



Peer Review
VNFIL Extended

European policy paper

*(addressed to VET/AL regulators/ operators/ developers/
policy makers at the EU level)*



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Imprint

Peer Review VNFIL Extended

Transnational Peer Review for quality assurance in
Validation of Non Formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL) Extended

Erasmus+ Project N° 2015-1-NL01-KA204-009004

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Executive summary

The aim of this policy paper is to highlight the main policy outcomes of the project, explain the benefits of Peer Review for VNFIL systems in Europe as well as outline the added value of Peer Review for current European policies. This document is mainly addressed to representatives of the European Commission (EC), the European Parliament (EP), the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), and the other European agencies such as CEDEFOP, ETF, etc., but can be enriching for a much broader public.

In the first chapter, a brief introduction to the project is provided. Aims and objectives are explained and results listed. Readers will also find there the project website and the take contact with the consortium.

In the second chapter, the benefits of Peer Review for quality development at the EU level are outlined. Some of them are intrinsic to the nature and approach of Peer Review, others were directly verified by the consortium. Readers can also have a glance at what the Peer Review procedure generally look like.

In the third chapter, the benefits of Peer Review for VNFIL at the EU level are explained. In particular, it is worthy to mention that Peer Review proven to be a promising instrument for the development of VNFIL provision, for the improvement its quality and, perhaps most importantly, for a better transnational use of VNFIL in Europe.

In the fourth chapter, some of the reasons why Peer Review for VNFIL is very effective and efficient for the national level are listed. The project partners mentioned that Peer Review promotes a quality culture among providers, stakeholders and policy-makers; contributes significantly to the progress of VNFIL systems in different countries; fosters the cooperation among VNFIL actors, sectors and countries; benefits the already existing initiatives at the national level; improves the image about and thus use of VNFIL opportunities among the general public. Readers can also learn the numerous benefits of Peer Review for VNFIL providers.

In the fifth chapter, a link to the current developments in European policies is made. In particular, it is elucidated how Peer Review can contribute to the European Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning as well as to the Upskilling Pathways Recommendation.

In the sixth chapter, a list of recommendations for European policy makers is presented. The project consortium is convinced that European policy-makers have a major role to play in supporting peer review, quality improvement in VNFIL and the progress of VNFIL systems in the EU.

In the last chapter, some very concrete implementation steps planned by the project partners are presented. The consortium will do its best to bring these recommendations forward, because it believes that if they are taken up, VNFIL systems in Europe will become a reality.

Introduction to the project

Aims and objectives

The 'European Peer Review VNFIL Extended' project aims to establish Peer Review to complement and enhance the usual quality assurance systems in VNFIL/VPL. Building upon the results of a series of previous European projects and the expertise of the partnership, the project seeks to increase the transparency, market relevance, consistency and transferability of VNFIL across Europe. Peer Review extended provides a common framework and tools for Peer Review for VNFIL providers to evaluate and improve their VNFIL provision and practices. On European level the project supports mutual trust in transnational use of VNFIL and alignment of VNFIL provision across Europe.

Results

The Peer Review VNFIL Extended project works with the Peer Review methodology and instruments adopted from previous programmes. The current project takes up further fine-tuning and transfer of the Peer Review methodology already developed by other projects (A Manual, Toolbox, and Quality Areas for Peer Review) to the VNFIL sector and to new countries. This is mainly done through research and capacity building activities aimed at increasing the professional development of VNFIL practitioners. Indeed, in the framework of this project, a report on quality assurance in VNFIL, constituting a complete inventory of current policies, QA systems and good practices in VNFIL of all participating countries and at the European level was drafted; a Transnational Peer Training Programme and Mentoring for VNFIL, focusing on capacity building of professional Peer Reviewers in VNFIL, was organised; as 11 Peer Review visits VNFIL from national and transnational partners were held by VNFIL providers. The final products also include, a reflection report with scientific analysis of the added value of Peer Review is published; a European Peer Review Reader for VNFIL, including recommendations for the participating countries on further development of their national policies on VNFIL; and this policy paper.

Consortium

The project consortium is composed of 15 partners from 7 European countries. Project partners are adult education- and higher education providers, VET organisations, and specialised VNFIL centres, companies and European NGOs. To ensure continuity of approach and enhance transference, project partners are both organisations that have been involved with preceding programmes and new partners from new countries.

Duration and funding

This project lasts almost three years (10.2015-07.2018) and has been funded with support from the Erasmus+ programme of the European Commission.

Contacts

To ensure long-term impact the project supports the European Peer Review Association (EPRA) in setting up a sustainable network on Peer Review. It is already possible to join this network now. As a member of the Peer Review network you can be invited as a Peer, and/or organise a professional Peer Review for your VNFIL/VPL provision. You can find more information and leave your contact details at www.peerreview.work

The benefits of Peer Review for quality development at the EU level

Definition

Peer Review a voluntary, formative and external evaluation procedure that enables a personalised, bottom-up and dialogue-oriented evaluation. Peer Review supports the initiator in its quality assurance and quality development efforts. An external group of experts, called Peers, are invited to assess the quality of the institution. During the evaluation process, the Peers visit the reviewed institution and provide feedback about the requested quality areas.

Peers can be counsellors, assessors or managers from other providers or also counsellors or assessors from other types of institutions in the Education System. In specific cases, or to assess specific work processes, the peers can also be other kinds of expert. Peers are external but work in a similar environment and have specific professional expertise and knowledge of the evaluated subject. They are independent and "persons of equal standing" with the persons whose performance is being reviewed.

Added value

The general aims of the Peer Review procedure are

- to promote quality assurance and development,
- to enhance transparency and comparability of quality in Europe through a common European standard, and
- to support equal opportunities.

Peer Review also contributes to the human resources management of organisations and increases their innovation potential. Peer Review builds on quality activities already in place, it is cost-effective and it fosters networking and exchange between providers. Transnational Peer Review in particular supports international exchange and mutual learning between providers in Europe. This could be used to strengthen mutual trust between providers in European Member States and strengthen the credibility of transnational validation systems.

How it works

The Peer Review procedure includes four phases.

1. The Peer Review starts with a preparatory phase. In this first phase, the Peer Review is organised and the VNFIL provider writes a self-report. 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 VNFIL 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, the Peers draw up a draft report. The VNFIL provider comments on this report and the final Peer Review Report is issued.
4. The fourth phase is crucial for the improvement of VNFIL provision and organisational development: results and recommendations from the Peer Review are transferred into concrete actions for improvement, which are planned and implemented.

The benefits of Peer Review for VNFIL at the EU level

As proven by the Peer Review VNFIL Extended project, Peer Review is a promising instrument for the development of VNFIL provision, for the improvement its quality and most importantly, for a better transnational use of VNFIL in Europe.

Indeed, VNFIL providers can decide to use Peer Review in the following cases:

- The provider gets a recommendation from their quality assurance body to improve on a specific part of their VNFIL provision. In that case, the Peer Review procedure will be focused on that topic and specialists from another provider will be chosen on the basis of their expertise.
- The provider wants to align the outcomes of VNFIL procedures with educational partners (in order to get exemptions on learning programmes and/or certification of the outcomes). In that case, validation experts from the educational provider can be invited as peers.
- The provider wants to align the outcomes of VNFIL with employers. In that case, HR specialists from these employers or employers' organisations will be invited as peers.

The Peer Review VNFIL Extended project has proven to be effective in supporting VNFIL systems in different countries by providing a common, European framework as well as different tools to VNFIL providers, organisations and policy-makers at the national, regional and local level.

The quality areas identified by the project are in line with the European policies and guidelines on validation as they include: the four distinct phases of validation (QA1: identification; QA2: documentation; QA3: assessment and QA4: certification); the conditions for developing and implementing validation (QA5: information, guidance and counselling, QA6: stakeholder coordination, QA7: quality assurance and QA8: professional competences of practitioners) and an overarching criteria (QA9: Organisation of VNFIL provision).

If Peer Review is organised following the project procedures or using the developed products, providers, stakeholders and policy-makers active at the national, regional and local level will strengthen the European dimension of their practices and policies.

When Peer Review is carried out transnationally, providers, stakeholders and policy-makers will learn more about other VNFIL systems in Europe, get acquainted with other policies and practices and thus contribute to the harmonisation of VNFIL systems in Europe. Their learning process is even more enriching than at the national level: new ideas, innovative approaches and inspiring methods will be shared among VNFIL practitioners all over Europe.

On a long term, this will lead to an increase of the mutual trust between providers, stakeholders and systems of different countries and thus to a better transnational use of VNFIL in Europe.

In the following chapters, arguments for carrying out, provide structures for and draft policies in support of Peer Review are listed from the national and European perspectives.

Why to use Peer Review for VNFIL at the national level

In this chapter, a list of reasons to carry out, support and finance Peer Review for VNFIL at the national, regional or local level is presented. To do so, project partners were invited to reply to a short questionnaire and provide three messages to share to European policy-makers. From the examples below, it becomes clear that Peer Review promotes a quality culture among providers, stakeholders and policy-makers; contributes significantly to the progress of VNFIL systems in different countries; fosters the cooperation among VNFIL actors, sectors and countries; benefits the already existing initiatives at the national level; improves the image about and thus use of VNFIL opportunities among the general public.

AUSTRIA:

1. The international perspectives of peers and deep insights gained during the transnational Peer Review enhanced the progress of VNFIL in Austria.
2. The Chamber of Labour, which demands and supports the implementation of VNFIL in Austria, got precious information on how VNFIL can be better structured by law and organized in practice. This is true even for an already established flagship initiative like the project “Du kannst was” (You have competences).
3. These experiences encouraged the people involved to treasure the international cooperation established during the transnational Peer Review by preparing an Erasmus+ project on validation in health care.

FRANCE:

1. Peer Review will contribute to the harmonization and improvement of quality of the national network of information and guidance centres for VNFIL. By sharing their experiences and practices, the counsellors in these centres will increase their professional development and thus contribute to a better quality of the information and guidance services.
2. Peer Review helps the counsellors integrate the logic of continuous quality improvement, in line with the national certification requirements for bodies providing lifelong learning.
3. Peer Review can reinforce the role of the social partners in quality assurance of publicly funded VNFIL services. The involvement of social partners and funding bodies in the peer review for can support a more engaging management of VNFIL centres.

PORTUGAL:

1. The adoption of the Peer Review methodology by the Portuguese National Agency (ANQEP), which is responsible for VNFIL policies, could be an opportunity to foster quality through a collaborative and low-cost tool, which is focused on finding solutions and sharing best practices.
2. Peer Reviews will also be beneficial for the improvement of the quality of the work developed in *Qualifica Centres*, which are the VNFIL providers in Portugal.
3. Peer Review could also strengthen the credibility and image of the *Qualifica Centres* towards the general public, contributing to the dissemination of the VNFIL offer in our country.

LITHUANIA:

1. Peer Review can support the Lithuanian VNFIL providers who are at the moment developing or improving their VNFIL systems. To do so in an efficient way, there is a need of a proper strategy, developed programme for training for teachers and piloting programmes for Peer Review in VNFIL.
2. If national policymakers working on VNFIL would support a structured and effective use of Peer Review, they could improve and increase access of citizens to VNFIL and thus contribute to the improvement of their socio-economic situation.
3. Peer Review will further contribute to the implementation of for VNFIL practices at national level, ensuring the principles of quality validation services, as well as, support to better employment and social inclusion.

THE NETHERLANDS:

1. Peer Review supports and enhances cooperation and networking between validation providers, which is something very valuable in the Netherlands. Indeed, besides the formal meetings with the *National Knowledge Centre*, Dutch VNFIL providers are hardly connected to each other.
2. Peer Review offer the possibility of professional exchange of practices, alignment of outcomes and therefore strengthening of the trust that Dutch clients can have in VNFIL. Peer Review in itself is a quality-assured procedure; it creates trust in the processes and outcomes of validation. It is also the method prevalent in higher education and its use for quality improvement of validation should meet with high acceptance there.
3. Peer Review offers a chance for organisational learning. Peer Review provides answers on questions Dutch VNFIL-providers have about their own organisation. Furthermore, Peer Review is a focused procedure; it is tailored to the needs of a particular provider. It is therefore also very efficient.

PROVIDERS FROM ALL OVER EUROPE:

Apart from the benefits already mentioned above, which are valid for a number of different stakeholders, providers gain enormously from Peer Review. Whether you are the requesting party or the Peer, you will always learn from Peer Review. Peer Review offers ample opportunity for mutual learning and transfer of innovative practices. For them, Peer Review is a cost-effective and easy-to-use method which allows them to get acquainted with an external perspective, to receive critical feedback on the quality of their provision, to strength and showcase your own good practices or to get informed about their weaknesses.

The fact that Peer Review is self-initiated means that its ownership is shared within the institution receiving the peers. This leads to an increased effectiveness and the contribution to the team building of the initiating organisation.

As mentioned above, when the Peer Review is transnational, it fosters the intercultural skills of participants and it increases the European dimension of the provider's work.

Link to the current developments in European policies

The Peer Review VNFIL Extended project and its outputs, including this policy report, contribute substantially to the [Council Recommendation of 20 December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning](#) and the [Upskilling Pathways Recommendation](#), adopted in the framework of the *New Skills Agenda for Europe*¹.

In particular, they tackle to three important issues mentioned in the **Recommendation**: quality assurance², coordination of different stakeholders³ and support to the Member States⁴.

Despite the progresses identified by the [2016 update of the European inventory on VNFIL](#), much still needs to be done in terms of *quality assurance* in VNFIL. Too many countries indeed address quality assurance of VNFIL through guidelines/codes only or cover it through an existing QA framework for formal education and training. Moreover, less than half of them quality assurance covers all phases of validation and about a fourth QA is considered flexible and easy to change according to need. Little is yet known on whether quality assurance systems and procedures are in fact able to ensure valid and credible assessments. Being Peer Review a reliable, simple and sustainable evaluation procedure, it will certainly contribute to further progresses in this area.

In regards to the *coordination of different stakeholders* which is somehow present in the Member States for different sectors but not so common across sectors, Peer Review can support the national bodies in charge of it by fostering the harmonisation of practices and enhancing trust and interaction between validation providers.

When Peer Review is transnational, those benefits are verified on a European level: providers, policy-makers and other stakeholders learn from other countries and systems and thus contribute to a *mutual support* for Member States as well as to a general improvement of validation systems in Europe.

As skills assessment and validation are key components of the **Upskilling Pathways**, the Peer Review VNFIL Extended project and its outputs find another interesting application within this European initiative. Again, they could both contribute to its development across Europe or to the evaluation of its implementation in each Member States.

¹ The [Agenda](#) is a key policy priority for the European Union for 2017, adopted on 10 June 2016. It includes 10 proposed actions to be taken in the next two years.

² 2012/C 398/01- Art. 1.3: The Member States should (...) apply, as appropriate, the following principles (...): transparent quality assurance measures in line with existing quality assurance frameworks are in place that support reliable, valid and credible assessment methodologies and tools.

³ 2012/C 398/01- Art. 1.5: The Member States should (...) promote coordination on validation arrangements between stakeholders in the education, training, employment and youth sectors, as well as between those in other relevant policy areas.

⁴ 2012/C 398/01- Art. 3.a: The Commission should (...) support Member States and stakeholders by facilitating effective peer learning and exchanges of experience and good practice (...).

Recommendations to EU policy-makers

For the reasons listed above, we call the European Policy makers to continue their efforts in developing accessible, trustworthy and sustainable VNFIL systems in Europe, to contribute to the quality improvement in VNFIL and to support Peer Review. Indeed, its implementation requires some basic structures and political support.

EUROPEAN POLICY-MAKERS CAN SUPPORT PEER REVIEW BY:

1. Recognising the added value of Peer Review for VNFIL both at the national and at the European level

The benefits of Peer Review are very visible to those that experienced this process, less for those who have only read about this. However, the project outputs explain in details how different stakeholders could profit for a more widespread and structured Peer Review, both at the national level and at the European level.

2. Contributing to the financing of Peer Review initiatives via European funding programmes

Peer Review is a low-cost and sustainable procedure, but will need some initial support to get started. European funding could be used not only to support its implementation, but also to raise awareness on its benefits of providers and policy-makers in the EU. Considering how much Peer Review could contribute to VNFIL systems in the EU, this will represent a very efficient and smart investment.

3. Supporting Member States in creating the structure for Peer Review for VNFIL at the national level

VNFIL systems' development and their quality assurance is key to reach the EU2020 goals. Since Peer Review is instrumental to achieve that, it should be supported by European policy makers by helping Member States foresee mechanisms and structures to use Peer Review in their own context.

4. Providing dissemination channels to spread the Peer Review approach at the European level

The Peer Review VNFIL extended project consortium has plans to keep the project results and its benefits visible after the end of the project lifespan. Nonetheless, more opportunity, especially in the framework of official events or publications would be very useful to spread the Peer Review approach.

EUROPEAN POLICY-MAKERS CAN CONTRIBUTE TO QUALITY IMPROVEMENT IN VNFIL BY:

5. Making sure Peer Review is considered a trustworthy way to improve quality standards by VNFIL providers and stakeholders

Including the Peer Review approach in official guidelines or good practices collections could be a way to demonstrate that the Peer Review methodology is recognised by the European policy makers as a trustworthy approach. This will then lead to a more widely adoption by Member States and thus to a quality improvement in VNFIL systems.

6. Including Peer Review as part of the quality assurance process for VNFIL providers

Peer review is a low cost, effective and highly enriching process for VNFIL providers. If included into the official quality assurance procedure, it will bring enormous benefits to those organisations, their staff and their VNFIL offer. European policy makers should endorse this via guidelines and recommendations.

7. Supporting a continued professional development of VNFIL providers and stakeholders

Professional development of providers and stakeholders is key to set up and/or improve VNFIL systems in Europe. European policy makers should support that with funding, formal and informal structures for exchange and transnational opportunities. Peer Review should be duly considered as a sustainable and effective approach to achieve that.

8. Giving prominent role to quality in the evaluation of the new strategies implemented by the Member States

In 2019 the European Commission will take stock of the progresses done in VNFIL systems in Europe. In doing so, extra attention should be paid to the quality of validation arrangements: a lack quality assurance will not only make VNFIL not attractive for national candidates, but also hinder its transnational use and thus negatively impact on the European mobility of learners, workers and citizens.

EUROPEAN POLICY-MAKERS CAN CONTRIBUTE TO THE PROGRESS OF VNFIL SYSTEMS IN THE EU BY:

9. Supporting European and national networks of VNFIL providers

As they see the many positive aspects of VNFIL for candidates and learners, providers are often those who believe more in VNFIL more and who are more motivated to implement validation arrangements. The creation of transnational and national networks could enhance the transfer of skills and innovation among them and thus keep them inspired to continue their important job.

10. Helping facilitate contacts and strengthen the cooperation between different VNFIL stakeholders via European funding programmes

There are a number of European projects focusing on VNFIL, but the majority of them are focused on a particular sector or on a particular target group. The successful experience of the Peer Review VNFIL extended project shows that diverse partnerships can really foster cross-sectorial cooperation in VNFIL. European policy makers can boost these kinds of projects by valuing the participation of these consortia in the funding programmes and/or establishing priorities in this direction.

11. Allowing a regular exchange of practices and experiences of VNFIL stakeholders at the European level

There are a number of European projects focusing on VNFIL, but an exchange of outcomes and products is lacking. The creation of a database of inspiring practices should be created and/or facilitated by European policy makers. The continuation of the Validation Festival is also very welcome in order to allow VNFIL stakeholders to exchange practices and experiences.

12. Providing support for the upscaling of successful local initiatives

The fragmentation of practices in VNFIL is well known. Local and project-based initiatives are often very successful because they bring together different sectors and can offer the best services to candidates. Support should be provided to those initiatives to be upscaled horizontally and vertically. Peer Review is actually one of the most convenient way to do that.

Road map/ implementation steps

The project consortium will share these recommendations with relevant European policy makers. In particular, EAEA will organise a meeting with the European Commission to discuss them in detail. On behalf of the consortium, EAEA will also monitor the follow-up of the EU Council Recommendation on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning as well as the implementation of the Upskilling Pathways Initiative.

The Peer Review approach will be presented at one of the autumn's Peer Learning Activities organised by the European Commission for the European Quality Framework Working Group. This will be an occasion for the project consortium to reach national and European policy makers and make them understand the added-value of the approach for the development of VNFIL provision, for the improvement its quality and most importantly, for a better transnational use of VNFIL in Europe.

Considering the interest sparked by the project on different occasions, the last being the European Validation Festival, partners will set up a community of practice in EPALE to gather different VNFIL stakeholders keen on working on Peer Review. This will be the first step towards the creation of a network of VNFIL providers that could then be a breeding ground of project ideas or a databank of experts on the topic.

As many partners as possible will attend the next official international events on validation, starting from the Validation Biennale in May 2019, but also make their best to promote the project results at the national level. EAEA will instead promote widely Peer Review among its members, who are 133 organisations from 45 countries.

If European policy makers will take up all or some of the recommendations above, they would support significantly the consortium in their endeavour to make VNFIL systems in Europe become a reality.

