy to identify possible stakeholders in Austria and set up an Austrian network (about 300 contacts) around Peer Review in validation. It has been successful in convincing the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education and the Chamber of Labour to join into the national conference of the project. The conference took place on May 3, 2018 and about 100 Austrian validation professionals attended. EPRA has done extensive dissemination through personal contacts, presentations and newsletters (EPRA newsletter) and will continue to do so.

### Dissemination of Conference on Quality in Validation (3.5.2018)

[www.peer-review-vnfil.eu](http://www.peer-review-vnfil.eu)

[www.qualifikationsregister.at/public/Nachschau\\_Validierungskonferenz](http://www.qualifikationsregister.at/public/Nachschau_Validierungskonferenz)

[https://erwachsenenbildung.at/aktuell/nachrichten\\_details.php?nid=12402](https://erwachsenenbildung.at/aktuell/nachrichten_details.php?nid=12402)